The Word of God: The Qur'an

I recall when, as a graduate student at Harvard, I first went to the Widener Library to do some research on the Qur'an. Much to my surprise, the card catalog listing for the Qur'an (under the older spelling, Koran) gave a cross-reference to Muhammad as the author of the text. In contrast, the Bible was listed without any author. This library listing created a subtle contrast; while the Bible may have been of divine origin, the Qur'an was viewed as the composition of a human being. A Muslim reader, regarding the Qur'an as the actual Word of God, would no doubt find this librarian's classification objectionable. This example indicates how complicated it may be to approach the Qur'an for the first time. The assumptions that one brings to this effort will have a great deal to do with the result. Readers who wish to probe the Qur'an more deeply will need to go beyond these preliminary remarks, since I will mainly address here the most common assumptions and misconceptions that surround this sacred text of Islam.

It is, in fact, difficult to read the Qur'an as if it were an ordinary book. Its composition is very different from that of the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament; regardless of one's view of revelation, both of these texts contain multiple documents of different types assembled over a period of time by different hands. The Hebrew Bible contains extensive narratives and histories, together with prophetic writings, poetry, and didactic literature. The New Testament has four gospels by different writers describing the life of Jesus, the pastoral letters of St. Paul and others, a history of the early Christian community in Acts of the

Apostles, plus the apocalyptic Book of Revelation. In the case of the Christian scriptures, their selection and inclusion in the Bible (and the rejection of other writings) was the work of church councils. In contrast, the Qur'an is widely accepted as the accumulated revelations of the twenty-three years of the Prophet Muhammad's career, and it therefore is much more homogeneous as a text, with no signs of multiple authorship. This does not make it easy to classify, however.

When one considers the organization of the Qur'an, it is first of all apparent that it is divided into 114 books or sections known as suras, each of which is composed of varying numbers of verses called *ayas* ("sign, miracle"). With the exception of the first sura, a short prayer known as "The Opening," the rest are arranged roughly in order of decreasing size, with sura 2 ("The Cow") being the longest. In standard editions of the Qur'an, one typically finds that the heading of each sura identifies it as belonging to either the Meccan or the Medinan period of the Prophet's life. This basic distinction is useful, since many of the earlier passages show particular features of the Prophet's first preaching in Mecca: the creative power of God, God's unity, the resurrection and the afterlife, and the experiences of revelation. In contrast, the verses revealed in Medina typically emphasize legislative and social issues, with reflection on the difficulties faced by earlier prophets such as Moses. Within many suras, it is not unusual to find abrupt changes of subject, such as a sudden shift from a description of Paradise to the details of inheritance law.

As a result of this complex structure, the Qur'an contains very few extended narrative passages; the one major exception is sura 12, which contains the story of Joseph, which is emphatically introduced as "the most beautiful of stories." Yet the many allusions and references to stories of prophets such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus presuppose that the audience is already familiar with the basic outlines of those narratives. In this sense,

some Qur'anic passages are similar to poetic cycles that dwell on certain famous incidents to explain their importance but do not need to spell out every detail of the story.

Because of the challenging character of the Qur'anic text, many authorities from early times have suggested that those approaching it for the first time should not simply start reading the Qur'an from page 1. Instead, they should begin with the short suras at the end of the Qur'an. These are largely from the early Meccan period, and with their vivid depictions of the afterlife, God's creative power in nature, and the power of the prophetic experience, they form an excellent entry for understanding how the Qur'an works. It is also helpful if one can get some idea of the aesthetic experience of hearing the Qur'an, either through recordings or on websites.[9] Many non-Muslims have acknowledged that the Arabic verses of the Qur'an do indeed have a powerful aesthetic effect. The name "Qur'an" itself means recitation, and it assumes that the text is read aloud rather than silently. The oral component of the Qur'an is a major part of its transmission and reception. When modern authorities in Egypt decided to print the Qur'an early in the twentieth century, this shift from handwritten manuscript to a new technology raised many questions. What is most remarkable about this process is that the new printed edition of the Qur'an was certified by oral transmitters who were viewed as authoritative custodians of the sacred text.

Readers familiar with debates over the historical composition of the Bible may wonder how the Qur'an originated. Biblical scholars have argued against Moses as author of the first books of the Bible, seeing instead a series of editors who refashioned narratives, legal codes, poetry, and prophecy over a period of many centuries. Likewise, the Gospels of the New Testament are believed to have been written down roughly between 90 and 150 C.E. When was the text of the Qur'an finalized? This ques-

tion is complicated by the traditional belief that the Prophet Muhammad was illiterate, a view that reinforces the doctrine of the miraculous character of the Qur'an; if the Prophet could neither read or write, so the argument goes, then his reception of a text of surpassing beauty and wisdom must be a divine revelation. The Arabic term that is often translated as "illiterate" (*ummi*) has another plausible interpretation: it could mean, instead, that Muhammad is the "Gentile" prophet sent to the nation (*umma*) of the Arabs. Symbolically, the illiteracy of the Prophet is parallel to the doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus, as many commentators have observed. In either case, the Word of God (whether in the form of the Qur'an or the son of God) comes into existence through divine agency rather than human initiative. Whether the Prophet was illiterate or not is debatable, especially since he was a merchant by profession and is said to have traveled widely. The revelations that he delivered seem to have been written down, in part, during his lifetime, although the accounts that we have also take for granted an amazing capacity for oral memorization among the Arabs.

According to the standard account, Muhammad's successors became concerned over the preservation of the Qur'an after several notable memorizers of the text died in battle. Verses that had been preserved written on branches, on stone, and on the hearts of men are said to have been copied out on sheets. Nevertheless, it eventually became apparent that different copies of the Qur'an contained noticeable variations. This caused 'Uthman, the third caliph (who ruled 644–52 C.E.), to establish an authoritative version of the text, and he ordered the destruction of all other copies. Interestingly, one highly respected Qur'anic scholar, Ibn Mas'ud, refused to surrender his Qur'an. Commentaries and other scholarly writings, in fact, preserve many minor variations on the received Qur'anic text. How significant are these variations?

If one looks to the history of biblical texts in comparison, it is significant that among the 5,000 surviving manuscripts of the Greek New Testament, no two are identical. For the most part, the differences are insignificant verbal variations that are easily understood as by-products of the scribal process of copying. Occasionally, however, there are manuscripts in which copyists have made deliberate changes to important words that had implications for religious debates within the early Christian Church.[10] The Qur'anic text has a certain amount of variation, which has even been codified into seven major schools of recitation and seven minor variations on those. The differences among these recitations of the Qur'an consist mainly of trivial alternatives in spelling and pronunciation of particular words, though there are occasional significant differences.[11] Although there were some early sectarian groups, particularly among the Shi'is, who alleged that certain important revelations had been suppressed, it is almost impossible to find any serious arguments in favor of this thesis today. A few modern European scholars have proposed revisionist accounts of the collection and history of the Qur'an, ranging from alternative dating of different sections to a hypercritical thesis that suggests that the Qur'an was composed a couple of centuries after the death of the Prophet. Most of this discussion was safely buried in obscure academic journals, but the Qur'an unexpectedly became a burning issue toward the end of the twentieth century.

The 1989 publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* turned the question of the Qur'an as revelation into an international controversy. Rushdie, a British-based novelist born into an Indian Muslim family, had distinguished himself with a series of bitingly sardonic works of fiction, including *Shame* (a satire on politics in Pakistan) and *Midnight's Children* (a "magical realism" interpretation of the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan). Rushdie had been educated in England, and while he

had received widespread applause and recognition there, *The Satanic Verses* was in part aimed at depicting the agonies and alienation of postcolonial Asian immigrants in England. In the midst of this complicated book occurs an extended dream sequence offering a strange account of a Middle Eastern prophet, obviously based on the Prophet Muhammad. A narrator named Salman, who acts as a scribe in recording the prophet's revelations, inserts his own words into the transcript as a kind of test, and much to his surprise, the prophet accepts them as part of the revelation. In his responses to later criticism, Rushdie tried to present this dream sequence as a postmodern depiction of the struggle of the artist or poet against religious authoritarianism, but it was widely perceived as an attack on the credibility of the Qur'an as an authentic divine revelation to Muhammad. His disclaimers were not helped by the novel's account of prostitutes in a brothel who were obviously modeled on the wives of Muhammad. In part thanks to an aggressive advertising campaign by the publisher, the novel aroused an immense outcry among Muslims around the world. The peak of the protest came on Valentine's Day in 1989, when Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, delivered a legal opinion (*fatwa*) stating that Rushdie's novel was blasphemy and the author deserved a death sentence. It is worth noting that *The Satanic Verses* also includes a satirical section apparently aimed at Khomeini himself; he appears as a mullah who is so severe that even pictures on walls run away at his approach.

What did this controversy really have to do with the Qur'an? Leaving aside the complex questions of artistic freedom and hate speech raised by the case, it is clear that Rushdie was inspired by the issue of the so-called Satanic verses. This is the name that European scholars gave to a report suggesting that the Prophet Muhammad inadvertently accepted a suggestion from the devil, thinking it was a divine revelation. Amazingly,

the verses would have permitted the Muslims to continue worshiping the pagan goddesses of the Arabs alongside the one true God (Muslim scholars refer to this report as "the lofty cranes," citing the words allegedly used in these verses to describe the goddesses as high-flying birds). A subsequent revelation is then said to have rejected or abrogated this insinuation, however. Most scholars now consider this report, which only occurs in two early compilations, to be dubious, for several reasons: it has weak transmitters, it is a suspiciously neat fit with the doctrine of Qur'anic abrogation (whereby a later revelation may invalidate an earlier one), and the story also has anachronistic details that make it questionable. It would have been inserted, moreover, in an extremely unlikely place, directly following the description of Muhammad's ascension to the divine presence (Qur'an 53:1–18). Implausible though this incident may be, it is, like many thousands of other dubious reports about the Prophet, transmitted in hadith collections; some of these reports were undoubtedly invented later to prove various points. Muslim scholars preserved all this material as part of an archival collection, even when they explicitly recognized it as problematic. What is striking is that early European Orientalists believed that this isolated report was undoubtedly true, precisely because they thought that it conclusively demonstrated something they already took for granted: the falsity of Muhammad's revelation. Rushdie had, in effect, internalized the Orientalist attack on the Prophet Muhammad. It was this voluntary alienation from Islamic identity, more than anything else, that motivated the outrage that Muslims expressed against Rushdie's novel.

When European and American media have turned their attention to the question of Qur'anic revelation, they have continued to do so with the breathless expectation that new discoveries would turn traditional Muslim attitudes upside down. Such was the case with a 1999 *Atlantic Monthly* article titled "What Is

the Koran?"[12] Citing the discovery of manuscripts in Yemen containing variations on the text of the Qur'an, this article strongly hinted that Muslim belief in the Qur'an as the Word of God would be seriously undermined by historical criticism. It is true that there is a genuine scholarly debate focusing on the lack of clearly dated Arabic manuscripts of the Qur'an prior to about 700 C.E. (the earliest dated Qur'anic text is the inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, from 692 C.E.). One group of scholars, following the work of John Wansborough, actually argues that the text of the Qur'an was not finalized for at least 200 years after the death of the Prophet. This argument, oddly enough, rests on speculative analogies rather than alternate documentary proof, so it is impossible either to prove or to disprove. The Yemeni manuscripts mentioned by the *Atlantic Monthly* article do not appear to have any startling or major changes but belong to the class of minor textual variations that have been known for centuries. There are other European scholars who maintain that the text of the Qur'an as we have it goes back to the very early years of the Muslim community. Much depends on the presuppositions with which this issue is approached.

The most peculiar thing about recent media treatments of the Qur'an is the tendency to privilege the modern reformist or fundamentalist interpretation as the only true representative of Islamic thought. Certainly one of the notable tendencies of modern history worldwide has been the fundamentalist insistence on so-called literal interpretation, which is used as a platform for resistance against secularism in the public sphere. This kind of modern globalizing fundamentalism has been especially prominent in American Christianity, and it may also be found in other religions, including Islam. Yet in making comparisons, Europeans and Americans generally assume that liberal and tolerant interpretations of scripture are typical of Judaism and Christianity, while for some reason Islam alone is exclusively

dominated by violent fundamentalism. They further assume that religious tolerance is somehow intrinsic to Christianity (and by extension Judaism), rather than being a result of disgust with the religious wars of European Catholics and Protestants.

A recent cover article for *Newsweek* magazine, "In the Beginning, There Were the Holy Books," wonders if Islam is inherently intolerant and argues that in the Qur'an, "aggressive verses have fired Muslim zealots in every age."[13] Strangely, the one Qur'anic verse that is cited (9:14) refers in context to battles with Arab pagans, and the article does not provide a single example of any later Muslim reading this text and deciding that it is imperative to kill Christians or Jews; such a conclusion would actually be contrary to historical principles of Islamic law that guarantee the rights of Christians and Jews. This article further maintains that Israeli commandos and Christian Crusaders have killed without being under the inspiration of scripture or messianic example. The Qur'an, we are told, is believed to be "God's eternal word," unlike the Bible—an assertion that would be challenged by a significant number of Jewish rabbis and Christian ministers. These dubious examples of not-so-religious violence do not explain why Muslims are supposed to be motivated exclusively by religion, while Jews and Christians evidently have more complicated lives. While it is true that Osama bin Ladin, a man who was trained as an engineer, has interpreted the Qur'an (including the verse cited above) in order to justify horrible violence, he himself refers in detail to twentieth-century history as the situation he wishes to remedy; his violence, in other words, is political and has political roots in recent history. His self-taught interpretation of the Qur'an, moreover, systematically takes verses out of context and ignores contrary views in traditional religious scholarship, grimly seeking to impose a predetermined conclusion in favor of unlimited warfare against non-Muslims.[14] In this respect, he is no different from

any Christian or Jewish extremist who proclaims himself against the world (like David Koresh) as the only righteous interpreter of God's word. Strangely, media outlets like *Newsweek* regard fundamentalists as the only true Muslims, and so they replicate and reinforce the very fundamentalist mentality that so appalls them.

One of the main misunderstandings of the Qur'an relates to the primacy of the original Arabic text. This stands in contrast to the Christian Bible, since the Greek New Testament was already a translation of what Jesus and his disciples discussed in Aramaic. Subsequent versions of the Bible followed in Latin and, after the Reformation, in the main European languages. Modern missionary societies have produced literally hundreds of translations of the Bible into every conceivable tongue. Like Orthodox Jews with Hebrew and Indian Brahmins with Sanskrit, Muslims continue to use the original language of their revelation, particularly in the daily performance of prayers. Arabic thus becomes a sacred language in this religious practice, despite the fact that it is not the native language of the vast majority of Muslims; since only about 18 percent of Muslims are Arabs, non-Arabs chant it as a foreign language, much as Catholics did with the Latin mass prior to the Vatican II reforms of the 1960s. The prestige of the Qur'an in Arabic is therefore immense, and it is regarded as an inimitable miracle; translation of the Qur'an, in the strictest sense, is therefore impossible. This opinion did not prevent certain early authorities from permitting non-Arabs to recite Qur'anic prayers in Persian translation, and for at least 1,000 years there have been interlinear translations of the Qur'an and commentaries written in other languages. It is very common today to see copies of the Qur'an with the translation into the local language alongside the Arabic. Nevertheless, a number of otherwise well-informed Europeans and Americans are under the impression that interpre-

tation of the sacred text is not possible for Muslims, since their engagement with the original text enforces a literal acceptance of it.

This misconception illustrates once again the tendency to assume that all Muslims are fundamentalists. In reality, many different traditions of interpretation of the Qur'an are to be found in the history of Islam. One of the earliest commentaries, that of Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d. 767), emphasizes the need to understand multiple meanings of words, each of which can have several different aspects. Some commentaries, like that of Tabari, are vast compilations of sometimes conflicting oral reports, transmitted as hadith from the first generations of Muslims. There are commentaries that systematically argue a sectarian interpretation, as seen in the many productions of Shi'i writers; a prominent modern representative of this school is the leading Iranian scholar 'Allama Tabataba'i. Mystical interpretation was the hallmark of the Sufis, who compiled many works reflecting their meditations about the internal sense of the Qur'an.[15] Philosophers and theologians who had drawn deeply on the writings of Aristotle and Plato applied these insights to the understanding of the sacred text as well. The existence of these many traditions of commentary underlies an important point: the average Muslim in premodern times (like the average Christian or Hindu) was not literate and necessarily relied upon the authoritative knowledge of religious experts, which was accumulated over centuries of tradition. This means that in premodern Muslim societies we do not find the Protestant model of scriptural interpretation—the believer alone with the sacred text, without the mediation of tradition. Instead, it was necessary for the average believer to turn to qualified authorities. Experts did not attempt to read the text in an individualistic fashion but relied on the many-layered discoveries of their predecessors. Far from being a faith that avoids interpretation of scripture, Islam has

been based on a rich and complex heritage with multiple ways of thinking about the Qur'an.

Another point that needs clarification is the role of the Qur'an as a source for Islamic law. There is no doubt that the prescriptions and prohibitions of the Qur'an have an enormous prestige, and in cases where they could be clearly applied, they have had a dominant authority. Nevertheless, of 6,346 verses in the Qur'an, only about 500—less than one-tenth of the total—have the form of law. The bulk of the sacred text thus consists of pieces of narrative, depictions of the afterlife and the power of God, and injunctions to have faith in God. Among the verses that have the force of legal prescription or prohibition, a great many are concerned with prayer and the religious duties of alms, fasting, and pilgrimage. Subjects such as inheritance, marriage, and divorce are indeed addressed in several passages, and there is a very small number of verses on what we would call criminal law. The Qur'an is therefore very far from being a complete code of laws that could serve as the basis for a state, whether in premodern times or today. While early legal scholars gave priority to the Qur'an as a source of law, it was unavoidable to supplement it with the example of the Prophet as revealed in hadith, with the consensus of scholars, and with the individual opinions of jurists based on analogy; all of this together formed the complex of Islamic law as an ideal, usually known as *shari'a*. In practice, premodern Islamic law was inevitably accompanied by extensive systems of administrative law created by imperial bureaucracies as well as by pre-Islamic custom and tribal law. In many cases, administrative law and local custom superseded Islamic law. With the arrival of European colonial powers in many Muslim countries in the nineteenth century, the rulers dismantled existing legal systems and imposed European legal codes wholesale, usually retaining only aspects of Islamic law relating to the personal and private sphere of marriage, divorce, and in-

heritance. Postcolonial Muslim countries have engaged in varying degrees of Islamizing experimentation with their legal systems, but in all these cases, modern legislators, bureaucrats, and ideologues (mostly without traditional legal training) are defining Islamic law in the name of the nation-state. This is a far cry from the highly developed tradition of Islamic legal scholarship that was intertwined with medieval empires. So when we speak of Muslim societies, this does not mean societies that are governed exclusively by Islamic law, since such societies did not exist; it is much less possible, therefore, to imagine societies ruled entirely by the Qur'an.

Although non-Muslims in recent years have imagined the Qur'an primarily as the ideological source for political activism, if we reconsider it as a religious text, its true importance becomes clear. Even, or especially, for those who do not know Arabic, the Qur'an is on their tongues and in their hearts as a direct sign of God's activity in the world. In a very real sense, the Qur'an as the Word of God for Muslims is parallel to Jesus as the Word of God for Christians. If one extends this analogy into religious practice, the most important ritual for Christians is Holy Communion or the Eucharist, by which the believer assimilates the body and blood of Jesus either in reality (for Catholics) or symbolically (for Protestants). In a similar way, when a Muslim recites the Qur'an, the Word of God is expressed directly on the tongue in a way that is charged with divine power. It is this experience that makes the Qur'an such a central part of Muslim religious life.