



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Introductory Notes on the Qur'an
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The Qur'an is a compilation of utterances by the Prophet Muhammad which all Muslims hold to be divinely inspired. The Qur'an is thus understood in Islam as a revelation from God (Allah). Muslim intellectuals spent a great deal of effort, in subsequent history, to understand and elucidate these ideas. The precise way in which the 'speech' of God, who in the monotheistic traditions is seen as beyond space and time, and beyond human attributes or expressions (including 'speech') enters into historical discourse was one of the issues which exercised their minds (though it was not cast or conceived of in quite these words). Another associated perplexity was whether divine mysteries were accessible to human reason, or whether they were to be accepted as such purely on authority. This last idea was part of a historical issue which divided the Muslims into different schools. The Sunni interpretation of Islam evolved in a particular direction from a concern for a legitimating authority for the political, social, legal and moral order of Muslim society. This led to a decision to treat the Qur'an, the sayings of the Prophet (Hadith), a limited extrapolation from these by way of inference to address other comparable issues and not least, consensus of the community (a theoretical ideal which in practice meant consensus of the scholars or clerics, or *ulama*) as the pillars of this order. The Shia differed fundamentally from the attribution of authority to the community (effectively the *ulama*), holding instead that the legitimate authority for the institution of the Muslim social and spiritual order belongs to the Imam descended from the Prophet who, they insisted, had designated Ali bin Abu Talib, as the leader of the Muslim ummah after him. He and his descendant-Imams, holding office by virtue of *nass* or designation, are alone qualified, with the help of divine assistance, according to the Shia creed, to lead and institute a just and moral order on earth originally revealed to the Prophet.

As a consequence, the interpretations of specific passages from the Qur'an by classical commentators may be found to differ on essential points, each school reading key expressions or passages in the text of the Qur'an in the light of, and in support of, the understanding of authority and tradition and the mental orientation (e.g. 'exoteric' or 'esoteric', socio-political or mystical) characteristic of the school of thought in question. However, all Muslims came to be united through the course of history, and continue to be so, in treating the Qur'an as the fount of inspiration in their lives, being the sacred expression of a moment in human history when God, as they firmly believe, vouchsafed moral guidance to their ancestors through the Prophet Muhammad, just as He had done to other communities through other inspired figures, and which every Muslim group or community strives to follow and re-actualise in the ongoing life of the community. Inevitably, this endeavour too shows up differences, between various groups or traditions,

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in how they understand what they take to be the exemplary event of fourteen hundred years ago with the time and place of today. Many believe that the message of the Qur'an, understood literally, is a sufficient key for a righteous order to be established for all times. Others, however (and this includes the Ismailis today, for whom this is a principle of the faith taught by the Imam) that the spirit of the Qur'an transcends the letter, and that understood in all its breadth and depth, this spirit could form the basis of bold and progressive initiatives designed to respond to challenges of the time which are vastly different from the challenges of earlier times, but which require for their solution, as all religions and indeed all moral communities recognise, the basis of a moral vision for the continual amelioration of the human condition on earth.

As these terms 'letter' and 'spirit' indicate (and others like them might well be added), the topic of the Qur'an and its influence in human history stands in need of tools of understanding and thought which go far beyond theological creed and doctrine (of the kind just indicated) and indeed well beyond the Qur'an itself and the Islamic tradition as such, to wider questions about meaning, morality, history and the human quest for justice and for personal well-being, not only in the material but also (in the broadest and humanistic sense of the word) spiritual spheres of life. The role of transcendent ideals (epitomised in the scriptural and religious concept of God) in finite existence needs to be inquired into and understood anew, in terms which are not necessarily limited to religious tradition, but take into account all forms of human creativity, including literary, philosophical, artistic and scientific creation – but also, equally, innovative action in society. The question of what are the determinants of human nature, how constant or variable it is, what the relationship of transcendent or cosmic ideals is to immediate, practical perception and impulse, and what factors are at work in the imaginative break with established patterns of life (when these become sterile or unproductive) that individuals of superior vision are able to effect, and on the basis of which they help give birth to new orders of social or communal life, are all questions which deserve the most elaborate intellectual application. No less puzzling are the mysteries of artistic vision and creation (in which the very best of religious expression is entirely at one with an aspect of what is understood as art). As the term 'mysteries' indicates, these may never be susceptible to rational or scientific explanation. But as they confer the gift of meaning to human life, and as in the first instance meaning is neither rational nor emotional (for these categories are but culturally secondary), but part and parcel of a basic existence, where these distinctions do not yet apply, it affords a starting-point for an inquiry which brings the full range of human faculties – thought, feeling, will and bodily life – into consideration. Obviously, this is a level of reflection and meditation (as distinguished from scholarly research, which is a secondary and specialised activity) where the insights of art, science and religion blend into a common quest, and which thus transcends the vocabulary and thought-forms of specific, institutionally religious, scholastic or cultural traditions (though they may exist in a latent form at the heart of the best of such traditions).

Needless to say, these considerations are of too wide a scope to even begin to be explored here. But as anyone sensitive to the form, music and meaning of language, and who has



heard the Qur'an recited will attest, it has an unmistakable charisma and intensity of its own, all the more vivid for being associated with founding events in history. This power may subdue individuality, and be harnessed, in the hands of rhetoricians, for purposes of the group mind, or for mobilisation for ideological ends. But that part of the Qur'an which alludes to the longings, the setbacks, the hopes, the quest for some sort of a harmony between happiness and virtue (which the religious way of thinking, noting its absence in the conditions of the world, attributes to an order yet to come, an ideal or 'ultimate' order – the *âkhira*) speaks continually to the inner being of individual Muslims. It does so in moments when, looking at one's individual life under the rubric of the human condition, an individual craves for the balm of meaning and assurance in the midst of illness, infirmity, reversals of fortune, social turmoil, solitude, or in the shadow of death; or rejoices at the advent of new life, or at personal success or achievement, where piety causes the joy to be tempered – hence rendered morally meaningful – by a sense of dependence on and openness and gratitude to God.

It is only right to remember that the Qur'an consists of much else besides this. It fulminates against the opponents of the Prophet, who fought battles against them. It denounces the perfidies of Jews and Christians. It prescribes regulations of diet, dress, commercial transactions and sexual liaison; and decrees punishments for their breach. Muslims in the liberal age, shaped by modern ideals of equality, liberty, citizenship, the sanctity of individual conscience and penal reform, are understandably impelled to distinguish between what they regard as the universal and the historically circumstantial elements in scripture; while their adversaries in argument insist that to make such distinctions is to subject the divine word to a picking and choosing dictated by the received wisdom of a particular (not necessarily godly) age. There is nothing specifically Islamic in these opposing positions. One may easily discern uncannily close parallels in the Jewish and Christian worlds. They are inevitable when an increasingly numerous, increasingly differentiated people, living in increasingly diversified, ever-altering milieus, seek to legitimate their varying responses and positions by appealing to the unvarying words of a single text, ostensibly finding in it the source of their all too current responses to all too current problems and opportunities.

Against those who maintain that a scriptural text provides pre-ordained answers to the proliferating issues of subsequent ages, it is sufficient to point out that the historicity of the Quran is there for all to see. There is history both within and around the Qur'an; *in* it, insofar as the flow of time, the unfolding dynamic of action and retrospective interpretation, forms the very character of its idiom; *around* it, in that the words and their meanings are anything but self-contained – they derive their sense as well as force, and not least, boundaries, from the universe of meaning specific to the time and place in question, hence too from the universe of experience anchored therein.

In this light, the notion of re-interpreting the text, or of distinguishing between supposedly 'universal' and 'historical' elements, may be seen as not going far enough. It is liable to succumb to apologetic manipulations, in which one finds a warrant in the text for virtually every major idea important to a later generation. Only, it is not now



recognised for what it is, but proclaimed instead as the ‘true’ or ‘real’ meaning of the divine message. Nor must we seek escape from this challenge, on the other hand, in the fashionable formula, much touted in our so-called post-modern age, that there is no ‘true’ meaning, just as (so we are told) there are no objective facts in human affairs – only (in the trivialising jargon of our day) ‘constructions’. For if there is such a thing as human nature (and a multitude of weighty considerations point towards rather than against this idea) it follows that those convictions and claims are true and wise, in contradistinction from others, which lead to the realisation and fulfilment of that nature, and thus to human well-being and felicity (a term now unfortunately in disuse) of the most comprehensive and complete kind attainable in this world.

In this perspective, the Qur’an is not only an entity but a symbol – a symbol, that is, of that kind of turning-point in human experience and awareness which marks the entry of the ideal in the realm of human affairs; in which a mode of being hitherto hidden in the ossified structures of habitual, codified and custom-bound experience is revealed in all its glory, terror and awesomeness. To see that this is so, one has only to glance at the large parts of the Qur’an (as of the Hebrew scriptures and the gospels), which speak about the Last Day (or of equivalent images). But the allusions to the other life, for all their sombre vividness, derive their force, and are of a piece with the struggle for worldly transformation, identical with the coming of Islam, in the here and now. In this sense, what is ‘historical’ is not simply the ‘context’ but (by definition) the whole process of transformation. If this is accepted, a conclusion of immense magnitude suggests itself. It follows that the way to ‘remember’, to cherish and to discharge one’s debt to the revelation is not through fixation on the letter (for fixation is a form of idolisation; and worship, on Islamic terms, belongs to God alone) nor simply by ‘re-interpreting’ the text (for textual re-interpretation – after all a scholastic activity – is only a branch rather than the root of the creative impulse). It consists, rather, in undertaking altogether new, creative, and above all ethical action in human history. The greater the difference between the time of the Qur’an and a contemporary epoch, the more radically new will be the shape of the action, the standards by which it is measured, and the goals to which it is directed. But, as the mainstays of human nature are constant in time and place (and here the absolute claims of history in the modern sense must surely be tempered) the ancient symbols, which it is the genius of prophets, sages, great philosophers and artists to find and express, will for ever strike a chord in the minds and hearts of generations to come.

It is too easily forgotten, in this connection, that the Qur’an was a spoken utterance before it was ever – as it happens, well after the death of the Prophet – compiled into a book. It was not in the first instance a ‘scripture’. Studies of the Qur’an which take ‘scripture’ as a starting-point are thus essentially mistaken. This point is made here not with a view to making an academic (‘anthropological’) point about the relative primacy of ‘oral’ over written ‘discourse’; nor to cast aspersions on the authenticity of the text as we have it (although critical explorations of the history of the text are valid in their own scholarly context); rather, simply, to drive home the immense difference that obtains, *existentially*, between words which are part of an *event*, and words which are enshrined between the covers of a book. The latter, one *reads*; the former is something which one witnesses; to



which one may listen and answer; by which one may feel summoned and seized, perhaps even shattered in the sense of bringing about a change of heart and being; and by which one may be spurred into practical action. All this constitutes the *event*. The power of the words which irradiate and set aflame as it were the pages on which they are written, escaping all effects of ‘bookishness’, is evident to anyone sensitive to the language. The ability to see beyond the actual content and meaning of the words – to see in them an example, a *symbol*, of world-creation (‘world’ here encompassing both meaning and action) – is less automatically evident. It demands subtle awareness and discrimination. It demands a humanistic sense, in which, while man is not put in place of God, what is deemed to be the revelatory power of the word is seen in seamless continuity with the creative potentialities of the human spirit. This implies that the power of the event which the Qur’an represents has a forward reference, beyond its words and contents. In the appropriate mind-set, it serves as a reminder of the capacity that the human spirit has, in the arenas of moral action, artistic creation or intellectual contribution to knowledge, to allow being to disclose itself anew to man. Under the tutelage of the revealed – in fact, the *revealing* – word, the phenomenal self learns that it is not the master of truth, nor the author of being, yet a privileged vehicle for the disclosure of a mode of being of which awe and wonder, worship and exaltation, and above all moral action in the world are the natural counterparts.

Ultimately, the impact of a revealing word has ramifications and roots in the human condition which are by no means confined (and at times, best not confined) to religious or theological categories. Yet no community as such lives by universal maxims. It cherishes, and finds direction from particular symbols which happen to be its historical legacy, and from which it derives its specific identity. Ismailis may possibly draw meaning from the symbolic implications of the principle of a living Imamate through which the appropriation of Qur’anic meanings in the life of the community is mediated. In the symbolic possibilities evoked by this principle and by the emphasis on spirit over letter, they may find an access to and a perspective on the Qur’an safely distant from some of the uses of the Qur’an observable in our day which have the effect of blighting rather than fostering individuality; and which, by setting Islam at odds with the rest of the world, converts ancient antagonisms into wholly new, and socially as well as morally ruinous divisions and confrontations.