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Article

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Islam today is the religion of about one billion people. It is far from correct to think that all Muslims are familiar with the story of how their religion became established. History as such has never held much interest for most Muslims. What is important about historical events is simply that God works through them. The significant events of the past are those that have a direct impact on people's present situation and their situation in the next world.

From this point of view, the one event of overwhelming significance is God's revelation of the Koran. The actual historical and social circumstances in which it was revealed relate to an extremely specialized field of learning that few scholars ever bothered with. The fact that Western historians have devoted a great deal of attention to this issue says something about modern perceptions of what is real and important, but it tells us nothing about Muslim perceptions of the Koran's significance.

Most of this book will be dedicated to bringing out some of the more obvious implications of the Koran's teachings, including what the Koran has to say about itself. At this point, however, it may be useful to say something about the form of the Koran, since most of our readers have probably never seen the book itself, though some may have seen a translation.

Notice that we make a distinction between the Koran and a translation of the Koran. This is normal procedure in the Muslim view of things, in marked contrast with the Christian view, according to which the Bible is Bible, no matter what language it may be written in. For Muslims, the divine Word assumed a specific, Arabic form, and that form is as essential as the meaning that the words convey. Hence only the Arabic Koran is the Koran, and translations are simply interpretations. Translations into the local language of the Islamic world, particularly Persian, were made at a very early date. However, these were not independent books but rather interlinear commentaries on the meaning of the text and aids to understanding.

The Arabic form of the Koran is in many ways more important than the text's meaning. After all, Muslims have disagreed over the exact interpretation of Koranic verses as much as followers of other religions

have disagreed over their own scriptures. One of the sources of the richness of Islamic intellectual history is the variety of interpretations provided for the same verses. Muslim thinks often quote the Prophet to the effect that every verse of the Koran has seven meanings, beginning with the literal sense, and as for the seventh and deepest meaning, God alone knows that. (The Prophet's point is obvious to anyone who has studied the text carefully.) The language of the Koran is synthetic and imaginistic – each word has a richness having to do with the special genius of the Arabic language. People naturally understand different meanings from the same verse.

The richness of Koranic language and its receptivity toward different interpretation help explain how this single book could have given shape to one of the world's great civilizations. If everyone had understood exactly the same thing from the text, the religion would never have spread as widely as it has. The Book had to address both the simple and the sophisticated, the shepherd and the philosopher, the scientist and the artist.

The Koran says that God never sends a message except in the language of the people to whom it is addressed: Revelation conforms to the needs of its recipients. The Koran also tells us that Muhammad was sent to all the world's inhabitants. In order to present a message understandable to everyone in the world, the Koran had to speak a language that everyone could understand. And Islam did in fact spread very quickly to most of the civilizations of the world, from China and South-east Asia to Africa and Europe. These people spoke a great diversity of languages – and we mean not only languages of the tongue, but also languages of the heart and mind. The Koran has been able to speak to all of them because of the peculiarities of its own mode of discourse.

Far from being a hindrance to the spread of Islam, as some have imagined, the Arabic language has been an aid. Although the form of the text was fixed, the meaning was left with fluidity and adaptability. People who did not know Arabic were forced to learn the Arabic text and then understand it in terms of their own cultural and linguistic heritage. But no one's interpretation could be final. The next generation could not depend exclusively upon the previous generation's translation and commentary any more than it could ignore the understanding of the text established by the tradition. Each Muslim needs to establish his or her own connection with the scripture. All serious Muslims were forced to enter into this Arabic universe of discourse – a universe, indeed, which they considered divine.

If, on the one hand, the Arabic Koran encouraged diversity of understanding, on the other, it encouraged unity of form. All Muslims recited the same scripture in the same language. They recite their daily required prayers more or less identically. Indeed, given the basic importance of God's revealed Word, recitation is the major way of participating in the Word. Understanding is secondary, because no one can fathom the meaning of God's Word completely. The most important task is to receive and preserve the divine Word. Its Arabic form is all important. What one does with the form that one receives follows after receiving it.

A translation of the Koran is not the Koran., but an interpretation of its meaning. The Koran has been

translated dozens of times into English. Each translation represents one person's understanding of the text, each is significantly different from the others, and none is the Koran itself. There is but one Word, but there are as many interpretations of that Word as there are readers...

This is not to say that Islam is a cacophony of divergent interpretations – far from it. By and large there is much less diversity of opinions on the fundamentals of faith and practice than, for example, in Christianity. Those who try their hand at interpretation have to undergo a great deal of training to enter into the Koran's world of discourse. Moreover, this training is accompanied by the embodiment of the Koran through recitation and ritual. The Koran possesses an obvious power to transform those who try to approach it on its own terms. This is precisely what Islam is all about – submission to the will of God as revealed in the Koran – but this is not simply a voluntary submission. The Koran establishes an existential submission in people so that they come to express its fundamental message through their mode of being, no matter how "original" their interpretations may be.

Of course, we are speaking of Koranic interpretation in the context of Islamic faith and practice. Many Westerners who have not been sympathetic toward Islam have offered their interpretations of the Koranic text. There is no reason to suppose that such interpretations will help non–Muslims understand the text that reveals itself to Muslims.

The Arabic book that goes by the name Koran is about as long as the New Testament. In most editions it is between 200 and 400 pagers in length. In contrast to the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the Koran issued from the mouth of a single person, who recited what he heard from the angel Gabriel. Both the Jewish and the Christian scriptures are collections of many books that were written down by a large number of human beings, and opinions differ as to their status as revelation. Even if we say that the books of the Bible were all revealed, they were revealed to different people who did not live at the same time or in the same place.

The Koran is divided into chapters of unequal length, each of which is called a sura, a word that means literally "a fence, enclosure, or any part of a structure." The shortest of the suras has ten words, and the longest sura, which is placed second in the text, has 6,100 words. The first sura, the Fatihah ("The Opening"), is relatively short (twenty–five words). From the second sura onward, the suras gradually decrease in length, although is not a hard and fast rule. The last sixty suras take up about as much space as the second.

The Suras are divided into short passages, each of which is called an aya. Some of the longer ayas are much longer than the shortest suras. The word aya is often translated as "verse," but literally it means "sign." This is an extremely significant word, and we will discuss it in some detail.

The content of the Koran is reminiscent of parts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The Koran tells stories about many of the same persons and draws conclusions for its listeners' edification. The Koran calls the great human exemplars of the past prophets and mentions as the most important of

these Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Moses is mentioned by name more than any other person, followed by Pharaoh, his great enemy, who is the Koranic archetype of human evil.

The Koran elaborates on the ways in which the followers of the prophets, specifically the Jews and the Christians, have or have not lived up to the prophetic messages. It issues instructions on how to live a life pleasing to God. It tells people that they should pray, fast, and take care of the needy. It goes into great detail concerning human interrelationships – such as laws of inheritance and marriage – in a manner reminiscent of parts of the Hebrew Bible but foreign to the New Testament. It tells people that they should observe God's instructions purely for God's sake, not for any worldly aims. It warns those who deny God's message that they will be thrown into the fire of hell, and it promises those who accept the messages that they will be given the bliss of paradise.

Much more than the Judeo–Christian Bible, the Koran talks specifically about God. No matter what the topic may be, it finds occasion to refer the discussion back to God., if only by the device of attaching clauses mentioning God by one or more of his names, such as "And God is the Mighty, the Knowing."

For Westerners, the Koran is an extremely difficult text to appreciate, especially in translation. Even for those who have spent enough years studying the Arabic language to read the original, the Koran may appear as disorderly, inaccurate, and illogical. However, there is enough evidence provided by Islamic civilization itself, and by the great philosophers, theologians, and poets who have commented on the text, to be sure that the problem lies on the side of the reader, not the book. The text is undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary ever put down on paper. Precisely because it is extraordinary, it does not follow people's expectations as to what a book should be.

At the height of the imperialist era, when social Darwinism had convinced a large number of Westerners that they were situated at the peak of human perfection, many scholars looked upon Muslims with disdain for thinking theta the Koran was worthy of respect. From that high point of human progress, the Koran appeared as a badly written mishmash of old sayings and superstitions.

Most Western scholarship of a more recent vintage has dropped the assumption of cultural superiority and looked at the Koran as a book that has its own unique genius. Positive evaluations are much easier to find that they were fifty years ago. Nevertheless, major barriers remain that prevent an appreciation of the Koran by non–Muslims or by those who do not have a thorough training in the Arabic language and the Islamic sciences. Even such training does not guarantee access to the book.

Many Muslims, especially those who are native Arabic speakers, feel a proprietary relationship to the Koran. However, it is not uncommon to meet people who know a great deal of the text by heart but have not the slightest understanding of the world view that permeates it. This does not necessarily hinder them from absorbing the Koran's transforming influence. But does meant that they are unable to express the Koran's meaning in a way that harmonizes with their own tradition.

The nature of the Koranic world view presents a fundamental barrier to understanding the book. It is true

that the Koran's view of things has a deep kinship with both the Jewish and Christian world views, but most people in the modern world have little understanding of those world views either. Simply attending synagogue, church, or mosque does not mean that one sees things any differently from contemporary atheists. Our culture's dominant ways of thinking are taught to us not in our place of worship, but in our media and educational institutions. We may like to think that our education is scientific and unbiased, but this is a highly biased judgement, as many contemporary tinkers and social critics have told us.[1]

As a rule, it seems, when people with no grounding in the Islamic world view pick up a translation of the Koran, they have their prejudices confirmed, whatever these may be. No real entrance into the Koranic view of things is possible without some idea of the type of thinking that infuses the text. And that thinking is foreign to the way that we are taught to think in our own culture and in modern education in general.

We do not mean to suggest that people with a modern mindset – which includes practically all English-speaking or modern educated Muslims – will not be able to understand anything of the Koran, or that they should not bother reading the available translations, First of all, the very fact that the Koran has been translated means that the translator has accomplished the task of bringing it into the range of modern way of thinking – and, of course, by that very fact may have severely distorted the meaning. In any case, everyone curious about Islam who cannot read Arabic should certainly read the book in translation. As a rule, it is much more useful to open it at random and read a few pages than to try to go through it systematically.

The Koranic world view is closely tied to the Arabic language, which, like Hebrew and Aramaic (the language spoken by Jesus), belongs to the Semitic family. The internal logic of Semitic languages is very different from that of Indo-European languages such as English, Latin, Sanskrit, and Persian. To begin with, each word derives from a root that is typically made up of three letters. From the three letter root, many hundreds of derived forms can be constructed, though usually only a few score of these are actually used. We will often discuss Arabic words in explaining the meaning of concepts. Without such discussion it would be impossible to suggest the richness of the associated meanings, the difficulty of translating words into English, and the interrelationships among Arabic words that are obvious in the original.

1. Those interested in learning more about some of the criticisms we have in mind might begin by looking at the books cited by Lawrence E. Sullivan in his masterly study, Ic\nchu's Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religions (New York, Macmillan, 1988), pp.884–85. What he says in the passage leading up to the suggested reading applies also to Western perceptions of Islam: "One of the great disservices to our understanding of South American religions (read: Islam) has been the perception of tribal people (read: Muslims) as slavishly dedicated to an unchanging order revealed in the images of myth and handed down unquestioned and unmodified from one generation to the next.

This attitude accompanies the evaluation of 'myth' as a banal and inane narrative. Tribal peoples (representing 'archaic' modes of thought) childishly cling to their myths., infantile fantasies, whereas mature contemporaries jettison myths with the passage of 'historical times' and the 'entrance' into 'modernity'. It would be fascinating to study these and other justifications proffered for avoiding a serious encounter with the reality of myth [read: Islamic thought] and symbolic acts....
This is not the place to carry out a history of the 'modern' ideas of myth and religion. It is enough to suggest that the

Western cultural imagination turned away when it encountered the stunning variety of cultural worlds that appeared for the first time in the Age of Discovery. Doubtless this inward turn sparked the appearance of all sorts of imaginary realities. The Enlightenment, the withdrawal of Western thinkers from the whirling world of cultural values into an utterly imaginary world of 'objective' forms of knowledge, and its intellectual follow-up coined new symbolic currency.
These terms brought new meanings and self-definition to Western culture: 'consciousness/unconsciousness,' 'primitive/civilized,' 'ethics/mores,' 'law/custom,' 'critical or reflective thought/action,'"

Links

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