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THE STORY OF THE
QUR'AN

ITS HISTORY AND PLACE
IN MUSLIM LIFE

Second edition

INGRID MATTSON

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BLESSED WORDS

The Qur'an and Culture

The Qur'an as the Word of God

An obvious, but not to be overlooked, fact is that Muslims across the world read and recite the Qur'an in Arabic; that this is true now, as it has been from the beginning of Islam, is not a historical necessity. In the early twenty-first century, only a minority (fewer than 20 percent) of Muslims are Arabs; the rest are indigenous speakers of other languages: Persian, Urdu, Bangla, Malay, Wolof, Amharic, Turkish, Berber, Hausa, English, etc. The cultural diversity of the Muslim world is not a new development. Indeed, it is likely that within two centuries of the rise of Islam, the majority of Muslims were non-Arabic speakers.¹ As we have emphasized earlier, a significant loss in translation is the sound of the Arabic Qur'an. To translate the Qur'an to another language is to lose the powerful aural effect of the rhymes, assonance, and other harmonious and poetic aspects of the Arabic words. In addition, it is clearly impossible to reproduce the *tajwid* of the recited Qur'an in a translation. However, languages other than Arabic have their own beauty and efficacy and, over the centuries, Muslims have employed their mother tongues to deliver sermons, compose religious poetry, narrate stories of prophets and righteous imams, explicate and interpret the Qur'an, and explore Islamic law and ethics. That Muslims across the world continue to employ Arabic to read and recite the Qur'an is a fact that merits some explanation.

Most importantly, the Qur'an declares itself in a number of places to be "an Arabic Qur'an," for example,

Verily We revealed it as an Arabic Qur'an.

(Yusuf; 12:2)

Muslims understand these verses to indicate an inexorable connection between the language and substance of the revelation. Hence, any translation of the Qur'an cannot be considered "Qur'an."

That God sent the Qur'an through Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad is something his Companions knew and believed. These men and women lived the miracle of the prophetic experience; they did not need to frame this experience in philosophical language. When Abu Bakr heard that the Prophet Muhammad said that he had been taken to Jerusalem and then into the Divine Presence in the "Night Journey," he declared, "If he says so then it is true. And what is so surprising in that? He tells me that news comes to him from heaven to earth in an hour of a day or night and I believe him, and that is more extraordinary than that which stupifies you!"²

For later generations of Muslims, however, the ontological status of the sacred book became an issue of increasing concern. By the end of the first century, Muslims were raising questions about the meaning of phrases such as "the word of God" and "God's speech." Did these expressions mean that God spoke in the manner of human beings? If this was not the case, how could Moses, for example, have heard God when he "spoke" to him (7:143)? At the same time, the Qur'an describes the revelation as being brought by the "trustworthy spirit" (understood to be Gabriel) to the "heart" of the Prophet. What, then, was the mechanism by which Muhammad received the revelation? Did he "hear" it or did he just "understand" it? The Qur'anic description that it is to be found on a "guarded tablet" (85:22) led to further ambiguities. For some theologians, this phrase gave occasion to propose a kind of liminal stage of revelation, when the eternal and unchanging speech of God was captured in concrete form. It was from this heavenly transcription that Gabriel took the Qur'an that he brought to the Prophet Muhammad. In the end, the question remained, even if the Prophet perfectly conveyed the words of the Qur'an, as all Muslims agreed, to what extent did the sound of the words replicate the actual speech of God?

For some theologians, the notion that God could or would produce sounds capable of being heard by humans suggested that God shared some aspects of his creation. In their estimation, this understanding approached anthropomorphism and violated the Qur'anic statement, *There is none like him* (42:11). To preserve the utter "otherness" of God from his creation, these theologians concluded that it was necessary to describe the Qur'an as

the *created* word of God. A group of these theologians, who became known as the "Mu'tazilites," promoted this doctrine in bitter opposition to other Muslim scholars, particularly the hadith scholars, who were highly skeptical of the philosophical discourse (*kalam*) being used to frame the issue and the potential for degrading the unique authority of the Qur'an by making it part of creation.

By the early third century, the ontological status of the Qur'an had become a highly contentious and politicized issue when the 'Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun used it to test the loyalty of prominent scholars and judges. Researchers have suggested a number of possible motivations for al-Ma'mun's establishment of this "test" (*mihna*). Among other possibilities, there is substantial evidence to suggest that al-Ma'mun was eager to claim not just political but also religious authority for himself. Many of his predecessors had ceded much religious authority to scholars, who sometimes used that authority to criticize the policies of the rulers. On a personal level, al-Ma'mun, like the English King Henry VIII many centuries later, found himself prevented from divorcing his wife by a religiously based law he did not have the authority to override.

Whatever al-Ma'mun's motives may have been, the letter he sent out to judges and scholars explaining his position is a clear explication of the Mu'tazilite position:

Among those things which the Commander of the Faithful [i.e., the caliph] has made plain to himself by reflection, and has studied intently by his thinking so that the great danger attending it has become obvious, as well as the seriousness of the corruption and harm which will rebound on religion, are the statements which the Muslims are passing round among themselves about the Qur'an, which God has established as an exemplar for them and an enduring legacy to them of the Messenger of God and His chosen One, Muhammad. The confusion of opinion about the Qur'an in the minds of many people is such that it has seemed good to them and attractive to their intellects that it is not created. They thereby lay themselves open to the risk of rejecting God's creative power, by which He is distinguished from His creation and remains apart in His splendor in the bringing into existence of all things by means of His wisdom and their being originated by His power, and in His priority in time over them by reason of His primordial existence, whose beginning cannot be attained and whose extent cannot be comprehended. Everything apart from Him is a created object from His creation and a new thing which He has brought into existence. Even though the Qur'an itself speaks about God's creative power, sets forth its proof and decisively

confutes all difference of opinion about it, these people talk just like the Christians when they claim that Jesus the son of Mary was not created, because he was the word of God.³

The reference to Christian trinitarian doctrine shows that one of the Mu'tazilites' major concerns was to articulate a theology of the Qur'an that maintained the perfect unicity (*tawhid*) of God. Indeed, many researchers suggest that the Mu'tazilites resorted to philosophical discourse to describe the relationship of God to the Qur'an precisely to counter critiques of Islam by Christian and other non-Muslim apologists.

Whatever the origin of the controversy, the political dimension of the imposition of a dogma unpopular with the majority of religious scholars was of paramount importance for those living under the 'Abbasid ruler during al-Ma'mun's reign and for centuries afterward. Thus, the great Iraqi historian al-Tabari (d. 310/923), despite his dislike for some Baghdadi Hanbalites who, in fact, harassed him for his views, presents a positive description of their eponym's refusal to concede to the demands of the state. Ahmad ibn Hanbal was a prominent hadith scholar and charismatic religious leader in Baghdad. It was no doubt Ahmad's widespread influence among the people of the capital city that made him a target for tests of political loyalty. Ahmad, like other scholars who were summoned to publicly support the Mu'tazilite doctrine, was threatened with imprisonment and corporal punishment if he refused. While many others capitulated under the intense pressure, a few did not; among them was Ahmad ibn Hanbal.

The conversations that reportedly took place between Ahmad and his inquisitor, Ishaq ibn Ibrahim, reveal a great deal about Ahmad's view of the proper way for the believer to approach the ontology of the Divine:

Ishaq ibn Ibrahim asked Ahmad, "What is your view concerning the Qur'an?"

Ahmad replied, "It is the word of God."

Ishaq asked, "Is it created?"

Ahmad replied, "It is the word of God, I cannot add any more to these words."

[Ibrahim continued to question Ahmad about some things then said:]

"What do the words, 'a hearing and a seeing one' mean?"

Ahmad replied, "God is even as He has described Himself."

Ishaq said, "But what does it mean?"

Ahmad replied, "I do not know. He is just as He has described Himself."⁴

Ahmad's response is interesting not so much for what he says as for what he does not say, or perhaps more accurately, *how* he will not say

what is being demanded of him. At the most basic level, Ahmad refuses to allow the interrogator to frame the question. For Ahmad, it is not acceptable for humans with their limited understanding to impose categories and concepts upon God. Only God has the authority to describe himself and it is only through his revelation that we have certain knowledge of his nature.

The reach of the *mihna* was neither deep nor wide, for only judges and scholars of hadith were tested. Nevertheless, the dramatic events had a profound effect on the scholarly community and significant ramifications for the division of political and religious authority during this formative period of Islamic history. The 'Abbasids learned that their violent attempts to control religious scholars did not further their legitimacy as defenders of the faith. They ended the *mihna*, and, although the 'Abbasid caliphs and their administrators did not completely back away from trying to control religious authority, they became less directly involved. Instead of interpreting law and theology themselves, political authorities encouraged and supported the development of more formal educational institutions and standards to stabilize the growing community of religious specialists. In turn, this meant that the *mihna* had the long-term effect of strengthening the social profile of the scholarly class, who henceforth tried to assert their independence from political rulers to judge on matters of religious law and belief, while simultaneously calling upon the power of the state from time to time to enforce the orthodoxy they delineated.

By the end of the third century, most Muslim scholars rejected non-engagement in theological discourse *à la* Ahmad ibn Hanbal as a viable option, despite their admiration for his courageous refusal to submit to political pressure. Once questions and doubts had been raised about the nature of God, the ontological status of the Qur'an, and the epistemological relationship of reason to revelation, these questions had to be answered. As with the study of law, a few intellectual schools formed around the systematizing efforts of particular scholars, who emerged as leaders in the struggle to define orthodoxy. Sunni Islam came to be dominated by the Ash'arites and the Maturidis: the schools of the Iraqi scholar Abu'l-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 323/935) and the Central Asian scholar Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 333/944), respectively.

In order to preserve the unique ontological status of revelation, both schools rejected the Mu'tazilite doctrine that the Qur'an was created and upheld the view that God's speech is one of his uncreated attributes. At the same time, these theologians were keen to avoid the implication the

Mu'tazilites had feared, that the Qur'an is somehow an incarnation of God's word.

At the popular level, orthodox Sunni theology was articulated in the relatively short "creed" (*'aqida*) of the Egyptian scholar Abu Ja'far al-Tahawi (d. 321/935), a contemporary of al-Ash'ari and al-Maturidi. Among the hundred or so articles of the creed is the following addressing the nature of the Qur'an:

The Qur'an is the word of God. It came from Him as speech without it being possible to say how. He sent it down on His Messenger as revelation. The believers accept it as absolute truth. They are certain that it is, in truth, the word of God. It is not created as is the speech of human beings, and anyone who hears it and claims that it is human speech has become an unbeliever.⁵

On the academic level, the Ash'aris and the Maturidis developed a sophisticated analysis of language and meaning, distinguishing between the recited words of the Qur'an (the signifiers) and their perceived meaning (the signified). The following passage from a major fifth/eleventh-century Ash'arite treatise, "The Guide (*al-Irshad*)" of Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni (d. 478/1085), demonstrates how this distinction is used to show that the created sounds of Qur'an recitation, articulated by a human reciter, are not God's eternal speech, but rather signify God's eternal speech:

The recitation, according to the orthodox, consists of the sounds of the readers and their intonation, which are acquisitions of theirs, commanded of them in the state required by certain acts of ritual obeisance or recommended at many other times. ... Recitation is something that is agreeable on the part of one reader and disagreeable when done by another. It can be defective or regular and exact. The eternal attribute, however, transcends all of the things to which we allude here. No person of true discrimination would ever think that the sounds that make his throat hoarse or engorge abnormally his jugular veins, and which, in accord with proclivity or desires, may be pronounced incorrectly or correctly, loudly or furtively, are the actual words of the Exalted God. This is our creed with respect to the recitation. In regard to what is recited in the process of recitation, a part of the recitation is grasped and understood and that is the eternal speech which the expressions signify but which are not it. Moreover, what is recited is not incarnate in the reciter nor does it subsist in him. The situation of the recitation and what is recited is like an invocation and what is invoked. The invocation belongs to the statements of those who invoke, and the Lord who is invoked, hallowed and glorified,

is not the invocation, nor the hallowing nor the glorifying. ... The words of the Exalted God are written in copies of the Qur'an, preserved in the breast, but they do not inhere in the copy nor subsist in the heart. The writing, by which it is expressed, either through the movements of the person who writes or through inscribed letters and imprinted lines, is altogether temporally contingent. What the lines signify is the eternal speech.⁶

This subtle understanding of the written and recited Qur'an as the signification of the speech of God was not acceptable to all schools of thought. The Hanbalites generally held onto their eponym's refusal to describe the Qur'an in any terms other than how it describes itself. In turn, Ash'arite and Maturidi scholars continued to characterize the Hanbalite position as vulgar and anthropomorphic.

In the end, although discussions of the ontological status of the Qur'an were obscure to the vast majority of Muslims, the issue became an aspect of dogma upon which all theological schools took a position. For centuries, ordinary Muslims repeated statements about the uncreated word of God as they recited dogmatic creeds taught to them in schools and mosques. Such creeds were dropped from the curriculum in many modern Muslim educational systems, which aimed to avoid sectarian controversies. However, the issue never disappeared completely in modern Muslim discourse and indeed, it resurfaced with some vengeance in the latter part of the twentieth century. Since that time, neo-traditionalist Ash'arites and Maturidis have tried to reclaim authority from Hanbalite theologians who had gained the upper hand through the widespread distribution of their views by means of publications and lectures originating in Saudi Arabia.

The Qur'an and Sacred Architecture

Theological controversies aside, Muslims are united in the belief that the Qur'an is the word of the Divine. In whatever sense they have understood this phrase, Muslims have been in agreement that the Qur'an has a unique ontological status. It is for this reason that Muslim societies are infused with the sound and script of the Qur'an. Oral and written tradition support and complement each other to allow God's word to reach the heart of every believer.

It is said that in pre-Islamic Arabia, the master poems, the *Mu'allaqat*, were recited in the market of 'Ukaz and hung on the Ka'ba. After the rise of Islam, God's words were recited day and night in the sanctuary of Mecca,

and the Ka'ba was draped in cloth embroidered with Qur'anic verses.⁷ Across the centuries, as Semitic, European, Asian, and African peoples embraced Islam, their soundscapes and landscapes too were transformed with the words of the Qur'an. Qur'anic recitation fills the air of Muslim societies as schoolchildren repeat verses after their teachers, loudspeakers broadcast morning and evening prayers from the mosques, groups gather to recite Qur'an upon the death anniversary of relatives, and shopkeepers play recitations of famous *Qaris* ("Reciters") for their customers.

On the visual plane, Qur'anic verses rendered by hand in elegant calligraphy and masterful engraving decorate mosques and homes; elsewhere, verses printed on mass-produced calendars and kitschy wall-clocks are displayed. Everywhere, the protective, blessed, and talismanic presence of the Word of God is experienced.⁸

By the time Islam established a presence in Europe and Asia, most major religious traditions already present on these two continents (excluding Judaism) invoked the sacred with images, although many of these traditions, including Christianity and Buddhism, had passed through significant periods of aniconism or iconoclasm.⁹ Islam's rejection of figurative religious art can be traced to the Prophet Muhammad's destruction of the idols housed in the Ka'ba. When Mecca surrendered to the Prophet in 8/630, the inhabitants of the city agreed to embrace Islam and Muhammad as their spiritual and political leader. On the basis of this authority, Muhammad cleansed the Ka'ba of the idols, just as his ancestor Abraham had destroyed the idols of his people. Abraham had prayed that his descendants would never again resort to idol worship (14:35; 21:55–67); despite his prayer, the Quraysh had allowed the Ka'ba to become a house of idols. Perhaps this furthered their economic goals, for allowing merchants a space in the Ka'ba for their idols may have helped Mecca become an important center of commerce. We might find in Muhammad's destruction of the idols echoes of Jesus' forceful action in clearing the temple of the moneychangers.

Because the Ka'ba occupies a unique position in Islamic spirituality and worship as the place of pilgrimage and the direction of prayer, it is the Prophet's mosque at Medina that provides the basic model for all other mosques. Thus, all later mosques have an open, roughly rectangular prayer hall with some indication of the direction of the Ka'ba (the *qibla*) in the wall. Very early in Islamic history, mosques adopted a variety of architectural features to facilitate the functions performed there, as well as to honor and dignify the place of prayer. Among these features is the *mihrab*, a niche in the wall indicating the *qibla*, often the site of elaborate decoration. The



Figure 4.1 Interior of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, Turkey. Light streams into the prayer space reminding worshippers that God is the Light of the heavens and the earth (Nur 24:35). (Photo: Li McLelland)

minaret, a tower from which the *mu'adhdhin* makes the call to prayer (the *adhan*), quickly became another feature of most mosque architecture and a platform for decorative expression.¹⁰

Wherever Muslims settled in the world, they incorporated elements of local sacred architecture into their mosques. In central Muslim lands, the Byzantine dome was quickly adopted, no doubt because it was especially effective in engendering in worshippers a feeling of transcendent expansion (what the mystics call *bast*), particularly in those places where the climate demands a well-covered roof for at least part of the year (Figure 4.1).

The square minarets of Syrian, African, and Andalusian Islam may have been inspired by church bell-towers. In much of China, the influence of Buddhist temple architecture is seen in the elevation of the mosque prayer hall, giving worshippers a sense of ascending toward the sacred. In short, early Muslims embraced many of the elements of indigenous sacred architecture wherever they went, while at the same time retaining the basic structure of the Prophet's mosque in Medina and shunning figurative and iconic representations of the Divine. In their place, Muslims put the word of God: Qur'anic calligraphy.¹¹

Because there is no indication that Qur'anic verses were hung in the Prophet's mosque in Medina, some early Muslims were reluctant to use the Qur'an in this way. In addition to wanting to scrupulously follow the Sunna of the Prophet, some Muslims felt that it was improper to use Qur'anic verses for decorative purposes in ways that hindered their readability.¹² The majority of Muslims throughout history, however, have wholeheartedly embraced Qur'anic calligraphy as a means to both sanctify space and to give visual instruction to the faithful, just as icons, friezes, murals, and statues have been used for such purposes in other traditions. As early as 90/709, the Umayyad caliph al-Walid ibn Marwan patronized a major expansion of the Prophet's Mosque at Medina that included Qur'anic verses rendered in mosaic; perhaps even the entire Qur'anic text was inscribed within the sanctuary.¹³

Muslim architects and their patrons generally select sacred words that bear some relationship to the function of buildings or architectural features on which they are to be placed.¹⁴ One example is the exquisitely beautiful verse from the "Sura of Light" that can often be found encircling the clerestory at the base of a dome or framing the *mihrab* of a mosque:

God is the light of the heavens and the earth! The parable of His light is as if there were a niche enclosing a lantern. The lantern is enclosed within glass; the glass shines like a brilliant star lit from a blessed olive tree that is neither of the east nor of the west; the oil is luminous even though no fire touches it. Light upon light! God guides those whom He wills to His light, and God sets forth parables for all people. God is knowledgeable of all things.

(Nur; 24:35)

Elsewhere are verses that refer specifically to the mosque, in particular:

O Children of Adam! Wear your beautiful apparel at every mosque and eat and drink, but not to excess, for God does not love those who are excessive.

(Araf; 7:31)

Verily the mosques belong to God, so do not call on anyone besides God.

(Jinn; 72:18)

The mosques of God will be visited and maintained by such as believe in God and the last day, establish prayer and pay charity and fear nothing except God; so that they may be among the truly guided.

(Tawba; 9:18)

Calligraphers often employ contrasting colors and bright highlights to ensure that Qur'anic verses on architectural structures are readable. In some cases, the script is so elaborate that it might appear illegible to some observers. However, as one scholar notes, because many Muslims have memorized significant portions of the Qur'an or at least have listened to it recited dozens, if not hundreds, of times, they need only "to decipher a word or two in order to identify the verse being quoted."¹⁵ This is further support for the position that it is primarily the *recited* Qur'an that is the foundation of Muslim spirituality and culture.

We recall that the first *mushaf*, collected a few years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, could not be read as an independent text but was used to support and complement the oral text. A skeletal script that did not even distinguish even among all consonants, this first *mushaf* primarily ensured that nothing new could be added to the text; secondarily, for individuals, the early *mushaf* could work as a mnemonic device, supporting memorization. Elaborate Qur'anic calligraphy in architecture serves a similar mnemonic purpose, whereby as soon as a thread of text is deciphered, a possible verse is brought to mind and then checked against the remaining script. Thus, it is common to see Muslim visitors to an important Islamic site grouped in front of a calligraphic panel, each trying to identify a word or a phrase; finally, one person makes out a few words and others from the group recall the verse and they complete it together. This collective reading-recitation strengthens feelings of religious community and a shared connectedness with their Islamic cultural heritage and spiritual tradition.

The earliest extant examples of monumental Qur'anic calligraphy in Islamic sacred architecture are found within and without the Dome of the Rock (Figure 4.2), construction of which began just over a half a century after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. This magnificent domed structure, until now the most prominent feature on the Jerusalem landscape, is not a mosque but a monument built around a rock outcropping where Muslims believe the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven to receive

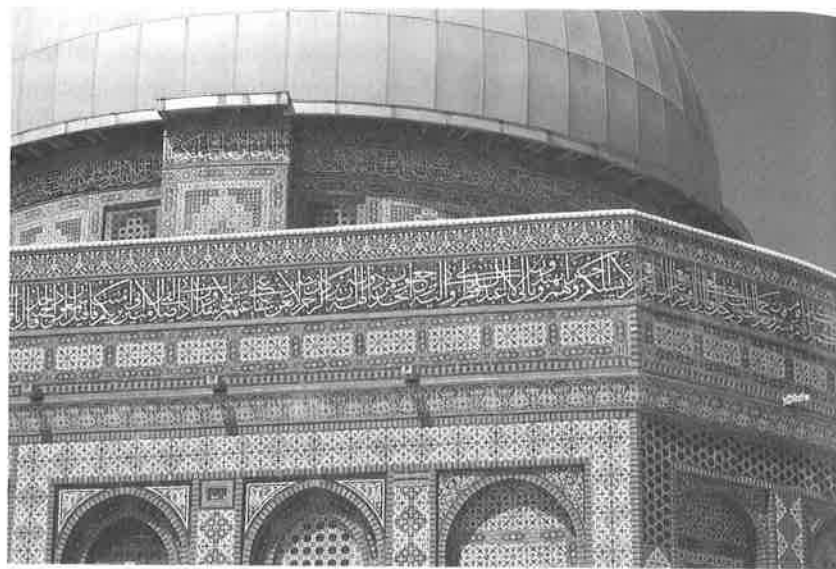


Figure 4.2 Qur'anic calligraphy on the exterior of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. © Chris Bradley/Axiom/Getty Images

instructions at the throne of God. The octagonal structure has two concentric arcades which are decorated with supplications and passages from the Qur'an rendered in mosaic tiles. Among the Qur'anic passages reproduced are the following:

O People of the Book, do not go to extremes in your religion. Do not say anything about God except what is true. Verily the Messiah, Jesus the Son of Mary is the Messenger of God, and God's word that He cast into Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and in His messengers and do not say "Three"; it is better for you to desist. Rather, God is one god. He is too exalted to have a son, and everything in the heavens and on earth belongs to Him. It is enough to have God as the disposer of affairs.

The Messiah does not scorn being a servant of God, nor do the favored angels. Those who scorn servitude to Him and are arrogant will be gathered back to Him all together.

(Nisa'; 4:171–172)

Such is Jesus the son of Mary; it is a statement of truth about which they dispute.

It is not befitting of God that He should take a son, He is exalted above that.

When he decides a matter He only says "Be" and it is.

Verily God is my Lord and your Lord so worship Him; this is the straight path.

(Maryam; 19:34–36)

There are many theories about why the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (reigned 65–86/685–705) commissioned the construction of this temple.¹⁶ Some believe that his main goal was to neutralize any legitimacy that had accrued to his political rival, the counter-caliph 'Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr, due to the latter's control over the Sacred Mosques of Mecca and Medina at that time. Although this theory has some merit, the Qur'anic verses chosen to adorn the temple clearly indicate that engagement with Christianity was the main purpose of the building. At the time of the building of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem was a city of important Christian monuments; particularly significant was the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, built in the fourth century CE. Some observers have therefore suggested that the Dome of the Rock was built in a competitive spirit to demonstrate that the majesty of Islam was no less than that of Christianity. This is one explanation offered by the fourth-/tenth-century historian al-Muqaddasi.

We should be careful, however, in assuming that al-Muqaddasi's perspective, articulated some centuries after the building of the Dome of the Rock, represents the sentiments of first-/seventh-century Muslims. We need to recall that the Muslim rulers of Jerusalem did not suppress Christianity, nor did they damage any Christian monuments. This tolerant policy toward Christianity (and Judaism, for it is the Muslim conqueror of Jerusalem, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, who lifted the Byzantine ban on Jews entering Jerusalem) was based on verses of the Qur'an and examples from the Prophet's Sunna. It can be argued further that the Qur'an does more than offer guidelines for a legal policy of tolerance and that its attitude toward other faith communities in general and Christianity in particular is, in many ways, inclusive. As we have discussed earlier, this does not mean that the Qur'an does not explicitly present itself as a correction to distortions and errors accrued to the religious doctrines of earlier communities that were given divine revelation. But at the same time, a reformation of doctrine can only be undertaken within the bounds of the same community. The verses chosen for the Dome of the Rock, therefore, attest

to a time when Muslims seem to have been articulating a more distinct identity with respect to the People of the Book, while at the same time still trying to reach out across a doctrinal divide that possibly could be bridged. Al-Muqaddasi's view that the Dome of the Rock was built in a spirit of religious competition, therefore, may be somewhat anachronistic and overstated. But once the Dome of the Rock had been built, later Muslims could not avoid being influenced by their historical, social, and political context in their attempts to impart meaning to the Qur'anic verses found therein.

Naturally, patronage of religious monuments did not end with the building of the Dome of the Rock. Over the centuries, Muslim rulers and wealthy individuals have continued to patronize the building of mosques, religious retreats (*ribat*), Islamic seminaries (*madrasas*), and mausoleums. In many cases, even buildings with eclectic and syncretic cultural influences draw upon the blessing and imagery of the Qur'an in some way. It is suggested, for example, that the Taj Mahal, built by the Moghul emperor Shah Jahan (ruled 1628–1658 CE), is an allegorical representation of the throne of God above the Garden of Paradise on the Day of Judgment.¹⁷ This Qur'anic eschatology is reinforced by verses inscribed on the building, such as the following:

*O you soul at peace!
Return to your Lord, contented, in His good-pleasure.
Enter among my servants;
Enter my Garden!*

(Fajr; 89:27–30)

The fourteenth-century CE Alhambra Palace in Granada is another exceptional example of magnificent Islamic architecture that integrates the Qur'an's approach to both earthly and heavenly matters with great success. The palace is rich with gardens filled with fragrant plants and fruit trees growing around clear pools and flowing water that recall the Qur'anic descriptions of Paradise.¹⁸ The walls of Alhambra are filled with a sobering reminder that is repeated over and over: "There is no victor except for God (*la ghalib illa Allah*)." This phrase is taken from the Qur'anic statement (12:21) "God is the Victory" (*Allah al-Ghalib*), and is a reminder to rulers, even in the midst of their worldly splendor and power, that it is God who ultimately controls all affairs (Figure 4.3).

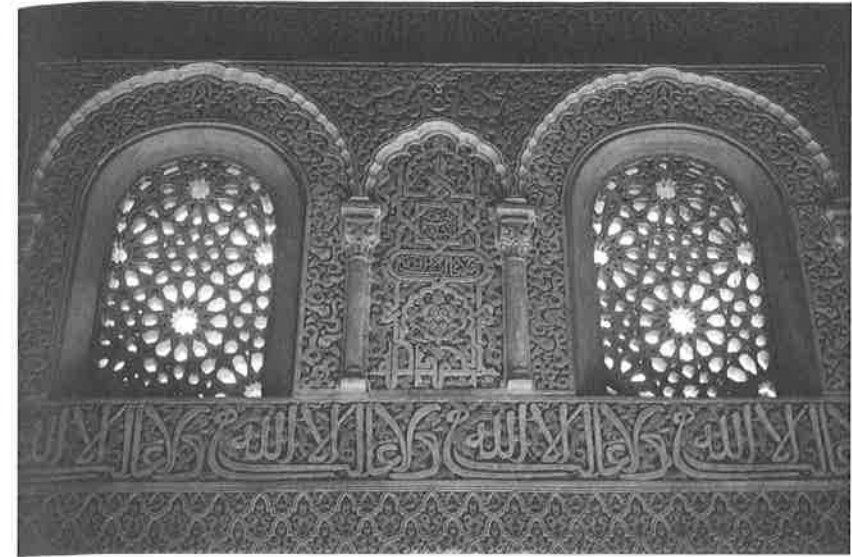


Figure 4.3 "Victory belongs to God" carved into the wall of Alhambra.
© M. Freeman/PhotoLink/Getty Images

The Elevation of the Qur'an

Where they are inscribed on buildings or hung on walls, Qur'anic verses are generally elevated, in keeping with the superiority of God's Word over the words of humans. The idea that ontological superiority is implied by physical elevation, while dishonor can be signified by literally lowering a thing or placing it under one's feet, may be universal. This accords with an anthropocentric perspective, for as a human develops in strength and maturity, he or she rises from the floor to become tall and erect. It is also the experience of sages of many traditions that sacred insight can best be found on the mountaintops. The Qur'an was first revealed to Muhammad in a cave on a mountain, Moses spoke to God on Mount Sinai, the transfiguration of Jesus took place on a mountain, Syrian Christian saints of late antiquity stood on tall pillars for years seeking God's presence, and Buddhists climb the steps of temples like the temple in Borobodur, Java, where the highest level symbolizes freedom from worldly desires. It is the collective experience of humanity that once one leaves the familiar markings of one's own landscape, looking upwards at the stars, the moon, and the sun is the most effective way to be guided. The Qur'an explicitly associates the critical

role of heavenly bodies in helping humans to regulate and direct their affairs¹⁹ with God's sovereignty over all of creation:

God is the One who elevated the heavens without any pillars that you can see, and He established Himself on the throne. He subjected to His authority the sun and the moon; each one runs an appointed course. He regulates all affairs and gives exquisite detail to the signs so that you will be certain about meeting your Lord.
(Ra'd; 13:2)

Apart from its symbolic implications, it is obvious that physically elevating precious objects can protect them from being trampled upon, knocked over, and dirtied. The symbolic and pragmatic work together to inspire feelings of awe and respect in the worshipper as he or she approaches a Christian or Hindu altar, a Buddhist stupa, or a statue of Apollo mounted on a pedestal. It is understandable, therefore, that Muslims are keen to ensure that physical copies of the Qur'anic *mushaf* – the record of God's exact words revealed to humanity – should be treated with respect.²⁰ In most Muslim cultures, this means that the Qur'an is never placed on the floor, is usually stored on a high shelf, and even when stacked with other books (for example, when a scholar or student is doing research), the Qur'an is usually repositioned on top of the pile. As a Muslim reaches up for the Qur'an, he or she is reminded that "the word of God is superior" (*al-'ulya*, literally, "the highest"; Tawba; 9:40).

A remarkable demonstration of the importance many Muslims give to this gesture of respect toward the Qur'an can be found at the start of the twenty-first century among Muslim prisoners held at the American detention camp at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. The prisoners were allowed only a handful of items in their "cages." Among these items was not only a Qur'an, but also a hygienic face mask that prisoners hooked onto the wires of their cages to suspend the sacred book off the ground. Later, it was revealed that despite these accommodations, some guards and intelligence officers had deliberately mistreated the Qur'an to provoke or punish some prisoners. Some men reported that it was this mistreatment of the Qur'an, rather than the physical and emotional humiliation they endured, that was truly unbearable.²¹ One released prisoner told reporters, "I could bear all the obscene abuse and all the beatings but I was agonized to see one US soldier stomp on the Holy Qur'an, while another soldier in Kandahar threw it into the toilet."²²

Some non-Muslim observers were surprised at the depth of hurt and anger these reports elicited among Muslims across the world. Journalists and analysts sought parallels from other traditions and cultures. Depending

on their denomination, Christians stated that they would feel similar outrage if they experienced like mistreatment of the Bible, the consecrated Eucharist, or an icon of Jesus or Mary. Certainly, it is not unusual for an individual to be able to bear personal abuse better than abuse of objects to which he or she attributes deep religious or even patriotic significance. In his book *Flag: An American Biography*, Marc Leepson reports that the violent riots in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention in 1968 were precipitated by the deliberate desecration of Americans' beloved national symbol. "Police officials said that disrespect for the flag was the primary reason that they took physical action against the antiwar demonstrators. The 'profanity and spitting' by the demonstrators 'did not have the same effect on the police that incidents involving the flag did,' a Chicago police official later testified. 'Abuse or misuse of the flag deeply affected the police.'"²³ To avoid potential desecration of the Qur'an, the Prophet reportedly forbade the transport of the *mushaf* into enemy territory and Muslim scholars in pre-modern times forbade the sale or gift of the *mushaf* to non-Muslims.²⁴

Among Muslims, the elevation of the Qur'an should inspire a feeling of reverence, humility, and submission (the literal meaning of *islam*). Many Muslims express this deep feeling of love for the word of God by wrapping their Qur'an in fine fabric or kissing it after taking it off the shelf. Modernized Muslims might be uncomfortable with such gestures, considering such reverence for the text of the Qur'an "superstitious" and potentially distracting from the awareness of the absolute transcendence of God. Such exaggerated fear of a slippery slope toward idolatry has perhaps left some of these Muslims with a rather dry approach to faith. Traditional Muslim societies seem to allow more room for emotional expressions of faith, and a close connection between the body and the spirit. Certainly there can be excesses in this direction as well; however, one cannot help but feel that the traditional approach yields a richer spiritual culture in which the sacred words of God infuse one's surroundings and, as we shall discuss below, have a deep visceral effect on the individual.

Language, Naming, and Common Expressions

Because Muslims believe that the Arabic words of the Qur'an are God's words, and because Islamic law requires recitation from the Qur'an in daily acts of worship, the Arabic language has always been important to Muslim identity and the construction of religious authority. Before the end of the first century of Islam, Muslim scholars had decided that the increasing numbers of non-Arab converts – mostly Persians – had to learn enough Arabic as

soon as possible after their conversion to say their prayers in Arabic. During the same time, the Umayyads arabized the chancellery and placed the Islamic testament of faith, the *shahada*, in Arabic script on their coins (Figure 4.4).

While Arabic played an important role in the formation of early Islamic culture, the Qur'an in turn had a profound effect on the development of Arabic as a literary language. In the first century of Islam, the Arabic increasingly employed in the Muslim administration was not simply a written version of the spoken language of the Arabs but a literary expression that was continually refined and shaped by the language of the Qur'an itself. Among her detailed analyses of early Islamic manuscripts, Wadad al-Qadi has shown how the epistles of 'Abd al-Hamid ibn Yahya, the Chancellor for the Umayyad caliph Marwan ibn Muhammad (d. 132/750), are infused with Qur'anic phrases and influences.²⁵ Significantly, 'Abd al-Hamid was not an Arab, yet he had a great impact on the shape and development of literary Arabic during this critical early period.

The shift of the Islamic capital to Baghdad in the mid second/eighth century under 'Abbasid rule did not decrease the importance of Arabic, despite the fact that Iraq was primarily a Persian-speaking land at that time. Indeed, Persian Muslims like Sibawayh (d. 177/793) were among the most prominent grammarians of the Arabic language. The early contributions of Persians such as 'Abd al-Hamid and Sibawayh to the formation of classical literary Arabic gave non-Arab Muslims a sense of entitlement to this language.

Until today, at least a rudimentary instruction in the Arabic language is considered an essential foundation for Islamic religious education. In the religious context, "Qur'anic Arabic" rather than local Arabic dialects or Modern Standard Arabic is taught. In premodern times, Arabic was the *lingua franca* of educated Muslims, and today remains the preferred language of communication for religiously educated Muslims.

The primacy of Arabic in Islamic education affected local languages wherever Islam spread. After the emergence of Islamic rule in Iraq, for example, Persians switched to writing in a modified Arabic script and, over time, much Arabic vocabulary was adopted into the language, despite the fact that Persian is an Indo-European language whereas Arabic is a Semitic language. A similar pattern emerged in other lands as Islam was embraced by political rulers, with Turkish, Urdu, and Malayan Jawi among the languages written in Arabic, or Arabic-derived Persian scripts, and employing significant amounts of Arabic-derived vocabulary.

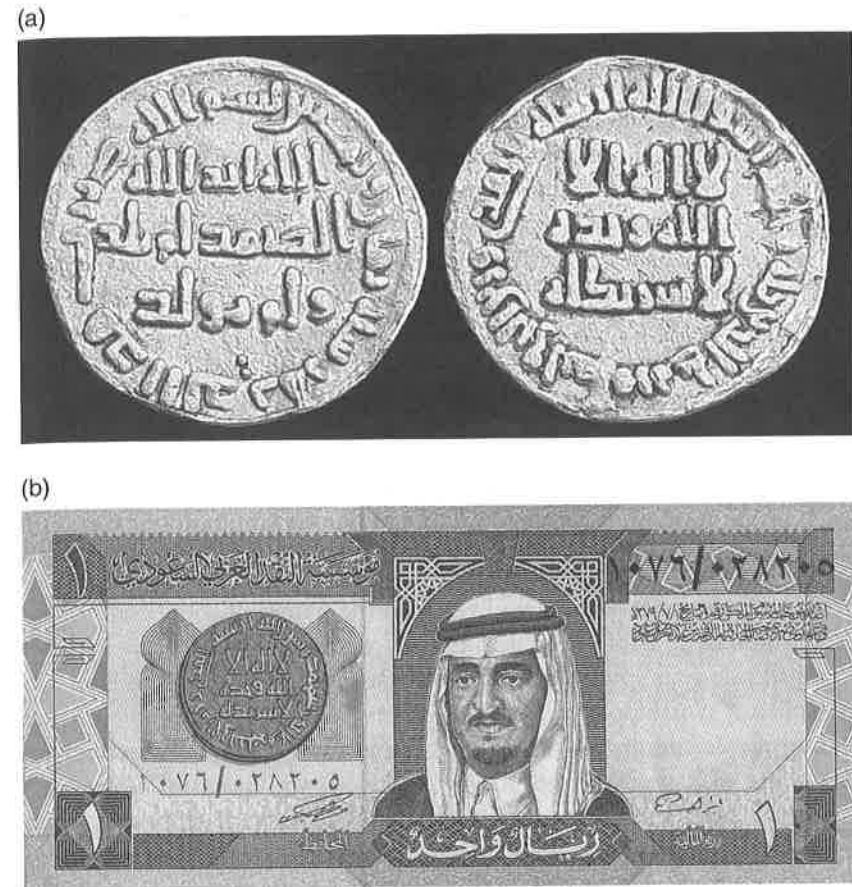


Figure 4.4 The Umayyads, the first Muslim dynasty, differentiated themselves from their Christian predecessors by replacing images of rulers with Islamic phrases. This early coin included most of Sura Ikhlas (112), but many felt the medium unsuitable for Qur'anic verses. Aniconism in coinage and elsewhere remained a dominant feature of pre-modern Islamic culture. Rulers of modern Muslim nation states, in contrast, adopted the European practice of incorporating a portrait of the monarch into their currency. Compare the Umayyad coin (a) with modern Saudi paper money (b), which nevertheless tries to signal continuity through the appropriation of the image of an older aniconic coin. (a) EdgarLOwen.com; (b) obverse and reverse of Saudi Arabia 1 Riyal, 1984 (Daniel Mendea)

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries CE, as part of an effort to "divide and conquer" colonized people, European powers sometimes encouraged non-Arab Muslims to reject the Arabic language and script as foreign to their indigenous culture. In the wake of the European intrusion, secular nationalists in places like Egypt and Syria encouraged the adoption of local dialects and languages in an attempt to break with a form of Arabic so closely associated with a religious worldview. Atatürk, the founder of Turkish nationalism, ordered that the Turkish language should be written in Latin, rather than Arabic, script. This change left Turks who did not receive special religious instruction outside the public school system unable to read the Qur'an, and cut them off from six centuries of Ottoman Turkish history as expressed through written texts and documentation. Not surprisingly, in Turkey and elsewhere throughout the twentieth century, the role of classical Arabic in Muslim societies remained a contentious political issue.

One area of linguistic expression that strongly reflects political and cultural affinities and values is personal naming. During the revelatory period, the Prophet Muhammad changed the names of some converts so they would be in conformity with Islamic values and beliefs. The Prophet changed one man's name from 'Abd al-Shams ("Servant of the Sun") to 'Abdullah ("Worshipper of God"). Enforcing the Qur'anic prohibition of calling people humiliating names (Hujarat; 49:11), the Prophet also changed the name of a woman from "Ugly" (*Qabiha*) to "Beautiful" (*Jamila*).²⁶ Historical texts show a tendency for non-Arab converts to bestow upon their children names that would identify them as Muslims;²⁷ many of these names are derived from the Qur'an and include most prominently the names of prophets, such as Yusuf (Joseph), Ibrahim (Abraham), Nuh (Noah), and names incorporating the attributes of God, such as 'Abd al-Rahman (Servant of the Most Merciful), 'Abd al-Quddus (Servant of the Holy), 'Abd al-Khaliq (Servant of the Creator), etc. Feminine forms of these names, for example, Amatullah (Maid-servant of God) and Amat al-Nur (Maid-servant of the Light), are used, but are much less common than the male forms. Qur'anic names for heaven or places in heaven are often used as female names, for example, Jenna, Kawthar, and Tasnim.

The extent to which Muslims ornament their conversation with Qur'anic phrases and expressions is, to a great extent, dependent upon the degree to which their societies have been secularized. There are still some American and European Christians and Jews who unselfconsciously use phrases like "God willing" or "God forbid," but secularization has crowded much of

this kind of language out of shared public discourse. This is not the case in most Muslim societies, and the observations of the nineteenth-century Englishman E.W. Lane still hold for many places:

There are often met with, in Egyptian society, persons who will introduce an apposite quotation from the Qur'an or the Traditions of the Prophet in common conversation, whatever be the topic; and an interruption of this kind is not considered, as it would be in general society in our own country, either hypocritical or annoying; but rather occasions expressions, if not feelings, of admiration, and often diverts the hearers from a trivial subject to matters of a more serious nature.²⁸

The effect of the Qur'an on linguistic expression in Muslim societies is vast and merits a separate monograph, but we cannot leave this subject without mentioning some Qur'anic phrases used by Arab and non-Arab Muslims as common expressions. These expressions include *in sha Allah* ("if God wills"), *ma sha Allah* ("what God has willed"), *alhamdu lillah* ("Praise is for God"), and *bismillah* ("in the name of God"). These four expressions are so frequently articulated in Muslim societies, even by secular individuals and non-Muslims living among Muslims, that they alone testify to the profound way the Qur'an has shaped and affected Muslim cultures throughout the world.

Ritual Purity and Purifying Rituals

One rule that almost all Muslims rigorously observe to express reverence for the Qur'anic *mushaf* is to refrain from touching it unless they are in a state of ritual purity. This ruling is established in the Qur'an itself, in one of its many self-referential passages:

*Indeed this is a noble Qur'an,
In a protected book.
None shall touch it except for those who are purified.*
(Waqi'a; 56:77-79)

Qur'anic verses can signify many different levels of meaning simultaneously; thus, a metaphorical interpretation of this verse would yield the understanding that only those with pure hearts can access the inner meaning of the Qur'an. Parallel to this interpretation is the apparent



Figure 4.5 Muslim family start the breaking of fast and iftar with dates, India.
© Louise Batalla Duran/Alamy

(*zahir* – often called “literal”) meaning of the verse, that no one should touch the *mushaf* unless in a state of ritual purity.

Purity, for the Muslim, is both a physical and spiritual state.²⁹ Because humans live in their physical forms on the earth and normally locate their sense of self in their bodies, Islam works with the body to ennoble the spirit. The obligatory rituals of *salat*, fasting, and pilgrimage all engage the body and spirit together to uplift and dignify the believer (Figure 4.5). Although these rituals can be rigorous, they are not intended to punish the body or cause harm to the individual. Islam does not view the body itself as a source of sin or evil; bodily desires can be harnessed for good or for evil. Islamic rituals, therefore, are intended to help believers achieve consciousness about the way in which they use their bodies. When fasting, a Muslim cannot eat, drink, experience sexual intimacy, or engage in arguments. Having to refrain from these actions for a time, the believer later approaches eating, drinking, and intimate and social relationships with greater intentionality, thus taking responsibility for her greatest distinction among all of creation – the ability to impart meaning to her actions.

Ritual purification is one way a Muslim prepares him or herself to undertake acts of worship such as prayer, pilgrimage, and reading the Qur'an.³⁰

Taking this extra step of purification before commencing acts of worship helps the believer attain focus and begin the rituals in a reverential state. The Qur'an (5:6) and Sunna of the Prophet give specific instructions for the way in which believers should perform ablution. That spiritual purification is the ultimate goal is evident from the ruling that if water is not available for washing, then clean sand should be used in a symbolic cleansing. The great Muslim scholar of the seventh/twelfth century, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, advised:

When attending to ritual purity in the things that envelop you in progressively closer layers – your room, then your clothes, then your skin – do not neglect your inner being, which lies at the heart of all these. Endeavor to purify it with repentance and remorse for your excesses, and a determined resolution not to commit them in future. Cleanse your inner being in this way, for that is the place to be examined by the One you worship.³¹

That an act of physical purification can help the seeker along the path of spiritual purification is a lesson contained in the conversion story of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab. Initially one of the staunchest enemies of Islam among the Meccans, 'Umar was enraged when he discovered that his sister Fatima had become a Muslim. After a violent argument with her, 'Umar asked to see the parchment from which she was reading a passage of the Qur'an. Fatima replied, “My brother, you are impure in your polytheism and only the purified may touch it.” After 'Umar rose and washed himself, his sister gave him the page on which was written Sura Ta Ha (20). Reading the words, 'Umar declared, “How fine and noble is this speech!” Then 'Umar went to the Prophet Muhammad and declared his conversion to Islam.³²

One notable aspect of this story is that Fatima exercised her judgment in what is often reduced by many Muslims to a simple Islamic legal issue, namely, whether it is permissible to touch the *mushaf* – or a portion of it – without having performed ritual purification. In strict legal terms, it is impossible for a non-Muslim to complete ritual purification, since a condition of this act of worship, like all other acts of worship (*ibadat*), is that one forms the explicit intention (*niyya*) to perform this act in obedience to God in accordance with the instructions of the Prophet Muhammad. If no other relevant factors are taken into account, the logical conclusion is that no non-Muslim should be permitted to handle the *mushaf*. However, sound Islamic legal reasoning entails consideration of many factors involved

in a case – including assessment of the harms and benefits (*al-darr wa'l-nafa'*), the common good (*al-maslaha al-'amma*), and the broad goals of the Law (*al-maqasid*). Thus, throughout the centuries, Muslim scholars, like this early Muslim woman Fatima, exercised their judgment in determining when and how it might be permissible to give or sell a *mushaf* to a non-Muslim. At the same time, it is probably accurate to say that the strictly legal requirement of purity for touching the *mushaf* is less of an issue to most Muslims than the previously discussed concern that the *mushaf* will be treated in a disrespectful fashion. It is this same concern that led many scholars to discourage or forbid young children from handling the *mushaf*, since their inability to truly understand the sacrality of the text could lead them to handle it inappropriately.³³

Scholars are divided over whether it is permissible for a menstruating woman to touch the *mushaf*. Because a menstruating woman does not perform *salat* until her period has finished, many scholars have reasoned that she should also refrain from handling the *mushaf* during that time. However, the earliest author of a book dedicated to the treatment of the *mushaf* disagreed with this position. 'Abdullah al-Sijistani (d. 316/928) cites an authentic hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said to his wife 'A'isha who was reluctant to hand him an item in the mosque because she was menstruating, "The menstruation is not in your hand." This is proof, al-Sijistani offers, that the body of the woman is not impure during menstruation, therefore she can handle the *mushaf*. Still, many Muslim women who wish to read the Qur'an during their period will avoid touching the *mushaf* and instead read passages of the Qur'an from books of commentary or, in technological societies, from electronic devices like computers. Not surprisingly, some modernists who underplay or even belittle the notion of "blessing" (*baraka*) inhering in any object acknowledge few, if any, restrictions on the handling of a *mushaf* by menstruating women. Muslims who follow the traditional schools of law, and who generally also have more affinity with traditional notions of the sacrality of the *mushaf*, tend to uphold the prohibition.³⁴

The story of the conversion of 'Umar, like many other Islamic conversion narratives, demonstrates the awesome power of even a small portion of the Qur'an to open hearts to faith. In Christian narratives, it is, naturally, the voice of Jesus, "God's Word" (in Christianity and Islam, although the phrase is understood differently in the mainstream of the two traditions), that transforms Saul from being the most violent opponent of Christianity into the most forceful proponent of the faith. Similarly, in Islam, it is a direct

encounter with God's word in the Qur'an that can effect a total transformation of the spirit which also resonates in the body:

Is not the one whose breast God has opened to Islam thus on (a path of) enlightenment from his Lord? Woe to those whose hearts are hardened against remembering God, they are clearly misguided.

God has revealed the finest speech – a book coherent, reiterant. It makes the flesh of those who fear their Lord tremble, then their flesh and their hearts are softened to the remembrance of God. That is God's guidance. He guides whom He pleases, and one whom God leaves astray will have no guide.

(Zumar; 39:22–23)

This Qur'anic teaching, that its words affect the very flesh and viscera of one who is drawn to faith, is developed into a more explicit statement about the healing power of this guidance in the following verse:

O humanity! There has come to you an exhortation from your Lord; it is a cure for what is in your breasts and a guidance and mercy to the believers.

(Yunus; 10:57)

Again, it is possible to read such a verse as signifying the power of the Qur'an to work its healing power on multiple levels. In this respect, the Qur'an reflects a premodern notion that in postmodernity again seems to be regaining credibility: that physical, mental, and spiritual (or emotional) health are interconnected aspects of human well-being. It is not surprising, therefore, that Muslims consider the Qur'an to be the most efficacious healer of any disorder for which a person might seek treatment.

The Qur'an often refers to the "heart" as the locus of spiritual health. A heart open to God is "soft"; a heart that is closed to God's guidance is "hard" and "diseased." As a heart becomes more and more diseased, sickness becomes the norm and it takes greater exertion on the part of the individual to regain spiritual health.

Although falling into habitual sin is the most common consequence of a diseased heart, many Muslims believe that spiritual illness can make some people vulnerable to losing control over their will, leading to insanity or possession by jinn. The Qur'an recognizes the existence of jinn who are characterized as beings who, like humans, are endowed with free will. Jinn are made "from fire" while humans are made "from clay" (Qur'an 15:26–27; 55:14–15). Jinn have powers of movement and transformation far beyond

those of humans, who can easily be deceived by them because of this fact. The Qur'an also recognizes possession by jinn as a possibility (23:25; 23:70). The last verse of the Qur'an invokes the protection of God from the harm of "jinn and humans." The Sunna indicates that the last two suras of the Qur'an, collectively known as "The Two Protections" (*al-Mu'awwidhatan*), should be regularly recited for protection from all harm, including harm from unseen forces. It should be noted that while belief in the ability of jinn to possess humans was widespread in premodern Muslim cultures and probably continues to be held by most Muslims, others adopt metaphorical readings of the Qur'an's description of jinn and view possession as a form of mental illness.

Premodern and contemporary Islamic texts and popular literature seem to be in consensus that the "Verse of the Throne," a beloved and widely memorized verse attesting to God's dominion and majesty, is especially efficacious in protecting from all kinds of harm, particularly forces invisible to most humans:

Allah! There is no god but He, the Living, the Eternal, the Self-Subsistent. Neither age nor sleep overcome Him. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and all on that is upon the earth. Who can intercede with Him except by his permission? He knows what they have in their hands and what is behind them.

Yet they shall not grasp any of his knowledge except what He wills. His throne extends to the heavens and the earth, and He never wearies in guarding them. He is the Most High, the Most Grand.

(Baqara; 2:255)

The range of popular treatments for jinn possession is vast, eclectic, and mostly undocumented. Even in the "high culture" of institutionally trained religious scholars, exorcism seems to have remained mostly outside the formal curriculum, and taught as the need arises to individuals judged to be spiritually strong and sober.³⁵ This oral tradition teaches that because jinn are made from a different substance than humans, they have the ability to possess spiritually weak individuals and exert control over them.³⁶ Possession is confirmed when the spiritual healer recites the Qur'an – if the recitation produces a calming effect, then possession is discounted; if the recitation creates agitation, then possession is a possibility. Sometimes the person suspected of possession will speak with a different voice or in a different language; this is understood to be the voice of the jinn. The spiritual

healer will demand that the jinn leave the body of the possessed; if the jinn refuses, the healer will force him out. Because the jinn have powers beyond those of humans, a healer can force the jinn out the body of the possessed only with the power of God's Word. This is done by continuing to recite the Qur'an, especially particular verses that are known to be effective for this purpose, or by giving the possessed water over which the Qur'an has been recited. In an interesting symbolic inversion, this holy water is said to "burn" the jinn.

For those suffering from physical illness, water from the blessed spring of Zamzam in Mecca is considered to be highly beneficial. Verses from the Qur'an might also be recited over the water to increase the efficacy of its healing power; in this case, even plain water can be used if Zamzam water is not available. Although not always sanctioned by religious scholars, Muslims engage in a range of popular practices to further infuse water with the blessed words of the Qur'an. One common practice is to pour water into a bowl inside of which Qur'anic verses are inscribed; the water is then drunk by the person seeking healing. Taking the concept further, some believers will write verses of the Qur'an with an edible dye, like saffron, then dissolve the verses in water which they will drink.

What we observe, then, is that across Muslim societies, belief in the healing power of the Qur'an can be concretized with a number of diverse practices. In traditional societies, it is relatively common for Qur'anic verses and prayers to be written on small pieces of paper and worn in a neck pouch; even a whole *mushaf* can be written in tiny script and worn around the neck. From the premodern period, there are examples of children's and soldier's clothing written with Qur'anic verses.³⁷ In modern societies, gold and silver pendants are inscribed with Qur'anic verses and pinned to the clothes of babies and worn on necklaces.

Such practices are a concern for some imams and scholars, who see a risk of ascribing healing power to water, paper, and pendants rather than to God. For others, such practices are a logical extension of the belief that the Qur'an, as the eternal Word of God, occupies a status different from any created thing. Of course, the water and ink used in a healing ceremony are created, but the words that infuse the water are reflections of the eternal attribute of God's speech. Some might see in the division among Muslims over this issue reflections of debates between Catholics and Protestants over the validity of the use of relics and the efficacy of ritual sacraments. Although there are differences in the nature of the debates, there are evident similarities, and certainly in both cases the disagreement has sometimes led to divisive intolerance. Among

Muslims, followers of the eighteenth-century CE Arabian reformer Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (the "Wahhabis") have harshly condemned and even launched accusations of idolatry against those who use amulets for protection. Proponents of such practices have rebutted these accusations with theological proofs, as well as with scathing assessments of the intellectual shallowness of their opponents, whom they characterize as brutishly intolerant.³⁸

Other spiritual practices for healing are uncontroversial. The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have taught his followers a number of supplications for healing, as well as directed them to recite particular sections of the Qur'an over the body of an ill person. The Prophet's wife 'A'isha reported that whenever he became ill, he would recite the *Mu'awwidhatan* into his cupped hands then blow into them and pass his hands over his body. With some poignancy, 'A'isha relates how during the Prophet's final illness, she dearly wanted him to recover, so "I used to recite over him and rub his hand over his body, hoping for its blessings."³⁹

The Prophetic Sunna attests then to the practice of reciting the Qur'an for oneself or for others to promote physical healing. It is not even required that the sick person be a Muslim for the recitation to be effective. There is an authentic hadith that a Companion of the Prophet healed the chief of an Arab tribe from a snakebite by reciting Sura al-Fatiha over him and that the Prophet later confirmed that Fatiha is a healing prayer (*ruqiya*). Due to this hadith, recitation of Fatiha is generally the foundation for any healing prayer ritual.⁴⁰

Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife

Not everyone will recover from illness and eventually everyone will die; in many places the Qur'an reminds us of this reality:

Every soul shall taste death; then you will return to Us.
(Ankabut; 29:57)

The Qur'an states that God created death for a purpose:

*Blessed is He in whose hand is the dominion, and He has power over everything
He who created life and death to test which of you is best in deeds, and He is the Eminent, the All-Forgiving.*

(Mulk; 67:1-2)

This verse indicates that death is a means God uses to motivate humanity toward greater spiritual refinement and to develop our moral potential.

Upon death angels remove the soul from the body:

Say: you will be taken away by the Angel of Death; he is put in charge of you, then to your Lord you will return.

(Sajda; 32:11)

The Qur'an is emphatic that each soul will have an ultimate accounting before God and that on Judgment Day, the righteous will be separated from the wicked:

*Verily guardians are appointed over you –
generous, recording
they know what you do
Verily the virtuous will be in bliss
and the wicked will be in a blazing fire
which they shall enter on Judgment Day
they will not be able to evade it
And what could make you conceive of the Judgment Day?
It is a day when no soul has any power over another
For that day the matter belongs to God alone.*

(Infitar; 82:10-19)

In order to guide humanity to do what is right and prepare for this accounting, the Qur'an entices with descriptions of Paradise and the ultimate bliss of being in the Divine Presence:

*And the vanguard (in faith) shall be in the front ranks
They shall be near (to God)
In gardens of bliss
Many will be from ancient times
and a few from later times
Seated upon bejeweled thrones
reclining while gazing upon one another
Around them circulate ageless youth
carrying goblets, carafes and cups filled with spring water
that will not give them a headache nor will they become intoxicated
and any fruit they might choose
and any flesh of fowl they desire*

And companions with large lustrous eyes
like pearls in a shell
A reward for what they have done
They will not have to listen to idle talk nor sinful words
Only saying "peace," "peace."

(Waqi'a; 56:10–26)

The Qur'an repels believers from evil by vivid descriptions of the torment of hellfire:

And the people of the left hand, what shall come of the people of the left hand?
They will be in scorching wind and boiling water
And in the shadow of black smoke
With nothing cool or refreshing
Before this they used to indulge in luxury
And they used to persist in grave sins
And they would say, "When we have died and become dust and bones shall we
be then be resurrected?"

(Waqi'a; 56:41–47)

As for the friends and family the deceased leaves behind, the Qur'an says that those who experience a great loss (*musiba*) should say:

To God we belong and to Him we return.

(Baqara; 2:156)

This phrase (*inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*) is repeated by Muslims when they hear about a death. In this situation, as in many others, a few words of the Qur'an have entered the culture of Muslim societies to become a common phrase uttered by individuals who might not know that it is Qur'anic in origin (Figure 4.6).

For those mourning the deceased, the Qur'an emphasizes the futility of wondering "what if?" A believer accepts that the time of death is decreed by God:

O you who believe! Do not be like those who disbelieve – who say of their brethren when they traveled through the land or engaged in fighting, "If only they had stayed with us, they would not have died or been killed." It is God who brings to life and causes to die, and God sees everything you do.

If you are slain in the path of God or if you die, certainly forgiveness from God and his mercy are better than anything you might acquire.

(Al 'Imran; 3:156–157)



Figure 4.6 British graffiti artist Mohammed Ali puts finishing touches on the words "To God we belong and to Him we shall return." In 2007, the artist made the wall mural with West African immigrants living in the Bronx, NY who had recently lost many family members in a tragic fire. (Atif Ateeq)

While Muslim theologians and legal scholars tend to stress the importance of patience and restraint when faced with the death of a loved one, a variety of mourning rituals of a more emotive nature are observed in Muslim societies. In many gatherings, Qur'anic passages are invoked by a preacher or professional mourners to elicit emotional responses. Sober scholars like the sixth-/twelfth-century Iraqi Ibn al-Jawzi strongly disapproved of what he perceived as the use of the Qur'an by popular preachers to induce a loss of control and even sense of despair:

Some of them mention death, the separation of death, and the ruinations of decrepitude. They repeatedly mention these calamities to the women and to the weak in heart, and they cause them to resent the decrees of God. These topics constitute the major part of what they say in the ceremonies of condolence, this being among the abominable things. It is proper and fitting that the people who suffer misfortune be commanded to patiently endure their misfortune, but in point of fact they are goaded to [even greater] anxiety. Ibn 'Aqil said: "We were present in one of the ceremonies

of condolence held by an elderly man on behalf of his son who had died; and the Qur'an reader recited the following Qur'anic passage: *His father is an old man, advanced in years.* [Yusuf 12:78] Then the people cried out and wept. I said to myself: "This falls in the category of using the Qur'an to induce weeping."⁴¹

Even the traumatic death of a loved one should not shake the believer's faith in God, for pain and suffering are part of the divine decree (*qadar*). Belief in *qadar*, "the good and the evil of it," is one of the "six pillars of faith" that Muslims learn in their earliest religious education. The first four "pillars of faith": belief in God, the angels, the scriptures and the prophets, are spelled out clearly in this verse of the Qur'an:

The Messenger believes in what was revealed to him from his Lord, as do the believers; each one believes in God, His angels, His Books, and His messengers. We make no distinction between any of His messengers. And they say, "We hear and obey. Forgive us, Our Lord, and to You is the return home."

(Baqara; 2: 285)

The fifth pillar of faith, believe in life after death, is a dominant theme of the Qur'an, as is the sixth pillar, the acceptance that it is God who ultimately has power over all things, and thus, everything, including the bad, is part of his divine decree:

To Him belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. It is He who gives life and causes death and He has power over all things.

(Hadid; 57:2)

Explaining theodicy – why evil is part of the divine decree – is one of the most difficult, and often for many believers, one of the most unsatisfying discussions in which Muslim theologians engage. How can a merciful God, who calls himself "The Merciful" (*al-Rahman*) throughout the Qur'an, allow evil to exist? Most theologians emphasize, in one form or another, the inability of humans with their limited knowledge and perspective, to assess ultimate good and evil in the universe. God is "The Wise" (*al-Hakim*) and knows best how to organize his creation.

What makes the issue more complex is the need to maintain human moral accountability, a theme reiterated throughout the Qur'an, with God's justice and omnipotence. In short, how can individuals be held morally

accountable for their actions when God is the power behind everything, including all people's existence and powers? Here the theologians explore in detail the various Qur'anically established attributes of God to show how all these divinely established realities interact. For example, Abu al-Mu'in al-Nasafi (d. 508/1114) who was part of the Maturidi school of theology (one of the widespread classical schools) attempts to maintain God's omnipotence and justice by arguing that even though evil can occur only in accordance with his will, God is not pleased with evil. In other words, God's will is not identical to God's desire:

We hold that every temporal occurrence, whatever its traits, comes into being via the will of God. If an occurrence constitutes an act of obedience, it occurs in accordance with God's volition, will, pleasure, love, command, execution, and decree. If, on the other hand, it constitutes an act of disobedience, it occurs via God's volition, will, execution, and apportionment but not in accordance with His command or His pleasure or His love.⁴²

Non-specialists are rarely exposed to these arcane theological discussions. Rather, ordinary believers accept *qadar* as they have been taught from childhood. Attempting to reconcile the human sense of justice with the devastation wrought by natural disasters is not only futile, it is sinful. This common attitude is described in an article by *New York Times* reporter John Burns, about the survivors of a 2002 earthquake in Afghanistan. Burns describes a man who had just buried his eldest son and daughter, killed when his house collapsed in the quake. Now, covered in dust, bloodied and bandaged, Muhammad Siddiq expresses a kind of glass-half-full attitude that might be found anywhere in the world, saying that "things could have been far worse" since his two other children survived and they were rid of the oppression of the Taliban. "Look, we've got a beautiful place to live in here, and the spring weather is good, and we also have this disaster," he adds. Then Siddiq articulates the distinctively Islamic theological view on such a disaster: "It is all God's will, the good and the bad ... whatever happens, we have to accept it, and it is against God's laws for us to question it."⁴³

Muslims are expected to console one who is mourning with exhortations to remain steadfast in their belief that they could not have prevented the death of their loved one. This belief that God determines the time of death does not prevent Muslims from assigning a material cause to death, for the Qur'an is also clear that humans have free will and created capacities for

action within the domain of the absolute sovereignty of God. Thus, it is perfectly acceptable, and necessary, to investigate the material causes of death and to assign blame if found.

As for those attending to the dying person, they are encouraged to recite Sura Ya Sin because of its focus on God's mercy, forgiveness, and ability to resurrect the dead. The sura ends with the following verses:

(The disbeliever) creates his own similes for Us, but he forgets his own creation.

He says, "Who can give life to bones when they have turned to dust?"

Say: They will be brought to life by the One who created them the first time, and He knows everything about creation –

The One who brings fire out of the green tree and behold you kindle your hearth with it.

Is not the One who created the heavens and the earth capable of creating something like it?

Indeed, He is the All-Knowing Master Creator.

When He intends a thing, He need only give the command "Be," then it is.

So glory to Him in whose hand is the dominion of all things and to Him you will return.

(Ya Sin; 36:78–83)

The Damascene scholar Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1326) in his *Book of the Soul* says that Sura Ya Sin benefits the dying soul, for it conveys the good news (*tastabshir*) that God loves to meet him or her. Ibn Qayyim calls Sura Ya Sin "the heart of the Qur'an" and says that it "is an amazing privilege in that it is recited to the dying person." Indeed, this sura has a remarkable place in the culture of mourning in Muslim societies; not only is it recited to the dying person, but it is recited in death anniversary commemorations and grave visits across the Muslim world. In many Muslim societies, families gather forty days after the death of a loved one and recite Sura Ya Sin, as well as other prayers, for the benefit of the deceased. The sura is printed separately in small booklets that can be found in great numbers in mausoleums, where its verses are recited by individuals and groups visiting the graves.⁴⁴



Figure 4.7 Ornate box for carrying the Qur'an during a funeral. Xian, Shaanxi, China, 1936. (Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library)

It is a communal obligation of the Muslim community to hold a congregational funeral prayer over the body of the deceased before burial (Figure 4.7). This ritual prayer is short, consisting mostly of supplications (*du'a*) from the Qur'an and Sura al-Fatiha is recited silently by each member of the congregation. The centrality of the Fatiha in the funeral prayer likely gave rise to the widespread practice of reciting this sura when hearing that someone has died or when passing a grave. In many Muslim societies, reminders or requests to passers-by to recite the Fatiha are placed near the grave or, in contemporary societies, in newspapers.

The belief about which benefits accrue to whom during grave visits varies across Muslim societies and schools of thought. This is because there are different understandings about the state of the dead in their graves, in particular, the state of righteous people. The Qur'an states that those who have committed evil in their lives will wish at their death for another chance to do good. However, once death has come, there is a barrier

(*barzakh*) that prevents them from action and they must wait in their graves for the Day of Judgment, when God will raise all people and judge their deeds:

When one of them approaches death he says, "O Lord, let me go back so that I might perform righteous deeds in what I left behind."

No – these are just words that he utters. Behind them is a barrier until the day they are resurrected.

(Mu'minun; 23:99–100)

Because of this verse, some Muslims believe that all those who die exist in *barzakh* – a realm inaccessible to the living – and that they are no longer able to interact in any way with the living. From this perspective, the relationship between the living and the dead is strictly one-sided; the living can and should pray for their dead co-religionists, but the latter cannot respond in any way.

Other Muslims believe that the righteous dead can hear the living and can pray for them, just as the living can pray for the dead. Indeed, the Qur'an states that at least those who were killed "in the path of God" are not really dead, but exist in a special state:

Do not say about those who are killed in the path of God, "they are dead," rather, they are alive, but you cannot feel it.

(Baqara; 2:154)

Some scholars have interpreted this verse as referring only to martyrs; others extend the scope of this verse to include righteous believers, citing among other proof the following verse:

Whoever obeys God and the Messenger, they will be with those upon whom God has bestowed His grace: the Prophets, the Sincere, the Martyrs and the Righteous. What a beautiful fellowship they have!

(Nisa'; 4:69)

As a consequence of this belief, some Muslims visit the graves of righteous people to ask them to supplicate to God for them. To many Muslims, this is a clear violation of the Islamic principle prohibiting *shirk* – ascribing power to any being other than the one God. Advocates of intercession (*wasila*), however, argue that this is no more *shirk* than asking a living person to

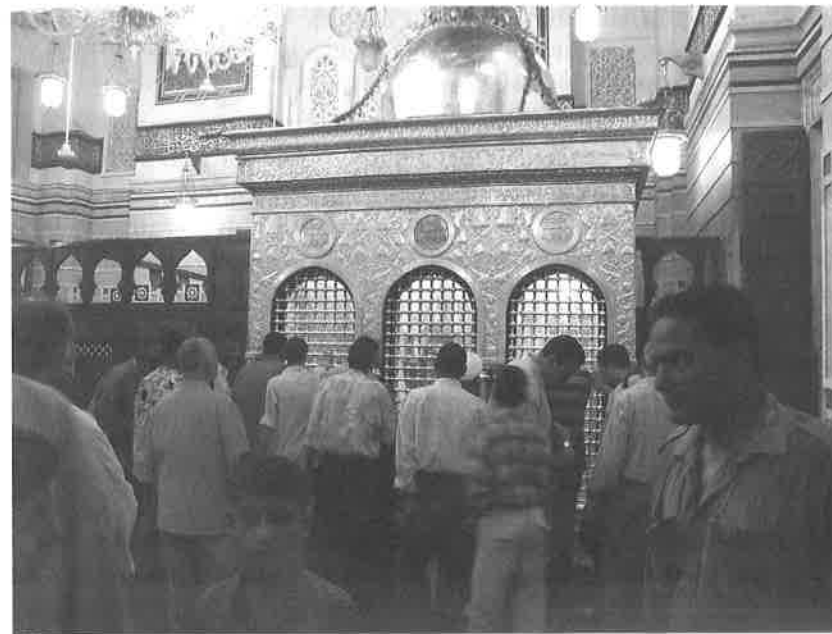


Figure 4.8 Men pray at the tomb of Zaynab bint Ali, the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad. Cairo, Egypt. (Photo: Brannon Wheeler, US Naval Academy)

supplicate God on one's behalf; in both cases, the act neither exempts one from supplicating for oneself, nor implies that such a person has any power to compel God to respond positively to the supplication. The main distinction between the two groups, then, revolves around the issue of whether the righteous dead are capable of responding to requests for prayers from the living. Proofs for both positions can be found, depending how one interprets various verses of the Qur'an and reports of the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad.

The issue of intercession is not an obscure academic topic for Muslims; rather, it is an issue that deeply affects the rhythm and structure of religious life and culture. The practice of *ziyara* – "visiting" the graves of the righteous – spurred the need for structures to protect the grave, and no doubt influenced by local pre-Islamic cultures, many people felt that it was only proper to honor exceptionally righteous people with a substantial monument (Figure 4.8). Thus, despite an accepted report that the Prophet had given specific instructions upon his deathbed to refrain

from building such monuments, in the centuries after his death, Muslims erected mausoleums and shrines of all sizes in great numbers across the Islamic world.

When such sites, such as the grave of the Prophet's Companion Abu Ayyub al-Ansari in Istanbul, are maintained under official patronage, it is possible to enforce a certain decorum and solemnity among the visitors. In other places, as might be expected, opportunists of all sorts lurk, ready to take advantage of desperate and emotionally vulnerable people. Many contemporary Muslims, following the lead of early modern Muslim reformers, are opposed to the doctrine of intercession not only because they consider it theologically incorrect, but also because, like European Protestant Reformers, they are repulsed by many aspects of popular pilgrimage culture. The Damascene Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) seems to have been ahead of his time in his vigorous and public denunciations of this practice. It was not until some centuries later that opposition to *ziyara* spread more widely among Muslims of various ideological leanings, including modernists who advocated a less clerical, more "rational" Islam, as well as those influenced by the puritanical theology of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1206/1791).

No doubt because of their affiliation with Reformed Christianity, European Protestant observers were not unsympathetic to this aspect of the activities of those who became known as "Wahhabis." The Danish explorer Carsten Niebuhr, for example, in his *Travels in Arabia*, made the following observation:

Among the Mussulmen (Muslims) it is customary to inter those who have obtained the reputation virtuous, or saints, in a private sepulcher, more or less ornamented, where their protection is invoked for the supplicant; and God is supposed to befriend their intercession. If the reputation of any particular saint becomes fashionable, the devotion increases, the chapel is enlarged, with administrators, servants, and so forth, chosen generally from among the individuals of his family, by means of which the relations of the saint acquire a situation more or less opulent. ... Already had the well-informed Mussulmen begun to despise these superstitions secretly, though they seemed to respect them in the eyes of the people. But 'Abd al-Wahhab declared boldly that this species of worship rendered to the saints was a grievous sin in the eyes of the divinity because it was giving Him companions. In consequence of this his sectaries have destroyed the sepulchers, chapels and temples elevated in their honor.⁴⁵

According to some Salafis, even engraved tombstones for ordinary believers are deemed to be in violation of the simple practice of the early Muslims (the "*salaf*" – hence the name "Salafi" for those who turn to the early generation of Muslims for legal precedents). For the poor, the issue is moot in any case – they can no more afford an engraved tombstone than they can afford to build the Taj Mahal. Indeed, for some contemporary Muslims, in addition to their desire to follow what they believe to be the Prophetic Sunna of burial in a simple unmarked grave, it is the desire to demonstrate Islam's egalitarian nature that leads them to embrace the practice of erecting no more than a simple stone. In premodern Islamic societies, however, those who could afford to erect at least a modest tombstone often did so. In some places, it was common to inscribe the stone with the spiritually powerful "Verse of the Throne." Other verses, like those incorporated into this touching inscription from the sixth-/twelfth-century Arabian Peninsula, attest to the fleeting nature of earthly life and the majesty of God:

In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

Everyone that is on (the earth) will pass away, except for the face of your Lord, the Possessor of Majesty and Dignity [Rahman; 55:26–27].

This is the grave of Khadija daughter of Qasim b. Ahmad b. Qasim b. Ja'd b. Abu Qasim b. 'Ali b. 'Ad b. 'Abd al-'Aziz the Qurayshite, the Perfumer, who died on Monday in Dhu'l-Hijja in the year 552 [AH]. May God have mercy upon her.

God's kindness fell upon her all the time,
on the pretty face of the deceased.⁴⁶

If all women died like this, they would be superior to men.⁴⁷

Around the mid-twentieth century, vast wealth from oil exports flowed into the Saudi Kingdom allowing them to export Wahhabi teachings through the funding of mosques, schools, missionaries and religious publications across the Muslim world. These teachings have not gone unchallenged. Scholars and movements claiming to represent traditional Islam defend practices such as building monuments to mark sites where saintly people lived or were buried. Thus at the same time that the Saudis have been destroying more and more religiously significant historical sites in their kingdom, the Jordanian royal family has dedicated resources to restoring holy sites in their country, including shrines for prophets such as Moses and Aaron, as well as Companions of the Prophet Muhammad, such as Abu Dharr and Bilal.

A book cataloguing the Jordanian holy sites includes a fatwa (religious legal ruling) from a scholar proving the merit of building and visiting the shrines and graves of the righteous. In his fatwa, Hasan bin Ali al-Saqqaf rejects the report that the Prophet Muhammad forbade the construction of domes over the graves of righteous people on the grounds that the Qur'an praises this action; he says, "God praised the people who erected a mosque on the Cave of the Sleepers and did not reproach them for it, as shown in the following verse of the Qur'an (18:22): *Those who won their point said: We verily shall build a place of worship over them.*"⁴⁸ Opponents of *ziyara* accept the hadith, arguing that a hadith whose chain of transmitters is sound should not be rejected on the basis of its content. They would try to reconcile the Qur'anic verse and the hadith, perhaps by viewing the practice praised in the Qur'an as appropriate for earlier communities but abrogated by the coming of Islam. Here we see how the same texts can be variously interpreted to yield different legal judgments, something we will discuss further in the next chapter.

Notes

- 1 Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).
- 2 Ibn Hisham, 183.
- 3 Tabari, *History*, vol. 32, translated by C.E. Bosworth as *The Reunification of the Abbasid Capital* (1986), 206–207.
- 4 Tabari, *History*, 32:212–213.
- 5 Abu Ja'far Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Tahawi's al-'Aqida al-Tahawiyya is found in a number of commentaries, including: *Sharh al-Tahawiyya fi'l-aqidaal-salafiyya* by 'Ali ibn 'Ali ibn Abi'l-'Izz (Cairo: Zakariyya 'Ali Yusuf, 196–?). I have used the translation of the text by Iqbal Ahmad Azami on the website: www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/misc/tahawi.htm (last accessed August 30, 2012).
- 6 Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni, *A Guide to Conclusive Proofs for the Principles of Belief*, translation by Paul E. Walker of *Kitab al-irshad 'ila qawati'l-adilla fi usul al-i'tiqad* (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2000), 72–73.
- 7 The cloth covering the Ka'ba, called the *kiswa*, has varied in color and design over the centuries, according to the tastes and interests of the rulers of Mecca. In the sixth/twelfth century, the Andalusian traveler Ibn Jubayr described the *kiswa* thus: "The outside of the Ka'ba, on all its four sides, is clothed in coverings of green silk with cotton warps; and on their upper part is a band of red silk on which is written the verse, 'Verily the first House founded for mankind was that at Bakkah [Mecca]' [Qur'an 3:96]. The name of the Imam al-Nasir li Dinillah, in depth three cubits, encircles it all. On these coverings there has been shaped

remarkable designs resembling handsome pulpits, and inscriptions entertaining the name of God Most High and calling blessings on Nasir, the aforementioned 'Abbasid (Caliph) who had ordered its installment. With all this, there was no clash of colour. The number of covers on all four sides is thirty-four, there being eighteen on the two long sides, and sixteen on the two short sides." Ibn Jubayr, 79.

- 8 Grabar says that the "rejection of mimetic representation in anything official or formal" in the first century had a wider impact on the aesthetics of Muslim society: writing on objects became one of the dominant modes of decoration. By the ninth and tenth century, it was fashionable in Baghdad to adorn all sorts of "objects of daily use," including bottles, kerchiefs, and turbans, with poems and pithy phrases. Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 63.
- 9 For various positions taken over these issues during the European Reformation, see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 145–155, 267.
- 10 Jonathan M. Bloom, *Minaret: Symbol of Islam*, Oxford Studies in Islamic Art VII (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- 11 Reformed Protestants would arrive at a similar solution, stripping their churches of images and replacing them with "often exuberantly floridly framed biblical texts, plus big boards bearing the three texts which all Protestants should know by heart: Nicene or Apostles' Creed, Ten Commandments and Lord's Prayer." MacCulloch, 559.
- 12 Abu Zakariyya Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, *al-Tibyan fi adab hamalat al-Qur'an*, translated by Musa Furber as *Etiquette with the Quran* (Burr Ridge, IL: Starlatch Press, 2003), 103–104.
- 13 Priscilla P. Soucek, "Material Culture," *EQ* 3:300.
- 14 Oleg Grabar with contributions from Mohammad al-Asad, Abeer Audeh, and Said Nuseibeh, "Art and Architecture in the Qur'an," *EQ* 1:169.
- 15 Robert Hoyland and Venetia Porter, "Epigraphy," *EQ* 2:27.
- 16 See Julian Raby and Jeremy Johns, eds., *Bayt al-Maqdis*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992–1999); Oleg Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- 17 Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam: 1250–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 280; Amina Okada and M. C. Joshi, *Taj Mahal* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993).
- 18 There are a number of good studies on the relationship between the Qur'anic description of Paradise and Islamic art and architecture; these include: Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, eds., *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art* (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, 1991); Elizabeth B. Moynihan, *Paradise as a Garden in Persia and Mughal India* (New York: G. Braziller, 1979); John Brookes, *Gardens of Paradise: The History and Design of the Great Islamic*

- Gardens* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987); D. Fairchild Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscape and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).
- 19 At the same time, the Qur'an (41:37) warns against confusing these powerful signs of God that serve as material guides for our daily affairs for powers in themselves.
 - 20 According to the third/ninth-century scholar al-Sijistani, the Prophet ordered that no piece of writing that contained the name of God should be placed on the floor. See Abu Bakr ibn Abi Daud 'Abdullah al-Sijistani, *Kitab al-Masahif*, ed. Muhammad ibn 'Abduh (Cairo, 2002), 448.
 - 21 Evan Thomas, "How a Fire Broke Out: The Story of a Sensitive *Newsweek* Report about Alleged Abuses at Guantánamo Bay and a Surge of Deadly Unrest in the Islamic World," *Newsweek*, May 23, 2005.
 - 22 Wisam Abd al-Rahman Ahmad interview on Aljazeera.net posted July 7, 2004, english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/68168BCC-608B-4593-91A4-637656C20625.htm.
 - 23 Marc Leepson, *Flag: An American Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 231.
 - 24 Al-Sijistani, 411–418; Al-Nawawi, 113; Lane, 281–282.
 - 25 Wadad al-Qadi, "The Impact of the Qur'an on the Epistolography of 'Abd al-Hamid," in *Approaches to the Qur'an*, eds. G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993), 285–313.
 - 26 In some traditional cultures, children are given names with negative connotations to ward off the evil eye or to trick invisible spirits who might steal bright and beautiful children to raise as their own.
 - 27 Bulliet, 18–19.
 - 28 Lane, 280.
 - 29 For an example of the deep layers of meaning that can be discerned in ritual purification by the mystics, see Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad Al-Alawi – His Spiritual Heritage and Legacy*, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971), 176–184.
 - 30 These acts do not require the performance of a new ablution as a condition for valid performance, but require that the worshipper be in a state of ritual purity (i.e., from an ablution performed earlier) during performance. Ritual purity is lost, among other things, by attending to the toilet, by having sexual relations, and by menstruating. Once these acts/states are completed, ritual purification restores purity.
 - 31 Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Inner Dimensions of Islamic Worship, Selections from Ihya 'ulum al-din* translated by Muhtar Holland (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1983), 44.
 - 32 Ibn Hisham, 156–157.
 - 33 Al-Nawawi, 113.

- 34 Nevertheless, Sayyid Sabiq, who offers the modernist or "Salafi" view in his book *Fiqh al-Sunna* upholds the prohibition, although he mentions the view of the Zahiri scholar Ibn Hazm that there is no such prohibition. Al-Sayyid Sabiq, *Fiqh al-Sunna*, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, n.d.), 1:67–68. The neo-traditionalist scholar Nuh Keller, in his annotation to the classical Shafi'i *fiqh* text, *'Umdat al-Salik*, calls this "a deviant opinion contrary to all four schools of jurisprudence and impermissible to teach." Nuh Ha Mim Keller in *Reliance of the Traveller: A Classical Manual of Islamic Sacred Law*, his translation of and commentary on Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri's *'Umdat al-Salik*, rev. ed. (Evanston, IL: Sunna Books, 1994), 74.
- 35 In his book *Prophetic Medicine*, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350) discusses possession, magic, and the evil eye in limited detail. See Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *al-Tibb al-Nabawi*, ed. 'Abd al-Ghani 'Abd al-Khaliq (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1957). Some Muslim modernists, uncomfortable with "superstitious" beliefs like the existence of jinn (although still able to maintain a belief in God), tried to rationalize the issue, as we shall discuss in the next chapter. The popularity of books about jinn in the late twentieth century indicates that many literate Muslims (since only the literate can read these books) do not have the same difficulty embracing both science and a belief in the unseen. 'Umar Sulayman Ashqar, *'Alam al-jinn wa'l-shayatin*, translated by Jamaal al-Din M. Zarabozo as *The World of Jinn and Devils* (Denver, CO: al-Basheer Publications and Translations, 1998).
- 36 This information is from the author's own observation of current practice in a number of Arab, African, and Turkish Muslim communities.
- 37 These are practices the author has observed in contemporary Muslim communities across the world. Lane observed the same practices in early nineteenth-century Egypt. Lane, 247–256.
- 38 The traditionalist Sufi position is strongly defended by Muhammad Hisham Kabbani in his *Encyclopedia of Islamic Doctrine*, 7 vols. (Mountain View, CA: As-Sunna Foundation of American Publications, 1998).
- 39 Bukhari, "*Kitab al-Tibb*," 1231.
- 40 Ibn Qayyim, 137.
- 41 Abu'l-Faraj 'Abd al-Rahman ibn 'Ali ibn al-Jawzi, *Kitāb al-Quṣṣāṣ wa'l-Mudhakkirīn*, translated by Merlin L. Swartz (Beirut: Dar El-Machreq Éditeurs, 1971), 198. Swartz's translation with some minor edits.
- 42 Citation by Sherman A. Jackson in *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 116. I have omitted his Arabic transliteration and changed his translation of *qadar* from "apportionment" to "decree."
- 43 John F. Burns, "A Nation Challenged: Disaster; Afghan Resilience Aids Recovery after Quake," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2002.

- 44 Sura Ya Sin is also among the Qur'anic passages recited in the evening. See Howard M. Federspiel, *Popular Indonesian Literature of the Qur'an* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1994), 97–98.
- 45 F.E. Peters, *Mecca: A Literary History of the Muslim Holy Land* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 289–299.
- 46 The mention of the deceased woman's "face" as the locus of God's blessing following the Qur'anic statement that only God's "face" will never perish is poignant and significant. The phrasing perhaps suggests that the holy woman becomes a kind of mirror for God's blessings.
- 47 From the website of the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, www.mnh.si.edu/epigraphy/e_islamic/fig52_naskh01.htm (last accessed August 30, 2012). I am unable to access the original stone, therefore I cannot attest to the complete accuracy of the translation of lines 8 and 9 of the translation provided, although I made changes to some of the other lines where I could better read the inscription.
- 48 *The Holy Sites of Jordan*, 2nd ed., ed. Ghazi Bin Mohammed (Beirut: Turab Publications, 1999), 23.

WHAT GOD REALLY MEANS

Interpreting the Qur'an

Exegesis before Hermeneutics

As we have seen earlier, when 'Umar ibn al-Khattab was informed of the death of the Prophet Muhammad, he refused to believe the news. Like many others faced with the sudden death of a loved one, 'Umar at first simply denied that it could be true. Abu Bakr rejected 'Umar's impassioned assertion that the Prophet could not have died, and convinced 'Umar of the Prophet's death by showing him his body, and by reciting the Qur'anic verse: *Muhammad is no more than a messenger; messengers before him have passed away. If he were to die or were killed, would you turn back on your heels?* (Al 'Imran 3:144)

By applying the appropriate Qur'anic verse to the relevant material evidence, Abu Bakr was able to determine the truth: indeed, the Prophet was dead. This was Qur'anic exegesis in action, and it was the first time the Qur'an had to be interpreted and applied without the possibility of resorting to the infallible guidance of the Prophet. From this point forward, the Qur'an was to be the last word on any matter Muslims faced, but determining what the Qur'an meant would not always be easy.

One of the most important issues the community had to address was the question of authority: Who was authorized to say what the Qur'an meant? The Qur'an did not explicitly address a succession plan for leadership of the Islamic community after the death of the Prophet. Not surprisingly, there was no unanimity among the Prophet's followers about who was most qualified to exercise political leadership, nor about the extent to which political leadership and religious authority were intertwined.