

Between the Seventh and the Twenty-first: Musings on Texts and Contexts in the Early Twenty-first Century

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Abstract

Monotheistic traditions of the Abrahamic variety have commonly conceived of the Divine interacting with this world through the Divine Word. No surprise, then, that the Qur'an refers to the Jews, Christians, and Muslims as "People of the Book" (Ahl al-Kitab). Yet the task of seeking and finding God is not as simple as opening a book, even *the* Book. Reading religious words necessitates some self-awareness about the revelation's context, the history of interpretations that stands between us and the text, and our own situatedness. What follows is a series of musings on these principles.

Listening to Stories

Children know how to listen to stories and indeed demand them. They become intimate with the characters and explore the magical realm of imagination with an unbound grace. Somewhere along the way, particularly in today's world, grownups lose this ability or restrict it to science fiction and video-games (not to say anything about more perverse formats).

This is relevant to our task here. The Qur'an's narratives always work at multiple levels. At one point, surely, they refer to historic individuals and communities who heeded or disobeyed God's call. Yet undoubtedly there are other levels at which the characters refer not so much to external personages,

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but to faculties and tendencies within us. How often does a Muslim sage like Rumi ask us who is the Moses of our soul? Does not a part of our *nafs* insist, Pharaoh-like, that it too is a god/goddess? How often do these Sufis remind us that the Divine's presence in us resembles Christ's birth out of Mary, a painful process that one has to endure on the path, and that if we do not endure this love-pain, then the Christ of Spirit will return to the realm from which it came? At this level, we see the Qur'an not as a historical text *per se*, but as a map to the realm of the spirit. As in the Qur'an, so within us.

For many modern readers, their/our ability to listen to stories has become flat. Here again it would help to be like children, who, after all, are closer to their primordial nature (*fitrah*).

Which Texts

What are we reading today? It is a cliché to say that everyone refers to the Qur'an and Sunnah. But what range of texts are we studying, and from which centuries? Do we study only Arabic texts from the eighth to thirteenth centuries, or do we engage the full range of Islamic scholarship from Malaysia to Morocco over the full 1,400 years of Islamic thought and life? Do we restrict ourselves to the sacrosanct disciples of the Qur'an and *fiqh*, or do we include all of the Islamic knowledge produced by Muslims? Even a cursory look at the texts used in many *madrasas* (and *madrasa*-like institutions) today leads one to conclude that a deliberate process of selectivity deems which texts are authoritative and normative and that whole subsets of texts are being marginalized. This is not to dismiss the good work being done, only to call attention to what is falling by the wayside.

Here is one example that can never be allowed to be marginal: where are women's voices? We have a limited number of premodern texts written by women in their own voices. From the realm of Sufism, that crucial medieval Islamic body of knowledge and practice, what we know about Rabi'ah, the "Friend of God," is most often preserved through the writings of men. How do we have an honest conversation about women's access to God in a tradition that either does not record or else marginalizes their voices? To say that we are making progress in documenting their participation in many facets of Islamic life and practice – which we undoubtedly are – is not to say that we are anywhere near making sure that half of our understanding reflects their lives, experiences, wisdom, and learning about how to live beautifully and how to relate to God.

Under Whose Supervision?

It was said of the Prophet (S) that “his nature is the Qur’an.” He was the living and walking Qur’an, whose being and example was and remains the foremost commentary on the Divine revelation. And it has been this way for all exemplars who have followed in his path. It has become almost legendary to state that the text and living commentary go hand in hand, that the greatest truths cannot be found on a page but have to be conveyed face-to-face, heart-to-heart.

But questions remain: today, when the texts are far more readily available, under whose guidance are they being read? Or, are they being read without the foremost commentary: their living exemplars?

Muslims Were Not Literalists

Traditionally speaking, Muslims have considered the Scripture to be God’s word. Since *al-Zahir* (The Manifest) and *al-Batin* (The Hidden) are both Divine Names, the word of God also has these dimensions. The only debate for premodern Muslims was how many inward layers the text contained and, just as importantly, who was authorized to access them. The Shi’i tradition had a different answer than the Sufi dimension, but both systems proceeded in a parallel fashion. Insisting that the Qur’an must be read only in a literal way is a modern aberration, a real *bid`ah* that, in many ways, has no substantial premodern corollary in the heart of the Islamic tradition.

In a way, one can argue that even Qur’anically speaking, one cannot give in to a crude literalism. In the Qur’an itself, in the *ahsan al-qisas* (the loveliest of stories), the Prophet Joseph is taught how to interpret dreams. His own dream, that of the eleven stars and the sun and the moon, signifies something else. It seems good and beautiful, and necessary, to remember this today.

Where Are Texts Being Read?

These above questions are inseparable from the place where the texts are being read. Historically, Muslims studied texts in religious academies (*madrasas*), mystical lodges (*khanaqahs*), and other settings. Texts were not only read and commented upon, but were recited, memorized, and, most importantly, lived. Part of the trauma of colonialism resulted in closing down or marginalizing *madrasas* (in favor of institutions for teaching sciences, thus creating a Muslim caste of doctors and technocrats during the twentieth century) and driving many *khanaqahs* underground.

So where are religious texts being read today? Many are being read in the modern university, and even more are floating around society and even on the Internet; some are being read in neo-*madrasa* settings like California's Zaytuna Institute.

This is a mixed blessing, for while many traditional texts are more available to a larger group of people – including women, who may have been on the periphery of many *madrasas* – reading such texts, particularly mystical ones, in new settings risks engendering a further breakdown of normative structures at a time when a cacophony of voices are speaking Islamically. At worst, there is also the possibility of profound misunderstanding, especially with respect to texts that seem to require a living commentary. At this level, the task of institutions like Zaytuna is both urgent and one that must be undertaken with the utmost seriousness and in an open spirit.

The Selective Tradition and Our Situatedness

Even if the idea of opening up the Qur'an for ourselves is a powerful one, full of democratic urges, we can never approach it with a *tabula rasa*. Our understandings are shaped both by the contingencies of our own time and by the 1,400 years of tradition standing between us and the Divine revelation. Our own situatedness implies that we approach the text selectively, approaching those verses that today are the subject of greatest scrutiny: the usual verses about women's rights, violence, and relations with other communities. We know 4:34 by number (almost as famous as John 3:16), but do we know 21:107?

Just as important is the vast body of interpretive traditions standing between us and the origin of revelation. We never approach the text naively, purely, or innocently. Whether we are aware of them or not, a whole set of interpretive paradigms stand between us, both illuminating and occasionally blocking our path. One of the important aspects of this interpretative tradition was that in the premodern era it was always multiple, overlapping though not identical. Commentaries were grammatical, theological, philosophical, mystical, Shi'i, and other. Aside from the formal genre of Qur'anic commentary (*tafsir*), a wider and maybe even more influential tradition of indirect references to the Qur'an permeated poetry, arts and architecture, the lives of the prophets, and story-telling. In short, the fragrance of the encounter with God's words permeated every facet of society. Beginning in Arabic, it spread through all of the main Islamic languages, from Persian, Turkish, and Urdu to Malay, Swahili, and others.

In much of the popular poetry, it would be enough to allude to a single Qur'anic phrase (e.g., *qalu bala* or *amanna*) or a phrase from the *hadith qudsi* to jolt the listener into an awareness that what had seemed like an ordinary love poem was in fact love at the level of both human and divine, an all-subsuming love that thrived on ambiguity to encompass the whole cosmos. How often do we see a single phrase like *lawlak* ("were it not for you") show up in poetry? This was a reference to the *hadith qudsi*, a private communication between Muhammad and God, that alludes to his exalted rank and, by extension, the positive nature of creation: "Were it not for you [O Muhammad], I [God] would not have created the Heavens and the Earth." Here creation is not an exile, a sending-away from God, or a creation "out of" God. Rather, the creation of the whole cosmos is done *through* love, through God's love for Muhammad, the cosmic Muhammad who is the cause of creation. We are created through love, are here for love, and on the *buraq* of love will find our way back to God. Creation is but a *mi`raj* of *`ishq*.

What to do with these seemingly extra-canonical references today? When we speak of the selective reception of the modern Islamic tradition, part of what is implied is that we have deliberately distanced ourselves from much of this medieval tradition's philosophical, mystical, and poetic aspects. We do so at a great loss to our own spiritual life, for these traditions often lay out, most powerfully and evocatively, how we are led to God and how love and mercy are the very cause of the creation, the sustenance of our souls.

Without the message of love and mercy, only a fractured sense of God is left. God is never fractured, however, but only our understandings of God. The medievals always spoke of how God has to be approached through both *jamal* (the set of qualities dealing with beauty: love, mercy, compassion, grace) and *jalal* (the set of qualities dealing with majesty: awe, power, glory). Through the creative dance of *jalal* and *jamal* in the faithful servant's heart, *kamal* (perfection) of the human spirit is reached. Looking at the selective reception of much of the modern Islamic tradition, it is hard not to conclude that we have abandoned *jamal* and are seeking to find God only through *jalal*. The result is all too often an austere and dry understanding of God that seems bereft of compassion and grace, not to mention love. No wonder we lack in *kamal* ourselves.

The Missing Context

The Qur'an is a Divine revelation, but even Divine revelation has to enter this immediate world (*dunya*) through the heart and consciousness of a prophetic

figure sent to both warn and bring good news to his/her community. Each revelation thus evangelizes and disapproves of its immediate context. The Qur'an is a text in clear Arabic, as the Qur'an itself reminds us, presented in the idioms and cultural matrix of seventh-century Arabia. Even a direct encounter with the text, putting aside for one moment the important question of how the centuries of interpretation have shaped what we look for and how we read the text, still has to account for this original context. The seventh-century Arabian context was morally not a neutral one, but a society with deep tensions in terms of gender, class, and tribal affiliation, but also one offering riches in terms of ethics and language, among others.

In many ways, the Qur'anic text was written "against" this cultural matrix. In other words, it does not – and did not – simply convey the context; rather, it challenged many of its dominant norms. For example, whenever a community mentioned in the Qur'an proclaims that its members are following the "ways of their forefathers," they are confronted with a prophetic challenge.

Finding out about this seventh-century cultural matrix is a daunting challenge. Many of our sources, aside from the Qur'an itself, are actually from the Abbasid period, two centuries or so down the road. Many of the sources lament the deprivation of the seventh century as the *Jahiliyyah*, as if to highlight the Qur'anic revelation's lofty impact.

Potentially, one of our most useful sources is the "occasions of revelation" (*asbab al-nuzul*) genre, which situates the Qur'anic revelations in terms of particular episodes in the Prophet's life. Yet even here there is still much work to be done, as these texts are often rather brief and do not cover the totality of the Qur'an. There is an urgent need for a more holistic contextual approach that weaves together the Qur'anic revelation and the Prophet's life both in light of and against the grain of the larger Arabian matrix.

The Canard of Original Purity

Part of the Salafis' malaise has been the ahistorical identification of a period of Islamic thought (variously identified as the first two generations to 400 years after the Prophet's time) as the classical age of the "righteous forefathers" and the rest of Islamic history as a time when undue influences crept into Islam's allegedly pure fount. One example is Seyyed Qutb, who stated in his influential *Milestones*:

The fountain from which later generations imbibed was mingled with Greek philosophy and logic, ancient Persian legends, Jewish scriptures, and

traditions, Christian theology and remnant[s] of other religions and cultures. ... All the subsequent generations which arose after this first one were saturated from this mixed source, hence the perfect and pure generation like the one of the companions of the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) never arose again.¹

Aside from this period's undeserved idealization and the intellectual impossibility of conceiving of an Islamic tradition bereft of wider connections, there is also the issue of ungratefulness for the later-day Muslims, whose own seeking after God is dismissed in this surgical would-be purification.

Other People's Culture

One of the persistent myths of relating texts and society is that one can – or should – strive to read texts in a way that “avoids cultural baggage.” It is impossible to read texts in a vacuum. We are always reading in – and against – certain cultural contexts. The assertion that one can avoid cultural contexts almost always means that “other people's” culture is to be avoided and that one's own is somehow a pure receptacle for receiving Divine truths.

In today's Salafi-triumphant context, it is occasionally Arabs, and increasingly, Americans, who make this particular assertion. The Arab polemic (primarily against Persians, Turks, and South Asians) is part of the Salafi matrix; the American polemic is inseparable from the arrogance of the Empire.

The Qur'an Is Not a Science Textbook

There can hardly be anything more embarrassing than seeing the glut of publications and conferences presenting the Qur'an now as an embryology textbook, and now as a book of astrophysics. This is a reflection of how Muslims, succumbing to the conceit of modern western paradigms, have accepted the Enlightenment paradigms of science trumping religion. Historically, Muslims never tried to “prove” the Qur'an's veracity; it was taken for granted. That the Qur'an refers to natural phenomenon is of course well-established, particularly as it repeatedly asks humanity to ponder and meditate on the signs (*ayat*) of God all around and inside our own selves. However, one need not have an electronic microscope to do so. If anything, anachronistic scientific (though not scientific) readings of the Qur'an make a case that for 1,400 years its readers could not make “real” sense of the Divine text.

The Qur'an is Not a Mere Legal Code

One of the important debates among modern Muslims is the nature of the Qur'an as a legal document. Most scholarly estimates identify 10 percent or less of its verses as legal in nature. Estimates that want to see the Shari`ah (construed here as a legalistic category) as the revelation's core put the number much higher, as much as 80 percent. Yet the Qur'an is largely incomprehensible apart from the larger body of prophetic traditions, Qur'anic commentaries, legal texts, and mystical unveilings that have emerged from the tradition. Even prayer, that most central Islamic practice, requires commentary, for the Qur'an tells us to pray to God but not how to do so. A Protestant-derived *sola scriptura* approach to Islam is ultimately bound to fail. The popularity of these arguments among modern Muslims of various leanings simply reflects the desperate debates about authoritative interpretation.

Not Just Scripture

One of the Qur'an's most well-known verses argues that God is manifested in three sites: scripture, the natural realm, and inside the very soul of humanity: "We shall show them our signs (*ayat*) on the furthest horizons and inside their own souls until it becomes manifest to them that God is the Truth (*al-Haqq*)" (41:53). The pages of Scripture feature *ayat* that function simultaneously as verses and as signs. And yet this is not the only site of Divine manifestation. In other words, Muslims are not just to look to the Scripture "between the two covers" as God's Book, for mediating on the natural cosmos and inside the very souls of humanity – the very *raison d'être* of mysticism – are also foundational Islamic practices of perceiving the Divine.

Part of the malaise of modern Muslims is that the understandings of the Qur'an have been flattened to the most external level, mediations on natural phenomenon have been reduced to pre-figuring scientific discoveries, and meditations on sparks inside the souls of humanity that lead us back to God have been almost entirely neglected. No wonder many people have abandoned the theater of manifestation of Divine realities and, instead of *tahqiq* (realization), *kashf* (unveiling), and illumination, we nowadays occupy ourselves with that other *bid'ah*, called *'aqidah*, which figures nowhere in the Qur'an.

Endnote

1. Syed Qutub [Shaheed], *Milestones*, tr. S. Badrul Hasan (Karachi: International Islamic Publishers, 1988), 56.