

Qur'anic Reasoning as an academic practice

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Abstract

The increasing engagement of Muslim theologians with issues of textual criticism raises larger questions relating to the space provided by Western universities for Muslim theological practice. In this paper, these questions are examined in the context of the rapidly-increasing Muslim participation in the Scriptural Reasoning project. It is suggested that classical Muslim theological and mystical scriptural commentary will demonstrate continued relevance and vitality, particularly in conversation with Jewish readers, despite the considerable difference in method resulting from the distinctive shape of Quranic revelation, and the lack of a history of secularisation in most Muslim cultures.

According to a hadith of the Prophet, the Qur'an 'has an outward and an inward aspect, a limit and a place of rising [matla']'.¹ The mass of exegesis triggered by this and analogous scriptural proof-texts for the possibility of an esoteric reading of the Qur'an is represented in summary form in a gloss by the Anatolian theologian Daud al-Qaysari (d.1350). The 'outward' aspect, or 'back' (zahr) of the scripture is 'what is immediately apparent to the mind,' and is the first-order exegetic sense accessible to ordinary Muslims as well as to specialists. Rational deduction from this plain sense produces second-order theological insights, which are the 'inward' (batin). The greatest theologians reach the 'limit', represented by the most abstract texts of philosophical theology (kalam). Beyond this lies the 'place of rising', a term suggestive of the splendour of sunrise, which is the knowledge triggered by contemplation of the divine speech, gifted by 'unveiling' (kashf): a direct self-disclosure of God.²

¹ For this hadith see Gerhard Böwering, The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur'anic hermeneutics of the Sufi Sahl al-Tustari (d.283/896), 139-41. The parallel with the Talmudist's four levels of meaning, pesht (plain sense), remez (allusive meaning), derash (solicited meaning), and sod (secret meaning) is evident.

² Mehmet Bayrakdar (ed. and introduction), 'Risala Fi Ilm at-Tasawwuf li Dâwud al-Kaysari', Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi, 30 (1988), 171-216, p.199.

Qaysari was a solidly orthodox figure, revered as the first professor of theology in the new Ottoman state.³ In his college in Iznik he taught the major texts of Muslim theology in its twin orthodox manifestations of Ash'arism and Maturidism. Such a theology was, Islam being what it is, a scripture-driven exercise, eternally subordinate to the 'back', or the supportive plain sense, to which all legal and theological reason was answerable. His fourth, frankly illuminationist category, he took to be no less scriptural; yet it was not taught in mosque or madrasa. For medieval Islam, a reading of scripture that was not subject to formal disciplines of philology, historiography, and learned consensus, formed no part of the schoolmen's curriculum.

Qaysari lived in times of transition (five years previously, his madrasa in Iznik had been a church in Nicea), and of a scepticism generated in part by the profusion of religions and sects in his vicinity. An honoured theologian-legist, he nonetheless acknowledged that formal theology is 'a deduction from behind a veil',⁴ confessing that 'inductive monotheism [al-tawhid al-istidlali] seldom delivers safety from doubts and ambiguities.'⁵ It

³ Mehmet Bayrakdar, La Philosophie Mystique chez Dawud de Kayseri (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı, 1990).

⁴ Qaysari, Risala, 210.

⁵ *ibid.*, 210.

is only God's friends, who are in receipt of direct illumination, who may safely call themselves monotheists. This uncertainty continued to preoccupy Ottoman thinkers, who from time to time attempted to reconcile the mystical and ratiocinative epistemologies, both of which were grounded in the Qur'an;⁶ but the illuminationist method of scriptural reading, despite its prestige, was never thought appropriate as a subject for university students. Instead, its proper place was the Sufi lodge, the tekke, site of what Weberians would identify as the charismatic religion that coexisted, at a distance but quite calmly, with the traditional piety of the madradas.

Such a bifurcation was in certain respects akin to the cognitive dissonance which many modern theologians experience. The language of liturgy and sermon deployed in places of worship, particularly in charismatic contexts, is not always the obvious entailment of the finer work of the divinity schools, and scholar-theologians may find that their discursive assumptions about the origin, authority, and exegesis of scripture may fluctuate in complex ways as they migrate between class and congregation. Often this generates a Spinozan hermeneutic of suspicion towards theology

⁶ For an example in translation, see Nicholas Heer, 'Al-Jami's Treatise on Existence', in Parviz Morewedge (ed.), Islamic Philosophical Theology (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979), 223-56.

in the secular academy, and a reciprocal devotional disdain for scholarship, and in particular for philosophical theology and scriptural criticism.

Classical Islamic civilisation did, however, contrive one method of overcoming this kind of polarity, and of integrating the direct experience of the living scripture into the formal academy. The Qur'an had presented itself as an apologetic miracle, and as the theologies evolved came to be regarded as the principal proof of the Prophet's mission from God.⁷ One aspect of this was taken to be the text's content, as a magisterially clear corrective to the errors of the polytheisms and monotheisms of the decadent age of its appearance. However it was the text's literary force which was taken to lie at the centre of the phenomenon of i'jaz, of the revelation's miraculous inimitability. The leading theorist of this quasi-aestheticist argument for God and His prophet was the Baghdad judge and Ash'arite theologian al-Baqillani (d.1013), whose text The Inimitability of the Qur'an is still widely taught.

Baqillani lived in an age no less turbulent than that of Qaysari. Sceptics such as Muhammad ibn Zakariyya al-Razi (d. 925) had publicly condemned formal religion on the grounds that had the scriptures all been

⁷ Muhammad ibn al-Tayyib al-Baqillani, I'jaz al-Qur'an (Cairo: Muhammad Ali Subayh, 1370/1951), 33.

from the same God, their followers would not have descended into conflict. In place of scripture, Razi and his followers taught, human reason should be sufficient to distinguish right from wrong.⁸ Against this background, Baqillani begins by lamenting the times, and the inadequacy of the academic theology and scriptural hermeneutics of the day. ‘Everywhere,’ he writes, ‘heretics and unbelievers are challenging the foundations of the faith, and stirring up doubts, while the upholders of truth are few [...] Matters are as they were in the early days [of Islam], with some saying that the Qur’an is the product of sorcery, or that it is poetry, or that it is mere fables handed down from ancient peoples. Nowadays people tell me that they compare it unfavourably with literature.’⁹ Responding to this failure of the formal theologians of the time to vindicate the truths carried in scripture, he embarks on a theological effort that is also literary: the text which he loves, and which had amazed the pagan Arabs four centuries earlier, can be studied

⁸ Latimah-Parvin Peerwani, ‘Abu Hatim Razi on the Essential Unity of Religions’, in Mohammad H. Faghfoory, Beacon of Knowledge: essays in honour of Seyyid Hossein Nasr (Louisville KY: Fons Vitae, 2003), 269-87; see also P.E. Daiber, ‘Abu Hatim al-Razi (10th century A.D.) on the Unity and Diversity of Religions’, in J. Gort, H. Vroom et al. (eds.), Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach (Grand Rapids and Amsterdam: Eerdmans, 1989), 87-104. For the background see Josef van Ess, ‘Scepticism in Islamic Religious Thought’, in Charles Malik (ed.), God and Man in Contemporary Islamic Thought (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1972), 83-8.

⁹ Baqillani, 29.

formally so as to show it as miraculously replete, an aesthetic marvel so astounding that its divine provenance could not be rationally doubted.

Literary criticism, grammar, rhetoric, and the entire sophisticated structure of Arab analysis of discourse were deployed as publicly verifiable supports for the presence of an aesthetic epistemology that pointed unmistakably towards God and the divine origin of the text.

Modern academic practices of textual criticism are therefore not in principle wholly unassimilable by Muslim theology. The contextual analysis of the Qur'anic text, arguments over the chronology of its pericopes, and the use of a variety of extraneous sources to unravel cruxes, are modern weapons with real medieval precedents. Indeed, there are historians who claim that the higher criticism which has so taxed believing Bible-readers is of Islamic origin.¹⁰ Yet most Muslims in the academy are demonstrably alienated by conventional operating techniques in the philological wards. Most recurrently, Muslims point out that while Biblical criticism is carried out largely by Christian and Jewish insiders, the study of Muslim scriptures in the secular academy is carried out largely by Christian and Jewish outsiders; and this has contributed to the sense that the 'higher criticism' is

¹⁰ Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

an alien and even an adversarial project.¹¹ Matters are not helped by a certain Orientalist paternalism: one leading academic account of the genesis of Islam's texts specifies in its introduction that 'this is a book written by infidels for infidels'.¹² If, as Gadamer believes, interpretation is a three-way activity, since the understanding (verstehen) of a text presupposes an understanding (verständigung) with another human subject on the meaning of that text,¹³ it is easy to see why Muslim scholars have often found themselves ploughing a lonely furrow in the faculties, the victims of deeply sceptical reviewers.¹⁴

¹¹ See, for instance, Mohammad Khalifa, The Sublime Qur'an and Orientalism (London: Longmans, 1983). For a classic example, see the leading 19th century British historian of Islamic origins, William Muir: 'The turning point is the genuineness and integrity of our Scriptures; when that is proved, the truth of the Christian religion and falsity of Mohammedanism follow' (William Muir, The Mohammedan Controversy (Edinburgh, T. and T. Clark, 1897), 54.

¹² Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, Hagarism: the making of the Islamic world (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), viii.

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, tr. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Truth and Method (second edition, London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), xvi.

¹⁴ Conversely, the association of critical scholarship with Orientalist and hence implicitly imperial aspirations has intensified the difficulties of those working to confirm the integrity of the Qur'an while developing theories of its deep appurtenance to its original Arabian context; this political inhibition is discussed, for instance, by Ömer Özsoy, Kur'an ve Tarihselcilik Yazıları (Ankara: Kitâbiyât, 2004), 98.

The arrival over the past fifteen years of larger numbers of Muslims in Western universities has both highlighted and eased this asymmetry. Muslims, like their colleagues, belong to their tradition in discrepant ways. Many are comfortable with secular interrogations of the integrity of scripture;¹⁵ others reject the right of outsiders to work in the field,¹⁶ while many others, perhaps the majority, are negotiating the relationship between the two styles of reading in ways as complex as those current among their Jewish and Christian colleagues. Here the academy, much more than the place of worship, is hospitable to gradations rather than boundaries, and allows a mutual fecundity, which, in the case of the Scriptural Reasoning project, has already progressed with striking results. The Muslim participation in the Journal of Scriptural Reasoning, which presupposes a high degree of comfort with academic paradigms, is much more substantial than that of most Islamic Studies journals, and has been able to platform some of the most significant Muslim theologians. Aref Nayed, Vincent Cornell, Basit Koshul, Muhammad Sohail Omar, among others, are deeply involved in the movement.

¹⁵ See, for instance, the various writings of Abdul Qadir Sherif.

¹⁶ Abbud Zaki al-Ghamidi, Mawqif al-Mustashriqin min Kitab Allah (Beirut: Dar al-Ghuraba', 1987).

The classical Orientalist Vernunftreligion may remain sceptical; but the *Journal* is simply displaying its openness to recent shifts in hermeneutics to which Oriental Studies remain largely oblivious. The trajectory can readily be mapped. Dilthey believed that the genealogy of hermeneutics as a formal discipline can be substantially traced back as far as Lutheran zeal in refuting Tridentine strategies of scriptural appropriation, the kairos theme of the Reformation which ultimately made possible the ‘liberation of interpretation from dogma’,¹⁷ and hence from irrationality. Oriental Studies remains largely caught within this objectivist paradigm. With Heidegger, by contrast, interpretation became an ‘ontological event’, a relationship between the reader and the text that cannot be distinguished from the text’s content. The move has been implicitly reinforced by the many writers who have emphasised the subjective quality of the instruments which Dilthey held could permit a measurement or recreation of the interpretative experiences of others. The notion that one might persuasively model the ancient societies in which scripture was embedded has been widely challenged. The assumption that the outsider enjoys a privileged situation of neutrality (an

¹⁷ Gadamer, 176.

axiom in much of Islamic studies) is under sustained attack.¹⁸ Even classical logic has been the site of ambitious refinements that incorporate the role of the human subject, and seek to include a moral teleology.¹⁹ Many would therefore concede Gadamer's prophecy:

If, however, the ideal of the historical enlightenment that Dilthey pursued should prove to be an illusion, then the prehistory of hermeneutics that he outlined will also acquire a quite different significance. Its evolution to historical consciousness would not then be its liberation from the chains of dogma but a transformation of its nature.²⁰

The inevitability of this paradigm shift is still bitterly contested, and indeed, Diltheyan scientism has been pushed even further in a positivist direction by the many thinkers who write in the wake of Emilio Betti. At another extreme, there is the continuing appeal of a totalising hermeneutic of

¹⁸ Francis Watson, Text, Church and World: Biblical interpretation in theological perspective (London and New York: T. and T. Clark, 1994).

¹⁹ Peter Ochs, Peirce, Pragmatism and the Logic of Scripture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁰ Gadamer, 177.

suspicion as espoused by Derrida, which may not even permit the existence of the category of ‘scripture’.²¹ Yet Scriptural Reasoning, while located somewhere towards the end of late modernity, is usually committed to the effectively pragmatist view that as readers we experience ourselves as at least partially autonomous subjects, who would be unacceptably diminished by the counter-intuitive dogma which denies that there is a subject which reads. Scriptural Reading listens to Gadamer’s scepticism about method, but is respectful of many methods, and is itself shaped by its continuing encounter with different methods and participants as well as with the text (which is why it bears no resemblance to fundamentalism, a quite different post-liberal option).²² This has the invigorating consequence that our readings may be competitive: the text may not mean a single thing, but neither are all readings created equal; to use a Milbankian formulation, some scriptures may turn out to ‘out-narrate’ others, and some methods may prove more persuasive than others in contemplating certain types of text. So Scriptural Reasoning, while admitting a certain postmodern reticence about

²¹ Wesley A. Kort, ‘Take, Read’: Scripture, Textuality and Cultural Practice (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 4. The Algerian thinker Mohamed Arkoun follows this closely: Mohamed Arkoun, Lectures du Coran (2nd ed. Tunis: Alif, 1991), 258.

²² It cannot be emphasised too often that SR bears no resemblance to the alliance sacrée between fundamentalism and postmodernism which is emerging in some quarters.

final meaning, is by no means an intrinsically liberal method, and may turn out to be particularly hospitable to conservative thinkers who find that little is being communicated in academic or popular ‘dialogue’ sessions driven by liberal presuppositions.²³

Islam and SR

What might be the specifically Muslim experience of Scriptural Reasoning? SR is not a method, but rather a promiscuous openness to methods of a kind unfamiliar to Islamic conventions of reading. Although medieval Muslim exegesis could be as discrepantly hospitable in the paradigms it adopted as, say, Origen, contemporary styles of reading the text have for the most part passed it by. The Bible has been complicatedly part of the intellectual world which evolved into the academy within which SR typically takes place; the Qur’an and Hadith have not. For the West, outside a few specialist circles, Muslim scriptures are largely terra incognita, or a backwater, associated by theologians with the culture which, through medieval Avicennism, influenced Europe for a while, before becoming isolated as an oxbow lake. For Muslims, Islam continued in fidelity to classical paradigms of faith,

²³ ‘The more one is firm about the classical points that divide us the better we know where we stand, and our discussion becomes surprisingly open and fruitful.’ Georges Anawati, ‘Vers un dialogue islamo-chretien’. Revue Thomiste 64 (1964), 627.

worship and devotion, while the Renaissance re-paganised European thought; and the Enlightenment secularised it. Muslims engaged in scriptural reading are therefore, in many cases, substantially medieval, and are generally proud of having providentially avoided the calamities of infidelity which have beset the West. But this very isolation places them at a certain disadvantage: they may find themselves, for instance, asked to clarify features of scripture which for them are elementary, due to the sheer unfamiliarity of Qur'anic prophecy even to cultivated non-Muslims. A no less substantial inhibitor is the discovery that analytical tools developed in Biblical studies may prove inappropriate when investigating Qur'anic texts, indeed, many Muslims hold that the entire Western culture of scriptural criticism, whether conservative or sceptical, is a reductionist Enlightenment or Protestant project which is apt to be culturally oppressive as well as philologically inappropriate when applied to Muslim sources.²⁴ The Qur'an, after all, is accepted even in sceptical circles to have appeared over the course of a very few decades, and there is no question of identifying a vorlage for the text; it is simply unsuitable for the application of most methods of Biblical form-criticism. Hence as far as theology, or even

²⁴ Ismail Albayrak, Klasik Modernizmde Kur'ân'a Yaklaşımlar (Istanbul: Ensar Nesriyat, 2004), 17-9.

society, are concerned, for Islam there cannot be a ‘return to Scripture’ in Peter Och’s sense, since the Qur’an has nowhere been abandoned; and Muslim interlocutors in SR are much more likely to feel part of an unbroken tradition than advocates of a latter-day ressourcement. Unlike many Christians and Jews in SR, who come from societies wounded by a great divorce from scripture, Muslim participants are apt to come from societies wounded by fundamentalist misappropriations of scripture, and their appreciation of the insights and the moral teleology of the encounters will inevitably be very different.

Properly speaking, a Muslim may only interpret scripture after authorisation (ijaza) from traditional masters, who have themselves been authorised as part of an unbroken succession (isnad) stretching back to the Prophet himself.²⁵ Historicity is hence an axiom: no Muslim Bultmann has yet appeared at an SR seminar. Medieval exegesis, too, is authoritative, and Muslim scholars will, in theory, not use it unless they are accredited in the same fashion, this time as links in a chain extending back to the author of a given commentary. In this way, Muslims see themselves not just as interpreters but as para-witnesses to the scripture and to the exegetic

²⁵ For the *ijaza* system see Franz Rosenthal, Knowledge Triumphant: the concept of knowledge in medieval Islam (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

cumulation. This imposes formal restraints on the reflections they are likely to offer. Muslims are not, however, required to be custodians of a univocal tradition. Medieval Muslims, like Jews and Christians, lived in internally diverse worlds; and like Jews, normally inhabited societies where more than one scripture was widely followed. Although the canonical form of the Qur'anic text is not discernibly the product of an internal argument, but of an argument against other religions, the manifold difficulties of its language, and the immense and ambiguous body of hadith which supply its initial exegesis and sitz im leben, prohibit a single Islamic gloss on any given verse. Even the earliest major commentaries show this clearly.

Yet the Muslim freedom from Enlightenment constraints is very different from post-Enlightenment, postliberal freedom. Where, for Jews, pre-modern riches may be alive currently in smallish rivulets that escaped the Shoah, and where, for Christians, they might be found on Athos, to be brought home to the seminar room and unpacked, and jubilantly recognised, for Muslims premodern orthodoxy, liturgy, and scriptural reading are likely to exist in the nearest mosque. This will equip Muslims with an always discrepant voice at the seminar table. If SR tends to exclude the search for precision, and to celebrate an 'irremediable vagueness' (Ochs), Muslims may demur: God need not choose to disclose himself only in playful

obscurity, however successful that disclosure may be. First-order exegesis has the right to be true, rather than merely illuminating. ‘Fallibilism’ is not a doctrine which is easily discerned as the way in which prophetic scriptures seek to be approached. Peirce’s pragmatism will work, perhaps, for Maturidis, persuaded as they are of the consensual discernability of human florescence autonomously of scriptural definitions; but Ash’aris (and so perhaps the majority of Muslim theologians) are committed to a command ethic which will need to interrogate any arbitration between rival interpretations which is attempted merely on the basis of our perception of the humanity of their practical outcomes.²⁶ For Ash’aris, such a pragmatism can in fact be deconstructed, like the great edifice which Rawls erects on thin presumptions about ‘good people’, or like Nussbaum’s virtue ethics. Monotheism, taken seriously, means that God alone is the axiological source; human intuition is liable to set up rivals which may be idolatrous. What would an SR seminar have looked like in Nazi Germany, between, say, a Nazi biblical scholar and a Bosnian Muslim supporter of the Reich, in a world where definitions of human flowering were very different to those

²⁶ For the Ash’ari-Maturidi split here see Kevin Reinhart: After Revelation: the boundaries of Muslim moral thought (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

which currently prevail? Heidegger, after all, trusted his own phronesis.²⁷

There may be a progressist, liberal substratum here after all; in fact, a ‘hard’ Ash’arism or Hanbalism of a type not uncommon amongst today’s polarities might even interpret SR as yet another Americanisation of religion (not only Peirce, but also Dewey and William James are at work somewhere behind the scenes). As for the hopeful idea that psychomachy will naturally produce a love of the Other, one need only consider Ignatius Loyola’s attitudes to Moors and Jews (examples in the Jewish and Muslim world are also not far to seek).

Yet where the vagueness entails an openness to a lack of closure, and nothing more than this, Muslims can and do participate energetically. As an internal validation, they may affirm the need to act in fidelity with the kerygmatic Qur’anic address to Christians and Jews, who are called to love and affirm the Ishmaelite prophet, but also, in other texts, to uphold their own scriptures. Non-Muslim scripturaries are to be ‘disputed with in the most courteous way.’ (16:125) ‘O people of the Book’ is a frequent Qur’anic appeal, respectful insofar as the great bulk of the exemplary stories

²⁷ The dangers are starkly illustrated in Hans-Georg Gadamer (tr. F. Lawrence), Reason in the Age of Science (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 88-112.

embedded in the text concern Israelites and Christians.²⁸ The Qur'an is not a national polemic against rival ethnicities; on the contrary, it holds up the diversity of human 'tongues and colours' as a sign of God (30:22). Generally hostile to Arab history and values, it is Arabic, but not Arab.²⁹

This latent universalism and kerygmatic openness seems to have been a leading factor behind the growing Muslim participation in SR. Its consequences are not yet easy to discern. Even medieval Muslim encounters with other monotheists could bring about changes in exegesis, or at least an expansion of the boundaries of licit meaning.³⁰ The loose canons of SR are likely further to broaden Muslim interpretations, for instance by encouraging a reading of the Bible whose principal ambition is no longer to seek

²⁸ Özsoy, 13-5. Christian stories held up for Muslim admiration include the legend of the Seven Sleepers and the 'Companions of the Trench'.

²⁹ Or, if it is Arab, it is a document of radical autocriticism and affirmation of the Other. The text's non-Arab nature allowed attacks on the Arabs, on Islamic grounds, by the likes of Abu'l-Rayhan Biruni (Edward D. Sachau, Alberuni's India [London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1910], 185), and Abu 'Uthman al-Jahiz, Risala fi fadl al-Turk, in Abd al-Salam Muhammad Harun (ed.), Rasa'il al-Jahiz (Cairo: al-Khanji, n.d.), 1-86.

³⁰ See, for instance, the already-mentioned Abu Hatim Razi, whose consciousness of Christianity and of religious diversity impelled him to read Qur'an 4:157 against the Muslim consensus, as affirming the reality of the crucifixion. (Peerwany, 282-3.)

Muhammadan ‘foretellings’ in the text,³¹ but to consider it on its own terms, or, if that proves too essentialising, on the terms of a community of its own interpreters. Internal Muslim differences are also likely to flourish, including esoteric-exoteric balances, Maturidi, Ash’ari and Shi’i differentials, and gender-based disparities in the reading of the Qur’an.³²

The Muslim-Jewish intersubjectivity

Although Scriptural Reasoning is comfortable with the tripartite ‘Abrahamic’ category of monotheistic and historically-grounded traditions,³³ Muslim theology is probably more explicitly committed to the category than are either Judaism or Christianity. Afdal al-Din Kashani (d.1213), outlining

³¹ This was the main reason for pre-modern Muslim Bible reading; see for instance Ali b. Rabban al-Tabari (tr. Alphonse Mingana), The Book of Religion and Empire (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1986).

³² Over the past few decades the number of Qur’anic commentaries authored by women has grown rapidly; see for instance M.Akif Koç, Bir Kadın Müfessir: Aise Abdurrahman ve Kur’an Tefsirindeki Yeri (Istanbul: Sule Yayinlari, 1998).

³³ ‘The proper Buddhist place to start the study of Buddhism is not the life-story of the Buddha at all, but through outlining straight away the Dhamma’ (Paul Williams, Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian tradition [London: Routledge, 2000], 23).

his theory of scripture (the ‘sending-down’) as the necessary catalyst for self-knowledge, is representative when he writes:

[God] adorned the mark of these three sending-downs for three communities: the folk of the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur’an. Despite all the prophets, He said that only these three levels of sending-down should be kept standing. Thus He says: ‘O Folk of the Book! You are not upon anything until you uphold the Torah and the Gospel, and what was sent down to you from your Lord.’³⁴ (Qur’an 5:68)

The three-way dynamic helps to reduce binary polarisations, but it does carry a bias towards the ‘Semitic.’ Muslim-Jewish relations turn out to be privileged for several reasons which may relate to this traditional category. Both traditions are nomocentric, and have been the subject of analogous charges of ‘legalism’, which may have influenced some textual critics.³⁵ Purity laws, for instance, comprise an important area of intertextuality between Torah and Qur’an, and may be the subject of conversations that

³⁴ William C. Chittick, The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afdal al-Din Kashani (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 228.

³⁵ This is probably a fair comment in the case of Wellhausen, who worked extensively on the textual sources of both Judaism and Islam.

partially exclude Christian participation.³⁶ Jew and Muslim also converge when they read scriptural tales against a background of a very analogous valorisation of martial prowess and of human sexuality (again, both have on occasion been the subject of Christian critiques).

A further convergence which can emerge from SR sessions is that neither tradition is as manifestly committed to teleological views of history than is Christianity, with its proclamation of a radically new covenant. (For Islam, the messiah has come, but his role was to emphasise, in somewhat amended or even Masorti form, the timeless Law of Moses: no new ‘economy of salvation’ is being launched.)³⁷ Hegelian notions of a progress from nature and image towards abstraction seem to be interrogated by Semitic naturalism, by the integration of the body and its functions into a liturgy which continues to satisfy modern needs, and, in the arts, by a

³⁶ Jacob Neusner and Tamara Sonn, Comparing Religions through Law: Judaism and Islam (New York: Routledge, 1999). For a large but interesting generalisation about the relationship between universalism, law, and the monotheisms, see Huston Smith’s introduction to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), vii.

³⁷ Mahmoud Ayoub, The Qur’an and its Interpreters II: The House of ‘Imran (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 149-50. The strictly non-chronological structure of the Qur’anic text is, probably, a further sign of this non-progressivism.

primordial aniconism.³⁸ It is true that certain forms of liberal Judaism, rooted in Abraham Geiger's view of Tanakh and Talmud as early, primitive stages of human evolution, remain staunchly committed to ideas of progress; but the experience of the Holocaust has dented this, and encouraged a reversion, (sometimes formalistic, sometimes sophisticated, and sometimes both), to older patterns of 'awaiting the day of the Lord.'³⁹ Most Muslim and Jewish participants in the joint study of scripture will be alert to messianic references, but will not see the 'Old Testament' as either the foreshadowing of full salvation (Augustine), or as the record of a process of moral advancement (Wellhausen), but as the complex memory of a people whose access to the divine was, from earliest times, already complete, a completion that was periodically wounded and healed. There is a historia monotheistica, but monotheism itself does not advance.

The cognate quality of Arabic and Hebrew, which frequently enriches the practice of comparative SR, is a well-established topos, having

³⁸ Some hold that the Qur'an may best be seen as a form of literature older than Torah; see most notably Jaroslav Stetkevych, Muhammad and the Golden Bough: reconstructing Arabian myth (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); cf. for instance page 11: 'Unlike the latter [Genesis account of Joseph] the Quranic rendition is not an ideology-saturated pretense of tribal history, and, for that reason, it is more detached and more archetypal – and thus closer to myth.'

³⁹ Peter Ochs, 'The God of Jews and Christians,' in Tikva Frymer-Krensky et al., Christianity in Jewish Terms (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 2000), 54.

historically permitted substantial cross-fertilisation, as in the case of Muslim scriptural lexis with Hebrew cognates,⁴⁰ and also subsequently, as the Arab grammarians transformed rabbinic strategies of scripture-reading.⁴¹ Still more theologically productive is the fact that both religions have cherished their scriptural languages as meta-languages, uniquely sacred vessels of a real presence, and have developed, and debated, doctrines of Torah or Qur'an as the uncreated divine speech (Torah min ha-shamayim; al-Qur'an kalamu'Llah al-qadim). The power of the bayan, the discourse, expressed in a powerfully pure and consistent language, is itself taken to be evidence of God's unity, as Baqillani and his tradition saw, supplying a 'kerygmatic ontology'.⁴² The 'sending-down' of the 'word made book', is composed of

⁴⁰ Even during the Prophet's lifetime the Qur'anic vocabulary was being explained with reference to Hebrew cognates: Husayn al-Baghawi, Ma'alim al-tanzil (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1407/1987), III, 22.

⁴¹ W. Johnstone, 'Reading the Hebrew Bible with Arabic-sensitized eyes,' in W. Johnstone (ed.), William Robertson Smith: essays in reassessment (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 390-7.

⁴² See further Antoine Maqdici, 'L'Ontologie kerygmaticque de Paul Ricoeur: Approche arabe', in Gary Brent Madison (ed.), Sens et existence: en hommage a Paul Ricoeur (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 170-206, cf. p.188: Arabic 'a été tellement parfaite, que le rythme du discours, l'attitude qu'il provoque, la sensibilité qu'il crée, semblent être le travail d'un seul, l'Unique dans son unicité qui crée en exprimant et exprime en créant.' See also Jacques Langhade, Du Coran a la philosophie: la langue arabe et la formation du vocabulaire philosophique de Farabi (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1994), 26-7.

‘signs’ (aya); but these turn out to be unlike other signs, in that they are ontological reflections or even instantiations of the divine, a belief that triggered exuberant forms of letter-mysticism both within and outside the paradigms of Kabbalah and Sufism. Gadamer identifies Plato’s Cratylus as the point at which the view of language as comprising icons rather than mere signs begins to decay, leading to the modern view that ‘the word is reduced to a wholly secondary relation to the thing.’⁴³ Classical expressions of Judaism and Islam, by contrast, appear to revert to ancient iconic associations of signifier and signified,⁴⁴ which become the basis for a logocentric theology which is the polar opposite of Saussurean relativism.

The Argument from Beauty

If scripture is God’s uncreated speech, then to recite it is to speak a miracle; even more, it is, as Baqillani insisted, to speak an apologetic miracle. Hence there is a strongly aesthetical aspect to SR engagement, and this is certainly congenial to Muslim concerns.⁴⁵ Most hermeneutical theory has stressed

⁴³ Gadamer, 414.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Kashani, tr. Chittick, 164; certain readings of the Kabbalah also readily sustain this view in a radical way.

⁴⁵ And to most monotheistic concerns; although note that Calvin would repudiate any SR venture conceived on such principles, since, in his understanding, ‘it was also not without God’s extraordinary providence that the sublime mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven

beauty as a potential indicator of truth (Gadamer's Truth and Method starts by mobilising Plato to defend this), and in recent years, in tandem with the decline in classical Kantianism and in reaction against postmodern dismissals of aesthetics as mere reification, there has been a revival of interest in aesthetics as a possible sign of truth. A well-known instance is Elaine Scarry's On Beauty and Being Just, which proposes that beauty offers a 'radical de-centering', supplying both ethical intuition and access to timeless truths, which for her include political liberalism and social equality.⁴⁶

SR has no doubt gained in credibility from the turn which Scarry champions; yet in concentrating on the beauty and plenitude of scriptural language it represents a unique and highly concentrated case.⁴⁷ The three

came to be expressed largely in mean and lowly words, lest, if they had been adorned with most shining eloquence, the impious would scoffingly have claimed that its power is in the realm of eloquence alone.' (Cited in Kort, 26.)

⁴⁶ Elaine Scarry, On Beauty and Being Just (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); for a thorough critique see Robert B. Pippin, The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian aftermath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 273-7.

⁴⁷ Aref Nayed criticises Gadamer for his desire 'to see hermeneutica sacra only as a special application of a universal General Hermeneutics' (<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/nayed-princeton.pdf>); yet 'sacred' and 'profane' hermeneutics will not be so swiftly distinguished in the academy; neither should they be, unless we are to discount the possibility of discerning the transcendent in all texts not conventionally classed as scriptural.

traditions, in their irreducibly distinct ways, experience Truth in the fullness of the text: not the text as meaning, but as reading. Consider Levinas, reflecting on a Talmudic passage, where it is shown that

the statement commented upon exceeds what it originally wants to say; that what it is capable of saying goes beyond what it wants to say; that it contains more than it contains; that perhaps an inexhaustible surplus of meaning remains locked in the syntactic structures of the sentence, in its word-groups, its actual words, phonemes and letters, in all this materiality of the saying which is potentially signifying all the time. Exegesis would come to see, in these signs, a bewitched significance that smoulders beneath the characters or coils up in all this literature of letters.⁴⁸

This is hard to distinguish from the deepest insight of i'jaz theory: the Qur'an is a literary, aesthetic argument for itself, which challenges (tahaddi) present-day readers despite the apparent archaism of its diction and concerns, where the anachronic gap simply adds another fertile dimension to

⁴⁸ Emmanuel Levinas (tr. Gary D. Mole), Talmudic Readings and Lectures (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 109.

the productive interaction of its letters and sudden shifts in style and subject. The spoken miracle continues to speak thanks to the difficulty of its beauty.⁴⁹

Qur'anic Reasoning as epistemology: two examples

Had they established [aqamu] the Torah and the Gospel, and what has been revealed to them from their Lord, they would have eaten from above them and from beneath their feet. (Qur'an, 5:65-6)

The medieval commentaries offer divergent but 'valid' (hasana) interpretations of this text. What is it to 'establish' the Torah or the Gospel? It is to be faithful to God's covenant as set forth therein, such fidelity including a receptivity to the possibility that God might will to send a Gentile prophet. Alternatively, it is to apply the laws and commandments which those scriptures contain. Thirdly, it could mean that Christians and Jews are to hold up their scriptures 'before their eyes', lest they slip in any observance. 'What has been revealed to them' can refer to the new

⁴⁹ Talip Özdes, Mâturîdî'nin Tefsîr Anlayışı (Istanbul: İnsan, 2003), 279-2.

revelation of the Qur'an, or to the books of the Prophets (nabiyyin) such as Daniel. Such are the plain senses, as commended by the leading medieval Ash'arite Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d.1209).⁵⁰ A Scriptural Reasoning encounter would probably register these meanings, and then press on in unforeseeable ways to consider the consequences of 'establishing' Scripture: prosperity, perhaps earthly, perhaps celestial; the metaphor of scripture as a 'banquet' (ma'daba) to be savoured (as the Latins put it), with the palatum cordis;⁵¹ the implication that faithfulness to scripture places human beings between heaven and earth (the verse continues: 'Amongst them are a balanced people'). There would be no conclusion, despite the general enrichment and sense of respect for the fecundity of the text; however there would probably be a consensus that the text is presenting scripture as the source and guarantor of a divine gift.

And when the Qur'an is recited, pay heed, and listen with reverence,
that you may perhaps receive mercy. (Qur'an 7:204)

⁵⁰ Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, Mafatih al-ghayb (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-Misriyya, 1933), XII, 46-7.

⁵¹ See the hadith 'the Qur'an is God's banquet' (Abu Daud, Fada'il al-Qur'an, 1). For the 'eating' of Christian scripture see Peter Norton SJ, 'Lectio Vere Divina: St Bernard and the Bible,' Monastic Studies 3 (1965), 165-81, especially pp.174-5.

Here the plain sense found by Razi focuses on the use of the imperative mood, and on the deduction, from the ‘perhaps’, that both believers and unbelievers are being addressed.⁵² The Sufi commentary of Ismail Bursevi (d.1725), affirms Razi’s reading, but adds a reflection on scripture-reading as a source of mercy. The core liturgical habit of Islam is the fivefold daily prayer (salat), and the core of the salat is Qur’anic recitation.⁵³ ‘Paying heed’, for Bursevi, suggests the formal activation of a sense, while ‘listen with reverence’ denotes an appreciation with one’s ‘inward ear’. This is not the batin of Qaysari’s schema, but the matla’, the ‘rising-place’. Bursevi cites another scriptural text, the hadith in which God says, ‘When I love My servant [...] I become the ear with which he hears’; so Bursevi observes that ‘whoever hears the Qur’an with the ear of his Maker has truly heard it being recited,’ and adds a couplet from the poet Jami (d.1492):

For you to understand not one letter of the Qur’an is no wonder;

The wonder is that your eye can be blind to the sun of His generosity.⁵⁴

⁵² Razi, Mafatih, XV, 102-5.

⁵³ Ismail Haqqi Bursevi, Tafsir Ruh al-bayan (Istanbul: Eser Kitabevi, 1389/1970), III, 303. The hadith is from Bukhari, Riqaq, 38.

⁵⁴ Bursevi, 305.

Considering a commentary of this order, an SR seminar might summon other scriptural resources, such as the passage where the Qur'an speaks of its own 'sending-down' as a 'healing' and a 'mercy'. (17:82) A discussion on mercy (Ar. rahma, with its Hebrew cognates) as the salvific fruit of worship might include, in the context of the 'sending-down', the metaphor of rain (rahmet, in some Islamic languages), and of the 'healing' of the earth. Finally, the conversation might 'fall' in the direction of the clear soteriological and epistemological intent of these texts. Does scripture purport to supply a sacramental source of knowledge intuited through recital and cantillation that is supra-rational but which cannot be ignored theologically? If so, will this yield simply another private fides ex auditu (the sam'iyyat of kalam), or is it akin to the 'hermeneutical ontology' towards which Gadamer worked (or does it resemble it only in its insistence on indeterminacy)? Does the miracle of holding the text point towards its exogenous origin, as in the Muslim legend in which Moses can only lift the tablets of the Law when he invokes the name of God?⁵⁵ And what of the intuition of fellowship experienced during the seminar, as the texts are tasted as a kind of ambivalent communion in three kinds. Do we find in this new

⁵⁵ Al-Rabghuzi, The Stories of the Prophets: Qisas al-Anbiya, an Eastern Turkish Version, ed. H.E. Boeschoten, M. Vandamm and S. Tezcan (Leiden, New York and Köln, 1995), II, 347.

fellowship of intersubjectivity, which is so often tangential to religious boundaries, something transcendent?⁵⁶ Nothing is sought to be proven; but a context and an energy for further work within one's own community have certainly been supplied. Perhaps SR's hermeneuts are to resemble the monks of Ibn al-Farid's Sufi poem:

Joy to the monastery's people! How much they are intoxicated by this wine;
though they have not drunk it, catching only the aroma.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Here the seminar might ponder the hadith: 'My love must come to those who love one another for My sake' (Muwatta', Shi'r, 16).

⁵⁷ Umar ibn al-Farid, ed. and tr. Jean-Yves l'Hôpital, Poemes mystiques (Damascus: Institut Français d'Études Arabes de Damas, 2001), 240-1.