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Interpreting the Qur'ān: Non-Muslim as Mufassir

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Abstract

This essay presents a reflective intellectual history of the author's engagement with Islamic studies, specifically the challenges and insights inherent in a non-Muslim attempting to interpret (*tafsīr*) the Qur'ān. Drawing upon decades of scholarship at the Australian National University and fieldwork in Cairo and Indonesia, Johns articulates the hermeneutical difficulty of accessing the "tone and colouring" of the Islamic revelation from outside the faith community. The narrative traces the author's methodological turn to a literary and phenomenological appreciation of the Qur'ān as a recited, oral text. Key turning points in this hermeneutical journey include the realization of the distinct nature of Islamic "salvation history"—contrasted with Biblical narratives, particularly through the story of Joseph (Yūsuf)—and the discovery of the internal coherence of the Qur'ān. The essay emphasizes that understanding the Qur'ān requires moving beyond textual translation to experiencing its recited reality and accepting its prophetic narratives on their own terms, independent of Judeo-Christian antecedents. Ultimately, the work argues for an empathetic scholarship that bridges the "familiar" (shared prophetic figures) and the "remote" (distinctive Islamic theology) to foster inter-religious understanding.

Keywords: Qur'ānic Studies, Arabic, Indonesia, Malay, Comparative Theology.

Introduction

If I may use a cricketing metaphor—and despite my accent, I barrack for Australia—, it is difficult to put a bat to the ball bowled by Tony Street (of Cambridge University). I am deeply moved by his kind words and the acuity of his insights. He was the first Ph.D. student to graduate in our Arabic program at the Faculty of Asian Studies (Australian National University/ANU). His words awaken many memories of years together at the ANU, as student, friend, and colleague. We spent months together in Cairo as guests at the Dominican Institute of Oriental Studies, where we were Tony I and Tony II. There, Tony II was able to work with the revered Georges Anawati, a great Dominican, a great scholar, a great Arabist and a great eccentric, who insisted that knowledge of French was a necessary pre-condition for entry to heaven.

While in Cairo, I forget the year now, we were able to get to the al-Azhar Ramadan book fair. The al-Azhar University is within walking distance of the Institute, where we were able to buy at bargain prices many of the basic works of Islamic scholarship. Tony II had the contacts to enable their transport to the Menzies Library. Alas, Fr. Anawati and many of his co-freres have long passed away. I am indebted to them, and to many more colleagues and friends, at the ANU, in Indonesia and the UK, who have contributed to much, both to what I had to unlearn, and what I had to learn as the years passed, of these, too, many no longer with us. I think especially of my very first colleague from Indonesia, Dr. S. Soebardi, who joined me back in 1960. More recently, there are Dr. Ian Proudfoot and Dr. S. Supomo, colleagues and friends over the years, who have been taken all too soon. This thought brings the realisation that anything I now say, whatever its sense or any aspiration it expresses, may be valedictory.

I should also thank this campus of the Australian Catholic University (ACU) in Canberra for hosting this launch, and, while being thankful myself for still being here- thankful to all of you for being present, new and old friends, and especially Hilary Regan, the editor of the Australian Forum for Theology (AFT), from distant Adelaide. It was Hilary who offered the opportunity to put the book together, and to whom I owe copious apologies for repeated unscheduled amendments to drafts of the text—something editors rightly abhor. And would it be out of place to acknowledge the presence of my daughter, three sons and Yohanni among you.

Republishing the Published

It is an honour to be included in the AFT's Scholars Collection. In it are names I revere. Perhaps, there is even a symbolic value in the book being 12th in the series. More important, however, is the fact that it steps out of the so-called 'Western World' and explores aspects of 'the other' in the Qur'ān, and the world of Islam, with vision of salvation history, and the colourings it imparts to so many cultures.

Republishing already published material is a fraught exercise. It raises the inevitable question: is it worth it? Or perhaps, was it worth it, even in the first place. But one should have confidence in the judgement of editors, who someone remarked to me (not wholly in jest) as a breed are omniscient and have impeccable taste. There was still a decision to be made: when a piece is selected for reprinting, is it to be reprinted as it is, following the example the wise thrush who sings each song twice over, (lest we forget his first fine careless rapture) or is there an opportunity, as has been said of von Karajan's repeated recordings of the Beethoven symphonies, trying to get it right. I settled for a chance to get them better, even if not right. In any case, the Qur'ān presents more challenges and has more to offer than the score of a Beethoven symphony. All the same, if you forgive the metaphor, we are gathered here today to set this cardboard boat with its sails of paper on its maritime journey to be buffeted by whatever winds happen to blow.

The spiritual world of Islam is both remote and familiar. What is familiar can effectively disguise and even distort what is remote. Meanwhile, what is remote is in some respects so private and personal as to be inaccessible, and approaches to it by an outside, a non-Muslim, may appear intrusive, or an attempt at appropriation. It is private and personal. And there is yet another difficulty. Religious traditions develop a way of presenting their internal coherence in a special kind of language, one that includes not just the mastery of a currency of specific concepts, but a tone and colouring that accompany, and are distinctive of all internal communications within the community living by this tradition (Johns, 2013). Learning this language is not just an ability to state a given set of doctrines. Tone and colouring are equally part of the reality a religion represents. The former, like any language, can be studied, ideally by a number of years in a madrasa. The tone and colour, however, can only be learned by living the

language, by sharing in some way in the life of the community for whom it is native. In saying this, I speak personally, conscious of the false trails I have followed, detours, backtracks, and false starts. No one starts from nowhere, and a starting point conditions the course of the journey, and perhaps even determines its destination. Background, education, culture, life experience, personal contacts, often unplanned, arbitrary, and even, direct the course of the journey.

Malay-Indonesian Studies

Southeast Asia is now recognised as one of the major cultural regions of the Islamic world, and in this world, Indonesia has a special place. Its Islamic culture is revealed in institutions such as the madrasa, in calligraphy such as the illumination of manuscripts. Likewise, in the use of the human voice—above all in Qur'ānic recitation—in dance and drama. It is to be found in various genres of religious writing. All are part of a continuum that began when the first Islamic communities were established in the region. Even I speak are being extended as artists and scholars re-present the spirit and achievements of the past in new forms such as experimentation in new styles of calligraphy, dramatic performances of the Barzanji, and what as been called *dakwah* rock, songs with religious lyrics by singing groups.

It has fecundated a rich Islamic humanism. The religious elements in it may be immediately evident, or indirect and allusive. They may be seen in the design of public buildings. They may insinuate themselves into secular forms of music dance and drama. They may be imbedded in works of literary imagination in its variety of forms such as lyric poetry, the essay, and the novel, all of which offer a writer scope to express even doubt as a part of religious faith.

Northrop Frye looked at the whole corpus of English literature and saw it virtually as a commentary on the great spiritual themes presented in the Bible such as Fall and Redemption, Death and Resurrection. In the same way, values, symbols, types and antitypes are presented in the Qur'ān in virtually all writings with an Islamic provenance. Such a presentation may not be explicit, and at a superficial level may even seem to be denied. Yet it is the themes of the Islamic revelation that set the basic moral perspectives of human perception of personal identity.

My journey into this world began on Christmas Eve 1947, arriving in Singapore on a troopship for two years military service in what was then British Malaya. On 1 January 1950, I returned to the UK, with my heart left in the Malay-Indonesian world of Southeast Asia. I enrolled in SOAS for a degree in Malay with Arabic as a subsidiary subject. My parents dismayed and asked: what is the commercial value of Malay? In 1954 this was to lead me to Indonesia, where I spent four years during which I met Yohanni. In 1958, I was appointed to what is now the ANU and what became the Faculty of Asian Studies. We made our home in Canberra, and there, and elsewhere where, I taught and wrote for 35 years; after retirement continuing my association with the ANU (Department of Political and Social Change) as a Visiting Fellow without grant. This book is the fruit of teaching, study and travel over these years, and up to and including today (14 August 2023). I was devoted to the new literature of Indonesia, the writings of Amir Hamzah, Chairil Anwar, Achdiat Karta Mihardja (Johns, 1959). Popular names at the time, but perhaps now a little demode. Then moved back to a study of Islamisation and *tasawwuf* (Sufism) in Indonesia (Johns, 1961; 1993; 1995; 1996; 2001). I proposed that it was primarily Sufism that facilitated the spread of the new religion (a 'courageous' hypothesis) which had the effect of throwing a stone into a pool of frogs) (Johns, 2025). I then moved on to Qur'ānic exegesis, and the Qur'ān itself (Johns, 2007; 2013; Saenong, 2006).

For at least ten of these years, I had paid only a passing attention to the Qur'ān. When I was a student at SOAS, way back in 1950, courses in Arabic, and on Islamic thought, treated the Qur'ān in a rather off-hand fashion. Thatcher's *Arabic Grammar* (Thatcher, 1982) was the foundation of the language course. Occasionally a phrase from the Qur'ān might occur without comment in a grammatical exercise, for example *Innā li Allāhi wa innā ilayhi rāji'ūn* (We belong to God, and to Him we are returning). It tests knowledge of features of Arabic grammar, no doubt. The lecturer identified it as Qur'ānic, but added nothing on the significance of its meaning, let alone its place in social life, where it is regularly uttered in expressions of condolence on new of a death. On theology, the Qur'ān was said to be inconsistent or disorganised. There were references made to *sūra* (chapter) and verse, but without attention to their context or wider setting.

The Qur'ān as Literature (?)

The Qur'ān—even in translation—is not easy reading for Non-Muslims, or an unprepared reader. There is the sheer stylistic unattractiveness of many English renderings which often have a churchy tone, imitating the diction and rhythms of the King James Bible. Such a style is ineffective for the rhetoric of the Qur'ān which moves at a different pace and has different arcs of tension. This is sufficient to discourage many from even an effort to read it. I will come to more serious problem later.

There are other reasons for this. One is cultural. In the English literary tradition, there are no reference points such as those provided for the Bible, by the authorised version of the Bible. Another is rhetorical. It is the spoken word and internal organisation into what are called *sūra*s, which do not have an explicit continuing relationship that one expects from the word 'chapter' in English. Its 114 divisions are sequential, but the sequence is not chronological of logical, and the relations between the *sūra*s are subtle and indirect. Further, there is the switching of styles and topics. Its tone moves seamlessly from the grandiloquent and poetic, to the formal and legalistic, devotional, and mystical. There is a variety of rhetorical forms within the *sūra*s, descriptions of the wonders of nature, of land, sea and sky, multi-directional dialogue, rapid shifts of speaker, exhortations to battle, promulgation of laws, dramatic changes of scene, allusions to events in the immediate and remote past, reference to beliefs, memories and practices, and events occurring outside the text, although encoded within it (Johns, 1993; 2011). A rendering of the Qur'ān in English may then be accurate at the level of the word, but it cannot of itself on the printed page provide signals to decode the shifts and contrasts in style, the modulations of tone, the changes in speakers, for which there are no explicit signals in the printed text, and which need to be heard. It is then difficult to give a coherent rendering in English that communicates both its meanings and the variety of styles in which they are expressed.

On a first encounter, it appears disjointed and incomplete, and links between events appear to lack a framework in which they can be set. Yet with its ringing changes, and continuities, silences and dramatic encounters, it comes together as a unit. It is one book. It is to be heard. It is the ear that carries it to the heart so that it is experienced. This is why, for many Muslims, it is an ideal to memorise the whole Qur'ān. All Muslims know some of the shorter *sūra*s by heart as part of the

daily ritual prayers. The language of the Qur'ān hovers as a penumbra over the Arabic speaking world, and every student of Arabic should be aware of this, and as part of any course, memorise some *sūra*s.

Nevertheless, along my journey, I came across a number of verses and shorter *sūra*s that even in an English rendering served as points of entry into its textual world, explore it, to appreciate it, and so respect it as a revealed book. Yet these passages of spiritual depth and beauty also need to be understood in their context, and their place in the movement of the *sūra*, and this is difficult to express (Johns, 2006). Among them are many that move the heart and mind of the non-Muslim as directly as the psalms, and can be felt as an authentic extension of that spirituality. Among them is the is the first verse of the penultimate sura: *"Declare: I take refuge with the Lord of the Dawn"* (QS. al-Falaq [113]: 1). Another is God's counsel to Muhammad.

"Think on your Lord morning and evening. Humbly, and filled with awe. Speechless with adoration (QS. al-Aʿrāf [7]: 205).

But there are longer passages too of sustained power and beauty that can be expressed effectively in English. Among them the sublime verse of the throne:

> *God, there is no god but He, The Living, the Eternal;*
> *Neither slumber nor sleep seize Him.*
> *To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth.*
> *Who is there who could intercede with Him without His leave?*
> *He knows what is before men and what is past*
> *But they know nothing of His knowledge, except in so far as He wills*
> *His throne embraces the heavens and the earth:*
> *to sustain them is no burden to Him.*
> *He is the Exalted, the Almighty* (QS. al-Baqara [2]: 255).

There is the divine generosity revealed in the gifts of nature:

We pour down the rain in abundance
We break open the earth,
and make spring from it grain and grapes and clover,
olives and date palms,
gardens planted thick with trees
and all the gifts of the earth. (QS. ʻAbasa [80]: 25–31).

Joseph in the Qur'ān

The sublime diction of such verses in my early encounter with the Qur'ān opened for me the door for me to enter the world of Qur'ānic studies. But there were two events that were life-changing in the way they propelled me into that world. One was a chance meeting with a remarkable Egyptian scholar and reciter, Dr Muhammad Ali al-Erian. He had agreed to recite a number of passages of the Qur'ān for an English-speaking audience, and something prompted him to ask me to prepare English renderings of them to distribute for the event. Among them was the celebrated Light Verse.

God is the light of the heavens and the earth
His light is like to a niche
in which is set a radiance;
this radiance is within a glass,
the glass gleaming like a brilliant star.
Its radiance is lit [from the oil] of a blessed olive tree
of neither east nor west
an oil that would radiate light
without ever flame having touched it,
light upon light. (QS. al-Nūr [24]: 35)

As he recited it with a superb cantillation, he, caressed on his lips, with (lingering embrace phrases that had a special meaning for him. And when he came to the final words 'light upon light', *nūr 'alā nūr*, he halted, then repeated them time and again up to seven times before continuing. When I heard these words of the Qur'ān, lifted from the confines of the printed page, it was as though they had taken wing from the letters with which they were written. I at once understood the lines of the Indonesian poet Amir Hamzah expressing his love of God as he recites the Qur'ān:

Kujunjung di atas hulu	I hold You in highest honour
Kupuji di pucuk lidah	I praise You with my tongue
Kupangku di lengan lagu	I bear You in the arms of melody
Kudaduhkan di selendang dendang	I cradle You in a shawl of melody

The presentation was a success. So later he asked me to present a lecture on the Qur'ānic story of Joseph. He urged me to study it, analyse, and explain it, then prepare English renderings for the passages that he would recite in Arabic. At first, I resisted. At that stage I could not relate to it. The telling of the story in the biblical book of Genesis formed a barrier of habit and custom that I had to discard before I could appreciate it in its own terms.

I had to realise that not only was the story told in a different language, operating according to different rhetorical conventions. It represented a radically different salvation history, a different understanding of the divine design for creation and human history. This Joseph was not a key figure on the road to the coming of the Messiah as in Jewish history, but a prophet sent to teach them, his own people. The Jews in Islamic salvation history are not a chosen people. They are, however, a specially favoured people. More messengers have been sent to them than to any other people. But they have rejected them, as they are rejecting Muhammad.

I am forever grateful to his memory for the insight he gave me. He provided the jolt necessary for this break-through, to hear and experience afresh the story I already knew in its biblical form. I then realised that the story of Joseph in its Qur'ānic form, reflects this cosmic difference in vision of salvation history

between it and the Bible, and communicates it through a different rhetorical form (Johns, 1981; 2005). It is also told for a different reason. Muhammad is challenged to tell it as proof that he is a prophet, as Joseph too was a prophet. The same is true of all the figures in the Qur'ān with biblical names. They are presented in narratives which have many elements in common with their biblical counterparts, such as Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob Moses, but are playing their roles on a different stage in a different cosmic drama (Johns, 2016). These roles need to be understood and accepted as the Qur'ān presents them independently of their biblical antecedents if the distinctive genius of Islam to be understood. They have to be accepted as the Qur'ān presents them. Their role in Islam is as the Qur'ān presents them, and what it has to tell of them.

The second was when I encountered in Cairo the work of one of the great minds of human history, the philosopher and Qur'ān exegete Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) of *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (Keys to the world beyond vision), a work of exegesis in sixteen volumes (32 fascicules). I had discovered him thanks to a commentary on the Qur'ān written in Mecca by an Indonesian, a Sundanese from Banten, — oddly enough brought to me from Banten by my colleague Dr. Soebardi—who spent most of the second half of the 19th century in Mecca who was given the title Lord of Religious Scholars of the Hijaz *(Sayyid 'ulamā' al-Hijāz).* The great Dutch scholar Snouck Hurgronje met him there in 1884.

His work *Marah Labid* introduced the name of al-Rāzī to me, and in Cairo, al-Rāzī himself was introduced to me by the Dominican scholar Jacques Jomier, passing me volume by volume from his room (cell?) This was how Tony Street too made the acquaintance of al-Rāzī, and found in his *tafsir* a topic for his his Ph.D. thesis— a wonderful study. A few years later, the Dominican Fr. Laurie Fitzgerald followed in his footsteps with another outstanding thesis. To me, al-Rāzī became a guide, my virgil, who took me by the hand to lead me through the universe of the Qur'ān. Because Dr. al-Erian had sensitised me to the sura of Joseph, al-Rāzī's exegesis of this chapter was the first part of his work that I read. It demonstrated how the Qur'ānic presentation of the story was not simply a collage of episodes from different sources inexpertly put together. Neither were other accounts of prophetic figures in the Qur'ān. Many of the lemmata of them in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (at least the first edition) regarded the biblical citation, being the earlier, as a norm. Subsequently, reports of them in the Talmud and the oral tradition found their way into the Qur'ān in a confused form. The Qur'ān

accordingly was regarded as an epigone—a later and inferior re-working of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures (Johns, 1986).

Stories of the prophets, such as that of Joseph are one of the major Qur'ānic modes of communicating its message. The Qur'ān throngs with personalities along with them, male and female, the blessed the damned. The story of Joseph is the best known, and is unique in that an entire *sūra*s devoted to it. There are 25 names of individuals with prophetic status, for example Job (Johns, 1999; 2001; 2002), Noah, Moses (Johns, 1982), Solomon (Johns, 1986), Jonah (Johns, 2003), Jesus, Abraham (Johns, 2008), Shuʿayb (Johns, 2011), and many more. Their stories are told in different ways: sometimes in full, sometimes in episodes distributed across a number of suras. Sometimes mentioned only in a verse or two. These figures are often presented with a freshness and vigour that adds to their appeal. They need to be recognised as personalities in their own right. In addition to these, however, there are myriads of prophets, most of them not known by name. Extra Qur'ānic stories about the prophets abound, culled from a variety of sources, distributed across all levels of society, as people let their imaginations and spiritual taste run untrammelled. They are an important genre of Islamic literature, and are to be found in all the languages of the Islamic world.

Public street corner and marketplace story telling is not common in today's Western world. They are not to be seen (or heard) at entrances to the Canberra Centre. But 12th century Baghdad was different. The story of Joseph, his father Jacob, his brothers, the wolf, Zulayka, Potiphar provided rich materials for the public imagination. There was a storyteller who promised to tell the name of the wolf that ate Joseph. A passing scholar objected that the wolf had not eaten Joseph. Undeterred, the storyteller said he would give the name of the wolf that had not eaten Joseph.

There were story tellers who sexed up the narrative by saying that after Zulaikha's words "*Hayta laka"* (QS. [12]: 23)—which might be freely rendered, 'Yipee I'm ready for you. Take me', she dimmed the lights, locked the doors, drew the curtains and stripped herself naked (Johns, 1998; 1999). There was a storyteller who related that Potiphar was impotent, by which he would explain much. But there are stories with higher theme. One is that Zulaikha repented her attempt to seduce Joseph, and calumniated him and that their love and marriage had been predestined.

Scholarly exegetes found exemplars of virtue in them. Sometimes they identified with them, seeing in them their own joys and sorrows. The great exegete al-Rāzī saw in Jacob's grief at the loss of his son his grief at the loss of his own son, Salih and Muhammad who had died far from home and family. He asks anyone who found his book of value to say *al-Fātiha* (QS. al-Fātiha [1]) for his son and himself and all who die away from home, far from brethren mother and father. And he quotes lines of a classical Arab poet's dialogue: He asks a companion why he weeps whenever he passes a cemetery and has the reply: It is like a wound that bleeds afresh when the scar is torn off. This message is for every grave there is the grave of my brother Abdul.

Conclusion

But a word of conclusion is still needed. The essays in this cardboard boat with sails of paper are about something remote and something familiar, and about a way to one from, the other. The stories of the great figures, culture heroes of the Judaeo-Christian tradition are familiar. As told of in the Qur'ān, they appear remote. In understanding this difference, we are put to the test. The Qur'ān presents them unambiguously as participants in its own revelation of salvation history. Its presentation of them proceeds differently to our expectations of narrative. The challenge is to find access to a different tradition, using this difference as leverage to gain access to another textual world, another tradition, another faith. This I try to summate in the final essay with the question as title 'Abraham — Our father in faith?' A question. Can there be an answer? Only one word can be the last word, the great word, Amen (or as our Muslim friends might express it: *Āmīn, āmīn, ya rabb al-ʿĀlamīn*.

Note: This paper is based on Johns' remarks in the launch (14/08/2023) of his recent The Dye of God: Essays on Islam and the Qur'ān (Adelaide: AFT, 2023).

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