

Flashlight on the Qur'an: Some Thoughts for Westerners

Karima Vargas Bushnell – 2002, revised 2023

Bismillah, ar-Rahman, ar-Rahim. In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

When, as a child, author Sumbul Ali-Karamali asked her father, while reading the Qur'an, "Why does God sound so angry?" he laughed. "That's because you're reading it in English," he said.

As a U.S. American and a nine-year convert to the religion of Islam, I read that, "Americans are reading translations of the Qur'an in record numbers!" I reacted to this news with some dismay, as if I had been told, "Americans are climbing Mount Everest by the hundred thousands! Everybody's doing it!"

The question is not whether the mountain is tall and beautiful or whether the climbers are well-intentioned. The question is whether training, guides, and equipment are needed to promote both the wellbeing of the climbers and a better understanding of the mountain.

Within a few days, my fears were confirmed. I was speaking to a church congregation, something I started after 9/11, and we had entered the question period. "I bought the Qur'an and tried to read it," said one woman, "but . . ." She gestured helplessly, her face baffled. She had expected to open an inspiring, comprehensible religious text and had found . . . what?

Because it must be read in translation — but for other, more important reasons as well — the Qur'an can sometimes seem impenetrable by Westerners. World religions scholar Huston Smith sums up the problem. "No book in the religious heritage of any other culture is as inaccessible to Western appreciation as the Koran. Carlyle said of it, 'It is as toilsome reading as I ever undertook, a wearisome, confused jumble, crude, incondite. Nothing but a sense of duty could carry any European through the Koran.' Muslims, by contrast, consider it an incontrovertible miracle." ¹

As a convert who embraced Islam through powerful personal experiences, I have, at times, shared Carlyle's problems. "What am I reading?" I have sometimes thought. "What have I gotten myself into?" I have also had the opposite experience. Upon first attempting to read the Qur'an, I decided to buy a notebook and copy down passages that were particularly illuminating, inspiring, or meaningful. I abandoned the attempt after realizing, with a mild shock of humor, that I was copying down every passage.

Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi, the thirteenth-century Muslim mystic whose poetry sold out in U.S. bookstores long before September 11th, has something intriguing to say about this shape-shifting quality of the Qur'an.

"The Qur'an is like a young married woman: even if you try to unveil her, she will not show herself to you. If you discuss the Qur'an you will discover nothing, and no joy will come to you. That is because you have tried to pull off the veil, and the Qur'an refuses itself to you; by employing cunning and making itself ugly in your sight and undesirable to you, it is saying, 'I am

not that which you love.' And it can in this manner show itself in any kind of light."²

The Qur'an is not exactly a book, an inanimate thing that lies on a table. It is a Book, more like a living being, enormous in scope, sometimes through seeming coincidence tossing up exactly what the reader needs³. Sometimes opaque and frustrating, at other times it provides a single phrase that can comfort and guide the recipient safely through the most painful and difficult experiences in human life. And some Westerners, contrary to everything above, are enamored instantly, merely by reading the Qur'an in English. To some people, it shows itself immediately and is utterly convincing.

My spiritual teacher, a Sufi shaykh, once told me, "Thinking the Qur'an is a book you can hold in your hand is like thinking the sun is a small, round mirror." The Qur'an itself confirms this, saying that the word of God is inexhaustible and that if the ocean were ink and seven other oceans of equal size were added to it, it would never be enough to write the word of God.

The fact that most Westerners must read the Qur'an in translation presents a problem. It's written in Arabic, and there have always been those who maintained that it could not be translated – not because it is forbidden, but because it is impossible. I agree with them. My study of written Arabic over the last 30 years has made it obvious that much of the power of Qur'anic expression is lost in translation. There is consensus among Muslims that a translation of the Qur'an is an approximation, not the Qur'an itself. Also, it is recited in particular ways, sometimes by trained Qur'an chanters, not merely read silently or spoken aloud.

Another difficulty, according to religious scholar, teacher, and mystic Frithjof Schuon, is a difference in the way different cultures approach religious texts. Westerners "look for a meaning that is fully expressed and immediately intelligible," while Semites "are lovers of verbal symbolism and read 'in depth'. The revealed phrase is for them an array of symbols from which more and more flashes of light shoot forth the further the reader penetrates . . . the words are reference points for a doctrine that is inexhaustible."³ I have personally experienced this phenomenon with a number of Qur'anic passages. While I don't understand many things in the Holy Book, certain phrases have come to live with, sustain, enlighten, and comfort me.

"They shall have no fear, neither shall they grieve," "There is no power nor might save in Allah," "Say Allah, and leave them to their empty play," "Let me come in with honor, and go out with honor." These seemingly simple phrases have opened out and out and out, providing an antidote to mental and emotional suffering, physical and spiritual dangers, and turmoil and confusion of every kind. Their effect cannot be explained by the obvious surface meanings of the words. In some strange manner, they are alive and active, a sure touch of reality amid the dramatically shifting perceptions and situations of earthly life. Interacting with the Qur'an in this way feels like walking outside into a fresh spring wind after being confined in a stuffy room full of silly, trivial conversation.

While even small portions of verses can display this transformative power, the Qur'an is essentially a structure. Arabic letters make up words, words make up phrases, phrases make up ayats (verses), ayats make up surahs (chapters), and surahs make up the whole towering building. This structure is almost infinitely compressed and can be infinitely expanded. It is

taught that each phrase, and even each word of the Qur'an, has seven levels of meaning. (Or even more. I recently read that there are 70,000 levels in the Qur'an.) It's something like a Chinese puzzle box, in which many secrets are hidden within a deceptively simple container.

According to tradition, the whole Qur'an is contained within the opening verse, Surat al-Fatiha, which is said many times during each of the five daily prayers. The entire meaning and power of the Fatiha are contained in the opening phrase, "Bismillah, ar-Rahman, ar-Rahim," ("In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate"), with which devout Muslims begin and sanctify every activity. The entire meaning of this phrase is contained within the word of power and blessing, "Bismillah." And finally, the entire force of the Bismillah is contained in the point beneath the beginning letter ba, a dot like a period under an upward-curving line.

Given all these interesting challenges, how does a Westerner approach the Qur'an? What equipment and training are helpful in scaling this mountain? Who are the guides, where are they found, and which ones are trustworthy? One way to begin understanding the inexhaustible sea of Qur'an is to listen to some of it. Find a recording, lie or sit in a quiet place, turn it on softly, and let the divine melodies wash over and through you. It has been stated by those who know that there are meanings accessible through hearing that go far beyond the dictionary definitions of the words.

You can also access Muslim friends or teachers, but be discerning. As within any religion, these people are a human mix containing every shade and possibility within the human spectrum. "Follow those who do not ask of you [any] payment, and they are [rightly] guided," says the Quran (36:21). Your key to knowing who is rightly guided is sincere prayer, then following your heart and your God-given intelligence.

Of course, you can always obtain a Qur'an translation and just start reading. The chapters are arranged roughly from longest to shortest, not in some other logical or revelatory order, so you might be well served by reading the first chapter, the Fatiha, then beginning with the short surahs at the back in reverse order. These chapters are concerned more with universal principles and less with individual instructions for running the early Muslim community. You may be one of those to whom the Book is immediately accessible and welcoming. Some people are instantly touched by its simplicity, its absolute insistence on social justice, or its other arguments and qualities.

Regarding specific translations: Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali's work is widely respected and nice if you like a Biblical tone. Be aware that the footnotes were revised in 1980 by the Saudis, removing many mystical elements. A.J. Arberry's translation has been cited as best conveying the feeling and tone of the original – something also accomplished for a limited few surahs by Michael Sells' *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (which includes audio links). Many people, including Sufis, like Muhammad Asad's translation best, but the hard copy is an unusually large, heavy book, not convenient for easy transport.

There are many more English translations, dating from the 1700's into the 2020's, the more recent ones including those of Laleh Bakhtiar and Abdel Halim. *The Study Qur'an*, edited by Seyyed Hussein Nasr, is an excellent resource, though not a true Qur'an as it leaves out the

written Arabic. And like Approaching the Qur'an in examining chosen verses rather than the whole (but on the other end of what could be called the terseness/expansiveness spectrum), Lex Hixon's* Heart of the Qur'an draws out some of the mystical meanings, taking one portion from each chapter. His other book on Islam, Atom From the Sun of Knowledge, goes even deeper into the mystical meanings of specific verses in the sections titled "Three Days of Prayer" and "Lightening Flashes: Verses Favored by the People of Tasting".

Finally, Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi's Mathnavi is sometimes called "the Qur'an in Persian." But to see this, you need a direct translation, not one of the interpretations now current, beautiful and helpful though they may be. Reynold Nicholson's translation is the go-to and has the advantage of using italics for phrases originally in Arabic, thus marking the direct Qur'anic quotes. The Mathnavi constantly references the Qur'an; Rumi would have been surprised at being considered a universalist poet rather than a scholar and teacher of Islam, of which the mysticism is an essential element.

The Qur'an itself challenges anyone to produce anything like it, and asserts that they cannot. The genius — or rather, the unduplicable, God-inspired quality — of the original is that it combines the terse, impactful phrases seen in one group of translations with the depth and expansive generosity of a second group and the clarity and precision of yet a third. This alone could justify the claim that the Qur'an is a miracle, even without the strange way it seems to adjust itself to each reader and even to each moment. (There's a story about a wealthy man who fell while riding. On returning home, he immediately sought his library and the Qur'an. His servant, probably concerned about injuries or dishevelment, asked what the man was doing. He replied, "I'm looking to see where it says I would fall off my horse.")

Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, never claimed to be bringing a new religion. Quite the opposite: Both he and the Qur'an itself repeatedly stated that it was a further unfolding of the Umm al-Kitab, the Mother of the Book, which contains all the sacred books given to humanity as well as what Hazrat Inayat Khan calls "the sacred manuscript of nature". "We shall show them our signs on the horizons and in themselves until they see that it is the truth." (Qur. 41:53) So, the next time you look at a Qur'an, see it a little differently: as an ocean of wisdom, open to the infinite, disguised as a book that can lie on a table.

1. Smith, Huston. (1968). The Religions of Man, pp. 228-229; NY: Harper and Row
2. Schuon, Frithjof. (1989). Understanding Islam, p. 45. London: Unwin Hyman Ltd.
3. Schuon, Frithjof. (1989). Understanding Islam, p. 59. London: Unwin Hyman Ltd.

*a.k.a, Shaykh Nur al-Jerrahi