



A perspective on the Signs of Al-Quran

Through the prism of the heart

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This work is based on personal reflections from the perspective of a grateful believer in his spiritual infancy. This work cannot possibly be, and is not any more than an earnest attempt to make an approach towards the Signs (Ayah) and symbolism of the Quran.

Today's Muslim, (defined by social or political belonging), beset by anarchy, intolerance and assault, both from within and outside, finds his or her self in the vortex of despair. Civilizations will rise and fall. This is a historical fact. The geographical arc of North African, Middle-Eastern and South-Asian nations, the crescent of political Islam, is negotiating the abyss of its fall. This is a matter of political dynamics and is not the matter of this book. It merits a separate focus. Spirituality depends upon nothing else but personal sincerity. In adversity it discovers its worth and wings. The spirit will not be confined to a border or a condition. It is transcendental. The environment bears signs and these signs offer learning and tests of faith. It is said; in the same vein that one's enemy is one's teacher and that pain can become the pivot of change. Adversity distills and purifies faith, as pain forces self-inquiry and introspection. When the desolation of a charred forest is at its peak, the dormant seed is stirred by the silent call of renewal and the ashes on the forest-floor will yield to its pristine stalk.

The soul is the collective and competing consciousness of the body and the spirit. The body finds the environment real. The spirit finds it a manifestation of another Reality. The body senses and reacts to its environment while the spirit ponders its signs. The Quran is an Arabic recital so its sound is integral to its form. Its verses are called "signs" and like all signs they are to be meditated upon. The sound and signs of the Arabic Quran, which appeal to the heart and not just the mind, are lost to any literal translation.

Yet, with my very limited understanding of Arabic I had to rely heavily on English

translations of the Arabic Quran. To add some breadth to the narrow scope of any one literal translation, I referenced multiple translations. So that the mind could be led by the heart, I studied the English texts in the backdrop of a recorded Arabic recitation.

Some of the English texts, I used often, are listed below. The list includes some other works which are not translations of the Quran, but are rich in their meditative content:

- The Glorious Qur'an* Translation by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall
- The Qur'an* A new translation by Thomas Cleary 2004
- The Holy Quran* English Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali
- Approaching the Quran* by Michael Sells
- The Heart of the Quran* by Lex Hixon
- The Message of the Quran* Translated and Explained by Muhammad Asad.
- Muhammad, his life based on the earliest sources* by Martin Lings
- A return to the Spirit* by Martin Lings
- Muhammad: A biography of the Prophet* by Karen Armstrong
- The life of Muhammad* by Muhammad Husayn Haykal. Translated from the 8th edition by Ismail, Ragi A. al Faruqi

I would be remiss if I did not mention a few websites that have been tremendously helpful. These sites have brought the Quranic text, recital and interpretations from multiple sources to the desktop and PDA. The sites I used the most frequently are “Islamicity.com/QuranSearch/”, “QuranExplorer.Com” and “QuranPDA.com”.

I am also indebted to Usama Cannon, the charismatic youth leader at the Taleef Collective; Tahir Anwar, the youthful Imam at the San Jose Mosque; Dr Behnam Sadeghi, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Religious Studies at Stanford University; Michael Wolfe, the prolific author and filmmaker; Dr David Dahl, PhD, a caring healer; and my closest friends, Masood Alavi and Zainul Abedin, who are no longer of this world, amongst many others who have taken the time and effort to review and improve upon my work. I must also thank my Silicon-Valley fellows John Reinhardt and Hafiz Khan. Hafiz’s proficiency in Arabic has been a great resource. The Arabic inserts in this book are his idea and labor. The encouragement of my wife Bhoomija and daughters, Aila and Ayesha, my son-in-law Kapil, my siblings and their families made this effort a labor of love. My wife reminds me, fairly, of the deficit between my ‘talking the talk’ and ‘walking the walk’. May my ‘walk’ *now* be better than the brazen laxity of lost-yesterdays. I seek forgiveness and mercy because I dread the fairness of justice.

Yet, this is first, a work of faith—Faith, because I bring no other credentials. Faith, because I bear witness that there is no god but God and Muhammad (may peace be upon him) is the last messenger of God.

Personally, I have also found encouragement and drawn inspiration from the prayer and invitation of the Prophet (peace be upon him) in his last sermon {*Khutbah*}, “All those who listen to me shall pass on my words to others and those to others again; and may the last ones understand my words better than those who listen to me directly”. “O God”, he concluded in the same sermon “be my Witness that I have conveyed Your Message to your people.” The Divine Message is The Arabic Al Quran.

To those who may approach this book from another faith, let me say in the inimitable words of the thirteenth century, Sufi-poet, Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, “This (Al Quran) is a symbol of God’s knowledge, all knowledge belonging to God, not this only. After all, in the time of Moses and Jesus the Quran existed. God’s speech existed, but it was not in Arabic.”¹

God is both personal and universal. The personal God is an intimate God and no two intimate relationships are alike. The same God is universal too so that all human beings are equal and equally special. The heart is that place within us which is both intrinsically personal and universal—our inner core with the capacity to hold the universe, the sanctum with infinite doors. It is that organ of faith that expands with inclusion. It grows when it is tolerant and is richer by giving. God’s speech in Arabic is aimed at the heart.

This book is merely one perspective from the moving train of life. I invite you to start this book from any chapter and exit as you will. The order of the chapters is accidental. My hope is that this work, despite all its short-comings and unintended errors, will serve the purpose of opening a door of entry to the Arabic Quran— the “last cycle” of Divine Revelation.

Prologue

First and foremost

It is customary in Islamic practice that the Divine messengers be mentioned with respect and reverence. Texts written by Muslims customarily attach the abbreviation 'PBUH', meaning "may peace be upon him" every time any Divine Prophet's name is mentioned. Prophets as God's chosen are first and foremost amongst God's creatures in rank and proximity to God. To know and respect the proper place and rank of anything and everything is part of spiritual conscientiousness. By offering our respects and our prayer of peace for God's own emissaries we are imploring God to unlock the doors to our own guidance. Praise belongs only to God and blessings belong to those who have earned proximity to Divine Glory and Majesty. We gain no worth except by discernment. We can gain no peace except by first wishing it for the deserving. We also acknowledge that those who have lived in full alignment to the Divine Will never 'die'. These, the purest of the human spirits are the 'truly successful', bestowed and blessed with Divine peace. May God accept that every reference to a Prophet in this manuscript is preceded and followed by an imploration of peace upon the Prophet. May we thus join the Chorus of Truth.

سُبْحَانَ رَبِّكَ رَبِّ الْعِزَّةِ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ ﴿٥٤﴾ وَسَلَامٌ عَلَى الْمُرْسَلِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾ وَالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ
الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾

*Limitless in His Glory is thy Sustainer,
The Lord of almightiness,
[exalted] above anything that men may devise by way of definition!
And peace be upon all His message bearers.
And all praise is due to God alone,
The Sustainer of the worlds²*

The struggle of the soul

This book is about spirituality from the Islamic view-point. It is not about religion. Spirituality and religion are inseparable but they are not synonymous. Spirituality is an extra dimension of religion. This dimension is the path to God anchored in the earnest orthodoxy of religious practice. The orthodoxy of a religion is the rich soil that nurtures the tree of spirituality. Under the shade of this tree is the repose of life. The tree itself manifests the consciousness of the soul. Frithjof Schuon, the Sufi Scholar of the 20th century and an advocate for the “transcendent unity of religions”, lays out, in his inimitable precision, the struggle facing the soul: .

What are the great troubles of the soul? A false life, a false death, a false activity, a false rest.

A false life: passion which engenders suffering;

A false death: egoism which hardens the heart and separates it from God and His mercy;

A false activity: dissipation, which casts the soul into an insatiable vortex and makes it forget God, who is Peace;

A false rest or a false passivity: the weakness and laziness which deliver up the soul without resistance to the countless solicitations of the world.³

Islamic Spirituality, as we shall see is about Sincerity *{Ikhtlas}* –Sincerity of thought, sincerity of purpose and sincerity of action. Sincerity eases the struggle that Frithjof Schuon defines.

All Sincere Paths lead to God

There are many Holy Scriptures as there are many Holy messengers. It follows therefore that the spiritual highway has many lanes. To quibble with this, from within the perspective of any one religion is to be sanctimonious rather than spiritual. Within this sanctimony lies the danger of constricting the ‘heart’ and thereby missing the Truth. Yes, within religions there are human innovations and resultant “half- truths” and sadly some of these innovations were for the benefit of those who invented them. Yet the word of God is discernible as it is living and immutable, be it as “Divine Word-made-flesh”⁴ in the case of Jesus Christ or “Divine Word-made-Book”⁵ in the case of the *last* prophet, Muhammad. The last Word-made-Book is the Holy Quran. The Quran does not refute or deny other messengers with a Divine mission; instead it claims and represents culmination and finality to the essential message of all prophets, starting with Adam. ‘Last’ *implies* a ‘first’ and ‘prior’; the Quran is clear and explicit about the spiritual unity of their missions. The multiplicity of religions, notwithstanding man’s propensity

3 Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts, by Frithjof Schuon., A new translation by P.N.Townsend

4 Phraseology borrowed from Martin Lings

5 Phraseology borrowed from Martin Lings

to err, is not man's error. It is God's Will and is repeatedly stated:

وَلِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَّسُولٌ

*For every community there is a messenger*⁶

And

لِكُلِّ جَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ شِرْعَةً وَمِنْهَا جَا^٤ وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً^٥

*For each of you We have appointed a law and traced out a path and if God had so willed, He would have made you one community*⁷.

True, that the verses preceding this last verse (quoted above) point to a measure of erosion of prior revelations (given the disputes amongst their respective followers), yet there lingers in these messages an essential core, as would be implied by the statement “confirming the truth of whatever truth there still remains of earlier revelations”:

وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَمُهَيِّمًا عَلَيْهِ^٦
فَأَحْكُم بَيْنَهُم بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ^٧ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ عَمَّا جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْحَقِّ^٨

And unto thee [O Prophet] have We vouchsafed this Divine Writ, setting forth the truth confirming the truth of whatever there still remains of earlier revelations and determining what is true therein.

*Judge, then, between the followers of earlier revelations in accordance with what God has bestowed from upon high and do not follow their errant views, forsaking the truth that has come unto thee*⁸

The prophet Muhammad and therefore his followers are commanded to remain anchored in the certainty of the final message and be fully immersed in its Truth. To be immersed is to be no place else.

In another verse, as if to discourage fruitless debate and thereby possibly impugn other messengers (a danger for the novice believer), the Quran states that not all the names of all the messengers were disclosed to the prophet; the “holier than thou” attitude constricts the heart, and handicaps the spiritual quest.

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلًا^٩ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ مِنْهُمْ مَنْ قَصَصْنَا عَلَيْكَ وَمِنْهُمْ مَنْ لَمْ نَقْصُصْ عَلَيْكَ^٩

*We have sent messengers before you. About some We have told you, and about some We have not told you*⁹

6 Al Quran 10:47

7 Al Quran 5:48

8 Al Quran 5:48 as interpreted by Muhammad Asad

9 Al Quran 40:78

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالصَّابِغُونَ وَالنَّصَارَىٰ مَن ءَامَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ
وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

*And verily, the faithful, and the Jews and the Sabians and the Christians –
Whoever believe in God and the last Day and act piously, no fear shall come
upon them nor shall they grieve* ¹⁰

Worthy of note also in the preceding surah is the non-definitive classification “Sabians”. Though there are some scholars with the view that the Sabians are a group from amongst the Jews, there are others without a definite opinion. If one were to follow the latter view, the Quran is telling us that there are others beyond the followers of the three monotheistic religions who shall find God’s Peace. Even if the Sabians can be identified, it is quite clear that the test of God-consciousness is to be left with God. The spiritual spark resides in the innermost niche of the heart disqualifying us from questioning another person’s spiritual quest. The spiritual-center and the spiritual struggle are within. One’s earnest conscientiousness must therefore turn its focus within one’s own “Straight and Sincere Path”.

Sincerity focuses inwards. Outwardly it manifests tolerance

It is a historical fact that each successive monotheistic religion has been more tolerant of its chronological predecessor. The opposite has not been true. Succeeding religions have held within their beliefs the doctrine of ‘continuity of prophets’. Tolerance has been precious little the other way around. Judaism has considered Christianity an errant religion as has Christianity considered Islam. Many if not most of those who believe that Moses parted the Red Sea to save his people, doubt the virgin-birth of Jesus. And many if not most of those who believe in the blessed virgin Mary doubt the Quran as God’s direct Word and the prophecy of Muhammad. The renewal embodied by Jesus was considered detraction by the day’s ‘religious establishment’, like wise the renewal embodied by the Quran has met its own resistance. Intolerance of faith is a potential pitfall for any ‘religious establishment’. The equivalent and likely pitfall for the soul seeking renewal is a relapse, certainly not intolerance. Intolerance is a flaw of the heart likely to attach itself to the mighty, seeking to block any change, rather than to those who want to escape from under the might. The renewer merely seeks to protect and preserve the renewed Message. The establishment and other powers that be, will label such conscientiousness, ‘exclusivism.’ The ‘religious establishment’ of our times, is fond of citing, as evidence of Quranic intolerance and exclusivism, a verse that exhorts the believers to stay anchored in the message of the Quran:

10 Al Quran 5:69

يَتَأَيُّمُوا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تَتَّخِذُوا الْيَهُودَ وَالنَّصَرَىٰ أَوْلِيَاءَ

*O you, who have renewed your faith, do not take the Jews and the Christians as your allies and patrons {awliyaa}*¹¹

It helps the cause of these dissenters that some poor renderings have translated *awliyaa* to 'friends'. It cannot be so. The Quran allows the marriage of a Muslim to a Jew or a Christian. How could it then prohibit friendship? Far from forbidding friendship with the Jews and the Christians, the Quran is merely reinforcing the message of reliance on God Alone. God and not some other pre-existing human authority is the '*Wali*' (singular of *Awliyaa*).

وَكَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ وَلِيًّا وَكَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ نَصِيرًا

Sufficient is God as a patron and protector {Wali}
*Sufficient is God as a Helper*¹²

Or take it from Joseph; there can be no better authority than this young man, who was once a little child abandoned in a dark and dank well by his own brothers. Witness Joseph's gratefulness to his *Wali* upon being finally reunited with his parents, at the end of his long and arduous ordeal:

﴿ رَبِّ قَدْ ءَاتَيْتَنِي مِنَ الْمَلِكِ وَعَلَّمْتَنِي مِنْ تَأْوِيلِ الْأَحَادِيثِ فَاطِرَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ أَنْتَ

وَلِيٌّ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ تُؤَفِّي مُسْلِمًا وَآلِحِقْنِي بِالصَّالِحِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

"O my Sustainer! You have indeed bestowed on me some aspect of power, and taught me some aspects of interpretation of dreams; Creator of the heavens and the earth, You are my Protector { 'Wali' } in this world and in the Hereafter, Let my return (in death) be of a soul in submission and join me with the righteous." ¹³

Having said so, it must be clearly understood by the believer and the nonbeliever (who cares to understand) that the Quran reminds the Muslim that God and His Prophet take precedence over any other relationship, including the relationships of blood. Many muslims, including Noah and Abraham and Lot had to endure the pain of leaving a loved-one behind in the way of God. A Muslim after all places God, his Message and the Messenger at the very center of his core. They who 'fight the believers for their beliefs and expel them from their homes or support their expulsion' are to be avoided:

11 Al Quran 5:51

12 Al Quran 4:45

13 Al Quran 12:101

لَا تَجِدُ قَوْمًا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ يُوَادُّونَ مَنْ حَادَّ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَلَوْ كَانُوا
 آبَاءَهُمْ أَوْ أَبْنَاءَهُمْ أَوْ إِخْوَانَهُمْ أَوْ عَشِيرَتَهُمْ أُولَئِكَ كَتَبَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمُ الْإِيمَانَ وَأَيَّدَهُمْ
 بِرُوحٍ مِّنْهُ وَيُدْخِلُهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا
 عَنْهُ أُولَئِكَ حِزْبُ اللَّهِ أَلَا إِنَّ حِزْبَ اللَّهِ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

Thou will not find folk who believe in God and the Last Day loving those who oppose God and His messenger: even though they be their fathers, or their sons or their brothers, or their clan. As for such, He has written faith upon their hearts and has strengthened them with a Spirit from Him, and He will bring them into Gardens underneath which rivers flow, therein to abide forever. God is well pleased with them, and they are well pleased with Him. They are God's party. Surely! is it not God's party who are the successful? ¹⁴

This too is a test of faith. Abraham sums up the pain of a dutiful and submitted heart when he leaves his father:

إِلَّا قَوْلَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ لِأَبِيهِ لَأَسْتَغْفِرَنَّ لَكَ وَمَا أَمْلِكُ لَكَ مِنَ اللَّهِ مِنْ شَيْءٍ ^ط

Except that Abraham said to his father: "Certainly I shall ask forgiveness for thee but I have no power to do aught for thee against God." ¹⁵

Robert Frager, Ph.D, relates an incisive incident related to his spiritual guide, Sheikh Muzaffar, who was once invited to perform Islamic Prayers in a Paris Cathedral. After having performed the prayers the Sheikh turned down a request for a reciprocal gesture. "Absolutely Not", was the Sheikh's response. Explaining further to his hosts who must have been rather befuddled, no doubt, he said: "I have a right to pray in your cathedral because I love Jesus. But you cannot pray in our mosque because you do not love Muhammad". ¹⁶

Islam honors the prophetic chain. Islam also respects those whose practice differs from theirs. In Medina when around sixty delegates of the Najran-Christians were visiting the Prophet in the Mosque of Medina, the guests were allowed to pray in the Mosque, notwithstanding the fact that they faced East during their services. Through providential design, as the last of the major messages, Islam has a natural disposition for religious tolerance. The followers of Islam must zealously guard this Divine gift. It is a gift not to be merely acknowledged. It must be conscientiously honored. God is *Al Muqaddim*, the One who determines the sequence and precedence of objects and events and

14 Al Quran 58:22

15 Al Quran 60:4

16 Heart, Self and Soul, Robert Frager, Ph.D, pg 14, Theosophical Publishing House 2006

beings. Jesus renewed and realigned the message of Moses and his predecessors. Muhammad renewed and realigned the message of Jesus and Jesus' predecessors. A 'muslim' (and the Muslim)¹⁷ cannot but honor each and every prophet in the prophetic caravan. The Truth is that each new cycle of revelation is meant to open new doors. Spiritual doors do not close, they lead to new vistas. Sincerity is an unfolding quest. To love Muhammad is to love Jesus and Moses too. Rumi reminds us all:

There are those who accept the law of Moses and not the grace and love of Jesus,
Like the Jewish King who killed Christians.

This is not right. Moses is inside the soul of Jesus as Jesus is in the soul of Moses.
One era belonged to one; then it was the other's turn, but they are one being¹⁸

Sincere approach to the Quran

The Quran is meant to be guidance for those who are spiritually hungry and sincere, the "*muttaqeen*", and who are open to Faith, believing in "*ghaiib*" (the reality beyond human grasp and therefore embraceable only by the "heart"), who beseech their Lord, share their wealth with others and apart from believing in the Quran, believe as well in other Divine revelations bestowed before the Quran itself.

Says the Quran in attestation of the messenger who bore it, and those who were his close companions:

ءَاٰمَنَ الرَّسُوْلُ بِمَا اُنزِلَ اِلَيْهِ مِنْ رَبِّهِ ۚ وَالْمُؤْمِنُوْنَ كُلُّ ءَاٰمَنَ بِاللّٰهِ وَمَلَٰٓئِكَتِهِ ۚ وَكُتُبِهِ ۚ وَرُسُلِهِ ۚ
لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ اَحَدٍ مِّنْ رُّسُلِهِ ۚ

*The messenger believes in what has been revealed to him from
His Lord, and (so do) the believers; they all believe in God and
His angels and His books and His messengers; [And they say:]
"We make no difference between any of His messengers"*¹⁹

For the believer the Arabic Quran is the purest form of Holy Scripture. It is the un-altered word of God. In the word of God is Certainty, Truth, Grace and the immutability of a living message, ripe with relevance to a person's time and condition. It bears a message that is adaptable across the diversity of culture as it is across the chasm of time:

17 I use 'muslim' with a lower-case 'm' to refer to the spiritual muslim, anyone who submits to God. I use 'Muslim' with upper-case 'M' to refer to the social-muslim who declares by way of the *Kalima* to be a 'Muslim'

18 *The Soul of Rumi* by Coleman Barks. Published by Harper Collins 2002

19 Al Quran 2:285

كَلِمَةً طَيِّبَةً كَشَجَرَةٍ طَيِّبَةٍ أَصْلُهَا ثَابِتٌ وَفَرْعُهَا فِي السَّمَاءِ ﴿٢٤﴾ تُوْتِي أُكْلَهَا كُلَّ حِينٍ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهَا ۗ

A good word is as a good tree

Its root is firm; its branches are in Heaven.

It gives forth its fruit at all times, by the permission of its Lord.²⁰

The believers also hold that just as Muhammad validated the prophethood of his predecessors, (many of them being mentioned in the Quran itself), his predecessors made a corollary testament of those who would in turn follow them. Divine guidance is based on spiritual continuity through a preordained brotherhood between the prophets. The prophets are committed to this brotherhood:

وَإِذْ أَخَذَ اللَّهُ مِيثَاقَ النَّبِيِّينَ لَمَا آتَيْنَاكُمْ مِنْ كِتَابٍ وَحِكْمَةٍ ثُمَّ جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولٌ مُصَدِّقٌ لِمَا مَعَكُمْ لَتُؤْمِنُنَّ بِهِءَ وَلَتَنْصُرُنَّهُ قَالَ أَأَقْرَرْتُمْ وَأَخَذْتُمْ عَلَىٰ ذَٰلِكُمْ إِصْرِي قَالُوا أَقْرَرْنَا قَالَ فَاشْهَدُوا وَأَنَا مَعَكُمْ مِنَ الشَّاهِدِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

And, Lo, God accepted, through the prophets, this solemn pledge [from the followers of earlier revelation]: "If, after all the revelation and the wisdom which I have vouchsafed unto you, there comes to you an apostle confirming the truth already in your possession, you must believe in him and succor him".

"Do you" - said He - "acknowledge and accept My bond on this condition?"

They answered: "We do acknowledge it."

Said He: "Then bear witness [thereto], and I shall be your witness."²¹

Martin Lings, an enlightened Islamic Sufi, who rested in Islam after his spiritual journey within and into Catholicism, Buddhism and Hinduism, cites the following text in St. John, XVI, 12-15 as Christ's prophesy of Prophet Muhammad:

I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all the truth: for he shall not speak from himself; but what things so ever he shall hear, these shall he speak: and he shall declare unto you the things that are to come.

The Quran is the last Word of God, revealed to the last prophet. For those who quibble with this belief must contend with the historical absence of another book or credible prophet since the advent of Islam. Indeed speaking to those who doubt the Quran, the Quran itself lays open the challenge to produce an equivalent book.

²⁰ Al Quran 14:24-25

²¹ Al Quran 3:81. Interpreted by Muhammad Asad in "The Message of the Quran"

قُلْ لَئِنِ اجْتَمَعَتِ الْإِنْسُ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَىٰ أَنْ يَأْتُوا بِمِثْلِ هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ
لَا يَأْتُونَ بِمِثْلِهِ وَلَوْ كَانَ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ ظَهِيرًا

Say: "Verily, though mankind and the jinn should assemble to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like thereof though they were helpers one of another".²²

The equivalency to the Quran does not mean another book equivalent in words or verses or chapters, or rhythm or grammar. It must meet the equivalency of beauty, inspiration, living relevance, and a million other intangibles. It must make grown men break down and cry, make violent men drop their swords, make young and old women want to cover their heads and to kiss it, and it must make you want to wash your hand and rinse your soul before you touch it. The equivalent book must transform hearts and change the world as the Quran did, is doing, and will continue to do. The equivalent book must be miraculously committed to the heart of its unlettered reciter and it must inspire other words and books and deeds until the seven seas, and then some more, if they were ink, could bear no more. The *Mathnavi* of Rumi, the world's best known inspired book by the best known ancient-poet of the modern world, is inspired by the Quran. It is called by some as the Persian Quran. But make no mistake; the Quran is not of it. The *Mathnavi is of the Quran*. The Quran inspired the *Mathnavi*. The *Mathnavi* cannot inspire a Quran-equivalent. Rumi would be the first one to say that. The Truth of the Quranic verse about the inimitability of the Quran could be better understood by the non-Muslim western mind if the challenge was made to produce the like of Prophet Jesus: "If all mankind and *Jinn* should attempt they could not produce the like of Jesus". This should bring home another point unique to the Quran. If Jesus were amongst us today, he, Jesus, would be the prime if not singular source of spiritual renewal for his followers. Today, in his stead, is the church and the clergy. It cannot but be a poor substitute. The Quran, on the other hand, is amongst us today and to a Muslim it is the prime and supreme source of spiritual renewal. It does not warrant, nor does it allow for a substitution.

The Quran is a living companion of the sincere

The Quran has both an exoteric and esoteric content. Says the Quran of itself:

²² Al Quran 17:88

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ
 وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَبَهَ مِنْهُ
 ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَابْتِغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ

He it is who has bestowed upon thee from on high this Divine Writ, containing messages that are clear in and by themselves and these are the essence of the Divine Writ- as well as others that are allegorical.

Now those whose hearts are given to swerving from the truth go after that part of the Divine Writ which has been expressed in allegory, seeking out [what is bound to create] confusion and seeking [to arrive at] its final meaning [in an arbitrary manner]; But none save God knows its final meaning.²³

The exoteric content holds plain and unambiguous guidance. This guidance establishes the principles of ethics and conduct. There are five basic principles, often called the five pillars of the conduct of Faith: Testament of Faith in One God and the Seal of his prophets, Muhammad, Daily prayers and prostrations, fasting, sharing of wealth, and based on affordability, a once-in-a life-time pilgrimage to the *Kaaba*. The sincere believer, trying to live within the matrix of the “clear message”, will find in the esoteric content an invitation to reflection and contemplation. Contemplation is the food of the spirit. It changes the person from the inside out. For those who embrace the Quran in its totality, anchored in its “unambiguous guidance”, the contemplative ground is fertile as it is limitless, because “*But none save God knows its final meaning.*” These verses of the Quran are *not without* meaning. It is quite the opposite. These verses have a depth and richness of meaning. The meaning is limited by the capacity and sincerity of the seeker and therefore has a personal and indigenous characteristic. It cannot and must not be boxed into a dogma.

وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا عِنْدَنَا خَزَائِنُهُ وَمَا نُنزِّلُهُ إِلَّا بِقَدَرٍ مَعْلُومٍ

*And whatever there is, its storehouses are with Us;
 And We only distribute it in allotted measures²⁴*

The Quran is a spiritual kaleidoscope both in its Arabic form and its meaning. The form and content of the imagery is anchored in and compounded by the richness of the Arabic language. The fabric or building blocks of the Arabic language are its ‘root’ words. Almost every word is derived from a list of root-words; each root-word consisting of three (rarely 4) consonants. A root word may spawn many words with meanings of varying and even opposite shades. Contemporary, ‘spoken’, languages morph with the force of cultural changes.

²³ Quran Al-Imran 3:7-8. Interpreted by Muhammad Asad in “The Message of the Quran”

²⁴ Al Quran 15:21, translation taken from *The Qur'an*, A biography, by Bruce Lawrence

The Quranic Arabic is not a ‘spoken’ language and it retains (by virtue of word-association via root-words) it’s classical (or pristine) ‘mind-set’. Words associated via a single root can often be suggestive of a theme or thematic connectivity. For example the root-word ‘*wjđ*’ is common to ‘*wujood*’, meaning ‘existence’ ‘*wajada*’, meaning ‘to find’ and ‘*wujd*’ meaning ‘means or ability’. It is difficult to resist the suggestion (offered by this word-association), that ‘finding’ and ‘knowing’ and ‘being’ are connected. And that ‘finding’ one’s self is to ‘come into being’ and ‘becoming empowered’! See what these co-rooted words suggest to you: ‘*Sidq*’ (meaning truth), ‘*Sadaqa*’ (meaning that which is given in God’s name, ‘charity’ if you will), ‘*Sadiq*’ (the one who is truthful and lives by the truth) and ‘*Mutasadiq*’ (one who gives).

The contemplative quality of the Arabic Quran becomes the source of its universal appeal and cultural neutrality. The Moroccan, the Turk, the Persian, the Chinese, the Indonesian Muslim or the Western Sufi will anchor their contemplative endeavors in the Arabic of the Quran. It is here that the composite radiance of infinite colors is stored. Each will take his or her “allotted measure”.

As an example of the Quran’s kaleidoscopic imagery, consider life’s beating heart and the pulsating quality inherent in all levels of the universe as expounded in the sound vision of Surah *An Naziat* (That which rises). In this mystical Surah is depicted the pulsating interplay and interdependence between motion and time; mass and gravity, creating, shaping and sustaining life as we know it. Some interpreters of the Quran accord this to be an allusion to the pulsating rhythm that sustains the expansions of the constellations. Others interpret it as the angels at work fulfilling His bidding. Quite often the *Ayahs* (verses) of the Quran will invoke the *Ayahs* (signs) of Nature, giving us the license and invitation to reflect.

An Naziat is interpreted variously, yet inclusively, by Assad, Pickthall, Yousuf Ali and M. H. Shakir as follows:

وَالنَّزِعَاتُ غَرْقًا ۝ وَالنَّشِيطَاتُ ذَّشَطًا ۝ وَالسَّابِحَاتُ سَبْحًا ۝ فَالسَّابِقَاتُ سَبْقًا ۝
فَالْمُدَبِّرَاتُ أَمْرًا ۝

*Consider those [stars] that rise up only to set
And move [in their orbits] with steady motion
And float [through space] with floating serene
And yet overtake [one another] with swift overtaking
And thus they fulfill the [Creator’s] behest²⁵*

....

25 Al Quran 79:1-5 as interpreted by Muhammad Asad

*By the (angels) who tear out (the souls of the wicked) with violence;
By those who gently draw out (the souls of the blessed);
And by those who glide along (on errands of mercy),
Then press forward as in a race,
Then arrange to do (the Commands of their Lord),²⁶*

... ..

*By those who drag forth to destruction,
By the meteors rushing,
By the lone stars floating,
By the angels hastening,
And those who govern the event,²⁷*

... ..

*I swear by the angels, who violently pull out the souls of the wicked,
And by those who gently draw out the souls of the blessed,
And by those who float in space,
Then those who are foremost going ahead,
Then those who regulate the affair.²⁸*

Standing by the shore, the Surah would apply to the mesmerizing beat of the restless sea. The incessant rise and fall of the waves, dissipating into the floating foam, one yielding to the other, breathing and sustaining life between each rise and fall. Not random, not wanton but intricately regulated and severally essential.

*By those that rise to then crumble
And move in harmony
And float with serenity
And supersede unrelentingly
And so fulfill the Creator's bidding²⁹*

At a more personal level it evokes the living heart-beat of life. More meaningfully, therefore, the surah encompasses images of incessant and tireless creation at all levels, weaving the personal and cosmic into one grand scheme. There is a common theme and rhythm in the heart-beats of nature. In these rhythms are means and signs of expansion and contraction, inhalation and exhalation, life and death, creation and rebirth. All interconnected and interdependent, controlled by a single cosmic scheme. The microcosm mirrors the complexities and magnitude of the macrocosm.

²⁶ Al Quran 79:1-5 as interpreted by Yusuf Ali

²⁷ Al Quran 79:1-5 as interpreted by Picktall

²⁸ Al Quran 79:1-5 as interpreted by Shakir

²⁹ Al Quran 79:1-4

The symbolism of the Quran is entrenched in the Arabic language itself. It follows therefore, that the experience of the Quran is incomplete without its Arabic recitation. The rapturous rhythms of Arabic recitation aim straight at the heart, where its meaning takes root. Each verse (*ayah* in Arabic, meaning “sign”) is laden with a “sound vision”³⁰, transforming the message into a living message. Just as the sky and the earth, the setting and rising of the sun and the changing of the seasons are signs (*ayahs*) of the Compassionate Creator, so are the verses (*ayahs*) of the Quran.

The Quran is not just a ‘book’. The book is merely one form of it.

After years of study, I can only tell you this that I do not have the words to ‘define’ or ‘describe’ the Quran. To approach the Quran is like approaching a light source. The light reveals everything, other than itself. Likewise the Quran’s seeker becomes its subject. Rumi does not want you to call it just a book when he says, “Now with fifty **drams** of ink one can transcribe the whole Quran. This is a symbol of God’s knowledge, all knowledge belonging to God not this only. After all in the time of Moses and Jesus the Quran existed. God’s speech existed, but it was not in Arabic.”³¹

The Quran existed before it became a bound book. It is therefore not a book. It is more like a *sea of signs*. These signs are formless visuals for the inner eye and soothing resonance for inner hearing. They draw us out of ourselves into a mystical vastness, obscuring selfhood and its boundaries of form and time. Like the Nature-lover who is drawn ever deeper into the obscurity of wilderness, the seeker of the Quran is drawn into the immanence of Wholeness. All signs manifest the Unity of Divine Will, Divine Purpose and Divine Mercy; beyond space, beyond time and beyond dogma. The edicts of the Quran, by their sanction or forbiddance are meant to change our actions. The signs of the Quran are meant to change our thoughts.

The *Arabic* Quran was revealed in stages as *needed* by the Prophet’s mission. Through the Prophet it has become a *revelation upon us* (7:3). It is in this context, perhaps, that Rumi urges us to start *needing* and *wanting* God. The Arabic Quran would then become for us a *meaningful* revelation (instead of being merely a venerated book). And what are the *meaningful* aspects of these revelations? We will let the Arabic Quran speak for itself:

A wondrous mystical recital {*Quran an Aajaban*} (72:1); full of parables (17:89); bearing for mankind guidance (2:185), learning (12:2) wisdom, healing {*Quran al hakeem*} (36:2) and mercy (17:82). It reveals itself to the reciter in stages (17:106), but has been made easy to remember (54:17, 54:22, 54:32 and 54:40). Above

30 Approaching the Quran by Michael Sells

31 *Discourses of Rumi* By Arthur John Arberry

all it is a clear path to God (36:69)—An Open Book {*Quran in Mobeen*} (15:1), free from discrepancy (4:82), bearing solace for the sincere believers; (17:9), admonition (17:41) (38:1) for the disbelievers. Inimitable (17:88), glorious {*Quran un Majeed*} (85:21, 50:1) and bountiful {*Quran un Kareem*} (56:77); bearing immensity {*Quran al Azeem*} (15:87) and revealing an ever increasing depth to the discerning seeker. (41:3)

The Quran speaks to the many within one soul

There are terms used by the Quran to make a distinction between humans based on the state of their heart or the level of their spiritual consciousness. Terms such as “*Zalimeen*”, “*Kafireen*”, “*Muslimeen*”, “*Momineen*” have no similar English synonyms and neither should they. The rich symbolism of these terms can only conform to the receptacle of understanding. The form and color of a liquid conforms to the form and color of the vessel. A translated equivalent not only limits the symbolism but is also molded in the shape of the vessel. The term *Zalimeen* for example is used in the story of Adam

وَيَتَفَادُمُ اسْكُنْ أَنْتَ وَزَوْجُكَ الْجَنَّةَ فَكُلَا مِنْ حَيْثُ شِئْتُمَا
وَلَا تَقْرَبَا هَذِهِ الشَّجَرَةَ فَتَكُونَا مِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ

*O Adam dwell thou and thy wife in the garden and eat both of you,
whatever you may wish,
but do not approach this tree, lest you become Zalimeen³²*

Zalimeen has been variously translated as “wrong doers”, “transgressors” and “unjust” by Yousuf Ali, Pickthall, and M. H. Shakir respectively. Neither of these words truly captures the breadth of the symbolism here. The root word for *Zalimeen* is *Zulm*. The latter implies putting something in other than its proper place, to be in darkness, lacking vision and clarity, thereby engendering the propensity to transgress, be unjust and do wrong. Eating the forbidden fruit would lead to a transformation of consciousness, mirroring the transplantation from Paradise. Adam and Eve would enter the state of *Zulm*, separated from their proper place with God in Paradise, disengaged from the Truth, and entangled in the illusory. It is a state where the new “self” is disconnected from the only “Self”. The illusion of the self masks the true Self.

Similarly *Kafireen* has been translated as “Atheists”, “Disbelievers”, “Unbelievers”, “Deniers of Truth” and rarely (and thankfully only rarely by Muslim scholars) as “infidels”. The early Quranic surah delivers a message to the prophet’s early

³² Al Quran 7:19

tormenters:

قُلْ يٰٓأَيُّهَا الْكٰفِرُوْنَ ﴿١﴾ لَا اَعْبُدُ مَا تَعْبُدُوْنَ ﴿٢﴾ وَلَا اَنْتُمْ عٰبِدُوْنَ مَا اَعْبُدُ ﴿٣﴾ وَلَا
 اَنَا عٰبِدُ مَا عٰبَدْتُمْ ﴿٤﴾ وَلَا اَنْتُمْ عٰبِدُوْنَ مَا اَعْبُدُ ﴿٥﴾ لَكُمْ دِيْنُكُمْ وِلٰى دِيْنِ ﴿٦﴾

Say: O you who disbelieve {Kafiroon}

I do not serve {la abidu} that which is master over you

Nor do you serve that who is Master over me {Ma abud}

I will not worship that which you worship

Neither will you worship that Who I worship

*Unto you, your way and unto me my way*³³

A prophet conveys a Divine message and speaks to all. On his lips the surah has a proclamatory value. The follower on the other hand must internalize the message as it speaks to the reader's self. The residual experience from the recitation of the surah is one of affirmation of one's own faith as opposed to the obsession with another's divergence. The call of the "*Mabud*" (the Master, the One who is served, the One who is worthy of all the devotion, the One who draws adulation) has been heard by the "*abd*" (an adoring slave, one who serves, one who is devoted, one who adulates). The *abd* is purposefully committed to follow the way (*Deen*) shown by the *Mabud*. It has a hymnic quality for a purposeful lover, putting all distraction aside, undertaking the journey to his or her Master, if not yet Beloved.

Kafir is a person in the state of *Kufr*. To be in *Kufr* is to be misaligned with God. Nominally, it is to be outside His message, un-heedful of final accountability. Yes, the state becomes deeper with callousness, doubt, rejection and hostility, but even a 'Muslim' can and is likely to find his or her self in the un-heedful state. To hoard wealth, to be dishonest, unjust or unkind—any of these conditions—reflect misalignment with God and His revelations, and expose the person's un-heedfulness of final accountability. A person is not defined by a label but by the person's own state of a consciousness and conscientiousness. The state of *Kufr* is known to God as it is a state *known* to the *Kafir*. There is therefore, from the perspective of the non-prophet, no purpose served as there is no grace in looking for *kufr* outside of one's self. It has been attributed to Umar, son of Khattab, the second caliph of Medina, and a companion of the prophet that every verse revealing the torment awaiting the *Kafir* has a relevance to the disobedient 'Muslim'.

An uninspired translation of this Surah risks rendering the Surah to be about the Atheist instead of being about the reader and his *Mabud*. This Surah as any other

33 Al Quran 109:1-6

Surah must be directed inwards. When contemplating the Quran the Muslim must direct the message (*both the promise of deliverance and the admonition inwards*), not withstanding its relevance to some-one else.

There are similar considerations associated with the terms *Muslimineen* (typically substituted as 'muslims') and *Momineen* (typically substituted as the 'believers' or the 'faithful'). The term 'muslim', derived from root verb "*aslama*", meaning 'he surrendered himself', has a spiritual as well as a social connotation. From the spiritual perspective *any one* and everyone who surrenders to God, is a *muslim* ('muslim' with a lower-case 'm'). *All* prophets are in this fold. This is the Quran's declaration. The spiritual patriarch Abraham is amongst the best of muslims. This too is the Quran's declaration. From the social perspective a Muslim ('Muslim' with a capital 'M') is one who professes belief in God, the Quran, and therefore the prophethood of Muhammad and all preceding prophets. It is a personal declaration made in the form of the *Kalima*, admitting the individual to the local or at-large community {*umma*}. The declaration however does not by itself amount to surrender {to God}. Surrender to God is an attained and demonstrated state achieved by a growing inner consciousness and a persistent outward scrupulousness. The action and the preceding intent determine the state. The *state* defines the person. The Quran speaks to the states of doubt (*kuft*), ignorance (*zulm*), surrender (*islam*) and faith (*Emaan*). These are states people find themselves in. More significantly though, these are states *within* the searching heart. The searching heart must confront itself through a *personal* and persistent introspection until it is conditioned to test and align every thought towards surrender. This is the process by which the heart burnishes faith and itself. The heart is faith. The Quran is not the standard by which we must judge others; judgment is Divine. The Quran is the inspiration by which we must move and lift ourselves. It is directed to the heart that recites it, calling the many *within it* (and of course each one of us) to the Abode of True Peace and Unity.

The Quran yields to the sincere

There are also other terms with some measure of mystery attached to them. One such term in the Quran is "*Jinn*". *Jinns* and humans are almost always paired together in the Quran. It is therefore inferred that *Jinns*, like humans, are agents of free-will. Taking the last chapter of the Quran as an example, one finds the diversity of interpretation. Thomas Cleary in *The Qur'an A new translation* uses the word "demonic" in translation. Muhammad Asad in *The Message of the Quran* uses the phrase "invisible forces". Fittingly, Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Dr. Mohsin, retain the word *Jinn* in their interpretations. One can and must reasonably ask, if it is really possible to grasp the color of every knot and strand of the Divine tapestry? The Quran speaks of eternity and the message is given to all generations this side of eternity. Must we not make allowances for the

limitation of our current knowledge? Must we also not accept providential intent? Not only is there no loss in the quality or integrity of the message that the Quran bears without an explicit understanding of the term *Jinn*, the resultant malleability places an effective demand for greater reflection. The malleability itself makes allowances for the limits of our current knowledge and the non-obsolescence of the message.

As an example of the transcendence of the Divine Signs, consider God's claim of Universal Dominion: Lord of East and West (26:28 & 73:9) {*Rabb al Mashriq wal Maghrib*}, Lord of the two Easts and Lord of the two Wests (55:17) {*Rabb al Mashriqayn wa Rabb al Maghribayn*} and Lord of all [infinite] Easts and all [infinite] Wests (70:40) {*Rabb al Mashriq wal Magharib*}. The Quran speaks, as it does here, to every quantum of consciousness. From the perspective of an Arab trader bound to a trading caravan, fourteen centuries ago, a pair of Easts and many Easts conveyed an immeasurable Dominion, both worldly and heavenly; on many planes both real and mystical. Two Easts and two Wests found a new meaning when man discovered that the world was spherical and there indeed were two routes to the East, the first heading directly East and the second heading *West*? Today, the infinite Easts and infinite Wests take a new meaning as we discover in awe, a newer perspective; of a tiny, spinning ball we call Earth, revolving around the gaseous and liquid magma of a constant fire, we call the Sun, dwarfed in a moving galaxy, we call the Milky Way, amongst a billion other galaxies, in an ever expanding Universe! Today we can appreciate not just the immensity but the intricacy of Divine Design. Is it not an aspect of Divine Mercy that in the 'relativity of space' we can still assign and rely upon definitive co-ordinates? The 'reliable illusion' of our definitive global positioning in a moving universe is an aspect of Divine bounty. It is by design too that the Quran transcends any single context. Divine Signs have a living meaning. The Dominion of God extends to the limits of our *current* consciousness *and beyond*.

Any translation of the Quran is a reflection, conditioned by the changing perspective of its translator. The Quran is meant to be recited, contemplated, and used as guidance in the *approach* to God—a process without end, but a process that is transformational and regenerative. The Quran's interpretation and translation are therefore neither ever static nor ever complete. What is anchored and complete is its *form*. In his prologue to Muhammad Asad's "*Message of the Quran*", Hasan Gai Eaton writes:

"It is axiomatic from the Islamic perspective that the Quran cannot be translated, because the *form* of God's revelation, that is the Arabic itself, is not merely incidental to its meaning but essential to it. The Arabic of the Quran does not, however limit the Quran to one "literal" interpretation, but by the virtue of the power of its vocabulary allows for a depth of meaning that would be lost in any translation. A rendering into another language, therefore, is not and never can

be the Quran as such, but merely an interpretation of it”

This should not serve as discouragement to one uninitiated in Arabic, in fact quite the contrary. Firstly the majority of the Muslim world can only recite Arabic and their understanding of Arabic is limited. There are many who cannot read but listen to it several times a day. Secondly, the Quran can be approached in stages, very small stages. Many Muslims will initiate their approach to the Quran with two chapters. The first chapter, *Surah Fatihah* (literally the opening), is in fact the opening window to the Quran and is the essence of the spiritual pursuit. The second of the two chapters is *Surah Ikhlas* (Chapter of Sincerity) which is the essence of Reality itself, the goal of the spiritual pursuit. With an eye on posterity perhaps, and the sure knowledge that Islam would move beyond the borders of Arabia, the Prophet is documented to have said that *Surah Ikhlas* was equivalent to a third of the Quran. This chapter with four short verses can be memorized in minutes and by itself is enough to sustain a believer for a life-time! Thirdly, the fraternity of interpreters, their perspectives, and interpretations are vast, rich and growing. Fourthly and most importantly is the promise made in the Quran itself:

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا الْقُرْآنَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِنْ مُدَكِّرٍ

“We have made the Quran easy to comprehend and remember³⁴”

And this too has been foresworn, witnessed by all elements of creation, big and small, high and low; categorically and unconditionally: “Disallowed and therefore impossible is the non-delivery of recompense to the sincere and persevering heart”.³⁵

34 Al Quran 54:17 54:22 54:32 54:40

35 Al Quran 95

