

Qur'an in Conversation

Michael Birkel

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This book is meant for non-Muslims who want to understand the Qur'an but are perplexed by it. Describing it as a complex book, neither thematic nor chronological, but elliptical with much of its content out of reach of the uninitiated, Michael Birkel explores how it is interpreted among North American Muslims. From the beginning, this non-Muslim author highlights the diversity of approaches and manages to present accessible "insider's" views. Its seven sections contain a selection of voices obtained through personal interaction with the twenty-four Muslim contributors, a brief introduction, and a closing conclusion.

The first contribution, “The Mother of the Book,” reflects upon how the Qur’an’s first chapter is both foundational as its “opening” and opens hearts throughout each of the five daily prayers. The two partner pieces, “Knowledge Hidden and Manifest,” focus on the Qur’anic accounts of Joseph (by Ingrid Mattson) and the encounter between Moses and the mysterious Khidr (by Maria Dakake). The themes of both stories, namely, faith and wisdom, draw the reader into the wider theme of aligning oneself with God. The author then moves on to his second theme: “Close Readings, Old and New.” Mohammad Hassan Khalil discusses God’s mercy with the phrase “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful,” which appears at the beginning of all but one *sūrah*. He wrestles with the idea of an everlasting hell, having discovered as a student that some Muslim scholars challenge it on the basis of God’s mercy. Alongside this “shocking” (his expression) opinion, he also came across the conviction that non-Muslims would receive God’s mercy in the Hereafter. Challenging negative readings of the Qur’an, he says, “Reading the Qur’an under the benevolent shadow of *raḥma* allows one to appreciate Scripture on a different level” (p. 37).

Close readings continue with two feminist approaches by Asma Barlas and Kecia Ali. Barlas, whose methodology for reading scripture is shared by this reviewer, states: “How the text speaks to you depends on what questions you’re asking it” (p. 53). She compares the Biblical and Qur’anic accounts of Abraham almost sacrificing his son, an approach that was a key feature of early Qur’anic hermeneutics. It should be encouraging to all readings that the record of the author’s conversation with Barlas includes the Biblical story (Genesis 22), which supports her assertion that our scriptures are interconnected. She argues that the story of Abraham is not “patriarchal” in the negative sense, for it includes consultation and devotion to God, rather than the will of the patriarch, and that the Qur’an does not consider God “Father” or patriarch.

Kecia Ali’s “Gender and Destabilisation” explores the characteristics of Mary, presented in *sūrah* 3 (*Āl ‘Imrān*), as potentially a prophet and having equality with men both in liturgy and devotion. This leads to her observation that “her gender is in a number of places here highlighted, and then it is undone” (p. 72). In short, Mary is treated like a man. As a Christian reviewer, it is worth pointing out that the person of Mary is more developed in the Qur’an than the Bible, for the former often contains additional elements that do not appear in the latter. However, unlike other Biblical figures, there is only a small amount about Mary and so her story is extended. This is what Ali engages with and why Mary is clearly a strong Qur’anic character.

The next part, “Living Tradition,” engages with how modern Americans are using tradition in contemporary approaches to scripture. Jamal Badawi focuses on how tradition teaches Muslims to read the Qur’an properly to avoid it being hijacked (as Daesh and other extremists have done). He then asserts, via a contextual study of Q. 9:5 (one of the “kill verses” so beloved of extremists and those who have a problem with Islam), that it is “one of the most misunderstood verses of the Qur’an and so it offers an excellent opportunity for exploring an appropriate methodology for reading the Qur’an” (p. 78). He highlights, as expected, that it is the dominant theme (e.g., mercy) and majority reference (e.g., Christians and Jews referred to as “People of the Book”) that provides a backdrop for specific, limited, and more difficult verses. Birkel summarizes Badawi’s thoughts as “all [Scriptures] cry out to be read from a place centred in divinely ordained compassion” (p. 85).

“Living Tradition” finds its deepest, spiritual expression in a spiritual practice based upon the Qur’an. Fareeha Khan talks about this in her “Mercy and Healing,” a description of her own experience of physical healing in connection with Q. 9:129. This verse also inspired her to be gentle with people in order to give them an accurate impression of Islam’s mercy and blessing.

In times of anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiment, the question of Muslim attitudes toward non-Muslim neighbors is a regular one. Unfortunately, the questioner often does not wait for an answer. This is the subject of part 4, “Encountering Others,” in which Hassan al-Qazwini deals with “Repelling Evil with Good.” This title, taken from Q. 41:34, echoes Jesus’ teaching of turning the other cheek regardless of the context.

James E. (Jimmy) Jones continues with “Justice and the Human Family.” He begins with the point that the Qur’an is addressed to humanity because we are all one family. Out of this comes a concern for justice for everyone, a key concern within the Nation of Islam, one of his early influences. Remarkably, as Imam Qazwini did, that this is not what Islam is known for, he models this in his relationship with the nearby Catholic church and in the diverse local neighborhood.

A meditation on “the face of God” (Q. 2:115) is the core of Zayn Kassam’s “Dignity and Relationality.” This very well-known verse is read with a strong emphasis on pluralism, following his father’s reading of it that everything is either a sign or a reflection of God’s face. Some Muslim traditions might have issues with this, although as a diverse religion, Islam’s own pluralism extends to flexible and elastic interpretations of the Qur’an. Nevertheless, I was impressed with the idea of Qur’anic support for pantheism, including it as another way of looking at *tawhīd*. In Kassam’s hands this also counters misog-

ynist readings. She develops her theme more fully by connecting it with prayer: “Our eye for beauty is opened up through prayer, so that when we chance upon beauty there’s an inner sense that is willing to receive it with the grace that’s around it” (p. 144).

In part 5, “Contemporary Contexts,” Fazeel Khan’s piece “The Final Prophet” is perhaps slightly counterintuitive, given his status as a member of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement. Nevertheless, he is at pains to point out that this branch believes that Muhammad was the final revelatory prophet. In effect, he offers a basic introduction to his significance in Islam. According to him, even after Muhammad’s death God is still communicating with people in various ways. The Ahmadiyya’s important message for the last 100 years has been non-violence. It must be noted, however, that it is extremely unlikely that an Ahmadiyya Muslim would have been included if the author/editor had been Muslim.

The next topic is the thorny and infamous “wife-beating” verse of Q. 4:34. Ayesha Chaudhary addresses this in “Domestic Violence and Idealized Cosmologies.” As a young person, she was told that the questions it raised had been answered in the past, but that contemporary scholars were not prepared to say much about it. This highlights the need for books like this one and the scholars assembled in it, for such reluctance, regardless of the reason, risks diminishing the Qur’an by treating it as being unable to stand up to robust questioning.

Feminist scholars like Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud opened up gender-inclusive and, perhaps even more importantly, non-violent interpretations. Sadly, readings in tune with Islam’s values – gender inclusive and non-violent – still remain rather scarce and it is no easy thing to be a Muslim feminist. After her introduction, Chaudhary outlines how engaging with the difficulties associated with this verse require choosing between continuity and discontinuity with the tradition or underlying Islamic values, which lead to understandings and translations that prohibit hitting. Similarly, Suad Abdul Khabeer’s “Divine Care, Dignity, and Cultural Norms” deals with how the Qur’an expresses deep respect for women, promotes gratitude, and encourages a positive self-image from a Black Muslim perspective.

Part 6, “Justice,” reflects the strong Qur’anic (and Biblical) theme on this subject. It opens with Dawud Walid speaking about “The Heart of Guidance in the Qur’an.” A member of the Nation of Islam, he roots human rights in God’s character and dealings with and respect for humans. Amina Wadud, a Muslim scholar well worth reading and listening to, contributed an essay on “Intimacy and Compassion,” a theme that she sees in Q. 30:21: “God has cre-

ated mates for you and has made between you *intimacy and compassion*" (the last phrase is her own rendering). These two elements are the eternal model of the Qur'an. This is also the message of Islamic feminism, for patriarchy does not support intimacy.

The final grouping of conversations, "The Journey Inward," includes an anonymous contributor's "The Consoling Qur'an," which for her is summed up in "we have already returned to our Lord" (Q. 7:125). She shows how this is a frequently recurring theme, including as a response to a woman whose husband had divorced her in a fit of pique (Q. 58). Her personal tale of domestic abuse, justified by her husband's misreading of Q. 4.34, makes this a very moving segment.

In the next segment, Jonathan Brown talks about his spiritual journey toward Islam in "Comfort and Signs." He describes how the Qur'an is addressed both to the Prophet and to each of its readers: "It's intimately part of the Prophet's life, yet when I read it, it speaks to me." At a time of personal crisis and doubt, he is struck by some of the most moving words in the Qur'an, originally addressed to the Prophet: "Did we not find you an orphan and give you shelter?"

The book's final contribution is Homayra Ziad's "From Chaos to Union." She develops her exploration of Qur'anic apocalyptic imagery into an examination of "the tension between individual accountability and God's overpowering will" (p. 228), which leads to a personal change: "I learn to forgive myself for what I could not have avoided and ask God to help me avoid the same mistakes in the future" (p. 230).

Birkel closes with a very useful concluding reflection and overview of the book. In fact, this might be a good place to start for readers who have very little time. His very visible commitment to letting the contributors speak for themselves makes this an encouraging and accessible introduction to the Qur'an. His final paragraph is particularly noteworthy and encouraging. Commenting on how the Muslim speakers have engaged with non-Muslim thinkers, he observes: "It seems feasible that non-Muslims can similarly be enriched by an encounter with the Qur'an" (p. 235) and concludes with: "Whether the conversation is face to face or within one's own mind, Muslim and non-Muslim conversation partners may come to agree how to disagree, in a way that honours the integrity and beauty of each Scripture. Articulating that 'how' can be wonderfully liberating, even exhilarating."

The strengths of this book are that it preserves the contributors' thinking and actual words: Sunnis, Shi'as, Ismailis, the Nation of Islam, and Ahmadiyya, and within this group are those who take Sufi, feminist, and other

approaches. Nearly all the contributions are valuable, and there is much to reflect upon as well as, probably, ideas and approaches that will be largely unfamiliar or unexpected. Overall, it is particularly good at introducing various parts of the Qur'an and providing a deep overview of it by exploring key themes, even those that do not fit into the themed sections (e.g., justice, feminism, mercy and compassion, equality, patriarchy [which is consistently challenged], and diversity).

Its sole weakness, apart from a number of distracting typos and overlong paragraphs, is that we encounter so little of Michael Birkel. A longer introduction or a more personal closing reflection, as well as a greater understanding of him and his own journey, would be a great addition. I highly recommend this book to those who are unfamiliar with the Qur'an or possess negative and uninformed views. A similar book about the Bible would be highly valuable.

Julian Bond
Former Director, Christian Muslim Forum
London, United Kingdom