Who Speaks for the Quran?

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The Quran is arguably one of the world's most misrepresented and misunderstood texts. While it is true that many works have and continue to be characterized by misrepresentation and misunderstanding, the case of the Quran is altogether different: it is the sacred scripture of at least one quarter of the world's population, meaning that it directly and indirectly informs the doctrinal, ethical, and spiritual perspective of one out of every four people living on the planet, not to mention the many non-Muslim cultures and peoples influenced by Islam in one way or another. Misunderstanding the Quran is therefore potentially tantamount to misunderstanding the people who hold it dear to their hearts. I do not wish to advance some kind of simplistic formula to the effect that once we "understand" the Quran we "understand" every Muslim. It is clearly more complicated than that. But if we fail to understand the Quran, then we have next to no hope in understanding the basic building blocks of the Muslim *worldview.*

How, then, should we go about understanding the Quran, a book that was written in Arabic and which dates back to the seventh century? Let us begin with the simple observation that there are both legitimate and illegitimate ways to understand any literary composition. For example, if *Macbeth* were the subject of a study by a scholar of twentieth century English fiction, but someone not nearly as knowledgeable of Elizabethan English or Shakespeare's writings in both form and meaning, what kind of document would he produce? Some may deem his work a masterpiece, but a person specialized in Shakespeare's writings, and who also is a master of Elizabethan English, would easily be able to

detect the flaws in this particular study. After all, the author, despite his many talents in the area of twentieth century English fiction, is not a scholar of Shakespeare and does not even know the particular form of English that he used in his writings.

It is the Shakespeare scholar's superior knowledge of the subject matter that is the legitimate touchstone here. And this is because we recognize that subjects and texts are best spoken for by those who are deemed to be their certified interpreters. The same holds true for the Islamic tradition. Every formal discipline in Islamic civilization, from logic and law to spirituality and theology, has had its group of scholarly representatives, those who, by virtue of their specialized training and formal connection to a scholarly tradition transmitted from generation to generation, have been unequivocally recognized as scholars in their respective areas of expertise. Since this is the case with the various Islamic sciences, the same applies to the science of the interpretation of the Quran.

The tradition of explaining the meanings of the Quran goes back to the practice of the Prophet Muhammad, who has always been seen by Muslims as "the walking Quran." The Prophet was thus the first and most authoritative interpreter of the Quran. In his absence, and in keeping with his teachings, the tradition of Quranic explanation and interpretation developed into a robust interpretive enterprise collectively referred to in Arabic as *tafsir* or "Quranic commentary." Thus, within three centuries of the Prophet's death, Muslim scholars of the Quran already had at their disposal a variety of works of Quranic interpretation, ranging from short treatises on various linguistic usages in the Quran to wide-ranging, multi-volume tomes of Quranic commentary. Quranic commentaries have in fact been produced by Muslim scholars from that early period right up to our own day, with conservative estimates enumerating works in the genre of Quran commentary to well over seven thousand titles, most of which have been written in Arabic, and a smaller portion in languages such as Persian, Ottoman Turkish, Chinese, and Urdu.

This of course does not mean that others have not attempted to speak for the Quran. But this is where the touchstone of specialization is so important. Just as it would be imprudent to take as reliable the interpretation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* by someone not specialized in Shakespeare, so too would we be imprudent to take as reliable the

interpretation of the Quran by someone not specialized in the Quran. It was lost on no one in traditional Islamic civilization that the most reliable interpreters of the Quran were the Quranic scholars who belonged to the Quranic commentarial tradition. They effectively spoke for the Quran, and have been widely acknowledged as the most qualified people to do so.

Enter *The Study Quran*.[1] This newly-published work makes available, for the first time in any European language, the vast body of Quranic commentarial literature produced by Muslim scholars of the Quran, from past to present. Far from offering one, monolithic view of a continuous explanation of the Quranic text, *The Study Quran* highlights the various different voices throughout Islam's long history of Quranic scholarship, allowing Islam's foremost Sunni and Shi'i interpreters of the Quran to display their vast erudition of the Quran's various levels of meaning as they cross over many disciplinary boundaries, from history and linguistics to theology and philosophy. At the same time, the editors of *The Study Quran* have also sought to address in the commentary a number of contemporary issues associated with misrepresentations of the Quranic text. The net effect is a document in English of over 2000 pages which offers, amongst other things, a new and highly accurate translation of the Quran and its corresponding commentary. This commentary gives readers a contemporary window into how to understand the Quran with the help of its historically most significant scholarly representatives, while also creating space for new vistas to emerge in current Muslim and non-Muslim receptions of Islam's sacred scripture.

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[1] *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

[*] [Editor's Note: A review essay of *The Study Quran* by Peter Samsel appears in this volume of *Sacred Web*.]