

The Study Quran

A New Translation & Commentary

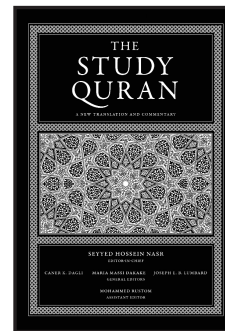
Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Editor-in-Chief

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Reviewed by Peter Samsel



If I were asked to summarize *The Study Quran* in a single word, I would, without hesitation, reply, “Useful.” That might seem faint praise indeed, but its intent is precisely the opposite. When I received my review copy I was absorbed in another project and expected to set the book aside until I could turn to its review in earnest. Instead, *The Study Quran* quickly became an invaluable resource, one that has only rarely left my desk and that I have consulted frequently and with benefit over the past several months. I fully expect it to be a close and honored companion for many, many years to come.

As the first Islamic entrant into the established genre of the study Bible, which includes such works as *The HarperCollins Study Bible*¹ and *The Jewish Study Bible*², *The Study Quran* is neither simply a Qur’ān translation nor even a translation integrated with commentary, but is

¹ Society of Biblical Literature, *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, Rev. Ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2005).

² Jewish Publication Study, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd Ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014).

rather a comprehensively integrated work incorporating translation, synopses of traditional commentaries or *tafsīrs*, chapter summaries, topical essays, indices and maps. As such, and as the title and genre suggest, it is a work primarily intended for serious and extended intellectual engagement. Although it will no doubt find ready adoption in the classroom, it is also intended to address both general Western readers as well as Muslim readers often cut off from the deeper intellectual resources of their own tradition.

To properly situate *The Study Quran*, it is necessary to understand the underlying guiding choices informing the work. First, just as *The HarperCollins Study Bible* is the work of Christian scholars and *The Jewish Study Bible* is the work of Jewish scholars, so *The Study Quran* is the work of Muslim scholars, a point that was insisted upon by its chief editor, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, at its outset. As such, although conforming to Western academic standards of scholarly rigor, it should be recognized as a work of Islamic scholarship. The very fact that there was a team of scholars working in collaboration—comprised of Nasr, general editors Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard and assistant editor Mohammed Rustom—is itself enough to set *The Study Quran* apart from many prior English translations of the Qur’ān and was perhaps necessarily dictated by the scale of the work conceived, while also serving as a check against individual idiosyncrasies of judgment.

Translation

A critical guiding choice of the work was that of the prose style adopted for the translation. The challenge is that of conveying the majesty of the Qur’ān’s expression in classical Arabic into English without the translation being either stilted or obscure to a contemporary readership. The obvious choice, and the one followed by the editors, is to look to the highest examples of early modern English for inspiration regarding prose styling—most notably *The King James Bible*, but also such ‘secular’ works as those of Shakespeare and Donne. There are certainly readers who might prefer a rendering into contemporary English, but here the recent example of the Anglican Church, inheritor of what are without question the two most influential works upon the whole of the English language—*The King James Bible* and Cranmer’s *The Book of Common Prayer*—may offer a cautionary lesson. Both of

these masterpieces of English prose have, in recent years, been largely displaced in liturgical use by the Anglican Church in favor of bland, contemporary versions.³ It is surely not wholly coincidental that the membership of the Anglican Church has gone into such steep decline that there is serious speculation that the last Anglican may have already been born.⁴ The poet W.H. Auden, witnessing the sidelining of *The King James Bible*, observed, “It was our luck to have that translation made when English was at its strongest and most robust. Why spit on our luck?” Why indeed? Meanwhile, among serious individual readers, *The King James Bible*, a work more than four hundred years old, remains to this day more favored for individual devotional reading than all other English translations combined.⁵

Intention is all very well, but does *The Study Quran*’s translation actually succeed on these terms? A.J. Arberry’s *The Koran Interpreted* has often been judged the most successful translation in capturing something in English of the beauty of the Qur’ānic Arabic. His own standout example of such, discussed at length in his introduction, is his translation of the Qur’ān’s rendition of the story of the Annunciation, a rendition parallel to yet distinct from the Gospel account of the same found in the Book of Luke. Below, we offer a comparison of the Qur’ānic rendition of the Annunciation from *Sūrat Maryam* (Mary) [19:16-9] from four leading Qur’ān translations: *The Study Quran*, A.J. Arberry’s *The Koran Interpreted*,⁶ Marmaduke Pickthall’s *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran*⁷ and M.A.S. Abdel Haleem’s *The Qur’an*.⁸ The selection of this passage also affords comparison to *The King James Bible*’s translation of the Biblical rendition of the same story [Luke 1:26-31].

[Nasr et al.]: And remember Mary in the Book, when she withdrew from her family to an eastern place and she veiled herself from them. Then We sent unto

³ Peter Mullen, “The king of the bibles,” *The Telegraph* (Nov 14, 2011) (www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/8887946/The-king-of-the-bibles.html); Victoria Combe, “‘Easy-read’ service book is insult to past, says Prince,” *The Telegraph* (Nov 06, 2000) (www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1373385/Easy-read-service-book-is-insult-to-past-says-Prince.html).

⁴ Damian Thompson, “2067: the end of British Christianity,” *The Spectator* (June 13, 2015) (www.spectator.co.uk/2015/06/2067-the-end-of-british-christianity/).

⁵ Philip Goff, et al., *The Bible in American Life* (The Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, 2014), p.12 (www.raac.iupui.edu/files/2713/9413/8354/Bible_in_American_Life_Report_March_6_2014.pdf).

⁶ A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

⁷ Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran* (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1993).

⁸ M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008).

her Our Spirit, and it assumed for her the likeness of a perfect man. She said, “I seek refuge from thee in the Compassionate, if you are reverent!” He said, “I am but a messenger of thy Lord, to bestow upon thee a pure boy.”

[Arberry]: And mention in the Book Mary when she withdrew from her people to an eastern place, and she took a veil apart from them; then We sent unto her Our Spirit that presented himself to her a man without fault. She said, ‘I take refuge in the All-merciful from thee! If thou fearest God. . .’ He said, ‘I am but a messenger come from thy Lord, to give thee a boy most pure.’

[Pickthall]: And make mention of Mary in the Scripture, when she had withdrawn from her people to a chamber looking East, and had chosen seclusion from them. Then We sent unto her Our spirit and it assumed for her the likeness of a perfect man. She said: Lo! I seek refuge in the Beneficent One from thee, if thou art God fearing. He said: I am only a messenger of thy Lord, that I may bestow on thee a faultless son.

[Abdel Haleem]: Mention in the Qur’an the story of Mary. She withdrew from her family to a place to the east and secluded herself away; We sent Our Spirit to appear before her in the form of a perfected man. She said, ‘I seek the Lord of Mercy’s protection against you: if you have any fear of Him [do not approach]!’ but he said, ‘I am but a Messenger from your Lord, [come] to announce to you the gift of a pure son.’

[KJV]: And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son and shalt call his name Jesus.

In terms of literary quality, the prose of *The Study Quran* may be judged at least on a par with Arberry’s translation and somewhat better than the slightly more stilted Victorian prose of Pickthall’s translation or the slightly more awkward contemporary prose of Abdel Haleem’s translation. While the passage in *The Study Quran* is not quite as elevated as the comparable passage from *The King James Bible*—which includes the memorable, indeed immortalized phrase, “the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women”—its language is also somewhat more accessible.

The Arabic Qur’ān is well known for the frequent allusiveness of its expression, an aspect that presents a challenge of conveyance to any translator. A particularly severe example of this occurs in the last four verses of *Sūrat al-Qāri’ab* (The Calamity) [101:8-11]. Michael Sells, in his *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations*, offers a very nuanced and detailed commentary regarding the ‘semantic openness’ of this *sūrah*, one focused on the meaning of the mysterious term *hāwiya*, a figure of feminine construction that carries connotations of an abyss or a woman who has lost her child.⁹ Also critical is the final *āyah*, in which the expression is explicitly indefinite. Thus, Sells translates these verses as:

[Sells]: Whoever’s scales weigh light | his mother is *hāwiya* | What can tell you what she is | Raging fire

In comparison, the four translations considered above render the verses as follows:

[Nasr et al.]: And as for one whose scales are light, an abyss shall be his mother. And what shall apprise thee of her? It is a raging fire.

[Arberry]: But he whose deeds weigh light in the Balance shall plunge in the womb of the Pit. And what shall teach thee what is the Pit? A blazing Fire!

[Pickthall]: But as for him whose scales are light, the bereft and Hungry One will be his mother. Ah, what will convey unto thee what she is!—raging fire.

[Abdel Haleem]: But the one whose good deeds are light will have the Bottomless Pit for his home—what will explain to you what that is?—a blazing fire.

Here, *The Study Quran*’s translation of *hāwiya*—its connotations of profound loss, its feminine construction, and its meanings of an abyss and a mother bereft of child—as well as the final unspecified, indefinite phrase—“a raging fire”—may be judged the most successful of the four translations considered. Further, the phrase “an abyss shall be his mother” is particularly evocative as an instance of poetic prose.

A significant example of where the reduction of Qur’ānic allusiveness in translation can alter the meaning of the text is the final *āyah* of *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah* (The Opening). Taken in conjunction with the preceding

⁹ Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999), pp.24-6,113.

āyah, the four translations under consideration translate the relevant sentence [1:6-7] as follows:

[Nasr et al.]: Guide us upon the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those who incur wrath, nor of those who are astray.

[Arberry]: Guide us in the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those against whom Thou art wrathful, nor of those who are astray.

[Pickthall]: Show us the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast favoured; not (the path) of those who earn Thine anger nor of those who astray.

[Abdel Haleem]: Guide us to the straight path: the path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray.

The Qur’ān does not specify an agent with respect to “those who incur wrath,” nor does it specify whether such wrath has in fact been incurred. Pickthall explicitly names God as the agent, while Arberry—who is usually quite careful in preserving the ambiguities of the Qur’ānic text in translation—further specifies that the Divine wrath is in effect. Only *The Study Quran* and Abdel Haleem preserve the syntactic ambiguity of the Arabic text. This is a non-trivial point, for as the relevant commentary in *The Study Quran* reminds, “God does not wrong human beings in the least, but rather human beings wrong themselves.” [10:44]

Just as in the construction of a building—in which, when the scaffolding is at last removed to reveal the final structure, its removal also obscures the manifold efforts needed to raise that structure—so too, in *The Study Quran*, a great deal of care and effort was taken that is in no wise visible to a reader of the finished book. In this regard Nasr has explicitly noted:

In fact, a huge effort and many countless hours have been expended to ensure that the translation is internally consistent in matters of both style and content. This effort included the creation of hundreds of secondary indexing documents and an enormous spreadsheet to track the use of individual words, phrases, and roots appearing in the translation.¹⁰

Commentary

Although the translation offered in *The Study Quran* is impressive, the most significant aspect of the book is without question its commentary.

¹⁰ *The Study Quran*, p.xlii.

This commentary, which might more properly be termed a ‘compound commentary’, gathers and summarizes a large number of commentaries to be found in the broader Islamic tradition. Just as the question of prose style formed a critical guiding choice for the work, another, even more critical choice was that of the selection of commentaries (*tafsīrs*) for inclusion. Nasr has noted regarding this selection that:

We selected the most authoritative and widely read and accepted traditional commentaries as well as specialized commentaries that offered important information not always available in those commentaries that are more widely read.¹¹

Major commentaries, such are those of al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī and ibn Kathīr, are obvious and non-controversial in their inclusion. However, precisely because the genre of *The Study Quran* is one that attempts to represent a tradition—whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim—in its entirety, the selection of commentaries that followed from this was necessarily broad, straddling internal sectarian divisions and avoiding both narrow dogmatism and confessional particularity. Thus leading Sunni, Shiite and Sufi commentaries were included, totaling forty one in all. In this, *The Study Quran* is far more expansive than its closest analogue, Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s *The Holy Qur’an: Text, Translation and Commentary*—here we specifically refer to the 1938 Sh. Muhammad Ashraf edition¹²—which consulted a much smaller number of Sunni *tafsīrs*, only rarely quoting from or even explicitly mentioning them in its commentary.

The work that the commentary of *The Study Quran* most closely resembles is in fact the only other example in English of a similar ‘compound commentary’ summarizing the tradition, the two-volume work of Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur’an and its Interpreters*,¹³ a project that, unfortunately, did not extend past the Qur’ān’s third *sūrah* (*Sūrat al-’Imrān*). Ayoub’s project, although again not as expansive as that of *The Study Quran*, nevertheless consulted a large number of *tafsīrs*, including those from Sunni, Shiite and Sufi sources. It also consulted

¹¹ *The Study Quran*, p.xliii.

¹² Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur’an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1938).

¹³ Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters*, Vols. I & II (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984 & 1992); one might also mention the more restrictive anthology, Feras Hamza, Sajjad Rizvi, Farhana Mayer (eds.), *An Anthology of Qur’anic Commentaries, Volume 1: On the Nature of the Divine* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010).

a *tafsīr* notable by its absence in the list of *tafsīrs* consulted in *The Study Quran*—that of the modern Egyptian commentator Sayyid Qutb.

Such a decision is in line with the broader decision by Nasr to include only traditional *tafsīrs* for consultation and to eschew modern ones. Here, ‘modern’ does not mean ‘contemporary’—note that the *tafsīr* of ‘Allāma Ṭabāṭabā’ī (d.1981), which was consulted in *The Study Quran*, postdates that of Qutb. Rather, ‘modern’ may be understood as that which has broken with, been ruptured from or is set apart from the larger historical expression of the Islamic tradition. Such a choice may well strike one as at once perfectly judicious and defensible, but an explicit statement explaining and justifying this choice would have been welcome. In part, this is addressed in the final paragraph of Walid Saleh’s essay, “Quranic Commentaries”:

Four major trends can be noted in modern Islamic *tafsīr*: the modernizing, the Salafī, the classical, and the fundamentalist. The modernizing and the fundamentalist trends share the same hermeneutical outlook; both have escaped the dictates of the tradition and see fit to interpret the Quran according to an ideological stance. One has modernity as its guiding principle, the other a militant outlook. Both also seem to have had only a limited appeal to the general Muslim public. The Salafī trend, which is increasingly the norm in Sunni lands, attempts to leapfrog over a thousand years of Islamic scholarship in order to return to an imagined golden age of the first Islamic centuries.¹⁴

Taken in this light, the commentary of *The Study Quran* may be understood as having been based upon a comprehensive consultation of *tafsīr* comprising the classical *tafsīr* tradition, itself bound up with the broader classical tradition of Islamic scholarship, representing the dominant intellectual core of the Islamic tradition taken as a whole. Seen as such, the broad criterion of choice adopted by Nasr regarding the selection of *tafsīrs* is not only eminently sensible, but the only one that could reasonably have been followed.

Of course, such a conclusion will hardly mollify modernist, fundamentalist or Salafī Muslim readers, who will, quite predictably, take umbrage at the marginalization of their own particular confessional perspectives. Further, the inclusion of Shiite and Sufi commentarial source materials will pique some Sunni readers, just as the inclusion of Sunni and Sufi commentarial source materials will pique some Shiite

¹⁴ *The Study Quran*, p.1657.

readers. Here, a consideration of hypotheticals may be in order—if *The Study Quran* had only included commentarial materials from, say, Sunni sources, it might have pleased Sunni readers, but might well justifiably been seen as biased towards an exclusively Sunni interpretation. An analogous conclusion would hold if the materials chosen were exclusively Shiite or exclusively Sufi (*ta'wīl*). The Qur'ān is a preeminent example of what might be termed a 'charged' text: many have strong opinions regarding it, many have a sense of ownership toward it and its interpretation. In brief, a general condition of life finds particular resonance here—it is impossible to please everyone.

Such considerations aside, it is important to note the nature of the commentary that has been crafted by the editors of *The Study Quran*. As Nasr has helpfully clarified:

Our commentary, while based on the traditional commentaries, is not simply a collage of selections drawn from these books, but a new work. Our text has required making choices about both inclusion and exclusion of earlier texts in addition to providing in some places our own commentary, which is not found, at least in the same way, in the earlier sources. Ours is therefore a new commentary that is nonetheless based completely on traditional Islamic thought and the earlier commentary traditions.¹⁵

Anyone even passingly familiar with traditional *tafsīrs* will know that the most obvious fact about them is their massive, encyclopedic, multi-volume character. No single work, no matter how thin the paper, could hope to fully present them in their entirety. As Maria Dakake, one of the general editors, expressed:

It had to be a process of narrowing down. Often we would read hundreds of pages for a single verse and then have to figure out what were the most key, the most important, the most influential lines of interpretation and present those in a synoptic form.¹⁶

In other words, the commentary is not only a 'compound commentary', but also a 'condensed commentary', one that required considerable scholarly care and acumen to produce, a labor largely hidden from readers of the finished work. Given how central the consulted *tafsīrs*

¹⁵ *The Study Quran*, p. xliii-iv.

¹⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Maria Dakake, "Politics and Prose BookTalk about *The Study Quran*," 27:30min [Video] (www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pSAt45aYyQ).

are to *The Study Quran* as a whole, an addition that we would recommend to the general introduction—one that might readily be folded into a future edition—is a more expansive discussion of the detailed nature and relative significance of each of these specific *tafsīrs*. The “Biographies of Commentators” offered in Appendix C addresses this in part. Mahmoud Ayoub’s discussion in the introduction to his own work on *tafsīr* offers one possible example of what might further be done.

Turning to the commentary itself, a point recognized by the general tradition is that the first and most important commentary on the Qur’ān is the Qur’ān itself. The topic or content of a given *āyah* is quite frequently linked to the same or similar as found in a number of other *āyāt* scattered throughout the text. Typically, the first and best means of more fully grasping the meaning or intent of the Qur’ān in a given verse is to examine others cross-referenced to it. Here, *The Study Quran* is exceptionally useful to the reader, not only typically including a comprehensive listing of related *āyāt* for a given *āyah*, but also specifying under which the most relevant lines of commentary are to be found. The second most important commentary on the Qur’ān is the *ḥadīth* tradition, the general body of recorded statements attributed to the Prophet. By extension, this second level of commentary might also be taken to include the Prophet’s *sunnah*, or lived example, the *sīra*, or biographical traditional, and the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, or ‘occasions of revelation’. *The Study Quran* integrates into its commentary all of these various Prophetic aspects, frequently providing a very rich tapestry of addition connotations, contexts and insights. The third level of commentary is that of the commentarial tradition proper, as discussed in detail above. A point that should perhaps be made is that the standard practice of the editors has been to append a brief reference—such as (R) for al-Rāzī—following a given commentarial summary, ensuring that *The Study Quran* is by no means a disconnected, free-floating text, but rather integrates back directly *and traceably* to the larger body of traditional *tafsīr*.

The commentary integrated with the Qur’ānic text of *The Study Quran* is extremely thorough—offering substantial comment upon nearly every verse—as well as generally insightful. The traditional commentators consulted possessed vast erudition, but occasionally the Qur’ānic text defeats their efforts of interpretation, something that the

synoptic treatment of *The Study Quran* reveals particularly well. Thus, the Qur’ānic story of Dhu’l-Qarnayn (18:83), associated with the legend of Alexander, has generated a broad spectrum of commentarial notions, many of them quite evidently speculative in character. Similarly, the detailed nature of the mysterious “inscription” (*al-raqīm*) that appears in the Qur’ānic story of the Companions of the Cave (18:9), associated with the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, has yielded a number of speculative commentarial opinions.

A good reminder that even the traditional *tafsirs*, for all their thoroughness, comprise only a portion of the Islamic intellectual and spiritual tradition may be seen in the commentary for 5:54, a verse that includes the phrase “a people whom He loves and who love Him.” This phrase is profoundly significant to the tradition—as indeed acknowledged in the commentary and explored to a certain degree—so much so that William Chittick has recently authored a sizeable book¹⁷ based in considerable measure upon an even more sizeable body of Islamic spiritual literature articulating the meaning and implications of this single phrase. Similarly, an example of a commentarial lacuna occurs in 33:13—“O people of Yathrib! There is no stand for you; so turn back.” The commentary offers no suggestion that “no stand” is in fact the Qur’ānic point of reference for Ibn ‘Arabī’s highly influential teaching regarding the “station of no station” (*maqām lā maqām*), closely related in turn to the broader Sufi doctrine of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*).

Essays

A particularly valuable addition to the text, one that would form a book in its own right if published separately, are the many essays on various facets of the Qur’ān that follow the translation and commentary proper. A point to note—as well as a testament to Nasr’s intellectual authority and influence—is that a number of the essays included in *The Study Quran* are by the leading authorities in their respective fields. The general introduction by Nasr also deserves mention here as a major essay in its own right. This introduction addresses the main themes of the Qur’ān, its language and structure and its embodied role in Muslim life before turning to a discussion of detailed matters relating specifically

¹⁷ William C. Chittick, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

to *The Study Quran*. The first essay proper, by Ingrid Mattson on how to read the Qur'ān, serves as an extremely valuable first orientation for the novice reader of the Qur'ān of the kind that should be commonplace, but is in our experience exceedingly rare. As such, it fills an unfortunate pedagogical gap and does so with the same sure hand displayed in her earlier work, *The Story of the Qur'an*.¹⁸ The essay on the Qur'ān in translation by general editor Joseph Lumbard offers a good introduction to issues of translation, including those of linguistic alternation (*iltifāt*) and grammatical polyvalence, but in the end seems too brief a treatment of the topic. The essay on the Islamic view of the Qur'ān by Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, author of the authoritative work *The History of the Qur'ānic Text: From Revelation to Compilation*,¹⁹ ably summarizes the Prophetic reception and transmission of the Qur'ān, its collection and recording, the details of its compilation and the issue of variant or multiple readings. The essay on Qur'ānic Arabic by Muhammad Abdel Haleem, a master Arabist and himself an esteemed translator of the Qur'ān, treats the Qur'ān's conceptual language, linguistic characteristics, grammar and memorability, as well as the manifold effects of the Qur'ān on Islamic languages and literatures.

The essay by Walid Saleh on the general field of Qur'ānic commentaries (*tafsīrs*), serves as a very helpful outline and assessment of the general field of *tafsīr*, giving both a fine overview as well as demonstrating the many remaining gaps in the historical understanding of the genre. The essay by Toby Meyer addresses the genre of *ta'wīl*, or mystical commentary, discussing the esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān through letter and number symbolism, association with transformative inner experiences, and allegorical symbolism. The essay on scientific commentary on the Qur'ān by Muzaffar Iqbal, a leading authority on the topic of Islam and science, serves primarily as a cautionary demonstration as to why such commentary on what is fundamentally a repository of Divine signs (*āyāt*), and not of natural sciences, is an ill-conceived idea. The essay on the Qur'ān as source of Islamic law by Aḥmad Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar and a leading authority on Islamic law, addresses such topics as the principles of Islamic law, the determination of rulings from the

¹⁸ Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life*, 2nd Ed. (New York, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

¹⁹ Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, *The History of the Qur'ānic Text: From Revelation to Compilation*, 2nd Ed. (Selangor: Islamic Book Trust, 2011).

Qur'ānic text, and the general philosophy of commands and prohibitions. The essay by Muṣṭafā Muḥaqiq Dāmād, a leading Shiite authority on Islamic philosophy, addresses the Qur'ān and schools of Islamic theology and philosophy in the specific context of Mu'tazilite, Ash'arite, Shiite, Sufi and philosophical *tafsīr*. The essay on the Qur'ān and Sufism by William Chittick, a leading authority on Sufism, treats such related topics as the Qur'ānization of memory, the meditation on God's signs and qualities as revealed in the Qur'ān, the recognition of the Face of God in all things, both without and within, the inculcation of the Divine presence through invocation, and the mutuality of Divine and human love.

The essay on the Qur'ān and Islamic Art by the late Jean-Louis Michon, a close friend and collaborator of the late Titus Burckhardt in the artistic preservation of Fez and like him a noted authority on Islamic art and culture, treats the underlying Qur'ānic inspiration of Islamic art, as expressed in the use of such themes as light and water, as well as the garden and the enclosure of living space. The essay by Joseph Lumbard on the Qur'ānic view of sacred history and other religions addresses topics of religious form and the covenantal relationship between God and human communities, the primordial norm of human beings in relation to God, the specific nature of Jewish and Christian covenants, the possibility of their betrayal, and the new covenant established under Islam. The essay by general editor Maria Dakake on Qur'ānic ethics addresses the general Qur'ānic principles of social ethics, including a nuanced discussion of the sensitive topic of marital rights and responsibilities, as well as treating economic justice and social comportment, all within a framework that, although different than that of the post-Enlightenment West, is spiritually and morally coherent on its own terms. The essay on conquest, conversion, war and peace in the Qur'ān by general editor Caner Dagli treats the charged topic of *jihād*, addressing the use of force, the question of coercion in religion, the understanding of treaties and treaty peoples (*dhimmīs*), and the rules governing the conduct of war and limits of conquest. The final essay, by the influential Muslim scholar Hamza Yusuf, addresses the Qur'ānic description of death, dying, and the afterlife, providing a very thorough overview of Qur'ānic eschatological teachings, including the various meanings of death, the immediate posthumous condition, the manifold aspects of the final resurrection and judgment, and the nature and characteristics of Paradise and Hell.

All of the essays competently treat their respective topics, with the typical variations to be expected in such a disparate collection—a number of the essays are truly excellent. A list of suggested readings appended to each essay for further study of a given topic—only partly addressed through individual essay footnotes—would, however, have been a welcome addition, one very much in line with the general intent and purview of *The Study Quran*. In his general introduction, Nasr explicitly mentions that, due to space allotments, there was a restriction on the total number of essays that could be included. One can certainly respect this limitation. Nevertheless, we would have liked to have seen the inclusion of two additional essays: on the rhetorical structure of the Qur’ān, for which Michel Cuypers would be the obvious contributor, and on argument and persuasion in the Qur’ān—touched briefly upon in the essay on Qur’ānic Arabic—for which Rosalind Ward Gwynne would be the obvious contributor.

Book Design

To speak of *The Study Quran* as a ‘book’ is, in a way, deceptive. Weighing in at some two thousand pages, it should more properly be conceived as a multi-volume work that only fits between a single pair of covers by the application of “bible paper”, that remarkable substance long-familiar to Bible readers but—to the best of our knowledge—applied here for the first time in the context of Islamic scholarship. Such paper is the result of highly technical material tradeoffs between such factors as thickness, opacity, brightness and tensile and shear strength. While it requires some care in use—the main issue seems to be a tendency toward wrinkling and creasing—the advantage is that one has only a single hefty tome on one’s shelf instead of four or five. The layout of the text, with the translation in large type at the top of each page and the relevant commentary in two columns of finer type immediately below, is easy to read and navigate. The fine type of the commentary is a bit on the small side—necessarily so—but still quite readable given the selection of the overall font—Garamond Premier Pro—which is quite attractive and easy on the eyes over long periods of reading. The use of red color to set off both the individual verse markers—roundels designed by Caner Dagli—and their number references in the commentary is effective and greatly helps navigation in a given page. The Arabic Basmalah that graces the beginning of each

sūrah—the work of the esteemed American calligrapher Mohamed Zakariya—is a lovely addition to the text.

The scholarly apparatus in Appendix A of a complete index of all *aḥādīth* quoted or referenced in *The Study Quran*, specifying their citation in recognized *ḥadīth* collections, as well as a bibliography of *ḥadīth* collections cited, is a necessary and welcome addition to the text proper. The general index appears a model of thoroughness, particularly invaluable for comprehensively exploring a given Qur’ānic topic or theme. Although translations of Arabic terms are given for each relevant index entry, a separate glossary of terms would also have been welcome. The historical and topical maps prepared by Daoud Casewit, best consulted in conjunction with the brief time line of major events offered in Appendix B, are models of their type and a very welcome and useful addition to the text. Finally, the cover design—also by Dagli—evokes the best traditions of Mamluk bookbinding and frontispiece illumination and showcases the geometric genius that has always been such a standout feature of Islamic art, providing a very elegant artistic ‘framing’ for the book.

The hardcover version of *The Study Quran* is what one would expect, with the cover design embossed in gold on the front and rear boards. The leather version has a very attractive appearance and feel but—perhaps unsurprisingly, given the publisher’s expertise—is modeled in form on the ‘floppy leather Bible’, of a type long familiar to Bible readers. This is a bit of an acquired taste—I have grown to appreciate it as a desk copy, as it helps the pages to lie flat, but it doesn’t travel well. It would be nice to eventually also see a leather version with stiff boards. A specific critique of the Kindle version of *The Study Quran*, by far the most portable, is the inability to directly search for a specific *sūrah* and *āyah* number (e.g. 112:1) and the complete absence of hyperlinking in both the *ḥadīth* index and general index. These are gross oversights that unnecessarily limit the utility of the e-book version.

The exclusion of the Arabic text of the Qur’ān from *The Study Quran* was taken as a publishing decision by HarperCollins in order to keep the book to a single volume, given concerns of publishing costs, audience and sales.²⁰ The publisher is planning to release a subsequent edition with the Arabic text but with the trimming of some of the commentary in order to free up space for its inclusion while still maintaining the book

²⁰ www.facebook.com/thestudyquran/posts/1651703598409815; also, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Maria Dakake, “*Politics and Prose* Book Talk about *The Study Quran*,” 48:45min [Video].

as a single volume. Given the ubiquity with which the Arabic text may be obtained, this would seem a bad trade. Further, many Qur’ān translations that include the Arabic text are driven by space considerations of their own to cram it into a small corner of the page, which limits the reading utility of the Arabic text in any case. The obvious solution for serious Arabic readers is to simply adopt the novel course of keeping two books open at the same time: *The Study Quran* and an Arabic *muṣḥaf* of their choice.

Particularist Critique

Although reception of *The Study Quran* since its release has been broadly positive, a significant strain of critique has focused on what is seen as the unjustifiable pluralist thesis advanced in the text, even going so far as to accuse *The Study Quran* as being, as it were, ‘smuggled Perennialism’. The pattern of such critique has followed a broadly three-pronged approach: a) to highlight the perceived pluralism advanced in the text as being at once novel and un-Islamic; b) to present a historical Islamic scholarly consensus rejecting pluralism and advancing a particularist exclusivism; and c) to argue that Qur’ānic statements apparently advancing a pluralist thesis are either miscontextualized by a pluralist reading, overwhelmed by opposing particularist statements, or ‘superseded’ by opposing particularist statements. Without presuming to speak for the editors of *The Study Quran*, who are perfectly capable of defending themselves,²¹ it nevertheless seems fitting in the context of the present journal, devoted as it is to Traditionalist thought, to offer a reply. In so doing we address each of these identified points of critique in turn.

The Traditionalist School, of which Nasr is the most eminent living representative, does indeed find its specific origin in the writings of René Guénon, a Frenchman who adopted Islam in the context of Sufism and lived most of his adult life in Cairo. However, the philosophically pluralist concerns that are a focus of this school hardly originate with it, nor are they alien to the intellectual concerns of Islam historically. The first historical reference to the ‘perennial philosophy’ that is such

²¹ As the initial forays of such a defense, see: www.facebook.com/joseph.lumbard/posts/1047442181952798, www.facebook.com/caner.dagli.92/posts/10100608388276822; also see the comments of Caner Dagli in the comment thread to muslimmatters.org/2015/12/14/the-study-quran-a-review/. **Addendum:** for a very recent addition, made available just as this review was going to print, see Caner Dagli, “The Quran and The Perennial Philosophy” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vs3Vj1LYPvI).

a hallmark concern of this school of thought appears in the work of the eleventh century Persian Muslim philosopher Ibn Miskawayh, whose comparative doxography *Jāvidān khirad* is best translated as ‘eternal wisdom’ or ‘*philosophia perennis*’. Islamic philosophical consideration upon religious pluralism naturally arose historically in contexts where the religion found itself in close company with other dominant expressions of faith. Two historical Islamic contexts that might be mentioned in particular are those of India and China. In the case of India, the remarkable Mughal prince Dārā Shukōh translated the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita into Persian and authored the *Majma’ al-bahrain (The Commingling of Two Oceans)*, a comparative study of Sufi and Vedantic metaphysics. Another notable example is that of the Mughal emperor Akbar, who displayed a remarkable interest in and tolerance of other faiths and who frequently encouraged and participated in inter-religious discussion and debate at his *Ibādat Khāna* (House of Worship) at his court in Fatehpur Sikri. A third, if more muted, example is that of the brilliant medieval Muslim polymath Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī, whose encyclopedic *Kitāb al-Hind (The Book of India)* displays a degree of openness to the understanding of Hindu philosophic and religious conceptions. In the case of China, Wang Tai-yü (Daiyu), author of *Ch’ing-chen ta-bsüeh (The Great Learning of the Pure and Real)* and Liu Chih (Zhi), author of *Chen-chen chao-wei (Displaying the Concealment of the Real Realm)* and *T’ien-fang hsing-li (Nature and Principle in Islam)*, represent leading Chinese Muslim intellectuals who successfully assimilated Confucian social teachings, Neo-Confucian metaphysics and Buddhist and Taoist conceptions into Islamic thought.²² A remarkable example of Islamic ‘perennialist’ concern—in all but name—is the early 20th century Indian Sunni scholar Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad, who expressed an inclusivist Islamic theology based upon what he termed *wahdat al-dīn*, or ‘unity of religion’—which he considered the foundation of the message of the Qur’ān—an understanding that finds further confirmation in the teaching of the famous 18th century Indian scholar Shah Waliullah al-Dahlawi.²³

²² See Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000); Sachiko Murata, *The Sage Learning of Liu Zhi: Islamic Thought in Confucian Terms* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009).

²³ See Mun’im Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur’ān and Other Religions* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp.72-5.

In any debate between pluralist and exclusivist positions, it is critical to be clear as to the type or meaning of the pluralism or exclusivism under discussion. In this regard, there is a basic confusion often on display as to just what is being rebutted. Here, the primary concern of the Traditionalist School and other similar historical Islamic intellectual articulations is with what might be termed ‘ontological pluralism’—with the ultimate origin and ground of multiple religious traditions in the Divine knowledge and will. Taken in broad outline, such a position should not only be non-problematic for Muslims but may be seen as practically required, given the repeated Qur’ānic insistence on having sent a multiplicity of messengers to humanity. Whether one accepts the mainstream Islamic scholarly position or not regarding Islam’s supersession of other faiths is largely irrelevant to such an ontological pluralism precisely because its primary concern is ontological and therefore ultimately above the world of change and time. If a religious tradition is truly grounded in the Divine, then it possesses an archetypal reality as such, as an ‘immutable entity’ (*‘ayn thābita*) in the Divine knowledge, and this remains the case even in the face of any historical supersession ‘in time’. In contrast the primary concern of Muslim particularists is soteriological, or ‘salvific’, pluralism—whether those outside of the confessional fold of Islam proper can gain Paradise or are necessarily destined for the Fire. There is certainly an overlap of consideration between ontological pluralism and soteriological exclusivism, as ontological pluralism often carries over into soteriologically pluralist concerns, but our point here is that it is not ultimately grounded in such concerns.

The question as to whether there is a historical Islamic scholarly consensus (*ijmā’*) regarding soteriological exclusivism is more vexed than is often thought by contemporary Muslims, and for perhaps three reasons. First, scholarly positions are more diverse than a simple claim of consensus would suggest. As Mohammad Hassan Khalil, in the conclusion to his doctoral dissertation on the topic, asserts:

Among some of the most prominent scholars in the history of Islam, there does indeed exist a rich diversity of opinions regarding salvation and the fate of non-Muslims.²⁴

²⁴ Mohammad Hassan Khalil, *Muslim Scholarly Discussions on Salvation and the Fate of ‘Others’* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan, 2007), p.221 [Doctoral Dissertation].

Second, a critical point on which Muslims and non-Muslims alike may be reasonably assured, on the repeated affirmation of both the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth qudsī*, is that we are—to misquote Jonathan Edwards—“sinners in the hands of a Merciful God.” Thus, the Qur’ān promises “Say, ‘O My servants who have been prodigal to the detriment of their own souls! Despair not of God’s Mercy. Truly God forgives all sins. Truly He is the Forgiving, the Merciful,’” [39:53] that “My Mercy encompasses all things,” [7:156] and that “He has prescribed Mercy for Himself,” [6:12] while a *ḥadīth qudsī* records that upon the Divine Throne is written, “My Mercy has precedence over My Wrath.” Such generous promises of Divine mercy are far more expansive and all encompassing in character than any comparable threats of Divine wrath. Possessing an expressly universal character, there is no reason to consider them curtailed by the delimitation of confessional boundaries. Third, that the traditional *ulamā* were profoundly learned and deeply pious individuals worthy of respect and indeed reverence does not mean that they were not invested in the assertion—supported in part by the Qur’ān itself—of a distinct and indeed superior religious identity, both for themselves and the communities they served. As Frithjof Schuon has observed:

Every religion by definition wants to be the best, and ‘must want’ to be the best, both as a whole and in its constitutive elements; this is only natural, or rather ‘supernaturally natural’.²⁵

In a similar vein, Alister McGrath has remarked regarding the formulation of religious doctrine:

Doctrine is thus linked with the affirmation of the need for certain identity-giving parameters for the community, providing ideological justification for its continued existence.²⁶

Historically, this has played out in the Islamic tradition in ways that are, perhaps, unsurprising. Thus, as Mohammad Hashim Kamali has noted:

The universality of the Qur’ānic message is often suppressed, however, by the orthodox exegetes who have interpreted the exclusivist verses of the text more literally than its inclusivist verses.²⁷

²⁵ Frithjof Schuon, *Christianity/Islam: Perspectives on Esoteric Ecumenism* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008), p.91.

²⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.11.

²⁷ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, “Diversity and Pluralism: A Qur’ānic Perspective,” *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 1(1) (October, 2009), p.36.

Joseph Lombard has similarly observed:

Despite a clear message of universality, tolerance and pluralism in the Qur'ān, the main line theological and hermeneutic traditions have almost always chosen to read the universal, inclusivist dimensions of the Qur'ān, and of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad in light of the more exclusivist verses such as, “Verily the religion with God is Islam” (5:3), and “Who seeks other than Islam as a religion, it will not be accepted from him” (3:85).²⁸

Ali Asani, commenting upon the motivation for such, has contended that:

... the Quran essentially espouses a pluralist worldview... Through the centuries, however, it has been subjected to anti-pluralist, or exclusivist, interpretations in order to advance hegemonic goals, both political and religious.²⁹

William Chittick, complementing this motivational analysis, has noted:

In the case of the Muslim community, the *ulama* had no good reason to argue in support of Qur'anic references to the universality of religious truth, verses like “every nation has its messenger” (10:47). If they had suggested that others might be following legitimate ways, they would have been diluting the absolute authority of the religious command designated by the Qur'an and the Sunna.³⁰

The question as to whether Qur'ānic statements apparently advancing a pluralist thesis are miscontextualized by a pluralist reading, or, alternatively, either overwhelmed or ‘superseded’ by opposing particularist statements is necessarily a broad one. Here, we confine our comments to two crucial sets of verses often advanced to support either pluralist or exclusivist claims. We emphasize that a pluralist position may be advanced on a much wider body of Qur'ānic testimony than we treat here, as amply demonstrated in Lombard's essay—“The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions”—in *The Study Quran*. On the

²⁸ Joseph Lombard, “Qur'ānic Inclusivism in an Age of Globalization” in *The Religious Other: Towards a Muslim Theology of the Other Religions in a Post-Prophetic Age*, Muhammad Suheyl Umar (ed.) (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2008), p. 152.

²⁹ Ali S. Asani, “On Puralism, Intolerance, and the Quran” (www.twf.org/Library/Pluralism.html).

³⁰ William C. Chittick, “The Ambiguity of the Qur'anic Command,” in *Between Heaven and Hell: Islam Salvation, and the Fate of Others*, Mohammad Hassan Khalil (ed.) (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 77.

pluralist side are two remarkable verses that the Qur’ān underscores through their near repetition:

Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans—whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve. [2:62]

Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Sabeans, and the Christians—whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness, no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve. [5:69]

The bare meaning of these verses has rarely been allowed to stand unchallenged in the *tafsīr* tradition, as Mahmoud Ayoub has noted in his summary of the tradition in its treatment of 2:62:

Commentators have differed concerning the intent of this verse and reason for its revelation. The verse is one of many general statements in the Qur’an in which faith is raised above any religious or ethnic identity. Commentators have, however, sought to limit its universal application in several ways. Four main approaches may be distinguished. The first was to declare the verse abrogated and hence inapplicable. The second was to limit the application of the verse by assigning the reason for its revelation to a specific group of people. The third approach has been to limit the verse to a strictly legalistic interpretation, and the fourth has been to accept the universality of the verse until the coming of Islam, but thereafter to limit its applicability only to those who hold the faith of Islam.³¹

The late Fazlur Rahman, remarking upon the traditional commentaries on 2:62 and 5:69, will have none of it:

In both these verses, the vast majority of Muslim commentators exercise themselves fruitlessly to avoid having to admit the obvious meaning: that those—from any section of humankind—who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds are saved. They either say that by Jews, Christians, and Sabeans here are meant those who have actually become “Muslims”—which interpretation is clearly belied by the fact that “Muslims” constitute only the first of the four groups of “those who believe”—or that they were those good Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans who lived before the advent of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)—which is an even worse *tour de force*.³²

³¹ Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters*, Vol. I, p. 110.

³² Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, 2nd Ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 115.

Ayoub, in another context, expresses a view complementing that of Rahman's, including the key point that the interpretative tradition generally regards the abrogation of one Qur'ānic verse by another to be non-admissible in the case of non-legislative, purely narrative verses such as 2:62 and 5:69, a point echoed in *The Study Quran* as well:

This verse [the near repetition of 2:62 and 5:69] is of decisive importance for several reasons. First, it occurs twice in the Qur'an at the beginning and near the end of the Prophet's career in Madīnah, as Surah 2 was the first major sūrah to be revealed in Madīnah and Surah 5 was revealed before Surah 9, which was the last major sūrah sent down to the Prophet. It must therefore be conclusively argued that this verse could not be abrogated, as many classical and modern jurists and Qur'an commentators have held. This is because abrogation applies only to legislative verses and this is a narrative verse.³³

In contrast to the verses considered above, two key verses typically advanced in favor of an exclusivist position are:

Truly the religion in the sight of God is submission. [3:19]

Whosoever seeks a religion other than submission, it shall not be accepted of him, and in the Hereafter he shall be among the losers. [3:85]

Here, the word translated as “submission” by the editors of *The Study Quran* is, of course, *islām*. This word may certainly be understood in a reified sense as referring specifically to the particular religion practiced by the followers of Muhammad, as indeed another verse—part of the Prophet's final sermon during his Farewell Pilgrimage and thus one of the last verses to have been revealed—would suggest:

This day I have perfected for you your religion, and completed My Blessing upon you, and have approved for you as religion, Submission (Islām). [5:3]

The interesting choice of the editors of *The Study Quran* to capitalize “Submission” here—the only place where it so appears—is telling in this regard. An exclusivist reader would object that the consistent translation of *islām* as “submission”, rather than “Islam”—taken as the specific religion—is misleading, if not in fact deceptive, and serves only to blunt the clear exclusivist stance evident in the Qur'ānic Arabic. In

³³ Mahmoud Ayoub, “Religious Pluralism and the Qur'an” (<http://iiit.org/Research/Scholars/SummerInstitute/TableofContents/ReligiousPluralismAndTheQuran/tabid/244/Default.aspx>).

fact, such is far from the case, and for several reasons, as the commentary on these verses in *The Study Quran* makes clear, for if *islām* may justifiably be understood in a reified sense as “Islam”, it may by no means be understood *exclusively* as such.

It should be noted that the choice of translation of *islām* by the editors is neither novel nor eccentric, but is in fact well represented among other leading translations. Thus, the recent and esteemed translation by Muhammad Abdel Haleem similarly translates—in broad accord with such earlier translations as those of Marmaduke Pickthall, Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Asad—the three verses in question as:

True Religion, in God’s eyes, is *islam*: [devotion to Him alone]. [3:19]

If anyone seeks a religion other than [*islam*] complete devotion to God, it will not be accepted from him: he will be one of the losers in the Hereafter. [3:85]

Today I have perfected your religion for you, completed My blessing upon you, and chosen as your religion *islam*: [total devotion to God]. [5:3]

Such an understanding, unsurprisingly, runs against the main body of the *tafsīr* tradition, as Ayoub has noted in his summary of the tradition in its treatment of 3:85:

Commentators have generally taken this verse literally. For early commentators, the word *islām* here refers to ritualistic or juristic observance and identity. Later and contemporary thinkers have used the verse to argue for the finality and supersession of Islam over all other religions.³⁴

Abdel Haleem has clarified his choice of translation as follows:

One further cause for misinterpretation is the lack of awareness of the different meanings of a given term in different contexts... Thus, for example, in Dawood’s translation: ‘He that chooses a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted of him and in the world to come, he will be one of the lost’ (3:85), it has to be borne in mind that the word *islam* in the Arabic of the Qur’an means complete devotion/submission to God, unmixed with worship of any other. All earlier prophets are thus described by the Qur’an as *muslim*. Those who read this word *islam* in the sense of the religion of the Prophet Muhammad will set up a barrier, illegitimately based on this verse, between Islam and other monotheistic religions.³⁵

³⁴ Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters*, Vol. II, p. 241.

³⁵ M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *the Qur’an, A New Translation*, p. xxiv.

To expand upon Abdel Haleem’s point, figures predating Muhammad that the Qur’ān specifically refers to as *muslim* include Abraham (2:128, 2:132, 3:67), Ishmael (2:128), Jacob (2:132), Noah (10:72), the apostles of Christ (3:52, 5:111) and the sorcerers of Pharaoh (7:126). Such “submitters”, needless to say, cannot be understood as having followed the specific guidance vouchsafed to the Prophet. The ransom of the Qur’ānic assimilation of such pre-Muhammadan figures as *muslim* is precisely that *islām* cannot, on pain of contradiction, itself be assimilated to the religion of Islam proper.

The late Toshiko Izutsu, a leading expert in Qur’ānic semantics, has similarly noted:

But by far the most important of all the concepts belonging in this class is the concept of *islām* itself, not, of course, in the sense of the historical, objective, religious culture known as Islam—Islam as a result of the process of ‘reification’, to use the terminology of Dr. Wilfred Cantwell Smith—but *islām* in the original sense of the determined self-submission, self-surrendering to the Divine Will, i.e., a decisive step taken by each individual person, as his own inner personal and existential problem, towards resigning his soul to God.³⁶

The same point has been made by the late Muhammad Asad, a leading translator of the Qur’ān who had studied the linguistic nuances of Arabic first-hand for many years with the Arab Bedouin:

Throughout this work, I have translated the terms *muslim* and *islām* in accordance with their original connotations, namely, “one who surrenders [or “has surrendered”] himself to God”, and “man’s self-surrender to God”... It should be borne in mind that the “institutionalized” use of these terms—that is, their exclusive application to the followers of the Prophet Muhammad—represents a definitely post-Qur’ānic development and, hence, must be avoided in a translation of the Qur’ān.³⁷

Finally, Mohammad Hashim Kamali, bringing in additional Qur’ānic testimony, has similarly argued:

Thus the two verses: “Verily the religion with God is Islam—*inna ‘l-dīn ‘ind Allāh al-Islām*” (3:19); and “Who seeks other than Islam as a religion, it will not be accepted from him—*wa man yabtaghi ghayr al-Islām dinan fa-lan*

³⁶ Toshiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran* (North Stratford, NH: Ayer Company Publishers, 1995), p.199.

³⁷ Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur’ān* (Bristol, UK: The Book Foundation, 2003), pp.1011-12, n.17.

yuqbal minbu” (3:85)—are cited as incontrovertible evidence that only those who follow Islam shall be saved. *Islām* is in one sense the exclusive name for the religion revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad. But *Islām* is also the primal religion of submission preached by Adam to all his posterity, who accepted God as their Lord, as in the divine invocation: *alastu bi rabbikum? Qālū balā sbabidnā* (Am I not your Lord? They said: Yes, we do testify—7:172). All humankind then, before time began, professed Islam in its widest sense of *submission*. Understood in this way, the two verses (3:19 and 3:85) recognise the validity of every religion that entails submission to the divine will. Al-Qaraḍāwī has also made a point to say that even if the orthodox exegesis of the two verses under review is given preference, they still do not deny the truth of other religions. They merely entitle the Muslims, as indeed the followers of other faiths, to hold on to their own religion.³⁸

If we consider 5:69 and 3:85 conjointly as most fully emblematic of the pluralist and exclusivist positions under discussion, we may see that any claim for the abrogation or overriding of 5:69 by 3:85—as is common in the *tafsīr* literature—fails, and for no fewer than five reasons. First, given that 5:69 belongs to one of the last revealed *sūrah*s, there is little reason to think that 3:85 postdates 5:69 and much reason to think precisely the reverse—in contrast, 5:3 does in all likelihood postdate 5:69, but is not in itself an exclusionary statement. Second, even if 3:85 were to postdate 5:69, there is no good reason to think abrogation of the latter by the former is even applicable, given that both are non-legislative. Third, *islām* in 3:85 cannot be assimilated to ‘Islam’ proper—and without such a justified assimilation, the verse simply lacks the exclusionary ‘force’ imputed to it—as its close cognate *muslim* is quite deliberately *not* assimilated by the Qur’ān to ‘Muslim’ proper. Fourth, *islām* in 3:85 cannot be assimilated to ‘Islam’ proper as this is inconsistent with the early semantic meaning of the word as it appears in the Qur’ān and as it was understood by the native Arab contemporaries of the Prophet. Fifth, the contextualization of 3:85 by the verse immediately preceding it, which strongly emphasizes the continuity between the message vouchsafed to the Prophet and the universality of revelation, confirms that *islām* in 3:85 must be taken in a universalised sense as devoted submission to God:

Say, “We believe in God and what has been sent down upon us, and in what was sent down upon Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in

³⁸ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, “Diversity and Pluralism: A Qur’ānic Perspective,” *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 1(1) (October 2009), pp.36-7.

what Moses, Jesus, and the prophets were given from their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and unto Him we submit.” [3:84]

There remains the consideration that the Qur’ān’s pluralist verses are, if not ‘overridden’, then at least ‘overwhelmed’ by its exclusivist ones. Several points should be noted. First, there are certainly Qur’ānic verses—as an exclusivist reader would be quick to remind—that are, at the very least, deeply critical of other religions—this should be acknowledged. Second, the Qur’ān’s pluralist verses persist and pertain regardless of the proportionality of exclusivist to pluralist verses—and it is by no means overwhelming or even dominant on the exclusivist side. Even if there were only a *single* pluralist verse and a multitude of exclusionary verses, this would in no way render the message of Qur’ān wholly exclusionary. There is an inescapable nuance and ambiguity in the Qur’ānic treatment of other religions that resists collapse to a single, reified position. Third, the presence of Qur’ānic verses deeply critical of other religions may be a ‘problem’ for a certain type of pluralist reader, but is not a problem for a reader grounded in the ‘pluralism’ of the Traditionalist School precisely because the assertion of the Islamic tradition—an assertion that certainly finds its own grounding in part in the Qur’ān—to be the ‘best’ or ‘only valid’ religion is recognized as a legitimate need. In contrast, the presence of even a *single* Qur’ānic verse clearly open to a plurality of religious traditions is a disaster for an exclusivist reader, who—unable to accommodate it to his position—must undermine, marginalize or dismiss it as best he can—and such is precisely what is on display in much of the *tafsīr* literature addressing such verses.

Let me conclude with a final reflection. Although not broadly recognized, both the post-Christian West and the contemporary Islamic world suffer from a crisis of tolerance.³⁹ In the West, this crisis is expressed as an unprincipled excess that has collapsed to a thoroughgoing relativism increasingly indistinguishable from moral nihilism. All must be tolerated, with the exception of intolerance, which must be rooted out and mercilessly punished—the performative contradiction, of course, goes unnoticed. In the Middle East, this crisis is expressed as a catastrophic loss, such that a tradition notable for broad historical toleration—not only

³⁹ See, for instance, James S. Cutsinger, “Corruptio Optimi Pessima” (www.cutsinger.net/blog/?p=190).

between intra-religious divisions such as Sunni and Shia but also between Muslims and minority communities such as Christians and Jews—is wracked in part with a hyper-rigorism prone to *takfīrī* accusativeness and terroristic outrage. Yet the Western appeal for Muslim polities to embrace pluralism has often seemed suspect, as yet another attempt by the West to reform the Muslim world in its image. Such suspicion is frequently well founded, for there is a vast distinction in principle between what might be termed a ‘pluralism from below’ and a ‘pluralism from above’. A ‘pluralism from below’ is one that ultimately rejects transcendent truth claims—characteristic of the Enlightenment heritage of the West—in the name of social harmony. A ‘pluralism from above’ is one that recognizes the possibility of a pluralistic vision *in light of* transcendent truth claims. It is precisely this latter kind of pluralism that is the concern of the Traditionalist School, but whether one subscribes to that perspective or not in this present context is very much besides the point, for the Qur’ān *itself* provides an array of scriptural resources and grounds for the forwarding of such a ‘pluralism from above’ should Muslims choose to recognize it.

It is often forgotten just how *unusual* a scripture the Qur’ān is when it comes to matters of pluralism. As the late Isma’il al-Faruqi was to observe:

In this, Islam is unique. For no religion in the world has yet made belief in the truth of other religions a necessary condition of its own faith and witness.⁴⁰

Even more pointedly, Mahmoud Ayoub has noted:

Among all the scriptures of the theistic religions the Qur’an is unique in that it sets its worldview within the context of divine Oneness and human diversity, including the plurality of religions. Furthermore, it regards religious diversity as one of the signs (*ayat*) of God, second in importance to the “creation of the heavens and earth.” [30:22]⁴¹

Conclusion

A short time after receiving *The Study Quran*, I took the opportunity to write Dr. Nasr a brief note of congratulations in which I commented

⁴⁰ Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi, “Towards a Critical World Theology,” in *Towards Islamization of Disciplines*, International Institute of Islamic Thought (ed.) (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1989), p.436.

⁴¹ Mahmoud Ayoub, “Religious Pluralism and the Qur’an”.

that, “I used to consider *Knowledge and the Sacred* your *magnum opus*. No longer.” Further time and consideration have only served to more fully confirm this early impression. The work is a triumph, in respect of which he, its editors and contributors should be justly proud and its readers deeply grateful.