

Rituals, Ideals, and Reading the Qur'an

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Abstract

This article discusses the role of the Qur'anic text in a Muslim's life and why it should be viewed as a non-linear text designed to guide humanity, rather than as the foundation for a political order or a set of iron-clad laws for ruling a society.

Introduction

As Muslims, we revere the Qur'an as an object, allotting it pride of place in our homes, treating it with care, keeping it bound nicely (if not ornamentally), and using it as a "trump card" to win arguments with our Muslim friends. We seem, however, less able or willing to accord it the respect it deserves as a text. To suggest that most Muslims do not treat the text with respect seems to fly in the face of many believers' experience, for do we not take its verses and make amulets out of them, place them around our homes and other buildings, and incorporate them in our prayers? Surely, this suggests that Muslims do respect the Qur'anic text. By "respecting the text," I mean undertaking a reading critically shaped by our awareness of God as All-Powerful and All-Knowing, whose effects can be gleaned in the Qur'anic language like footprints in the snow, but whose infinite majesty invariably escapes our limited comprehension. In other words, respecting the Qur'an means recognizing the nature of its textuality, recognizing the way it is written.

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Muslims Believe that the Qur'an is the Record of What God Said to the Prophet (pbuh)

For Muslims, reading the Qur'an has a unique significance that it cannot have for non-Muslims, be they politicians, columnists, polemicists doubling as scholars, or even serious scholars. I would argue that for non-Muslims, the Qur'an's significance is secondary, in that its importance is derived from the value that Muslims place on it. While anyone can have an opinion about the Qur'an, it is the Muslims' opinion that is of primary importance, for, as a collective body, Muslims comprise its main stakeholders. Others may hold opinions that could influence Muslim opinion, but they have no direct access to the Qur'an's significance. This has to be stated forcefully, since there is a tendency among western Orientalists and polemicists to claim some sort of expertise in the field of Qur'anic studies, which is viewed as superseding the understanding of inexpert or untutored Muslims. This claim of expertise, which is reinforced by the West's supremacist discourse, has to be rejected, for what matters is how Muslims read the Qur'an, for only Muslims believe that the Qur'an truly matters.¹ In what follows, I confine my remarks to the relationship between Muslims and the Qur'an.

At the heart of the Qur'an-ummah nexus is a fundamental tension arising from the attempts of historically located finite beings to comprehend the transcendental Infinite. The major challenge in any reading of the Qur'an goes beyond such linguistic difficulties as the divergence between the Arabic of the prophetic era and of the contemporary era or the challenge of translating Arabic into other contemporary languages. The major challenge is philosophical and has to do with how we read the Qur'an with respect to the power of its revelation. In other words, what kind of text is the Qur'an?

Different texts imply different types of reading strategies. We do not read a shopping list the same way we read a poem, or the manual that tells us how to program our car's navigation system the same way we read a novel. The Qur'an is not like the New Testament, the first four books of which can be described without too much difficulty as a biography of Jesus as told by four different writers. It is true that the Qur'an has elements of various prophets' biographies (e.g., Moses and Joseph), but providing such information is not its main function. Nor is the Qur'an simply a set of instructions, although it contains such elements.² The Qur'an is not organized in a narrative or a chronological form, for its verses are not

patterned in terms of length, while the *surahs* eschew a straightforward linearity.

Reading the Qur'an means reading a non-linear text, for unlike most texts, it is not structured in linear sequences. We cannot use all of a language's words at once, for their sequencing structures our meaning. Given that sentences are organized linearly, reading a non-linear text is not an easy task. Of course, Muslims are helped in this endeavor by the way the Qur'an asserts its role as a guide accessible to all those who wish to be guided. Thus, there is a suggestion that those who seek guidance from the Qur'an will find it, despite the complexities of its textuality, and will succeed in unveiling its verses' meaning. I will return to this point a little later. Now, I turn to the way Muslims want to use the Qur'an as the foundation for a political order, an amalgam of ideas that has found popular expression in the slogan "the Qur'an is our constitution." How can the Qur'an be read as the source of a constitutional order?

It is estimated that out of the Qur'an's 6,238 verses, at least 228 of them refer to public affairs and the regulation of socioeconomic, and legal relations.³ This suggests that the Qur'an clearly presents itself as a text that cannot be contained within the confines of the post-Enlightenment (western) Christian definition of a distinct religious sphere.⁴ This seems to allow Muslims to use the Qur'an to found a constitution and, of course, this is what many Muslims attempt to do. For example, recently a group of Muslims in the United States (viz., the Progressive Muslim Union) drafted an ideal Islamic constitution.⁵ Its various clauses are introduced with a citation from the Qur'an, which is supposed to justify the document's relevant clause. Thus, Qur'anic citations serve as prefixes to the clauses of a document that bears a strong (structural) resemblance to the American constitution (e.g., similar vocabulary and similar notions of division of powers). More literal-minded Muslims may exclaim that this is only to be expected from a group calling itself Progressive Muslims; however, precisely the same strategy is followed by Hizb ut-Tahrir.⁶ Even those Muslims who have less overtly political concerns use this strategy of citation to buttress their viewpoints.

There are two difficulties with following this strategy that I would like to consider. First, there is the common problem of selecting the various citations. Second, there is the problem of interpretation. To be fair, astute readers of the Qur'an are aware of these problems. Their solution to these problems is to make an important distinction between the Qur'an as divine and immutable, and its reading as historically conditioned and mundane (e.g.,

Asma Barlas and Tariq Ramadan).⁷ This is a fairly standard way of proceeding, and there is nothing wrong with it. However, a third and less obvious difficulty is of more critical importance and has to do with the differences between the Qur'an and legal or constitutional texts.

Legal codes have to be structured in particular ways and constructed in a linear fashion. One of the most common reading strategies is to discover the author's intention, for legal disputes often entail deciphering the legislators' intention in promulgating a particular law. As Farid Esack points out, this is very difficult to do when the author is Divine, All-Knowing, and All-Mighty.⁸ We cannot access the "mind" of God, and attempts to transcend our fundamental limitations lead to what might be best described as "spiritual positivism,"⁹ namely, the attempt to use scientific discourse to compensate for our limited ability to understand the "mind" of the Divine; thus, for example, concluding that pork and alcohol are forbidden to Muslims for health reasons. In other words, lacking access to God's "mind" causes us to resort to using a human tool (science) to reveal the divine will.

Superficially, this seems like an attempt to make science serve God. However, in reality it entails privileging the scientific discourse over Revelation, thus leading to the divinization of science. Since it makes the logic of God equivalent to the findings of science itself, God becomes the object of scientific laws uncovered by human minds. Such an approach confuses scientific descriptions of the universe with the reality of the universe itself. This leads to an epistemological fallacy in which scientific descriptions of creation are taken as creation itself or, otherwise stated, scientific descriptions of reality are considered to be reality itself. (For example, some commentators see the one electron of the hydrogen atom as a confirmation of *tawhid* [unity]. Of course, this example made more sense when science did not consider that there was anything smaller. Clearly, in a world of quarks and strange attractors, it becomes more difficult to sustain the "one electron one God" view.)

The positivist strategy toward knowing God is deeply flawed, both in epistemological terms (there is no reason to assume that scientific descriptions are more accurate in themselves than other kinds of descriptions [e.g., a flower described by a biologist is not more of a flower than one described by a poet, given that the descriptions serve different purposes]) and in Muslim theological terms (by making the Divine secondary to science, which is a human endeavor, one closes the gap between the human and the Divine, which leads to diminishing the Divine to the level of the

human). Positivist readings of the Qur'an cannot help us know the "mind" of God or assist in any attempt to construct a legal framework from the Qur'an.

Muslims Believe that the Prophet (pbuh) Was Both Ontologically and Epistemologically Privileged

Given that the Prophet's knowledge was unique and privileged, his conduct fleshes out some of the Qur'an's concepts and his "operationalization" is both authoritative and absolute. The record of this "operationalization," however, presents a number of difficulties. First, there are empirical problems regarding the authenticity of the Hadith and the Sunnah, problems that cannot simply be resolved by an act of faith that extends the Prophet's (pbuh) epistemological privilege to those scholars who compiled the Hadith. Despite their skill in scholarship and their rigorous methodology, it is naïve to dismiss the possibility that unauthentic hadiths still exist. This can only be done by degrading the Prophet's (pbuh) exceptional status, since it entails an admission that Qur'anic scholars attained such high levels of excellence that they could not make mistakes and, instead, somehow were able to partake of his ontological privilege. In other words, their exceptional caliber instilled in them an almost Prophet-like understanding of the Qur'an's substance. Such conclusions would be difficult to maintain while accepting the Prophet's centrality to Islam.

Second, given that the Prophet lived in a particular historical context, we do not know whether, for example, he would have considered text messaging as a permissible way of divorce. In the absence of a direct prophetic example, Muslims have to rely on various processes of reasoning to work out the significance of his example in different historical contexts. This expansion is an intellectual activity subject to all the vulnerabilities of any human action, something that most Qur'anic commentators accepted long ago.

The difficulty, of course, arises from our construction of the process of reasoning. Is reason historically constructed or is it permanent? If one believes that reasoning is permanent, then one concludes that the techniques of interpretation developed by Qur'anic scholars are based on permanent categories that cannot be succeeded by alternative strategies or concepts. In western thought, reason became Reason during the Enlightenment with the abandonment of a God-centered universe. The Enlightenment spawned the cult of Reason as a universal and changeless attribute that was manifest in the thoughts and actions of educated and socially privileged European men,

while the thoughts and actions of non-Europeans, women, and the dispossessed came to be viewed, antithetically, as unreasonable or irrational.

This belief in Reason is undermined by history. One does not have to look very far or deep to see how different communities at different times have constructed what they consider to be reason. For example, the idea that white people of European descent were biologically superior to all other people was considered reasonable (at least by white Europeans until very recently). If one accepts that reason is a path that different communities adopt at different times to make sense of their world, then one cannot sustain the idea of one Reason that is universally valid. This suggests that while techniques formulated by the classical Hadith scholars reflected their concerns, those techniques should not be confused with the issue of interpretation itself. Other techniques reflecting the concerns of the Muslim ummah at present may yield different emphases, different insights.¹⁰

The space between the Qur'an's text and the reconstruction of its meaning by Muslims cannot be closed without extending the epistemological privilege of the Prophet to such scholars as al-Bukhari or to Reason itself. Such expansion has the necessary effect of reducing the Prophet's status so that his unique role can be filled by other humans or by abstracted techniques. I would suggest that Muslims must be wary of such a course of action, for the space between reading and understanding the Qur'an cannot be closed. We cannot say that our interior mental state is the same as that of the Qur'an's author. Therefore, it follows that we can never be absolutely sure that our interpretations of the Qur'an are correct.

In the absence of such certainty, we have to rely on the various conventions designed to help us bridge the gap between reading and understanding the Qur'an. Conventions, however, are no more successful in accessing the "mind" of God than are our interpretive techniques. For instance, they cannot tell us if we understand the Qur'an because we understand what God "intended."¹¹ All they can tell us is what a particular understanding means now in the context of the present-day Muslim ummah. Rather like the use of language, we say that someone has understood an expression if he or she uses it properly. Conventions provide guidance as to what is correct or incorrect. So we learn how to pray and behave by being part of the community, which has arrived at certain agreements about what constitutes a "proper" understanding of the Qur'an. Hence the centrality of the Qur'an-ummah nexus.

These conventions, however, are the result of historical compromises and struggles. What is conventional today once might have been an issue

of great uncertainty and disagreement. Agreements about the Qur'an's interpretation rely on the fact that human beings are historically situated creatures.

The historical and contextual nature of interpreting the Qur'an introduces a tension within the Qur'an-ummah nexus between the transcendental and the historical. For the Qur'an transcends and overcomes all attempts at limiting and mastering it within a specific historical frame. Future generations of Muslims may question or reject our understanding, because its divine nature points to its characterization as a text that cannot be particularized. The ummah's historical and finite nature, as well as its humanness, limits the possibility of establishing conventions that can master historical development.

In this field between the transcendental text and its historical community of readers, it is possible to isolate two different methods of trying to settle the tension. The first tendency seeks to extend the historical to claim the transcendental; in other words, it argues for the historical nature of the Qur'an itself.¹² According to this approach, the Qur'an is a text of its time and therefore occurs in history. As such, it can be said to simply reflect the circumstances of its revelation. The second strategy is to expand the transcendental, to argue that Revelation does not simply occur in human history, but that it consumes it. The historical is denied in the name of the transcendental, and so human understanding becomes trans-historical. This approach suggests that Revelation and its meaning are outside history and, therefore, not specific to any time or place, and that the Qur'an reveals universal systems of knowledge that are not reducible to any particular moment.

What both of these approaches have in common is an attempt to settle the tension between the Qur'an-ummah nexus by a process of decontestation. Decontestation is defined as referring to words and concepts whose meaning is no longer the subject of struggle or conflict. It also refers to the distribution of names and functions that are settled and generally accepted.¹³ Decontesting the Qur'an would make it transparent. This seems to be a good thing, since most Muslims would welcome a situation in which its meaning was no longer subject to differing interpretations, but rather the source of unity. Many Muslims want the Qur'an to provide a rock-like foundation, while others want to see in it the possibility of iron-like laws that cannot be twisted or bent by unscrupulous men (alas, mainly men). Time, however, can cause iron to rust and even the hardest of rocks to turn to dust.

The idea that the Qur'an can provide the "absolute reference frame" for Muslims misses the complexity of the relationship between Muslims and the

Qur'an.¹⁴ A reference book is only possible when the meaning of its core items has been consolidated and accepted. The Qur'an cannot be the final arbiter in a dispute, even though Muslims who invoke its verses seem to be doing just that. But resorting to Qur'anic quotations is not a means of determining the Qur'an's voice; rather, it is the process by which Muslim communities find in its echoes their own voice. Given this, the Qur'an provides a common language by which Muslims can relate and disagree, for it binds the ummah by providing it with a common currency that transcends the local and the immediate. Thus it should not be surprising that some of the most controversial issues within Muslim communities are disputed by various sides armed with their own interpretations of the Qur'an.¹⁵

Decontesting the Qur'an implies depoliticizing it, which, in turn, presents the possibility of a depoliticized Islam. The vision of a depoliticized Islam has a great appeal for many Muslims as well as Islamophobes (Muslim and non-Muslim). Most Muslims who want to decontest it are guided by the best of motives and the noblest of concerns, for they think that doing so will result in a unified ummah organized around an agreed-upon vision of Islam based on unanimity regarding its interpretation. This would provide the ummah with a mechanism for resolving conflicts and preserving unity, since any dispute could be settled simply by referring to the Qur'an.

However, this would make the Qur'an no more than a collection of platitudes and clichés. Since all Muslims would agree on all that the Qur'an says and means, we would find ourselves in a situation in which the Qur'an ceases to be a subject of reflection or meditation and is reduced to a mere bundle of maxims that we could utilize without having to engage with its textual richness and profundity or with the extent of its impact upon our existence. It would simply become the agglomeration of common sense possessed by most communities – a set of assumptions and values that people resort to rather mechanistically without probing their deeper significance. Therefore, transforming the Qur'an into a collection of ready-made instant *bon mots* or slogans would mean that while it gained in accessibility and intelligibility, it would lose its power to challenge the current set of received ideas and practices. Decontestation opens the path toward its banalization and turning Islam into a form of ancestor worship, since the Qur'an's ability to guide the ummah depends upon its capacity to remain fresh; not to become a set of platitudes, but to remain full of meaning and, therefore, significant.

The decontestation of the Qur'an also appeals to many Islamophobes, since it promises the depoliticization of Islam. That is, Islam will be confined

to specific arenas of life concentrated around “rites of passage” so that it does not interfere in the processes by which Muslims conduct themselves in relation to other people. A depoliticized Qur’an is a Qur’an that has lost its power to move its readers and one that will be absorbed by the prevailing social norms. Any text by definition, a text that is laid down and absorbed within a society is, in turn, constructed through the exercise of power. This is another way of saying that given the finitude of humans, and given that we cannot be all things at all times, we have to make decisions. Therefore, each decision involves repressing other possibilities – the paths not taken.¹⁶ The foundation of any social order is ultimately external to that order. (An illustration of this can be seen when the Prophet [pbuh] and his Companions, none of whom were from Madinah, arrived in that city to establish the first Muslim community.) Thus, a society cannot be equivalent to the process of its formation. If that were the case, this formation would be an internal moment in the working of the social logic and instead of a foundation.

The exercise of power produces the effect of society.¹⁷ Society then can be understood as a set of routinized social relations whose contingent nature is concealed. The primacy of the political pertains to its position as the foundation of all social relations, for it is at the moment of the political that power can be represented. And, it is the moment of the political that allows us to see that the way things have been is not the way they need to be. Power is impossible to represent once it has successfully constituted a social order. This is Lukes’ third view of power, which says that those subjected to power act in a way that requires neither coercion nor the threat of coercion.¹⁸ As a result, within the dominance of what are broadly called neo-liberal conventions, such moments of power disappear into the “free-will” of autonomous subjects making their own choices. The absolute exercise of power will absolutely constitute a social order in which its exercise can no longer be represented.¹⁹

To be able to criticize any specific form of how this power is exercised, the possibility of being able to stand outside its exercise and its effects must exist. Within traditional political thought, both Islamicate and western, truth has often been seen as being external to power, so it can speak to – and limit – power’s and limit its corruption and excesses.²⁰ If truth, however, is itself an effect of power, it cannot readily perform that function. Hence, many of the western plutocracies, academics, writers, and cultural entrepreneurs have, with few notable exceptions, become supporters of the “war on terror.” Even Muslim organizations have felt the need to send letters to mosques warning of them of associating with “terrorism” – all these interventions

based on the belief that terrorism is an empirical category rather than a polemical term. Thus, terrorism is decontested and made a purely descriptive term, rather than a contested term whose use is highly charged.²¹

Muslims Read the Qur'an To Commune with the Divine²²

Attempts to use the Qur'an as means of guaranteeing the polity's Islamic nature is itself a sign of the Muslims' loss of self-confidence, for doing so suggests that the political order's Islamic character can be demonstrated only by its adherence to the Qur'an. Such a view fails to understand that identity is the outcome of a system of differences; in other words, the nature of an Islamic order will be known by what it rejects.

The Qur'an-ummah nexus has to be preserved in the form in which the Qur'an is recognized as a horizon toward which the ummah has to move. This means that it cannot be absorbed into the ummah or become the centerpiece of an Islamic constitutional order in which selected verses are used as pillars to support what purports to be an Islamic order. Such an edifice threatens the integrity of the Qur'an by making some verses superior to others by providing them with legally enforceable prerogatives and thus *de facto* undermining the totality of the Qur'an. There is a need for a set of standards that will allow us to judge whether the legal order itself is just, a standard that stands outside the legal framework itself so that the legal framework can be subjected to its guidance. The Qur'an cannot be turned into a law, for it has to remain above the law in order to ensure that the law itself continues to be just. In short, there must be a way to judge any law so that the law will not become just another tool in tyranny's armory.

In fact, the Qur'an does provide a criterion by which the law can be judged and proclaimed tyrannical. This, in fact, is what Muslims have always done. They can view concrete manifestations of polities that claim to be Islamic as lacking in relation to the Qur'anic criteria of what it means to be Islamic. And so they are happy to accept that Islamic governments composed of fallible humans (alas, usually men) can be judged and found wanting in relation to the vision of justice articulated by the totality of the Qur'an.

The early Islamic state had no problem in using administrative techniques, personnel, and other resources from previous political entities (principally the Persians and the Byzantines). It could do this in the context of a "100-year jihad" that brought regions as far flung as Spain and Sind under

Muslim dominion.²³ The confrontation between the Muslim empire and its enemies guaranteed the Islamic identity of the semantic order founded by the revelation bestowed upon the Prophet (pbuh).

The distinction between Muslims and anti-Muslims has to be a political one. It has to have meaning for life itself, and cannot simply be a distinction without substantive qualities. A distinction that is banal is rather like the distinction between Coke and Pepsi. To choose Islam, again and again, in the face of both biographical and sociological challenges and temptations can only have meaning if the choice matters beyond cultivating a prepackaged lifestyle. This is what I understand to be meant by the term *existential*: The Qur'an, at its most powerful, offers its readers an existential challenge. It makes them think about the manner and direction of their lives and how they can aspire toward being rightly guided. At this level, the glory of the entire Qur'an comes into play; all its verses produce an effect upon the believers that cannot simply be reduced to the linearity of its writing, the content of its stories, or the authority of its injunctions, for the Qur'an rises above these moments and thereby provides a means of accessing the transcendental.

So, Muslims read the Qur'an for guidance and as substance for meditation. But most of all, they read it to feel the imprint of the Divine. Thus, choosing to submit to Islam is invested with purpose; it changes the way in which we Muslims conduct ourselves and makes our actions resonate as part of a wider fabric. Most importantly, however, it affects the way in which we know how to become Muslim. One can see how deep this impression can be when looking at some of the most anti-Muslim Muslims who still cannot escape the way in which Islam marks them even at the superficial level of their names. Many Muslims want the Qur'an to provide a rock-like foundation; some want to see in it the possibility of iron-like laws that cannot be twisted or bent by unscrupulous people. But iron and rock are still subject to decay over time. Perhaps it is more useful to see in the Qur'an a promise, the strength of which comes not from its intrinsic nature, but rather from the nature of the relationship between the parties.

One way of thinking of the ummah is to see it as an interpretive community based around the Qur'an. It is this relationship between the ummah and the Qur'an that helps to potentially transform Muslim readings of the Qur'an into social acts.²⁴

Thus it should not be surprising that some of the most controversial issues within Muslim communities are disputed by groups using their own

interpretations of the Qur'an. Atomistic readings of the Qur'an, in which individual Muslims pluck a particular verse because it speaks to them at that moment is fine for those particular individuals, since the purpose of such selections is not to find a master metaphor that renders the rest of Qur'an intelligible, but simply to find in a particular verse something that resonates with their current circumstances. Such individual recitations do not have the same impact as attempts to select specific verses for decontesting the Qur'an.

Conclusion

I have suggested that the Qur'an is too important for the ummah to be reduced to a banner that masks our unwillingness or incapacity to project our Muslim identity into the future. Perhaps it is more useful to see in the Qur'an a promise, the strength of which comes not from its intrinsic nature, but rather from the nature of the relationship between the parties. The Qur'an can give direction, solace, and hope, but it cannot substitute for the struggle to stake out a distinct Muslim presence in the world. This allows the Qur'an to be a source of prayer, reflection, and mediation; a criterion of good and evil; and "a demand for something better." I would like to suggest that we Muslims reject the short-term and easy comfort of decontesting the relationship between the Qur'an and the ummah in order to allow the Qur'an to play its unique role in our lives, a role for which no legal code or institutional settlement can be a substitute.

Endnotes

1. The idea that expert non-Muslim scholarly knowledge of the Qur'an can trump Muslim understanding is one of the staples of Orientalism. A useful discussion of the relationship between Muslims and Islamicate heritage and non-Muslim experts can be found in Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 224-25. For a general critique of Orientalism, see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).
2. Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1999), 32. (reprint.)
3. Tariq Ramadan, *Islam, the West, and the Challenges of Modernity* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 2001), 13-14.
4. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27-30.

5. "The Natural Republic": A working model of the Islamic Constitution in Action. www.ProgressiveMuslims.Org. I would like thank Abdulkarim Vakil for alerting me to this document and the subsequent discussion about the methodology used to produce it.
6. See Taqiuddin an-Nabahani/Hizb ut Tahrir, *The Islamic State* (London: Khalifah Publications, n.d.).
7. Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 32-37. Ramadan, *Islam*, 14.
8. Farid Esack, *Qur'an Liberation, and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1977), 73-75.
9. I was introduced to this felicitous expression by Mohammed Siddique Seddon.
10. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) for a critique of the trans-historical notion of Reason, or John Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age* (London: Routledge, 1995) for a description of the Enlightenment project and its vision of universal Reason.
11. Of course, any kind of anthropomorphic expression that calls upon God to act has to be understood as a metaphor, since it is difficult to think of how the Supreme Being, who knows all, can be described in such human terms as "acting" or "intending." Surely, the All-Powerful, All-Knowing, and Infinite can only "be."
12. In *Qur'an Liberation, and Pluralism* (p. 53), Esack suggests that the Qur'an is primarily addressed to the people of Hejaz living during the Prophet's time.
13. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
14. Zia Sardar, *The Future of Muslim Civilization* (London: Mansel, 1980).
15. See Khalid Blankinship. *The End of the Jihad State* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994) for explanation of this phenomena.
16. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 18.
17. *Ibid.*, 17
18. Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).
19. Ernesto Laclau and Lilian Zac, "Minding the Gaps: The Subject of Politics," in *The Making of Political Identities*, ed. Ernesto Laclau (London: Verso, 1994).
20. *Islamicate* is a term introduced by M. G. Hodgson to refer to those sociocultural phenomena that are inspired by Islam but are not reducible to it as a religion. See M. G. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 1:57-60.
21. The problem with term *terrorism* is not one of having a poor or a confused definition that can be resolved by a more accurate one.
22. I am grateful for Abdulkarim Vakil's formulation and discussion of this point – of course, the bits that readers disagree with are the ones for which Vakil is responsible.

23. For a brief discussion of the concept of interpretive community, see Edward Said, "Opponents, Audiences, and Constituencies," in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto, 1983).
24. As history shows, different periods or schools of thought, or even different groups of Muslims, have tried to monopolize the Qur'an-ummah nexus by privileging a particular section within the ummah as being capable of establishing the interpretive conventions by which we read the Qur'an. It has often been asserted that it is the *ijma`* of the ummah rather than that of the ulema', even though the latter group's *ijma`* may often be the crucial step in securing the *ijma`* of the ummah. It is not axiomatic, however, that the ulema' are always in the vanguard of forming an ummah-wide consensus.