

Speaking Qur'an: An American Scripture

Timur R. Yuskaev

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Associate Professor of Contemporary Islam at Hartford Seminary, Timur R. Yuskaev received his PhD from University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. At the seminary he directs the program for American Muslim Chaplains and also co-edits the *Muslim World* journal. *The Speaking Qur'an* is his

first book and emerges from his dissertation work at UNC. Yuskaev's approach to Islamic studies focuses on lived religion in the American context, at the intersection of hermeneutics of sacred text, memory, and linguistic studies. This work explores how American Muslims, through embodying the Qur'an, render the text an American scripture. More specifically, the author focuses on the orality of sacred texts in an American context relating to lived experiences. Through his four case studies of scholars and preachers, he explores how themes and content from the Qur'an came to be related to their respective audiences' "common sense" and lived realities. Yuskaev quotes Walter Ong in the afterword: "Written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield meaning" (150). The dialogical process is one in which this seemingly foreign originating text takes root on American soil, yet Yuskaev notes throughout the book the difficulty and antagonism of the Muslim presence in the US. In a post 9/11 world, could Muslims who profess allegiance to this sacred text be really American? He contends that the Qur'an is an American scripture by virtue of the fact that Americans who are Muslim value and cherish it, engage it, and speak it.

The structure of this ethnographic book on American Islam focuses on four main case studies of American Muslim intellectuals (Fazlur Rahman, Amina Wadud, W.D. Mohammed, and Hamza Yusuf) whom the author pairs each with a specific topic (respectively, Time, Justice, Redemption, and Politics) to reveal how the Qur'an becomes an American text in the dialogical lived experience of believers. Yuskaev situates his work generally within the field of American religion, and follows the anthropological methodology of Talal Asad with respect to exploring cultural concepts. Additionally, he situates his book against other works that focus on the dialogical nature of religious communities' relationship with canonical texts and their constant re-membling, a term the author plays with throughout the book and develops from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theories are central to the analysis in *The Speaking Qur'an*. Yuskaev specifically centers how language is collective and dialogical, couched in the collective's place and time: in this case, how the Qur'an becomes a living text in the American context.

While each of his case studies would not be considered representative of orthodox exegesis, Yuskaev argues that each figure, through their writing and/or preaching, communicates a type of *tafsir* of the Qur'an to their respective audiences and embodies "cultural translations of the Qur'an"

(3). Yuskaev contends that each of these intellectuals, while representing diverse American Muslim discourses, was highly influential in American Islam from the Immigration Act of 1965 to the first decade after 9/11. What they each did in their particular venues was teach their audience how to make sense of themselves as Muslims, primarily through their remembering and speaking the Qur'an in their local space and time, and, notably, through relying on Qur'anic polysemy. Yuskaev explores at length how each of these public intellectuals offers their audience the opportunity to make sense of themselves as Muslims in America in their time by engaging with four key issues: modernity, gender justice, racial justice, and politics. This premise is contrary to the orthodox view that the Qur'an is timeless and that the goal of any exegesis is to reveal God's true, original intent. Yuskaev states that his goal is to prompt his colleagues to look beyond officially recognized *tafsīr*, to engage "informal and differently produced Qur'anic interpretations" (14).

One thing Yuskaev expertly does is frame the issues that these Muslim public intellectuals address within the context of American religious history and to demonstrate the universal nature of non-Protestant American religious experiences. Yuskaev references the work of Wendy Cagde and her exploration of American Buddhism's global networks, which carry religion through new constructions into "conceptual vocabularies and grammars of American" reality (21). In addition, Yuskaev references the work of Jacques Maritain and John Courtney Murray, twentieth-century Catholic public intellectuals, and how they parallel Rahman's concerns with respect to engaging the challenges posed by modernity and political engagement, specifically how justice and ethics could be articulated from sacred texts and traditions. Yuskaev argues that Rahman, while remaining within the academy, sought to express the themes of the Qur'an in an effort to capture an essential and normative Islam within an American zeitgeist of pan-Islamic rhetoric. This move contrasted with political, orthodox uses of Islam abroad. Key to Rahman's contributions is the articulation of Islam's moral social order and core ethical lessons through a double movement, linking the past to the present via the sacred text. Hence this chapter's title, "Time".

In the chapter titled "Justice" Yuskaev turns to the academic and preaching work of Amina Wadud, noting Rahman's influence on her ethical focus on gender justice within her Qur'anic hermeneutics and her *tawhidic* paradigm. He explores both her exegetical contributions to Muslim American life and her oral *tafsīr* through preaching, noting how she

also embodied a distinct pragmatism. Her own African American history and experience were foundational in her scriptural interpretations and activism. During Wadud's time in academia and activism, women across Muslim communities in America were taking up more and more leadership positions, mostly through volunteering—a trend Yuskaev links to the same developments in Buddhist, Jewish, and Christian communities in the American religious landscape. He also argues that Wadud's scholarship on gender equality was widely and well-received, and was resonant with the wider American Muslim conversation. Yuskaev states, "the notion of gender justice became for many American Muslims an unequivocal element of the Qur'an's overall concept of justice" (51). Importantly, he also engages the critique of her woman-led prayer in 2005 levelled by more orthodox voices, noting Zaid Shakir's response. Shakir underscored men as the sole agents of change and the trope of the frustrated woman, yet Yuskaev highlights Shakir's important adjustment in tone where he alludes to the sensibility of men and women working together in the Muslim community. In addition, shortly after the woman-led prayer, ISNA published the document "Women Friendly Mosques", which Yuskaev takes as evidence of how Wadud's scholarship and activism cleared a path for this type of gender "common sense" to become normative in the US Muslim context. Although he references *A Jihad for Justice, Honoring the Life and Work of Amina Wadud* (edited by Kecia Ali, Juliane Hammer, and Laury Silvers, 2006) in his footnotes, Yuskaev should have brought the voices of at least some of the thirty-three mostly women scholars who contributed to this *Festschrift* into conversation, because they definitively establish the impact of Wadud's scholarship and activism in the American Muslim academy and community domains.

In the third chapter, titled "Redemption", Yuskaev takes up themes of racial justice as embodied by the preaching and oral *tafsir* of Warith Deen Mohammed. Precisely how the Qur'an becomes an American scripture through speech and a dialogical process is more fully developed in this chapter. The soundscape of the preacher and the audience is centered in this and the subsequent chapter as collective memory and a personal resonance with the Qur'an is demonstrated, where an American sound of the Qur'an is revealed and received. The W.D. Mohammed community's place within African American religious history is highlighted, along with the themes of racial injustice and racial uplift. Although Yuskaev sidesteps a deep analysis of syncretism versus orthodoxy in this chapter, he normalizes

the American-ness of the overlapping of Christian language and sensibilities with this community's move to Sunni Islam and greater political engagement. Yuskaev makes a case for how Mohammed spoke to the African American collective memory about their past, present, and future place of belonging. In addition, he examines Mohammed's ability to communicate authoritatively to his community by intimately "speaking from scripture" (79) and relying on the idea of the Qur'an's polyvocality, to both recite and to hear the Qur'an's meanings, despite critiques from those who deemed foreign authority more Islamically authentic.

In the final and fourth chapter, "Politics", Yuskaev studies the preaching of Hamza Yusuf, who, like the case examples before, is striving to speak to his particular audiences' experiences and 'common sense' as American Muslims. His interlocutors, like Sadaf Khan, a young first generation American of Pakistani origin, attest to Yusuf's ability to "tell it like it is" and to "make sense" (121). Yusuf's credibility began by his embracing of "authentic" markers of Islam, such as fluency in Arabic, Arabic dress and mannerisms, and attachment to a religious lineage that was ostensibly never touched by secular modernity. Yuskaev explores how Yusuf's project of Islamic traditionalism extended into his establishment of the Zaytuna Institute (later, Zaytuna College), which "projected an aura of traditional stability" (116) and deference for the *'ulema'*. This audience, however, is quite different from those analyzed in previous chapters, and Yuskaev could have spent more time analyzing this important distinction. That is, this audience is more predominantly immigrant Muslims and their first-generation American offspring who yearned to embody an authentic, original Islam in their new land, when separated from the cultural and political contexts of the Middle East and South Asia and, importantly, as communicated in understandable English. Also worthy of further exploration and analysis is the dynamic of race at play with how Yusuf, as a white, male convert, delivered credibility and authority to a foreign religion.

Yuskaev does explore substantive shifts in Yusuf's rhetoric; before 9/11, "he had consistently instructed his audiences to cultivate an attitude of separation from secular life, including American politics" (111), often using the volatile word *kāfir* to describe American society. This changes after 9/11. Yuskaev describes this as Yusuf's responsiveness to his American audience's sensibilities, but the shift could likewise be analyzed as an about-face and contradictory. Yuskaev demonstrates how Yusuf had to decouple America and modernity (an equation he had established earlier) in order

to respond to the pressing politics of the time, changing his rhetoric of withdrawal to an ethics of engagement (a move similarly made by Murray, the Catholic intellectual). The common sense of many American Muslims after 9/11 was how to be “American” and not alien, how to be part of the pluralistic, civically engaged diversity of America; Yusuf responded with, “We are inheritors of the struggle in this country to keep this country in course with its founding principles” (139). Through the sermons Yускаev analyzes, he continually emphasizes Yusuf’s adept way of remembering and interrelating the Qur’an and hadith, to allow his audience to remember their religion in the midst of modern cultural forgetting and drastically new political realities.

The Speaking Qur’an depicts the cultural translation of the Qur’an in America through the embodiment and lived realities of Muslim Americans, as presented by four significant Muslim American intellectuals. With attention to the context of the audience and the way in which each of these authorities infuses their words with shared connotations, Yускаev succeeds in embedding Islam within the American religious landscape and soundscape, and the sacred text in a living dynamic relationship with diverse authorities and communities. There remain some gaps and questions, however, the first being the complete lack of Shī‘ī voices save a few references to Seyyed Hossein Nasr—despite the latter’s most recent significant contribution to making the Qur’an speak to American Muslims: *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (HarperCollins, 2015). Some attention should also have been paid to how the title is significant in Shī‘ī Islam as an eponym for ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib, drawn from the hadith “‘Alī is with the Qur’an and the Qur’an is with ‘Alī. They shall never separate until they return to me in Paradise.” This demonstrates that common sense is particular to specific communities, and as such leads to another point that the book could have explored further: whether these four case examples are equally influential, without qualifying how they address very different strains of Islam in America. The groups of Muslim Americans approached here are sociologically and ideologically dissimilar; they compete for legitimacy in the broader Muslim American context. For example, the W.D. Mohammed ministries have had a conference for thirty years, often held at the same time and same city as ISNA, and Yускаev overlooks this significant contestation. Likewise, the influence of Salafi discourse is marginalized in this work yet is quite substantial in the development of Islam in America, particularly on college campuses. Aside from these points, the book is well

situated in the discussion of American religions and understanding Islam in America, and is an important successor to earlier work on the topic. It is accessible to a wide audience of readership.

Nicole Correr
PhD Candidate, Department of Religion
Boston University, Boston, MA