Communities of Interpretation: The Case of the Qur'an

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Abstract

This article discusses "Communities of the Qur'an," a conference, public talk, and forthcoming book that will examine the Qur'an's "communities of interpretation." They are represented by ten world-renowned academics and leaders from the Sunni, Shi'i, and Ahmadi communities; reformist LGBT, feminist, African American, and Qur'an-only groups; as well as non-Muslims like the Bahais. In this brief paper, I discuss their nature, engagements with the Qur'an as a text or an experience, and the challenges they face in the twenty-first century.

One Scripture, Many Communities

Many years ago I became interested in learning more about different approaches to reading and understanding the Qur'an. How do the various groups of Muslims understand it, and how does this understanding shape their community? With approximately 1.6 billion adherents, the global Muslim community (*ummah*) is anything but monolithic. But is it a single community at all? Finding the whole discourse on "sectarianism," "ancient hatreds," and the Sunni-Shia conflict superficial, too political and fundamentally lacking, I looked for a deeper, more systematic and critical theory to explain its diverse and even fractured nature.

My exploration, which took me through classical exegesis and modern hermeneutics, soon became fixated upon literary theory. I took an interest in reception and reader response criticism, especially the idea that a text – in this case the Qur'an – only has meaning when interpreted by the community to which it was sent and informed by its cultural assumptions. This idea resonates with the famous tradition ascribed to Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 40/661), who informed the Khawarij that "as for this Qur'an, it is but writing between two covers and it does not speak, but it is men who speak through it."[1] Since each community interprets the Qur'an differently, it has, in the words of the renowned American literary scholar Stanley Fish, several "communities of interpretation."[2]

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The "Communities of the Qur'an" project refers to intellectual inquiry as well as religious dialogue. At its heart, it asks "What is the dialectical relationship between the Qur'an and its communities of interpretation?" "How is the relationship between community and scripture mediated?" and "Can a better understanding of each community's reception, hermeneutics, and cultural assumptions bring about a better understanding of the Qur'an for the twenty-first century?" This project also seeks to revive the "ethics of disagreement" (*adab al-ikhtilāf*) found in classical Islam. The Qur'an interpreters, jurists, and theologians of medieval Baghdad, Cairo, and Cordoba serve as examples of peaceful coexistence and tolerance in the face of vehement disagreement. On numerous occasions, the historical record shows that Muslims from different legal schools or denominations, as well as Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and others, agreed to disagree.[3]

Recent literature on "Islamic communities of interpretation" is both ample as well as thoughtful.[4] A certain measure of feminist discourse and theological reform, both of which are essential, is taken for granted within such communities. However, the advantage of framing the dialectic relationship, as I have, between a community and a scripture accommodates even greater diversity. Similarly, authors have been exploring the limits of the ethics of disagreement for decades, but only within the traditional forms of Islam.[5] To express this point differently, this project encapsulates groups typically outside the pale of traditional (or neo-traditional) Islam. Among many others, these include:

- The Baha'is: A distinct nineteenth-century offshoot of Islam from Iran
- The Ahmadis: A twentieth-century Islamic sect from South Asia that was excommunicated by the World Muslim League in 1974.
- African American groups: The Nation of Islam, The Five-Percent Nation, The Moorish Science Temple, and other groups considered beyond the pale of "mainstream Islam."
- LGBT groups, including those who have recently established "gay mosques," which are altogether rejected by mainstream Muslims.

Why should a project like the "Communities of the Qur'an" cast such a wide net? In short, the various crises of the twenty-first century demand it. The challenges of today's political climate are greater than those of our predecessors. The religious, social, and cultural diversity of the imagined global Muslim community, as well as the richness of the people's traditions in the greater Middle East, are under threat by extremist fundamentalism. It is the Muslims themselves who have paid the greatest price for the intolerance, violence, and "sectarianism" undertaken in the name of Islam.

The discourse surrounding the "war on terror" and Islamophobia, which have spread in the wake of 9/11, and the Arab uprisings of 2011 have only polarized members on both sides of the debate. As a result, the Qur'an, Islam's sacred scripture and an integral part of world literature, has been subjected to misuse and misunderstanding. More than ever before, leaders from within and without the imagined global Muslim community have the opportunity to protect the diversity of Islamic civilization and promote religious tolerance as well as peaceful coexistence, broadly speaking.

On the Nature of Community

On March 10-11, 2016, the Boniuk Institute for the Study and Advancement of Religious Tolerance hosted the "Communities of the Qur'an" conference, which was addressed by (in order of presentation) Ingrid Mattson (London and Windsor Community Chair in Islamic Studies, Huron University College), Sajjad Rizvi (associate professor, Islamic intellectual history, University of Exeter), Ali Asani (professor, Indo-Muslim and Islamic religion and cultures, Harvard University), Ahmed Subhy Mansour (president, International Qur'anic Center), Amina Wadud (professor emeritus and visiting scholar, Starr King School for the Ministry), Mujeeb Ur Rahman (Advocate of the Supreme Court, Pakistan), Todd Lawson (professor emeritus, Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, University of Toronto), and Aminah Beverly McCloud (professor, religious studies, DePaul University). Also featured were three panel chairs: Hina Azam (associate professor, Middle Eastern studies, University of Texas), David Cook (associate professor, religious studies, Rice University), and Emran El-Badawi (program director and associate professor, Middle Eastern studies, University of Houston). Paula Sanders (director, Boniuk Institute; professor, Rice University) opened the event with welcoming remarks, and philanthropist Milton Boniuk closed it with parting words. The papers presented therein are currently being turned into a book.

In addition to the eight conference papers, two additional chapters will discuss the Sufi and the LGBT reception of the Qur'an, respectively. To give the reader a sample of what to expect, short summaries of the initial eight chapters, as well as the contributors' names and tentative chapter titles, are given below.

- Ingrid Mattson, "How the Qur'an Shapes the Sunni Community."

  > Debate, dialogue, discussion and explanation – the Sunni community is, above all else, a discursive space that can be initiated at any point with a word of the Qur'an … The recognition of a core set of diverse, equally authentic interpretive methods and schools within Sunni Islam is an (aspirationally

irenic) solution to the rejection of the imamate on the one hand, and the need to establish parameters of orthodoxy – or the appearance thereof – on the other. The embrace of an ethical pluralism that does not descend into relativism or anarchism is ideally the result of the Sunni approach to the Qur'an.

- Sajjad Rizvi, "The Speaking Qur'an and the Praise of the Imam: The Memory and Practice of the Qur'an in the Shi'i Ithna'ashari Tradition."

  It is commonplace to hear Shi'i believers hold that the Qur'an is a long poem in praise of the family of the Prophet and the Imams in particular. In one sense, this is an expression of the famous narration of the "two weighty things" (*al-thaqalyn*) popular in Shi'i sources for an early period; in another it complements another early hadith corpus on traditions on how the intimacy of the Qur'an and the Imam is such that the former is silent unless the latter makes it enunciate for believers. Both the scripture of the Qur'an and the person of the Imam are acts of the self-revelation of God.

- Ali Asani, "Ismaili Engagements with the Qur'an: The Ismaili Khojas of South Asia."

  These verses portray the Imam as the locus of knowledge and divine authority and reinforce the authoritative nature of the living Imam's pronouncements and guidance. The Imam's pronouncements, called *farmān*s, are regarded by the community as the *ta'līm* (instruction) and *ta'wīl* (esoteric interpretation) of the Qur'an as opposed to tafsir (commentary). In his public addresses, the current Ismaili Imam, Prince Karim Aga Khan, speaks to the challenges of interpreting the faith of Islam in the contemporary world, particularly with respect to diversity, the inseparability of faith and world, and the interplay of faith and intellect.

- Ahmed Subhy Mansour, "Why the Qur'anists Are the Solution."

  In our belief, the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) is the first Qur'anist, as he was ordered to uphold the holy Qur'an alone (Q. 43:43). We also believe in the holy Qur'an as the only hadith: (Q. 45:6; Q. 7:185; and Q. 77:50). We understand the Qur'an according to its unique Arabic terminology, in order to disentangle the true, abandoned Islam and its great values of peace, tolerance, freedom and justice … Instead of the so-called Shari'ah law, we want to convince the Muslim world to accept the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as Islamic laws, according to the real core of Islam.

- Amina Wadud, "Men in Charge?: Qur'an and Gender as a Category of Thought."

The most distinguishing feature of Islamic feminism is a construction of Islamic knowledge based on a dynamic interaction with the Qur'an as it relates cultural attitudes, personal praxis and public policy. Indeed, this initiative – led by Muslim women on behalf of their own perceptions and experiences of Islam, – invloves an active relationship with the Qur'an as a tool for women's full agency, spirituality, inter-relationships and empowerment. How do Muslim reformists wrestle equality out of the Qur'an? While there are ample examples of Qur'anic privilege to men and the male gaze, this presentation will focus on the methodologies used to advocate for gender neutrality as fundamental to the Qur'an. It will discuss how Islamic feminism relates to text and context to achieve gender reform today.

- Mujeeb Ur Rahman, "The Qur'an and the Ahmadiyya Community."

  The Qur'an speaks of a living God, who guides humans through continued revelation. The Qur'an is the living word of God just as the universe is His living act, both unfolding their verities according to the needs of time. The Qur'an has no conflict with science, nor with rationality ... The Qur'an teaches freedom of conscience and rejects all forms of compulsion. Ahmadiyya tradition rejects the prevailing concept of armed jihad, which is a negation of Qur'anic teachings.

- Todd Lawson, "The Baha'i Reception of the Qur'an."

  According to the Baha'i teachings, the Qur'an is a sacred and absolutely authentic repository of the word of God. The earliest major works (considered revelation), whether from the Babi phase or the later Baha'i phase are, in fact, works of Qur'anic exegesis. The Qur'an is the central focus of contemplation and explication by both the Bab and Baha'u'llah. In addition, each author frequently comments on various sacred traditions (Hadith) ... Perhaps it is more accurate to ask how the Baha'i faith embodies and spreads these Qur'anic verities to what might be thought otherwise rather unlikely quarters, instills great love for Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (whom Baha'u'llah refers to as the "Seal of the Prophets") and identifies as an independent religion.

- Aminah Beverly McCloud, "African-American Communities of the Qur'an."

  Approaches to the Quran across the African-American community are widely varied. During the first decades of the 20th century, the earliest communities to engage Islam, depended upon The Holy Qur'an as translated by Maulana Muhammad Ali of the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam (India). It has been reported that many early Muslims kept both a Qur'an and a Bible

> in the home for reading and study ... The Qur'an began to be read by many in fragments with emphasis on marriage, duties, etc rather than as a coherent text. Though many of the Muslims of this generation were college-educated, Muslims from outside America asserted the Qur'an as a text that could not be read by ordinary people who had not mastered Arabic. This debate continues, as does the alienation from the text.

Despite the diversity found within these communities, there is a discernible divide between communities of text vs. communities of experience. The former includes traditional forms of religion (in this case Islam and Bahaism) founded upon deep, patriarchal, and literary engagement with the Qur'anic text, whereas the latter represents a non-textual, culturally informed re-imagination of what the Qur'an is and how it shapes a community. These communities include, for example, African-American communities, the Khojas of South Asia, and LBGT communities whose relationship with the Qur'an is imbued by customs or sub-cultures beyond the text itself.

On the Nature of the Qur'an

It would be fair to say that communities of the Qur'an disagree on what its very nature is. This diversity is both rich as well as complicated. A number of provocative ideas came to light during both the panel and round table discussions. Most striking was how some communities consider the Qur'an a foundational text, but one that is dissolved into the fabric of salvation history. To say this differently, the Qur'an, the New Testament, the Hebrew Bible, and the Avesta simply belong humanity. In this vein, Lawson evokes the writings of Baha'ullah (d. 1892). While Bahai writings pay homage to the Arabic Qur'an and Muhammad the prophet, as it does other ancient religious texts and figures, it fashions out of their model a new scripture altogether.[6] To put it plainly, it seems in this case that the Qur'an has been both accepted as well as abrogated.

Similarly, when speaking through the lens of Islamic feminism Wadud posits that the Qur'anic text, namely, its patriarchal language and ancient cultural background, represent a kind of transition in human salvation history. In other words, there will come a time when the adherents of the Qur'an will no longer have recourse to the text, but rather to its universal, egalitarian message to humanity.[7]

These views are in stark contrast to the unique, static, and eternal nature of the Qur'an that is central to the Sunni tradition, despite its diversity and numbers. As Mattson suggests, the authenticity of the textual tradition (espe-

cially the Qur'an and Hadith) is central to orthodoxy, and thus any criticism of or departure from it is highly suspect at best, or heresy at worst.[8] The Imami Shi'i position demonstrated by Rizvi represents a sort of compromise between the text's eternal nature and the unfolding of salvation history in human terms. This is, namely, the doctrine of the Imam, of which there are two primordial, co-equal, and co-eternal manifestations: the silent Imam (i.e., the Qur'an) and the speaking Imam (i.e., the progeny of Ali and Fatima).

This brief survey on the nature of the Qur'an does not do justice to its complexity, nor does it afford it the nuance it deserves. However, it does underscore the fact that these communities have never agreed upon a question as basic as "What is the Qur'an?" Among historians, however, it is not unusual that such communities – mainly Muslim – inherently disagree about its nature, much like how the various Christian denominations continue to disagree sharply among themselves over the nature of Christ. As such, the failure of consensus has been repeated through Christological controversies and Islamic civil wars. This is a sobering fact.

On Faith and Extremism

This event was more than a conference, for it included a two-day moderated discussion "Between Faith and Extremism," one hosted by the World Affairs Council of Greater Houston and the other one by "The Other Side," a Houston-area TV program. This portion of the project explored the misuse of religion, especially through violence, and focused primarily – but not exclusively – on Islam and Judaism. Rabbi Reuven Firestone and Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, two seasoned interfaith speakers and esteemed leaders of their respective communities, expressed their views on a number of pressing issues, such as religious law, holy war, the challenge of the so-called Islamic State, and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On this latter question, Firestone argued that "holy war" had died out in Judaism until the rise of the state of Israel in 1948, a development that continues to contribute irrevocably to this ongoing conflict.[9]

In the spirit of diversity and tolerance central to this project, Abdul Rauf equated "democratic values" (especially human rights) with "objectives (*maqāṣid*) of Shariah."[10] An increasing number of Islamic leaders worldwide are taking up this position – not without some debate, of course – and in the case of Malaysia the government is making it law. Since modern nation-states are the seat of legitimacy, both secular as well as Islamic, groups like ISIS are a "rogue anomaly … far from Islamic."[11] The expertise of both Firestone and

Abdul Rauf afforded some much-need sobriety to otherwise politicized, misunderstood, hot-button issues.

Community and Diversity in the Twenty-First Century

This article began with reference to an important Shi'i tradition ascribed to Imam Ali and now concludes with reference to an equally famous Sunni legal tradition ascribed to Prophet Muhammad: "Indeed God will not make my community (*ummah*) agree (inf. I *jama'ah*; inf. IV *ijmā'*) upon error."[12] The idea of a single, global community founded upon consensus is incredibly empowering. It is, however, also incredibly dangerous.

Like the speaking Imam, the consensus of the community has existed in Sunni legal and exegetical thought for over a millennium. Wahhabism, a brand of Sunni fundamentalism that could only eke out an existence in the desert, was given limitless political, economic, and military power on the world stage with the founding of Saudi Arabia in 1932 and the subsequent exploitation of its oil resources. Similarly, by founding the Islamic Republic in 1979, the top Imami Shi'i *mujtahid*s (ayatollahs) assumed the powers of a modern nation-state under the newly crafted "governance of the jurist" (*velayet-i-faqih*). The 9/11 attacks in 2001, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the so-called Arab Spring of 2011 have caused the global Muslim community(ies) to be subjected to unprecedented warfare, sectarianism, and Islamophobia.

In particular, much of the Arab world has descended into civil war, religious sectarianism, and political unrest. While the reasons for these phenomena are complex, the idea of consensus has always been fundamentally political. This has been demonstrated throughout history, from the days of the first "ecumenical council" held in 325 under the auspices of the Byzantine emperor Constantine (d. 337) to the "year of consensus" (*'ām al-jamā'ah*; 661), which is a pious reconstruction of Caliph Mu'awiyah's (d. 60/680) founding of the Umayyad dynasty, to the founding of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC; 1969). All of these efforts have attempted to centralize the political power that has pushed for consensus building. All of them were undertaken with ample reason ... and with ample bloodshed.

Diversity, on the other hand, refers to the practice of smaller local communities, villages, groups, and sub-cultures. It is the natural order of things, which is why the classical Islamic ethics of disagreement and the universal declaration on human rights are central. It is little surprise, therefore, that virtually all communities of the Qur'an participate in a concomitant discourse between classical Islam and human rights. The Qur'an's communities of in-

terpretation represent the diversity, tolerance, and typically apolitical concerns of smaller local groups, not the grandiose, political brutality of a centralized government – religious or secular. This project teaches us much about the nuances of localized Muslim and non-Muslim reception of the Islamic scripture, which is worthy in and of itself. However, it also teaches us that the global Islamic community is caught between the push of diversity and the pull of consensus. Its members do not even agree on the reception of the Qur'an – a text that they all share. History teaches us that true consensus is impossible. My hope is that co-existence is not.

Endnotes

1. Among Sunni variants, see the Shi'i version by Muhammad b. Babawayh al-Qummi (al-Shaykh al-Saduq), *Risālāt al-I'tiqādāt*, trans Asaf Fyzee, *A Shiite Creed* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), 77.
2. Cf. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), esp. 171-73.
3. Inter-religious debates and disputations within classical Islamic civilization were common and typify this tolerance. For example, see "The Disputation between a monk of Bet Hale and an Arab notable," in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, vol. 1 (600-1500), ed. David Thomas et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 268-73.
4. See Farhad Daftary, "Diversity in Islam: Communities of Interpretation," in *The Muslim Almanac*, ed. A Nanji (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1996), 161-73.
5. Cf. the work of Taha al-Alwani, esp. *Adab al-Ikhtilāf fī al-Islām*, trans. *The Ethics of Disagreement in Islam* (London and Washington, DC: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1993).
6. Cf. Baha'ullah, *Kitab-i-Iqan* (*The Book of Certitude*) (Wilmette, IL: US-Bahai Publishing Trust, 1989), 213.
7. See, in passing, Amina Wadud, "Interview," Frontline/WGBH Educational Foundation, March, 2002.
8. Cf. Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 16-18.
9. Reuven Firestone, *Holy War in Judaism: The Fall and Rise of a Controversial Idea* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 107.
10. Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, *Defining Islamic Statehood: Measuring and Indexing Contemporary Muslim States* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 116, 145-49.
11. Ibid., 268.
12. Muhammad ibn Isa al-Tirmidhi, *Al-Jāmi' al-Kabī*, ed. Bashshar Ma'ruf (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami,1996), 40 4:2167.