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CHAPTER

1

THE KORAN THROUGH MUSLIM EYES

Twice a day, the cannon shot echoed across our town. It was Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. My family lived in Saudi Arabia, and the artillery booms marked the officially determined times of dawn and sunset, between which all practicing Muslims were to fast from food, drink, and other pleasures.

Saudi Arabia is a self-described Muslim nation and, as such, promulgates and enforces the teachings of the Islamic prophet Muhammad as found in the Koran.¹ Fasting during the month of Ramadan is one of many of these practices. Since it is commanded in the Koran, it is enjoined on all faithful Muslims. Why? Because for the Muslim the Koran is the Word of God, the highest authority on earth by which to regulate one's life. It is their Holy Book, and it plays a role in Islam in many ways similar to that of the Bible in Christianity. Yet there are also many significant differences, and the task of this book is to help those unfamiliar with the Koran to become conversant enough with it and its place in Islamic society to compare and contrast it with the Bible and its use in Christian contexts. I also hope that by the time you finish reading this book, you will have increased confidence in conversing about faith issues with Muslims you may encounter in daily life or travels.

A Growing Number of Muslims

Islam claims over 1.2 billion adherents worldwide, second in size and scope only to Christianity, which numbers roughly 1.9 billion. Together, these two religions account for almost half the world's population. Amazingly, they remain relatively ignorant of each other's central beliefs. Though the reasons for this are no doubt complex, they should not continue, at least not for the Western Christian world. For many years, Islam has seemed to the Christian West to be a religion of the Middle East and other Third World nations. Having little direct contact with Muslims, most Christians remain ignorant of this world religion. But because of the influx of Muslim immigrants to Europe and North America, the rise of militant Islam and its attendant terrorist targeting of Western interests, and the reopening of painful wounds in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Islam is very much in the forefront of media interest. Issues of style of dress, special dietary rules, different days of worship, and stringent religious practices are all contributing to a new curiosity among Americans as to the nature and beliefs of Islam.

Christians can no longer afford to be indifferent to the teachings and practices of this faith birthed in the seventh-century Arabian Peninsula, which now finds its home in the bulk of Asia and Africa and is quickly making inroads into Europe and the United States. If the church is to be serious about its commission to make disciples of all people groups, then we must be conversant with the belief system that presently sways one fifth of the world's population. Perhaps the quickest way to do this well is to familiarize ourselves with the Koran, which stands at the heart of Muslim theology and practice.

A Unique Physical Book

For the Muslim, there is no book on earth that is its equal. Roughly the size of the New Testament, it claims to be the revelation of Allah (God) to Muhammad in the language of Arabic. Native Arabic speakers recognize a beauty and power in the poetic diction of the Koran, which some claim has never been equaled in the history of human communication.

For this reason, as well as because of the theological place of the Koran in the Arab Muslim world, Koranic Arabic has become the standard for what is now known as classical Arabic, the primary dialect of the educated and refined throughout the Middle East.

Since Muslims consider the Koran to be the literal words of God (i.e., spoken directly from the mouth of God through the angel Gabriel to Muhammad, who then repeated these exact words to his listeners, who in turn memorized or transcribed them), the physical book itself becomes an object of holy veneration. There are particular rules for how it is to be handled and treated. For example, in elementary schools in Saudi Arabia, children are taught to wash themselves and be in a state of ritual purity before handling the Koran, to kiss it three times before opening it to read, and then to kiss it again three times and touch it to one's forehead after closing it and putting it away. Menstruating women must not touch it. The Koran is not to be left open and unattended, lest the devil or a *jinn* come along and read it (presumably, their unclean



presence would greatly dishonor it, and their increased knowledge of Allah's Word would enable them to cause more mischief).

As a sign of its ultimate value, the Koran is to occupy the highest place in a home or mosque, above all other books or objects. Hence it should be on the highest bookshelf in the house, with nothing sitting above it. When held, it is never to be carried below the waistline. When transported among belongings in a suitcase, it is to be the last thing packed so as not to be covered by anything else. It is never to be placed on the ground, lest one incur the wrath of Allah. Often, however, the Koran is read by those seated on the floor prior to prayer. For such individuals there are special book holders that allow the book to rest open and off the ground. It is a great dishonor and embarrassment to allow the Koran to fall to the earth.

I remember a story, perhaps apocryphal, that circulated throughout the Middle East in the early 1970s about one of the earliest African-American athletes to convert to Islam. Desiring to learn more of the faith he had embraced, he accepted an invitation to tour the holy sites of Islam in Saudi Arabia. His presence caused a great stir of excitement among Arab Muslims in Mecca and Medina. Dressed in Saudi robes and carrying a Koran, he cut quite a figure among the admirers surrounding him. Asked for his autograph, he found a chair on which to sit, and then very naturally tucked his Koran under the chair legs so as to be out of the way while he signed papers. Immediately, the bustle around him ceased with stunned and embarrassed silence. When one of his handlers recognized what had happened, he quickly retrieved the Koran, brushed it off and kissed it, and apologized profusely to his fellow Muslims on behalf of the athlete, who after all hadn't known any better.

Though somewhat mollified, the crowds no longer thronged about this famous American; indeed, as word spread, disrespect mounted and the extended tour had to be cut short. While I cannot confirm that this particular event actually happened, the story certainly rings true in terms of typical Muslim reactions to perceived indifference to or disrespect for "the Noble Koran." No human being, no matter how popular or

respected, is of greater importance than the Koran. Those who dishonor it will face the indignation of good Muslims everywhere.

Punishment for Abuse of the Book

Of even greater import for Muslims, however, is the belief that Allah will protect his book and will punish infidels who attempt to abuse it. The Koran itself contains many references to the dire fate of those who disbelieve Muhammad's claims and make fun of his teachings. These unbelievers will be undone in the fires of hell, while God's revelation remains protected.

Stories abound in the Muslim world today of attempts to dishonor the Koran that have been foiled by the supernatural power of God. One of my cousins related to me an account from her childhood in Saudi Arabia. It was said that an infidel (opponent of Islam) had broken into the home of a Muslim family to cause mischief. Finding a copy of the Koran while ransacking the place, he threw it into the toilet—an act of horrific desecration in Muslim eyes. When the family arrived home and saw the damage to their home, they were naturally downcast. Upon finding their Koran in the toilet, they were mortified. Quickly fishing it out to see if it could be rescued, they were astonished to discover that though it had lain completely submerged in water, it was not in the least bit wet. God had fully protected his noble book. This story parallels a declaration found in the Hadith traditions:² “If the Koran were wrapped in a skin and thrown into a fire, it would not burn” (Al-Tirmidhi, 652).

While most educated Muslims do not take such stories at face value, to the less educated masses such supernatural interventions concerning the Koran are par for the course. The underlying presupposition is that the honor of Allah is closely tied to the honor of this book, and that he will do whatever is needed to defend his honor. For this reason as well, since Muslims proclaim that the Koran is without error of any kind, having as its source the perfect mind of God, most are not open to examining its contents critically. Forbidden questions would be:

- What pre-Koranic sources influenced Muhammad?

- Since the Koran recognizes the full inspiration of the Bible, why are there serious discrepancies at points between what it says and what Muhammad teaches?
- How did the Koran come to be in the form in which we find it today?

These questions are seen as dishonoring to God and his prophet. The answer, quite simply, is that God spoke everything to Muhammad; nothing came from the prophet's own thinking. The words of God were perfectly preserved and collected before the prophet's death, and the Koran today is exactly the same as it was when it was first presented to the world almost fourteen centuries ago. If there are discrepancies between the Koran and the Bible, that is the fault of Jews and Christians, who perverted the truth they originally received. The Koran, by God's perfect wisdom and power, restores and clarifies the truth as it was originally given to Moses and Jesus. To seek to delve behind the revealed words of the Koran is to disbelieve their divine source and so to dishonor Allah. For the faithful Muslim, this must not be done.

Its Self-Proclaimed Exalted Status

Not surprisingly, the Koran often speaks of its own exalted status. Since Muhammad was opposed early by many who claimed that his revelations were counterfeit, a significant number of his messages are defensive in nature, claiming an exalted, divine status. Early commentators listed fifty-five titles given the Koran in its pages. Though many of these are redundant, a sample will demonstrate the place Muhammad expected it to play in the lives of his followers:

• Establisher of Truth	• Sermon
• Enlightener	• Message
• Reminder	• Narrative
• Straight Path	• Wisdom
• Explanation	• Philosopher

The above titles all emphasize the Koran's claim to be the ultimate conduit of a true picture of God, humanity, and the world. This picture

is held to be in line with all of God's previous revelations, including that found in the Bible. Muhammad's interest in setting the Koran on a par with the Old and New Testaments is underscored by two biblical titles given it: the Psalm and the Herald of Good Tidings.

But the Muslim Scriptures are not simply an essay on Truth; they seek to change the lives of those who hear the message. The Koran is a hortatory book, exhorting humanity to obedience to the Sovereign One and laying out what this means in no uncertain terms. Titles such as the Guide, the Righteous, the Justice, the Exhortation, the Warner, the Order, the Firm Handle, the Distinguishing Speech, and the Health all serve to underscore the goal of moral obedience inherent in these teachings.

Other titles stressing the unique qualities of the Koran set it apart from mere human works. It is called each of the following:

• The Good	• The Mighty
• The Inspiration	• The Uniform
• The Wonderful	• The Lofty
• The Exalted	• The Blessed
• The Excellent	• The Proof
• The Purified	• The Mercy
• The Light	

Such names emphasize the eternal and divine nature claimed for itself and demand that all who hear its message bow before its unmatched stature and beauty. Muslims frequently claim that there is no book on earth that can match the Koran in terms of literary power and elegance. In Muhammad's day the challenge was frequently issued to opponents to try and formulate their own poetry to match the creative genius recognized in Koranic Arabic. Not surprisingly, non-Muslim Arabic speakers claim there are many early Arabic works that equal or exceed portions of the Koran, while Muslims categorically deny this possibility. Beauty, indeed, is in the eye of the beholder!

In conversations, Muslims most often refer to their Scriptures as the “Glorious Koran” or the “Noble Koran.” Within the last century, as Muslims have become more familiar with Christian claims about the Bible and its traditional title as the “Holy Bible,” some have applied this title to the Koran, especially in English translations. Though the adjective “holy” is not found in the Koran as a self-description, there is no doubt that the idea is derivable from the other titles found there. In a shorthand fashion, Muslims sometimes speak of the Koran as *al-Furqan* (“the Distinguisher”), *Kalimat Allah* (“the Word of God”), or simply *al-Kitab* (“the Book”).

Learning at an Early Age

During a young Muslim’s educational years, much time is spent learning portions of the Koran by heart. Emphasis is placed not only on memorizing the texts but also learning the correct pronunciation of the Arabic words. Naturally, in non-Arabic-speaking countries this is of critical importance. Since the recitation of Koranic texts is a core element of the Muslim prayer ritual, and since these prayers must be said in Arabic, the correct intonation of the scriptural texts is essential. Sadly, many Third-World Muslims do not understand the words they speak in prayer, though they know in their own tongues the gist of what they have learned by rote in Arabic language schools run by the local mosque.

In the Arab world, the Koran figures large in the typical school program, from elementary to college years. Studies in language and doctrine as well as in history, science, and the arts all sing the praise of the Koran and an Islamic worldview. By the time one graduates from a Muslim school system, he or she will have been exposed to rote repetition of the entire Koran. At Al-Azhar University in Cairo, the oldest continuously existing university in the world, one of the requirements for graduation is that each student must be prepared to successfully recite the entire Koran from memory.

Art and Geometric Patterns

While such a feat is not expected of all Muslims, the memorization of significant portions of the Koran is encouraged for all believers, as well

as regular reading. One Hadith tradition declares, “The state of a Muslim who reads the Koran is like the orange fruit whose smell and taste are pleasant.” Islamic societies are immersed in the pervasive influence of the Koran. Favorite texts are found dangling from taxi rearview mirrors, inscribed on jewelry, and laced throughout everyday conversations.

Islam has an uneasy relationship with art since Muhammad cursed artists who drew or painted human or animal forms (a reaction against the polytheism of his day). Hence, most artwork in Muslim culture derives from geometric patterns (such as mother of pearl and wood inlays found on backgammon boards, boxes, and furniture) or from the calligraphy of the Arabic language, whose flowing style lends itself effortlessly to intricate and breathtaking designs.



Naturally, the text of the Koran serves as the fundamental content for such ornamental calligraphy. Koranic calligraphic art is found in mosques; on public buildings; in prized, often ancient copies of the Koran; and at Islamic holy sites. In the homes of devout Muslims, where the ban on any human or animal images is maintained, framed scriptural

quotations in colorful calligraphy are typical. On the wall in my office is one such piece of art that used to hang in my father's study. Written on parchment in blues and golds, with traces of red, the Arabic script almost dances with graceful curves and is intertwined with sleek, sharp lines and bold pointings. One does not have to be able to read Arabic to enjoy the beauty of this developed art form.

My Visit to Damascus and Memorization

Some Muslims make their livelihood from being reciters of the Koran at special family or social occasions. Last fall while in Damascus, I visited the Umayyad Mosque, located within the old city walls. The fourth holiest site in Islam after Mecca, Medina, and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, this mosque is an impressive sight, containing among other relics the tomb of Saladin and a shrine said to hold the head of John the Baptist (who, interestingly, is a recognized prophet in Islamic tradition). As my guide took me around the mosque, we stopped before this shrine. It was surrounded by women, for tradition holds that those who touch its stone walls and pray there will be blessed with fertility, based apparently on the fact that John was conceived by a previously barren and also relatively old Elizabeth (see Luke 1:5–25 for the full account).

Near this particularly holy site, a group of six men were seated on Persian rugs, spaced about three feet apart and unconcerned with the bustle happening all around them. They were swaying gently forward and back as their mouths moved in quiet speech. I had woven my way through them without much notice when the guide asked me if I understood their purpose. I shook my head. "These men are all blind," he said. "They have memorized the Koran perfectly and spend their days at the mosque reciting it. People know they are here, and when they wish to hear the Koran recited at weddings or funerals or for special family occasions, they hire one of these *qurra'* (i.e., individuals who have memorized and can recite any portion of the Koran).

Such individuals are accorded great respect in Muslim society. Even greater in esteem are those who have memorized the Koran and become

acknowledged interpreters of its message. One Hadith tradition relates, “The best person among you is he who has learned the Koran and teaches it” (al-Bukhari, 6.545). The religious teacher is expected to have labored long and hard over the meaning of the words of Allah, to devote all his energies to knowing it intimately. So another tradition declares, “He who is an expert in the Koran shall rank with the ‘Honored Righteous Scribes,’ and he who reads the Koran with difficulty and gets tired over it [i.e., expends much honorable effort] shall receive double rewards” (al-Bukhari, 6.459). Even everyday conversations among Muslim acquaintances are peppered with quotations from the Koran to support conclusions. In public debates the better versed one is in the Koran, the more verbally powerful his or her arguments are accepted to be.

Nevertheless, the gulf in perspective and knowledge between such a scholar and the typical Muslim on the street is often huge. While Muhammad’s followers all revere the Koran as most holy and exalted, there is a fine line that, when crossed at the popular level, turns the Koran into a source of magical powers or an object of worship itself. Particularly in folk Islam, where Muslim beliefs are interwoven with animistic superstitions, the Koran is viewed as a powerful aid in the battle against evil forces. Often talismans (known as *ta’wiz*) are worn on the body of the superstitious Muslim. Constructed typically of a black cord or some other cloth, the talisman will have woven or sewn into it a piece of metal on which a Koranic text has been inscribed. Similarly, Muslims sometimes wear around their neck or waist, or on the arm, a gold or silver case with a scroll of scriptural text inside. These objects are held to ward off evil spirits, to deflect curses or “the evil eye” of others, and to be of aid in physical and psychic healing.

Another common practice may be called the “ingesting of the Word.” When someone is ill or in danger or wandering from the straight path, verses from the Koran are sometimes written with ink or sandalwood paste on the inside of a bowl or plate. Water is then poured into the dish to dissolve the writing, and this water is then given to the “patient” to drink.

I learned a few months ago of a variation on this practice used by a Muslim immigrant family in Chicago. The traditional grandmother, deeply concerned about the unhealthy social influences surrounding her granddaughter in this country and her increasing Americanization, wrote out on paper some verses of the Koran reputed to be very powerful in their spiritual influence, then placed the paper in a glass, filled it with water, and let it sit until the ink had dissolved. When the girl in question returned home from school that day, the grandmother insisted she drink the cup dry. Only in this way, by having the sacred words ingested literally into her body, could this young teenage girl find strength to remain true to the tenets of Islam.

In all fairness it must be said that superstitious Christians sometimes view the Bible in much the same way. In my late teenage years I knew a devout young lady who had been raised in the Bible Belt. One autumn day she came down with a sore throat, which increasingly bothered her. The next day, however, she felt fine, and attributed this to the fact that when she had gone to bed the night before she had placed an open Bible over her neck, and that God through that means had healed her. Superstitious use of holy objects is not limited to any one religion.

As Christians look to the Bible for specific direction and guidance in life, so Muslims appeal to the Koran. Those who do not know very well the contents of their respective holy books often use the same method for seeking God's will at a critical juncture of their lives. After praying for guidance, they will open up the Scriptures at random and, without peeking, will place the index finger somewhere on the open page. Hoping God is somewhere in the mix, sovereignly overseeing their actions, they will then read the passage on which their finger fell and attempt to justify it (if at all possible) as God's will for them in this situation. Both Muslim and Christian clerics decry this practice, but it goes on at the popular level, indicating at least two things: the high level of ignorance among the masses as to what their respective holy books say about living according to God's will, and the deep hunger evident in religious people of all stripes to know and carry out that will.

The Day the Music Was Silenced

To understand the Muslim mind better, let me conclude this chapter by showing a contrast between the place of music with regard to the Koran and the Bible. In the Islamic world, holiness is associated with seriousness and sobriety. Thus, when the Koran is read publicly, whatever else has been going on in the environs must cease. Out of respect, everyone must listen, or give the appearance of listening, to the recitation. No music is allowed, even in the background, when the Koran is recited. Music is seen as entertainment or diversion and thus has no place in a holy setting where the Koran is proclaimed. To compensate for this, Islamic culture has created a kind of voice art utilized strictly for the public recitation of Koranic verses. Called *tartil*, this art uses ululation and other forms of voice modulation together with the elongation of various syllables to create the sing-song or chanting effect so familiar to the ears of any traveler in the Middle East. Nevertheless, Muslims do not consider this music.

Not long ago, my father, a lifelong Muslim, died suddenly at his home. When the unwelcome phone call came from my brother to break the news, thoughts raced through my mind, and my heart was filled with yearnings, regrets, and hopes for my father's eternal well-being. I was surprised to learn that the extended family was adamant that his burial should be in Syria. So we flew over a few days later. There at the public memorial reception in his honor, the services of a number of these skilled chanters were retained.

As we sat in relative silence, these chanters took turns reciting portions of the Koran. During breaks, soft, traditional music was played in the background. At one point during one of these breaks, a heated argument broke out. This break had occurred during evening prayers, and many mourners were heading to the mosque adjoining the hall we had rented for the reception. The argument centered on the fact that the Koran was being recited next door, and it was inappropriate for any music to be played. Others responded that there were no recitations going on in our hall, so it was all right. The more conservative interpretation won the day.

For the Muslim, then, holiness and the vast array of human emotions do not mix. Prayer times at the mosque are somber, subdued affairs. Typical Islamic worship does not include music of any sort. How different from the Christian world, whose Scripture includes an inspired songbook (the Psalms) within its canon! For Jews and Christians, holiness certainly demands weightiness and the seriousness that attends anything profound. Nevertheless, holiness also demands joy, for the thrice-holy God is also the wellspring of all blessing. At the heart of his being is joy, and in his presence all is well. As C. S. Lewis was fond of saying, "Joy is the serious business of heaven."

It is no wonder, then, that Christians down through our history have employed music as a conduit for expressing the full range of our emotions in worship, especially our praise and adoration of God and our joy at being the objects of his redeeming love. The Bible in particular provides the content, directly or indirectly, for the hymn texts set to music. Far from feeling that the Scriptures are too holy to be combined with music, the Christian argues that at times music of the appropriate style and form supplementing the revealed truth of Scripture is the only vehicle that can adequately express our devotion to the full holiness of the One in whom we believe.

Two different holy books, with two widely divergent ways of using them in worship. If the Bible is inspired by God, how can the Koran make the same claim? Where did the Koran come from? How did Muhammad arrive at his claims of revelation? Why are Muslims so captivated by the Arabic form and structure of this text? To these questions about the Arabian prophet and his book we now turn.