

# THE QUR'AN - A CLOSER LOOK

## PART 1

### INTRODUCTION

In the West, for at least two generations, moral relativism has ruled. Absolute truth is thought not to exist, except in science. In the speeches of recent US Presidents, "God" has been effectively relegated to vaguely blessing America, but is certainly not allowed to press too far His existence, nature or claims.

Yet this situation is unsatisfying to an ever-growing minority. Secularism is losing its charm. "Fundamentalist" Christianity (but not its rationalistic or ritualistic brands) is making a comeback. More exotic religions too, are offering their wares in our supermarket of lifestyles. Muslims are very active in propagating their religion in Europe and North America; a not inconsiderable trickle of Westerners have been turning to Islam. A large number of programmes relating to Islam, some co-produced by Muslim organisations, have appeared in recent years on national and regional television. Several large book-selling chains now stock the Qur'an and other material on Islam.

The situation following the "Nine Eleven" attacks in New York and Washington, and more recently, the "Seven Seven" suicide attacks in London, have sadly resulted in Muslims in the West suffering personal violence and sharp criticism. But it has also given them media opportunity to claim that true Islam is a religion of peace. Secular Westerners may have found this confusing, to say the least. It seems therefore a good idea to look carefully at the Qur'an, the very foundation stone of this faith. We should understand it as fully and with as little prejudice as we can. By examining its historical and religious context too, we might be better prepared for some opinion on the claim of Muslims (and the Book's own claim), that it is the final Word of God.

These questions will obviously be of interest to those enquiring after a religion to which

to commit themselves. We will discover that Islam is much easier to join than to leave. Therefore we should perhaps “look before we leap”. Muslims we have met personally may not be particularly militant or revolutionary. They may seem to prefer at present to follow their religion as a code of personal behaviour only, and appear content enough to live in a largely secular society like ours. But in doing so, are they neglecting or concealing part of the very essence of Islam?

For this is not merely a religion. As we shall see, Islam has sociological and political elements, seen as equally God-given and necessary. Should there be an even more serious clash of interest between the secular West and the Islamic world than we have yet seen, the loyalty of home-born Muslims in our countries could be further strained by a prior and greater loyalty to fellow-Muslims abroad. Nationality is little valued in Islam; allegiance to the religious community is everything. Westerners need to know much more about the genuinely Qur'anic mind-set.

Not only enquiring non-Muslims will read the present study. Muslims who do will find it very hard to appreciate. From them I ask only this; read the study as carefully as it has been written, and do not make up your mind about it until you have considered all the evidence. The author has done his best to maintain a reasonably objective, even-handed approach. None of us is completely neutral on anything, but we can at least attempt to suspend our prejudices and look at the evidence dispassionately.

One pre-condition did seem necessary. It appears to me impossible to carry out a fair examination of the Qur'an, (or any other book claiming to be God's Word), without at least provisionally assuming there is a God, and One Who might reveal Himself to humans. Readers not prepared for this assumption will find the study unsatisfactory. Unless you are already an immovable atheist, I simply ask that you try to keep an open mind (and will?).

#### THE METHOD AND PURPOSE

A long-established religion like this has both itself produced, and attracted from others, a

vast amount of written material. My own approach is not intended to be original, even in the limited but foundational field of the Qur'an itself. I have tried to simplify the issues, for people lacking time or ability to do much research for themselves. I have laboured hard to keep this study readable, by avoiding complexities of argument or of wording. So, unlike an academic treatise, not every statement has its authority listed. However, I hope that readers will believe my claim that I have tried not to misrepresent the Qur'an, Islam or Muslims. By wide, careful research, I have tried to be as accurate as possible in statements of fact.

In many ways it would be better if the Qur'an could be examined purely in its own terms, without comparing it to other books or religions. But the Book itself makes this impossible. The Qur'an establishes itself by claiming to correct and complete two other religions, Judaism and Christianity. This brings it into immediate intellectual conflict with them. Reflecting the Qur'an's own approach, Muslims try to establish their religion by strongly denying the truth of others. This may be done on a crude popular level by controversialists like Ahmed Deedat and his successors such as Zakir Naik, of whom more later. Or, on a somewhat more scholarly level, by writers like Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Indian author of a translation and commentary on the Qur'an which is widely available in English. We shall refer also in places to a much longer commentary by the Pakistani scholar, A.A. Maududi, translated into English.

Nearly all Muslims believe in another primary source of authority too. While not seen as the direct Word of God, the Traditions, known as Hadeeth or Sunnah, are given almost equal weight to the Qur'an in practice. These are the sayings and behaviour of Muhammad, as re-told during the first two hundred years or more of Muslim history. They were then sifted and collated as an authoritative example for an "Islamic" life. To Muslims, whatever the Prophet said or did must be perfect. There seems to be no definite evidence that Muhammad ever commanded an official collection of his sayings and doings. But the Qur'an itself made this almost inevitable, for a later verse, 33:21, calls his conduct a "**beautiful pattern**". Compare 68:4.

A careful reading of the biographies of Muhammad written even by Muslims is very illuminating as to his character - but that is another subject. It is enough to say here that non-Muslims would scarcely regard his behaviour as beyond question. If we assume, as all Muslims do, that Muhammad is indeed the Final Prophet, on the basis the Qur'an given to him is God's final Word, there can be no reason or authority to question anything he said or did. If the Qur'an is NOT God's Last Revelation...

Most Muslims hold that the Qur'an is directly the Word of Al'lah (probably from **Al Ilah**, "The God"), only in the original Arabic. They base this insistence on verses like 12:2, 13:37, 14:4, 16:103, 41:44, 42:7, and 43:30. Yet the reason Al'lah gave in these places is that the Arabs, who had never had any Scriptures in their own language, would now be able easily to understand God's Word. Insisting that translations into other languages are not the authentic Qur'an, has some disadvantages. Most Muslims, who haven't studied the now outdated Arabic used in the Qur'an, depend heavily on religious teachers. These are, after all, only human, and certainly far from infallible.

Even in translation, the Qur'an contains some beautiful and profound material, and in places is most impressive to read. In the original Arabic it is very poetical and almost hypnotic when read aloud. This in itself may have discouraged objective assessment of the Book. Nevertheless, in following chapters, an objective or at least fair appraisal is exactly what we shall attempt. Fortunately, the translation into English by Abdullah Yusuf Ali is approved by many Muslims. This translation we shall use in references to the Qur'an. Sometimes we shall quote from his commentary too.

Unfortunately, like others, Yusuf Ali has adopted 17<sup>th</sup> Century English, perhaps to mimic the grandeur of the Authorised Version of the Bible? At any rate, I suggest that readers obtain an English translation of the Qur'an, and look up at least some of the references given here, which are not excessive in number. By doing this, you will be able to confirm or challenge whatever I have written.

A warning: other translations may have different numberings for the verses, varying by up to six verses. I have spelled transliterations of most Arabic words in a slightly unusual way, to help more accurate pronunciation. "Mecca" and "Medina" I have left in their inaccurate common forms.

One final point in this Introduction.. In our civilization, prevailing fashion suggests we "feel" all things spiritual, rather than test them by intellect. This is surely quite wrong. Unless there actually is no such thing as absolute truth about God, it seems a very inadequate and foolish method, to adopt a religion just because it somehow "feels right". Still less, because it meets our own personal needs better than others.

On the other hand, religion must be more than mere intellectual propositions, to be accepted by rational proof. What we can do, surely, is to listen carefully while the religion speaks to our hearts, but also to examine it with such intelligence and moral discernment as may be available to us. So we begin our study with a selection of short passages, particularly from the earlier chapters of the Qur'an. Sensitive people from many backgrounds have been impressed by their profundity, poeticism and power.

This "poetic" character of the Qur'an is deliberate. It was originally written in a kind of rhyming and rhythmic prose, with very short lines. At the risk of removing something of this quality, I have decided to save space by putting the verses I quote into ordinary sentence form. The words in brackets have been mostly inserted by the translator, to help the sense. Some think this particular translator has been too free with his additions. Capitals on some words are also by Yusuf Ali's own decision.