

MUSLIMS AND THE WESTERN STUDIES OF THE QUR'ĀN:
THE QUR'ĀN IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Conversation with *Muzaffar Iqbal*

Iqbal: *Bismi'llāhi'r-Raḥmāni'r-Raḥīm.* Today I would like to discuss three unprecedented situations that arise as the contemporary world encounters the Noble Qur'ān. There are some 1.6 billion Muslims, but only about twenty percent can actually open the Book sent down for their guidance and start reading, how does this impact Muslims? Second, what paths are open to non-Muslims to access the Divine message? And, finally—and I would like to address this thoroughly—is the situation of academic scholarship on the Qur'ān.

Nasr: *Bismi'llāhi'r-Raḥmāni'r-Raḥīm.* Let me begin with the first very important question that you brought up. It is true that only twenty percent of the Islamic community is Arab, but that really has very little to do with the question, because not even those fluent in Arabic can simply open a copy of the Qur'ān and begin reading with full comprehension of all its layers of deep meaning. And it has always been like this: throughout Islamic history, after the early expansion and the Umayyad period, a large part of the Ummah was not Arabic speaking. The Persians, the people of the Indian subcontinent, the Turks, the Chinese, the Malays, the Africans—even in the so-called Middle Ages, the majority of Muslims did not have Arabic as their mother tongue. Perhaps the Arabic minority was not as small a minority as it is today, but, nevertheless, it was a minority.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is University Professor of Islamic Studies at The George Washington University, Washington D.C., USA; Email: msirat@gwu.edu.
Muzaffar Iqbal is Founder-President of the Center for Islam and Science (www.cis-ca.org); Email: Muzaffar@cis-ca.org. This conversation took place on Saturday, October 23, 2010 in Professor Nasr's office at The George Washington University, Washington DC. USA.

Despite this sociological and linguistic diversity, however, Islam and Islamic civilization could only survive insofar as the Noble Qurʾān preserved its centrality and they did survive and, in fact, flourished. Someone in Sumatra hearing a verse of the Qurʾān would weep as much as someone in Fez or Cairo, and their physical location and their mother language were irrelevant to their piety. There were established channels through which the external and inward meanings, the message, and even the art of litany of the Qurʾān were transmitted across the vast reaches of the community of believers, the *ummah*. There was a historical infrastructure for the dissemination of the Qurʾān and its understanding. Those who knew would teach those who did not know: people would listen to its transmitted understanding in *khuṭbahs* (sermons); scholars transmit it through literature, and men of letters through stories... And then, of course, one should never overlook the very important aspect of hearing the Qurʾān. Do not forget that the Qurʾān is an oral revelation; it was not originally a written revelation analogous to Moses receiving the Ten Commandments inscribed on a tablet on top of Mount Sinai. The Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, first *heard* the Qurʾān. This experience of *hearing* the Qurʾān is extremely significant. The fact that people might not understand every sentence is in a sense really secondary in comparison to the basic presence of the reality of the Qurʾān in their hearts and minds.

The new situation we are facing therefore is not simply the fact that eighty percent of contemporary Muslims do not speak or read Arabic. It is that many of those traditional channels I just described have become weakened or even, in some cases, destroyed. This is heightened also by the introduction of modern education into the Islamic world, as a new so-called intelligentsia—I hate to use this word, because they are not really what we know as the *khawāṣṣ* (elect) but merely educated people in the modern Western sense—came to the fore. Even people without advanced modern education began to be trained in another way of thinking, of connecting subject and predicate, of looking for meaning in sentences other than the traditional Islamic way, as they approached the Divine revelation and otherwise as well. These acquired habits of mind were very different from the way traditional Muslims thought about and looked upon the text of the Glorious Qurʾān and in fact upon all traditional Islamic texts in general. So our task in the modern world is first of all to recreate, as much as possible, those channels of the transmission of the authentic knowledge of the Qurʾān; and, secondly, to redirect Muslim minds whose ways of thinking, even unconsciously, have been transformed by the methods of modern Western education

back to the Islamic norm. We can understand this difference by pointing to a spatial metaphor: the new understanding is very horizontal; it does not go deep and vertically into the meaning of the text.

Iqbal: What I had in mind with regard to this situation was actually this significant group (though ultimately a minority) of so-called educated Muslims who continue to define the Muslim polity today, whether it be politics and economics or intellectual trends, and so on. Until the middle of the twentieth century, through my grandparents' generation even to my parents' generation, most educated Muslims had a working knowledge of Arabic; in the Indian subcontinent of both Arabic and Persian. These languages and the worlds they opened up were a part of their experience, even if they did not speak Arabic on a daily basis. And the same was true for the rest of the Muslim world. Further, their encounter with the modern world had not yet changed the way of their thinking, as you said earlier. Now, you know, you come across so many educated Muslims who actually *can* read the Qur'ān, but they have absolutely no idea about the real meaning of what they read and the levels at which the Qur'ān operates.

Nasr: Yes, this is exactly what I was saying—

Iqbal: For example, we had a seminar in Edmonton about Islam and science, and the story of Ibrāhīm, upon him peace, being thrown in the fire was mentioned. One young fellow stood up and he said, "You know, I have studied fire in much detail in order to make sense of this event, and modern science has finally shown us that there are varying degrees of heat in fire. There are various zones in fire, and one of these zones is absolutely cool; Ibrāhīm *'alayhis-salām* must have been sitting in that cool zone of fire; and so he was saved because Allah taught him to access that cool zone." It was as though his mind would not or could not accept a description of a miracle in the text and so he was forced to somehow rationalize it, by changing the understanding of the text and also the laws of physics! How can one approach these people and reground their understanding in textual sources and the Islamic tradition?

Nasr: This is one of the most basic questions facing us today, which involves not only the way we understand the Noble Qur'ān but also the *Hadīth*, in fact the whole of our religion and tradition. There is no way of bringing modern educated Muslims back to the traditional understanding of the Qur'ān unless you are also able to bring them back to the sacred universe in which the Qur'ān has a sacred reality, that is, to counter the process of secularization of the Muslim mind that has been going on

for over a century. It was really only in the mid-twentieth century when people like myself began to criticize this process, to criticize the modern world and its deep structures of secularization, and try to recreate the sacral world, what we call the traditional world. That is a momentous task, a truly crucial task for our times.

One way of gauging if we have been able to recreate the traditional world is to think for example about whether the realm of the unseen, the absent world, *‘alam al-ghayb*, can be again understood as being real, that is, whether it is possible to accept non-physical levels of reality, not to try to explain away the Jinn as forces for psychologists to deal with, not to treat the angels as simply metaphors, but to understand that the levels of reality are also beyond the physical or visible and apparent levels. Unless we challenge and change these basic assumptions, there is no way of making those modernized people, whose minds have been forged by that meagre view of reality, see the multi-dimensional reality of the Qur’ān itself and the multi-dimensional universe within which the Qur’ān reveals its full meaning. So, the task is really to reconstruct the spiritual and intellectual world of Islam—something to which I have devoted my whole life. Without that, if you just try to prove to some modernized mind that a certain verse has more than a simple literal meaning, or that it also means something other than a specific historical interpretation, it just is not going to work. *Al-ḥamdu li’lLāh*, many people who have reduced their reality to a single level still believe in God. They say their daily prayers, still revere the Qur’ān. But the universe in which they think is secularized. Between God up there and the world in which they live, all those other levels of reality have been destroyed for them through modernism, through secular education and modern secular science, and of course through the direct, frontal attack against the Qur’ān itself which we will discuss in a moment. These are the tasks we have before us.

I do not mean that all of the one billion six hundred million Muslims all over the world must be re-educated. Neither you nor I nor all the scholars in Muslim countries can do that fully nor is this needed for the majority of Muslims to remain traditional. What happens rather is that truth always percolates downwards, like from the apex of a pyramid. I always give this example to present day Muslims. I say: Look at when Galileo and Descartes were exchanging letters about the new science and about the new understanding of nature as pure quantity. There were not even three dozen people in Europe who shared their view. Within one century they had conquered all the universities and the

whole intellectual life of Western Europe. And from there these ideas began to percolate into the broader populace. Even in the seventeenth century, if you went to an Italian village and there was an earthquake, people thought it was the wrath of God and they would start reciting the beginning of the Book of John. The new scientific understanding only began to seep into the whole of the population gradually from the few to the many. What we need, now, is not to pull every villager from Malaysia or Sarawak or Nigeria aside to re-educate him or her to understand the Qur'ān traditionally. No. It is to re-educate the people who, as you said, determine the educational, political, and economic lives of the large number of Muslims. Those people must be taught to breathe again in the traditional Islamic universe—and that is not possible without a deep critique of modernism.

Many keep asking me, “Why do you keep criticizing modernism?” I say, you cannot build anything on a ground that is full of ruins. You have to clear the ground first. There is no other choice. We have to do that. Many Muslim thinkers display a kind of wishy-washiness—either they have an inferiority complex vis-a-vis the West or they have lack of knowledge or in fact they subscribe to what they consider as a higher form of modernism (even if it is reworked in Islamic terms). These compounded factors have prevented a broad-base in-depth critique to take place except among a few people, a critique that would then clear the ground and permit Muslims to better understand the inner meanings of the Qur'ān. And this is something that can be done. The proof of it is that it *has* been done to some extent already although its effect is not as widely disseminated as it should be. A new generation of young Muslim scholars has appeared on the scene. They know Arabic very well and they totally reject the reductionistic worldview within which the inner meanings of the Qur'ān cannot have any significance. They reject the use of allegorical and metaphorical interpretations of the Qur'ān as excuses to avoid the deeper spiritual meanings of it and also to dominate through power nature that is God's sacred creation with impunity in the name of Islam. Such scholars are increasing in number and they will affect that young Pakistani or Persian or Arab student who is indirectly and often unconsciously influenced by a secularist interpretation of the world and therefore even of sacred scripture. This unconscious influence can be either modernist or so-called fundamentalist—they are both equally reductionist, just from opposite perspectives. Both gloss over anything having to do with the kernel of the Qur'ān. So many of the commentaries we have today are from one or another of these perspectives, dealing only with the shell.

Iqbal: This leads me to bring one more dimension to our discussion this morning. This intellectual task, to which you have contributed tremendously, is only one aspect, because there is also a spiritual dimension involved in this process of relationship with the Qurʾān. Traditionally, intellectual work took place within the spiritual register, as these efforts were usually directly transmitted, through the *ḥurūq*, the disciplines of *taṣawwuf*—

Nasr: Of course, of course.

Iqbal: So even while these minds are being re-trained, do you not think that we also need to simultaneously revive that direct, heart-to-heart mode of transformation?

Nasr: Absolutely. And that is what is at the heart of what has happened in the Islamic world. Since you spoke about *taṣawwuf*—even though the channels of traditional knowledge transmission were largely bypassed or dismantled, this did not always mean that the *ḥurūq* died out as well. Many survived, *al-ḥamdu liʾllāh*, those violent projects in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of the Islamic calendar, that is the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries of the common era, against *taṣawwuf*! Those projects were of two kinds: first, the puritanical, rationalistic, reductionist, simplistic interpretations of Islam which came out of Wahhābism and later Salafism; second, the modernist movements and colonial influences. These influences, although opposed to each other in certain matters, are joined in so many other things: they all “worship” modern science and technology, they are all indifferent to Islamic art, they all join hands in their opposition to Sufism—but for different reasons—and they are all opposed to the Islamic intellectual tradition. Of course, some Sufi orders gradually weakened, but we do have in the Islamic world today, *al-ḥamdu liʾllāh*, many Sufi orders, which, on the spiritual and practical level, are still very vibrant. What is lacking in most of them is intellectual power, which is what people like myself are trying to provide.

Without spiritual practice, knowledge is like a tree that does not bear fruit. The fruit of a tree is the result of the manifestation on the plane of action, you might say, of the being of the tree. There is the famous Arabic proverb—I do not think that it is a *ḥadīth*—*al-ʿilm bi-lā ʿamal ka-shajar bi-lā thamar*, that is, knowledge without deeds is like a tree without fruit. I would be the last person to deny the relationship between high intellectual reflection on traditional science and cosmology and the basic need for such reflection to be mirrored in our own lives, our own spiritual practices. At the very first step, when I began to see the cracks

in the wall of modernism and I sought authentic knowledge, I also began to seek an authentic way to “practice” that knowledge. I have been involved in it since my twenties—for over fifty years of my life, now. So, I agree with you—absolutely. These two dimensions; that is, doctrine and method, go hand in hand.

I think that once the ground is cleared of the intellectual errors that prevent those who are sincere and spiritually disposed from following a spiritual path, they will do so. And I have seen many, many examples of that truth. Indeed, in this regard it is much better now than it was fifty years ago. Then there were very few people who could adequately respond to the errors of modernist ideologies. They tried to circumvent them. Often they simply did not talk about them. Rather they tried to talk about generosity, gratitude, etc.—of course, these virtues are central to human life. But we are created as *ḥayawān an-nāṭiq*: beings who think, discourse. If you think rightly you come to God—that is what the Qurʾān keeps telling us with imperatives such as *taddabbarū*, *tafakkarū*, and so forth. And if we do not think rightly, that affects our religious and spiritual life. Knowledge and virtue are not separable from each other; rather, one complements the other. Moreover, each person has his or her own destiny and vocation. My vocation has been partly to resuscitate the spiritual life in Islam and *taṣawwuf*; but it has also been to try to recreate the Islamic intellectual universe, which has been—if not totally destroyed—in large part dismantled by the ideological and material processes of modernism since the nineteenth century.

Iqbal: Let us now address the second aspect of the contemporary predicament: how non-Muslims, the average disbeliever, can approach the Qurʾān.

Nasr: Let us first question the question. Let us be honest with each other and ask, “why do we care about what non-Muslims think about the Qurʾān?” There are many reasons. If we are thinking specifically about the West, America and Western Europe, what non-Muslims think about the Qurʾān and Islam affects the lives of Muslims around the world in a thousand ways—from bombs falling in northwest Pakistan to economic factors, the dissemination of information and news on the media, and all kinds of other ways including the effect of Western orientalism, pop culture, and missionary proselytizing. There is a context to these questions that we need to keep in mind. There is obviously a special reason involved if we are speaking about helping non-Muslims from the West understand Islam. The second way we can approach this question is of course that we consider the Qurʾān to be the Word of God and we therefore want to propagate its truth. This is a kind of missionary proselytism on our part.

The way that it is done now is not of great consequence if we have the Western intelligentsia in mind; I believe much more in trying to create accord between religions and then to present the Qurʾān in such a way that its light will transform the hearts and minds of those whose beings are destined to be open to it.

To make the Qurʾān better known in the West brings up with it the idea of the universality of religion. This notion is foundational to the Qurʾān, even though many among generations of commentators have not paid much attention to it. They in fact did not need to; it was not a concept that they needed to expound as we need to do so today. The Qurʾān speaks to every age, and we need to read it for how it speaks also to our age. If we look at traditional commentaries on the idea of *Ahl al-Kitāb* [People of the Book] for instance, we see that most commentators tried to constrain its universal import because of the world in which they lived. They emphasized other parts of the Qurʾān. But the Book advocates a universal mission for religion in the universal sense (let us remember the verse, *to every people we have sent a messenger*), and Muslims can step forward to speak on the basis of the Qurʾān about the universality of religion, of brotherhood and sisterhood among followers of various religions, of harmony between religions. This, again, is one of the tasks I have set before myself all my adult life and I truly believe that this approach, in itself, will have a tremendous effect in countering the enmity that exists in the modern world against Muslims and Islam.

Muslims asserting their Islamic identity in the West of course need to also simultaneously embody the Muḥammadan character of being kind and generous. That in itself is not going to forestall enmity on the part of Christian fundamentalists, Zionists, extremists, secularists, and so on. But many Westerners, Christians, Jews, and also ethical people generally who do not follow a formal revelation, will recognize and respect that virtuous character.

What we can and should expect of non-Muslims is not that they all accept the sacred nature of the Qurʾān. That would mean in turn that they would become Muslim—and I do not think we can expect that, unless we are forecasting the appearance of the Mahdī or some other eschatological event to bring about the global unity of religions. Had God willed it, the Muslims historically would have not only reached but also remained permanently in France and captured the rest of Western Europe. Obviously, God did not will it: He willed both Islamic civilization and Christian civilization to survive. We cannot expect all non-Muslims to simply accept the Qurʾān as the Word of God. Some will

even remain Jews, Christians, etc. while understanding that God spoke in revealing the Qur'ān, and that is a very important thing in itself. And it is this category of people, along with those destined to embrace the Islamic tradition who I think will most benefit from deeper studies of the Qur'ān in Western languages, and they can play a very important role vis-à-vis other elements within Christendom. Jews, of course, have fewer troubles with the Qur'ān than Christians do, because of so many similar elements within their own tradition. The case of Maimonides provides a good example.

For Western non-Muslims, the situation has changed in one major and unprecedented way through the presence of Muslims in the West. Even though it is true that Muslims ruled Spain for 800 years, 200 years in Sicily, and they had a strong presence in Eastern Europe and the Balkans for hundreds of years as well, but this did not always translate into sustained interaction with mainstream Western Europe. When you read, let us say, Western European intellectual history, or the history of mysticism in Europe written by Westerners, there is not even one page on all the *Qāḍarīs* in Albania who were practicing Sufism only a few miles from Italy; nothing is said, as if they did not exist. But now you have a Muslim presence in the West on another level for the first time. A person like you did not exist in the eighteenth or nineteenth century in the West. We now have the presence of a sizeable Muslim community in North America, and a bigger community in Western Europe. In America and Canada, of all minority groups except for the Jewish community, the Muslims are the most educated. The new Muslim generation born here is gradually going to produce its own philosophers, theologians, intellectuals, and religious scholars.

To explain the Qur'ān to Western non-Muslims is in any case very important; and Western Muslims have a very important duty and role to play in this task and also in relation to the broader Islamic community. However, and I will repeat myself here, the way the Qur'ān is explained is crucial. I am opposed to a kind of Muslim missionary proselytizing, which itself is based on the model of what the Christians did in the Muslim world in the nineteenth century. In fact, even attempting that kind of work itself reflects a kind of Westernization, because Islam never spread in the same way that Christianity was spread by Christian missionaries throughout Africa, India and South Asia. Somebody else may have another view on this issue, and I do not want to be dogmatic, but, on the basis of my experience of the West, I think that the best way to spread Islam is to state the truth and to live the truth, to live the truth

of Islam and not only talk about it. We must try to be a presence for the truth—of course we are all humbled by the very presence of the Qur'ān, but surely the Divine Presence has to be reflected in our presence.

Iqbal: As you have said, it is very important for Muslims to approach non-Muslims with the message of the Qur'ān, though not in a proselytizing way. The problem of course is how to do so, and we should also recognize that translations of the Qur'ān are not enough—translations do not convey the message to a first-time reader. There are very few works that Muslims have produced on the Qur'ān itself that will help an educated non-Muslim understand its broader and deeper message, let alone major themes or topics such as *jihād*, *sharī'ah*, and so on.

Nasr: Well, let me address myself to this issue. The discussions about *jihād*, *sharī'ah*, and so on are second-order concerns. The fundamental issue is paying attention to the spiritual and intellectual structure of the Qur'ān, and its meaning as the Word of God, *kalām Allāh*. I was only thirty years old when I wrote *Ideals and Realities of Islam*. And I was very afraid and in awe to write the chapters on the Prophet and the Qur'ān, even though I found it easier to write about God. I fasted and prayed before I wrote, and focused not on secondary issues (women's rights, and so on) but on what the Qur'ān *means*. That book of mine has brought numerous people into Islam, and just last month was released in Chinese, fifty years after it was written. *Astaghfiru'llāh*—I do not want to talk about my own works in this way, but the point remains that they are among a small number of works that attempt to present the spiritual significance of the Qur'ān to a Western audience. The trouble with most other works is that either they are written by Muslim '*ulāmā'*' as though they were preaching in a Lahore mosque—they most often do not understand the Western audience, even when they write in English—or they are by modernists who are ignorant of the inner structure of the Qur'ān and its linguistic nuances, the broad Islamic tradition, and so forth while being at the same time in a state of inferiority complex vis-à-vis modernism.

What is required is people who have the following qualifications: First, to have faith in God and the Prophet of Islam in the Islamic religion, and, more than faith, to have love for the Prophet and God's Word, an intense love for God; that is, that they have spiritual virtue. Second, they have to possess command of the Arabic language in such a way that they can understand the linguistic depths of the Qur'ānic text. Third, they must have a deep command of a European language, especially English or French and perhaps German. Fourth, they must have knowledge of

the traditional commentaries. Fifth, they should not be duped by the errors of the modern world, by Enlightenment understanding and instrumental reason, by the relativization of historicism, by the nihilism of post-modernism. Such things are alien to Islam; they must understand them but not be duped by them. If all these conditions are met, which is rare, then, what we need of these people is to produce contemporary commentaries on the Qur'ān.

Unfortunately, in the Islamic world itself, since the nineteenth century, we have had commentaries that reflect mostly only the penetration and reach of modernism into the Islamic world or “fundamentalist” perspectives although there are some exceptions. I consider very superficial the scientific commentaries of people like al-Iskandarānī and Seyyed Ahmad Khan; this becomes evident when we read them now, nearly over a hundred years later. You and I have both studied science, and it is obvious to us that they do not even hold a serious scientific point of view. They would be laughed off from the field from the scientific point of view; any serious scientist who is interested also in religion would criticize the scientific part, not to speak of the religious part. Or, for example, Mawlānā Abu'l-Kalām Āzād whose commentary is now available in English. He was a different kind of man from al-Iskandarānī and Seyyed Ahmad Khan, but still there are a lot of nineteenth century modernist ideas in his commentary. Or take those commentaries that come from a Salafi background, such as the commentary of Sayyid Quṭb and people like that. There are some interesting things in those works but also a sense of anger and a very shallow understanding of the West and even of much of the Qur'ān itself. When Sayyid Quṭb came to America I was at Harvard, president of the Harvard Islamic Society; we met and spent several days together. He was interested in learning about the West, but the poor man did not have the intellectual preparation to understand what was really going on intellectually in the West. So his analysis of the West was to a large extent superficial, looking critically at girls' dress and boys and girls talking together in cafes. It was reduced to a critique along those lines. Today we have all sorts of modern and “fundamentalist” commentaries that I do not consider to be relevant in terms of what I am talking about here.

You have also contemporary commentaries which are not modernistic or “fundamentalist” but which unfortunately are often inaccessible in Western languages. The supreme example is *Tafsīr al-Mizān* of 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, who, as you know, was my teacher for twenty years. I was witness to the birth of that commentary. He knew all the well-known

commentaries—Sunni and Shi‘i, linguistic/*lughawī*, historical/*ta’rīkhī*, theological, philosophical, Sufi. He was familiar with all of these; he knew more about traditional commentaries than all of us put together. He was interested in the challenges of modernism, but was not himself modernistic by any means. Sometimes his answers to certain matters provided material with which leftists, Marxists, and other modernists would attack Islam. In any case, his text itself is contemporary without being modernist or “fundamentalist”. What we need in our current condition in the West, no one scholar can achieve along the lines of his twenty-seven volume work. But what we can do, and what we need to do, is to produce commentaries by people who are knowledgeable not only in the text of the Qur’ān but also in the tradition of commentaries. The *Ḥadīth* is the first commentary; everything else relies upon it, from the commentaries of Imām Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, Ṭabarī, Qurṭubī, Zamakhsharī, and Jalālayn, all the way to our own day with ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā‘ī. The exigencies of modern life do not allow for one person especially in the West to write fifteen or twenty volume commentaries, such as those that have been written during earlier historical periods in the Islamic world—the authors of such commentaries did not have to go out and buy stamps and envelopes and install light bulbs, like you and I have to do. That is a different kind of scholarly life with its own kinds of scholarly disciplines. Islamic civilization was and is still able in some cases to produce these kinds of scholars in *dār al-Islām*—for example, Makārīm Shīrāzī in Iran, who just finished a sixteen or seventeen volume commentary. He and I were friends in the old days, I knew him well—he writes from his home while not having to worry about tax forms: he has had time to devote himself fully to this task without the impediments that a Muslim scholar faces in the West. Therefore, we need to concentrate on smaller commentaries and make use of all the tremendous wealth of exegesis that we have inherited; we need to present something pertinent in contemporary language that remains traditional.

Iqbal: The last aspect to which we turn is that of the academic study of the Qur’ān, in the Western world especially. As you know, Brill has produced an encyclopedia about which I have written a long critique. The problem here, of course—and I want to discuss this with you very frankly—is the fundamental question of whether it is possible for a non-Muslim scholar, who does not believe that the object of his or her study (the Qur’ān) is the actual Word of God, is it possible for this person to produce a completely objective work on the Qur’ān? The first demand that the Qur’ān makes on its readers/reciters is to commit to whether one accepts it as Divine Word or not. If a person does not accept it as

such, there are veils that fall on his or her intellect, on his or her heart; there is a negative spiritual impact of that denial of the Qur'ān as God's actual Word.

Nasr: Of course.

Iqbal: So, what are the ways in which non-Muslim Western scholarship can actually seriously, sincerely, and productively engage with the Qur'ān, assuming of course that it is not biased against the Qur'ān from the start?

Nasr: Yes, this is a very important issue. There is no way we can address here all of the different aspects of it. But let me start with something I remember: many, many years ago, before Fazlur Rahman came to America, he was the head of the Islamic Institute in Pakistan when in 1959 I met him in Lahore. I did not agree with his modernist interpretations of Islam, but we were good friends. He once said to me, "You know, Dr. Nasr, let the Western scholars study Islam as much as they like, but they should not have the right to study the Qur'ān." That was a person who had studied in the West and was a modernist saying such a thing, and I concurred with him but I said, "Dr. Rahman, you are not going to be able to stop it, nor can I." This is a fact of life. Western scholars are going to study the Qur'ān whether we like it or not. But there are many complicated factors that are related to this kind of scholarship. You have written about this matter yourself, as have others. The first element we need to understand is the thousand-year-old history in the West reaching back to Peter the Venerable of studying the Qur'ān in order not to understand it but to try to destroy it, to destroy its impact. Second is the rise of modern Orientalists. By modern I mean the nineteenth century, people like Goldziher and Nöldeke, and moreover the idea that Westerners have developed a scientific methodology, coming out of the Enlightenment, that is universal—the idea that Western scholars not only have the right to apply this methodology to whatever they want for their own purposes but also that everybody has to accept the results of their scholarly findings whether they are Westerners, Muslims or otherwise, ultimately, because their guns are bigger than those of others. It is brutal power structure that lies behind this hubris. The same thing happened to India, to Hinduism; what has happened in the history of Western interpretations of the Vedas is very similar to what has happened to the Islamic tradition in the Orientalist interpretations of the Qur'ān. Moreover, certain interpretations in the West of the Vedas and Upanishads have been taken up by modernized Hindus,

just as those concerning the Qurʾān and *Ḥadīth* have influenced many modernized Muslims.

For the sake of intellectual honesty it is necessary to mention that a number of Western Orientalists—let me use a term that is not that common now, Orientalists as well as Islamicists, because I want to connect classical, pre-World War II Orientalism with its newer face—had a reverence for the Qurʾān and even considered it to be the Word of God. Two of the greatest Western Orientalists, Sir Hamilton Gibb and Louis Massignon, both of whom I knew personally, considered the Qurʾān to be the Word of God; although they were not formally Muslims, they were very close to Islam. One was a Protestant and one was a Catholic lay cardinal, but they lived in a spiritual world which was close to that of Islam. They were, however, exceptions rather than the rule.

Despite the distortions and desacralization seen in most Western studies of Islam and the Qurʾān, there is still great possibility of serious inter-religious dialogue. Let us remember that for centuries there have been Muslims, especially Sufis, who have studied Christianity with great sympathy and yet who did not accept Christ as the Son of God. Some of these studies are of such metaphysical depth that many Christians today do not fully understand the depth of what Rūmī means when he talks about Christ in the *Mathnawī* or Ibn ʿArabī in the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. This possibility comes from the fact that God has given us intelligence so that we can be participatory in various senses. We can participate in something without being there. And this goes both ways: so I do not preclude the possibility that there might be a few people in the West who are attracted to Islamic studies because of the beauty of the Qurʾān, who deep down in their hearts do believe that this text is the Word of God, who can say “I follow the Word of God which for me is Jesus Christ who is called the Logos, the Word of God in the Book of John—but this other Word [the Qurʾān] must [likewise] come from Heaven,” and so look upon it with reverence.

The majority of people in the West who carry out Qurʾānic studies today, however, are not in this category at all. First of all, some of them are atheists or agnostics, who have no sense for the sacred as such even if they were to study the New Testament. Some of them are not atheists but Christian missionaries (like Kenneth Cragg, perhaps the most sympathetic among them, who knows Arabic well and was in Jerusalem for a long time, but who deep in his heart does not accept the Qurʾān as the Word of God). And then there are those who used to be Marxists and now are deconstructionists, postmodernists, etc. who follow the ideas

of thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida about reading a text. Now, nobody is going to prevent any of these types of scholars from studying the Qurʾān. The important task for us, who are traditional Muslims, is to be able to respond to them with authenticity, eloquence and precision, and also with all the scholarly paraphernalia that is prevalent in Western scholarship. We must also demonstrate clearly that, from the point of view of logic, of reason, of any “scientific view” that one might have, if you have an object that you are studying, and the central aspect of that object is sacred in nature, to those who look upon that object as having a sacred nature, if you negate that element, you are not studying the same object as that which is sacred for people whose religion you are studying. In fact, for the most part, the Western study of the Qurʾān does not study the same object as the Qurʾān as seen and experienced in the Islamic tradition. Yes, their studies might teach you something. It might teach you aspects of Arabic philology, of history, about various events—but it is not the same object of study as is the Islamic Qurʾān.

Today, most chairs in Islamic studies in the United States and Canada are held by non-Muslims. However, this has been changing increasingly during the last few decades; and, *inshāʾaʾllāh*, one day Islamic studies in America will develop along the lines of Jewish studies as far as having Muslims teaching Islam in concerned. I think that, except for Seton Hall—which is a Catholic University in New Jersey—every single important chair of Jewish studies in the United States is now occupied by a Jewish scholar as it should be but this was not the case fifty years ago. The Jewish community has made this change possible over a period of thirty or forty years by sacrifice—a sacrifice that Muslim parents also have to make. Many Jewish families encouraged some of their children to pursue Jewish studies or religious studies in general knowing that they would be earning less as teachers and scholars than if they became doctors and lawyers, which many of them did also become. But when we come to Muslim parents, even those who are devout Muslims, they are the ones who are for the most part putting pressure on the younger generation to pursue the fields of medicine and engineering at the expense of the humanistic disciplines and Islamic studies. The long term effect of changing this attitude and having more Muslim students to pursue religious and Islamic studies is that of course one would still have some non-Muslim Western scholars of Islam. But they would not dominate the field. This transformation will take a generation of work along the lines of what our Jewish cousins have achieved, but it needs effort on the part of the Islamic community in the West.

Iqbal: Right.

Nasr: It is interesting to note that what is happening at several upper-ranking universities in America already is that many if not most of the PhD students are Muslims—and almost all of the professors are non-Muslims, many of whom are anti-Muslim. And, metaphorically speaking, the students are pushing their teachers to the wall. You have a new generation of young, very brilliant, gifted Muslim students coming up, and the difference from the past is that they now have access to traditional and traditionalist books on Islam which did not exist fifty years ago. These are works, and my own books have been an attempt to contribute to this corpus, that respond to the errors of Orientalism and present the authentic traditional Islamic point of view. And then, of course, you have the works such as those of Edward Said which also play a part in revealing the real nature of Orientalism. I respect Said's works but I am more inclined to speak about Orientalism at the metaphysical level, instead of the political and social level; and I am not 'against' the works of individual Orientalists like he was—I am perhaps less passionate, more discriminatory and nuanced in the criticism of them.

There are now two major Qur'ān projects being carried out and both of these are likely to play a very important role in the future reconfiguration of Qur'ānic studies in the West: The *Study Qur'ān* of which I am the Editor-in-Chief, and the *Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, of which you are the General Editor. When your encyclopedia comes out, once people see its caliber and recognize that its scholarly standards are just as high as other encyclopedias but the work is produced by Muslims, it is going to be a real intervention in the field. Why was the *Catholic Encyclopaedia* composed? Why did the *Jewish Encyclopaedia* come out? Because the Catholic Church realized that with all these encyclopedias coming out, it needed an encyclopedia in the libraries that a Catholic student can rely on! The same is true for the Jewish case. A Catholic student can go to *Americana*, *Britannica*, and other works as well, but at least that authentic Catholic voice is now also there. We already have *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, of course, with many good articles in various disciplines (history, philology, archaeology...), but the worldview and methodology of its scholarship is not from an Islamic point of view. And though the second edition is a little bit better in this respect than the first, the key articles on Islam itself still have problems from our point of view. Of course there are changes being made to this in many encyclopedias, to the extent that in the new edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* the articles on the Prophet and the Qur'ān are written by

myself. If we look at the historical weight behind this change it is really amazing that they finally decided they wanted a Muslim to write a major article of ten thousand words on the Prophet rather than someone who does not even consider the Prophet to be a prophet. Of course the Urdu encyclopedia, the Turkish encyclopedia, try to do that to a large extent, but even they consist to a large extent of articles drawn from Western sources. The greatest Islamic encyclopedia of Islam today is *Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif-i Buzurg-i Islāmī* in Persian. That is the first one to be written from the Islamic point of view throughout. Nearly all the essays are freshly written by Muslims, not simply translated from English or French. Now that an abridgement of that work is being translated into English, *inshā'a'llāh* it will be a first step, in making available a general encyclopedia in English; but from the Islamic point of view *The Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān* that you have started will be the first with this characteristic but devoted solely to the Qur'ān.

Iqbal: It will be very interesting to see what happens, ten or twenty-five years down the road, to this other tradition, because, you know, we do not as yet have anything to compare it with. If we have *The Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān* sitting next to Brill's *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, scholars and researchers will be able to use both—and, *inshā'a'llāh*, the difference they will see will change the dynamics of the production of knowledge concerning the Qur'ān.

Nasr: Absolutely. Until now the Western academy has been their world—and what do we expect from that except what we see now? Western scholarship on the Qur'ān has developed a particular method of scholarship with its own ends. But the claim to objectivity, to objective universality, is what needs to be challenged. Otherwise every civilization has a right to produce its own view about other traditions and civilizations.

Iqbal: My fear with regard to such projects is that the academic world is going to once again cast aspersions on such knowledge—that they are going to be received negatively simply because their engagements come from positions of belief.

Nasr: We can answer that directly. What is this category 'objective'? If we were to approach this philosophically, as Foucault and other postmodernists have already done in their own particular way, we must recognize that every reading of any text presumes a certain worldview. There are theoretical presuppositions and frameworks that we bring to these texts and that cannot simply be ignored with a claim to universality beyond the particularity of the worldview upon which scholarship of a sacred

text is based, if that scholarship ignores the sacred nature of the text that determines its nature. I do not at all agree with post-modernist philosophies but I need to mention that many currents of contemporary Western philosophy have themselves already debunked this idea of universality, of objectivity, in the humanities and religious studies the sense of objectivity that still rules in modern science. But even there, in quantum mechanics, there is this idea that the very process of observing something on the micro-level changes what you are observing.

The more direct response to objections that faithful engagements with sacred texts are not objective, is that what we are studying in the case of Islam, for example, is that object as seen and understood by a billion and half Muslims all across the globe. What those with pretensions to other kinds of objectivity study claim is something else altogether. It is as though we gather to establish an institution to study the cross and we bring chemists to study its composition, and geometers to study the geometry of its perpendicular angles, historians to discuss the symbolism of the cross in ancient India, in Babylonia, and so forth—without ever approaching the cross in light of what it means to Christians. What do such studies have to do with the Christian cross? Nothing. And in what sense are such studies objective? This is what we have to demonstrate in relation to the Qurʾān as an object of study.

Iqbal: Indeed. Thank you.