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Munʾim Sirry (ed.)

New Trends in Qurʾānic Studies

Text, Context,
and Interpretation

New Trends in Qur'anic Studies

International Qur'anic Studies Association
Studies in the Qur'ān

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David S. Powers

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New Trends in Qur'anic Studies
Text, Context, and Interpretation

Mun'im Sirry, editor

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Foreword

In 2009, when addressing a conference of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars engaged in critical studies of the Qur'ān at the University of Notre Dame, Professor Abdolkarim Soroush remarked, “what a shame it is that conferences of this kind are not held in Islamic countries, and are unlikely to be for the foreseeable future, because they would not be welcomed by Muslims.”¹ Professor Soroush is rightly recognized as one of the most influential intellectuals in the Muslim world today. But his remark proves that brilliance does not a prophet make. The year 2009 was only five years before the incorporation of the International Qur'anic Studies Association (IQSA), which held its first international conference on critical studies of the Qur'ān the following year in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country by population in the world. The essays in this volume derive from that conference.

Indonesia was a fitting locale for this historic 2015 conference. Apart from having the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesian Muslims are extraordinarily diverse, both religiously and culturally, and many other religions are practiced there. What is more, Indonesia's secular national government does not generally interfere with religious practice. Jogjakarta, the locale for this conference, is a renowned center of education (*kota pelajar*) and culture with an impressive mix of traditional and modern schools and approaches to learning. The fact that the State Islamic University (UIN) Sunan Kalijaga was the local host for this conference is particularly appropriate, as this university has been the country's leading center for studies of vernacular Islam, state-Islam relations, and contemporary social change in Muslim societies. Here is a respected Islamic university located in a Muslim country engaging in critical study of the Qur'ān!

The phrase “critical study of the Qur'ān” merits consideration, since it has come to mean in some quarters the *criticism* of the Qur'ān with the purported goal of denigrating it and reducing its standing as a sacred text. “Criticism” carries a sense of disapproval or disparagement, an unfortunate misreading of the term as I use it here. In critical studies the term signifies the exercise of judicious evaluation of an object or idea examined, and it includes the questioning of all assumptions. Perhaps the most appropriate synonym would be

1. Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspective on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context 2* (London: Routledge, 2011), xvii.

“analytical.” Analytical perspectives have been applied to the Qur’ān since its emergence as a text in the seventh century CE. The earliest critical study of the Qur’ān was made by Companions of the Prophet who asked him questions about the meaning of the revelation he announced. The Companions would not hold back from questioning his answers, and subsequent Muslim commentators have continued in their footsteps by applying critical analytical methods in a wide variety of literary, linguistic, and historical explorations of the qur’anic text. Muslim scholars have often adjusted their approaches to the Qur’ān in response to contemporary developments, and a certain level of openness to new methods among traditional Muslim scholars continues to this day.

Methodologies and perspectives have continued to evolve. What has changed with respect to the critical study of the Qur’ān is not only the particular modes of analysis (historical, religious, intellectual), but also the tools that scholars apply to it. Researchers are influenced by many factors: developments in science and technology, changes in the languages we speak, and new ideas that inevitably arise from exchanges between people. These factors have an impact on our assumptions as readers, not only in relation to the Qur’ān, but also in relation to the entire world that we are constantly “reading,” a term that aptly describes the way we process and make sense of the world around us. Reading is interpretive because we “read ourselves” into whatever it is that we read. Whenever we read, we interpret, but because we are all different, the interpretive products of our reading will differ as well. This certainly applies to reading the Qur’ān.

That we differ, one may argue, is a divinely wrought reality (Q 5:48, 49:13). But whatever our perspective on the source of human disagreement, it is impossible to deny that we humans differ over our reading of almost everything. Difference is inevitable, and the nature of difference is such that it often causes discomfort that can lead to discord. Such is the nature of the human condition. Disagreement, however, can also bring illumination. Since we are destined to differ, let us learn and grow from our differences so that we may understand more fully the subtleness of the universe.

The series of essays in this collection reflect an earnest and intellectually honest effort to learn and grow from our diverse perspectives and approaches to qur’anic studies. They employ a range of methodologies: historical, rhetorical, juridical, and theological. One of the most striking aspects of this remarkable collection is the conversation between and among its authors. The conversation begins, for example, with an essay by Fred M. Donner on the history and evolution of the study of the Qur’ān in the West in the modern period. That essay is followed by Yusuf Rahman’s study of Indonesian Muslims’ responses to outsiders’ studies of the Qur’ān and *tafsīr*.

Like all sacred scriptures, the Qur’ān presents itself as an eternal message. And like all sacred scriptures, it reflects the particularities of its historical

context. The extraordinarily complex meanings of the Qur'ān are knowable most fully when it is studied in two directions. In addition to its historical context, the Qur'ān looks back to the past in its references to ancient times, while it also considers what will or might come in the future. It reflects antecedent literatures, both oral and written, that provide the linguistic and ideational context for the articulation of its message. It then becomes a focus for reflection in the record of its reception in commentaries, theological treatises, juridical decisions, and even folklore.

This collection includes studies in both directions. Looking back in history, Emran El-Badawi writes on what he perceives as a dialogue between the Qur'ān and the New Testament in its Semitic, Syriac articulation. Other essays consider Shi'i approaches to the history of the qur'anic text, and the use of computers in its textual analysis. The full assemblage contains a broad range of studies, from an examination of shifting Indonesian responses to women's attire, to Indonesian Sufi commentaries, to strategies of qur'anic reading and interpretation ranging from early legal to contemporary qur'anist commentaries.

The perspectives offered in this collection extend broadly from the traditional to the post-postmodern. They naturally differ, and it is precisely these differences that deepen and strengthen the discipline. As we learn broadly from one another, our exchange advances our knowledge. Such a course of engagement draws closer to a truth that will, of course, ultimately elude full understanding. As in so many things, the satisfaction lies in the process.

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Notes on Transliteration and Translation

Transliteration style follows the guidelines of the *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association (JIQSA)*. Long vowels are represented by *ā* for the *alif*, *ī* for the *yā'*, and *ū* for the *wāw*. *Tā' marbūtah* is rendered "h" (e.g., *sūrah*), except in construct, where it becomes "at" (e.g., *sūrat al-Baqarah*). With regard to references to scriptures, the following conventions have been adopted: Qur'ān (uppercase with transliteration); qur'anic (lowercase without transliteration); Bible (uppercase); and biblical (lowercase). Individual contributors used different translations of the Qur'ān into English, according to personal preference; some have used his or her own translation or modified a published Qur'ān translation.

Abbreviations

General

AH	anno Hegirae
ca.	circa
ch(s).	chapter(s)
<i>EI</i> ²	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> . 2nd ed. 11 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1954–2002.
<i>EQ</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān</i> . Edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe. 5 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2001–2006.
IAIN	Institut Agama Islam Negeri
IDEO	Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies
IIUM	International Islamic University Malaysia
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
MUI	Majelis Ulama Indonesia
n(n).	note(s)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
PCA	Principal Component Analysis
RBS	International Society for the Study of Biblical and Semitic Rhetoric
SRA	Semitic rhetorical analysis
Syr.	Syriac
TQbQ	<i>tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān</i>

Ancient Sources

<i>Did.</i>	Didache
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