**The Qur’an**

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**Archbishop Michael L. Fitzgerald, M.Afr.**

His academic training was in theology, and then in Arabic and Islamics, with emphasis being put on Islam as a religion. He then moved out of academic life, being first involved in the general administration of the Society of Missionaries of Africa, to which he belongs, and then in the work of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in the Vatican. He ended his service of the Holy See as its representative in Egypt and to the League of Arab States. See <https://orderofmaltaamerican.org/files/pages/0047-newsletter_hospitallers_20_islam.pdf>. See also <http://afjn.org/documents/2015/03/archbishop-michael-fitzgerald-on-the-grounds-for-dialogue-with-islam-today.pdf>.

* + - 1. Introduction.
         1. Fitzgerald today is speaking to Christians who are unfamiliar with the holy book of Muslims. There is a need for respect, respect for any writing deemed Scripture.
         2. Plan

Basic Information the Qur’an.

Assessment from a Chistian point of view of the Qur’an as revelation.

* + - 1. Respect: “Only the Purified Can Touch the Qur’an.”
         1. What this means.

Muslims can object to non-Muslims reading the Qur’an. Encountering some boys studying Arabic in Dar es-Salaam, Fitzgerald asked them to recite passages. When he, Fitzgerald, began to read, one of the boys objected because Fitzgerald was a non-Muslim.

There are “Shiite” Qur’ans. Only the imams that have succeeded Muhammad – the Shiites – can properly understand the Qur’an.

Muhammad said that his only cares were the Qur’an and his family (and only his family can understand).

* + - * 1. The Qur’an is “The Noble Qur’an.”

The Qur’an is only in Arabic. Any other language is a “translation” or “interpretation.”

The Word of God is displayed on a shelf in the house of a pious Muslim, and the stand is called a “throne.”

To deface or destroy pages of the Qur’an is blasphemy. Christians in Pakistan have been accused of blasphemy for having pages of the Qur’an in their possession.

In Rome, there was an exhibition in Turin. An artist took pages of the Qur’an and drew nude figures on them. The Muslims were aghast, and demanded that the pope stop the blasphemy.

* + - * 1. The Qur’an. It is a protected record or book – but it is, above all, a word to be recited.

The Qur’an arose in an oral society. News got around via word of mouth and story-telling.

Jews and Christians have their Scriptures; but the Arabs didn’t have a “holy book” but rather is a “Scripture for a people that have no Scripture.” It is a message or collection of messages to be recited.

* + - * 1. The Meaning of the Word.

Qu R’An it is related to qara’a, meaning to *read*. But it is more to *recite*. Montgomery Watt: The word Qur’an “represents the Syriac *queriana* or ‘Scriptural reading in church.’”

Some have even speculated that the Qur’an was first written in Syriac. Some say that it was later by two centuries later than Muhammad. Some say that Muhammad knew the Gospel in Syriac, and the OT in Hebrew. Muhammad himself, some say, did not produce the Qur’an. All of this is “too revisionist” for Fitzgerald. He reminds us that the Qur’an arose in an oral society. Stories are used to back up the Qur’anic message.

One does not “read” from the Qur’an, one recites. Fitzgerald’s translation is by a “hafez,” one who has committed the Qur’an to heart.

The suras. Each of the 130 *suras* or chapters has a name. There are for example “The bee,” “women,” “battle games.”

Recitation.

Yet another division: 30 *sections* to facilitate the recitation of the Qur’an every day of the month.

Children begin by learning the last section of the Qur’an, which includes the shorter *suras*. The initial *suras* are far longer.

Exactness in pronunciation is more important than the understanding of the text. Recitation brings a *barakah* or blessing (*ex opere operatum*).

The Qur’an is the equivalent for Muslims of the blessed sacrament for Christians. The Word is present in the consecrated species for Christians, and in the Qur’an for Muslims.

* + - * 1. It is better to read the Qur’an in the original Arabic. One can then appreciate its poetic quality, which is difficult to render in translation.
      1. Examples of the Qur’an. Fitzgerald reads first in Arabic, then in English.
         1. Sura 96:1-5. The first passage of the Qur’an, the first message received by Muhammad.

Two rhymes help in memorizing and recitation.

The meaning: “Read [or recite; but Muhammad was illiterate and not able to read], your lord [Muhammad] is the most bountiful man, who was taught by the Lord what he did not know.

* + - * 1. Sura (Purity of Fate).

The rhymes appear to provide auditory limits.

“Say he is one, the God, the eternal; he begot no one, nor was he begotten.”

* + - * 1. Sura (the last Sura).

The rhyme: “en nes,” sibilance.

Meaning: “Say I seek refuge with the lord of people, against the harm of the slinking whisperer, who whisperers into the hearts of people.”

* + - * 1. Sura (the crashing blow). “What is the crashing blow, and what will explain what it is? A day will come when people are like scattered moths, and the one whose good deeds are light will have a bottomless pit as his home.”
        2. Commentary.

If you can read the book in Arabic, do so. If in translation, start with sura 1, and then go to the end and work backwards. Question: is there narrative tension in the Qur’an, with a complication, rising action, climax and denouement? Is there a Genesis at the beginning (the first *sura*) and a Book of Revelation (“A Crashing Blow”) at the end?

The later suras were written after the establishment of the community, and it needed rules.

The Qur’an includes legislation for the community, rules for fighting (those who are not ready to go out will be blamed). We should read the Qur’an with something in mind – if not, says Fitzgerald, you’ll get lost.

* + - 1. Interpretation of the Qur’an. What Does the Qur’an say about the Love of God? About women? About justice? How should we interpret it?
         1. Is there a “Christian interpretation” of the Qur’an? Consider the example of Giulio Basetti-Sani, who wrote, “The Qur’an in the Light of Christ.”

His assumption: if the Qur’an is Scripture, then it must be Christological. It was written to bring the Jews of Arabia to Jesus.

The texts in which God speaks in the first person plural, “We have sent it [Qur’an] down so that you might understand.” Basetti assumed that the royal “we” meant the Trinity.

Basetti-Sani discovered a sensus plenior. There is a surface meaning and a deeper meaning. Sura 97:1-5 (“The night of glory,” or destiny). “We [God] sent it down on the night of glory. What will explain that night? It is better than a thousand months. Angel and spirit descend again and again on every task, and give it peace until the rising of the dawn.”

For Muslims, this is about the sending of the Qur’an.

It was sent to Muhammad as a whole, and then later (when he couldn’t remember it) in parts.

For Basetti-Sani this was about Christmas, the incarnation of the Son of God. The night of the divine decree. The “angels” is a reference to the angels at the birth of Jesus.

Critical Reception. Reviewers said that Basetti-Sani shows “utter contempt for Islamic doctrine.”

* + - * 1. Kenneth Cragg, an Anglican Bishop, appointed Bishop of Jerusalem, wrote until his death at age 99. As he became older, his language became more complicated.

Cragg’s books are difficult to understand. He would draw meanings out of the Qur’anic texts that would never occur to Muslims.

Allahu-Akbar. Literally, it means “God is greater.” Muslims understand this as “God is above everything, transcendent.” Cragg said, “God is truly greater than anything we can imagine, and we human beings cannot put limits to what God is, or what God can do. Why should we limit God? Why can’t God enter into creation and become a human being? Is that impossible for God? Does it demean him?

Cragg took Islamic logic and brought it to its ultimate conclusion. But Muslims rejected it.

* + - * 1. The Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies. Jacques Jomier, OP, wrote a book entitled “Bible and Qur’an.” He also produced “A Selection of Qur’anic Texts related to the Bible.” Jomier is serene, without preachiness.
        2. Anthony St. John has produced a book on the stories in the Qur’an. He shows that the story of Joseph in the Qur’an includes a prophecy.
        3. Michael Cuipers, Little Brother of Jesus. He has applied to the Qur’an the method of Rhetorical Analysis (pioneered by Roland Meynet).

His book received a prize from Iran, was invited to Syria to give talks on his work.

Cuipers does not inspire Fitzgerald, but it has been well received. He applies his method too methodically.

* + - * 1. Summary.

Fitzgerald developed conference for a retreat based on some of the 99 beautiful names for God. It was published this year as *Praise the Name of the Lord: Meditations on the Most Beautiful Names of God*. He correlates the Qur’anic names to names for God in the Hebrew and NT Scriptures.

Is the message legitimate or exploitive? A Muslim who became a Franciscan (Jean Muhammed Abdel-Jalib) wrote, “The Inner Aspect of Islam.” If you want to understand a religion, try to get inside it.

The Christian-Muslim reflection group (“The Challenge of the Scriptures: the Bible and the Qur’an” published by Orbis). The divine word does not belong to exclusively to us.

Coffee Break

* + - 1. Revelation. Is the Qur’an “revelation”?
         1. Examples.

Who was to be sacrificed – Ishmael or Isaac? The Bible says Isaac. Some interpret Sura 37 to suggest that it was Ishmael.

Abraham rebuilt the Qa’aba.

* + - * 1. Contradictions. Christians cannot accept the entire Qur’an as revealed by God.

Sura 4: The Jews were accused of breaking their pledge by killing the prophets. They uttered a slander against Mary: i.e., that Jesus was born out of wedlock. The Jews were not certain that they killed him. God raised him up.

Sura 37: The sacrifice of Ishmael (not Isaac).

Sura 89 (at the end): There is a punishment to come at the end of time, “but you, soul at peace, return to your lord, well-pleased and well-pleasing; go in among my servants and my garden.” There are three souls:

The soul that commands us to do evil (concupiscence).

The soul that admonishes or blames (the conscience).

The soul that is at peace and doing the right thing. It returns to the Lord “well pleased and also well-pleasing,” giving pleasure to God and being rewarded by dwelling into God’s garden. No divinization of the human being.

* + - * 1. Nostra aetate 2. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.(4)

This year is the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra aetate*, which speaks respectfully about traditional religions.

*Lumen gentium*: Muslims adore the one God. We have the same God.

We understand that God differently. Some translation of the Qur’an won’t use the word “God” but speak of “Allah.”

*Nostra aetate* says God is one, eternal, almighty, and one who speaks to human beings.

* + - * 1. The same God?

Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God? Some Christians say, “We have a different God.”

One student asks: How far back can we say that El Shaddai, Adonai, and the Abba of Jesus (as well as the Allah of Muhammad) are the same God?

Fitzgerald: The Muslims refused the God of Jews and Christians; or rather, they refused the understanding of the Jews and Christians. But the Muslims rejected the incarnation.

* + - 1. The Identity of Muhammad.
         1. He was a Reformer, yes; but was he the founder of a religion?

A Reformer? In Spain, in 1974 or 1975, there was a meeting about Muhammad and Jesus. A Jesuit spoke about the different kinds of prophet, mentioning Karl Marx. This offended both the Muslims and the Marxists. Muhammad, according to the Jesuit, saw Jesus as a sociological reformer.

An Epileptic? Some attribute the “visions” of Muhammad to epilepsy; he heard sounds, bells; and he saw lights. He was consoled by his wife Hadijah.

Satanic? This is the answer of Medieval Christians. Pope Benedict XVI quoted the Byzantine Emperor, who said, “Muhammad didn’t bring anything into the world but violence.” But Satan cannot make people holy.

A “Natural” Religion. Some say that Islam fulfills the human desire for God. It presents itself as a natural religion. Muslims say, “Every child is born a Muslim; the child’s parents make him or her a Zoroastrian, a Jew, or Christian.”

* + - * 1. What was the effect of Muhammad? Gamaliel said about Jesus, “If his teaching is not the direct will of God, it will die out.”

Louis Massignon said that Islam “is a sting for Christians, to bring them back to the true faith.” Because Christians are always unfaithful.

John Conroy: The Holy Spirit can use Islam. Vatican II said that the Spirit is at work, all through the ages, within cultures.

There are holy people, not “despite” their Muslim faith, but “on account” of it.

* + - * 1. Islam is the “natural” religion; but God sends prophets. And this sending is “supernatural.”
      1. Conclusion.
         1. Muhammad is a prophet, but not the “last” prophet, as Islam teaches.

St. Paul talks about Christian prophets. They don’t give “new revelation” (because revelation is complete with Jesus), but they give an understanding of that revelation

Muhammad was a prophet to a polytheistic people who had forgotten the teaching about the one God.

Prophecy is not perfect; prophecy will, in the end, disappear.

* + - * 1. Prophets can bring a genuine word of God, and can purify the word of God. But the word of prophecy can be distorted.

Muhammad offered a genuine prophecy. But once he became a statesman, and the head of a community, he had to be more than a prophet.

We have to affirm, before our Muslim brothers, that Muhammad is a true prophet. He is the model for the lives of millions. We should not consider him an imperfect prophet.

* + - * 1. Muhammad brings a genuine message; but not everything that people say in the name of Muhammad is “of God.”

Pope John Paul II (Wednesday general audiences, preparing for year 2000) spoke about the “seeds of truth.” Every word of truth and goodness is inspired by God. (See Pope John Paul II on September 9, 1998; see the book entitled “Interreligious Dialogue.”) The seminal word: the *logos spermatikos*.

All religions arose from a primordial openness to God. This experience took form in doctrines, rites, and precepts. The pope’s words may refer to Muhammad.