

# What does the Qur'an mean to me?

## Answers to My Questions

Alia N Athar

*You do not see in the creation of the all-merciful any imperfection. Return your gaze- do you see any fissure? Then return your gaze, and again, and your gaze comes back to you dazzled, aweary.*

(Surah Al-Mulk 67:3-4)

This is the conviction that the invisible power of the Qur'an has created in me, which is reinforced every time I take some moments out of the worldly enticements and meditate. I did not acquire this frame of mind by virtue of being born a Muslim. It encompassed me through various stages: fear, dissatisfaction, disbelief, doubts, speculations, objectivity and rationalization. In fact the Qur'an remained just a sacred, metaphysical entity for me, until the time I tried to venture into its realm beyond mere recitation. There is no denying the fact that the majesty and grace of the Qur'anic language is strong enough to keep the interest of the reader even if he/she is unable to comprehend its meaning. But is this the primary objective of the Qur'an? Limiting this real source of knowledge to just recitation is sheer injustice to this book as well as the society which is presumed to be founded on the principles laid down in the Qur'an. I cannot help feeling sad whenever I reflect about the method of learning the Qur'an prevalent in my society.

The unreasonable and unjust bifurcation of religious and secular education in schools resulted in limiting the learning of the Qur'an to the few leisure hours at home, making it something optional, rather accessory. The teaching of the Qur'an depended absolutely on the individual efforts of

the conscientious family member, which again rested upon her/his ability, opportunity, and commitment. Surely, it was the most prestigious and valuable object in the household, to be kept in an elevated place, and protected vigilantly from all sorts of desecrations. It was similar to a precious asset, which is protected from all kinds of pollution and which is soothing for the senses.

Is this a justifiable treatment of the Qur'an, the book which is a guide, and a theoretical model for the foundation of the Muslim society? How diligently we look at the systems of different man-made organisations, scared of making mistakes and being labelled as out-dated and ignorant, and how imperceptibly we avoid referring to the Qur'an for our day-to-day affairs, due to our ignorance of its contents. Instead of keeping the Qur'an on our right hand as a reference book, we tend to diffuse the information brought by a knowledgeable person, by either labelling him as old-fashioned and fanatic, or criticizing his personal life, or moulding the tasfir, the interpretation of the Qur'anic part, to suit our objective. Allama Iqbal, the famous poet of the east, had stated this inclination that 'they don't change themselves, but change the meaning of the Qur'an'. Is this our prudence or is this the human egocentricity which strives to satisfy itself, disregarding the natural laws?

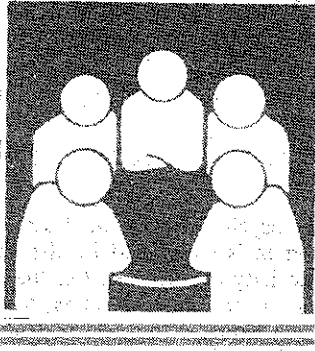
For me the reading and understanding of one line of the Qur'an is more important than reciting the whole text without comprehending the message. What is more important is internalization of the theme. Once we have

crossed this bridge, the valley falls open for us. The meaning becomes vivid as we progress gradually imbibing the spirit of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an is not an end for me, it is a means to attain my goals. It teaches me to ponder over every phenomenon I come across and strive to attain its reality, which ultimately leads to the knowledge of the creator. The deeper I study it, the better I understand Allah's creation, and the more I become aware of his majesty and power. I feel the Qur'an is meaningful only when one is seeking the truth. To be able to seek the truth, one has to be free from subservience to all the earthly powers and all preconceived notions. The real understanding of the Qur'an manifests itself in action, failing which means flaws in our comprehension.

I perceive the Qur'an as the best means to obtain spiritual and material freedom. It is the most comprehensive code of liberty. It contains the most detailed declaration of freedom and dignity of humankind. It makes me throw away the clutches of superstition of the ancient and the materialism of the modern. It gives me a scale for a balanced living on this earth, freeing myself from the chains of striving for material superiority and at the same time, providing me with self-esteem and personal and social dignity.

It is an answer to all my questions, about my existence, the existence of the world and my inextricable link with the rest of the world. It unravels the law of nature and the scheme of creation, which is undeniable sign of the creator and the proof of his might.



## Resolving Dichotomies

### Manazir Ahsan

I often wondered, what does the Qur'an mean to me? What does it demand of me? How does it relate to my life? In moments of despair and despondency, I mused: Is it the same book which brought a revolution, changed society, transformed morals and manners and imbibed people with a sense of mission and purpose of life? I murmur to myself: Why does the Qur'an not appeal to present-day Muslims as it did to the people of the Prophet's generation? What is wrong with us and our environment? Does not the Qur'an transcend the bounds of time and space? Is not its message eternal, applicable to all situations and environments? Millions of Muslims read the Qur'an every day, in and outside their prayer, in the morning and in the evening, in the day and the night, yet there is no visible effect of reading the Qur'an in their life, in their character, in their dealings and behaviour. Why has the Qur'an become a collection of dead letters, read, sacrosanct, a thing of the past, irrelevant to our national and international life? Why has reading the Qur'an become a lifeless exercise in our lives, neither moving our hearts and minds nor overpowering our bodies and affecting our lifestyle? These and many other questions puzzled and often disturbed my mind.

I finished reading the Qur'an for the first time when I was a boy of seven. Since then I do not know how many times I have read the Qur'an from cover to cover. It must have been more than one hundred times at least. My father sent me first to a religious seminary, the Madrassah, to learn Islam and recite the Qur'an. There I studied the Qur'an for more than ten years, wading through the Arabic exegesis of *Jalalayn*, *Kashshaf* and *Baidawi*, entangling more in its grammatical niceties, unexcelled expression and beauty of language than the message it contained and the relevance

it had for me, for my environment and for the whole of mankind. Naturally, like many other scholars and students of the Qur'an in the Madrassah, I grew up with the impression that, though the Qur'an is a book of *Hidayah* or guidance, it is mainly related to the spiritual and the aspects of life which are known as religious. It has hardly anything to do with political, economic and other dimensions of human existence. With this immediate and truncated vision of the Qur'an and Islam gathered from the religious seminary, I entered into the secular institution of the country, the University, to learn something of this world. My eyes were opened when I came across the *Tafhim* of Mawlana Mawdudi in Urdu. Then I found the missing dimension of my life and realised the relevance and relationship of the Qur'an to my existence. It was as if the main switch was activated and the current began to pass through the wires of my brain and heart. It was then, reading the Qur'an again and again with the help of this most powerful and modern exegesis of the Qur'an, that I rediscovered myself, found a purpose in my life and established a new relationship with Allah and His Creation.

I often reflected on the phenomenon that when we say "I read a book", it meant that I read it consciously, fully comprehending its meaning and message and not merely reading the words without understanding. Then why is it the Qur'an alone which we claim to have read and continue to read without even understanding its meaning, let alone comprehending its message and relevance to our life. Is it not an irony that we recite the Qur'an daily and yet we do not 'read' it? It reminds me of the Qur'an's own complaint when it says: "And the Messenger will say: My Lord, surely my people read this Qur'an as a forsaken thing" (*Al-*

*Furqan* 25:30). To me the Qur'an is therefore a kind of *mazlum* (victim of injustice) and we are committing some sort of *zulm* (injustice or violence) to it, relegating it to a position it was never meant to occupy. It was certainly revealed to guide us in every moment of our life, to widen our vision, to impart to us knowledge and wisdom, to treat it as a light (*Nur*) to remove the darkness of ignorance or *jahiliyyah*, to cure the illness of heart and mind, to purify the soul, intentions and motivations, to make us behave like a legitimate representative of God on earth (*Khalifah*) and to become true witnesses unto mankind.

The Qur'an is the *raison d'etre* of my life. It is for me the complete code of life, guiding and protecting me in all moments and situations, leaving nothing vague or unexplained. The more I read, understand, reflect and try to absorb its meaning and message, the more peace and tranquility, happiness and nearness to Allah I achieve. It is not possible to comprehend the Qur'an without approaching it with the reverence, openness of mind and other prerequisites of mind and heart that were the hallmark of the Prophet and His Companions' study of the Qur'an. The Qur'an to me is not only a book to be read for blessing, but a dynamic and thriving book which is meant to transform our outlook on life, to inspire revolution in individuals and society, leading ultimately to the establishment of a just order on this earth.

The questions and apprehensions I outlined at the very outset can only be answered and solved if Muslims uphold the Qur'an in its right and correct perspective and endeavour to benefit from it as Muslims in earlier centuries did. As long as we fail to realise and determine the place of the Qur'an in our individual and collective life, and take it as the only unimpeachable source of guidance, the Qur'an will not unlock its mysteries, will not shower its blessings and will not guide us in our march of life. I believe that the obligations Muslims owe to the Qur'an are not only that they should read it correctly or understand its meaning, but also act upon its teachings and share its blessings with other members of humanity who thus far have not been so fortunate in receiving the divine guidance. Only then the eyes, once again, will overflow with tears, hearts will tremble, minds will be touched and lives will be

*Surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day and ship that runs in the sea with profit to men, and the water God sends down from heaven there-with reviving the earth after it is dead and his scattering abroad in it all manner of crawling thing, and the turning about of the winds and the clouds compelled between the heavens and the earth, surely there are signs for a people having understanding*

(Sura Al-Baqarah 2:164)

The Qur'an explains the obvious

and the obscure aspects of my relationship with others. It gives the power of discretion and the strength to combat injustice. It removes all those fears from my mind, which arise occasionally and hamper my advent to my goal. For this purpose, I have to be cautious not to loosen my grip of the Qur'an, to keep the interaction alive, and to maintain the strength that transformed me into an unembarrassed personality, with unflinching trust in the creator. This trust relieves me from all other contingencies.

that the psyche of most of those men and women is enveloped by the same old historicity of miracles. On the one hand, they continue to cling to the narrowly defined 'miracle', grounds enough for relegating 'religion', and on the contrary, sick and tired of the ambiguity, they yearn for spiritual uplift. Alas, their solace does not lie in ritual invoking of the stories of the past.

What did Qur'an imply by the perfection of Din, finality of prophethood, and a consequent universality of the Divine Message? We have argued that the Qur'anic universality is a logical extension of both the completion of Din and Propethood. It could become universal only and only after making these claims. And, in turn, these claims are supported by the universal Qur'anic statements.

Because the claim of Qur'anic universality is upheld not only through its textual but contextual means, it must be accepted and the historicity of 'miracles' discarded in its favour. Once the human psyche becomes internalized around this axis, Din becomes a way of life and the finality of Propethood is expressed as the model to be emulated for all ages. It is then that the human psyche finds its true liberation from superstition: the falsehood vanishes and the truth triumphs. The following of Sunnah of the Blessed Prophet becomes an imperative.

The Universal spirit of the Qur'an was translated in the person of the Blessed Prophet whose life and deeds were said to be the best commentary on the Qur'an and whom the Qur'an itself declared to be the best model. Thus, the universality of the Qur'anic message is not a metaphysical entity. It can be discerned through the elements of Sunnah of the Blessed Prophet. It is this aspect of finality of prophethood that expresses the miraculous nature of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an extends its domination to universal guidance and presents the Blessed Prophet as the final bearer and interpreter of that Divine guidance. This guidance is, invariably, complete and immutable because it springs from the Qur'anic universality. It is neither an abstraction nor a metaphysical expression. It is neither a 'miracle' bound in the parameters of time and space, nor a ritual in the name of an ancient myth. It is the living, eternal guidance for humankind.

## Eternal Miracle

Munawar Ahmad Anees

THE Qur'an is a miracle of miracles. Infact, even an inexhaustible number of appellation will not be too many for the Qur'an. I'jaz Al-Qur'an, both in the classical and modern sense of the word, has come to be interpreted as its inimitability - both in content and form. Beyond that, its miraculous character is engraved in its universal proclamation of the perfection of Din.

The Prophets and the Divine books, that preceded the Qur'an, all were parts of a whole: but primarily addressed to a given group of people. Thus, the nature and the domain of pre-Qur'anic Prophets and books was limited in time and space. The Qur'an not only accords due recognition to the previous Prophets and books, it even exonerates them from any charges of corrupting the Divine Message. It recognizes them as integral components in the long chain of Din-i Ibrahim that found its culmination in the advent of the last Prophet, Muhammad.

Thus, the perfection took place at two levels: the completion of Din and the finality of the Prophethoods. The preceding Prophets or books could never make universal declarations: They were no close to the perfection of Din. Their spatio-temporal limitations would have never allowed them to make such a commitment. The act of perfection inherently carried the

Qur'anic foundations of universality. In that respect, the elements of perfection and universality became complementary to each other.

The Qur'anic universality precluded the rise of any other 'Din' or, as its corollary, any other 'Prophet'. Because if the Qur'anic claim of universality is true, then it must go beyond the spatio-temporal limitations and in order to do so, its miraculous nature must transcend the ordinary meaning of the word. It so happened that the Jews and the Christians of Makkah and Madinah, in the tradition of their forefathers, demanded from the blessed Prophet that he 'perform' a miracle. It was in the historicity of 'miracles' that such a demand was put by those people.

The blessed Prophet did not 'perform' many miracles. Instead, he is reported to have said that 'Qur'an is my miracle'. Those accustomed to miracles in their strictly spatio-temporal context were thus unable to comprehend the universal, eternal miraculous nature of the Qur'an. The universal, normative statements of the Qur'an are not constrained by artificial boundaries of time and space, and that indeed is the perpetual miracle of the Blessed Prophet.

Even in today's overtly modern civilization that takes pride in rebuking superstition, it is not hard to find

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changed at the reading of the Qur'an.

Then, and only then, the whole scenario will be repeated and, as Mawdudi puts it, "one will go through all the events and experiences which occurred during the course of its revelation. One will then pass through Makka, and Habsha and Taif, one will face Badr, Uhud, Hunain and Tabuk. One will encounter Abu Jahl and Abu Lahab; one will meet the hypocrites and Jews; one will come face to face with those who instantly responded to this call as well as those who were drawn into Islam seeking some gain. One will come across all of these human models; one will deal with all of them" and again he warned, "Neither the individual who lives independently of the Qur'an nor the nation which runs its institutions in violation of its guidance can discover the spirit of the Qur'an" — how true and perceptive his comments have been!

I believe that the dichotomy in a Muslim's life is not so prominent as it

is in the understanding of the Qur'an and practice of its teachings. Muslims are guilty not of a flagrant violation of Qur'anic injunctions, they are guilty of creating a wedge between the teachings of the Qur'an by accepting some and rejecting others not through their pronouncements but through their actions and behaviour. As if they have not read the Qur'anic proclamation: "What! Do you believe in part of the Book and disbelieve in part? What, then, shall be the reward of those of you who do that but ignominy in the life of this world and on the Day of Resurrection to be returned into the most grievous suffering" (*Al-Baqarah* 2:85). It should not come as a surprise to us when we find the Muslim world as a whole passing through the most despicable humiliation, ignominy, distress and backwardness. What remains in store in the *Akhirah* will be certainly most grievous and tormenting. And yet the eyes remain shut and the hearts locked — a pathetic situation indeed. ■

shape and language that resonate on so many levels that even now, when I return to reading them, I feel as a child discovering, yet again, the vastness and complexity of creation in a butterfly's gossamer wing. Yet, as always, the terrible thing is that even to begin to give an indication of the Qur'an's greatness one is forced back onto clichés and worn out phrases. The Qur'an is its own only true advocate. Those who seek to defend it, regardless of the depth of their integrity, are made into charlatans. So, I too in the class room, was condemned to defend my faith by silence and patience, two qualities that do not come easy to me.

Being cut off from any verbal stimulation in my own language I read and re-read my Arabic novels. Soon they were to bore me and I would abandon them. What appeared on a first read to be deep and significant, on a second or third look-through struck me as shallow and trite. Occasionally, sitting up late in my darkened room, I would be able to tune in, with my pocket transistor aerial raised as high as I could get it, to Radio Algeria or Morocco and listen to some music or a bulletin of news. But if one thing anchored me to my culture, my language and my people it was that pocket-book Qur'an. I recited its verses on the way to school and tried to understand its complex references in the quietude of my small room. The Qur'an is often called the sustainer and in my case it was to be just that.

As I grew older and became increasingly involved with Muslims, first as a student at university and then in my working life, my interest was drawn to other parts of the Qur'an. The Medina presented themselves with a richness that is distinct from, but no less profound than, their Makkan sisters. I began to find facets that were new to me. It was like encountering an old friend who one had not seen in a long time and discovering that life had matured and spiritually enriched him, except it was I who had matured. The Book had stayed the same as it had been for centuries. But it is also no longer, simply, my anchorage to a remembered past. It has also become the route by which I seek a future of enlightenment and understanding. The Qur'an's value to me has been intensely personal. That it has remained such a constant in my life is a grace for which I am truly grateful. ■

## Constant Companion

### Karim Alrawi

I came to Britain as a child, or barely more than one. I had just passed thirteen when I disembarked at Tilbury. I had brought with me very little and felt that I had left behind in Egypt all that was precious to me. In my baggage I carried a small collection of novels, I now realise that they were not particularly good ones, and a pocket-book size leather bound Qur'an. As a child I would always sleep with a small Qur'an under my head, no doubt, put there under my pillow by some worried or over-protective aunt. I have no idea where I got this particular Qur'an from. It may have been a gift, like many others that I have had, or I may have bought it especially for the voyage. What I do know is that it became a dearer friend to me than most.

My family moved to the outskirts of Greater London and I was sent to school there. As a Muslim and an Arabic speaker I found myself to be in a minority of one. Unlike my school in Alexandria there was no masjid for *zuhr* and *asr* prayers. There was no

chance to use the language to which I had been brought up. Instead, I was subjected to the unrelenting attempts of well scrubbed porky faced Religious Instruction teachers to convert me to the tenets of Protestantism and other fallacies. Fixing me with their beady eyes, they would deliver the absurdities of the Trinity, with all the conviction that they could muster, directing it primarily at me, the Saracen among the Saints. Of course, the rest of the class were much relieved by this as they could not give two chews of a toffee apple as to whether God was three in one or one in three, and whether or not he had given birth to himself through an immaculate virgin who was also His mother!

Against such a welter of illogicality and reason long-abandoned, the beauty of the Qur'an bespoke its truth in a manner that struck me as irrefutable. That words can conjure up such an intensity of meaning is the finest proof of the message's veracity. The short Makkan suras have a perfection of