



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 imbued 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 *Jalālayn*, *Kashshāf* and *Baidāwī*, 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 *Hidāyah* 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-*

Furqān 25:30). To me the Qur'an is therefore a kind of *mazlūm* (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 (*Nūr*) to remove the darkness of ignorance or *jāhiliyyah*¹¹, 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'être* 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

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 Habsba and Taif, one will face Badr, Uhud, Hunain and Tabūk. 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