LISTENING TO THE SACRED

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ABSTRACT

A study of the sacred in Islam that is manifested in the oral revelation as it had occurred in the world through reciting and listening to create a sacred aural sphere in which perceptions, attitudes, and practices of the community and the individual are shaped. This work suggests an unconventional approach to studying the role of the Qur’an in generating a culture of listening that creates a sacred aural sphere that is an amalgamation of the artistic approach in reciting the Qur’an and its Divine source. The novelty of the applied purviews is not in their use in the study of the Qur’an, but rather in employing them in the study of “listening to the sacred” and attempting to explore the role that listening has played in Islamic history as a major generator of culture.
To my Mom, my sisters, and all other essential women in my life

Abdul Rahman
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INTRODUCTION

“To hear with the heart is not strictly something cognitive but involves the body in its entirety, as a complex synthesis of patterned moral reflexes.”

“(when the Qur’an is recited, listen to it and remain silent; perhaps you will be shown mercy).”

(Is it not time for those who believe that their hearts should grow humble at the mention of God and the Truth that has been revealed?). In a specific culture, the artistic act of reciting and listening to a formative work creates an aural sphere in which meaning has room for expansion at the margins. The role of interpretation can no longer be a separate activity because it is enmeshed in the symbiotic relationship between the work and the transmitters/listeners, in the sense that the latter are active participants in reproduction not only through repetition and listening but also by living in the sphere they both created. This symbiotic relationship obfuscates the source of authorship and disperses it. The formation of formative texts is related, in one way or another, to the internal communal identification, which means that the community gives this identification to its texts subjectively.

2 Sūrat al-’A’rāf, 204.
3 The Qur’an. Trans. Tarif Khalidi. New York: Viking, 2008, 133. This translation will be used throughout this work and thus will be shortened in further citations.
4 Sūrat al-Hādīd, 16.
6 The Oxford Dictionary defines a text as “a book or other written or printed work, regarded in terms of its content rather than its physical form.” The argument in this work is to prove the Qur’an is also a listening material, a recitation, other than being just a written work. Therefore, the word text is going to be used for both the written and the recited for the lack of a better word. Sometimes the terms “scripture,” “literary work” and “art” might also be used interchangeably to indicate a text.
“No text is authoritative or sacred apart from its functional role in a religious community and that community’s historical tradition of faith. The sacred character of a book is not an *a priori* attribute but one that develops and achieves widespread recognition only in the lives of the Faithful who perceive and treat the text as holy or sacred.” President Obama describes the formative text of the United States, the constitution, as “a remarkable beautiful gift. But it is really just a piece of parchment. It has no power on its own, we the people give it power, we the people give it meaning with our participation and with the choices that we make and the alliances that we forge.” Regardless of the process by which the text becomes powerful and authoritative, it does require two factors at least, the presence of a text (not necessarily written) on one side, and the presence of an identified powerful community on the other. There should be formative texts that can bear both meaning and the burden of power, a power that is also able, by its turn, to establish the normative stature of the text; and a community inside which the text becomes authoritative. The text might not be naturally authoritative or legislative, what makes it so is the way through which the community sees it, and the way the community recognizes itself in the text, since the text is meant to answer the community’s questions, even if those questions do not have a strong link with the historical setting during which the text was produced. This mutual relation between the text and the community makes the text a formative one; formative texts are those that are recited, listened to, and circulated. The knowledge of such texts forms common references for some communities. These texts can be artistic works that present aesthetic values and they become

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archetypes to be emulated, in other words these are the classics. Religious texts or “scriptures” are definitely part of these formative texts although they are not perceived solely as works of art, they can be approached artistically and have the same role as formative artistic works. “Scripture is meant to be recited, memorized, and repeated; it is meant to be listened to, mediated upon, and internalized. It is written word that is spoken, because it is (ontologically as well as chronologically) spoken word before it is written.”

For Muslims, The Qur’an is seen as the sacred “book” that provided them with clear legal codes by which they should abide. It is true that the Qur’an has revealed verses that usher in a list of commands, admonitions and explicit prohibitions concerning a great variety of issues. The Qur’an also provided more or less a detailed coverage of different areas of law, such as family law, as well as of ritual, commercial and pecuniary rules. But the Qur’an was not very categorically clear in all its commands and prohibitions; it does encourage and forbid some deeds, but it does not really define them clearly. In its final arrangement, the Qur’an consists of one hundred and fourteen Sūras (chapters), each Sūra comprises varying numbers of verses, the longest Sūra has two hundred eighty six verses, while the shortest one has only three verses. The total number of verses in the Quran is 6346. This includes 112 unnumbered Basmalas (the opening verse of all chapters; In the Name of God the Most Merciful the Most Compassionate) which occur at the beginning of the Sūras. (Note that the first Sūra has a numbered Basmala). Without the unnumbered Basmalas, the number of verses in the Quran is 6234. In any case, the legal verses in the Qur’an do not exceed six hundred verses. In other words, the verses in the Qur’an that deal

with law or that are considered legal codes do not amount to more than ten percent of the whole text. The other ninety percent is largely concerned with faith, morality, and mundane existence.\textsuperscript{13}

It also tells the stories of the biblical prophets with corrections and stresses at length the notion of the day of judgement, when all people are going to be judged according to their deeds in their worldly lives. Nevertheless, the legal approach to the Qur’an may be considered as the most dominant approach, since this has produced the Shari‘a law that is also considered as sacred as its source; this approach is also textual in nature and deems the Qur’an as a canonical writing, although “a canonical writing is something people read and study, a scripture something people live by and for.”\textsuperscript{14}

The Qur’an is a derivation of the root $qr’$ which means to recite and to chant, it also means to gather and collect its verses. Traditional Muslim scholars suggested these as two different meanings, however, these meanings can be seen as two sides of the same coin. The role of the Qur’an is the combination of both, it is the recited language that creates a collective assembly. There is a verse in the Qur’an that solves this duality and emphasizes the meaning of reciting and chanting over gathering and collecting, “wa idha qara’nāhu fat-tabi’ qur’ānah”\textsuperscript{15} (when We recite it, follow its recitation,) especially that the verse that precedes this one says “‘inna ‘alaynā jam’ahu wa qur’ānah” (Up to Us is its collection and recitation) it cannot be that the two consecutive words have the same meaning like: Up to Us is its collection and its collection, knowing that the Qur’an avoids redundancy. There is another Arabic term that means “to recite” as well, and actually became the most dominant term for Qur’anic recitation,\textsuperscript{16}$talā$. $Talā$ means “to recite” and means

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Graham, Qur’an as Spoken Word, 28.
\textsuperscript{15} Al-Qiyāma, 18.
\end{flushright}
“to follow”\textsuperscript{17} at the same time. The combination of the two meanings might be helpful in grasping the notion of reciting and listening, for the recitation of the text involves the concept of following; following in the steps of those who recited before and still reciting, following the unity that is created in the same recital sphere, and following the meaning of the recited language. Denny, whose work on the Qur’anic recitation is indispensable, did not give this dimension any attention. He just mentioned that the word \textit{talā} is derived from a root that means “follow.”\textsuperscript{18}

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, among other Islamic modernists, argues that the Qur’an names itself \textit{al-Kitāb} (the book) and this is a clear indication of it being a written book as a clear separation of the dominant oral culture of the time; the Qur’an is a transitional link in the history of the Arabic culture that divides two different stages, the oral and the written.\textsuperscript{19} This argument jumps from the main principal name ‘the Qur’an’ to ‘the book’ that is given to previous religious scriptures too. Abu Zayd and the like are convinced that the Qur’an is a book that is meant to be written to establish a writing culture as opposed to the oral culture in which the Qur’an itself has originated and was its milieu. This is a very convenient position from which one can apply textualization in the study of the Qur’an and to approach it from a literary point of view; which is also textual in nature much like the legal approach, Shari‘a. There is no doubt that the Qur’an is a language and might be classified as a linguistic message, but the question of it being only a written text or not remains unsolved. The Qur’an, by virtue of its name, requires recitation and a reciter. In this case, the sacred, regardless of its divine source, still requires the profane artistic human involvement of recitation and listening.

\textsuperscript{17} See Ibn Manzūr, \textit{“Lisān al-Arab,”} root t-l-ā.
\textsuperscript{18} Denny, Ibid, 7.
This notion of listening to the sacred as an active exercise is integrally linked to the process of authorship as a method of societal progression and replication of art. The audience is active in an artistic listening to the Qur’an; the experience is shaped by the sensitivities of the audience in a way that a response to a visual work is not. Listening is closer to the sacred, since both of them can be marked as the unseen, “A writer notes: ‘I can hear what I see: a piano, or some leaves stirred by the wind. But I can never see what I hear. Between sight and hearing there is no reciprocity.’” Listening can also be classified as not comprehensible just like the sacred. “A musician writes: ‘How is it that sound has such a particular impact, a capacity to affect us, which is like nothing else, and is very different from what has to do with the visual and with touch? It is a realm we still do not know.’” This involvement of the body is one of the major objectives of listening in Islam since Islamic ethical traditions give explicit recognition to this kind of somatic learning.

The human body was not to be viewed simply as the passive recipient of ‘cultural imprints,’ still less as the active source of ‘natural expressions’ that are clothed in local history and culture, as though it were a matter of an inner character expressed in a readable sign, so that the latter could be used as a means of deciphering the former. It was to be viewed as the developable means for achieving a range of human objectives, from styles of physical movement (e.g. walking), through modes of emotional being (e.g. composure), to kinds of spiritual experience (e.g. mystical states).

Listening, therefore, shapes the whole character of the listener at the level of the individual. In the case of ideal Islamic practices, every Muslim must participate in listening to the Qur’an and must deliver the message herself to other listeners, so her participation is consisted of two components; listening and transmitting. When listening to the Quran for the sake of transmission the individuals inject themselves, their voices and nuances, into the text thereby transforming them

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from mere consumers to active producers. This act would create a public discourse which in turn would produce a community, an example would be the *Tablīghī Jama‘at* that will be discussed later as a case study, that enjoys power separate from a state or any formal institution and is able to create its own culture, norms, and tradition.

Listening has become a minimal way of perception in our loud visual culture. While it is still preserved in many forms, the ability to create images with greater levels of fidelity has generated a general social trend of more visual production, and listening has been supplanted as the dominant form. It creates less saturated representations and gives the audience more room for their own role of interpretation in shaping that image or message. Modern western radio shows have persisted in what seems to be a fairly stable cultural niche, they have not achieved the level of pervasiveness that film and television have, and seem unlikely to do so in the future.

The rupture between modern visual societies and the traditional act of listening, as the generator of culture, allows power to be consolidated in a lone entity eliminating the idea of dispersed communal authorship through institutionalizing culture as in the case of modern states. While the forces that have driven the relative decline in auditory media in most of the developed West are common across all societies, the particular relationship between Islamic societies and their notion of the Divine has worked to preserve the dominance of auditory media. The oral tradition of Qur’anic rhetoric is more closely in line with this philosophy and it acts as a countervailing force to the changes in technology and societal norms that have pushed the visual to a position of dominance outside of the Muslim world. However, this visual revolution has affected many traditions that have always largely depended on listening, like Islam. The fact that the Qur’an is transmitted through a verbal, auditory medium, is not merely incidental to the
character of Islam, but rather shapes that character on a core level. The auditory tradition of sacred art in Islam could not be easily replaced with a visual medium without changing the underlying cultural structures on which the Islamic tradition relies, especially regarding Islam’s strong division between the sacred and the profane. It is well known that Islam has developed a hostile attitude towards the visual. Although some modern scholars tried to ease this poignancy, the reputation that Islam had acquired remains. The tenacity of the auditory tradition in Islam reinforces the notion that the particular style of media that the Islamic tradition has chosen as its primary means of communication is linked to the tradition’s shared sense of identity on a deep level.

Reciting, listening to, and circulating the formative/authoritative texts have a great effect on both, the text and the individual/community that is circulating it. It does not matter whether the content of the text is real, true, and authentic or if it is just a collection of imaginary stories; in both cases the text is going to be formative and powerful, but it might be even more powerful if the text is deemed sacred for the community. The texts that put the believer in the same position as the first disciples of the ‘Master’, makes her feel how the ‘spirit’ has reached that ‘Master’ from above and then it was transmitted to her through other people, those are the texts that became so dear to the believers’ hearts and had been in use more than other texts. This reminds us of the short story, by Anton Chekhov, “The Student” that gives a very specific description of the religious experience and explains well the feeling mentioned here, i.e. the link between past and present, a link that

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22 For a detailed scientific discussion on cinema in order to prove that it is *halāl* in Islam, see Al-‘Alayli, Abd Allah. ‘*Ayna al-Khata’*. Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm lil-Malāyīn, 1978.
reveals to the believer the past events as is, is real and close. In line with this idea, the Qur’ān mentions this and it addresses it first and foremost to the Prophet:

“These are reports from the Unseen which We reveal to you. For you were not with them when they threw down their quills to determine which of them would care for Mary. Nor were you there when they quarreled among themselves.”

This verse is clearly stating the link between the past, which has become unseen (ghayb), and the present, which is the moment of revelation received by the Prophet, and will continue to be the same for every believer who recites or listens to this verse and other similar ones; it is exposing the unseen past. The verse also states the entities and the medium of the communication process through which the unseen was conveyed; “We” the Divine as the first entity revealing the unseen, “you” the Prophet as the receiver, and revelation as the medium from the Arabic verb nūḥī (We reveal) from the term Wahy which is the main concept of revelation in the Qur’ān. The fact that the Prophet is not actually mentioned by name or any other clear indication makes the listener to such a verse feel that she is the one who is being addressed by the Divine, in addition to the feeling of being in the same stand, where the Prophet and all believers in between, listened to the same sacred words. It is very noticeable that this verse has a lot of motion in it, like throwing down quills and being in a quarrel, all these details make the story sound very real and closer to the listener’s notice. Another interesting verse that also begin in the same way but concludes differently:

“These are reports of the Unseen which We reveal to you. You were not present among them when they agreed together and plotted. Nor are most people believers, no matter how hard you try.”

24 ‘Āl ‘Imrān, 44.
25 Revelation is Wahy in Arabic, and the verb in the text is conjugated as We reveal. The Wahy is believed to be communicated between God and the Prophet through the angel Gabriel, as mentioned, but sometimes the Qur’ān sounds as if the communication was directly executed without any intermediaries.
26 Yūsuf, 102.
It concludes with the fact that most people would not believe in you (the Prophet or any follower of him) “no matter how hard you try,” the implication here is that although God is revealing to you the unseen past and establishing a link between that unseen past and the Prophet’s present, in addition to the link between the Prophet’s time and the present of all believers after him; still most people will not believe the message!

On the other hand, reciting, listening to, and circulating texts that are not necessarily claimed to be true or authentic, has almost the same effect. It seems that the authenticity or the content of the text do not matter that much in the process of circulation. “In reading imaginative texts, we inevitably reproduce aspects of ourselves, although this is not simply a matter of arbitrary preference or prejudice. We are all already – constituted subjects, placed in networks of power, and in reproducing ourselves it is also the latter we reproduce.”27 The act of transmitting verbal recitation depends mostly on man. It could stretch time and slow it down due to the lack of temporal awareness. Man is engaged in reproducing the very culture in which he lives. Also, “for traditions to be operative in society, they must be transmitted,”28 the transmission could take any shape or type of communication, but it cannot be neutral because “it is rooted in politics and institutions, and it helps to shape the message it transmits. The manner in which a tradition is handed over from one generation to the next is a clue to its place in the social fabric and to the source of its legitimizing power.”29

With visual culture, individual works can be preserved in a rigorous sense. The exact contention of the original can be maintained across time regardless of the cultural trappings that surround it. It can persist from year to year without change, it can remain as a cross-section of a

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27 Asad, Genealogies of Religion, 270.
29 Ibid.
particular point in history rather than a synthesis of ideas arising out of the processes that have shaped the culture it inhabits. By contrast, the auditory depends somewhat more on the action of a succession of participants in order to persist across time. As a result, “observing” an auditory work at a particular moment in time does not really yield a single data point in a narrow sense, but rather an instance of an ongoing relationship.

This work consists of three chapters that discuss the nature of the Qur’an as a listening text, rather than a written one, that has established the culture of listening in Islam. In addition to the culture of listening, there were other elitist approaches that were developed around the Qur’an as means of comprehension or reception; the most relevant approach would be the literary one, developed in Egypt in the twentieth century, since it is also an unconventional method in reading the Qur’an as a book of literature or art. The chapters review the most notable stages of this approach through Islamic intellectual history and then focus on the twentieth century as the most recent and blatantly self-aware stage. These chapters will also show the culture of listening through the historical tradition of preaching and storytelling while also elaborating on the act of listening in contemporary time. The goal of this study is to augment the placement of Islam in the study of religions in the west, and continue the fairly recent attempts of studying the Qur’an as an oral recitation. However, instead of delving into the western discussion, the interest would be targeted on the study of modern Muslim thinkers in their approach to the Qur’an as a scripture, an approach that looks very similar to the western one prior to acknowledging Islam in the field of the history of religions. This approach was applied in the study of the Bible as a scripture and had influenced some of the Muslim thinkers of the twentieth century, as it will be discussed in chapter two of this work.
The first chapter will study the definitions of the sacred in order to recognize the Qur’an as the Islamic sacred which leads to the discussion of authorship. It includes a thorough discussion and presentation of the authorship of sacred visual art represented in the icon vis-à-vis the oral. This chapter concludes in presenting the oral as a cultural tool that leads to a communal sense of authorship that includes a strong notion of dispersed power. As Emile Durkheim, the theorist of the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, argues, the sacred represents the welfares of the unity of the group or the community, while the profane is concerned with the worldly daily life of the individual. Durkheim openly indicates that this dichotomy of the sacred and the profane has nothing to do with the good and evil duality. The sacred can be either good or evil, and the profane can be either one as well.30

This chapter explores the Islamic notion of fascination together with pre-modern Muslim theories of i’jāz. This fascination has been initially realized through listening to verbal revelation. This poses the question of the profane nature of human involvement in the Qur’anic recitation. The notion of fascination is central to the Qur’anic language; it has been argued for centuries that it is the most notable proof of the divine source of the Qur’an and not vice versa. The Qur’anic language is not seen as an extremely beautiful language because people believe it to be a sacred language spoken by God, rather it is proven to be God’s speech because its marvelousness has not been preceded and definitely cannot be replicated. This inimitability of the Qur’an is the “uncomprehended” notion that makes it belong to what Otto would call the numinous.31

The second chapter introduces the literary approach employed in the study of the Qur’an by modernist thinkers of Islam in the twentieth century, most notably Ali Mabruk among his

predecessors like Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who supposedly innovated a modern artistic approach to the Qur’an yet they were still stuck in the textual sphere that was created by those who preceded them. The textual approach is based fundamentally on reading which occurs in the visual field, however this thesis argues that the Qur’an is not a written text that should be approached visually i.e. through reading, rather it is an open text to which Muslims should be listening, reciting, and circulating themselves without the intervention of any elitist entity, institution or state. Moreover, it depicts the visual as an individualistic approach that leads to isolation and institutionalized power.

The Third chapter shows two major Islamic revival movements of listening that occurs in the contemporary age. One partially depends on technology, as in the case of the cassette, but still functions as a listening medium, and the other mobilizes strictly through verbal communication, as in the case of Tablīghī Jama‘at. This chapter shows that the tradition of listening is still alive in the current modern dominant visual culture, and it is producing a community of listeners and transmitters who are actually producing their own culture, norms, and beliefs. Only because they are listening to the sacred.

This work will suggest an unconventional approach to studying the role of the Qur’an in generating a culture of listening that creates a sacred aural sphere that is an amalgamation of the artistic approach in reciting the Qur’an and its Divine source. The novelty of the applied purviews is not in their use in the study of the Qur’an, but rather in employing them in the study of “listening to the sacred” and attempting to explore the role that listening has played in Islamic history as a major generator of culture.
THE QUR’AN AS THE ISLAMIC SACRED

“Wa ‘Anā-khartuka fa-stami’ limā yūḥā”\textsuperscript{32}

(I have chosen you, so listen to what is being revealed)\textsuperscript{33}

In Islam the Qur’an, being the speech of God, is the language that is supposed to be modelling the culture. The Qur’anic discourse is normally a sacred discourse that does not only create an aural sphere but also gives it a sacred dimension; it creates a sacred aural sphere. Until the sixties of the twentieth century, Islam was not included in the study of the history of religions,\textsuperscript{34} thanks to Mircea Eliade, whose work is a spine of this thesis, for his efforts in filling the gap between Islam and the study of religion. William Graham has also played a very important role in late eighties when he published his \textit{Beyond the Written word} and challenged the classifications of the history of religions in which he argues “that any concept of ‘scripture’ that is useful and meaningful for the study of religion must include recognition of its importance both as written and spoken word.”\textsuperscript{35} Modern scholarship rarely applies the methods of history of religions to Islam; it does not use the thorough studies of the sacred developed in the west while approaching Islam. Studies of the Qur’an, moreover, has been predominantly occupied by the literary approach in the west, it seems that Kristina Nelson was one of the pioneers to study \textit{The Art of Reciting the Qur’an} in 1985.\textsuperscript{36} Her book became a major reference in later studies on the topic. However, most of these

\textsuperscript{32} Sūrat Tā Hā, 14.
\textsuperscript{33} The Qur’an. Trans. Khalidi, 248.
\textsuperscript{36} Nelson, Kristina, \textit{The Art of Reciting the Qur’an}. Texas: University of Texas Press, 1985, it was republished in 2001 in Egypt by the American University of Cairo press.
studies focus on the art of reciting as an Islamic ritual, rather than studying the Qur’an as a sacred recited language.

In this chapter, the study of the sacred will be applied in an attempt to place the Qur’an in the category of the sacred, not as a mere sacred scripture, but as a sacred artistic language to be recited; especially because “scripture, unlike myth, ritual, sacrifice, sacred space, or the like, is not”37 listed as “sacred.” This approach aims to clarify that the display of this sacred in Islam should not be through human intervention, but rather through the most nonmaterialistic possible way of Divine revelation, language. The language of the Qur’an, though, is precisely anticipated to escape exact demonstrations by the source in order to leave space for communal understanding. The aural feature of the Qur’an contains less physical manifestation than the visual, for this reason, the comparison between listening and seeing is needed, even in the study of language itself. In any literate society language “tends to be primarily script-oriented and visual as opposed to sound-oriented and oral.”38

The act of reciting and listening of any type of a recited language would normally create an aural sphere in which those who are active in it would be immersed. They become active contributors in the reproduction of this language. This kind of reproduction would muddle the meaning of the content and the actual authorship in a more authoritative unity that is of listening. Reciting and listening for the purpose of transmission create members who become vital parts of the language they are circulating and this results in them being active producers of their own discourse instead of being just consumers of a foreign one. This mutual creating between the language and its human devices would generate a culture that administers the community of those individuals who are

38 Graham, Qur’an as Spoken Word, p. 27.
sharing the same language; the power in such a community would never be concentrated in one separate entity, rather frittered roughly between the community and its circulated discourse.

**Islamic Sacred**

According to Islamic orthodox doctrine, the Qur’an is a sacred text and it is the conclusion of the Divine Revelation since it is the last revealed text to humanity. However, the Qur’an does not refer to itself with the word text at all; the word text (naṣṣ) does not appear in the Qur’an. Moreover, it does not refer to itself as sacred (muqaddas); the term appears only three times as an adjective to places, land or valley.\(^{39}\) Unlike wahy, revelation or inspiration, that is mentioned five times in this form and more than sixty times in different forms. The term wahy, as mentioned in the Qur’an in verse 4 of chapter 53 “this is naught but a revelation revealed”\(^{40}\) or as in another translation “it is not but an inspiration inspired,”\(^{41}\) is the definition of whatever the Prophet used to recite to people as God’s speech. The original Arabic structure in this verse uses ‘inn and ‘illā “‘inn huwa ‘illā wahyun yūḥā” as tools for exclusivity (ḥaṣr); it is nothing but a revelation. The other famous term that the Qur’an gives to itself is book (kitab), which is used “only to describe the Qur’an in its relation with the monotheistic past”\(^{42}\) as it appears in giving the previous monotheists, Christians and Jews, the name: People of the Book.\(^{43}\)

It is commonly known by Muslims that the first word ever revealed to Muhammad was ‘iqra \(^{44}\), which is usually conceived as ‘read’, but it has been argued that the intended meaning is ‘recite’. This is no random coincidence, and in fact, this word ‘iqra’, shares the same linguistic

\(^{39}\) See An-Nāzi‘āt, 16; Tā Hā, 12; Al-Mā‘īda, 21.
\(^{41}\) *The Qur’an*. Trans. Khalidi, 434.
\(^{43}\) The discussion on Qur’an’s self-image will be discussed further in Chapter 3.
\(^{44}\) Al-‘Alaq, 1.
root as the word Qurʾān. Recitation in the Islamic and Pre-Islamic world has always been intrinsically woven into its culture and traditions. For hundreds of years before the revelation of the Qur’an (and after, for that matter), the Arabic-speaking world had always prized its highly developed oral tradition over its written practice. Many of the greatest works of Pre-Islamic poetry hail from this spoken tradition⁴⁵ and exist today only thanks to those who chose to memorize their many verses. The Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through angel Gabriel between the years 610 and 632 A.D..⁴⁶ Its contents were divulged piece by piece to the Prophet Muhammad over a period of 23 years and he preached these revelations to all who would listen.⁴⁷ These Qur’anic pieces, however, were only collected after the Prophet’s death, despite the fact that the Prophet asked his companions to write down the Qur’an,⁴⁸ there was no one copy of it. It is said that ‘Umar came to Abu Bakr and told him that a big number of qurrāʾ (reciters) were killed and he sees that Abu Bakr should command the collection the Qur’an because he was concerned about losing it.⁴⁹ This anecdote shows that the Qur’an was more of a record than a book, it was a collection of texts that are relatively independent and might not be very homogeneous; they were not intended to be assembled in one book. Moreover, the narrative above shows that the Qur’an


⁴⁸ According to tradition, the Prophet, at the beginning of the Qur’anic revelation, prevented the Companions from writing anything other than Qur’an: Lā taktabū ‘annī, wa man kataba ‘annī ghayra al-Qurāʾn falyamhuhu, wa ḥadithū ‘annī wa lā haraj (Do not write from me and whoever writes anything from me other than the Qur’an must erase it, but you can narrate from me without restraint.) After a while the Prophet gave general permission to write after him. This occurred when most of the revelation was already revealed or well memorised by the believers, so he said: Qayyidū al-ʾilmā bil-kītāb (Record knowledge by writing). See Al-Dārimī. Sunan al-Dārimī. Vol. 1. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʾIlmiyya, 1996, 127.

was mainly preserved by the memory of the qurrā‘ by whose death the Qur’an would be threatened to be lost, and that was the concern of ‘Umar. It can be claimed, therefore, that the first Qur’an was a recited text that was memorized by the reciters and there was a scattered record of this text. No one can claim to know the intention behind the event of collecting the Qur’an and the power that entails such a decision, it might be solely ‘Umar’s concern over losing the Divine revelation that had lost its source among them i.e. Muhammad. Regardless of the intentions and the concerns, one can still argue that transforming the scattered memorized sacred into one authoritative book would entail a lot of sacred power and authority to this book and by substitution to those who are experts on it. To a certain extent, this seems to be very similar to the concept of modern law or modern constitutions, since modernity tried hard to achieve unity of power and law, and to clarify all ambiguities around them.\(^{50}\)

The well-known Islamic scholar Toshihiko Izutsu, divided the literary idea of the Qur’an into two contrasting categories: that of language (lisān) and that of speech (kalām). The concept of speech is to be taken in the literal sense of the word, as the Qur’an is comprised of records of the Prophet’s speech, and the rhetorical devices of a speech differ greatly from those found in writing. The concept of language is meant to signify God’s selection of the Arabic language for his message to be delivered in, and this choice cannot be considered a coincidence, for no divine action of this level could be an accident.\(^{51}\)

From the very beginning, Islam was extremely language conscious, and with good reason. For everything here began by God’s having spoken. The whole Islamic culture made its start with the historic fact of God’s revelation of the Koran. But this was not by any means a mere “sending down” of a sacred Book; it meant that God spoke, no more nor less. And that is the revelation….This makes language one of the cardinal problems of Islamic thought. From this point of view, one

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\(^{51}\) Izutsu, Toshihiko. “Revelation as a Linguistic Concept in Islam.” Tokyo: Sept. 1962, 123. This is a published draft of a lecture given at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University, Montreal, spring 1962.
would almost feel inclined to qualify Islam as essentially verbal or linguistic, with all the cultural implications of such a qualification.\textsuperscript{52}

The above quotation can be confirmed by the Qur’an itself, as the phrasing \textit{kala\text{"u}m Allah} (God’s speech) is one that appears a great deal within this holy revelation. As an example of this, take \textit{Sūrat} At-Tawba: “if a polytheist seeks your protection, grant him protection until he hears the speech of God (\textit{kala\text{"u}m Allah}), then escort him to where he feels safe.”\textsuperscript{53} These same words are repeated often, and it is this repetition which shows the Qur’anic emphasis on its nature as the speech of God.\textsuperscript{54} Nothing can be as sacred as the speech of God Himself. It seems that right from the start, God is addressing a specific group of people at a specific point in time. “The large majority of Muslims cultivate an experience of the Qur’an that is based less in the text as a written object than in the sound and practice of its recitation.”\textsuperscript{55} Nevertheless, most Muslim scholars and non-Muslim scholars have been approaching the Qur’an as a literal written text rather than a striking recital aural language.

When exploring the Quranic rhetoric, it is important to consider the importance of the Qur’an as a holy text in the nature of that rhetoric. The Qur’an is a representation of the Divine (God’s speech) that has taken a worldly means in order to reach humanity, and as such, it is the point of intersection between the Divine (the sacred) and the worldly (the profane). In this way, the Qur’an acts as a conduit for the faithful to access the Divine, which every religion needs but each approaches in its own way. The distinction between the sacred and the profane is central to the workings of any religious philosophy. Indeed, religion itself can be seen as a manifestation of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 124.
\item \textsuperscript{53} \textit{The Qur’an}. Trans. Khalidi, 145.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid, Izutsu, 124-126.
\end{itemize}
this idea. The profane is of this world, and as such is subject to the normal bounds of logic that govern it. It occupies finite, explicable intervals of time and space, and it can be directly explained using language. By contrast, the divine is inexplicable, nor can language be used to explain it or logic used to reason about it. It does not occupy fixed points in time and space but rather exists separately from it. The Divine, or in this sense the sacred, are two terms that will be used interchangeably; they cannot be as freely discussed as the profane. This idea forms the primary division between religious and secular philosophy. From the secular viewpoint, there is no sacred world, and there is no profane world defined in opposition to it. Rather, the rules of the profane world govern the entire system and attempting to place ideas in one realm or the other is absurd.

This dichotomy, of course, necessitates a set of tools to bridge the divide. The sacred cannot be accessed directly, constructs such as holy texts and traditions are necessary to communicate aspects of it in a manner that lends itself to interpretation. Such constructs are not in themselves wholly sacred, but they constitute a means to represent the sacred. Here, the recitation of the Qur’an will be discussed as this sort of construct, but it is not the only one to act this way, either inside or outside of the Islamic faith. In the Christian tradition, holy texts fulfill this role, as do the many rituals that individual communities practice. Those rituals are finite and essentially worldly but they are used to access a common idea of the sacred, and play a special role in the function of Christian culture. As a result of this relationship, the specific tools that a culture uses to express ideas of the sacred and the specific ways in which those tools are organized, shape the religious discourse within that culture at a core level.

For example, sacred religious art (icons) can be seen as the Divine representation in Christianity, while in Islam it is the recitation of Qur’an which can also be deemed—from a worldly perspective—an artistic work, since producing any kind of eloquent language that can be
sung or recited is a type of art by all means. In this instance, the art is the worldly element of the text used to express an abstract notion of the sacred. An aesthetic work is, by its nature, an element of the profane; it relies upon the senses and, as in this case, upon language, springing from the imagination of the artist and the interpretation of the audience rather than from any notion of the Divine. However, the Qur’an is not a human production, nor does it consider itself a work of art. Yet, the art of reciting and chanting it is emphasized in the following verses:“‘alladhīna ʿātaynāhum al-kitāb yatlūnahu ḥaqqa tilāwatih ‘ulāʾika yuʾminūna bihi, wa man yakfur bihi fa ‘ulāʾika humu al-khāsirūn”56 (Those to whom We revealed the Book recite it as it should rightly be recited. They believe in it. But those who repudiate it, they are truly lost.)57 And “ʿaw zid ʿalayhi wa rattil al-Qurʿāna tartīlā”58 (Or add to it! And chant the Qur’an in a plain chant).59 Thus, we see a fundamental dichotomy in the relationship between the sacred and the aesthetic in the Qur’an. The element of recitation suggests an aesthetic quality to the Qur’an, but the text also casts itself as a part of the sacred world through its appeal to faith. Whereas a work of art concerns itself entirely with the intellectual and sensory experience of the audience, a holy text aims to use those as a means to communicate some notion of the Divine. It should be noted that the Qur’an places explicit emphasis not only on the content but also on the auditory quality of speaking and listening as means of communication. This relationship indicates the use of the aesthetic as a conduit for the sacred, for the Qur’anic content might aim to deliver an intellectual experience while its recitation aims to deliver a sensory one. In this manner, the Qur’an attempts to bridge the divide between sacred and profane using multiple facets of the Qur’an; the Qur’anic language acts as the

56 Al-Baqara, 121.  
57 The Qur’an. Trans. by Khalidi, 17.  
58 Al-Muzzammil, 4-5.  
59 The Qur’an. Trans. Khalidi, 484.
representation of the sacred while the human recitation and listening constitute the sensory and aesthetic perceptions as the worldly aspects.

Furthermore, God in the Qur’an attributes the act of chanting to himself: “wa qāla lladhīna kaffārū lawlā nuzzila ‘alayhi alQur’ān jumlatan waḥidatan kadhalika linuthabbita bihi fuʿādaka wa rattalnāhu tartīlā”60 (Those who blaspheme say: ‘If only the Qur’an had been sent down upon him whole and undivided!’ Rather, to confirm your heart with it! And We made it to be chanted, a sublime chant!)61 The verse reveals a repudiation of the purely intellectual as the sole path to access the Divine. Only through synthesis of the intellectual and the aesthetic can the text serve its purpose, and subverting one in favor of the other would fundamentally undermine that purpose. Additionally, the text indicates the role of interpretation in communicating its meaning. For the wholly intellectual, ambiguous language is entirely inefficient, but for the aesthetic, the audience’s interpretation is a critical element of the work. Indeed, whereas here the aesthetic is used to bridge between the sacred and the profane, the audience’s interpretation of the text is not merely the process by which meaning is discovered but a part of that meaning in and of itself. If the author here were to take control of the interpretative element of the text as well as the formative part, one of the main determinants of its character would be lost.

Therefore, one might be able to call this type of reciting or chanting an art, but it is a sacred art. That is, it relies upon the tools of the aesthetic, including interpretation of the text, but utilizes them as a means to elucidate the sacred.

60 Al Furqān, 32.
What is the Sacred?

The simple definition of the sacred is that which is related in any way to the supernatural, the unseen, to God Himself or anything that has to do with His characteristics. What precisely that idea encompasses varies across cultures, but it would be a mistake to view the sacred as entirely variable. A particular leader, object, or area of land might be considered sacred, but so too might be an abstract notion that is not encompassed in some physically perceptible space. Even in post-revolutionary France, with its explicit commitment to secularism, a notion of the sacred persisted the notion of the state and the popular will that continued to drive the country’s political philosophy.62

Usually it is used in opposition to the word profane which literally means whatever that is outside the temple. Giving a concrete definition of the profane is as difficult as giving one of the sacred, as the two concepts are inextricably linked to one another. Without a notion of the sacred, any idea of the profane is trivial, and without a notion of the profane as flawed, finite, and logically intelligible, no conception of the sacred can be meaningful. The division between the two takes different forms in different religious traditions, and the way in which that division manifests itself shapes the ways in which those traditions interact with the Divine. In some religions, the sacred is unseen and inaccessible, described purely in the abstract if at all, while in others the sacred is represented in entities that are tangible or at least visible. Often, a single tradition will utilize both frameworks to various degrees, but in every case the sacred transcends any individual object or idea. In Christianity, for example, objects and symbols such as the cross, and the Eucharist are

treated as channels of the Divine, but concepts such as the Holy Trinity indicate a concept of the sacred that is intangible. In other words, some religions deem the sacred to be beyond human senses and as such outside of sensory experience, while other religions believe that the sacred could be any physical thing, like a tree or a stone, still “the sacred tree, the sacred stone are not adored as stone or tree; they are worshiped precisely because they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the sacred.” These two approaches generally lead to dramatic differences in tradition and practice, but they draw from a similar understanding of the world of the sacred defined in opposition to that of the profane. Where the sacred is intangible, it may be described using symbols and traditions, but it is not contained within them. Where it is tangible, it may be present in individual objects but it is not limited to them. Rather, the objects that are viewed this way are seen as having an aspect that is separate from and ultimately more important than the characteristics of the profane by which they might ordinarily be described.

No religious tradition treats the sacred as entirely unknowable, as doing so would undermine the purpose of that tradition. The sacred, for those who believe in it, is not conceived of as a human invention, but religion certainly is, and it exists as an effort to transcend the bounds of the self as defined in secular terms. That is, the followers of a particular religion would not be satisfied if that religion merely stated that the sacred world exists while offering no path by which it might be reached. Rather, religion offers a set of symbols and a shared cultural vocabulary by which to step outside of the profane world and experience the sacred world. Even some religions

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that claim to be more mysterious regarding the Divine—keeping it in the unseen-tend to have manifestations in more complicated forms of representations like the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ or the Qur’an as God’s word in Islam. These manifestations do not quite function in the same way as sacred objects, but they represent the Divine in a way that adherents of their source traditions can more easily understand and interpret. Moreover, they invest the divine in symbols that are stable and transferable, allowing a culture to develop around them rather than relying on the haphazard process of communicating idiosyncratic emotional experiences.

Representing the sacred in worldly material objects, animals, or humans, can be understood in several ways. First, it could be a method to meet the human need to have something tangible to believe in. Essentially, this relationship works as an extension of the bridging aspect of holy texts and rituals. While imbuing certain abstract notions with an aspect of the sacred might appeal to the purely intellectual sensibilities of a religious community, physical objects provide an anchor by which individuals may see the sacred interacting with a world that they recognize. In addition to making the divine a more relatable presence, this process also casts it as a more relevant one, as an element of the world that actually impacts the individual’s life.

Second, it could be an attempt to humanize the sacred in order to give humans a bigger share in the Divine. By manifesting the sacred in objects and sometimes even in individual people, a religion casts itself as a unique path towards commune with the Divine. In some cases, as with the hierarchical organizational structures and procedurally rigid practices of Catholicism, this idea is argued in a very direct form; the Catholic Church is, in its own philosophical framework, not

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65 Ibid, 11.
merely a repository of the sacred but a conveyer of it, allowing it to claim a sort of moral grounding that a secular organization often cannot. In other cases, a particular religious tradition will not present itself as the sole proprietor of knowledge of the Divine, but by investing the Divine in particular objects associated with the tradition that places itself in a privileged position.

Third, it could be meant to create a mediator that consists of the sacred and at the same time, a worldly thing that is familiar to humans and makes the relation with the sacred less complicated since it is embodied in something seeable but also sacred, rather than maintaining a relationship with just an abstract idea that has no worldly representation. The sacred is defined as being resistant to the normal tools of logic and reason by which human beings understand the world. Associating it with a physical object confers on it specific characteristics that can be understood in a meaningful fashion. It is difficult to think of the sacred in the abstract, being courageous or altruistic, but by identifying it with a saint or another clerical leader, a particular religious tradition can associate it with human traits that it hopes to give special significance. A good example of this could be the passion for the traditional histories of the saints and martyrs, “partly as example of the loftiest virtue, partly as benign intercessors between suffering humanity and that Deity who, in every other light than as a God of Vengeance, had been veiled from their eyes by the perversities of schoolmen and fanatics, till He had receded beyond their reach, almost beyond their comprehension.”

When the sacred is inaccessible, when it cannot be imbued with characteristics that are familiar to the audience of religious rhetoric, it becomes distant. This sort of relationship between the sacred and the faithful tends to lend itself to a god that appears solely

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as an explanation of mystery and a source of arbitrary judgment. If it has no physical representation, it is far more difficult to relate to concrete aspects of life, much less a specific set of ideals that a particular religion endeavors to inculcate in its adherents.

When addressing the Qur’anic rhetoric as a characteristic of Islamic culture, one must precisely explain what that encompasses. Qur’anic rhetoric does not merely express substantive ideas but its character lies within the act of listening itself. In order to ascertain the role of listening as the dominant mode in Qur’anic rhetoric, one must take a comparative approach. In other words, to be able to understand the effect of listening, one should compare it to another major sensory modality, such as seeing. The flourishing of visual media in our modern culture and medieval Christian culture makes the comparison especially interesting. That is, the prevalence of visual media tends to generate certain core assumptions about the role of author and audience in the communication and preservation of ideas. In order to understand how these factors vary in a context where auditory media is predominant, one must explicitly define the effects that both visual and auditory media have, and consequently examine these effects in the context of societal, and particularly religious discourse.

Approaching the Bible with an artistic or aesthetic mode seems to be a subject of debate in Christian theology. Although there are many dissimilar points of view as to the role of aesthetic representation in the church, some scholars have begun to ask for a renewal of the faith by using modern art as a vessel:

If the artist often calls theology and piety back to an “essential integrity,” one can say that art as a whole, the aesthetic order, is always an indispensable corrective and nourishment to faith. Recurrently threatened by Docetism and irrelevance, the Christian faith is in need of recurrent baptism in the secular, in the human, to renew itself. It has to be continually re-immersed in the vitalities of nature to be
saved from a spurious and phantom Christ. Art mediates this order of creation to us.\textsuperscript{67}

The main purpose behind this approach centers on the elevation of modern art and aesthetics to a higher position than that of strict and antiquated theology. This is largely due to the fact that “the believer and the artist are dealing with the same single reality, and the artist is freer in handling it. By virtue of his craft and his embattled autonomy, he presents the voices of nature more directly. The theologian cannot enter so freely into the modern reality.”\textsuperscript{68} It is exactly this kind of thinking which inspires someone to re-read the Bible, or even rethink their entire theology, with a present-day type of perspective, one that has resulted from the current reality that we live in. However it is still important to remember that this is a reality that acknowledges arts and aesthetics as a “refuge for the dreams and ideals”\textsuperscript{69} that are being “threatened by materialism.”\textsuperscript{70}

\textit{The Tangible Sacred}

Qur’anic rhetoric is not limited to addressing applicable thoughts or even rituals, but its enchantment is derived from the performance of listening itself. Listening, though, is not manifested physically, which makes it very distant from tangible forms of sacred art like the icon. To understand how these aspects of the tangible and non-tangible manifestations, one must define the properties that both visual, as tangible, and auditory, as intangible, media have, and consequently examine their effects in the context of individual believers and religious communities.


\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, 408.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, 410.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, 408.
Having a tangible sacred is an attempt to reach the mystery of the unseen Divine and reveal it to make it reachable by the abilities of human senses. When the sacred is disembodied, any experience with it is intrinsically personal and difficult to transfer across individuals. It cannot be recreated with language or preserved through social institutions. As a result, forming a religious tradition based entirely on that sort of personal experience is difficult. It can also play an inverted role by being the medium through which the Divine can contact the world. That is, it demonstrates to adherents of a particular religion that the Divine tangibly impacts their lives. It attributes specific outcomes to the intercession of the Divine and certain images to its likeness, making it more materialistic in the lives of those who believe in it. The best manifestation of this type of revealing the sacred is the icon. “The icon is a symbol which so participates in the reality it symbolizes that it is itself worthy of reverence. It is an agent of the Real Presence. In this sense the icon is not a picture to be looked at, but a window through which the unseen world looks onto ours.”  

In this way, the role of sacred art is not entirely aesthetic. It does not derive its value from a purely emotional or sensory response but rather from its connection to a culturally consolidated notion of the Divine.

The tradition that undergirds sacred art depends upon the premise that the sacred can and does influence the world of the profane in very real ways. One way to demonstrate that is to represent the sacred through art which then becomes an integral part of society. When observing any religion that has been successful in sustaining and propagating itself, sacred art becomes a powerful cultural force. Therefore, the icon is not a mere artistic work that is restricted only to

human experience, but it enjoys another function that is related to the unseen world. Insofar as the sacred worlds imagined by different religions are distinct, they vary in the ways in which they influence the world, and in particular human society. The core philosophical concept of the sacred as defined in opposition to the profane may be constant across Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and every other major religion, but the specific totems and traditions built around that concept are not, and they are what determine what the religion teaches and how it operates on a regular basis. “As the eight-century theologian John of Damascus put it, icons ‘contain a mystery and, like a sacrament, are vessels of divine energy and grace…. Through the intermediary of sensible perception our minds receive a spiritual impression and are uplifted towards the invisible divine majesty.”\textsuperscript{72} It should be noted that the notion of an icon does not weaken the foundational aspect of the sacred as separate from the world of both sensory perception and logical reasoning. The use of an icon does not imply that the sacred has been distilled in a physical form and has thus become a part of the profane. Rather, the normally profane tool of art has become elevated to convey elements of the scared. Similarly, icons are not envisioned as mere profane objects designed to reference a personal experience of the sacred without creating a solid linkage to it. Therefore, the icon is considered to be a real manifestation of the invisible Divine.

The intention here is not to focus on the icon as the only presentation of the sacred but rather using it as a clear example for the topic in hand because the icon is still a debatable issue in the Christian theology. In fact, the type of conduit used to give adherents of a religion as reference point when thinking about the sacred has always been an object of controversy. The volume of

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, 6-7.
debate that has centered around this issue makes intuitive sense considering the importance of the particular tools used in constructing and maintaining icons; whether the divine is represented visually or auditorily, whether the figures of individual deities are depicted, and just about every other defining feature of religious art, shape the way in which a religious tradition conceives of the Divine. The question is: how can an artistic work, created or produced by a human, be considered a real viewing of the sacred? And “the sacred” here is not merely a religious topic but the actual holy role that this artistic work is expected to play in the believers’ psyche. That is, given that any human recreation of a physical event will be imperfect and even the original perception of the event itself is fallible, how is it that an artist can assert that she has represented physically an event that is understood to have been invisible, inaudible, and intangible. For a piece of art that depicts solely the profane, this problem does not arise. The art only purports to be an individual’s perception of a particular event, and as such the artist’s assertion that his or her perception is accurately represented is valid on its face. Sacred art, though, seeks to do more than that. It aims to characterize a quality of the world that is entirely external to the artist and that cannot be verified with any sort of empirical comparison.

Of course, this question is to be addressed to the religious person, because she is the one who believes in the supernatural power that exists as the ultimate truth in this world, and she is the one who takes the presentation of the sacred in the world seriously. To be more specific, this question should also be restricted to religions that believe in a god who had the initiative to intervene in human history by revealing Himself to them through His own means, excluding other religions that were completely a human attempt to reach the Divine. That is to say that the notion
of Divine action to reveal the sacred to humans presents a special problem in understanding the role of sacred art. If reaching the sacred is an anthropogenic behavior, sacred art could be seen as an approximation of the Divine that predominates because a better method is not available. If, however, we proceed from the perspective of the aforementioned religious person, we would have to conclude that a better method is available; if the Divine had the ability to reveal itself surely it would have done so by now, and a human tool would not be necessary.

The physical appearance of the icon can be conceived as the profane, but it carries within it the manifestation of the sacred. However, the icon is admittedly made by a human artist as a tool to display the sacred in the world, it is presented as a visual art that cannot be transmitted by the audience. On the other hand, the recitation of the Qur’an could be perceived, just like the icon, as the profane, but the Qur’an itself is the Divine manifestation. Nevertheless, the author of the Qur’an is God who interfered in the physical world through revelation, using an oral/aural language that can be transmitted by the audience. The icon was presented by a specific author/artist, and its audience is consisted of individual believers who are affected by it but cannot circulate it. The Qur’an, on the other hand, was presented by God, as its author, and has a community of believers as listeners, reciters and transmitters; this makes them the physical profane vessels that contain the Divine. Visual art does not create a discourse since it is limited to the experience of the individual who is being subjected to it.

The Question of Authorship

Answering this question brings us to the influence of authorship in sacred art. As we will discuss further below, the role of the artist varies based on the particular characteristics of the medium employed, and serves as a filter in determining how the art conveys its meaning. Each
artistic tradition adopts a particular framework of authorship, and although that framework may change over time, it usually does so slowly and arises at least in part from structural aspects of the art itself. Broadly, an artistic tradition can take either a centralized or decentralized approach to authorship. Where it is centralized, the author takes sole ownership over the creation and reproduction of a particular work; the audience watches or listens passively, and the same piece of art placed before different audiences will constitute an identical experience. Where authorship is decentralized, the author and the audience interact in creating and or reproducing a given work of art. That work will change based on the characteristics of the audience, and may change over time as it is reproduced by communities with changing sensibilities.

The difference between the human religious experience that a believer in any religion might undergo and the faith or the belief in a separate deity that is actually found in the unseen sacred world. The two states can be similar, in the sense that even the belief of a separate god could have been developed within the human experience, which, according to secular scholarship, is the case. But here the attempt is not to investigate the absolute truth behind religions; rather to try to follow the practice of religions with respect to what they claim as truth. In the context of sacred art, the distinction between the societally-developed belief in the sacred and the sacred as a cosmological fact is irrelevant. By its very nature, a religious tradition posits the existence of the sacred as something indescribable while simultaneously proposing tools by which to describe it. Understanding the way in which those tools are constructed requires only that we situated ourselves within the religious conception of the universe and extend its notion of art and of the Divine along parameters that are internally consistent with religious philosophy. The problem of
bridging the divide between the sacred and the profane exists even if we set aside whether or not that dichotomy is socially constructed. Sacred art cannot serve its purpose unless it is considered legitimate by the adherents of its source religion, and to garner that legitimacy it must match the internal logic of that religion.

It is one thing merely to believe in reality beyond the senses and another to have experience of it also; it is one thing to have ideas of ‘the holy’ and another to become consciously aware of it as an operative reality, intervening actively in the phenomenal world. Now it is a fundamental conviction of all religions, of religion as such, we may say, that this latter is possible as well as the former. Religion is convinced not only that the holy and sacred reality is attested by the inward voice of conscience and the religious consciousness, the ‘still, small voice’ of the Spirit in the heart, by feeling, presentiment, and longing, but also that it may be directly encountered in particular occurrences and events, self-revealed in persons and displayed in actions, in a word, that beside the inner revelation from the Spirit there is an outward revelation of the divine nature.73

This quality separates religion from ethereal notions of spirituality. In a religious tradition, the sacred not only exists but it is bound to specific symbols or practices such that cultural institutions can be built around it. The effectiveness of a particular religion depends heavily upon how deeply those symbols can enmesh themselves in the fabric of a society and how vividly they represent the idea of the sacred to their adherents.

The concern here is about the “outward revelation” of the divine nature which, should be strongly separated from the inner revelation. As a result of this separation, depicting the Divine in an artistic work by humans and calling it “sacred” contradicts strongly the original faith; a faith in which the authentic “sacred” is a work that has been done exclusively by the Divine (such as miracles, revelations, transfiguration, etc…). By definition, the inward revelation can only be experienced by an individual. Sacred art constitutes a sensory representation of that experience.

73 Ibid, Otto,143.
that can be communicated to others. As such, the particular way in which it is communicated is somewhat malleable. The artist does not see herself as recreating the sacred in concrete terms, as the sacred is not conceived of as having a concrete nature to be transmitted or recreated. Rather, the artist seeks to provide her vision of the sacred, and must do so by translating an amorphous experience into a set of sensory inputs.

Of course, sacred art is not the only means by which the idea of the sacred takes on a worldly manifestation. The “sacred” actions that are performed by the Divine are the same ones that are deemed by the believer to be proofs for the existence of the supernatural power; “a man encounters an occurrence that is not ‘natural’, in the sense of being inexplicable by the laws of nature. Since it has actually occurred, it must have had a cause; and, since it has no ‘natural’ cause, it must (so it is said) have a supernatural one.” This type of experience, of course, is still a sort of secondary experience of the divine. It is a physical phenomenon, or rather an experience of one, that convinces the person experiencing it that the sacred both exists and actively influences the world. Rather than being represented through art, in this case the sacred is represented through a physical experience that communicates a notion of the sacred through logic. As we have established previously, the sacred is defined as not being susceptible to logic, but in this case, it is represented through the normal channels by which an individual reasons about the world. The relationship is analogous to that of the Divine and sacred art, although in the case of sacred art the Divine is communicated by means of the aesthetic rather than the logical.

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Ibid, 144.
So in this case, the Divine has its own willpower that is independent from that of humans, but its actions are recognizable by humans since they take place in the world and occur within the worldly time; as mentioned before, the numinous manifests itself as a wholly other. So, if the sacred manifests itself in its own way, and presents itself as a completely different entity, how can we (humans) then present it again in worldly means? By its very nature, this sort of representation of the Divine is rooted in an omission of some normal logical process that underlies the profane world. The type of events mentioned above represent the Divine specifically because they contradict normal expectations about the world. Like sacred art, they are transferable in a way that personal experiences of faith are not. Stories about supernatural phenomena can be repeated and changed to match their circumstances, allowing the representation of the sacred through logic to become a cultural institution that is stable over time and that can be enmeshed in a particular society. It should be noted here that even the most literal manifestations of the Divine through physical acts are not conceived of as actual direct confrontations of the sacred but rather as representations of it through worldly action.

Doing so means that there is no consistency between the belief and the practice. Cotton, wood, and paints are neither “wholly others” nor basically and totally different, so if they attempt to represent the sacred, it can be understood in its modest context; human imagination trying to depict the sacred. Often, any discussion of this problem in sacred art is averted by making reference to specific symbols or institutions. An icon depicting a Christian saint is perceived as being a representation of the sacred because it depicts symbols that are known to be associated with the notion of the Divine, and they carry that meaning because the institution of the Church and its various subunits have built the idea of the sacred into the culture that it governs. Each individual
may have her own unique internal conception of the sacred, but those experiences are collectively invested in the common set of symbols that constitute a religious tradition, and as a result the depiction of those symbols acts to signal that a particular work of art be associated with the Divine.

But this does not make it “the real sacred” that deserves worshiping and admiration from the worshipper. Because when man is confronted with the sacred, she “senses his profound nothingness, feels that he is only a creature, or, in the words in which Abraham addressed the Lord, is ‘but dust and ashes.’” Absolutely this is not the case, or at least should not be, when man is confronted with an artistic work that is depicting the sacred. Keeping in mind that some depictions may evoke the fear inside human, and according to Bertrand Russell religion is based primarily on fear, and here the connection is possible. Even so, sacred art cannot be the genesis of a person’s belief in the sacred. A Muslim may experience her own conception of the sacred when listening to the Qur’an just as a Christian may experience her conception of the sacred when viewing the Sistine chapel. A person with no knowledge of either tradition could undergo either experience without having any strong personal reaction on the level of the sacred and the profane. For this third person, the symbols invoked in sacred art register only on the level of the aesthetic; she may respond strongly, and may respond with fear in the manner described above, but these reactions are only characteristics that are prescribed to the sacred by the religious traditions that seek to

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75 Ibid.

access them. They are fundamentally still elements of the profane that are utilized to make the sacred relatable to humans and transferable from one individual to another.

Although, as we mentioned previously, distinguishing between the sacred and the profane is the defining trait of religious belief, not all religions treat the divide in the same way. Religions that believe in a sharp separation between the sacred and the profane tend to limit the amalgamation of both as much as possible. They do not permit any kind of depiction of the sacred for worshiping purposes, not even for use as intermediaries between the worshiper and the Divine. The attitude of such religions towards the image is the iconoclastic attitude. “The iconoclasts communicate directly with the divine and therefore have no need for the intermediary role of the image.”

For the iconoclast, the notion of a worldly conduit by which to communicate the sacred is internally contradictory. The notion of the sacred as separate from the profane world can be described in abstract terms, but any attempt to attribute actual comprehensible characteristics to it is fundamentally impossible. Some even go farther than this, suggesting that attempting to represent the sacred through worldly means strips it of its essence and as such is degrading to the very idea of the Divine. Of course, every religion has some threshold of separation between the sacred and the profane with an associated prohibition on relating the two too closely to each other, but for the iconoclast, that separation is absolute. As a result, an iconoclastic religious philosophy relies heavily on personal experiences of faith; individuals can speak of witnessing the sacred but cannot

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describe it in terms that are specific enough such that another person can claim to have shared in that experience on a deep level.

This attitude towards images seems to be more consistent with the original belief that the Divine is completely separated from the human. Still, sometimes it depends on the way by which the Divine had contacted humans in this world; if the contact happened through the incarnation of the Divine in a worldly thing or a humanly body, then this could represent a good model, for the followers of this religion, to imitate. The reason behind the tolerance for images that Christianity enjoys over Judaism and Islam, where in the latter God cannot be seen at all, not even a Mountain can stay still if God reveals Himself to it\footnote{See the verse 21 of Sūrat al-Ḥashr.} and it is almost the same in Judaism where His face can never be seen as “he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.”\footnote{Exodus 33:20.} While in Christianity God has incarnated in Jesus “the human.” So, if God himself considered it normal to be embodied in something or someone, why would the believers refrain from doing so?

Naturally, no religious tradition falls entirely on one end of the spectrum or the other. Broadly speaking, Catholicism tends toward an icon-oriented notion of the sacred. In the Catholic tradition, the sacred is heavily invested in works of art and cultural institutions. The fundamental distinction between the sacred and the profane still exists, but the shared idea of the sacred lends itself towards explicit depictions that attribute explicit characteristics to it. In the Islamic tradition, depiction of the sacred is restricted. Islamic sacred art does not attribute a physical aspect to the Divine in the same way that some Christian traditions do. As we will discuss further below, the
nature of Qur’anic rhetoric, especially with respect to its auditory quality, grows out of the stronger separation between the sacred and the profane in Islam than the analogous doctrine in Christianity, especially in Catholicism.

In this case, a religion that has the concept of embodiment as a core concept in its theology might be more likely to have the doctrine of partnership between the divine and the human. Consequently, whatever actions done by human would be considered partially divine in its nature, and as a result, artistic works that were done by humans can easily play the role of intermediaries between the Divine and the human since the hands that made them were a combination of the two. Here, the conduits by which religions link the sacred and the profane can lead to some counter-intuitive logic. That is, the type of embodiment mentioned above creates a connection between the worldly and the Divine. A sacred text, place of worship, or religious authority may be an object of the profane, but it serves a purpose that is inextricable from the sacred. Indeed, those profane objects become a tool that the sacred uses to interact with the profane, and although they may be created with worldly tools they are perceived as being, at least in part, the work of the Divine. Still, all religious traditions are premised on the notion that the sacred and the profane are separate, and that the former cannot be truly perceived or explained by the latter. In this way, the idea of embodiment of the Divine in sacred art is crucial. To say that the sacred is embodied in a work of art is not to say that it has become an object of the profane, but rather that the work of sacred art is intended to carrying the artist’s personal experience of the sacred to the audience. As the role of authorship may differ across types of artwork, the specific methods by which that transmission takes place will also differ, but the fundamental role of sacred art is common across religions.
They “also served as a medium for religious insight and spiritual awareness, with a specifically sacramental function in the worship of God. This was especially the case with the interior space of many French Gothic cathedrals. There, as the famous Abbot Suger of St Denis in Paris, described it:

I see myself dwelling in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of heaven; and that, by the Grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner … transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial.\textsuperscript{80}

In this quotation Suger did not claim to be entirely in the earth nor entirely in the purity of heaven, but in a region that is in between the earth and heaven. Crucially he speaks of being “transported” from the world of the profane to the world of the sacred. In the context of sacred art, the idea of transporting the audience into the sacred world, or more precisely representing an experience of the sacred world to them, is critical. Suger does not describe the sacred art that he experiences as an object of the Divine itself. Even as he expresses awe at that experience, he still regards the sacred world as separate from the aesthetic sensation of observing art. He may perceive sacred art as a means by which he accesses the sacred, but Divine itself is something different. Being, as he describes it “immaterial,” the Divine is not something that art can actual depict, and yet he has a personal, internal experience of the sacred that is catalyzed by an external object in the form of art.

This is a strong signal to the partnership between the human and the Divine in producing such a combination of heaven and earth. However, some images are considered truly and purely

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid, Howes, 12.
sacred, because humans did not make them. In this case, these images retain their sacredness for it was not granted by humans but it was miraculously given to them.

Some sacred images are naturally imbued with spiritual power, while others must be consecrated. A religious image categorized as venerable is interpreted as being holy or sacred in and of itself. Due to its fundamental sacrality, such an image deserves adoration and respect. These sacred images can be further distinguished from religious images that are humanly inspired and produced. A singular category of sacred images consists of acheiropoietai (Gr.: ‘not made by human hands’), which devotees believe to be both divinely inspired and divinely produced. More often than not, acheiropoietai are ‘found’ fully formed in nature.\footnote{Ibid.}

**Point of Intersection**

In both cases, the object is still related to the sacred as a conduit. In the former case though, the object is seen as a construct of its associated society, while in the latter it is seen as a normal element of the world that was discovered. The crucial distinction between these two scenarios concerns not the divide between the sacred and the profane but between different ideas of authorship. When a sacred object is seen as having appeared without human intervention, the Divine is the sole author, and the religious community that venerates the object is the audience. They do not shape the form of the object; they only observe and react to it. The art may be constructed in a particular way to engage them, but ultimately they do not take part in its creation or modify it after the fact. When the sacred object is seen as having been constructed by humans, the role of the author is shared by the Divine and by its associated society. The human element of the artistry can be seen as inspired by the Divine, or as mirroring an internal experience that originates in the Divine, but the object reflects both the sacred author and the human author. Here,
the human society that venerates the sacred object does not take a passive role. They change the object in the process of observing it, and may in fact continue to do so over time.

In order to be consistent with the idea of the sacred, the medium that is used by the Divine to contact the world has to fall also beyond the worldly abilities of comprehension; “‘A God comprehended is no God’ (Tersteegen.)”\(^{82}\) That is, a sacred object can engage the audience on the level of the profane, but ultimately it has failed to achieve its goal if it instills only a sense of perceptible images or intertribal concepts. Suger’s experience of sacred art is instructive here, as is the section of the Qur’an regarding the role of chant in Islamic rhetoric. The experience of sacred art is in a sense incomplete by design, in that the audience perceived that the art is linked to something that it does not in itself depict. As Suger observes, there is a sense in a work of sacred art that there is something of the sacred that the art strives for but that can be neither seen nor heard, as the artist does not have the tools to construct it using solely the language of the aesthetic, however complex that language may be.

On this very topic of art and the Qur’an, Christopher Nouryeh, in his book *The Art of Narrative in the Holy Quran*, speaks personally about the challenges of calling Muhammad an artist and studying in this track. He says he studies it because the Qur’an infuses all the features (art, faith, ethics, politics, rhetoric, theology, law history) into one indivisible whole. He calls this infusion: *Ijāz*. He claims that he studies Muhammad’s narrative art as a literary exercise, i.e use it as a way to learn how fiction and faith can stage each other and also how art concepts, such as

\(^{82}\) Ibid, Otto, 25.
“event, performative, iteration or repetition and alteration” can be used to prize the Quran’s new symbolic order.\textsuperscript{83}

Nouryeh says that God is no artist, because the term artist must denote human being, and therefore it is Muhammad who is the artist. Since Muhammad organized the Sūras “with specific objectives in mind, he must also have invented, as part of his artist freedom, the performative events that fulfill those objectives.”\textsuperscript{84} Through re-molding and reshaping the traditional structures of Arabic language in order to truly open his eyes to what lies hidden within them.

For Nourryeh Qur’an is no History,\textsuperscript{85} he means this literally, that the Quran does not serve as an empirical history or a chronological record of events, it isn’t even a history of empirical laws. Neither is it a history of politics or political systems. He believes that such notions of history have been superimposed on to the Book in order to maim its artistic beauty. “Muhammad composes a Book as a means of determining readers and listeners, who will learn to read or listen to something they aren’t accustomed to receiving from nowhere else or from anyone else. This something is the practice of warning or admonition.”\textsuperscript{86} He uses many dual examples of verses in the Book in order to “seemingly juxtapose” them, then he turns around and breaks this idea. He asserts that the Prophet (he seems to never use this term for Muhammad) weaves in the poetic element of the Book through opposing but cohesive structure.

All narratives, quasi-narratives, myths, parables, and mathals don’t just follow one another in some phantasmic or rudimentary fashion. Poeticity is the most dominant genre, or generating force, behind all of them, and grafts them onto the other as one. Muhammad always grafts art onto faith and ethics, as he does fiction into reality. At the same time, and because of it, one frequently

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, 15.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 151. Khalafallah also takes this position and it will be discussed in details later.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid, 152.
discovers aporetic relationship between and within narratives, and this relationship finds expression in a poeticity that’s the dynamic force behind them all.\textsuperscript{87}

The text exceeds history because the verses dull out the specifics, which Nouryeh posits not only gives us the power of interpreting a meaning but more importantly refuses any position of authority over that meaning.

\textbf{The Qur’anic Sacredness: Fascination?}

\textquote{A God comprehended is no God,” (Tersteegen)}\textsuperscript{88} this quote is very interesting and seems to summarize the whole idea behind the relationship between God (or the idea of God) and the human ability of comprehension. Although the statement is brief, its significance is very deep-rooted and profound, and it suggests one of the most complicated questions in the history of ideas: the question of God. In many ways, this quote states that any idea of divinity that can fall into the realm of human understanding is not truly divine.

On the other hand, it is alluding to an additional question which seems to be a legitimate one: is there anything that cannot be comprehended by the human mind? Or, in other words: is there a possibility for anything that cannot be comprehended by us to exist at all? One would argue that “thought needs no objects outside itself, it can make up its own, it is pure; reason is therefore chaste rationalism, unravished by experience.”\textsuperscript{89} However, it is very possible that Tersteegen’s quote could be aimed for an entirely different purpose; to throw the idea off behind the fortifications of rationality and into the peripheries of mystery, or, in Rudolf Otto’s terminology,

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid, 154.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid, Otto, 25.
mysterium.\textsuperscript{90} In his own words, Otto describes this concept of \textit{mysterium} as that which “would first mean merely a secret or a mystery in the sense of that which is alien to us, uncomprehended, and unexplained.”\textsuperscript{91} So, according to this definition, ‘mysterious’ is nothing more than something new to us that we do not understand. However, Otto proceeds in his explanation of \textit{mysterium} in another way, one which in its essence coincides with religious logic and follows a theological line of reasoning.

Taken in the religious sense, that which is ‘mysterious’ is -- to give it perhaps the more striking expression -- the ‘wholly other,’ that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the ‘canny’ and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment.\textsuperscript{92}

Furthermore, the same sacred actions performed by a Divine power are the very same actions that the believers claim as evidence for the existence of supernatural power. “A man encounters an occurrence that is not ‘natural,’ in the sense of being inexplicable by the laws of nature. Since it has actually occurred, it must have had a cause; and since it has no ‘natural’ cause, it must [so it is said] have a supernatural one.”\textsuperscript{93} So in this case, the Divine appears to have its own willpower, one which is independent from that of humanity, and yet its actions are recognizable by humans being that they happen to transpire within the spheres of the world surrounding us. “The numinous (from Latin \textit{numen}, god) presents itself as something ‘wholly other,’ something basically and totally different. It is like nothing human or cosmic….The sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from ‘natural’ realities.”\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid, Otto, 26.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid, 144.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid, Eliade, 10.
There is a considerable difference between the mysterious aspects of this world which falls beyond our natural ability to understand, and a generic concept that we cannot understand due to a lack of obtaining the knowledge necessary for its conception. As Otto puts it, “it might be objected that the mysterious is something which is and remains absolutely and invariably beyond our understanding, whereas that which merely eludes our understanding for a time but is perfectly intelligible in principle should be called, not a ‘mystery’, but merely a ‘problem’.” The really mysterious factor is therefore not a straightforward problem that ignorance impedes us from solving, but is in reality “beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently ‘wholly other.’”

It appears that by ‘wholly other,’ Otto is not referring to something that can be realized or imagined by the mind’s thoughts without assistance from the five senses. Such a thing is best described by the fifth century Greek philosopher Parmenides, who stated: “if you believe geometrical figures are real, you believe in the truth of a world beyond sense. For a perfect triangle, for instance, is like God - no one has ever seen one, though crude human-made approximations are commonplace.” This kind of reasoning was supported in modern times by the British philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell who believed that “it is natural to go further and to argue that thought is nobler than sense, and the objects of thought more real than sense-perception.” That being said, there remains a missing component in both of these theories, for

95 Ibid, Otto, 28.
96 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
they fail to consider the element of the ‘mysterious,’ for this is something that cannot be realized by reason or even the purest of thoughts, for its “kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb.”

Consequently, the faith of a believer does not originate from a set mental process that results in logical outcomes, for the mysterious is not a comprehensible matter. The mystery is for the follower of any faith, “not merely something to be wondered at but something that entrances him; and beside that in it which bewilders and confounds, he feels a something that captivates and transports him with a strange ravishment, rising often enough to the pitch of dizzy intoxication.” According to Rudolf Otto, this sensation described above is the element of fascination.

The element of fascination can also evoke a religious emotion by affecting the psyche of a believer by means of his visual senses. Otto observes three primary factors that could potentially stir up a religious sentiment. The three main factors involved in making an artistic work sacred are, interestingly enough, all negative. Emptiness and void, silence and dark, each one of these is a negation just like the other, “but a negation that does away with every ‘this’ and ‘here’, in order that the ‘wholly other’ may become actual.” On the other hand, it was also said about great artistic works that “these works are to be classed with the profoundest and sublimest of the creations of human art.” It seems that Otto himself was fascinated with this idea of the holy that is represented in the sacred art, as he refers to it time and again as numinous. Numinous in such...

100 Ibid, Otto, 31.
101 Ibid, 70.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
places, according to Otto, “comes into being.”\(^{104}\) He writes a beautiful illustration of the majestic effect that sacred art had had on him:

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\text{The darkness must be such as is enhanced and made all the more perceptible by contrast with some last vestige of brightness, which it is, as it were, on the point of extinguishing; hence the ‘mystical’ effect begins with semi darkness. Its impression is rendered complete if the factor of the ‘sublime’ comes to unite with and supplement it. The semi-darkness that glimmers in vaulted halls, or beneath the branches of a lofty forest glade, strangely quickened and stirred by the mysterious play of half-lights, has always spoken eloquently to the soul, and the builders of temples, mosques, and churches have made full use of it.}\(^{105}\)
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Therefore, the impact of the ideas behind the holy, the mysterious, and the sacred art are very similar, in fact, almost the same. Sacred art in particular is a perfect example of how the wholly other can be captured into a material form, becoming actual.

Offering another perspective is Soren Kierkegaard, who was renowned for his contributions to both philosophy and theology as a Danish scholar.\(^ {106}\) An interesting aspect of Kierkegaard’s writings lie in his opinion, of reference to the literary approach to Qur’anic interpretation (\textit {tafsīr}) that will be examined later below, or in his case, Biblical exegesis. He found it to be of the highest degree of impiety one could possibly accomplish.\(^ {107}\) He is an example of the Christian believer that, although the words of their holy book are indeed immensely poetic and beautiful, the study of such a thing could not convey the truth of the divine message.\(^ {108}\) He sharply criticized “all preachers and theologians of his age, who try to convince people of the truth of the Gospels by explaining how beautiful, deep, elegant or meaningful they are. He claims that these

\(^{104}\) Ibid, 68.
\(^{105}\) Ibid.
\(^{108}\) Ibid, 214.
people prostitute Christianity for the sake of the demands of the scientific age.”\textsuperscript{109} This seems to be, in his point of view, a sign of poor faith; he clearly does not approve of the scale on which religious truth is being measured by its modernity. His thoughts seem to reveal that theologians “want to give people something secure, a confirmation of their belief that can compete with the positiveness of modern science.”\textsuperscript{110}

It is an ingrained belief among Muslims that early converts to Islam were largely struck by the perfection and the beauty of the Qur’anic style. \textsuperscript{111} “Until today, declarations of fascination with the language of the Qur’an, reports about various situations in which its recitation caused ecstatic reactions, or praise for particular reciters are known throughout Muslim—and especially Arabic-speaking—literary and theological history.”\textsuperscript{112} Throughout its history of reception, it is strongly believed that the Qur’an has an aesthetic effect that is unsurpassed by any other literary text.\textsuperscript{113} For many Muslim theologians, the “sole confirming miracle of the Muslim Prophet is the beauty and perfection of the Qur’anic language.”\textsuperscript{114} It has been argued that the beauty of the Qur’anic rhetoric, rather than the content, was a major reason that attracted the first converters to Islam. Abundant stories narrate the fascination of early Arabs towards the Quranic recitation. However, this does not undermine their admiration of the content or the message being imparted. It is with no doubt that the Quran was and remains the generator that empowers and renews faith amongst the believers. As Muhammad Abu Zahra, a modern Muslim Scholar, puts it:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{109} Ibid, 213.
\item \textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{112} Ibid, 255.
\item \textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{114} Ibid, Kermani, “Revelation in Its Aesthetic Dimension,” 213.
\end{itemize}
The Qur’an attracted the Arabs to faith on the strength of its stirring magnificence (raw’a) and the power of its rhetoric (bayān), on the strength of its short stories as well as many small and important instructions, because its long expressions cause joy and its short phrases neglect nothing in their transparent expression and their clear indications. Indeed their faith did not emerge from a desire for revolt or from their weakness, weak as they were. When their faith was strong, then this came from the Qur’an. The Qur’an was what drove them to faith on the strength of its rhetoric, which exceeded the talents of man as was obvious to all.

This understanding is not particular to modern scholars that study Islamic thought; it is an inherent intellection that has long existed in Islamic tradition. Despite the perplexity many of them carry towards the nature of the Qur’anic style, especially the storytelling style, the miraculousness in the eloquence of the text is an attribute that is agreed upon. Indeed, some exegetes like al-Fakhr al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) interpret the verse that responds to the infidels of Quraysh, who accused the Prophet for being taught by someone in Makka, by explaining that the one they were alluding to had a foreign tongue while this (the Qur’an) is a rhetoric Arabic tongue: “The Qur’an is only miraculous according to the eloquence in its words, [to the extent that] the Qur’anic response does not oppose the fact that the Prophet was getting the meanings from that foreigner since the Qur’an is miraculous only for the eloquence of its words,” says Wadad al-Qadi. Even an earlier Muslim scholar like ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd b. Yaḥya al-Kātib (d. 132/750), the author who was once considered the founder of Arabic prose, advices the crown prince of his time in one of his letters by saying:

Recite a section of the Book of God so that you examine its literary formulation time and again with your judgement, and you adorn your words by reciting it so that you bring your mind to it [...for in it there is the healing of the hearts from

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115 The role of Qur’anic stories will be examined later in the discussion of Khalafallah’s theory. He argues, that the Qur’anic stories are not historical, rather they are literary in nature. Although, the argument in this work is based, to an extent, on the beauty of the Qur’anic rhetoric, it still disagrees with Khalafallah on his textual approach to the Qur’an as a written book.


their illnesses, the dislodging of the devil’s insinuations and his wicked, vile thoughts, and the shining of the vestiges of light.\textsuperscript{118}

Wadad al-Qadi finds this account very revealing\textsuperscript{119} as she believes that ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd considers the Qur’an “as a psychological and moral deterrent to error and sin, a source of wisdom and law, and, above all, a literary text of the highest caliber.”\textsuperscript{120} Al-Kātib, advises the crown prince to actually recite the Qur’an and not merely read it. The outcomes as one can see is involving the language, the mind, the heart, and the psyche. While Al-Qadi’s inference is true, the Qur’an is a literary text of the highest caliber; however, it implies, regardless of its high status, that the Qur’an is a book of literature. This implication undermines the other major role of the Qur’an as a sacred recitation that is meant to be recited and listened to with the involvement of the whole body, as Al Katib points out.\textsuperscript{121}

The beauty of the Qur’an is the factor that affected and still affects listeners, the beauty is in its language, not merely as a piece of literature that should be read silently. This beauty is the place in which \textit{i’jāz} resides; it exceeds man’s talents and challenges them and that is why it cannot be man-made rather the sacred. The following is a preview of major Muslim arguments proving the divine source of the Qur’an based on its fascinating language and the power of its rhetoric. The Qur’an itself challenges humans to try and come up with something similar to it, and failing to do so would be the proof that it was revealed by God.


\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{121} See Talal Asad’s quote in the introduction on page 6.
The I’jāz of the Qur’an: Fascination?

In most works on the topic the focal point is the challenge that the Qur’an presents to humanity, specifically, to come up with a work similar to the Qur’an if they do not believe in the divine source of the message. This approach is illustrated by the works of Abū Bakr Al-Bāqillānī (d. 1012) and ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078) – I’jāz al-Qur‘ān and Dalā’il al-I’jāz, respectively. Both Al-Bāqillānī and Al-Jurjānī, discussed below, attempt to prove that, as the production of God, the Qur’an is unmatched and, since it is impossible to produce such a work or similar to it by human abilities, wholly or partially, it establishes the famous Islamic doctrine that it is just a miraculous work,122 and the only one that was performed by Muhammad, al-Baqillānī states: “the Qur’an is the greatest miracle of the messenger, and it is staying, and he has no miracle other than the Qur’an.”123

Much of the work was inspired by the age-old question of i’jāz. Its conventional definition simply means “incapacitation,” although amongst theologians of Islam, i’jāz symbolizes “inimitability” and distinctly refers to this specific aspect of the Qur’an. It is interesting that the definition of incapacitation then translates to an inability to replicate the Qur’an. This is due to the sublimity of its rhetoric and divinely inspired components found within its pages, the combination of both are believed to have incapacitated mankind, rendering it unable to reproduce the like.124 Since its conception, Muslims have always deemed the Qur’an to be without fault and unrivaled by any other text, so it has been the continuous task of scholars and Shaykhsthroughout the centuries to attempt to decipher just what it is about the work which makes it so supremely unique.

The notion of *i’jāz* has profound significance within the Muslim religion, and is in fact a core dogma of its ideology. The term became an accepted creed about three centuries after Muhammad’s death in the tenth century and has challenged theologians ever since.

What is important to understand when considering this concept of *i’jāz*, is that the Qur’an is not just a holy book, but is considered a legitimate miracle in the Islamic faith. To say something is a religious miracle is the manifestation of the sacred within religious studies. The incomparable level of rhetorical excellence exhibited by the Qur’an, other than being itself a miracle, also is theologically considered proof of the prophethood of Muhammad. A prophetic miracle is technically termed *mu’jiza*, and shares its etymological root with *i’jāz*, the topic which has preoccupied Muslim scholars and theologians alike for many centuries. It is believed that all prophets achieved the ideal in some realm of human capacity, and in fact, in order to even be considered a prophet, one must be divinely validated with a miracle. In the case of Jesus it was with medicine and in the cases of Moses it was with magic. However, for Muhammad his *mu’jiza* pertained to the realms of rhetorical supremacy. The Qur’an is unique in that it differs from many other miracles throughout history because it is not a single event that took place at one single time. It is a living, breathing miracle which continues not just to exist, but to confound and inspire millions of people for over a thousand years. The basis of the belief that the Qur’an is a miracle is explained in the study of *i’jāz*.

During the twenty-three years in which Muhammad received the word of God, he was constantly challenged and even accused of being everything from a soothsaying poet to a madman

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125 Mu’jiza is a supernatural phenomenon that usually occurs by a human being who claims to have supernatural powers, one of those powers could be the Divine power that appears through her as a proof of her prophethood.


127 Ibid.
in league with the devil. This period of revelation brought many followers, but also many opponents to Muhammad’s door. And so the Qur’an challenged all who dared to attempt to replicate the astounding eloquence of its rhetoric, a rhetoric that could only come from an unearthly source: This ‘challenge’ has become known in theological studies as the “taḥaddī,” (challenge) and summons any non-believers, or indeed any human at all, to attempt to reproduce even one Sūra of the Qur’an with success.\textsuperscript{128}

\begin{quote}
If you doubt what We revealed to Our servant, bring forth one sūra like it. And summon your witnesses, any other than God, if you are truthful. But if you do not, and surely you will not, beware of the Fire whose fuel is mankind and stones, made ready for the unbelievers.\textsuperscript{129}
\end{quote}

The fact that no one has ever been able to imitate the Qur’an’s use of the Arabic language only helped bring conviction and pride to its followers, confirming their belief in this doctrine. If there had existed a piece of literature confirming the opinions of Muhammad’s opposition, then certainly they would have used it against him without a second thought. Indeed the taḥaddī was instrumental in demonstrating the Qur’an’s inimitability and it is often listed as one of the prime explanations of its i’jāz.\textsuperscript{130}

Since its revelation, many efforts were made to surpass this challenge, but they all fell flat in comparison to the expressivity and beauty of the Qur’an’s rhetorical depth. Therefore, it was widely accepted that this inimitability was indeed a miracle in and of itself, not only validating the Qur’an as the word of God, but validating also Muhammad as the prophet he was believed to be. Outside of the taḥaddī, there are many other aspects of the Qur’an which prove its miraculous

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid, xii.
nature. The Qur’an also speaks of the future and of the past in ways which cannot be explained by human faculties or sciences, which further emphasizes the miraculousness of the Qur’an. However, the beauty of its writing is the primary reason as to why it is considered so inimitable.

Some, like Abu Bakr al-Baqillānī (d.1013), who tries to prove the miraculousness of the Qur’an through meaning, believed that this ability to foresee future events and preach eschatological intelligence is the greatest piece of evidence proving the Qur’an’s miraculous character. One example of its ability to see into the future relates to the Byzantine Empire: “The Byzantines have been defeated in the nearer part of the land, and yet, after their defeat, they shall be victorious - in a few years.” In the year 614, the Byzantines were defeated by the Persians in a battle for Jerusalem. Then fourteen years later in 626, the Byzantine armies decimated those of the Persians in the battle of Nineveh. This is not something the Prophet could have known as, according to standard sources, he was born in Makka in the year 570 AD, long before and a long distance away from these historical events. He referred to these types of prophecies in the Qur’an as the ability to harness the ‘unseen.’ The Qur’an also speaks of past events, and much pre-Islamic historical content is found in its pages. It gives detailed accounts of the lives of many prophets, as well as the stories of Noah, Abraham, Adam, and the creation of the world. This would not be such a prominent factor in the proof of the miracle of the Qur’an if it weren’t for the fact

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131 Von Denffer, Ahmad. *Ulum al Qu’ran: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur’an.* Kube Publishing Ltd, 2015, 120.


134 Ibid, 266-267.

135 Ibid, Von Denffer, 120.
that Muhammad was known to be illiterate, at least as the orthodox main stream of Islamic culture believes he was.

In addition to being illiterate, Muhammad is thought to have been ignorant of all previous Christian writings concerning the historical and religious narratives he later recites. The Qur’an itself points to Muhammad’s illiteracy, and he is described as An-nabiyy Al-‘Ummiyy,\textsuperscript{136} which can be translated as “the unlettered prophet.”\textsuperscript{137} The word also has another connotation, one connoting a connection with an uneducated group of people.\textsuperscript{138} The fact that Muhammad was illiterate only further proves the Islamic truth that he really was a prophetic vessel for the words of God. If not for the intervention of a supernatural force, then how could he have had such extensive knowledge of the prophets and scriptures before him? Living in a distant part of the cultural centers of his day, it is considered miraculous, by al-Baqillānī, that Muhammad was able to have such all-encompassing wisdom about the past and future. This is yet another factor al-Baqillānī pointed out in his explanations of the Qur’anic \textit{i’jāz}.\textsuperscript{139}

A final explanation of his theories of \textit{i’jāz} centers around the fact that the Qur’anic text has no contradictions. The Gospels of the Christian New Testament, for example, were written by the four evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Although there is definitely a consistent plot woven throughout the four gospels, there do exist small contradictions found within these chapters. Whether these include chronological problems or variations in names and numbers, it cannot be

\textsuperscript{136} Al-A’rāf, 157-158.


\textsuperscript{138} Ibid. Von Denffer, 119.

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid, 120.
denied that there are a few inconsistencies. However, throughout the Qur’an’s twenty-three year revelation, you cannot find such obvious contradictions. The New Testament was written down by men, and if the Qur’an were to have been similarly devised, then there would probably exist various human errors as well. However, the lack of discrepancy makes this yet another reason medieval theologians found to explain inimitability of the Qu’ran.141 There even exists a verse in the Qur’an addressing the lack of contradiction found within its pages. “Do they not ponder the Qur’an? Had it been from other than God, they would have found much inconsistency therein.”142

Around the same time, ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078) was creating his own theories. He was a medieval scholar of rhetoric and grammar, and happened also to be an ardent admirer of al-Jabbār’s theories. Never having left his hometown of Jurjān, his theories on Qur’anic interpretation contrast greatly with those of his contemporaries in the field of Arabic literature, and they stand out for this reason.143 Al-Jurjānī occupies a prominent space in the history of Arabic literary criticism, bringing it to the forefront of the academic disciplines of his day.144 Although he wrote extensively on many aspects of both theological and literary sciences, Dalā’il al-I’jāz, his first book, was concentrated solely on discovering what gave the Qur’an its literary excellence, and how to even begin to define that excellence.145 His own theories about the I’jāz of the Qur’an centered heavily on its naẓm. Naẓm in arabic literally means ‘the stringing together of pearls.’ It is


141 Ibid, Von Denffer, 119.


145Ibid, 165.
used very often when discussing written syntax and the semantics of grammatical structure. Throughout his scholarly works, Al-Jurjānī maintained that “Single words have no distinction over one another and that ideas cannot exist without words…It is the choice and arrangement of words, indeed their naẓm that creates a specific meaning in a distinctive style that only literary taste, sensibility and long aesthetic experience can help to discern.”

When it came to the age old question of iʿjāz and why exactly the Qur’an was so inimitable, al-Jurjānī used this principle of naẓm as his foremost explanation. There was not much distinction between wording and meaning for him when it came to Qur’anic literary studies, for they mirrored each other. He applied this perspective as a means of explaining the excellence of the writing found in the Qur’an. “There is thus only one appropriate wording for each meaning, and the proof that the Koran is the most eloquent text has to start from here.” Using this thesis of his, one can infer that the textual excellence of the Qur’an is centered on its perfectly consistent relationship between the words chosen and the meaning intended by such choices. He often used the expression ‘li-kulli maqāmin maqāl’ to explain this (roughly translated as ‘for every circumstance there is a single, most ideal means of idiomatic phrasing’).

Given that metaphor is inherently a stringing together of words, this line of thought has become very valuable for those conducting research on the various metaphors found throughout the Qur’an. He himself intensely studied the great Arabic poetry and literature of the past and used it as additional evidence of the Qur’an’s miraculous character. In his book Dalaʿil al-Iʿjāz, al-Jurjānī provided a copious amount of valuable research, elaborating further on the importance

146 Ibid.
147 Ibid. Heinrichs, 17.
148 Ibid.
of *nazm* and syntax. He used examples of both prose and poetry to help prove his theory that the Qur’an was not just miraculous because of its content but also because of its style. Because of his attention to detail and thorough research, his argument provides a more solid foundation than scholars had previously provided.149

Al-Jurjānī viewed the study of literature to be hugely important in the full understanding of the Qur’an. “For al-Jurjānī, the study of poetry reaches the degree of a religious duty.”150 Perhaps this attention to the importance of poetry is due to the fact that he was academically drawn to all things rhetorical and poetic. Therefore, in his point of view, if you ignore the great secular literature and poetry of the Arab language, then how could you say with one hundred percent certainty that the Qur’an is the greatest piece of writing in the Arabic language? A statement which is an essential part of the Muslim doctrine.

More theories have arisen over the centuries, and they use the works of these theologians and many before and after them to attempt to decipher this inexplicable *Ijāz* to the best of their ability. This conception of *i'jāz* was the major proof for Muhammad’s prophethood and by substitution proof for the divine source of this recitation. This was achieved by Muslim scholars later on like Al-Baqillani and Al-Jurjani, however, for the first listeners of the Qur’an there was no such terminology, the proof of the Divine source was their own fascination by Muhammad’s recitation which encompasses the literate and illiterate alike.

“He it was Who raised up a messenger from among an unlettered people, to recite His verses to them, to purify them and to teach them the Book and the Wisdom, though before they had been in manifest error -- them and others yet to follow them. He is All-Mighty, All-Wise.”151

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149 Ibid.
151 Al-Jum’a, 2. The Qur’an. Trans. Khalidi, 462. The word unlettered, or illiterate, is mentioned in the Qur’an by the Arabic term *ʿummiyyīn* that is interpreted by the Qur’an itself in another verse, Al-Baqara, 78, as those who do
Unlike other physical miracles (which are even mentioned in the Qur’an), Muhammad was sent with a living, transmittable, rhetorical, miraculous language.

The Qur’an is the sacred “intangible” language of Islam that is spoken by God Himself, it is an oral recital discourse to be reproduced by the audience. The divide between sacred and profane in Islam makes it impossible for any human-made entity to be sacred. Muslims believe that the Qur’an cannot be human-made rather a Divine revelation, this belief stems from the Qur’an’s marvelous beauty that cannot be easily accepted or comprehended by human minds or expectations to be human production. The emphasis on its literary strength had initiated an association between the Qur’an and literature at specific times throughout Islamic history, this association will be surveyed in the next chapter.

not know the book “some of them are unlettered, they do not know the book, but only as false hopes, and they are living in illusion.”
Stages of the Literary Approach

From the very beginning, revelation as conceived in Islamic theology is primarily lingual in nature. This is speaking in a very literal sense, meaning that the text of the Qur'an falls into the discipline of semantics and linguistics. The literary dimension of the Qur'an has been in a way or another a hot topic for different types of studies and/or approaches. Most of these studies or approaches tended to fall in the realms of theology and other related field but very little were inclined to the realm of literature. The common ground from which most of these works embark is the inimitability of the Qur'an that the Qur'an itself has challenged the disbelievers with; can they produce a similar work like the Qur'an?! Note that Arabs at that time were the most eloquent in Arabic poetry.

Like the Jewish and Christian faiths, Islam is claimed as a religion of the text. A complete comprehension of this fact sheds much light on why it has become so important for scholars to take up intensive studies of its text. It is comprised of 114 Sūras and, unlike the Bible for example, these Sūras are distinctly individual, sharing little common thread or plot between themselves, and arranged in a loosely chronological order. The greatest common thread that ties these many

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152 Ṣūrat Al-Jinn, 1.
chapters together is the fact that they are all recounted from the voice of God. Although at times the discourse of angels or human beings does come into play, there is little distinction between their voices and the larger voice of the holy narrator.\textsuperscript{156}

As mentioned before, many scholars (although perhaps not a majority) have advocated the study of the Qur’an by means of rhetorical devices. The literary debate was not one which simply appeared out of nowhere. In fact, the literary nature of the Qur’an has been a subject of scrutiny and academic discourse for many centuries, ever since it was first put to paper in the first centuries of Islam. The cause of this dispute partially stems from the fact that the Qur’an is regarded as far more than a common piece of literature. It is perceived by the Muslim world as a living miracle in and of itself, one whose rhetoric lives in a state of the eternally present.\textsuperscript{157} Therefore, it becomes a quickly sensitive topic to approach when scholars attempt to decipher these mysteries by means of standard literary analytical methods. However, from a rhetorical perspective, this living material is also a piece of literature unmatched by any other in the Arabic literary canon, and one perceived to be wholly without error. In the eyes of this belief system, there is no single part of the text which is superior to another, and it symbolizes perfection in every dimension. It has therefore become the task of scholars and theologians alike to discover what exactly about this sacred text makes that so effective, so indisputably supreme. From this origin came the literary study of the Qur’an.

The evolution of the practice of Qur’anic interpretation has changed and developed over the span of many centuries with the help of intellectuals and clergymen alike. Tarif Khalidi has been an instrumental figure in furthering the more contemporary varieties of Qur’anic

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\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.

interpretation. Khalidi, a prominent Islamic scholar and author of our day, translated the Qur’an into English with remarkable success. According to Khalidi, the Qur’an “is a sacred text which promises salvation in and through the power of rhetoric.”158 In his writings for the Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts, he systematically divided the journey of the Qur’an into three main stations throughout the religious and literary history of Islam.159

According to Khalidi, the first evolution towards a literary approach to the Qur’an began in the ninth century, almost two hundred years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. This phase was pioneered and headed by the writer and academic known to us as Al-Ｊāḥiẓ.160 For the purposes of this work, it is important to review some of the groundwork which he set for the many scholars who followed him in the discipline of religious literary study. Being a Mu’tazilī theologian, intellectual, and renowned author of both poetry and prose, al-Ｊāḥiẓ left an impressive mark on the history of Qur’anic literary study.161 Al-Ｊāḥiẓ sought to construct a systematic criteria of what makes a piece of literature contain bayān, or “truthful eloquence.” The greater purpose of all of his analytical writings and literary and theological research was to develop “a theory of prophetic excellence based on supremacy in eloquence.”162 Therefore, to prove the supremacy of the Qur’an’s rhetoric and also to uncover how it achieves such a flawless application of bayān, Al-Ｊāḥiẓ compared it to all the most advanced and profound literature of its day. In his extensive research and studies, he included a multiplicity of genres, including oratory, prose and of course,  

159 Ibid, 304.
160 Ibid.
161 Pellat, Ch., Al-Ｄjāḥiẓ. Encyclopaedia of Islam II.
162 Khalidi, Ibid. 305
In terms of the theological content he drew upon for his research, he sourced the documented dialogues of Muhammad as well as passages of the Qur’an. In doing so he attempted to prove that simplicity, concision and naturalness were primary reasons why the Qur’anic language was superior to all else.\(^{163}\)

In addition to his comparative analyses between poetry and the Qur’an in respect to *bayān* and the science of eloquence, Al-Jāḥīẓ also laid the groundwork for prominent scholars like al-Jurjānī to later supplement and advance the theory of *naẓm*.\(^{164}\) However, for Qur’anic studies it refers to the intense effect an arrangement of words can have on a reader. It is defined as “the particular ways in which words are arranged in order to put across the desired meaning.”\(^{165}\)

The idea of *naẓm* came as a hypothetical response to the question of what makes the Qur’an so inimitable and many books were written on it in the earlier days of Qur’anic exegesis. It is generally accepted that *naẓm* can exist in two states: as a correlation between a word and its meaning, or as a more linear relationship between the verse and its *Sūra*, and vice versa.\(^{166}\) As the early theologian al-Khattābī (d. 988 A.D.) wrote, “It employs the most eloquent words in ideal forms of composition, embodying the truest meanings.”\(^{167}\) In his studies, *bayān* consisted of words, meaning and *naẓm* (*naẓm*, the arrangement of words and meanings, being the most important).\(^{168}\) He strongly believed that *naẓm*, not content, was the key to the Qur’anic *i’jāz*. *Bayān*, in a sense,


\(^{164}\)Ibid. See *naẓm* in the discussion of al-Baqillānī in the study above.


\(^{166}\)Ibid, 10.

\(^{167}\)Ibid.

\(^{168}\)Ibid, 11.
addresses the pre-Islamic poetry of the Arabs as it seeks to prove that the Qur’anic language is not just conventionally eloquent. The fluency and expressiveness of poetry prior to Muhammad’s life should not be denied, but Qur’anic eloquence is one of divine truth, making it impossible for it to be associated with any human form of poetry. The pages of this holy text boast abundant examples of highly complex usage of various figures of speech, rhythmic implication and metaphor.169 “Figurative language is used to enhance the effect of what is said by making it beautiful, impressive, aesthetically striking, and semantically powerful. It persuades through literary devices that stir the imagination and appeal directly to the senses.”170 The Qur’an is a perfect example of a religious text that uses figurative, metaphorical language in such a way. Repetition is another way in which the Qur’an’s language seeks to ‘fascinate’ and inspire the listener. “It is meant to inculcate the qur’anic message with power while employing a sublime language that seizes the heart and mind.”171

Al-Jāḥiẓ had a similar yet still unique opinion on how the rhetoric of the Qur’an had achieved such a perfect application of naẓm. What he came to realize was that, even the greatest of masterpieces were still comprised of the same everyday tools that are familiar to the general population.172 This concept seamlessly crosses over into the field of literature as well, for even the most masterful authors still write their works using the words of the common people. It can also be seen in different fields of art, the most famous Sistine Chapel was painted by Michelangelo who had access to the same artistic materials to paint the remarkable ‘extraordinary’ ceiling as any Florentine street artist of his day. Likewise, The Qur’an (although its miracle certainly cannot be

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170 Ibid
171 Ibid, 8.
172 Ibid, Al-‘Aṭṭār.
compared to that of any earthly artistic masterpieces) uses the same Arabic words mostly known throughout the Prophet’s milieu in Arabia, however, to a degree of excellence which remains unrivaled to this day. Al-Jāḥiẓ recognized the Qur’an’s capacity to make from the ‘ordinary’ language an ‘extraordinary’ one as an unparalleled phenomenon and ultimately as the secret behind the Qur’an’s literary excellence.\textsuperscript{173}

The theological theory of \textit{sarfa} is one that many scholars have explored over the years. Al Jāḥiẓ’s can be described as a bit two-folded, and this has to do with his involvement in the Mu’tazilī belief systems.\textsuperscript{174} The traditional theory of \textit{sarfa} was made in response to what is known in Qur’anic theological studies as the \textit{Tahaddī}: the great challenge to surpass the Qur’an in verbal supremacy.\textsuperscript{175} It stated that if one ever thought to challenge the Qur’an, God’s will would intercede in an act of divine intervention, weakening the challenger’s will to such an extent that they would be unable to complete the task.\textsuperscript{176} Al-Jāḥiẓ, however, wanted to maintain the Mu’tazilī belief in free will as a core feature of humankind. Thus, in his theory of \textit{sarfa}, he writes that there is a \textit{sarfa} of capacity in which man’s free will is curbed by God’s divine intervention, but there is also a \textit{sarfa} of attention. In this second category, it is man’s humility and respect towards God and more importantly, the free will which gives him this attitude that stops him from attempting to compete with the Qur’an. This theory would be adapted for years to come, but it is valuable to consider the perspective of this pioneering medieval theologian.\textsuperscript{177} However, this kind of interpretation of the \textit{sarfa} doctrine that is of the people’s humility, is actually exclusive to believers and followers of

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{175} See above; first page of ‘Qur’an and literature.’
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid, Al-’Aṭṭār.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid.
Islam, but the challenge in Qur’an was for the humanity as a whole, which means that those who do not believe in the Qur’an would actually find the challenge interesting and might go for it as well. It does not make sense to consider the ṣarfa applicable only to Muslims; the meaning, though, could be that humans might have the ability to come up with something as ‘extraordinary’ as the Qur’an but their attention or ability was turned away by the divine power.

The second stage, according to Khalidi’s division, in the relationship between the theological and the literary study of the Qur’an took place nearly six hundred years later. After al-Jāhiẓ and his systematic endeavors to create an established criteria of literary eloquence, the next significant scholar to add to this area of study was the great Egyptian polymath Jalāl ad-dīn al-Suyūṭī. He was instrumental in furthering the relationship and bridging the gap between the study of literature and that of theology, trying to find a synthesis between the two. Writing nearly six hundred years after Al-Jāhiẓ, al-Suyūṭī lived in a time where there was much shared discussion between the literary and religious scholars of the time regarding the i’jāz of the Qur’an. It is a known fact that literary theory was greatly affected by the Qur’anic rhetorical sciences. The two topics which then came into question were finding a coherent dogma for the Qur’an’s i’jāz, and correctly interpreting some of its more ambiguous verses. As the dissemination of this holy book began to expand even further, both culturally and geographically, heretics from all sides began to expand their arguments against it. Therefore, it was the task of all Muslim scholars, whether

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178 Sūrat al-‘Isrā’, 88.
179 Ibid, Khalidi, 305.
180 Heinrichs, 16.
181 Ibid, 654.
182 Ibid, Khalidi, 305.
their academic work was secular or religious, to attempt the formation of a coherent argument against these nonbelievers.

It was in this time that *i'jāz* became established as a core principle of Muslim theology. It was the answer to this question of the Qur’an’s inimitability which had the potential to silence all those who doubted it. But was it God’s power of intervention, *ṣarfa* which rendered the imitation of this superb text impossible? Or was it the composition and style, a combination of its *bayān* and its *naẓm* which made the creation of its equal unachievable. This was the principle inquiry of al-Suyūṭī’s day, and his work is not exempt from the exploration of this argument either.\(^{183}\)

One need only consider the scope of his monumental encyclopedia *Al-Muzhir fi ‘Ulūm al-lughā* (The Luminous Work Concerning the Sciences of Language) to understand that he was an authority figure in the realm of philological studies.\(^{184}\) In this great work, he compiled over fifty chapters containing dense research on the various linguistic subtleties and nuances of the Arabic language. Eight chapters delved into the language’s terms of transmission, thirteen on various possible meanings any word might inherently possess, another thirteen were dedicated to pronunciations, five on the language’s beauty, and the remaining eleven chapters on transmitters and figures.\(^{185}\) It’s easy to see that he was one of the foremost scholars of his day when it came to linguistics and his knowledge of the Arabic canon of literature was vast. Al-Suyūṭī wished to apply this vast knowledge of the literary repertory to his theological studies of the Qur’an as well. Like

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\(^{183}\)Ibid, 305-306.


\(^{185}\)Ibid, 378.
Nasr Abu Zayd, al-Suyūṭī had the Qur’an completely memorized by the age of eight years old.\textsuperscript{186} Growing up to be a prominent \textit{mufassir} (Qur’anic exegete), a good deal of al-Suyūṭī’s writings are concerned with Qur’anic exegesis and Islamic law and jurisprudence. He wrote over five hundred works exploring the philology and fundamentals of Qur’anic sciences, \textit{tafsīr}, \textit{hadīth} and \textit{fiqh} (jurisprudence).\textsuperscript{187} 

Although Al-Suyūṭī never met with much opposition to his use of literary instruments of analysis in reference to the Qur’an, it is no secret that scholars doing the same thing today face much heavier criticism from both academic and ecclesiastical circles. Over the centuries, the resistance to individual interpretation has generally been limited to the interpretation of a small grouping of vague or ambiguous verses.\textsuperscript{188} Interestingly enough, an official agreement on exactly which verses were supposedly unclear and off limits to interpretation never came to fruition. Al-Suyūṭī defined these ambiguities using three primary characteristics: “literal ambiguity, conceptual ambiguity, and the combination of the two…Therefore, the knowledge of syntax, accidence and etymology is fundamental to the understanding of the Qur’an.”\textsuperscript{189} These words ring true in many respects, although a wholesome knowledge of Islamic theology is also a necessary tool when conducting an exegetical study of some of these “unclear” verses. Perhaps an integration of both these perspectives might be necessary for tackling the profoundly complex scrutiny of this holy text.


\textsuperscript{187}Ibid, Ikhwān, 380.


\textsuperscript{189}Ibid, 34.
Concerning the academic and cultural climate in which Al- Suyūṭī lived, it is important to mention that, excluding non-believers, in comparison to modern times there was much less opposition to personal *tafsīr*. On a deeper level, it was resistance to the formation of personal opinions on the possible meanings of these ambiguous verses which has over time led to the hostile climate towards the literary analysis of the Qur’an that exists today. Over the centuries, interpreters have worked around this hierarchical block in order to further human understanding of this monumental text.¹⁹⁰ Even in the case of Al-Jāḥiẓ, writing only three centuries after the Qur’anic revelation, it is unknown if he considered his comparisons between poetry and the Qur’an to be contradictory to his religious beliefs.¹⁹¹ He certainly never faced persecution like Nasr Abu Zayd experienced upon his literary studies of the Qur’an.¹⁹² This interpretation of the Qur’an is known to theologians and scholars alike as *tafsīr*, meaning the art of interpreting, interpretation, exegesis and explanation. In fact, commentaries written on the Qur’an are often referred to by this term.¹⁹³ Etymologically, its roots lie within the verb *fassara*, which denotes “exposing the meaning of a problematic word or expression.”¹⁹⁴ There are hundreds upon hundreds of examples of *tafsīr* in Arabic literature. These dedicated commentaries on the text of the Qur’an often differ in the analysis of larger parts (whole Sūras at a time) or smaller sections (verse by verse).¹⁹⁵ Interestingly enough, Qur’anic verses have also been featured amongst

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¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 35.
¹⁹¹ Ibid, Al-ʿAttār.
¹⁹² Ibid, Taji-Farouki, 170-171.
¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 32.
other literary writings since medieval times. They were often cited in legal and theological treatises over the years as a means of justifying claims through proof of the scriptural interpretation.\textsuperscript{196}

Another term which is often employed in the literary explication of the Qur’an is \textit{ta’wīl}. The root of this expression comes from ‘\textit{awwala} “which means to trace back [or] to manipulate explanation and interpretation.”\textsuperscript{197} In the Qur’anic usage, where it occurs seventeen times, “it implies explanation or interpretation of a dream or an event,” and therefore interpretation in general.\textsuperscript{198} It is also “used to denote the occurrence of a forewarned event, which implies foretelling or divination.”\textsuperscript{199}

“\textit{Ta’wīl}, in the understanding of most scholars, was based upon reason and personal opinion (\textit{ra’y}), whereas \textit{tafsīr} was based upon material transmitted from the Prophet himself or his Companions or the Successors” that is why \textit{ta’wīl} has been referred to as \textit{tafsīr bi’l-ra’y} since opinion plays a major role in interpretation,\textsuperscript{200} while \textit{tafsīr} is referred to as \textit{tafsīr bi’l-ma’thūr} which is only based on reports from the past as opposed to opinions.\textsuperscript{201} “\textit{Tafsīr} is thus appropriately described as concerned with \textit{riwāya} (transmission of reports), while \textit{ta’wīl} with \textit{dirāya} (to know the meaning by a sort of artifice or cunning skill).”\textsuperscript{202}

Al-Suyūtī spent a great deal of effort in the realms of both \textit{tafsīr} and \textit{ta’wīl} and dedicated much of his writing to tracing back the meanings of specific words or phrases, acting almost as a literary detective in a theological debate.


\textsuperscript{197} Ibid, Abdul Azeez,32.


\textsuperscript{199} Ibid, Poonawala.

\textsuperscript{200} The term \textit{ra’y} literally translates to opinion.


\textsuperscript{202} Ibid, Poonawala.
In his greatest work, *al-ʾItqān*, al-Suyūṭī compiled an indispensable catalog of the stylistic and linguistic tools necessary for a successful interpretation of the Qurʾān. The material from this magnum opus of his still remains valuable in modern Qurʾānic research, although translations are hard to come by. More than half of the book is dedicated to *bādīʿ*, or rhetorical excellence. “He begins by reviewing Qurʾānic tropes such as simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, transposition and so forth, then considers stylistics such as concision, ellipsis, proximity, reiteration, antithesis, sudden transition, and the like.”⁴⁰³ In *al-ʾItqān*, al-Suyūṭī establishes that there are eighty branches of exegetic sciences to be conducted in a Qurʾānic theological study, and goes on to explore these with thorough precision.⁴⁰⁴ Chapters differ from discussions on the verses revealed in Medina as opposed to those revealed in Makka, verses revealed at nighttime and those during the day, and other broad-ranging issues on the implications of chronology.⁴⁰⁵

As an example of how he was able to apply literary sciences to Qurʾānic *tafsīr* and *taʾwīl*, one may observe chapter twenty-nine of *al-ʾItqān*, titled “Verbal Assimilation but Separate Meaning.” This chapter deals with singular sentences which could be interpreted in a number of ways when considering the natural separations inherent in any given phrase.⁴⁰⁶ This is an especially important area of study when pertaining to the Qurʾān, because classical Arabic does not indicate precisely where halts or pauses in a sentence might occur. Tmesis, the separation of the parts of a word by an intervening element or elements,⁴⁰⁷ is to be found everywhere in the traditions of

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⁴⁰⁴ Ibid, Khalaf-Allah and Sallam, xi.
⁴⁰⁶ Ibid, 221.
classical Arabic, and the subtle changes in case-vowels can drastically alter the essence of a phrase’s overall message. This was more true in the case of poetry than prose, and even more so in the case of the Qur’an. The Koran, too, contains quite a number of phrases which do not make sense unless they were conceived with case vowels. Ascertaining the beginnings and endings of individual phrases falls certainly under the sphere of literary studies. For this reason amongst many others, it is imperative to apply some type of literary thought processes to certain passages of the Qur’an.

To further his argument on the importance of a sound literary proficiency when conducting interpretive studies of the Qur’an, al-Suyūtī used Sūra IV, verse 104 as a hypothesis of sorts. In doing so, he ventured to prove that one cannot examine just part of a verse, but must consider the possible literary implications of its entirety.  

“When you set out on an expedition in the land, no blame attaches to you if you curtail your prayer, if you fear the unbelievers will take you by surprise.” (4:100)

There exists a seemingly natural phrase ending at the close of this verse, therefore one might infer that the Lord was sanctioning a quick prayer based upon the existing condition of fear. The Prophet’s widow Aisha also took this view when the verse was first presented to her. However, being a thorough scholar, al-Suyūtī conducted an examination of every case in the Qur’an where the term “if you fear” was employed. He discovered that in almost every case, “if you fear” had nothing to do with the words prior to its appearance, but instead pertained to a latter part of the

210 Ibid, Al-Suyūtī.
212Ibid, Al-Suyūtī, 222.
sentence. While in the English language, one may utilize commas to help demonstrate the proper word order, this luxury did not exist in classical Arabic. Therefore, for a long time it was interpreted that if one felt fear, one could consequently perform a shorter prayer than normal. It wasn’t until this literary study was conducted that the sentence’s real intention was uncovered. In fact, if one keeps reading, this conclusion makes even more sense for the verse later states:

“Once you feel secure, perform the prayer, for prayer at a set time is decreed upon the believers. And do not falter in pursuit of the enemy: if you are aching, they too are aching as you ache, but you expect from God what they cannot expect.”

After reading the entire verse, it becomes clear that the presence of fear only heightens the experience of prayer, and God is in truth asking his believers to stand up for their beliefs in the face of fear, not curtail their practice as a result of it (an interpretation entirely unlike the one originally conceived). By systematically discerning the true meaning and purpose behind each word, al-Suyūtī came to a completely different understanding.

It was literary work like this which made al-Suyūtī truly stands out from other scholars of his day. He dedicated much of his life in search of a synthesis between academic and theological studies, and provided a great deal of material for scholars to draw upon in later efforts to interpret the words of this holy book. Although he often devoted many of his works to compiling the research of other scholars, his opinions every so often interjected this dense research. Therefore we do know his particular standpoint on the *i’jāz* of the Qur’an, and it had less to do with specific literary attributes.

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213 Ibid.
214 An-Nisā’, 104.
215 Ibid, Al-Suyūtī, 222.
216 Ibid, Khalidi, 305.
as one might think, and more to do with the genre of the Qur’an as a whole. He viewed it as the consummate marriage of every genre of literature, be it the genre of poetry, prose, epistle or rhetorical declamation. And yet, while it represents the ideal combination of all these categories, simultaneously it could never be solely defined as belonging to just one of them.  

Despite all this advancement in the relationship between the study of rhetoric and the theological study of the Qur’an, there still remained questions left unanswered, many of which are still being debated to this day. As mentioned previously, most Muslims generally accept all components of the Qur’an to be equal in their perfection, making no chapter or verse of a higher quality than another. Yet, going back to the theory that a large part of the Qur’an’s bayān is due to its ability to infuse maximum meaning in a minimum amount of words, some verses exhibit this characteristic more than others. For example, the Throne Verse seems to merge that exalted literary aesthetic found in the Qur’an in a perhaps more noticeable way. That is not to say that this verse is objectively better, because each verse must be evaluated first from a deep understanding of the context from which it comes. For this reason al-Suyūtī spent so much time delineating the exact circumstance in which each  Sūra was written, even taking note of differences between chapters revealed during winter and those during summer. That being the case, though some verses may possess more obvious grandeur than others, which is not indicative of superiority. The Muslim belief remains that each verse was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad for a reason, and its rhetoric is in every case perfectly suited for this particular reason, be it great or small.

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218 Ibid, 304.
220 Ibid, Al-Suyūtī, 224.
221 Ibid, Khalidi, 306.
The final chapter of its historical legacy takes place in Egypt during the twentieth century and has been described as the “literary moment.” This moment was championed by the well-known scholar Amīn Al-Khūlī (d-1966) and his student, Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah (d-1991). Their work was the culmination of a much larger cultural renaissance in the Arabic literary world, often referred to as Tajdīd, the Arabic word for ‘renewal.’ This Arabic Renaissance sought to establish the Qur’an away from established judgement as a book neither of history, nor of politics, nor of science. Following in the footsteps of these two great intellectuals was the Sayyid Qutb (d-1966) and the Egyptian Qur’anic thinker Nasr Abu Zayd (d-2010). Each of these scholars shed light on a more innovative method of interpreting the Qur’an, one which tries to comprehend the rhetoric of this holy book with new eyes.

Literary, or rhetorical criticism as it has come to be known, has for a long time been acknowledged with more acceptability amongst Western religious scholarship as opposed to Islamic theological studies. “Rhetorical criticism takes the text as a given, and generally adopts a synchronic rather than diachronic approach. It is concerned with the impact, intended or actual, of a text on its audience or recipients...and in how the text would be perceived by an audience of near contemporaries.” The Qur’an’s contemporary environment is especially relevant when considering how one might conduct a literary study of it. Neal Robinson, in his extensive study of the early Makkan Sūras, identified a total of six different types of subject matter. These categories ranged from eschatology, passages regarding oaths and signs, revelations, narratives, and finally, polemical content. An interesting discovery from his research was that the vast majority of the

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224 Ibid.
subjects from these early *Sūras* were concerned with polemics. There was a great deal of opposition towards Muhammad during his ministry, and this must have given rise to the extensive use of persuasion found in the Qurʾan.\(^{225}\)

“The Qurʾan is somewhat unique as a scripture in its close, interactive relationship with its original environment, even to the point of responding to specific questions asked by Muhammad’s contemporaries.”\(^{226}\) In fact, in many ways it is the most valuable historical resource which exists pertaining to the culture and times of the Prophet. The theological study of ’*ashāb an-nuzūl*, or “occasions of revelation” is concerned with analyzing and elucidating the true reason why certain verses came into being. Many scholars believe that it is imperative to connect the reality of the world from which a text originated to the essential message which it wishes to give to its reader.\(^{227}\)

This final stage of ṮʾAmīn al-Khūlī and the twentieth century’s milieu is going to be studied at length in the coming chapter. Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah, al-Khūlī’s disciple, will receive a lot of attention as an instrumental figure in the twentieth century and probably the most controversial. His thesis is a backbone to this study, since it is the most recent one that suggests an ‘artistic’ approach to the Qurʾan, however his approach is still a branch of the literary approach. This work, though about listening, is attempting to build upon previous approaches that had some novelty at their time in the field of religious art and aesthetics.

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\(^{226}\) Ibid, Zebiri, 96.

\(^{227}\) Ibid, 97.
The Literary Moment

With the dawn of the Egyptian Renaissance, new voices appeared but they hearkened back to the scholastic work in Qur’anic literary interpretation of the past as well. The theories of Amīn al-Khūlī and those who came after him represent somewhat of a break with these more traditional interpretations of the Qur’an. Amīn al-Khūlī himself was born in the height of this Egyptian Renaissance and was especially inspired by the philosophies of Romanticism appearing in literary studies at the time. In fact, he was one of the leaders of this age of literary Renaissance in the Arab world. He wrote everything from short stories and philosophy books, to highly commended studies of Qur’anic methods of interpretation. Following in the steps of Taha Husayn (d. 1973), al-Khūlī believed that, just like its European counterpart, this awakening should naturally begin in the fields of art and literature.

Like Taha Husayn and many others at the National University, he wished to explain the *i‘jāz* of the Qur’an through a systematic literary study in order to finally explain exactly why it was so inimitable. Husayn was definitely well-versed in the study of texts, as he was a distinguished literary historian and literary critic. Using all his studies and knowledge on the subject, he came up with the theory that what really made the Qur’an so inimitable was the fact that it is a literary genre that is completely its own. It cannot be classified under fiction, non-fiction, or historical writing. “By emphasizing its literary nature as a literary genre in itself...he claims that the Qur’an is neither poetry nor prose: it is Qur’an.”

This was an assessment that al-Bāqillāni had also

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229 Ibid.
230 Ibid.
begun to develop way back in the medieval era. He synthesized his extensive research in Arabic rhetoric and *balāgha*, the science of figurative expression, into his own interpretation of the Qur’an.

*Balāgha* can also be defined as the art of words, or “the study of aesthetic effectiveness.”

Husayn believed passionately in the importance of employing techniques of *balāgha* in the linguistic studies of the Qur’an. The study of *balāgha* evolved directly from the scholarly endeavor to create the truest possible exegesis of the Qur’an. As previously discussed, the Qur’an had always been highly praised for its eloquence of language. Therefore, a deep knowledge of *balāgha* and literary rhetoric could only help in the exegesis and interpretation of the Qur’an. An interesting fact about early exegetes is that they were required to be highly versed not only in the Qur’an with all its passages and theological interpretations, but also in the science of *balāgha*. The Qur’an for a long time was considered amongst Muslim scholars as demonstrating the highest criteria of excellence that a text could possibly show. Appreciation of its literary superiority was thus attributed to God’s miracle of verbal expression as well as His selection of the Arabic language as the vessel for His message. This literary aspect was recognized and sanctioned in the medieval studies of Qur’anic exegesis. And yet, in modern times, the literary application to *tafsīr* has proven to be dangerous in an increasingly hostile and conservative academic environment.

Amīn al-Khūlī, applied all the innovations of the literary Renaissance to his works, including *balāgha*, *tafsīr*, *adab* (literature), and *nahw* (grammar). The question of *i`jāz* inspired

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233 Ibid, 105.
234 Ibid.
many great thinkers and theologians to reflect upon what specifically makes the Qur’an so uniquely special and it was a driving force for Al-Khūlī’s research as well.237 As mentioned earlier, Amīn al Khūlī was a staunch supporter of Husayn as reflected in his research. He supported many scholars in Egypt at the time, encouraging them to push the boundaries of research in the development of this literary approach.238 “He made it crystal clear that we can come to the sacred text from different angles, such as philosophically and ethically, but to do that, we must first begin by studying the Qur’an as a literary text.”239 For many years preceding this Egyptian literary moment, there had been a very limited diversity of interpretive schools of thought and this has much to do with the deep-rooted selection interpretations and translations which are now hundreds of years old.

There is a certain established hierarchy of sources to consult when attempting an interpretation. Once first considering the Qur’an itself (which of course is the first priority when conducting an interpretation), the second source one would turn to is the Hadith, or the teachings and sayings of the Prophet. It is second only to the Qur’an in importance for the Islamic world, and is the origin of many choices in matters of legal and moral law.240 After the Hadith comes the Sahāba, the Arabic term for companions, which is comprised of a variety of testimonies from Muhammad’s closest followers in the generation after him. There does exist extensive Qur’anic commentaries written by scholars and learned Muslims in later generations, but in all its history

239 Ibid.
there had yet to be much pioneering innovation in the field of written interpretation. Perhaps for this reason the literary moment came as such a shock to the Muslim world. Amīn al-Khūlī along with many respected professors faced fierce opposition to their approach. Many were forced into retirement and accused of violating Islamic law with their theological research. There were many aspects of his theories and those of his followers which were highly controversial.

Al-Khūlī examined the text of the Qur’an almost pragmatically and as a product of its time, in other words, as a product of the seventh century pagan mentality. But more than anything, he stressed that when translating and interpreting the specific wording found in various passages, one had to consider first and foremost the overall meaning of the Qur’an. It would be insufficient to look at a wording or phrase in terms of its dictionary definition alone. What is far more important, is to consider the word in the context of the larger message that the text provides, a message which ultimately preaches justice and love. In this sense he directly places the Qur’an in its original historical context, moving away from the long-held opinion that it is a timeless text, relevant and perfect in any day or age.

Amīn Al-Khūlī, being the controversial yet appreciated analyst of Arabic literature of the 20th century, inspired and established a student of lesser celebrite. Al-Khūlī’s ideas of interpretation greatly influenced his follower and student, Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah who was faced with intense academic and religious criticism because of his theories on the Qur’an. Khalafallah was a product of artistic thought, one deeply rooted in literary interpretation and religious exploration. The intertwining of his religious identity with his artistic perspective led to

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a dilemma in the Islamic academic institutions of Egypt, and ultimately, for some time, disparaged his name as a scholar.²⁴²

Born in 1916, Khalafallah attended a string of Islamic and governmental schools throughout his educational journey, as did many others. His growth as a student was not much different than one would expect, in the sense that his educational environments were accepted institutions of Islamic teaching, and not unconventional in any sense. His later ideologies cannot be traced to this early stage of his academia, but it was upon his graduating from the Egyptian University, now Cairo University, and beginning his Graduate studies under the supervision of Amīn Al-Khūlī, that his work began to be challenged.

The purpose of Khalafallah and Al-Khūlī’s proposals was not to downgrade the Qur’an, but to demonstrate the importance of a literary approach to understanding it. Considering the Qur’an as a work of allegory and metaphor, Khalafallah, under the careful eye of Al-Khūlī, strove to extract the morals from the stories and the historical accounts written within a qualitative, not quantitative, consideration, this is especially important to notice since the Qur’an, with a few exceptions, does not treat history or specify any set date or period. To extract the moral of the story from beneath all the complex wordings and metaphors was always the goal behind this literary exegesis. But to read the holiest script, indeed the true words of their God, as a literary work of art did not sit well with the Egyptian people or the Egyptian institutes of Education,²⁴³ and consequently with the majority of the Arab world.

²⁴²Ibid.

By claiming the Qur’an to be a collection of stories based (loosely) on an artistic prose and not a factual detailing of history their opponents asserted that this can cast a certain doubt on the script itself, creating a certain loss of authenticity, for it might then seem to be just a simple book of tales, subjective, and open to interpretation. Khalafallah’s ideas were most challenged by his discussion of the history within the scripture, and not the morals or the lessons to be found. Khalafallah was not criticized for his distortion of the Quran and mistranslating it for his students, but like Al-Khūlī, he approached the scripture with a more open interpretation, one that allowed a deeper investigation into the stories and the words.\textsuperscript{244}

Khalafallah’s interest in the literary analysis of the Qur’an was most influenced by Al-Khūlī’s teaching of analysis rather than interpretation. Al-Khūlī suggested reading an entire segment as an interconnected whole, rather than simple plots and characters that tell a story. A focus on the words was a priority, and the careful pattern of verses, along with their roots was of an interest to the literary man. Al-Khūlī believed that analyzing the careful usage of words and finding the pattern between chapters of the same subject should be a priority for any commentator. Otherwise, the commentator, he believed, would be limiting herself by interpreting only the inside story of the outer subject, and overlooking the greater message.\textsuperscript{245} The main points of Al-Khūlī and his student, Muhammad Khalafallah’s proposals focused on how the Qur’an is not a book of history sent to teach Muslims of a past long gone, but rather its purpose is within its prose. It is the task of analysts to decipher that prose, and the task of institutions to promote a deeper, more all-

\begin{footnotesize}
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encompassing consideration of it, one which can be achieved through primarily literary means of analysis.\textsuperscript{246}

Khalafallah continued to write in favor of his and his teacher’s theories, and supported his views in the following years. An instance of his persistency lies in his claim that Arab socialism was very similar to Islamic teachings.\textsuperscript{247} He was again faced with more criticism, for he claimed that only the very specific prohibitions should be implemented upon the people, and the other, vaguer commands should be analyzed further for proper understanding.\textsuperscript{248}

Khalafallah and Al-Khûlî were not the first individuals to strive to modernize the approach to the Qur’an, and were in fact preceded by the Egyptian scholar Muhammad ‘Abduh. Egyptian Islamic scholar Zaki Badawi says that “‘Abduh led a late 19th-century movement in Egypt and other Muslim countries to “modernize” Muslim institutions.”\textsuperscript{249} Mohammad ‘Abudh was undeniably engaged in a political struggle during his scholastic life, and he utilized his modernist theories not only for Quranic interpretation, but for “Muslim Unity”. Born in 1849, and living through Egyptian colonialism, ‘Abduh was disappointed with the state of corruption and discord that had begun to take root in his country. A major influence on ‘Abduh’s pleas to reform Islamic thinking in Egyptian institutions can be attributed to the westernization of education under colonial rule. This happened extensively throughout all sectors of governmental institutions when Britain first began to extend its influence into the Egyptian state.\textsuperscript{250} With the exception of development in

\textsuperscript{246}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{247}Ibid, Azhar.
\textsuperscript{248}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{249}Badawi, Zaki. The Reformers of Egypt. Croom Helm for the Muslim Institute, 1978.
the studies of sciences and math, ‘Abduh was “distrustful” of the considerable western influence in the schools, and wished to see again the advancement of an organic, more independent form of Islamic education.\footnote{Ibid, Badawi.}

‘Abduh’s fears certainly materialized in the lives of Khalafallah and al-Khūlī, both of whom were shunned by their educational institutions for their progressive research. The Egyptian universities of which they were a part of began to overlook the purposeful beauty of the Qur’anic texts, and focused solely on the established interpretation that exists in the theological canon of research; an approach which is not ideal for a prominent Arabic university. Interestingly enough, many parallels exist between the goals of Khalafallah’s original thesis “The Art of Narrative in the Qur’an,” and ‘Abduh’s own work. In her book on Qur’anic interpretation as it relates to women, Barbara Stowasser writes:

> In his Interpretation of the Adam and Eve story, for instance, Abduh contends that the story’s purpose is to serve an example of admonition and guidance; the story serves to define human nature and man’s God-willed mission on earth. Furthermore, the story is also understood as parable for mankind’s historical development from innocence to greed and strife, to be followed, “God-willing,” by a better future in an age of reason and reflection.” Abduh goes so far as to say that this story has nothing to do with history, because history does not concern religion.\footnote{Stowasser, Barbara Freyer. \textit{Women in the Qur’an, Traditions and Interpretation.} Oxford University Press, 1996, 17.}

It is clear here that ‘Abduh believed the Qur’an to be far more than a mere historical text, and that to claim so would be diminishing the value of its essence. He, like many scholars after him, yearned for Egyptian scholars to ruminate on the works of the pre-Islamic Arabs who were drawn to the

\footnote{Ibid, Badawi.}
\footnote{Stowasser, Barbara Freyer. \textit{Women in the Qur’an, Traditions and Interpretation.} Oxford University Press, 1996, 17.}
Qur’an immediately by the beauty and power of its language, not the generalized meaning of its specific stories. Hidden within the words one would find the meaning.253

**No Book of History**

Khalafallah was an instrumental product and constituent of the modernist Egyptian theological movement. To this day, he is still known predominantly for his controversial doctoral dissertation. It suggested that the narrative accounts involving the prophets and history prior to Muhammad’s arrival were literary and artistic, rather than historical, in nature.254 They served a purpose other than the representation of facts, and one more geared towards teachings of morality. This morality argument, however, is not clear and may not be very convincing since morality is relative. Moreover, there are Sūras in the Qur’an that have no clear moral, like Sūrat Yusuf that is widely considered as one of the most beautiful Sūras with a huge effect on listeners, and still has no clear moral that can be learned. The whole story in the Sūra can be seen as a typical “happy ending” story. On the other hand, when this Sūra is read as an informative Sūra, one could see towards the end that there is a very important piece of information that seems to be the whole point behind it, regardless of the historical truth. The verse says:

“When they entered into Joseph’s presence, he embraced his parents and said: ‘Enter Egypt, if God wills, safe and secure.’ Then he raised his parents up upon the throne, and they fell prostrate before him. He said: ‘Father, this the interpretation of my former dream; now my Lord has brought it to pass. He was gracious to me when He delivered me from prison and brought you from the wilderness, after Satan had sowed conflict between me and my brothers’.”255

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253 Ibid.
255 Yusuf, 99-100.
The word wilderness mentioned in the verse is a translation of the Arabic word *Badw* (Bedouin life) as opposed to city or civilized life that was supposed to be found in Egypt.\textsuperscript{256}

The verse, then, can be seen as a praise of civilization in opposition to the Bedouin life, or can be seen as dating the entrance of the children of Israel to Egypt. Thus, no moral can be deduced.

In 1942, upon the completion of his graduate degree, with a thesis called *Polemics of the Qur’an*, Khalafallah began tutoring at the University and became a teaching assistant there. However, within this thesis, one already begins to notice the controversial nature of his academic pursuits. Although he composed a good deal of writings prior to his doctoral thesis, the extent of his daring endeavors was to be illustrated in 1947 with this controversial work, a work which was unsurprisingly rejected by the Egyptian institutions for its artistic consideration of the Qur’an. This dissertation ultimately led to Khalafallah’s resignation in 1948 after the influx of criticisms became too much.\textsuperscript{257}

Al-Khūlī’s influence can be seen in many aspects of the Khalafallah’s thesis. In fact, it is very clear that he follows his teacher’s methodology of Qur’anic interpretation.\textsuperscript{258} Concerning this interpretive procedure, Nasr Abu-Zayd writes, “The first step is collecting the Qur’an’s stories. The second step is to rearrange these stories according to chronological order of their revelation, in order to analyze and explain them according to their original context i.e. the social environment, the emotional state of the Prophet, and the development of the Islamic message.”\textsuperscript{259}

\textsuperscript{256} The word *Misr* (Egypt) in the Qur’an is argued to be somewhere else other than the Egypt of our day. See Kamal Salibi, *The Bible Came from Arabia*. Ziad Muna, *The Torah Geography* (in Arabic).

\textsuperscript{257} Ibid Azhar.

\textsuperscript{258} Ibid. 56.

Khalafallah’s view, by following these instructions one could understand how the Qur’an was meant to be grasped by the seventh century Arabs, an understanding which could be valuable in the literary study of this sacred book.²⁶⁰ He also believed that by claiming that the Qur’an is a historically accurate text, the theologians of the past had become far too dependent on pre-established conventions of interpretation, ultimately wasting time and energy in their attempts to prove this principle.²⁶¹

A core issue in his personal philosophy centered on the controversial belief that the purpose of the Qur’an was not to be historically accurate, but that instead, its allegories fall into a more ambiguous genre. He uses a specific term to refer to these allegories, calling them ‘*amthāl*, a definition which conveys its ambiguous, non-historical nature.²⁶² Over the years, classical commentators of the Qur’an had often turned to Judeo-Christian sources in order to explain the copious uncertainties found in their scripture. The literary approach, in comparison, necessitates no shortcuts such as this. It does so by means of a classical and modernist approach. The classical approach refers to the many narratives as ‘*amthāl* as well, contrasting between literal meaning (al-*ma’na*) with its interpretive implication (*luzūm*), two groupings which are not necessarily the same.²⁶³ The modernist approach is similar as it takes its influence from the classical literary interpreters (as many did exist during medieval times), although it does tend to be more specific in method. Using certain historical characters and events as example, Khalafallah sought to demonstrate that although the body of the narrative appears historical, the meaning does not

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²⁶¹Ibid.
²⁶²Ibid, 57.
²⁶³Ibid.
automatically indicate accurate history. Literature over time has used history freely as a means of adding truth and reality to a narrative. But very often, the purpose of a story, even one heavily based on historical truth, can be surprisingly unhistorical.

It must be mentioned that no Muslim scholar has ever made an outright claim that the Qur’an is an elementary history book, but it is well known that the text rarely mentions dates or specific names of places. In fact, on a first reading, it is quite obvious that in the Qur’an, the particulars of dates and locations are left vague while much more attention is given to the moral of the narrative. Regardless, Muslims take the Qur’an to be a creation completely without error, and that acceptance includes the accuracy of the pre-Islamic accounts of the prophets living before Muhammad. In fact these accounts serve as prime examples of sacred history in the Muslim world.

In his thesis, Khalafallah similarly advocated a focus on linguistics in the study of the Qur’an, emphasizing the timeless quality of its scripture along with the importance of these elements of fascination created by the beauty of its rhetoric. By placing too much attention on defending the historical aspects of the Qur’an, one simultaneously depreciates its legitimacy. This can be seen in the example of the Book of Genesis in the Bible, a chapter which for many years the Catholic Church claimed to be historical fact, only drawing more controversy by doing so as modern historical science had for many years proved this wrong. Khalafallah wished to prevent a similar treatment of the Qur’an. He believed the Qur’an to be the ultimate and eternal word of God, and an emphasis on prioritizing its historicity only denies the scripture’s eternal

Khalafallah did stress, however, that the historical accounts written within are not entirely fruitless; however, their purpose is one of guidance and direction, not only to Muslims of the present day, but more importantly to the first Muslim community in order to sustain the new religion through its emergent stages.\textsuperscript{268}

Khalafallah proves his theory about written history in an interesting way by declaring that the Qur’an should be viewed as a piece of literature. So by using this principle, there is therefore a distinction between history and the Qur’an. Like his teacher Amīn al-Khūlī, he believed that the Qur’an primarily addressed the Arabs of 7th century, a belief that produced a backlash later on in his life. For instance, the Qur’an speaks of things like ‘the evil eye,’ and witchcraft, but that is because these were issues present in the days of its revelation. They should not necessarily be considered wholly relevant in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century when such problems are more or less insignificant. Here, Khalafallah is not being consistent in his argument regarding the historical truth of the Qur’anic story, beliefs such as the evil eye and the like are not mentioned in the Qur’an as stories neither they are mentioned in a historical context. Khalafallah is obviously studying the Qur’an, as discussed, in its historical context and trying to limit it to that time, this shows the huge influence of the orientalist approach to the study of ‘scripture’ on Muslim thinkers, like Khalafallah, since he is approaching the Qur’an as a “study of documents and the historical context in which they arose.”\textsuperscript{269}

His thesis was divided into three chapters: Introduction, Method, and Conclusion. There is then another additional division: Between “The Historical, Social, Ethical and Religious meanings

\textsuperscript{267} Ibid, 19

\textsuperscript{268} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{269} Graham, Qur’an as Spoken word, p. 25.
and Values” and “The Art of Narration in the Qur’anic Stories.” Upon reading his thesis promoting the literary approach to the Qur’an, the committee members at the Cairo University agreed that while its academic level was impressive and more than sufficient, modifications would be necessary if they were ever to agree to its publication. They had four main points against him, and these main points help provide insight into the mentality of conservative Qur’anic exegesis, an interpretation which has slowed progress in the fields of Islamic theological studies for many decades now. First of all, the Qur’an is supposed to represent the true word of God, and to say that is just a literary text would be the same as saying it is a work of human imagination. To say this would be to deny not only its integrity as a miracle, but also the legitimacy of Muhammad’s prophethood. Secondly, and perhaps in the same line of thought, the assumptions inherent in the literary approach conclude that it was Muhammad, not God who wrote these holy words, therefore, this would be the same as saying that it is a text conceived by a human-being, which goes against basic Muslim doctrine. Thirdly, “claiming that the stories of the Qur’an do not present actual historical facts, as the literary approach suggests, is committing the greatest blasphemy that amounts to apostasy. It places the Qur’an in a lower position than a history book.” This third point against him deals with Khalafallah’s opinion that the historical features in the Qur’an are not factual, but serve the greater purpose of the book as a whole, a purpose which endeavors to inspire the hearts of its readers and teach morality and justice. The final claim against his thesis deals with his assertion that the language and structure of the Qur’an is a product of the seventh century; this

271Ibid.
272Ibid, 9.
273Ibid.
274Ibid.
was seen to be perhaps his most insulting offense as it insinuates once again that the Qur’an is a consequence of human creation.275

What is interesting about all these various attacks is that they seem to presume that Khalafallah himself believed the Qur’an to be a work of human hands, a presumption which he made overwhelmingly clear to be untrue. After his proposed thesis began to circulate in public, he was aggressively accused by popular media and even by some scholarly groups in Egypt of breaking with Islamic doctrine and law. But in the opinions of Khalafallah, Amīn al-Khūlī, and all who support this literary approach, it is the duty of all Muslims to study every word of the Qur’an to the utmost of their abilities. This study in no way should compromise one’s faith or ideology as a Muslim, as Islam is a religion of the ‘book’. These words are the holiest thing in the Islamic faith, so shouldn’t anyone who follows this faith feel compelled to analyze and examine them in every way possible? According to this view, the intensive literary study of the Qur’an could only help support the theory of its i’jāz; which might be enough since this approach attempts to study the sacred text as the fascinating. However, literature is just another textual genre that is very similar to history; the fascinating here should be studies as a sacred language that is not history and not literature as well.

Khalafallah believed that when it comes to historical stories, both the story and the storyteller depend on history in a loose manner. Oftentimes these stories ignored historical rudiments like dates, places, and chronological events in order to support their specific subject matter.276 Historical literature is often concerned with the well-known and most prominent happenings, or with the collective mental images of a group of people. According to Khalafallah,

275Ibid.
276Ibid, Khalaf-Allah, Al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī.47.
not only modernists believed that literature deals with themes not as they appear to be, and not as they are in themselves, but as they are perceived by the senses and as they affect emotions. In his research, Khalafallah found that it wasn’t just modernists, but also ancient Arabs who believed that literature deals with things not as they are but as they appear to be, and not as they are in themselves but as senses perceive them and as emotions affect them. These ancient Arabs comprehended this artistic fact and were satisfied with the mental insight that is usually based on norms and customs rather than on the rational and logical justification that is usually established on the factual essentials of things. The satisfaction gained from this perspective allowed them to tell stories with increasing freedom, giving examples simply for the sake of guidance and instruction. The storytellers of ancient times were no longer committed to giving only historical examples that adhered to complete reality and truth, for this style of narration as required only by the philosophers and historians of the day.

Now, in Khalafallah’s opinion, the problem that a researcher might face when considering a literary work from the epoch of these storytellers stems from the difficulties found when attempting to differentiate between the authentic historical facts and those used solely for the advancement of the story’s message. There is no official methodology that could be employed in order to decipher these differences, therefore the researcher cannot discriminate between actual historical events that were transmitted by the author objectively, and those created by his imagination. Khalafallah came up with his own potential theory: He suggests that the only possible

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277 Ibid, 48.
278 Ibid.
279 Ibid.
280 Ibid, 49.
way to extract the historical realities from a story is to know the parameters and limits of freedom which were enjoyed by the author as he was depicting these events. However, he found that the task of discovering the scope of an author’s freedom proved to be much more difficult than extracting the specific historical realities from a story. Interestingly, Khalafallah found his way out of this complexity by taking into account the objectives of the story first and foremost before delving into the search for historical facts. It is the objectives which play the first role in the ultimate modality and formation of the story and in the way images and characters are depicted. Therefore, it is the story’s objective which decides the extent of the historical flexibility employed by the author.

Returning to the Qur’anic atmosphere, Khalafallah asks his chief question: Does the Qur’an share the same freedom of bending historical truth as the stories of its time? Or does it retain a single, completely honest tone for the duration of its revelation, one which adheres to historical accuracy in every respect. This is an especially compelling inquiry when one considers all the liberties provided to storytellers during the pre-Islamic era, as well as during Muhammad’s own generation and the generations to follow. Of course, the prophet cannot be classified in the same category as these ancient narrators, however, the meticulous researcher must consider all the commonly accepted practices of his time and how they might have influenced him. Many Qur’anic examples portray the artistic narration employed in the storytelling nature of the Qur’an. Admission of this fact does not signify that one denies its sacred origins as God’s true word. It is a mere statement of fact that the artistic freedom which is often granted by the genres of literatures is harnessed throughout the Qur’an.

281 Ibid.
282 Ibid, 50.
There is no doubt that the Qur’an has included the core principles of Islamic doctrines and principles in its stories. There are also many attacks on the fake doctrines and worship of the 7th century Arab world. Khalafallah’s position regarding these additions is very interesting: while he does not deny the existence of them in the Qur’anic story, at the same time he does not consider them to be a top priority of the goals being aimed at. There exists also a social role which the text plays in society, and this is a role that can actually be played by all genres of artistic expression, including music, sculpture and photography. This role is related directly and in the first place to human emotions and the fact that humans often act according to what their emotions dictate.

When the Qur’an mentions the effects of its speeches and sayings on the hearts of its listeners, it seeks to draw attention to this emotionally provocative effect, one which engenders fascination for the words of the divine. For this reason the Qur’an made sure that its words were so eloquent and effective on the hearts of the observers. For this reason also scholars believe God chose the Arabic language, superior in the medieval world at the time, to impart his message to the world. It was the supreme art form of the Arabs and a central part of their communal life. In fact, it is known that many of the ancient Arabs congratulated each other on three occasions alone: the birth of a boy, the foaling of a strong stallion, and the arrival of a skilled poet. For this reason also it is so crucially important to analyze every word and the effect which its eloquence was intended to have on the listener. Imparting an emotional effect on an observer should be considered as the goal of all art forms. And yet, one does not reflect on a piece of art or contemplate a musical

283 Ibid, 200.
284 Ibid, 203.
286 Ibid.
work with the intent of finding a solution for a specific problem, or an answer for a question, or even a historical fact or a judicial verdict. To understand the artistic significance and essence of any creative work requires much effort and attention and the degree of this attention is a testament to the work itself: If an issue is very difficult to comprehend, then the artistic work is more rigid, and if it is too easy, that means that the work is trivial. Accordingly, one might think that the whole idea behind Khalafallah’s theory is to consider the stories of the Qur’an as literary works which address human emotions, since he is clearly stating that they are not historical in nature.

Here one can see that this approach is not considering the sacred dimension of the text. Khalafallah’s approach is limiting the Qur’an to a collection of literary stories that stir emotions among believers. This emotional reaction to beautiful literature can be noticed with other non-sacred texts. Investigating the Qur’anic story, though intended to protect the Qur’an from having error, is not the right way to treat the sacred. The concern that Khalafallah has, among others, that if we try to fetch history in the Qur’anic stories we will face historical discrepancies and then the Qur’an might lose its legitimacy. However, the Qur’an is no book of history to be investigated historically, neither is it a book of literature to be seen as a mere emotional generator. The Qur’an is the speech of God, *Kalām Allah*, to which believers listen and reproduce. What is called “historical stories” in Qur’an is defined by the term *ghayb*, it is the same term that is given to all unseen metaphysical concepts, including God Himself, angels, heaven and hell, and destiny. These concepts can never be approached with the methodology of studying history, and then judging them accordingly. These are concepts that belong to the sacred the “numinous” and not the physical world. Their role in the world is not to give information about the unknown, because only a

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287Ibid, Khalafallah, 202-203.
believer would really consider their existence somewhere outside the world in which she lives in. They must have another role to play in the world, inside the realm of the profane, among human beings who need to benefit from it in their worldly life. Same for stories about previous humans who supposedly lived before and their experience with the sacred and the way they treated it. It is even being told from the point of view of the sacred and focusing only on the relation between the sacred and profane, and this might be the reason why these stories do not mention places or dates, they are not of any major concern for the source and the recipient.

**Literary Text**

Among the most controversial of Islamic thinkers and Qur’anic analysts was Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. He was a product of many diverse influences, whether they be between East and West, the more conservative and the more explorative, or the linguistic and the literalist approaches. Abu Zayd incorporated all of these thoughts into his ultimate work as a scholar, making his literary productions stand out amongst Egyptian theologians of his time. The most controversial criticisms against him, like those of his contemporary Khalafallah, were centered around his “modernization” of the Qur’an, and his denial of the Qur’an as a factually constructed book of history.288 At the peak of this controversy, when heavy criticism, even death threats were being thrown at him from every direction, Abu Zayd was shunned by his own country, forced into exile because of all his suggestions to consider the Qur’an in a new light, a modern perspective.289

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289 Ibid, 62.
Over the years, Abu Zayd garnered many degrees and honors amongst the scholastic world, including a Master’s degree in Arabic Language and Literature, and a Doctorate in Philosophy from Cairo University.\footnote{Ibid.} He took a great interest in the subject of hermeneutics, especially as it applied to interpretive possibilities. Although this area of academic research is usually confined to the Biblical text, Abu Zayd admired its foreign style and used this foundational knowledge in many of his later writings on the Qur’an.\footnote{Tamer, George. “Obituary Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd,” \textit{International Journal of Middle East Studies}, 2011, 193-195.} In the academic pursuit of knowledge he came across the writings of both Amīn al-Khūlī and Muhammad Khalafallah, studying their works and theories in detail. He also began to familiarize himself with the Western style of interpretation and analysis.\footnote{Ibid.}

Hermeneutics can be described as the study of textual interpretation. It has for many centuries now been employed throughout the Judeo-Christian traditions as a means of uncovering the ethical morals and the true meaning of the New and Old Testaments.\footnote{Brodeur, Patrice C. “Religion”. \textit{Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an}. Ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe et al., Georgetown University, Washington DC, Brill Reference Online.} Interestingly enough, the interpretive debates that spring from these studies are very similar to those that appear in the Muslim school of theological studies. “Some persons have argued that the interpretation of the Bible must always be literal because the word of God is explicit and complete; others have insisted that the biblical words must always have a deeper ‘spiritual’ meaning because God’s message and truth is self-evidently profound.”\footnote{Ibid.} It is because both of these traditions are in many ways religions of the ‘book’, that the study of interpretation has become so pronounced within their theological
inquiries. In Christianity, they divided the possibilities into four categories: moral, literal, anagogical, and allegorical.295

The Muslim counterpart to hermeneutics can be found in the study of *tafsīr* and *t’awīl*. Although there was no need for interpretive studies during the life of the Prophet, once he passed and the word took shape as text, the need for commentary on these texts grew more pronounced.296 The Arabic tradition of *written* text was not very developed at the time, and since it is a derivative language, a combination of three characters could possibly signify a huge multiplicity of definitions depending on the placement of vowels and diacritics.297 A standard Arabic word is a combination of its root (three consonants which provide a general definition) and its pattern (vowels etc). However ancient Arabic differs greatly from modern standard, and lacks some of the grammatical detailing that is used today.298 Therefore, when a grouping of characters could lead to three or four different definitions, debates will naturally arise regarding interpretation. There arose in the fourth century of Islam an initial, basic science of interpretation, known as ‘ilm at- *tafsīr*, one which persisted for many centuries and was united perhaps with the Qur’an in its sacredness, and this unity might have been the reason behind the conservative and cautious manner in developing different techniques of interpretation.

Ignáz Goldziher, a Hungarian professor and notable scholar of Islam,299 was highly interested in how Qur’anic interpretation could lead to subtle yet practical usages in the

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295 Ibid.
296 Ibid, Rippin, “Tafsīr.”
298 Ibid.
constitution of Sharī’a law. He divided the historical advancement of tafsīr into three stages: “In the first…Muslims were concerned principally to establish the proper text of the Qur’an. The second stage, known as traditional tafsīr, featured explanations of Qur’anic passages based upon what the Prophet himself or his companions said these passages to mean…There [also] arose a dogmatic type of tafsīr. The Qur’an was interpreted by various sectarian groups to establish their own peculiar doctrinal positions.” The last point of this list represents the Mu‘tazilī, Ash‘arite and Hanbalī schools of thought, all of which arose a few centuries after the prophet, and slowly disappeared around the eleventh century. It is very thought-provoking to consider the fact that the three stages of interpretation that he identified all occurred almost a thousand years ago, and that little notable development has since taken place. This could be a possible reason for the extremely negative reactions that al-Khūlī, Khalafallah, and Abu Zayd all faced when they brought their new ideas to the Muslim intellectual community.

The common fault that these three scholars found in traditional methods of tafsīr was the treatment of the Qur’an as a textbook of history and, by doing so, denying its divinity and ignoring the larger ‘moral of the story,’ so to speak. There is, however, a major factor of Abu Zayd’s work in particular which introduces the opinions of the many. He thought that if everyone is permitted to interpret the Qur’an, then the book would be given many contrasting meanings from contrasting sources. Therefore, there has always existed this fear that the authenticity and universal message of the Qur’an would consequently be lost and therefore meaningless if the general public were

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300 Ibid, 191.
301 Ibid, Rippin, “Tafsīr.”
permitted to interpret its words. Abu Zayd did not wish to exploit the potential flexibility of interpretation, but rather invited scholars to probe deeper into the words, as deeply as possible, and to exercise a more qualitative mindset rather than falling victim to the practice of imitation.\textsuperscript{303} He was certainly not the first to propose such a state of mind, but he was probably the first to specifically apply the western method of hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{304}

It is interesting to briefly reiterate al-Khūlī’s own opinion on the nature of the Qur’anic story and how it relates to Abu Zayd’s. He introduced a unique mindset concerning the repetitiveness of the Qur’an (and how one might interpret the recurrence of certain words or phrases). Al-Khūlī also believed the Qur’an to be beyond the simple purpose of storytelling, finding the messages within to be more connected to the human psyche and its effects. He maintained throughout his works that the language and construction (\textit{nazm}) of the Qur’an was meant to engender a deeply emotional response within its readers.\textsuperscript{305} Abu Zayd theorized very similarly to al-Khūlī, unlike Khalafallah who used his teacher’s hypotheses as a starting point and spent much more time proving the storytelling nature of Qur’anic stories. Abu Zayd considered the Qur’an to be the ultimate form of communication between the individual and the divine. With this mentality in mind, he emphasizes the role of understanding and empathy within the text, for he too believed the purpose of the Qur’an to be centered around the generation of emotions. In fact, he was among the first scholars in Egypt to even consider the Qur’an as a ‘text’ of sorts, one that requires the human eye to analyze and consider each word.\textsuperscript{306} One could very easily take the

\textsuperscript{303} Ibid, Abu Zayd, and Nelson. \textit{Voice of an Exile}.  
\textsuperscript{304} Taylor, Gene. \textit{Hermeneutics: How to Study the Bible}. 1995.  
\textsuperscript{306} Ibid, 123.
words for their simplest, most literal definition, absorbing only what one is told to understand, and ultimately leading to a mostly superficial result. Or they could instead internalize the words, discovering what they mean for one’s soul and for the larger global community, connecting ultimately with how each word resonates within the spiritual self. The role of the individual in the future of Qur’anic interpretation was key to Abu Zayd’s hopes for the academic climate of Egyptian scholarship.

All in all, six major actions can be identified that are involved in the process of interpretation, almost akin to a system or mechanism in which each step must be accomplished in order for the others to function correctly as a result. Each factor includes the efforts of all parties, even the Divine has a role in the workings of this interpretation. The individual who conducts the reading of the ‘text’ also submits himself into the system, adopting a scholarly identity, for if he did not participate then a very important mechanism of the interpretation is sacrificed. This dynamic between the scripture and the individual can be described as follows:

Abu Zayd sees the Qur’an as a form or an act of communication, *wahy*, comprised of six factors: a message, an addresser, an addressee, a contact, a code, and a context. From these elements we may venture to describe his notion of text as a ‘message sent by an addresser to an addressee in a certain context through a contact using a special code.’ Although Abu Zayd does not put it this way. And in the case of the Qur’an, it is a message sent by God to His messenger through revelation in a certain context using the Arabic language.

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307 Ibid.
308 Ibid.
309 Ibid.
As can be seen in the above passage, Abu Zayd does not propose a simple process when it comes to reading the text, but rather, one’s complete attention is needed to tackle the complexity of the language and to truly conceive the miracle which is this divine content and intention.

Another point which Abu Zayd shares with Khalafallah is in his consideration of the language chosen as a means of understanding the context of the first generation of Muslims, the original receivers. He maintained that the literal translation of the Qur’an would only infer a mindset of the sixth century Arab world, in essence, the crucial importance of contemporary interpretation for the modern generation was not considered. If one were to conduct an exegesis with a sixth century frame of mind, the Qur’an would lose its timelessness, its essence as the eternal word of God, and eventually lose relevance as time moves forward. One of the most amazing aspects of the Qur’an is the precise preservation of its roots and words as it was revealed to the Prophet. The reason behind this preservation, as Khalafallah and Abu Zayd both speculate, was not as a means of perpetuating accurate history or conserving factual accounts of various events and persons. The purpose was to keep a message alive, a message that even over a thousand years later maintains a strong presence in this world.

Abu Zayd speaks of the Qur’an as a discourse which emphasized “dialoguing, debating, argumenting, accepting, and rejecting” amongst scholars. The voice of the Qur’an (which we must remember as the speech of God), was meant to influence and inspire human nature and not

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310 Ibid, Stowasser, 72.
311 Ibid.
simply define its attributes. He believed that if one considers its original form, that of a vocal discourse, then it becomes obvious that the Qur’an should be studied for the aestheticism of its intellectual prose as well as its literary aestheticism. Although he strongly promoted this literary method as highly effective, Abu Zayd also warned against the dangers of taking it too far, resulting in the potential diminution of the Qur’an’s Divine value.\textsuperscript{314}

Abu Zayd proposed a few methods of interpreting a passage found in the Qur’an: the first being the examination of the possible perspectives being drawn from it. There is certainly more than one voice found in the script; there is the first person, the third person, and the collective perspective (i.e. we, they).\textsuperscript{315} In addition, he states that within these perspectives exist a possible variety of narrators. The Lord himself is often mentioned through the voice of what can be considered an Angel, and yet at other times, the voice comes from that of the people, commemorating the Lord through their daily prayers.\textsuperscript{316} To identify the narrator, in Abu Zayd’s opinion, will lead to the identification of the mode of discourse. For example, if we pay close attention to the first verses that were revealed to Muhammad, we immediately recognize Muhammad as the addressee and the voice who speaks is also easily identifiable as the Angel’s voice in his introduction of the Lord to the Prophet. Within this introduction, God is referred to in the third person construction, and as the Angel does not appear to be interpreting the Divine voice, he therefore must be imparting knowledge about the divine, making this an ‘informative’ mode of discourse.\textsuperscript{317}

\textsuperscript{314} Ibid, Abu Zayd, 10.
\textsuperscript{315} Ibid, 19.
\textsuperscript{316} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{317} Ibid.
Another point lies in the angel’s repeated command of “Recite” as is found in the Qur’an. Abu Zayd implies that this restatement is suggestive of the possibility that Muhammad perhaps was previously connected as a prophet for other pagan divinities. The Angel’s demanding repetition seems to be calling Muhammad to correct his ways and redress his prophecy to the one true Lord, and it is the grammatical use of the imperative within the structure of the dialogue that twice substantiates this claim.\footnote{Ibid.} Abu Zayd further highlights how the use of language and voice combined gives the Qur’an its demanding and powerful influence. He emphasizes the role of the listener, or reader of the Qur’an, and how in reading a voice spoken directly to herself, as the Lord’s voice so often appears, one would acquire a greater empathy with the passages recited and would grow a stronger bond with this spoken voice.

This observation of the constantly flowing dialect and narration of the Qur’an is at the heart of some of Abu Zayd’s more controversial theories. There are features of the Qur’an that confirm its nature as a living, breathing revelation, and one that reacted to the history of the time.

An example arises in the way that it dealt with specific ethical, spiritual and ideological concepts of the pre-Islamic tribal era so as to embed these in a monotheistic creed and a value system based on human equality. He describes how the revelation reacted to specific historical events, in addition to the general social and political changes which were already ongoing, even before the rise of Islam.\footnote{Ibid.}

As observed above, the Qur’an oftentimes brings the reader to the mindset of sixth century Arabia. This can be seen in the chapter in which listeners ask questions to the prophet, awaiting the answer in his subsequent revelation. The questions asked are ones that often deal with the pagan pre-Islamic tribal world. They deal with the intellectual world, and more importantly, are phrased in

\footnote{Ibid, Taji-Farouki, Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur’an. 176.}
the literary style of the time of those first addressed.\textsuperscript{320} Classical, medieval theology of Islam, that which initially appeared in the first centuries of the emerging faith, contained two branches of study which are of particular interest to this research. \textit{Asbāb an-nuzūl} can be translated as ‘the occasions of revelation’ and \textit{an-nāsikh wal-mansūkh}, ‘the abrogating and the abrogated.’\textsuperscript{321} These two studies both took the Qur’an’s original historical dimension into account, almost without question. It was considered a logical departure point in theological discourse, as one must understand context in order to understand significance.\textsuperscript{322}

Khalafallah and Abu Zayd were discussed because they have suggested, to a certain extent, an artistic approach to the Qur’an and they are the most recent ones to tackle the issue of Qur’an and literature. They consider the artistic or aesthetic dimension of the text; in other words, they are trying to concentrate on the literary dimension of the Qur’an rather than the content of it. Khalafallah for example used the word \textit{fann} (art) in the title of his book: \textit{al-Fann al-Qaṣaṣī fī al-Qur’an}. His contemporary, Sayyid Qutb, also included the word \textit{fann}, six years earlier in the title of his book: \textit{at-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fī al-Qur‘ān}. Qutb’s whole theory centers on his observation that the Qur’an has a specific and very effective way of using language, one he refers to as “artistic portrayal.”\textsuperscript{323} In his explanation of this concept Qutb writes:

Portrayal is the preferred tool in the style of the Qur’an. By palpable fancied images, it designates intellectual meanings, psychological states, perceptible events, visual scenes, human types, and human nature. It then elevates these images it draws, and grants them living presence or regenerating movement; whereupon intellectual meanings become form or motions, psychological states become tableaux or spectacles, human types become vivid and at hand, and human nature becomes visible and embodied. As for events, scenes, stories, and sights, it renders them actual and

\textsuperscript{320} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{321} Ibid, 176-177.

\textsuperscript{322} Ibid, 177.

Much like Khalafallah and al-Khūlī, Sayyid Qutb had a great appreciation for the style of the Qur’an and the beauty and eloquence of its language. His primary concern focused on the Qur’an’s ability to depict pictures, making them seem extremely realistic to its reader or listener. Qutb does not deny the literary fascination of the Qur’an at all; however he disagrees with Khalafallah, in that he does not believe that the Qur’anic message exists only in its ability to provoke emotions and desires. It’s important to mention as well that, like other scholars of the Egyptian literary moment and almost every other Muslim, Qutb considered the Qur’an to be the ultimate truth and without equal in this world. However, all of them approach the Qur’an as a written closed book that should be studied as a scripture, by applying the methodologies of language and literature such as philology and hermeneutics. They do not share the same goals and same outcomes, but all of them view the Qur’an as a scripture. “Scholars of religion have historically devoted attention primarily to the written Qur’an drawing on the model of ‘scripture’ as a written text or book.” Even Khalafallah, who insists that the Qur’an is not a history book, still analyzes the stories in a desacralized manner to prove that it is no history. He applies the study of the worldly story to the Qur’anic one in order to cast out the latter from the historical field. He might be right on this, but by applying his textual methods, he is ignoring two important factors. First, the “sacred history” that these stories are aiming to build in the conscious of the believer for the purpose of imitation and not the purpose of writing accurate world history, “Stories do not


325 Ibid, 144.

convince us by their arguments but by their life-likeness.” Second is the idea that the Qur’anic stories should also be studied as a recitation and not as a closed text. Abu Zayd seems to be much more considerate of the oral nature of the sacred recitation but he is still stuck in an elitist textual prison.

**Textual Prison**

Desacralizing the sacred language is a very difficult task that does not seem to lead to the progress that is hoped and expected by reformists. Ali Mabruk, one of the most recent reformists who is highly influenced by Abu Zayd and whose writings can be classified as philological works, seems to fail to understand that one cannot study a text without considering its own terms. The sacred cannot be studied and judged according to secular terms, nor can it be seen through the lens of rationality as discussed earlier. Developments of the philological studies of ancient sacred languages ignore the caveat that these languages were, and still are, sacred. “Advances in Semitics undermined the idea that Hebrew was either uniquely ancient or of divine provenance. […] Out of these discoveries came philology, with its studies of comparative grammar, classification of languages into families, and reconstructions by scientific reasoning of ‘proto-languages’ out of oblivion.” This has moved the Divine language from the sacred territories to the realm of the profane. This was not exclusive or limited to certain languages or to the Semitics only, but also old sacred languages like Latin and Greek “were forced to mingle on equal ontological footing with a motley plebeian crown of vernacular rivals, in a movement which complemented their earlier demotion in the market-place by print-capitalism.”

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329 Ibid.
If the argument that the Qur’an is solely a written text prevails, then it has to be approached through literary and linguistic methods. This means that the Qur’an would be examined through the same methodological approaches that are used for any other text. This puts the Qur’an on equal footing with other worldly texts, regardless of their content, literary or legal. Advocates of the literary textual approach and advocates of Shar’ia would then share the same stance that the Qur’an is simply a written book, ignoring the fact that it is a sacred language that was spoken by God. There have been many attempts to desacralize Shari’a as a human production, but most of these attempts were not very successful at least on a popular level. However, many modern reformists, like the scholars mentioned before, fall into the same trap that producers of Shari‘a fall into because they all approach the Qur’an as a written textual book. Mabruk ironically argues for the Qur’an to be read as a living dialogue yet he still argues that the Islamic culture is a textual culture and praises this as a sign of development. However, “in Islam, the functions of the holy book as an oral text have predominated over its functions as a written or printed one. In Muslim piety, however, the written word of its scripture has always been secondary to a strong tradition of oral transmission and aural presence of scripture that far surpasses that of Judaic or Christian usage.”

Ali Mabruk argued for the “living Qur’an” in his attempt to desacralize shari’a, or at least to dissociate its applicability from current time, and limit it to the time of its production. In other words, he is trying to say that the Qur’an is an open book through which the believers are in dialogue with the divine and they affect it by their human interference. He does, though, argue in favor of the book (kitāb), like his predecessors, and not the text (naṣ). The word naṣ does not

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appear in the Qur’an as a reference to it, while kitāb appears for around three hundred times; he does not investigate the difference of the meaning of these two words at the time of revelation, knowing that he is an advocate of linking interpretations to their different timings. Mabruk supports his argument with one famous verse that mentions the “preserved tablet” (al-lawh al-mahfūz) as evidence of a written book. This tablet does not have, in any way, a physical appearance since it belongs to the unseen world which is not subject to our perspectives and expectations; what is a book or a tablet in the unseen (numinous) world? The Qur’an itself argues that it was not sent down as one written physical piece, “Had We sent down upon you a book, inscribed on parchment, which they touched with their very hands, those who blaspheme would say: ‘This is nothing but manifest sorcery.’”

In this verse the Qur’an is interestingly differentiating between it being a real miracle and what would be perceived as sorcery. It is a clear emphasis that for the Qur’an to be miraculous it does not have to be revealed in a physical supernatural manner, rather the miraculousness should be in the language itself that is neither “inscribed in a parchment” nor can it be “touched with their hands.” There is another interesting dimension of this verse, that of the believers’ will or power over the revealed language; as if God is proclaiming that the profane act of writing is not what He does, regardless of the fact that Muhammad or his followers decided to do it later.

Mabruk insists that the Qur’an presents itself as a book of meaning and not a text for memorizing and chanting. The purpose of it is reading and not repetition. He goes on to prove his point of view that the Qur’an introduces itself as a “book for understanding” (kitāb lil-fahm) and not a text for memorizing and chanting (lil-‘istiẓhār wal-ḥifẓ) by conveying the Qur’anic verse

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333 Ibid, Mabruk, 159.
334 Ibid.
that criticizes the carriers of the Torah harshly. “The likeness of those who carry the Torah but do not really carry it is like a donkey carrying heavy tomes – wretched is the example of a people who cried lies to God’s revelations! God guides not a people who are wicked,”335 and concluding, with the help of ibn Kathīr that they were not asked to carry it physically but to live by it, which is obvious, but, for him, memorizing and chanting are a form of the physical carrying.

Mabruk argues that the Qur’an was addressing its audience, *jahili* Arabs, with the word *kitāb* intensely to move them from the oral culture “with all what it entails of thinking mechanisms that do not allow any type of progress” to the written culture that enjoys a “more civilized stand.”336 The relation between oral and written is not that simple, and neither one of them can be granted one type of definition or explanation. Carrying a text or a book orally can never be compared to the physical carrying in any way and the oral culture cannot be judged as the doomed culture that will never be able to develop because the written cannot be separated completely from the oral as a new stage that has no roots whatsoever in the previous oral tradition. The new developed written is still, at the end of the day, the writing of the spoken word, and if the ‘spoken’ will never be able to advance how did it transform to become ‘written’ in Islam itself and other ancient traditions? Especially for someone like Mabruk, who considers the Qur’an as an open dialogue with its surroundings and the product of its environment or milieu, it is hard to believe that he does not see the written, which is -in his opinion- nobler than spoken,337 as a product of the previous oral. It is interesting that Mabruk is arguing for the advancement of the written over the oral, and not, at least, considering them as equals, like most of the researchers who were concerned with this matter used to consider all oral arts as non-written texts, and that is why they do not deserve any serious

337 Ibid.
Current understanding is so strongly affected by the written to the extent that makes the concept of orality elusive and incomprehensible. When it comes to etymology there is no one term that describes the oral the way the term ‘literature’ does, it “essentially means ‘writings’ (Latin literatura, from litera, letter of the alphabet), to cover a given body of written materials”339 while “the traditional oral stories, proverbs, prayers, formulaic expressions”340 are simply referred to as oral ‘literature.’ It is very interesting to note that this problematic dilemma does not exist in Arabic in the same way, the word Adab in Arabic does not mean ‘writings,’ it actually means good manners or a call for good manners, and verb addaba means to teach like it is used in “wa hadha ma addaba allahu bihi nabiyyahu” (and this is what God had taught His Prophet with) and it is known that God did not teach Muhammad writing or reading, but reciting.341 In Arabic then, the word Adab was borrowed from the oral and used for the written, and not vice versa as is the case in English.

To better explore the discussion on the Qur’an’s self representation, one should study Daniel Madigan’s work The Quran’s Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam’s Scripture. Madigan begins by tearing down claims that Muhammad committed his revelations to paper in order to create a Book that competes with the Torah. He has an issue with the concept of textuality, and he posits that there perhaps is a larger meaning to the word kitāb than just what is written.

What Muslim tradition tells us existed in written form at the time of the Prophet’s death could scarcely be considered a manuscript virtually complete but for the small emendations and additions that its divine author might wish to make. Therefore, Sprenger seems quite justified in concluding that the Prophet understood the Quran

339 Ibid.
340 Ibid.
to live not on paper so much as in the hearts of the “unlettered” to whom he was sent.342

He criticizes Noldeke, and his mistranslations; saying that if one believes that the term Qur’an comes from the Syriac word q’ryana, then Noldeke wrongly translates this term as “Lektionar” meaning lectionary: “a book of liturgical readings” whereas the translation should be “a liturgical reading.” Thus, the term Qur’an escapes the constraints of being a physical book, in both Arabic and in Syriac according to Madigan’s correction of Noldeke’s mistranslation. Madigan describes the many different accounts of the process of writing down the text. There is almost a consensus that there must be two witnesses to any verse before it was accepted. Earlier traditions tend to privilege oral testimonies whereas later commentators presume that the written material has higher significance in the role of collection. Madigan believes that these later commentators are bringing in their own modern assumptions and confidence in the written word that did not exist during the time of collection.

Given the reliance on oral accounts of the Ḥadīth, it seems that the same should apply to the Qur’an as well343. “Indeed many traditions make the case that those who criticized and rejected the Uthmanic recension relied for their authority on a direct oral link with the Prophet.”344 Scholars, up until the third and fourth centuries, were still contemplating on the propriety of writing down the Qur’an’s revelations, but eventually over time and with strengthening confidence in the act of writing, such worries faded.345 The collection of texts in the Quran must be approached with

343 Ibid.
344 Ibid, 27.
345 Ibid.
the same “critical sophistication” as that of the collection of Ḥadīth.\textsuperscript{346} The issue rose when a Qur’anic text seemed to contradict customary law, one such example was stoning. “Reports of variants were being used to ‘prove’ that the universally acknowledged mushaf does not actually contain the complete text of the Qur’an; that is, there are verses once recited by the Prophet and his Companions that did not find their way into the final official text.”\textsuperscript{347} Therefore, there can be legal norms with Quranic authority without textual evidence. This claim can be extrapolated to mean that in some cases the oral deserves higher privileging than the written. Madigan quotes Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who believes that “Muslims, from the beginning until now are that group of people that has coalesced around the Quran.”\textsuperscript{348} This statement might imply the existence of a complete Qur’an that Muslims coalesced around “but the evidence indicates that they ‘coalesced’ around it while it was still incomplete, still oral, still in process.”\textsuperscript{349} Early muslims gathered around the prophet when there were only a couple of verses of the Qur’an and they “committed themselves to belief in a God who had initiated a direct communication with them, and who had thereby established a continuing relationship with them. They gathered around the recitations as the pledge of God’s relationship of guidance with them rather than as a clearly defined and already closed textual corpus.”\textsuperscript{350}

There is no doubt that the ancient world had a good percentage of literacy in specific societies, this means that, at least, the language had stable grammar rules, and it was being taught at schools by using written books, in addition to written laws that had then several institutions

\textsuperscript{346} Ibid, 32.
\textsuperscript{347} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{349} Ibid. Madigan, 52.
\textsuperscript{350} Ibid.
especially official ones.\textsuperscript{351} In the Christian tradition the oral had to replace the written and not vice versa; “Christianity made its appearance […] in a world that assumed a large degree of literacy as the norm. Yet its spokesmen maintained that they were in direct dialogue with God. The gospels are filled with metaphors that extol the Word.”\textsuperscript{352} This did not make the oral replace the written completely but it made both interdependent; “there was no orality without an implied textuality: there was no literacy without the primal force of the spoken word.”\textsuperscript{353} Therefore, the spoken word can be equal or more powerful than the written, Mabruk seems to underestimate or even to avoid mentioning the sacred dimension of the oral language. In an oral society the effect on the individual can be huge if it is said that there is a Divine language to be heard, she can “supersede inherited laws, customs, and norms”\textsuperscript{354} just to obey the Divine call in a literate society.

Visual Isolation

In Islamic literature, the section that is usually dedicated to ghayb (the unseen) is actually called \textit{as-Sam‘iyyat}, things that are related to audition, since the news regarding ghayb like afterlife, heavens, angels, even stories from the past could never be seen, but they were delivered through listening. Even revelation was given the name \textit{as-sam‘} (listening.\textsuperscript{355}) The rhetoric of the Qur’an, though, is specifically intended to avoid direct, complete representations by the author in favor of inviting interpretation by the audience. “It was the interplay between style, structure, sound, and sense of the Qur’anic ‘Arabiyya that caused an “explosion” in the minds of the early

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{351} Ibid, Stock, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{352} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{353} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{354} Ibid, 2.
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Arabs.”

There are several reports on Muslims who died upon listening to the Qur’an but “they did not die because of the Qur’an’s content as they were believers who already knew it. It was the very sound of the words that had such an extreme effect.”

During ancient times, oral history was preserved by art, literature or mythology as the common vehicles. This ‘primitive’ method was applied regardless of the sacredness of the historical content that was being transmitted. This pattern can be traced throughout all of Europe, where painting and sculpture were the manner by which people communicated from generation to generation. Poetry is a prime example in the Arab world, as it has always been the great pride of Arab culture and language and is an abundant source of history in pre-Islamic Arabia. In fact poetry is a vessel for religious expression in many cultures across the world. “The sacred is very much alive in contemporary American poetry, maybe because poetry, like prayer, tends to be a dialogue with the holy.”

When it comes to poetry in the context of the Arab world, it was not only the primary media of communication, but furthermore, it represented and still represents an extensive archive of all the happenings, both sacred and secular, that occurred before Muhammad’s prophecy. Religious art, as discussed earlier, has many purposes which include much more than the mere preservation of history.

“The 19th century, in western Europe and North America, saw the beginning of a process, today being completed by 20th century corporate capitalism, by which every tradition which has previously mediated between man and nature was broken.”

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had acted as mediator between man and his surroundings in general, one of them being the act of
listening. The nature of modernity necessitates a break with traditional media that individuals
might use to interpret their surroundings. The degradation of the cultural processes that mediate
human beings’ interaction with their world has a strong correlation with the increasing prevalence
of visual media and the declining ubiquity of the oral. Insofar as visual media allows the author to
take a more active role in determining the way in which her work is interpreted, it shifted the power
to mediate between art and meaning from individuals to institutions.

A dispersed conception of authorship is also incompatible with modern capitalist societies
because markets have a difficult time dealing with notions of social ownership that are fluid and
difficult to quantify. Visual media, on the other hand, fit more easily into a capitalist conception
of society. Unlike an auditory tradition, a piece of visual art has a clear author and a clear audience
with statically defined roles relative to the work of art and relative to each other. The experience
of viewing the work of art is not tied up in informal institutions, therefore it is more easily
replicable at an arbitrary scale, and it can be integrated more quickly into a broad set of structures
for producing and distributing goods. The reason for this is heavily derived from the role of art
generally, as a method by which an artist’s emotional experience may be transmitted to an audience
in some approximate form. For visual media, that process of transmission is more self-contained;
reproducing the physical work of art allows an analogous reproduction of the experience, while in
the case of auditory art, reproducing the experience of the artist requires access to a broad set of
cultural experiences and rules, as the author is not a single individual but an entire population with
its own set of traditions.
Furthermore, for the visual to be preserved it needs technology, even primitive types of it, and this could help in the rapid development of the visual, and this is exactly what has happened in our recent history. With greater technology, preservation becomes easier, and reproduction becomes less important. As images can be represented using durable materials and presently stored electronically at a fraction of the cost and with a far diminished risk of decay, the need to reproduce them as they degrade has become substantially less acute. In fact, to the extent that function is still performed, it is done with the intention of maintaining to the greatest degree possible the character of the original in literal terms. Walter Benjamin argues that:

The particular experiential quality that grounds the uniqueness and authenticity (what he calls “aura”) of historical objects has been all but effaced under the perceptual regime of modern technological culture. With the mechanical reproduction of works of art, the idea of authentic originals loses all meaning; the traditions that were founded on and that upheld the knowledge of such authentic objects can no longer maintain the practical and perceptual conditions that sustain them.\(^{360}\)

In this manner, works of art that are preserved mechanistically are not instantiated within pervasive cultural institutions in the same way that those preserved through human labor are. Much of the European renaissance artistic tradition, for example, arose around the practice of replicating classical works that had risen to prominence previously. In this instance, the original in its precise form was not preserved, but it became a sort of abstract cultural object that outlived the original in terms of exerting influence over society. Preserving the original in precise detail decontextualizes it in a profound way, separating it from the process of societal development that would otherwise accompany the reproduction of a work of art. As a result the relationship between a work of art that is perfectly or nearly perfectly preserved and the society that produced it is much more

\[^{360}\text{Ibid, Hirshkind, 623.}\]
complex than that between a society and a work of art that a succession of artists must reproduce over time.

Technology appeared with its superpowers and it has been able to transform what used to be heard into what can be seen, and this has obviously affected the art of reciting and the act of listening to reciters. Generally speaking, more advanced technology allows the artist to more directly represent his or her perspective on an object or an event than less advanced technology does. The ability to create more sophisticated and more precise depictions of events in the world gives the author of those depictions more control over the artistic experience. Observing a picture of an event triggers a more direct and more tightly directed reaction than hearing a description of that event, and observing a more detailed image is still more affecting in this way. The image enjoys great power that affects humans strongly to the extent that they might be converted to become worshipers of an image although they know that it is a human production. The audience is less likely to see an image as a mere conduit or a symbol that is broadly open to interpretation than they are other aesthetic media. As a result, they tend to invest value in the image itself rather than the abstract notion of an external concept and entity that it may represent. People experience intense emotions while watching a movie, even if they know that the experience was entirely illusory and the people in it are mere actors.

The increasing pervasiveness of technology in works of art has, on balance, given the author the ability to control the experience of the audience in more dimensions than she previously could. The use of photography gives the artist the ability to transmit an image as it appeared to her, bypassing the need for the audience to see an imperfect representation and extrapolate from it. The use of various techniques of cinematography in film gives the artist the ability to manipulate not just the images that appear but how they appear, controlling the audience’s sense of perspective.
and time. This is not to say that visual media leave less room for subtlety; in fact, the use of a medium that engages the senses on multiple levels often presents more opportunities for subtlety. Rather, it is to say that some of the layers of meta-interpretation are stripped away. In a work where the role of the author is more distributed, as in the Qur’an, the final experience is the listeners’ perspective on the artist’s perspective on that event, however many listeners there may be. In a work where the role of author is solely played by the artist, the experience consists entirely of her perspective on the event.

Specifically, here, the transition of visual art towards a more complete representation of the artist’s individual perspective intensifies the concentration of authorship that is already present in visual media. This relationship can create a division in different types of art based on what precisely the art endeavors to represent. In some cases, a work of art will attempt to represent some literal event in the world; the artist’s depiction is meant to represent a real image that the audience could have seen themselves and had the same reaction that they would have to the artwork that took its place. In other cases, the art is intentionally meant to represent the artist’s subjective experience, and the actual image is in a certain sense incidental. In the case of visual art, the audience will at the margin perceive a particular work to fall more into the former category, as a literal representation of fact, rather than as the latter. The artist can sometimes use this perception for effect, as in film that is meant to be deceptive to convey to the audience that falsehood is difficult to reliably delineate from fact.

The image has developed into another function that overcame its first one and has had a great impact on the individual and by substitution on society:

Gradually it became evident that an image could outlast what it represented; it then showed how something or somebody had once looked – and thus by implication how the subject had once been seen by other people. Later still the specific vision of the image-maker was
also recognized as part of the record. An image became a record of how X had seen Y. This was the result of an increasing consciousness of individuality, accompanying an increasing awareness of history. It would be rash to try to date this last development precisely. But certainly in Europe such consciousness has existed since the beginning of the Renaissance.  

This change in perspective has come to supplant the cultural institutions that once mediated between the audience and the information contained in art. In less saturated media, the artist lacks the ability to both create and interpret a work of art, leaving space for socially-constructed institutions to intervene, but with the artist playing an enhanced role in the process, the role of community is diminished. This role that the image had played in increasing the consciousness of individuality is of great significance. It leads to the assumption that the previous traditions that used to mediate between man and his surroundings were not able to increase this individual awareness. These traditions had included listening which, obviously, could not play the same role as seeing the preserved subject especially that words or any type of verbal expression could not be preserved to outlast its time of production. In other words, one might conclude that the act of listening had played a role in decreasing consciousness of individuality or at least had helped in maintaining the communal consciousness as opposed to the individualistic one. In order to realize the communal effect of listening as opposed to the individual effect of the visual, visual being inclusive of reading, one should ponder over the following example introduced by Ong: “when a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of this audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker. If the speaker asks the audience to read a handout provided for them, as each reader enters into his or her own private reading world, the unity of this audience is shattered, to be reestablished only when oral speech begins again. Writing and print isolate.”


362 Ibid, Ong, 72.
Moreover, this dependency on technology, like print, reduces the involvement of the individual, or the whole community, in taking part in preserving and reproducing the culture. It creates a type of disengagement between man and the production of culture, which results in making man more of a recipient than a donor. While this notion seems to be at odds with the idea that cultural institutions lose their power to mediate between individuals and the world they experience, the two are actually complementary. The shift from a participatory process of reproduction to a passive process of preservation places the art itself and the artists who create it in the position of interpreter, and in so doing empowers them to shape the development of culture rather than channeling the art through a set of institutions heavily influenced by the audience. This might be one of the reasons that led thinkers such as Albert Schweitzer and many others to criticize the modern man harshly:

Of near contemporaries none has perceived the passive character of modern activity as penetratingly as has Albert Schweitzer, who, in his study of the decay and restoration of civilization, saw modern Man as unfree, incomplete, unconcentrated, pathologically dependent, and ‘absolutely passive’. 363

This passivity in the framework of Schweitzer is linked to the intrinsic character of the visual media. In an auditory medium, the sense of the audience are engaged in a limited way, purposefully leaving a part of the image unformed so that the audience can take the role of interpreter and form an image of its own based on the suggestion of the author. In a visual medium, that process is not at work in the same way.

The need for a sense of the uncertain or the incomplete in sacred art is derived from the difficulty of representing the sacred by means of the profane. If the sacred could be depicted in a

robust way using aesthetic methods, it would cease to be sacred, as the aesthetic is an element of the profane. As a result, sacred art must by definition give the audience a sense that something is suggested by the work of art but not actually represented in it. The role of the sacred in the exercise of sacred art must be inferred by the audience; the stronger the distinction between the worldly and the Divine, then the greater the role of the audience in inferring the presence of the Divine must be.

The role of the aesthetic in approximating experiences that cannot be represented directly is intrinsic to the nature of the medium, and as such is not limited to the realm of sacred art, but the nature of the sacred in Islam creates a peculiar relationship that does not exist elsewhere. A work of art is, at its core intended to represent the personal experience of the artist. While the source of that experience might be reproducible, the actual emotional response to it is internal to the artist, and cannot be reproduced, but rather can be approximated through a stylized representation of the original event.

Additionally, the weight that different information is given in a particular type of media is not necessarily proportional to the reliability of that type of media as a tool to represent empirical truth. Rather, media where authorship is more heavily concentrated in the hands of the artist tends to be perceived as a more faithful representation of events in the world. There is little doubt that a poem that has been recited before numerous audiences, repeated, reinterpreted, and reshaped each time, is a stylized representation of the world. It is a product of the author’s perspective and also of the many audiences’ perspectives. A picture, though, is often more easily seen as a recreation of real objects and events. The fact of the author’s interpretation and its influence on the character of the art is, in a fairly strong sense, hidden from the audience.
Another dimension appears when considering that “works of art can ‘capture’ the meaning or import of a ritual or religious experience and, by ‘freezing it’ in form, allow for the (possible) repetition of the original ritual or religious experience.” Some types of media are naturally more heavily saturated than others, which is to say that they are louder and more densely packed with sensory information. The more saturated an experience is the more of the audience’s attention is devoted to constructing its core image or narrative, and the smaller the role of the audience’s own interpretation in shaping that image or message. In a less saturated art form the audience would have ample space for involvement.

A less saturated art, in this case, would be an art that depends on listening and recitation. “The practice of recitation forms the foundation of Islamic education worldwide, making the sound and experience of reciting the first point of contact with the sacred text for most believers.” This contact is not merely a contact with the “sacred text” but actually a contact with the sacred or the divine itself, since the Qur’an, as discussed, is the speech of God Himself. God’s speech, however, cannot sound in the world without recitation, especially after the death of Muhammad. Several positions were taken regarding the nature of the Qur’anic language, whether it was a divine language or it was a worldly one uttered by Muhammad as he grasped it from Gabriel the angel who, in his turn, grasped it from God. “God made his speech comprehended by Gabriel while He is in the sky, while he is above place, and taught him how to recite it, then Gabriel performed it in the world while he lands in the place.” This connection between the world and the unseen is

364 Ibid, Turner, under “Religion and Art.”
very difficult to explore; it belongs to the numinous, however, the speech of God had finally landed in the world (place) through a language of our own. Regardless of the nature of the very language whether it is the exact same utterance of God or it was transformed into a worldly language, it can still be argued that “what is said in the Qur’an is verbally identical with what God proclaimed in a permanent and eternal act of revelation.”367 What matters here is that this language was definitely an oral language not only as a historical fact specific to Islam, but also generally since “language is overwhelmingly oral that of all the many thousands of languages.”368 The term language indicates that it is going to be communicated through its natural human ways of speaking and listening, which also means that it will come with the package of sound and effect. This speech falls actually in its natural place as words are originally grounded in oral speech, and any attempt to write them would “tyrannically lock them into a visual field forever.”369

The oral is a cultural tool that leads to the creation of a sacred aural sphere, consisted of a sacred language and a community, which circulates it with a synergetic relation between the two. This relation exerts a communal sense of authorship that includes a strong notion of dispersed power, since participants in this communal authorship insert themselves in the process and become partners in producing their own discourse instead of being mere consumers. This dimension is firmly ingrained in Islam, for the Qur’an is oral by its nature. Treating the Qur’an as an icon makes it lose the dimension of having human followers as vessels who carry the divine within themselves and restrain the divine to the iconic Qur’an only. This would create immobilized isolated individuals who would definitely lead to the presence of external institutionalized power.

367 Ibid, Van Ess, 177.
368 Ibid, 7.
369 Ibid, 11.
AURAL CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAM

“The visual is tendentially mimetic and the sonorous tendentially methexic.”

After examining the elitist approaches to the Qur’an that is strongly related to textuality and written book, this chapter will introduce two major Islamic models in which the popular mobilizes through listening and transmitting, this mobilization is not only limited to the Qur’an but includes general Islamic preaching. Through preaching and communicating, a specific aural sphere, in which community mobilizes, is created without the intervention of any external institution or state. Before delving into the contemporary models of orality, the history of preaching and storytelling in Islam should be introduced.

This chapter shows the success of the alive tradition of listening in the contemporary prevailing visual culture, and how it is able to produce a community of listeners and transmitters who are actually involved in generating their own culture, norms, and beliefs.

**Listening in Islamic History: Verbal Preaching**

Islam and Islamic culture have been strongly dependent on the oral tradition that is best represented in preaching and storytelling. Preaching is not exclusive to Islam but it was the only means of cultural reproduction in Islam. Moreover, Islam depended on verbal transmission in almost every branch of its religious sciences. Writing played a major role in preserving the Islamic tradition as well, but for some time it could not replace or even compete with the oral tradition. Islamic writing was mainly reserved for the elite scholastic activities that the governments had benefited from in shaping and structuring their legal regulations. However, public Islam did not

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370 Ibid, Nancy, 10.
necessarily match with elitist Islam, nor did the people have the same level of trust in the scholastic Islam that they had for the popular one.371

The history of storytelling in Islamic culture stretches back to the first century of Islam. Muslim writers have discussed its origins and performance practices extensively, and this is largely due to the significant impact storytelling had on the Arabic world. Storytellers occupied a well-recognized public status, and they were known as either qāṣ or wāʾiz. A qāṣ, for example, was part of a network of preachers, sometimes hired by the caliphate and sent throughout the region in order to answer the questions of the people. These storytellers were among the first paid employees in the Muslim world.372 In the ongoing debate concerning the official source of this practice, the most common hypothesis identifies Tamīm ad-Dārī, a Christian convert to Islam, as the first person to take an official appointment as storyteller of the faith.373 According to one report, he twice asked the Caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb for permission to act as storyteller, and was twice refused. It wasn’t until his third application that the Caliph finally granted his reluctant permission.374

Other sources claim that the origins of storytelling began with the Caliphate of ʿAli, a Caliphate controversial for bringing about an era of social and political upheaval to the community. This theory states that it was following this tumultuous period and the murder of the Caliph ʿUthmān, which the earliest storytellers first emerged.375 However, according to recent studies, these theories have little basis in concrete fact. The craft of storytelling had much more value back

373 Ibid, 22.
374 Ibid.
375 Ibid.
in those days than perhaps it has now. During pre-Qur’anic times, the written Arabic language was in no way as advanced as its contemporary in the oral tradition. For this reason storytelling was such an instrumental part of pre-Islamic culture. It was a necessity in the dissemination of the Islamic faith.\(^{376}\)

Muhammad gathered thousands to his side with the words he received from God, and historically speaking, it is very often the stirring words of great men that bring faith and conviction to their followers\(^ {377}\). In general, storytelling joined with the necessity to preach and teach the rapidly growing number of converts the true ways of the prophet in the early period of Islamic state. The tradition of storytelling in the Arab world is deeply rooted in the Qur’an and there is no doubt that this tradition came about due to the impact that the Qur’an had on the early and medieval Muslim culture.\(^ {378}\)

Storytelling occupied a prominent status in early Islamic history. In the first century of Islam, the office of the storyteller even acquired a political dimension, and it became an official institution of the state. Of course, there still existed less official, popular preachers who exhorted the Muslim faith on their own, but the fact that it was an authorized establishment of the state only further proves just how important this tradition became after Muhammad’s prophethood.

Preaching, or listening to preachers was, and still is, enormously popular, it was central to most medieval Muslims. It is important to mention here that preaching, as an element of the auditory tradition, is defined by a shared role of author and audience. In order to understand its significance in shaping culture, we must analyze it in the context of a dynamic relationship

\(^{376}\)Ibid, 23.
\(^{377}\)Ibid, Nelson.
\(^{378}\)Ibid. Berkey, 22.
between the preacher and the audience. Preachers and storytellers played a crucial role in the articulation and diffusion of Islam. Their audiences included men and women, the religious and the non-religious, the illiterate and the scholarly. They preached to all. Even Ibn al-Jawzī, a sixth century Hanbalī jurist and theologian who heavily criticized these preachers admitted that they held far more sway over the common people than scholars could hope to possess. “The preacher brings to God a great number of people, while a jurist or a traditionalist or a Qur’an reader cannot bring to God a hundredth of that number, because the preacher’s exhortations are addressed to both the common and the elite.”379 In truth he could not have said it better. It was their power of words, and wielding the holy words of the Qur’an that brought people flocking to the Muslim faith, not the academic and scholastic approach. Their message and means of communication was universal. Even as one of their major critics, Ibn al-Jawzī believed that the storytellers played a decisive role in religious transmission and more importantly, he believed that it was the greatest storytellers who gathered the greatest flocks. Because these speakers were responsible for the circulation of religious doctrine, Ibn al-Jawzī thought it was particularly crucial that the material they related was based completely in Muhammad’s teachings, for he did not want them spreading falsehoods.

In the later medieval period, preaching and storytelling grew in popularity. It was a pure act of promoting piety and passing on religious values and these preachers were highly respected, there were different types of preaching:380

First and the most important of all, the Friday sermon (khutba) during the Friday congregational prayers, in a mosque designed for that purpose, delivered by a preacher (khatīb)

379 Ibid. 43.
380 See Berkey, Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East.
usually appointed by the ruler. This position was the grandest and highest in rank because the
Prophet himself had done it. It also had an explicitly political character; it was the practice of the
Prophet, and later the Caliphs or the governors. It became one of the most characteristic and
universal features of Islamic religious ritual.

Second, the (wa’z) which means warning or admonishing, it had the responsibility of
inspiring pious fear in the listeners and telling them stories of the early heroes of Islamic faith.

Third the (qāṣṣ) which is storytelling and can be done in the streets. The storyteller
(qaṣṣāṣ) would recite from memory passages from the Qur’an, Hadith, and stories of the early
Muslims and encourage his audience to pray, fast, and fulfill their other cultic and legal obligations.

Finally, (qāri’ al-kursī) which literally means the one who reads from a chair, his
responsibilities were similar to the storyteller, but he would sit in mosques, schools, and Sufi
convents and read directly from books instead of from memory.

The different types of preaching indicate different aspects of the oral tradition that underlies
Islamic culture, but they interact in a complementary fashion to propagate that culture across the
societies that adhere to it. Being the most formal method of preaching khutba serves to reinforce
the cultural institutions that mediate individual Muslims’ relationship to their society. Here, the
tools of rhetoric act as a queue to indicate authority. Other societies employ similar tools, using
familiar symbols to invest an individual with a level of social significance that does not need to be
guaranteed with shows of power, and strong tradition of listening in Islam makes rhetoric drawn
from the Qur’an a particularly potent method to achieve this end.

The wa’z and qaṣṣ act through different channels to undergird the idealized past that many
Islamic revivalist movements have seized. Although they work in somewhat similar ways, the
distinction between the two indicates an important aspect of the role of preaching Islamic thought. They employ figures in the idealized past and stories about them as a means to demonstrate desirable qualities for the audience and encourage the audience to emulate them. Further, the qāṣṣ specifically exemplifies some of the unique traits of oral traditions as fixtures of culture, with its emphasis on informal structures, with qassāṣ practicing her craft in the streets, and dispersed methods of authorship based on a dynamic reproduction of art, with stories recalled from memory rather than being recorded physically.

The qāri’ (reciter) occupies a sort of interstitial space on the spectrum of cultural entities from those that are built on fixed and centralized social structures to those who rely upon malleable and decentralized ones. As the qāri’ reads directly from the Qur’an, the act of recitation is closer to the stable maintenance of artwork that is common in more visual cultures, but the particular characteristics of recitation, being fundamentally irreproducible from one instance to another, persist. That is, the qāri’ acts within prescribed sets of rules on how to recite the Qur’an, but each individual recitation is a unique act, and the community of listeners has a more active relationship than an analogous community of watchers would. There is a rich history of trained and specialized qāri’s, who each brought the text to life with their own unique styles. Numerous accounts exist detailing the ecstatic reactions which would capture audiences upon listening to its recitation.\(^{381}\)

The tradition of popular preaching in the Islamic Middle Period was defined by three characteristics. In the first place, stories (in particular those of the pre-Islamic prophets, and of the pious early Muslims) formed the stock-in-trade of many popular preachers. These stories provided

\(^{381}\) Ibid, Kermani, “The Aesthetic Reception of the Qur’an,” 255.
a helpful vehicle for the transmission of Islamic values and religious knowledge. The informality
of this type of practice, and in particular its dependence on shared mythology, buttressed the type
of collective artistic creation that is characteristic of the Islamic oral tradition. The stories that
made up the bulk of popular preaching were not generated by a single person or even a body of
people with any regularized selection process. Rather, they originated from a more nebulous
culture of storytelling in which all members of society were partial contributors.

Second, and more important, the relationship of the tradition of popular preaching and
storytelling to the more refined and disciplined transmission of religious knowledge was tentative
and problematic but nonetheless real and unavoidable. The tension between them manifested itself
on a variety of levels: that of topic (i.e. the nature and subject of the material addressed); that of
authority (i.e. the means and criteria by which the legitimacy of the information transmitted was
established); and that of personnel (i.e. the identity and training of those engaged in the
transmission of religious knowledge and texts.

This tension indicates a fundamental division that will tend to form in a society that uses
the sort of artistic paradigm that many Islamic cultures did. While the Islamic oral tradition
emphasized the utility of decentralized cultural structures based on informal societal consensus, it
also developed a clerical establishment with an expectation of authority over matters of religious
thought. These two societal developments, decentralization of authorship and the presence of a
strong religious hierarchy, are fundamentally at odds with each other. As with many instances of
social friction, the aforementioned clash manifests itself indirectly through the two mechanisms
listed above. Controversy over the subject of popular preaching is derived from the irregular means
by which this type of preaching constructs its subject matter. It claims to participate in a religious
dialogue that is of interest to the clerical hierarchy but its methods are, in essence, anti-hierarchical. The debate over legitimacy, and in particular over the criteria by which legitimacy is established, is similar; popular preaching draws its legitimacy from an appeal to a broad base rather than a narrow one, and as a result, identifying an identifiable body that gives the preacher the authority to practice his craft is difficult. Likewise, criticism of popular preaching based around the identity of individual preachers is a conduit for registering disapproval of the dispersion of authorship. In the type of regularized environment in which the clerical hierarchy operates, engaging in a meaningful way with a movement that has no unity doctrine is impractical. The dialogue that is instantiated in popular preaching, though, is shared among the audience, and derives its legitimacy from the investment of the audience.

Third, the tradition of popular preaching and storytelling became, over the medieval period, increasingly intertwined with Sufism. The polemic over preachers and storytellers was ultimately a question of knowledge; they served the role of transmitting basic religious knowledge and instruction to the common people. The controversy that their activities engendered was in the final analysis about how the common people were to understand Islam. This type of friction was doctrinal in a more traditional sense, hinging on specific teachings more than the methods by which they were taught. Even so, it was an inevitable consequence of the nebulous nature of popular preaching; given that the doctrines espoused by such preachers were malleable, the likelihood that prominent preachers would adopt points of view contrary to those of establishment clerics could only increase over time.
Even with respect to political authority, the preachers and the storytellers also had a spiritual influence on politicians. The growing authority of storytellers made jurists and scholars worry about the transmission of accurate Islamic knowledge. Some scholars had developed a hostile attitude against storytellers to the extent that they considered striving against them in a holy war more meritorious than doing so against the unbelievers.

The tension that arose from popular preachers (storytellers) gaining increased influence over matters of government is emblematic of the process by which an informal culture filters into more formalized institutions. While popular preaching may begin as a movement that is separated from powerful institutions and their leaders, in some cases, as with Abu Hanifa, the conduit by which the process occurs is personal. An individual leader of a small number of leaders buys into the framework of popular preaching and his or her action has secondary effects throughout the more rigid institutional structures that operate outside of realm of popular preaching. In other cases, the process occurs from the bottom up; suppressing the influence of popular preachers becomes too costly even when the clerical hierarchy sees a threat to its authority. In either case, the difficulty of suppressing a popular movement of this type originates in its ability to vest individually insignificant figures with cultural power. A single storyteller may not be broadly

\[382\] Ibid, Berkey.

\[383\] Berkey relates two stories in his book as good examples of the prevalence and significance of storytelling:
- The mother of Abū Hanīfa who was the founder of the first Islamic school of law, refused to accept her son’s ruling on a matter until his opinion had been confirmed by a storyteller in whom she placed great trust.
- Al-Sha`bī, a medieval Iraqi scholar, once entered a mosque in the Syrian city of Palmyra and there encountered an elderly man with a long beard, around whom the people in the mosque had gathered taking down into writing what he said. When the old man repeated a hadith according to which “God has created two trumpets each having two blasts: the blast of death and the blast of resurrection,” the visiting scholar could not help but correct him. “O Shaykh, fear God and do not relate traditions which contain falsehood. God has created only one trumpet having two blasts: the blast of death and the blast of resurrection.” The old man did not take kindly to al-Sha`bī’s intervention and struck him with his shoe. The audience followed the Shaykh, and they did not stop throwing shoes until he (al-Sha`bī) had sworn to them that God had created thirty trumpets each having but a single blast.
recognizable or have a prestigious reputation to draw upon, but can signal membership to the shared culture of popular preaching to which the audience is committed and thus achieve legitimacy. Attempting to discredit the storyteller is absurd; as is shown by the continual dialogue between popular preachers and members of the clerical institutions. This affirms the status of the storyteller as a fixture in cultural life.

The clash between the two opposing parties hinges upon what sort of selection process is used to determine who can speak on religious issues with authority. Among the hierarchical system, the selection process is regularized and to a certain extent intentionally designed. Who is allowed to speak with legitimacy on matters of religion and law is based on who has been judged as knowledgeable about those subjects by clerics and jurists. In the popular system, though, the selection process is idiosyncratic and often chaotic because many popular preachers do not become personally famous, their legitimacy is based on a sense that they represent a set of ideas that the community around them has accepted as true. They are at no point called upon to stand before a panel of their elders and prove themselves, yet they are on a regular basis called upon to present their ideas for judgment. Moreover, the method by which those ideas are validated occurs upward rather than downward, with the audience determining whether or not the preacher’s rhetoric is worthwhile. This means that the audience is participating in forming their own rhetoric by validating and accepting it which shows there is no sole author rather a dispersed communal authorship. This type of system is incompatible with a hierarchy that is intended to guide the audience based on a deliberately established set of principles.
The Tablighī Jama‘at

Among numerous Muslim groups, organizations, and associations operating around the world today, the Tablīghī Jama‘at is a twentieth century transnational movement for the renewal of Islamic faith and is perhaps the most successful movement of its kind. The movement’s annual gatherings in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the meetings it holds in London, Chicago and elsewhere, were so well-attended that they attracted media attention worldwide. According to one report, “the Raiwind International Conference of the Tablīghī Jama‘at (From here on, the letters TJ refers to Tablīghī Jama‘at) has become the second-largest rally of Muslims in the world after the Hajj.” The international spread of this organization and the huge number of its participants make it an excellent case study for understanding the notion of verbal preaching in contemporary Islam and the role or it among Muslims of today.

The Tablighī Jama‘at represents an especially consistent movement among a number of groups that have attempted to perform a similar function. The movement works against the backdrop of a changing societal landscape, with differing systems of authority and differing bases for defining social groups. Of course, movements like this one are not unique to Islam, nor are they purely a phenomenon of the last few decades. Judaism and Christianity have their own forms of revival movements, often focused on similar issues; dealing with changes in society that have emerged from rapidly advancing technology and evolving sets of norms. In this case, though, the movement is focused around preaching as a religious institution, with a particular focus on the dichotomy between the worldly and the Divine which so heavily influences much of the way that Islamic religious institutions work. First of all, the movement is working against the

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conglomeration of localized communities into larger units, where the type of artistic culture that existed previously can be difficult to sustain. That is, in earlier Islamic societies where communities tended to be smaller and relationships among individuals tended to be more permanent, the tradition of dispersed authorship that developed around auditory artwork was a less costly equilibrium.\textsuperscript{386} Insofar as many modern societies have coalesced around urban, multicultural centers with all of the associated norms of liberal individualism, they have moved away from a notion of artistic expression where the community is given a shared role as author of the artwork that exists within it.

TJ’s goal in attempting to reconstitute the type of collectively-based institutions that characterized earlier Islamic societies, has particular resonance in Western countries, where the trends of cultural change are especially pronounced. In places such as London and Chicago, the more rapid breakdown of traditional social structures has created a greater level of contrast between the society that TJ and like-minded organizations envision and the surviving ones. Muslims in these cities, often immigrants or the descendants of immigrants, are drawn to Islamic revivalist movements both as a source of cultural solidarity to counteract the feeling of isolation that often affects ethnic enclaves, as well as a means to reconstitute a familiar cultural environment.\textsuperscript{387} The dominance of visual media accentuates this aspect of the revivalist movement, as the contraction of auditory media as a form of art has left a demand for the type of aesthetic culture that only auditory media can produce. While visual media have in many ways a competitive advantage in the modern context that has allowed them to dominate the modern societal landscape, auditory media still have a unique valence especially with Muslim populations with traditions that develop around auditory media and often contrast with the modern milieu.

\textsuperscript{386} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{387} Ibid.
The aim here, however, is to examine the strategy that this group uses in achieving its goal which is the renewal of Islamic faith, or “the movement of the faith” as its founder, Muhammad Ilyas, used to emphasize. The TJ, according to its founder, does not consider itself as a new group or even a movement: “the Tablígh did not aim to launch a new movement or found a new group. In fact, this very trend of innovation, group formation and sectarianism is the cause of our present disgrace. The purpose of this work [Tablígh] is to revive the most ancient work to which all the prophets had invited (Kandahlawi 1962 “Islah-I Inqilab,” 43).”388 The emphasis on restoring a past social order seems to contrast with the actual function of Islamic revivalist groups like TJ in modern societies, as Islamic revivalism tends to oppose many dominant modern social norms of secular liberalism. The group’s rejection of sectarianism as a method to effect change, though indicates, the method by which it sees itself working in the Islamic cultural space. That is, TJ does not see itself as a fundamentally new group because it does not see itself as embodying novel ideas. From the perspective of the movement, the ideas that it espouses are already baked into Islamic culture, even among movements that may disagree with them. This conception of reform is derived from the underlying assumption of a static philosophical underpinning at the core of Islamic thinking. From the perspective of this sort of reform group, the various elements that make up the Islamic religious tradition function to access an unchanging sacred world, and the proliferation of diverse and changeable institutions to accomplish that goal only dilutes the tradition. Even so, the group contends that its methods are fundamentally in line with the base-level norms of Islamic thinking, and as such, it is not really proposing any new reforms.

For this reason the TJ emphasizes the History of the Muslim nation, especially the age of the Prophet and his Companions. This age is deemed to be the golden age of the Muslim nation. This position is supported by much evidence, one of which is a clear Hadīth by the Prophet that

388 Ibid, Masud, 88.
states: “Khayru an-nas qarnī thumma alladhīna yalūnahum thumma al-ladhīna yalūnahum...”

which means that the best among people is those who are in my period, and then those who come after, and then those who come after. The Hadīth goes on to describe the immorality that will come after those periods. This touches upon one of the major controversies in the concept of progress, which is locating the desired “Golden Age” of a specific nation in history; some put it in the past and others put it in the present or in the coming future. Whether the golden age is real or imagined really has no impact on the implications of this line of thinking. It is impractical to assign a particular point in history as the apex of a particular society given all the uncertainty involved, but the tendency of a group to idealize an imagined past or future indicates what sort of core characteristics motivate that group. For the TJ, glorification of the past signals a desire to recreate the artistic and cultural institutions that have been attenuated by advances in technology and associated changes in social norms.

Those who put their “Golden Age” in the present “divide history into the early, medieval, and modern periods - the implication being, of course, that the modern is the best of them all,” this perception could be due to the belief that “human history represents a continuous movement from bad to better, as if climbing the rungs of a ladder, with every rung being not only higher but also better than the one below it.” For others, history represents decadence and regression, their “Golden Age” is always in the past and then things take a turn for the worse. These ideas can exist in tandem and in opposition to each other, as they do in many Western societies where the older generation tends to think that they have experienced a steady decline relative to an imagined past while the younger generation tends to envision a relative advancement in social and cultural health.

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391 Ibid.
toward an idealized future. This generational split could explain why some younger Muslims in Western societies have not gravitated towards the TJ as much as their older counterparts have.\textsuperscript{392}

Each point of view can be further disaggregated based on the particular causes that its adherents point to in explaining the trajectory of society. In some cases, the relative decline is attributed to a particular generation of leaders who are seen as having failed to uphold the ideals of their society in the way that their predecessors did. In others, decline is attributed to environmental changes such as new technology or shifts in the structure of the economy. The latter case tends to generate a more fatalistic view of social change; not only is society declining over time, but that decline is inevitable and the best that the present generation can do is slow its progress by preserving cultural fixtures of the past.

This is the case with the TJ except for the fact that they still believe that everything can be fixed. This group builds its ideology on select traits of the Companions of the Prophet. Members of this group call these traits \textit{sitt sifāt}, the six traits or characteristics; they believe that if they achieve these traits in their lives, they will receive the same worldly and heavenly rewards that the \textit{Saḥāba} received from God.\textsuperscript{393} So the golden age for the TJ is still revivable but on the basis of acquiring the same traits that people of the first golden age have acquired. This belief would tend to put the TJ in a more leadership-focused framework of thinking about social progress. Although they do not ignore the presence of environmental changes in society, they heavily emphasize the traits of leaders in explaining a perceived decline in the health of society and in how that decline might be reversed. This view falls in line with the conception among the TJ of unity among Islamic groups and their static notion of the Divine. That is, for the TJ, the social changes that have generated the decline against which they endeavor to work are in a certain sense illusory. The

\textsuperscript{392} Ibid, Jan. 

\textsuperscript{393} Personal observation.
fracturing of modern society that they see as having led to its decline does not impact the fundamental nature of the Divine or individuals’ ability to access it, and as a result it is incumbent on individuals to rediscover the older methods of access to the Divine.

In this context, the tradition of preserving history is of huge importance and therefore the method of preserving this history is of extreme importance as well. Here the role of authorship is paramount in determining how precisely a particular culture’s history is preserved and how it is characterized by subsequent generations. That aspect of a culture’s history may vary along two dimensions: how heavily it is tied to empirical, historical facts about the world and how prone it is to change over time as it is passed down across generations. The auditory culture of Qur’anic rhetoric lends itself toward a historical narrative that is stylized and that changes to fit the context of its audience. That is, the sense of a golden age, or at the very least the specific nature of that period in time is a shared cultural value more than a historical fact. The actors involved in that age truly existed and undertook the acts of cultural genesis with which they are credited, but the granular details are molded to fit a societal narrative. The virtues of the golden age are constructed to meet the needs of the society that intends to replicate it. The nature of an auditory tradition, with its dispersal of authorship enables this process by giving the audience a role in shaping the narrative while also listening to it. As such, the notion of a past period of splendor to be reproduced is at once grounded in a static historical tradition and divorced from a rigid sense of historical determinism.

The role of preserving history for TJ indicates an intersection of their views on multiple different societal issues chiefly the relative social decline, the reconstitution of leadership characteristics of the past, and the unity of Islamic thinking. For TJ, preserving history is not simply an act of venerating the past but of gathering insights from it so that its particular structures can be reconstituted in the present. Doing so, they contend, can allow those in the present to reverse
the trend of fracturing that undid the past golden age. Furthermore, because they see a set of base-level ideas relating the sacred as being common across the many Islamic movements that have sprung up over the years, the central principles that guided Islamic thinking in the past are still fundamentally relevant in the present and will continue to be in the future. This notion of unity sets TJ apart from other movements that see a different sort of break between generations. For TJ, studying the past is not a way to observe an entirely alien society with foreign views on the world but rather a method to observe an idealized form of the present. The same core goal of reaching a deep but shared connection with the sacred motivates both the reform movement and the present group that it seeks to revitalize, but that goal has, from the point of view of TJ, been hampered by the proliferation of ideological factions and an increasing distance from traditional social structures.

This is not an Islamic innovation, nor is it exclusive for Muslims among the history of nations. History, for people of religion, has always been of great importance; religious people have special perceptions of history. They look at history in a sacred way, especially their own religious history. Usually they have a certain period in their history that they keep referring to as their point of reference. It is mostly the age when their doctrine had appeared for the first time, or it can also be the age when their doctrine reached its peak. Generally speaking, the historical period that is venerated in this way is described as a moment in time when the sacred was more readily accessible to the religious tradition concerned with it, or at the very least when that tradition was more heavily invested in describing the sacred. The need to use the historical record in this way, and to create a stylized notion of history so as to meet the needs and expectations of a modern society, is derived from the particular characteristics of the sacred as outside of normal human description and reasoning. It is insufficient to simply describe an encounter with the sacred as having occurred at a particular point in time, and in lieu of this, adherents of the religious tradition in question will identify the sacred with a sort of mythical history, one that invokes a set of ideals.
that its modern society values but that is understood to be stylized. In this manner, the historical period described becomes a manifestation of the ideals and aspirations of its society, and it will adapt to meet them.

The focus on the origin of a particular set of religious doctrines as the point of reference for an entire social movement is drawn from the particular relationship that the sacred has with time in motivating religious traditions. Unlike a phenomenon of the profane, the sacred cannot be said to occupy a fixed and clearly definable period in time. It is manifested in rituals that usually occur periodically, often at an interval that is determined by underlying social forces, as with economic structure of agrarian societies triggering them to build holidays around changes in the seasons, as those point in time have particular significance for them. Even so, these societies do not really see the sacred as interacting with the world only on a few days of the year or only at a fixed point in history, but the more nebulous notion of the sacred existing outside of time is not meaningful to most people, so religious traditions develop fixed points in time to give a point of reference for their adherents. For TJ, an idealized past perform this role, as it gives a reference point for when the social practices that were most effective in accessing the sacred were most prevalent.

In any case, preserving this history is of supreme importance for people of religion. Moreover, it could be the historical point when the sacred had intervened in history and particularly human history in order to found this point of reference; “for nothing can begin, nothing can be done, without a previous orientation, and any orientation implies acquiring a fixed point.” 394 So, in order to keep this point alive, humans take advantage of several cultural means of preservation.

As after the siege of Troy there were found, in every city of Greece, men who collected the traditions and adventures of heroes, and sung them for the recreation of the people, till these recitals became a national passion, a national poetry, so, at the time of which we speak, the traditions of what may be called the heroic ages of Christianity had the same interest for the nations of Europe. There were men who made it their business to collect them, to transcribe them, to read or recite them aloud, for the edification and delight of the people. And this was the only literature, properly so called, of that time.”

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Here, the focus on a particular point in history is again a way of providing a comprehensible reference point when addressing the issue in more direct terms might be non-intuitive. In the Christian context as well as the Classical one, the imagined period in history is not really the focus of artistic veneration. Rather, the artwork of these times aims to glorify a particular set of characteristics, to convey to the audience that they should display those characteristics in order to enrich their lives. The emphasis on history to achieve this end serves to offer idealized figures who present those characteristics, as presenting a framework for a social order or even for personal behavior is more effective when it is centered on a role model that can be defined in specific terms. Moreover, it conveys a sense of unification with societal aspirations, which may convince the audience that the idealized form of their society is attainable. That is, because desirable characteristics are manifested in another point in history but in the same society, adherents of the religious tradition that imagines them can see themselves as possessing some permutation of those characteristics, but perhaps in an imperfect or incomplete form.

This relationship becomes clear in the emphasis on reform of leaderships in TJ. Because the movement portrays a particular set of Islamic leaders as displaying the characteristics that it values, it can maintain that those virtues are built into Islamic society, and they simply must be rediscovered, not built from scratch. In this way, societal restoration can be framed as an introspective process, which may ease the tension of changing social structures that may have been in place for years. That element of the movement can help explain why it is popular among

395 Ibid, 4.
immigrant populations in the West, as the emphasis on an idealized past as a guidepost for future progress can help to alleviate the sense of alienation that may come from transplantation to a new society with different values, especially when elements of that society are strongly hostile.

This movement does not use any kind of media in spreading its beliefs and ideologies, it strongly believes that every ordinary Muslim, regardless of her Islamic knowledge, has to take part in spreading Islam and its teachings. It is trying to reclaim the right of the individual and the community of believers in shaping their own space without the need of any kind of institution. “Ilyas himself favored the method of direct oral communication. But after the movement began to spread outside Mewat his disciples requested that some texts containing the basic principles of the movement be issued, in which its aims and methods, as well as its divine rewards were outlined in brief. Ilyas gave in after some initial reluctance.”396 This change indicates a secondary effect of modern media on Islamic revival movements generally; with the ease of spreading the movement’s message comes a greater ability to mold that message from the top down. The movement does not need to rely on a diffuse network of preachers with disparate views and methods in the way that Islamic movements of the past did, and as such it can encourage greater cohesion by regularizing its message. This sort of change, though, is conceptually antithetical to the notion of dispersed authorship, where changes in the core message of the movement occur organically based on changes in the disposition of the audience. The modern context in which Islamic revivalist movements operate contributes to this sense of intra-group friction; the growth of more centralized and hierarchical structures in many areas of society, creates pressure for movements like TJ to

enact tighter mechanisms of rhetorical control in order to perform on a similar footing. Even for purists like Ilyas, continuing to handle group dynamics through the entropic process of popular discourse and argumentation becomes untenable, and some sort of middle ground must be reached.

Even so, many Islamic revival movements have actively worked to resist the pull toward more concentrated social structures driven by environmental changes in modern societies. By avoiding any kind of modern media, TJ is trying to avoid any kind of dependency outside the ability of the individual or the community. The huge success that this movement has achieved without the use of even the audio technology is remarkable. It revives the belief in human capacity of change. They use almost the same traditional method of storytelling that was common in medieval times as described above. Narrating stories is a central ritual act in Tablighi teaching sessions; it is usually addressed to *muballighīn* (preachers) and public audience. “One person would read aloud a story from books,” which were assigned by the early founders, 397 “while the others, sitting on the floor in a semi-circle around him, would listen attentively.” 398 The goal behind this type of narration, “besides its use as a pedagogical device,” is to serve as a major motivation for the listeners to strengthen their own faith, “to emulate in their own personal lives, particularly in the realm of ritual practice, the examples of the early pious Muslims, and, above all, to actively participate in the work of *Tablīgh* in the hope of divine reward.” 399 In a broad sense, this sort of cultural practice is placed in opposition to many modern expectations of how a movement of this

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397 The books that are assigned by the TJ to be read are few; they mainly use “The Blessings of Pious Acts” and “Lives of the Companions.” Actually, the TJ activists were discouraged by TJ leaders from reading any literature besides the assigned ones.

398 Ibid, 74.

399 Ibid.
type will conduct itself. The application of more advanced technology to the realms of art and
culture has shifted the role of authorship in a unique way, as the integration of a machine into the
process pushes some of the work of propagation and reproduction that would ordinarily be invested
in the audience onto that machine. In most cases, this change is a matter of convenience rather than
ideology, as the trade off involved allows the artist more freedom to create and selectively
eliminate labor in particular places where it does not add value. Movements like TJ, though,
consider the act of spreading sermons to a new audience and preserving their message through
repetition to be a critical element of the creative process, and as a result are loathe to delegate those
functions to a machine.

This pattern of behavior is tied to the dispersed form of authorship in the Islamic artistic
tradition and the strong divide between the sacred and the profane. By dispensing with technologies
that can reproduce a given work of art mechanically, the movement makes the process by which
that art is propagated more dynamic. Each work is not contained in a fixed storage device but rather
transmitted through a cultural system, and as a result changes along with that system. This type of
sacred art, heavily engaged as it is with the experience of individuals, is much more fully
compatible with a strong separation between the worldly and the Divine than a weak one. Insofar
as the Divine cannot be described with language, reasoned about with logic, or perceived with the
senses, the only direct experience with it that a person can undergo is internal. This sort of
experience is embodied in the personal nature of the Tablīghī Jama‘at. That is, the experience of
each work cannot be replicated without the participation of a person who previously experienced
it. In this way, it mirrors the sacred in being reachable only through individual action and not
transmissible through sensory tools.
In the case of TJ, every member has to participate in listening to the teaching sessions and has to deliver the message himself to other listeners, so that he participates in the two components; listening and transmitting. The participation of the audience extends the process by which TJ’s message is formulated; rather than being constructed in its entirety at the front end and then reproduced that way for the audience, it is formulated in part and then modified continuously throughout the process of transmission. The audience is neither a passive listener nor a mechanical conduit of repletion but a part author, shaping the creative process dynamically.

Although this might not be the chief purpose of TJ, or at least not the direct intention that they want to achieve deliberately, especially that the chief focus of this group is to satisfy God and abide by his commands. Still Ilyas, the founder, “saw the active involvement of ordinary Muslims in his tabālīgh campaign as playing a dual purpose. On the one hand, it was a means for individual Muslims to strengthen their own faith, which would motivate them to bring their personal and collective affairs in line with the rules of the Shari‘a. On the other hand, it also served as a vehicle for spreading the message of the TJ to other Muslims, exhorting them to participate in the work of the movement. It was self-propelling, with an inbuilt mechanism for expansion at little cost.”400 In an abstract sense, this dynamic is common to most religious movements, but in the case of TJ it is built upon an old tradition of engagement on the part of the listeners. In the context of religious revival, the idea of dispersed authorship gives rise to an analogous idea of proliferation. The listeners, upon self-selection into the movement, become preachers in their own right, and the

400 Ibid, Sikand, 79.
dynamic, decentralized method of organization that the movement uses makes them nodes in an expanding and deepening network rather than leaves at a fixed point in a hierarchy.

The Cassette Sermon in Contemporary Islam

As media has become more easily reproducible and political institutions have become more formalized, popular preachers have had a more difficult time gaining the sort of influence over political life that they had in the past. The ability to easily reproduce and distribute media weakens the tradition of popular preaching because it enables a more centralized cultural system. When access to written work was more limited, creating a truly mass cultural movement from within a relatively small institutional hierarchy was difficult; the restriction of resources and authority to a limited number of leaders generates a less participatory environment where the clerical hierarchy must bear the entire cost of dispatching preachers and scholars to spread its message. With that cost diminished, popular preaching has a smaller space in which to grow. Moreover, the increased formalization of interactions with the states shrinks the conduit by which popular preaching might ordinarily influence political life. Insofar as the state is more arduously governed by heavily monitored relationships between officials with more exposure to regulation by the underlying hierarchy, a popular preacher gaining leverage based on a personal relationship to a civil servant or through broad-based persuasion of the citizenry is more difficult.

The Islamic tradition of storytelling or verbal preaching has been able to find a middle ground through which it would be able to maintain as much as possible of the same established tradition. There is no doubt that there is no way to maintain the exact social or political role that used to exist due to the fact that the formal political and religious institutions have grown
in power. This obviously was not the case in the medieval times when there was an almost complete absence of formal institutions of authority and a clear devolution of responsibility for interpreting religion. However, the contemporary attempt of using auditoru media has been playing a major role in the so called “Islamic Revival” (aṣ-Ṣaḥwa al-Islamiyya). “The cassette sermon has become an omnipresent background of daily urban life in most Middle Eastern cities, accompanying and punctuating the mundane toils of men and women.”⁴⁰¹

The contribution of aural media to shape the contemporary moral and political landscape of the Islamic Revival in parts of the Arab world lies not simply in its capacity to distribute ideas or inspire religious ideologies but in its effect on the human “sensorium, on the affects, sensibilities, and perceptual habits of its vast audience.”⁴⁰² Moreover, “soundscape produced through the circulation of this medium animates and sustains the substrate of sensory knowledge and embodied aptitudes undergirding a broad revival movement within contemporary Islam.”⁴⁰³ This movement could be seen as a communal attempt to reclaim the authority from the formal institutions of authority and place it in its traditional locus which is the community, and it is also trying to involve the individual again in shaping and forming his own religious space within a wider communal awareness of responsibility. In essence, revival movements have endeavored to recreate the dispersed notion of authorship that once characterized Islamic preaching. As many Muslim societies have acquired a more hierarchical backbone, they have moved closer to a model

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⁴⁰¹ Ibid, Hirshkind, 2.
⁴⁰² Ibid.
⁴⁰³ Ibid.
of authorship that places total authority in the hands of the preacher. Fully reversing this cultural change is not practical even for a very successful revival movement, so they have endeavored to reach an equilibrium where the public remains invested in the Islamic rhetorical tradition while operating within a space that does not clash with the centralized authority of a modern state.

In addition the revival movements’ focus on dispersing authorship, these movements attempt to engage with the audience on a more pervasive level, shaping their behavior not only during the actual exercise of listening to a sermon but at all times during everyday life. This effort is in part facilitated by advances in technology; the ability to carry and listen to recorded sermons allows a greater degree of penetration into mundane lives of the listeners than would otherwise be possible. It should be noted, though, that this practice is a continuation, rather than a reversal, of the underlying cultural character of popular preaching. A large part of the strength of popular preaching as a social movement was its pervasiveness; hearing a sermon from a popular storyteller did not require access to exclusive institutions or resources, but rather only to the common spaces where the listeners’ personal business would likely be conducted anyway. The spread of cassette sermons as a part of the various Islamic revival movements that have sprung up around the world continues this general practice but with the aid of technology that was not available to popular preachers of the past.

From its inception in the twentieth century, this cassette movement has centered on a critique of the existing structures of religious and secular authority. For those who participate in the movement, the moral and political direction of contemporary Muslim societies cannot be left to politicians, religious scholars, or militant activists but must be decided upon and enacted collectively by ordinary Muslims in the course of their normal daily activities. The notions of
individual and collective responsibility that this movement has given rise to have come to be embodied in a wide array of institutions, media forms, and practices of public sociability. In this manner, cassette sermons act as both a tool of Islamic revivalist movements in proliferating their message throughout the populace and a symbol of the underlying social forces that actually make the movement work. On a basic level, the cassettes ease the decentralized spread of the movement’s message, but more importantly, they signal a disaggregation of authority that is necessary to actually strengthen Islamic revival as a social movement. That is, it would not be sufficient for the movement to simply affirm that any person can claim a legitimate right to engage with Islamic revival as a listener. What really matters for the movement is the assertion that individuals with no formalized clerical authority can claim to be active participants in religious discourse. The cassette symbolizes both to the listener and to his or her peers that members of the public are permitted to interpret the meaning of the sermons they hear and that those interpretations are a legitimate part of the process by which religious doctrine is formed.

The cassette enjoys a specific ability that enables it to function and spread widely without the interference of the authority. “Millions of ordinary Muslims around the world, men and women who hold regular jobs, study at the university, send their kids to public schools, and worry about the future of their communities listen to cassette sermons.” The cassette has played a crucial role in the spread, survival, and success of fundamentalist Islamic movements. Tapes have such an important role because in the absence of a hierarchical structure, they constitute a resilient web

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404 Ibid, 2-3.
405 Ibid, 4.
that holds together a plethora of local movements and groups, operating mostly within national borders.  

406 Ibid.
CONCLUSION

For a long time, western scholarship treated the Qur’an as a historical literary document. It was not seen as a sacred text that is very central to “the spiritual, social and cultural lives of millions of men and women around the world.” This central presence of the Qur’an in Islam is principally oral. By listening to the Qur’an Muslims take part in an involvement with the text far beyond the direct meaning or content.

As a result of the unequivocally exceptional nature of the Qur’an, Muslims and Muslim scholars strongly believe in the Divine source of the text, which makes it the only sacred entity in Islamic doctrine and culture. Its recitation can be seen as an art, but whether it is a sacred art or not has not been studied thoroughly especially among Muslim scholars. The reason behind this paucity originates in the western negligence of enrolling Islam in the study of religion on one hand, and on the other hand in the textual prison in which Muslim scholars have been trapped.

Qur’anic recitation is not only an expression of a text or a literal satisfaction of a religious duty. The actual recitation of the Qur’an should involve reciters and listeners in the sacredness of the text, mentally and effectively, for reciting the revealed language puts the listener and the reciter in the same instant of the original revelation. For this and more, recitation has been the main method in the propagation of Islam. In addition to the propagation of Islam, reciting and listening to the Qur’an have been the major generator of the communal culture and the social cohesion for Muslims throughout history.

This presentation of the oral nature of the sacred language of the Qur’an is the focus of chapter one in this study, in addition to the communal sense that is caused by the sacred aural

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sphere. The chapter discusses the notion of authorship; trying to emphasize the concept of dispersed authorship that leads to a communal power versus to an external one that is usually represented in states and institutions. This lengthy chapter attempts to draw a line between the Qur’anic fascinating rhetoric, as introduced by Muslim scholars, and the notion of the sacred or the holly as defined by western scholars. This fascination, though, has been recognized primarily by the oral recitation of the Qur’an.

The oral nature of the Qur’an comprises no physical display the way visual does, and the visual does include written script, since the way to access it would be through seeing. This comparison between the visual and aural, or the written and the oral is also discussed in the first chapter. The Qur’an is the sacred language of Islam that was revealed by God Himself, and it is His own very language; it is a recitation that should be transmitted and reproduced by the audience.

Regardless of the original nature of the Qur’an, scholars in the Muslim world and outside the Muslim world treated the Qur’an as if it was a scripture that was inscribed by God Himself and sent down to earth through specific means. Modern thinkers of Islam in the twentieth century, are still trapped, like others whom they criticize, in the textual field. They have returned to the same old stand that was taken by western scholarship prior to including Islam in the history of religions. They were under the influence of scripture studies applied in studying the Bible as a written text to understand the very meaning of it. The argument in chapter two, however, is that the Qur’an is not a written text that should be accessed by reading, rather an aural recitation to which Muslims should be listening to, reciting, and circulating themselves without the interference of any elitist entity, institution or state. Moreover, the visual is introduced in this chapter as an isolating method that functions in an opposite manner of the collective spirit of Islam that is generated by the aural.
Chapter three shows that the Islamic notion of listening is still striving today, even though the global culture of today is visually oriented. Listening has been preserved technologically by media, one of which is the cassette that is discussed as a model of listening still playing a major role in affecting the Muslim daily life. Another major Islamic revival movement of listening is the *Tablīghī Jamaʿat*, that depends largely on oral communication. This movement can be seen as a community of listeners and transmitters who are actually creating their own culture by listening to the sacred.

This thesis attempts to study the role of the Qur’an as an oral generator of the culture of Islam through reciting and listening. This approach has been neglected in academic scholarship as a major approach of study, only a few tried to study the artistic recitation of the Qur’an, but most of these studies focused on the details of the art itself as a ritual rather than its bigger role in creating a specific culture. Previous studies have approached the Qur’an as a literal text ignoring both, its importance as a recitation and its Divine source. The originality of this work is not only in the study of the Qur’an as the Islamic sacred, but also in proposing that Islam is about listening to the sacred.


37. Encyclopædia of Islam II Al-Djāḥiẓ.


68. Madigan, Daniel. The Quran’s Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam’s Scripture.


