
TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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THE QUR'ĀN AND ITS WORLD. IX. THE TRIUMPH OF DIVERSITY: MUSLIM EXEGESIS*

“That thou mayest make clear to mankind what was sent down to them”

The Qur'ān, 16:44

The events which took place after Muḥammad's death brought to light numerous questions which the Qur'ān could not answer directly. This became even more obvious after the end of the Arab conquests and the emergence on the subjugated territories of a new socio-cultural community. At that period Arab-Muslim society encountered many problems which differed considerably from those it had previously faced. On the one hand, this gave birth to the appearance of other sources of Muslim law, primarily the *sunna*, whose significance steadily increased, and, on the other, it fostered the emergence of numerous “metaphoric” commentaries on the Qur'ān which drifted ever farther from the direct meaning of the text. In effect, it has resulted in the creation of new “Scriptures” by the followers of various schools of thought.

The as yet unformed nature of the early Islamic theology, the absence of generally recognised institutions and procedures comparable to the Christian ecumenical councils for ratifying religious dogma and criteria for determining the “truth” of this or that position or statute inevitably gave rise to countless disputes within the Muslim community. These conflicts touched on the most important questions of the faith. Diversity of thought became an inalienable trait of Islam, so that the problem of the “true faith” came to be insoluble [1].

As a cultural symbiosis, marked by Muslim culture's broad assimilation of the accomplishments of the peoples it conquered, took shape within the Muslim state, the theoretical conception of the social-religious system naturally grew more complex. The centre of that system was the Qur'ān, which brought together the basic semantic “inventory” of the culture and formed many aspects of the world-view

characteristic of its followers. Since the culturally and linguistically alien environment influenced greatly the Islamic assimilation of ideas, customs, and commonplace assumptions, which were fundamentally foreign to it, the “guardians of the true faith” who strove to base their views solely on the propositions established by the Qur'ān and *sunna* became intransigent enemies of all “impermissible” innovations. The problem of “tradition and innovation” runs through the entire history of Islam up to the current day.

We have already spoken of the Qur'ān as a sacral text, the true meaning of which is always broader than its direct meaning; the text is always augmented by the associations and images which it evokes in readers and listeners. At various times and in various socio-cultural and ethnic contexts, the range of these associations varied significantly. The diachronic study of Qur'ānic exegesis as the reaction of Arab-Muslim society to the Qur'ān represents, hence, an attempt to recreate the real history of the text. In this sense, the Qur'ān and Muslim exegesis form a kind of unity and a unique religious, social, and historical document [2].

As a modern scholar puts it, “calligraphy is the first sacred duty of the pen, commentary the second” [3]. Indeed, numerous commentaries on the Qur'ān reflected political and religious convictions and national and cultural predilections of their authors, be they Sunnis or Shi'ites, Ṣūfīs or Ismā'īlīs, inhabitants of Egypt or Khorasan, Muslim Spain or India. Their approaches to interpreting the text, the appearance and development of various instruments for its analysis, were indissolubly linked to the ideological needs of the age [4]. Internal conflicts gave way to foreign invasions, periods of prosperity were followed by years of hunger and poverty, capitals fell and dynasties perished, and

* In concluding our publication of E. A. Rezvan's series of articles, “The Qur'ān and its world”, the author and the editors of the journal would like to express their sincere gratitude to all readers who responded to this publication. We are pleased to announce that a reworked and significantly expanded version of this series will appear in the near future as a separate book under the same title as the series. Orders for this richly illustrated edition should be sent to the journal's editors.