

In the year 610 of the Christian Era, a merchant of the prominent Quraysh tribe sat meditating in a cave on Mt. Hira near Mecca. He heard a voice saying,

Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created,
created man of a blood clot.

Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous,
who taught by the Pen,
taught Man that he knew not. [96.1-5]

Thus began the youngest of the major world religions and one of the most successful lives in world history. As a religious, political, and military leader, Muhammad (570-632) is without equal. Only Moses comes close, but Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land, while Muhammad returned to Mecca as a victorious conqueror. We are, moreover, fortunate to have better documentation for his life than for that of Moses, Jesus, or the Buddha. On any reckoning, Muhammad's biography is one well worth studying. If you read the *Qur'an*, you may want to read along with it the most important early biography, the *Life of Muhammad* by Ibn Ishāq.

Today, however, our primary goal is to become acquainted with the *Qur'an*. While some light may be shed on this great book by a fuller knowledge of its historical context, nothing replaces study of the text itself. Thus, most of my talk will focus on the primary text, though I will first discuss some of the major events and issues that form the background of the *Qur'an*.

Muhammad was an orphan. His father died before he was born and his mother when he was six years old. His grandfather took care of him for two more years before he died

as well. Thereafter his uncle Abu Talib, head of the Banu Hashim clan, assumed guardianship of the boy. Thus Muhammad grew up as something of an outsider within Meccan society. Although he did belong to its most prominent tribe, the Quraysh, he was a weak and vulnerable member of it. He rose to prominence, however, due to his skills as a caravan trader, as well as for his reputation of honesty. When he was 25, the wealthy widow Khadija, rather impressed, asked for his hand in marriage, was accepted, and became his first wife.

Mecca was a major hub of the Arabian caravan trade routes that connected the Byzantine Empire in the north with the spice-exporting Yemen in the south. The Quraysh not only dominated Meccan trade but also were custodians of the Kaaba, the central shrine for the still largely pagan Arab tribes. The word Kaaba, related to our word "cube", refers to the cubical structure enclosing the Black Stone, a sacred object traditionally venerated by the pagan Arabs and possibly of meteoric origin. Mecca and the Kaaba were already sites of pilgrimage before Muhammad's time, the time that Muslims refer to as Jahiliyya, or the time of ignorance.

During their sojourn there, the Arabs would hold fairs, including competitions in poetry, still a largely oral art. Several of these pre-Islamic poems survive. Some of them are known as the "Hanging" or "Suspended" Odes and were supposedly hung up in the Kaaba as a token of honor.

Although Arab polytheism still flourished at its major center of Mecca, monotheistic religions were common not only in the surrounding areas but even with Arabia itself. Orthodox Christianity was the official religion of the Byzantine Empire, while the

Sassanid Persian Empire supported Zoroastrianism, arguably a monotheistic faith, although a highly dualistic one. Many Christians, of various sects, were spread throughout Arabia, and there was a sizeable Jewish community in the city of Yathrib.

Thus when Muhammad brought forward his monotheistic message, he had many enemies. Although he had hoped to find a receptive audience among the “People of the Book”, i.e, Jews and Christians, in this hope he was largely disappointed. The fiercer and earlier struggle, however, was against the leaders of his own city and tribe, the polytheist Quraysh, for Muslims, like Jews and Christians before them, not only believed in the existence of one God, but held that God to be a jealous god, a god who would “have no other gods before him.” Polytheism was not simply mistaken, but even a direct affront to God and could not be tolerated.

Polytheism is more tolerant than monotheism. The chief god of the Arabic pagan pantheon was Allah, or "the God." "Allah" simply comes from a common Semitic root for "god" and is cognate with Hebrew Elohim and Ugaritic El. The pagan Arabs had traditionally associated other gods with Allah and worshipped these other divinities, in particular Allah's daughters (al-Lat, Manat, and al-Uzza). The polytheists could well accept that Allah was the one supreme god; they could not, however, accept that he was the only god or the only god to be worshipped. Particularly offensive to this traditional tribal society, however, must have been the claim that their ancestors, by worshipping associates alongside of Allah, were now burning in hell. Moreover, Muhammad's attack upon polytheism was a direct threat to their domination of the Meccan trade and shrine.

The polytheists challenged Muhammad to prove his apostleship by performing a miracle. He replied that it was not in his power to perform miracles, but only in God's power to do so, and that the *Qur'an* itself was the miracle. A noble, elevated discourse spoken through an illiterate merchant, the *Qur'an* impressed both believers and non-believers alike. Muhammad challenged his opponents to sit down and produce something like it. If they could not do so, the argument goes, then the *Qur'an* must be a work of greater than human creation.

Besides the *Qur'an* itself, there is one other miracle involving Muhammad that cannot be passed over in silence, since it is the basis of the Muslim claim on Jerusalem as a holy city. It is reported that one night as he was sleeping in Mecca, Muhammad was transported by the fabulous winged beast Buraq to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, whence he was allowed to ascend the seven heavens and discourse with Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Thence he was brought back to Mecca the same night. More than half a century after the Muslims conquered Jerusalem from the Byzantine Christians, the Umayyad Caliph Abd-al-Malik, had the Dome of the Rock constructed on the Temple Mount, known to Muslims as Haram es-Sharif.

The hostility of the Quraysh leadership could well have led to the murder of Muhammad, if it had not been for the protection of his still pagan uncle Abu Talib. The killing of somebody under tribal protection would have led to a blood feud. So instead of attacking Muhammad directly, the polytheists persecuted his followers. Despite persecution, Islam grew, attracting in particular many of the alienated members of Meccan society, such as freedmen and slaves. When Abu Talib died, however, (619) and

the new leader of the Banu Hashim, Abu Lahab (another uncle of the prophet) withdrew protection from him, Muhammad looked for another home for the Muslim community. When an opportunity for refuge and alliance presented itself in nearby Yathrib, he and his Muslim followers migrated there. This migration, or *hijra*, is the beginning of the Muslim epoch.

Up to this point, Muhammad had been a religious leader. Now he became a political leader by founding the nascent Islamic state in Yathrib, now known as Madinat an-Nabiy, that is, the City of the Prophet, or Medina. The revelations of the Medina period show a much greater concern for political matters and laws relevant to the foundation of a state.

The hostility between the Muslims and the polytheists of Mecca did not end then, however. Muhammad insisted that the Muslims be allowed to worship at the Kaaba, which he claimed had been originally a monotheist shrine founded by Abraham and his son Ishmael. The Meccans had also confiscated Muslim properties in Mecca and the immigrants to Medina turned to the Arab tradition of caravan raiding to make a living. This hostility broke out into open war when Muhammad led the Muslims in a raid on a Meccan caravan at Badr (624). Engaging with reinforcements from Mecca and outnumbered by more than three to one, the Muslims won a decisive victory. After further battles with mixed results, Muhammad entered Mecca as a conqueror in 630, pardoned nearly the whole population, and purified the Kaaba of its idols.

Muhammad only lived for two more years. In that time he completed the conquest and conversion of Arabia and unified the Arab tribes for the first time in history, a unification made possible perhaps by religion alone. He thus provided the basis for the

astonishing Arab military expansion that was to explode onto the world scene shortly after his death. He had no surviving sons, however, and his only significant failure as a leader was that he did not appoint a clear successor or establish a clear policy of succession. This failure resulted in a series of civil wars after his death and in the schism of the Islamic community into Sunni and Shi'ite sects that has remained of fateful importance even to the present day. The majority sect, the Sunnis, accepted Abu Bakr as the caliph or successor to Muhammad, whereas the Shi'ites believed that Muhammad's nephew and son-in-law 'Ali should have been recognized as the first caliph.

Even if Muhammad had only united the Arab tribes, he would be remembered as an eminent political and military leader. But his importance as not merely an Arab leader, but also as a *world* leader rests on his prophetic mission. For although the *Qur'an* is in Arabic and addresses Arabs most directly, its message is of universal import. From the beginning, Islam, like Christianity, has seen itself as having a universal mission. So without further ado, let us turn to the *Qur'an*.

When we first encounter with the *Qur'an* as Westerners, we are likely to be puzzled. This is not a book like the books we are familiar with. It does not tell a story like the *Iliad* or *War and Peace*. Although it has many themes in common with the Bible, it lacks the narrative frame that organizes many, if not all, of the books of the Bible. Although it has chapters, or *suras*, there is little or no apparent connection between a given chapter and the one that comes before or after it. Even within a given sura, one can encounter a bewildering mixture of prophetic warnings, stories, and legal stipulations. So our first question is, "What kind of *book* is the *Qur'an*?"

Just as the Bible is not one book, but a collection of many books, so too the *Qur'an* is not a single revelation but a collection of several revelations. If one were to sit down and read the entire Bible, one would be rightly puzzled if one were to find the book of Joshua next to the Gospel of Matthew, the Song of Songs next to Paul's *Letter to the Romans*. It is not surprising to find diversity within the Bible, a collection of texts spanning some thousand years, written by different authors, addressing different audiences in widely divergent circumstances. Since the *Qur'an*, however, was all revealed within a span of some 23 years, and to one man, Muhammad, we might have expected a high degree of uniformity, and while there is more uniformity in the *Qur'an* than in the Bible, there is still a surprising amount of diversity, as we shall see.

When I say that the *Qur'an* was revealed to Muhammad, I do not wish to take a stance on the question of divine authorship, but I do want to emphasize that Muhammad did not compose or write this book. According to all accounts, both those supportive of and hostile to him, Muhammad spoke forth individual *suras* while in a kind of trance or ecstatic state. Some believed that he was receiving communication from the angel Gabriel, others that he was possessed by a genie or demon. The former, of course, took him to be the latest prophet and became his first followers; while the latter accused him of being a "poet possessed," alluding to the traditional Arabic view of poets as being possessed by some divine or demonic spirit. The Arabic word for "crazy," *majnun* derives from the same root as *jinn* or genie.

While some thought that he spun old wives' tales, there is no contemporary accusation that he was simply "faking" an ecstatic state for some ulterior motive, e.g., a

political one. This, I have no doubt, is how Machiavelli sees Muhammad, thus joining him with Numa and Moses as political leaders who feigned divine communication in order to bolster a political order. But telling against this view is the fact that when the Quraysh offered Muhammad political leadership in exchange for ceasing to preach monotheism, he refused.

Muhammad spoke forth individual revelations or *suras* when he fell into an ecstatic trance. He and many of his followers were illiterate, so although some may have been written down by his literate followers, by and large the revelations were passed on by word of mouth, until they were all written down and collected by the third caliph ‘Uthman (c.656). Although traditions had passed down some information about when the various *suras* were revealed, in particular whether during the Meccan or the Medinan period, ‘Uthman did not attempt to arrange the *suras* chronologically. Instead, by and large, and with the exception of the first *sura*, the *suras* are arranged from longest to shortest.

It turns out that the Meccan *suras* tend to be shorter than the Medinan *suras*, so the *Qur’an* roughly moves in a backwards chronological order. Thus the traditional Muslim way of learning the *Qur’an* in Arabic—beginning with the end of the book—also makes chronological sense. A concern with chronology, however, is a largely Western concern, for Muslims would deny that there is any change or *development* in the message revealed in their holy book, whereas Westerners are always looking for development, even where there is none to be found. Although I would argue that there are interesting differences between the Meccan and Medinan *suras*, it is still debatable how significant those

differences are. The Meccan suras tend not only to be shorter, but also often use beautiful natural imagery to discuss the coming Day of Judgment. The Medinan suras, by contrast, are not only longer, but often deal with many of the social and legal issues that needed to be addressed by the nascent Islamic state in Medina.

So the *Qur'an* is not a composition, if by “composition” we mean an arrangement ordered according to a certain principle, so that it would be impossible to move pieces around and still have the same thing. Exodus cannot come before Genesis, the death of Patroclus cannot come before the anger of Achilles, Proposition I.47 of Euclid cannot come before proposition I.1. Nothing is lost, I would argue, by reading the *Qur'an* backwards. This is another way of saying that the *Qur'an* is a collection rather than a composition.

But perhaps a more important point to emphasize is that each *sura* is meant to stand on its own. The longer suras, one might argue, are even meant to present the whole truth. Thus to go from one *sura* to another in sequence is not like adding pieces together to form a whole picture but is like revisiting the same truth again and again, sometimes from a slightly different angle. Thus a key feature of the form of the *Qur'an* is *repetition*. While this may be tedious for a Western reader who is used always to encountering something new in the next chapter, this formal feature also reinforces one of the central points of the content of the *Qur'an*: human beings' central failing is that they are forgetful. Prophets come to *remind* us of the truth that we have forgotten or that we would like to forget. And as anybody knows who has tried to learn a foreign language, repetition is the key to remembering.

To fend off the accusation that Muhammad was just another “possessed poet,” the *Qur’an* itself is claimed not to be poetry, although it does make use of many poetic techniques. The suras are composed of verses and make extensive use of end rhyme. I will now play for you a recitation of the first sura, “Al-Fatihah”, or “The Opening.” Notice the end rhyme on “-im, -in.”

I hope this excerpt, even through the medium of a foreign language, gives you a sense of the beauty, power, and appeal of the original. These features of language, in particular of poetic language, suffer the most in the process of translation. Nor are they thought to be extrinsic to the essence of the *Qur’an*. For the *Qur’an* tells us more than once that it is written in clear, noble Arabic. The incomparable beauty of the language is the main argument for the *Qur’an* being a divine revelation. The verses are called ‘ayāt,’ which literally means “signs.” Just like the beautiful and powerful cosmic signs such as the sun, the moon, and the stars, the verses of the *Qur’an* are taken to be signs that point to the power, goodness, and wisdom of the Creator who made them.

Having touched briefly on the form of the *Qur’an*, I will now turn to its content. The first and most essential part of this content is the theology. A concise statement of its theology is provided by sura 112:

Say: ‘He is God, One
God, the Everlasting Refuge,
who has not begotten, and has not been begotten,
and equal to him is not any one.’

Thus God is one and without associates. That he neither begets nor is begotten not only rules out the Arab polytheist beliefs that he has daughters but also the Christian trinitarian doctrine. He is eternal and absolute. Elsewhere we are told that he is all-knowing and all-powerful. He created everything, not only inanimate things like the sun and moon, stars and earth, but also the different orders of living things—the angels, the jinn, and human beings and plants and animals. God is not only just but also "compassionate and merciful." He commands human beings to do good and resist evil, but is compassionate towards those who turn to him and ask for forgiveness. On the Day of Judgment, human beings will be resurrected and summoned before God. Their good and evil deeds will be recorded and weighed in a balance. Those whose good deeds prevail will be rewarded with eternal life in Paradise. Others will be cast into the pit of Hell to suffer eternal torment.

When God created Adam he commanded the angels to bow down before him. All did so except for Iblis (Satan), who thereby became man's bitter enemy. Adam and Eve were cast from the Garden for eating of the fruit of the tree of life, contrary to divine prohibition. There is no Islamic doctrine of original sin, however. We are not being punished now for the sin that Adam and Eve committed. We have, however, inherited their forgetfulness. In particular, human beings get caught up in pursuing their individual self-interest, such as accumulating wealth, and forget divine warnings. We will all die and cannot take our wealth with us. We will all be judged and our wealth will not help us. We are commanded to provide for the more vulnerable members of society—the

widow, the orphan, the poor. We are commanded to do so by paying the alms tax, the *zakat*. Failure to do so will result in grievous punishment in the hereafter.

Prophets have been sent to all peoples and have by and large been ignored. Even after punishment came upon certain cities that ignored a prophet's warnings, others did not heed those examples. God has even sent down two books, the Torah and the Gospel, to be constant reminders. The people who preserve those books, the "People of the Book" (i.e., Jews and Christians), continue to bear witness to the one true God, although even they have altered the true message by corrupting the divine text with human interpolations. During to these corruptions, Islam, unlike Christianity, does not regard earlier biblical texts as part of its canon. All the truths of the Torah and Gospel are also to be found in the *Qur'an* itself. Muhammad has now been sent as the final prophet, as the "seal of the prophets," so this is humanity's last opportunity to finally get the message.

The message has been essentially the same ever since Abraham, the first monotheist, brought it to human beings. By submitting his willing to Allah, the one God, Abraham became the first Muslim, ("one who submits"). The word *muslim* comes from the same root as the greeting *salām*, and is cognate with the Hebrew *shalom*. According to Islam, Islam did not begin with Muhammad but rather with Abraham. Muhammad's importance lies not in founding Islam, but in restoring it and in being the final prophet. Together with his son Ishmael, the ancestor of the Arabs, Abraham built and consecrated the central shrine of Islam, the Kaaba in Mecca.

To receive the message brought first by Abraham, restated by Moses and Jesus, and finally restored by Muhammad, is to be a believer. To ignore or reject the message is to

be a non-believer, or infidel. Since the essence of the message is monotheism, infidels and polytheists are seen as one and the same. Because prophets have been sent to all peoples, there are no “innocent” polytheists: every people has had an opportunity to accept the monotheist message. Since there are clear signs everywhere pointing to the existence of one God, rejecting the oneness of God is taken to indicate not mere ignorance, but willful ignorance. Polytheists reject God because they want to, not because they are clueless. Some passages suggest a doctrine of predestination: "God guides whom he wills and leads astray whom he wills."

The “People of the Book” are not infidels, nor are they believers in the proper sense. While they have accepted the core of the message—i.e., that God is one—they have become confused as to other aspects of it. Christians, for example, have mistakenly taken their prophet Jesus to be not a mere messenger of God, but to be God. Jews have wrongly rejected Muhammad’s prophetic mission.

Islam asserts a strong dualism of good versus evil and sees them as in constant struggle with one another. Struggle, or *jihād*, is a central concept of Islam, although it is not quite one of the pillars of the faith, at least for Sunnis. Just as in the universe, so too amongst human beings and in the human soul there is a constant battle between good and evil, a battle that will last until the Day of Judgment, when all will be resolved by God. Since God is good, and believers are the ones who have taken God’s side, believers are inherently on the side of good. This does not mean that believers cannot fall into evil or err, but it does at least mean that they are on the right side of the cosmic struggle. Contrariwise, to disbelieve is to go against God, to side with evil against good. Thus

whatever meritorious action, such as feeding a beggar, disbelievers may do, that action cannot override the fact that disbelievers have taken the wrong side in the battle of good versus evil. While they continue in their disbelief, they cannot be saved. Believers, on the other hand, are not *guaranteed* salvation, but they will at least receive God's open ear and mercy when they ask for forgiveness for their sins.

The struggle against disbelief and evil in oneself and in the world has important implications for how the Islamic community defines itself in relation to others. During the Meccan period, when Muslims were a persecuted minority in a largely pagan city, the message preached sounds something like a message of toleration, as we can see from sura 109:

Say: 'O unbelievers,
I serve not what you serve
and you are not serving what I serve,
nor am I serving what you have served,
neither are you serving what I serve.'

To you your religion, and to me my religion!'

Now this sura can be taken in more than one way. The weakest reading is that it is a mere observation that Muslims and polytheists have different religions. But since this is said directly to polytheists, it is at the very least an act of defiance, for polytheism seeks to incorporate new gods and cults within itself. It may even, as we can see from Herodotus, deny the existence of different religions. This sura may be a way of saying, "You may say that both you and we worship Allah, but in fact we don't worship the same thing, for

we worship Allah alone, while you worship him alongside of his supposed daughters and other false gods.” The last line is thus an assertion of an impassable barrier between Islam and polytheism.

Another intriguing possibility lies in an ambiguous word in the last line. The word translated as “religion,” *din*, can also mean “judgment,” as in the expression, *yawmu d-din*, the “Day of Judgment.” Thus we could translate instead, “To you your judgment, and to me my judgment.” This could be a way of saying, “We fundamentally disagree, and God will decide between us on Judgment Day.”

Whichever of these possible readings we adopt, something like tolerance is still being proposed, for in this sura the believer is told to speak the truth to the non-believer, rather than to attack, oppress, or kill the unbeliever. It does not, however, go against the idea of a fundamental struggle between good and evil, or between believers and non-believers. The Muslim community in Mecca was not in a position to take the offensive against the Meccan polytheists, so the most that can be expected of them is to maintain the integrity of their belief by bearing witness to it, i.e., being martyrs for it, in the face of persecution and oppression.

Once the Muslims migrated to Medina, however, and became powerful enough to assert themselves against the Meccans, they did so. And the suras from that period reveal a more aggressive and militant policy against polytheism. Muslims are commanded to fight the polytheists of Mecca until they cease oppressing Muslims and allow them to worship in the sacred mosque of Mecca: “Fight them, till there is no persecution and the

religion is God's; then if they give over, there shall be no enmity save for evildoers." (2.193).

Thus Islam is not a religion that says "Turn the other cheek." On the other hand, Muslims are explicitly warned not to be the aggressors, "And fight in the way of God with those who fight with you, but aggress not: God loves not the aggressors." (2.190) Thus only defensive warfare is justified, and it is not only justified but even commanded. Moreover, while Muslims are commanded to spread the word, forced conversion is explicitly forbidden, "No compulsion is there in religion." (2.256).

The People of the Book have a special status within Islam. While conflict between Muslims and polytheists is seen as nearly unavoidable, the People of the Book should be granted tolerance as fellow, although erring, monotheists. Tolerance in this context means that Jews and Christians living in a Muslim society are allowed to practice their own religion under their own laws so long as they recognize Muslim superiority and pay a tax in exchange for Muslim military protection. While this policy is not explicitly stated in the *Qur'an* itself, it did become enshrined in the *shari'a* or Muslim law. The *Qur'an* itself is equivocal on the relations between Muslims and Jews or Christians. To cite a favorable passage:

Dispute not with the People of the Book
save in the fairer manner, except for
those of them that do wrong; and say,
'We believe in what has been sent down
to us, and what has been sent down to you;
our God and your God is One, and to Him
we have surrendered.' (29.46)

We also read:

Surely they that believe, and those of Jewry
and the Christians, and those Sabaeans,
whoso believes in God and the Last Day, and works
righteousness—their wage awaits them with their Lord,
and no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow. (2.62).

If we turn to the structure of the Islamic society, we find it bound together by religious and social duties. Although the *Qur'an* itself does not assign a particular number to these duties or refer to them as “pillars,” different Islamic sects have enumerated different “pillars of the faith.” The majority sect, the Sunnis, enumerate five such pillars. Besides payment of the alms tax, or *zakat*, that we have already mentioned, we also find the prescription of five daily prayers, or *salat*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, or the *hajj*, as well as the fast of Ramadan. The remaining duty, the *shahada*, or testimony of faith, is not explicitly prescribed as a duty in the *Qur'an* but may be seen as a precondition for accepting the *Qur'an* as a revealed word at all. It goes, “I testify that there is no god but God, and I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God.”

What kind of society do these duties promote? First of all, it is one that struggles against the selfishness of individualism. There is nothing wrong with becoming wealthy in itself, but there is if one does so at the expense of others, or if one refuses to contribute to the welfare of those less fortunate. The *Qur'an* does not seek to abolish or level existing social hierarchies, whether of rich vs. poor, free vs. slave, or man vs. woman, but

it does accept the spiritual equality of all before God and insists that all have a duty to attend not only to the spiritual, but also to the physical, welfare of all others in the community.

The opposition between the spiritual and the physical, between the spirit and the “flesh,” so marked in Christianity, is not so strong in Islam. Islamic paradise includes flowing water, flourishing plants, abundant honey, and beautiful virgins and youths. Christians have long been scandalised, but that only shows that Muslims do not war against the flesh as Christians have for so long. Given that God has made both our bodies and our souls, our flesh and our spirit, to reject the physical is to reject part of God’s creation. While Islam does believe in a strong opposition between good and evil and does contrast this current inferior world with the superior world to come, it does not show a marked contrast between flesh and spirit, nor does it brand the “desires of the flesh” as inherently evil. There is nothing wrong with desiring and enjoying beautiful things. This world is inferior to the world to come not because this world is physical and the next world is spiritual. Even Christians, after all, insist on the resurrection of the body, and what would a body be good for in a purely spiritual realm? This world is inferior to the next rather because it is fleeting and filled with injustice and selfishness.

To take one particular example. Islam prohibits the consumption of alcohol not because it excessively titillates our appetite for gustatory relish, but rather because it inhibits our ability to act as responsible members of society. Likewise, its sexual regulations, against adultery and fornication for example, are justified in terms of maintaining a well-regulated society. There is nothing wrong with sexual pleasure per se,

much less with sexual desire. Modesty in dress is prescribed for both men and women, although it is more strictly expected of the latter.

Let us take another example. Islam, along with Judaism and Christianity, prohibits usury on loans to one's fellow citizens. While economists will rightly point out that prohibiting usury is both ineffective and inefficient, that criticism misses the point, for the economists are presupposing a core human selfishness that Islam is striving to overcome. It is possible to feed the poor to bolster one's sense of grandeur, or one's ranking on some list; it may even work well when all in society simply pursue their enlightened self-interest. But to do the right thing for the wrong reason is still not to act morally: one should support charity just because it is the right thing to do.

This is much more that one could say about the *Qur'an*. I hope the little that I have said gives you some sense of the context in which it was revealed, of its form and content, and also of how it conceives of the nature of Islamic society and the relation of Islam to other religions.