

## WHAT IS THE QUR'AN?

### A Moroccan Intellectual's Critique Of the Qur'an's Ethical Teachings

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#### 1 Introduction

Since the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Muslim reformists have been grappling with the problem of *tahdith* (modernization) and *tajdid* (renewal). One of the earliest reformers was Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897). He left several disciples to continue his work; among them were the Egyptian Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), followed by Qasim Amin (1856-1908) and Ali 'Abd al-Raziq (1888-1966). They admired the progress of European nations, fought the British occupation of their country, and looked for a revival of a vitalized form of Islam that would face the rising challenge of European imperialism.

Early in the past century, Taha Hussein, a graduate of al-Azhar University in Cairo and of the Sorbonne in Paris, joined his predecessors in attempting to further the cause of reform. He wrote a critical work on pre-Islamic Arabic literature, which brought him into conflict with the religious authorities in Egypt. They regarded his work as a threat to the integrity and uniqueness of the Qur'an as the very word of Allah. In his book, Hussein pointed out similarities in the vocabulary and style of the Qur'an, and the rich poetic Arabic literature of the days of "Al-Jahiliyya", a term reserved by Muslim historiographers for pre-Islamic times which literally means, "The Days of Ignorance." Orthodox Muslim teaching insists that the Qur'an is unique, not only in its divine origin, but equally in the very words of the text. For anyone to posit a commonality between the Jahiliyya and the Qur'an was seen as a threat to orthodoxy.

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The mood changed drastically after World War II. As some young Muslims went abroad for their higher education, they became heavily influenced by Marxist and secularist ideologies. For example, Jalal Sadeq al-Adhm, a member of a prominent Damascus Sunni family, published in 1969 “Naqd al Fikr al-Deeni” (A Critique of Religious Thought). Unlike the reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who sought the modernization of Islam, he attacked the sacred texts of all theistic religions. This marked the beginning of a new genre of writings that called for a radical reappraisal of their religious and cultural heritage. Al-Adhm got into trouble with governmental authorities in Beirut, Lebanon, which sought to forbid the publication of his book.<sup>2</sup> That was a warning to all would-be Muslim intellectuals that no criticism of the Qur’an was allowed or could appear in a printed form.

However, everything changed with the advent of the Internet and its almost instantaneous use by secular Arab intellectuals. Several Arabic-language websites exist, which have allowed the publication of critical articles that escape the shackles of governmental censorship. A recent example of such a critical article was posted on 12 September 2010 on [www.alawan.org](http://www.alawan.org). The essay entitled, “What Is the Qur’an?”<sup>3</sup> was written by Sa’eed Nasheed,<sup>4</sup> a Moroccan intel-

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<sup>2</sup> Sadeq al-Adhm was arrested and imprisoned on 8 January 1969 and released one week later. He was charged with publicly attacking the religious beliefs of both Muslims and Christians. On 27 May 1970, he appeared before a Lebanese court, and was exonerated from the charges of instigating religious dissensions in the Lebanese society. This information is taken from the March 1972 edition of the book. The fact that the book has appeared in three successive editions testifies that it was possible, prior to the Civil War in Lebanon (1975), to publish a critical book on Islam in Beirut. This would be impossible at present due to the changes in the political climate in Lebanon, after the rise of the radical Shi’ite group known as *Hizb-Allah*.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.alawan.org/%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%87%D9%88-D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A2%D9%86%D8%9F.html>

<sup>4</sup> Note about Sa’eed Nasheed from an autobiographical article posted on 14 January, 2010. About 25 years ago, Sa’eed was studying philosophy at the University of Rabat, Morocco. He was an activist among leftist-leaning university students. Quite often, he would miss attending classes, spending his time at the Soviet Cultural Center, learning Russian, and reading Pravda and other Soviet publications.

lectual and it dealt with the nature and authority of the Qur'an for our times. Here, translated from Arabic, are excerpts from this thought-provoking essay:

## **2 What is the Relevance of the Qur'an for our Times?**

One day, I found myself thinking of organizing a virtual forum where readers and contributors to [www.alawan.org](http://www.alawan.org) would dialogue on the question, "What Is the Qur'an?" or specifically, "What is the Benefit or Relevance of the Qur'an for our Times?" Perhaps such a discussion would yield a convincing answer to that important question.

### **Point 1**

As a Muslim, while in the process of reciting the Qur'an, I came upon my first difficulty in Surah 58, Ayah 3, "Al-Mujadilah: She That Disputeth, [or] The Pleading Woman," which states:

Those who put away their wives (by saying they are as their mothers) and afterward would go back on that which they have said, (the penalty) in that case (is) the freeing of a slave before they touch one another. Unto this ye are exhorted; and Allah is informed of what ye do. [Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall translation]

I thought to myself, I would never do such a thing to my wife; therefore, this Ayah is irrelevant and has nothing at all to teach me. I kept on reciting and stopped at Surah 4, Ayah 24, "Al-Nisa' (Women) that reads:

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He became very fond of his professor of philosophy, Abdel-Salam ben-'Abdel-'Ali who taught his students how to reflect and think through the problems that faced the nation at the end of the century. Sa'eed's world almost collapsed with the fall of the USSR, but eventually he could see the weakness of all totalitarian ideologies and regimes. However, his love affair with Russian writings and his acquaintance with post-modern philosophers contributed to his loss of faith in the truth claims of Islam. Somehow, he still considers himself a Muslim, but a Muslim who questions everything, even the authority of the Qur'an, Muhammad's claims, and Allah's!

And all married women (are forbidden unto you) save those (captives) whom your right hands possess. It is a decree of Allah for you. Lawful unto you are all beyond those mentioned, so that ye seek them with your wealth in honest wedlock, not debauchery. And those of whom ye seek content (by marrying them), give unto them their portions as a duty. And there is no sin for you in what ye do by mutual agreement after the duty (hath been done). Lo! Allah is ever Knower, Wise. [Pickthall]

To tell the truth, my right hand has never owned anyone, either at home or at work. Furthermore, my “madness”<sup>5</sup> doesn’t allow me to possess more than one wife. So this Ayah has nothing to teach me personally; in days gone by, it stated the obligations of those men whose whims and desires made them covet more than one wife.

Continuing my recitation of the Qur’an, I came across these words of Allah from the same Surah, Ayah 34:

Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High, Exalted, Great. [Pickthall]

Now let’s suppose I came home and began to beat my wife for one reason or another; this would be a criminal act; it would certainly upset my children and the neighbors. This Ayah does not relate to me at all; it’s utterly irrelevant!

Now, as a committed Muslim, I keep on in my recitation stopping at Surah 2, Ayah 21, “Al-Baqarah” (The Cow).

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<sup>5</sup> Arabs tend to exaggerate when they speak or write. While “madness” doesn’t make sense in a Western language, his words could be paraphrased, “Actually, it would be crazy or unthinkable for me to have more than one wife.”

Warfare is ordained for you, though it is hateful unto you; but it may happen that ye hate a thing which is good for you, and it may happen that ye love a thing which is bad for you. Allah knoweth, ye know not. [Pickthall]

I didn't grow up in a militant environment, and have never engaged in warfare. As a writer, I use my brain to make a living, and when I dialogue with my colleagues. The only time I use my muscles is when I carry my suitcase in travel. So what does it really mean that warfare "has been ordained" for me?! As I reflect on my attitude toward the Qur'an I find myself alienated from its teachings. So, I ask: does my alienation diminish my status as a Muslim?

Still, I keep on reciting the Qur'an and come across Surah 8, Ayah 41, "Al-Anfal" (Spoils of War, or Booty).

And know that whatever ye take as spoils of war, lo! a fifth thereof is for Allah, and for the messenger and for the kinsman (who hath need) and orphans and the needy and the wayfarer, if ye believe in Allah and that which We revealed unto Our slave on the Day of Discrimination, the day when the two armies met. And Allah is Able to do all things. [Pickthall]

I stop and lower my head in fear. Both International Law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights forbid me to accumulate booty or spoils of war! Such chapters and verses are irrelevant to me, or to others who are in my situation. To be honest, it's well-nigh extremely difficult to exegete these passages and see how they apply to the here and now!

I have always maintained that I am a Muslim. However, I must reach a bold and honest decision regarding my relation to Islam's sacred text, which is loaded with burdensome injunctions that don't concern me at all. My apprehension is shared by millions of Muslims who hesitate to express themselves openly about these topics.

In the final analysis, Islam will not be saved until we study its development throughout history, and disconnect it from its sacred texts. Islam belongs to the Umma; it will survive by the

Umma's ability to transcend the Qur'anic text by viewing it as a document that played a major role in the birth of Islam, but which is not a normative document for our times.

## Point 2

What can the Qur'an add of value, for example, to the International Declaration of Human Rights, the Rights of Women and Children, the Treaties for the Conservation of the Environment and Development; to the Modern Concept of Toleration, Elections, and Plebiscites? I realize that we are not living in the best of worlds. That would require decades of human struggles. But my question is very clear: What can the Qur'an contribute? The question is not about what the Qur'an has contributed in past centuries; indeed, it played an important role in creating a new worldview and its impact went beyond the Muslim world. Still, my question remains: What can the Qur'anic text contribute today to the welfare of mankind? Are we able to find in the Qur'an directives or solutions for our current problems? Or should we regard it as irrelevant for our times, and regard it simply and uniquely as a guide for worshipping Allah?

In this forum, I would like to pursue further the above mentioned thesis, with the hope that the other members of the forum would add their comments to this discussion.

## Point 3: The Qur'an is the Prophet's Personal Document

We conceive of Allah as the source of life, the maker of the world, and the master of history; we understand the Qur'an as created speech, just as the Mu'tazilites<sup>6</sup> taught during the 9<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "[The Mu'tazilites'] outstanding service to Islamic thought was the assimilation of a large number of Greek ideas and methods of arguments ... The Greek ideas thus introduced by the Mu'tazilites came to dominate one great wing of Islamic theology, namely, rational or philosophical theology. Since the Mu'tazilites were regarded as heretics, however, by the Sunnites, their ideas and doctrines could not simply be taken over, but exercised an influence indirectly." (*The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* by W. Montgomery Watt. Edinburgh University Press, 1973, pp. 249, 250) The Mu'tazilites advocated the theory of the "Createdness of the

century. Now being created speech should not imply that its teachings are valid for all times and places. On the contrary, every creature possesses a limited life span; this applies to the Qur'an.

Rather than regarding the Qur'an as an unchanging constitution upon which the Umma must base its laws, as many claim, actually it is no more than an historical document. Allah gave it to Muhammad as a tool in his struggle for the spiritual leadership of a people known for their love and admiration of Arabic rhetoric. On several occasions, Allah threatened to hide and conceal his revelation to the Prophet due to his wrong actions, such as in Surah 17 Ayah 86 bani Isra'il: The Israelites.

And if We willed We could withdraw that which We have revealed unto thee, then wouldst thou find no guardian for thee against Us in respect thereof. [Pickthall]

Allah's threat to withdraw His revelation was directed at the Prophet, and not at the Umma. This implies that the Qur'an was Allah's special gift to Muhammad rather than an abiding and never changing constitution to last for all time.

#### **This leads us to Point 4**

The Qur'an should be considered as a constituent text in the sense that its role or function had ended with the birth of a new historical order, namely, the Islamic Umma. Therefore, we find several Qur'anic Ayahs that are directed exclusively to the receptor (Muhammad) at a specific moment during the emergence of the Umma. Several of the Qur'anic injunctions had to do with the Prophet; now after his passing, they can no longer be normative for Muslims.

Consider, for example, the Ayahs that enjoined the Prophet to marry Zaynab bint Jahsh, his adopted son Zeyd's wife. It was

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Qur'an" which received the blessing and support of several Abbasid caliphs during the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Eventually, the doctrine of the "Uncreatedness" of the Qur'an prevailed in Sunni Islam.

prompted either by Muhammad's personal desire, or based on a divine sanction that was uniquely meant for Muhammad. Such texts in the Qur'an cannot be applied to anyone else: Surah 33, "al-Ahzab" (The Allies)

And it becometh not a believing man or a believing woman, when Allah and His messenger have decided an affair (for them), that they should (after that) claim any say in their affair; and whoso is rebellious to Allah and His messenger, he verily goeth astray in error manifest. 37 And when thou saidst unto him on whom Allah hath conferred favour and thou hast conferred favour: Keep thy wife to thyself, and fear Allah. And thou didst hide in thy mind that which Allah was to bring to light, and thou didst fear mankind whereas Allah hath a better right that thou shouldst fear Him. So when Zeyd had performed that necessary formality (of divorce) from her, We gave her unto thee in marriage, so that (henceforth) there may be no sin for believers in respect of wives of their adopted sons, when the latter have performed the necessary formality (of release) from them. The commandment of Allah must be fulfilled. [Pickthall]

Then, in the same Surah, Ayah 32, we find these words directed exclusively to the Prophet's wives, and are irrelevant to other Muslim women.

O ye wives of the Prophet! Ye are not like any other women. If ye keep your duty (to Allah), then be not soft of speech, lest he in whose heart is a disease aspire (to you), but utter customary speech. [Pickthall]

There are certain Ayahs that are meant exclusively for non-Muslims such as Surah 2, Al-Baqarah (The Cow):

O Children of Israel! Remember My favour wherewith I favoured you and how I preferred you to (all) creatures. [Pickthall]

Having referred to these Qur'anic verses that had particular applications, we may ask: how may the Qur'an be a standard of belief or norm of conduct applicable for all times and in all places? This leads to another related question: Does the Qur'an have a function other than a guide for the worship and adoration of Al-



Allah? The ‘descent’ of the Qur’an upon Muhammad (610-632) served as Allah’s seal of approval of the prophetic mission of Muhammad in a culture that was marked by its fondness for eloquence and rhetoric. The revelation was to be recited as an act of worship according to Surah 73, Al-Muzammil (The Mantled One):

O thou wrapped up in thy raiment! Keep vigil the night long, save a little - A half thereof, or abate a little thereof, Or add (a little) thereto - and chant the Qur’an in measure. [Pickthall]

The early Revelations [in Mecca] had no relation to governmental affairs, or laws, or social arrangements, etc. The enduring function of the Qur’an is to provide an aid for worshipping Allah. This may be noticed when non-Arab Muslims recite the Qur’an, without understanding its words! The sacred text (in Arabic) serves as an integral part in the ritual prayers of Muslims around the world.

To sum up, I am a Muslim, both emotionally and culturally. In fact, no people can be closer to the “spirit” of Islam than those new Muslims who declare that what attracts them to Islam is “their direct and natural relation with Allah.” They feel that way, having been liberated from the religious texts of Islam and its shackles. They feel close to Allah, this Supreme Being, who does not live in any sanctuary, or within any sacred text, or any specific religion.

### 3 Analysis

The author of the essay regards himself as a Muslim. However, he craves the freedom to adopt a new hermeneutic of the Qur’an that would allow him to disregard those ayahs that are loaded with burdensome injunctions that have no relevance to him. He wants to “disconnect Islam from its sacred texts.” He claims that his apprehension about the inapplicability of the Qur’an to the present-day is shared by millions of Muslims who hesitate to express themselves openly about these topics.

#### 4 Comments

When I was growing up in the Levant, and studying Arab-Islamic history and culture, I seldom came across such bold and open critique of the Qur'an. I knew of Taha Hussein's trouble with the religious authorities in Cairo, and the banning of his book on the "Jahiliyya Literature." I have read Jalal Sadeq al-'Adhm's, "A Critique of Religious Thought", and noticed among his several critical remarks, his amazement at the illogical Qur'anic account of the fall of "Iblis" (Satan).

That was then. But now there is the Internet, which has allowed for the flowering of freedom of thought. Those who have suffered the effects of a burdensome religious hegemony can breathe again. Now there are websites dedicated exclusively to the secularization of Arab-Islamic civilization. And here is this bold Moroccan intellectual, Sa'eed Nasheed, who invites fellow-reformers to join him in declaring that several parts of the Qur'an should be considered outdated. He and his fellow reformers cannot accept the Qur'anic injunctions regarding the relation between men and women, or the mandate to wage war on Infidels, or Ayahs that are concerned exclusively with Muhammad's wives!

Nasheed summarizes his thesis by declaring his solidarity with those "New Muslims" who, having been liberated from the religious texts of Islam, now could feel closer to "Allah, this Supreme Being, who does not live in any sanctuary, or within any sacred text, or any specific religion." He claims not to have departed from his Muslim identity and culture and can actually define his understanding of Islam as one which allows for a "direct" and "natural relation with Allah." This claim itself is indicative of a redefinition of Islam that is quite astounding. His quest for a "direct" relation with Allah implies that revelation is unnecessary, and is quite different from what the Christian maintains about God's general and special revelation, as taught in Scripture and confessed in the historic creeds of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>7</sup> Whether orthodox Islamic teaching

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<sup>7</sup> Islam's concept of revelation is different from the Biblical teaching. The Qur'an teaches that man has become ignorant of God's will; therefore all he needs is "in-

would allow for this concept outside of its own strict Qur'anic boundaries is another question. Nasheed's statement indicates his universalist leanings as well, not pinning Allah down to any "sanctuary", "sacred text" or "specific religion." This conception of God fits rather nicely with much that passes for current religious thinking today in many western circles: that the individual can have a subjective, personal, mystical experience of the Deity, whoever he is defined to be. Neither orthodox Christians nor orthodox Muslims

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formation" from Allah, so that he may practise what he learns and attains Paradise. The Christian concept of revelation is to inform us about our creation in the image of God, Adam's fall into sin, and the promise of salvation fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ and His redemptive work. Islam ignores original sin, and has no concept of revelation's relation to redemption. This is taught by Paul in Romans, and summarized in the Reformed confessions:

*Epistle to the Romans* [Chapter 1:] The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

*Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) [Chapter 1 - Of the Holy Scripture:] Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

*The Belgic Confession of Faith* (1561) [2. By what means God is made known unto us:] We know Him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to *see clearly the invisible things of God, even his power and divinity*, as the apostle Paul says, (Rom. 1:20). All which things are sufficient to convince men, and leave them without excuse. Second, He makes himself more clearly fully known to us by His holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation.

can accept such reformulation as orthodox, even though Christians would admit what he says is true in certain ways. The problem has to do with truth itself as espoused by those who believe in any religion. Christians hold the Bible to be the only absolute truth for faith and practice; Muslims claim the Qur'an as authoritative. In the end, what one thinks or says about God/Allah in both these religions would have to be in harmony with the respective holy books. The difference, however, between Christianity and Islam when it comes to what is said by anyone about their own personal conceptions of their beliefs or misinterpretation thereof, is that Christianity tolerates those it considers unenlightened, ignorant and subversive of the faith, while attempting to educate their deficiencies. Islam has yet to learn the grace of tolerating those who take exception to its belief system.

Overall, one can only sympathize with this thoughtful essayist, seeking to moderate and even totally reject the unenlightened aspects of the sacred texts of his still beloved religion, Islam. Whether an Islam minus its authoritative texts, and detached from its 1400-year theology and jurisprudence, could ever emerge, is highly doubtful. Perhaps his prescription could have been less radical, had he offered a modest proposal that others had already suggested, namely by declaring as normative, only the Meccan surahs of the Qur'an. For then Islam would have left behind all those onerous and harsh teachings of the Medinan surahs, most of which form the basis for the oppressive Shariah Law.<sup>8</sup> He appears to be on a deeper quest for a truer spiritual reality. Sacred texts are extremely important. But which one is the true one is the point in contention among all the world's religions. Thank you, Sa'eed Nasheed, for your contribution to the ongoing dialogue

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<sup>8</sup> Of the seven Qur'anic Ayahs that Nasheed quoted in his essay, only two belong to the Meccan part of the Qur'an, while five Ayahs (dealing with various aspects of social life) belong to the Medinan chapters of the Qur'an.