

The Qur'an as a Transformation Factor: A Survey on Reading vs Understanding the Qur'an among the Students of the International Islamic University Malaysia

By

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Abstract

The Qur'an is the basis of Islam and an intrinsic part of a Muslim life. It is the strong rope that connects Muslims to their Lord, Allah, the Straight Path (*al-Sirat al-Mustaqim*) leading them to everlasting bliss and the backbone of their success in both existences, i.e. *al-Dunya* and *al-Akhirah* (here and hereafter). The purpose of this paper is to explore how the students of the International Islamic University Malaysia read the Qur'an. It is undeniable that recitation of the Qur'an is an activity in which Muslims engage from childhood to death. No day passes without the Qur'an being read. Despite this, however, it is unfortunate that not many Muslims understand what they read from the Qur'an! The researcher contends that understanding the Qur'an is essential if Muslims are to uplift themselves from the current state of moral, spiritual, political and economic decline; that Muslims would have been the leaders of the world today had they been able to continue dealing with the Qur'an the way it was dealt with by the Prophet's companions and their immediate successors; and that understanding the Qur'an is the greatest challenge facing Muslims today.

Key Words: Qur'an, reading, understanding, reflection, transformation.

Introduction

Muslims' responsibilities to the Qur'an are threefold: to read it, to understand it and to act upon its teachings. Acting upon the teachings of the Qur'an is the objective of its recitation and study. In the early days of Islam these three responsibilities were strictly observed. Today, however, individuals, families and many Muslim institutions concentrate on *tahsin qira'at al-Qur'an* (the mastery of the Qur'an reading) rather than its understanding and embodiment. Understanding the Qur'an is so vital that it requires thorough investigation and discussion. While failure to understand this final complete revelation is one of the causes of deviation from divine guidance and Muslims' political and economic backwardness, and *taqlid* or unquestioning acceptance of religious teachings and social disintegration, it is also the cause of false accusations against Islam and Islamophobia. Understanding the Qur'an is crucial because: first, all the Islamic sciences are routed and derived from it; second, it has been argued that the very factor underlying the expansion of Islam and Muslims' victory was the Qur'an (Al-'Atibi, 2003). It was read, understood, reflected upon and embodied by the early Muslims; thirdly, in order for Muslims to act upon the teachings of the Qur'an and embody the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w), they have to understand the Qur'an.

Survey Objective

The survey on *Reading vs Understanding the Qur'an* aimed at exploring how the Qur'an is read and dealt with by the students of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) where the Qur'an is the fountain of knowledge. The main objective of the survey was to explore the University students' view of the Qur'an i.e. whether they simply regard it as a source of reward (*thawab*) and healer or as a source of guidance (*hidayah*) and the fountain of knowledge. Islamization of knowledge, which is one of the University's mission simply means reconstruction of secular knowledge in accordance with the

Qur’anic worldview, also known as *tawhidic* worldview so that it is beneficial to Muslims in particular and humanity in general.

Survey Methodology

Data collection for this research was solely based on questionnaire which was randomly distributed to one hundred and fifty (150) students. The focus groups were the undergraduate and postgraduate students of the University. The survey asked the respondents questions pertaining to the Qur’an as a transformation factor.

Respondents’ Profile

While the respondents came from various countries, fifty four percent were Malaysians and only forty six percent were international. Most of the respondents were non-Arabs. There were more females than males due to the fact that the number of female students on campus outnumbers that of male students. Two-third of the respondents (78 percent) was below twenty five years of age and 21 percent were in 25 – 45 age group.

I. The Qur’an as a transformation factor

Section one of this paper deals with the Qur’an as a transformation factor. No book has transformed societies the way the Qur’an has. The Qur’an inspired the early Muslims to become the torchbearers of knowledge. S.P.Scott , speaking of the Muslims (Moors) of Islamic Spain, wrote:

“At a time when even (Christian) kings could not read or write, a Moorish king had a private library of six hundred thousand books. At a time when ninety-nine percent of the Christian people were wholly illiterate, the Moorish city of Cordova had eight hundred public schools, and there was not a village within the limits of the empire where the blessings of education could not be enjoyed by the children of the most indigent peasant, and it was difficult to encounter even a Moorish peasant who could not read and write.”
(Kashmiri)

The question, “Reading the Qur’an has led me to a new life” is thus fundamental in this paper and it has been answered as follows:

Survey Results

Response to the Question: Reading the Qur’an has led me to a new life

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	148	98.7	99.3	99.3
No	1	.7	.7	100.0
Total	149	99.3	100.0	
Missing System	1	.7		
Total	150	100.0		

It is clear from the above that the overwhelming majority of respondents (99percent) agreed that reading the Qur’an has led them to a new life.

Survey Comment

The Prophet (s.a.w) said, “Verily, Allah elevates some people with this *Qur’an* and abases others” (Muslim). It is undeniable fact that the *Qur’an* elevated the Arabs from “an abysmal low to the ultimate zenith” (Nadwi). “Without the *Qur’an*,” writes Nadwi “These Arab Bedouins would have hardly survived on the world map” (Nadwi). One may divide the *Qur’an* transformation of individuals and societies into the following: Firstly, the transformation of the primitive Arabs of the *jahiliyyah* into bearers of knowledge and agents of change. Historians generally agree that Arabia before Islam was a primitive and disordered society. It was a society where immorality e.g. usury, female infanticide, exploitation of the poor, adultery and fornication were prevalent. Baig in his “Relating to the *Qur’an*” writes:

“The companions were the first group of people who followed [the *Qur’an*] as it must be followed. They were transformed from being the lowest of the low to being the highest of the high. They established personal standards of piety and virtue that no other group of people since then can match. They established a society based on justice, fairness and goodness that no other society can match.” (Baig)

Secondly, the transformation of Arabia from polytheism (the worship of multitude of deities besides Allah which is termed as *shirk* or *kufur*) to monotheism (*tawhid* or the worship of one God, Allah). Transformation of society from polytheism to monotheism simply means transforming it from multi-religious community into a unified community; thirdly, the transformation of Arabia from unjust to a well-organized society (socially, economically and politically); fourthly, the transformation of Arabia from a disunited society into a unified community; and last but by no means the least, the transformation of many people of the world from Godless into God-conscious.

Adil emphasizes that it was the *Qur’an* and *Sunnah* (the Prophet Muhammad’s embodiment of the *Qur’an*) which led to the transformation of Arabia and that indiscipline due to the spell of too much wealth and power is what led to the decline of Muslims. He writes,

“it was the guidance provided by Qur-aan Majeed and the example set by the unique personality of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) that transformed the desert into a divinely formed dynamic garden. Muslims were on top in the world for as long as they followed that guidance but when, under the spell of too much wealth and power they slipped into a life of ease and indiscipline, they naturally had to face evil days and difficulties. These can be dispelled provided they revert to the life of Islamic discipline and austerity...” (Adil, 1986).

In a nutshell, one may say that the *Qur’an* provided a “blueprint for a new order” in Arabian society and beyond.

Conditions for effective transformation

In order for the *Qur’an* to transform one’s life, it has to be viewed as guidance and healer. Details of these two conditions are as follows:

A. Viewing the *Qur’an* as Guidance

The *Qur’an* is the main source of guidance in our lives. It is *nur*, light and *huda*, guidance to all seekers of the truth, be they believers or disbelievers. It guides them to the true path, known as *al-Sirat al-Mustaqim* (the straight path) i.e. the path that has been trodden by the prophets (who teach), the sincere (lovers of Truth), the witnesses (who testify), and the Righteous (who do good). (See the *Qur’an* 4:69).

This path comprises of beliefs such as the belief in Allah as the only God worthy of worthy, the belief in angels, revealed books, the prophets, the day of judgement and *qada'* and *qadar* (the divine decree), and practices such as *salat*, *zakat*, *sawm* and *hajj*. 'Ali expounded upon the Qur'an as follows:

“The Book of God, in it is the record of what was before you, the judgment of what is among you, and the prophecies of what will come after you. It is decisive, not a case for levity. Whoever is a tyrant and ignores the Qur'an will be destroyed by God. Whoever seeks guidance from other than it will be misguided. The Qur'an is the unbreakable bond of connection with God; it is the remembrance full of wisdom and the straight path. The Qur'an does not become distorted by tongues, nor can it be deviated by caprices; it never dulls from repeated study; scholars will always want more of it. The wonders of the Qur'an are never ending. Whoever speaks from it will speak the truth, whoever rules with it will be just, and whoever holds fast to it will be guided to the straight path.” (Al-Tirmidhi)

It is understood from the above that the Qur'an is guidance par excellence. Whoever makes it his guide does not go wrong and whoever deviates from it can never find a guide. Allah says in the Qur'an, the meaning of which is, “Verily, this is My way, leading straight, follow it, follow not (other) paths: they will scatter you about from His (great) path: thus doth He command you that ye may be righteous.” (Qur'an 6:153)

Many Muslim scholars have argued that the Muslim *ummah* (nation) will never be delivered from its current state of weakness and backwardness except by turning back to the Qur'an. By this they mean until the Qur'an becomes their guide: “Because Allah will never change the grace which He hath bestowed on a people until they change what is in their (own) souls: and verily Allah is He Who heareth and knoweth (all things).” (Qur'an 8: 53).

B. Viewing the Qur'an as Healer

One of the distinctive characteristics of the Qur'an is the promotion of health and well-being for the individuals and societies. Firstly, it enjoins individuals to cleanse themselves spiritually and physically before engagement in certain acts of devotion to Allah, to eat what is pure and legitimate and forbids them from sexual promiscuity, homosexuality and sexual intercourse during the menstrual period, and consuming what is hazardous to health such as the intoxicants, excessive food and beverage. Secondly, it has a direct healing effect on the organs of human body (ElKadi, 1985). Thirdly, it contains a number of stories of wise men such as Luqman and Prophets for man and societies to draw lessons from. Fourthly, it commands Muslims to perform *salat*, *zakat*, *sawm* and *hajj*. These are cure for the sicknesses of the heart and remedies of one's soul. They are therefore means to achieve certain ends. To illustrate, *salat* restrains a person from shameful and unjust deeds. Allah says, the meaning of which is:

“Recite what is sent of the Book by inspiration to thee, and establish regular Prayer: for Prayer restrains from shameful and unjust deeds; and remembrance of Allah is the greatest (thing in life) without doubt. And Allah knows the (deeds) that ye do.” (Qur'an 29:45)

Commenting on this *ayah* al-Sawwaf writes:

“Genuine prayer, based on humility and submission, illuminates the heart, purifies the soul, and teaches the worshipper both the refinements of worship and his obligations to the divinity of the great and almighty Allah, for it is through prayer that the glory and majesty of Allah is implanted in his heart. Prayer endows and ennoble man with such excellent virtues of character as truthfulness, honesty, moderation, integrity, understanding, modesty, fairness, and generosity. It raises him up and directs him to the One Allah, increasing fear and dread of Him. In this way his moral standards are raised, his soul is purified, and he sets aside lying, falsehood, evil, deception, anger, and pride and thus rises above injustice, enmity, meanness, iniquity and disobedience.” (Al-Sawwaf).

Salat promotes unity and dispels racism and segregation which are common and ancient diseases found in almost every society. Artz writes: “Of all world religions, Islam has been most successful in overriding barriers of colour and nationality. No line is drawn except between believers and unbelievers.” (Artz, 1980).

When a Muslim confronts difficulty and crisis in life he or she resorts to prayers. Thus, *salat* is consolation factor for a believer. It should be made clear that despite the continual resistance from the Quraysh, Muhammad (s.a.w) still experienced great joy and contentment in communion with Allah by performing the *salat*.

Zakat purifies the heart of the donor from greed and that of the recipient from envy (Qur’an 9:103). Greed is one of the causes of economic inequality. It is also the cause of cheating and corruption. In nations where there is economic inequality, there is less happiness, more violence, and shorter life expectancies. Many Third World countries suffer today because of greed; it is the main factor behind colonization and slavery. It is in the light of this that Proudhon, a fundamentalist Socialist, defined property as “theft”. In his famous work *What is Property?* Proudhon described private property as “the origin of evil on the earth, the first link in the long chain of crimes and misfortunes which the human race has endured since its birth” (Proudhon, 1966).

Sawm (fasting) helps a person to control the low desires. It is also a means to the attainment of *taqwa* (Qur’an 2:183); that is, a state of the heart that prompts virtuous acts and abstains from vices. Furthermore, *sawm* (fasting) is described as “a great restorer of youth and prolonger of life.” (Saeed, 2007, p.99). It is believed that “people who fast acquire a clearer skin, a rosier tint to their cheeks, and a more youthful complexion than they had before.” (Saeed, 2007, p.99). Patients suffering from “high blood pressure, asthma, allergies, chronic headaches, inflammatory bowel disease (ulcerative colitis and Crohn’s disease), irritable bowel syndrome, adult onset diabetes, heart disease, degenerative arthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis, eczema, acne, uterine fibroids, benign tumours, and systemic lupus erythematosus” are advised to fast (Kim).

Finally, *hajj* teaches Muslims to observe cleanliness most of the time, to be kind and generous, and more important, to be patient and tolerant (Qur’an 2:197). Intolerance has been a social problem since ancient history. It is the principal cause of conflicts in and between nations.

II. Understanding the Qur’an

The second section of this paper deals with understanding the Qur’an. People all over the world have laboured to learn Qur’anic Arabic so that they are able to understand its message. Moreover efforts have been rendered to have the Qur’an translated into different languages so that the non-Arabic speaking Muslims and non-Muslims are able to understand it. It is worth noting that the more one reads the Qur’an with understanding the more one have his knowledge increased. As a Book of knowledge, the Qur’an has been described as

“an infinite ocean into which all people with knowledge and ability can dive deeply and, according to their capacity, find its pearls and coral. The passage of time only rejuvenates its scientific wisdom. Every generation discovers its wisdom anew, and its secrets continue to be revealed over time.”¹

Respondents were asked if: They devote themselves to understanding the Qur’an and the following are the survey results and comment.

Survey Results

I devote myself to understanding the Qur’an

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	135	90.0	91.8	91.8
No	12	8.0	8.2	100.0
Total	147	98.0	100.0	
Missing System	3	2.0		
Total	150	100.0		

Survey Comment

It is compulsory upon every Muslim to make efforts to understand the Qur’an. This may be done on one’s own, or in a group of friends. It is worth noting that the best and easiest way to understand the Qur’an is to read it in a study circle. This is how the companions of the Prophet (s.a.w) used to read it. They used to read ten verses from the Qur’an, study *iman*, *halal* and *haram* from them before memorizing them or shifting to other verses.

“The number of participants should be 3-10; with no great divergence in the levels of their knowledge and intelligence. Anything less will make it a dialogue, anything more may hinder the active participation of everyone” (Murad, 1986).

The Prophet (s.a.w) is reported to have said that groups of people would emerge from his *ummah* that will drink the Qur’an just as they drink milk. Commenting on this, Al-Munawi says in his *Fayd al-Qadir*, “they will raise their voices with their tongues without contemplating and reflecting on its meaning and pondering over its rulings; instead it (the Qur’an) passes over their tongues as milk passes over them (tongues) quickly”. Reflection on the Qur’an is a necessary requirement for understanding it. Only when the Qur’an is read or listened to with understanding and reflection it is able move one’s heart and affect one’s deeds. The Prophet (s.a.w), his companions and the great *imams* of the four *mazhab* used to be moved by emotions when listening to the Qur’an. Suffice to mention here are the following:

“Abdullah ibn Mas‘ud narrated: “Allah’s Messenger (s.a.w) said to me, “Recite (the Qur’an) to me,” I said: “How shall I recite it to you while it was revealed to you?” He said, “I like to hear it from others.” So I recited chapter four till I reached (what means): “How then if We brought from each people a witness, and We brought thee as a witness

¹ “A General Evaluation of the Past and Future of Islam” in <http://www.thewaytotruth.org/islam-humanity/pastandfuture.html> Retrieved on January 10, 2012.

against these people!” (Qur’an 4:41). So the Prophet (s.a.w) cried until his tears flowed down his cheeks.”” (Muslim)

‘Abdullah ibn Shaddad said, “I heard the sobbing of ‘Umar from the last rows while he was reciting the verse from the Qur’an: “I only complain of my grief and sorrow to Allah” (Qur’an 12:86). (Al-Bukhari).

It is reported that Imam al-Shafi‘i once listened to the recitation of the verse “On that day they shall not speak, nor shall it be permitted to make excuses” (Qur’an 77:35-36). Thereafter his face changed, cried terribly and fell unconscious. After regaining consciousness he was heard repeating “O Lord, through the grace of Thy countenance, forgive me my shortcomings” (Patel, 1989, p.4).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The above is the detailed analysis of the results to the survey titled *Qur’an as a Transformation Factor: A Survey on Reading vs Understanding the Qur’an among the Students of the International Islamic University Malaysia*. In view of what has been expounded, it is clear that:

Firstly, understanding the Qur’an is essential and should therefore be an urgent priority in the Muslim endeavors. It was due to understanding the Qur’an that Arabs of the pre-Islamic Arabia, described as primitive and violent, were elevated to a higher level of culture. Their admirable qualities were the prime factor behind the expansion of Islam and its glory.

Secondly, majority of respondents viewed the Qur’an as a transformation factor. For effective transformation of one’s life by the Qur’an it is necessary to view this last revelation as guidance and healer. It has to be born in mind that the sole purpose of revealing the *Qur’an* is to take mankind out of darkness (ignorance and barbarity) into light; to guide them to the straight path of moral conduct and resolve their problems both in the physical and spiritual realms (The Qur’an 17: 9, 2:257, 14:1 and 5:15-16).

The Arabic terms for ignorance and barbarity are *jahl* and *jahiliyyah* respectively. It is a fact that the years prior to the revelation of the Qur’an were filled with darkness; monotheism (the belief in one God and the worship of Him alone (*al-Tawhid*)) had for long been replaced with polytheism and idolatry (the belief in superstitions and the worship of objects (*shirk*)) and wisdom and guidance with blind acceptance of tradition (*taqlid*). In short, man had lost his dignity. The Qur’an changed the lives of the Arabs and turned them into a nation of high moral standards. It inspired them to become the pioneers of Islamic civilization, the greatest civilization in human history: “In the unfolding of human history, there has never been another global civilization like it” (Khan).

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