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How Muslims Trivialize the Qur'an

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The crux of the Islamic worldview is the primordial principle of justice, which is represented in the Qur'an mainly by three terms: *'adl'*, *qist*, and *mizan*. Although the first two are synonymous, the former is generally interpreted as justice and the latter as equity or fairness. *Mizan* is the scale or balance that determines the administration and condition of justice. But *'adl* also has a deeper meaning, that of equilibrium or putting things in their correct places. Thus it is the opposite of *zulm*, which is usually translated as oppression or despotism but actually denotes disequilibrium or putting things in their wrong places. Many Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions emphasize the preeminent importance of *'adl'* and condemn *zulm*.

These two terms may even be extended to other beings or the objects that human beings handle, and even to how people approach the divine. For example, according to God the proper awe, respect, and gratitude that are His due, as well as abiding by His commands, is considered *'adl*. Not doing so is tantamount to *zulm*. As regards the Qur'an, using and approaching it for the correct purposes is considered *'adl*, whereas using it incorrectly or using it only for non-primary purposes may be considered *zulm*. Keeping this view in mind, I will discuss how Muslims at times trivialize the Qur'an without understanding it.

The physical desecration of the Qur'an is a grave sin, but trivializing it is also a serious offence. Muslims certainly do not disrespect their holy book tangibly and physically. Their obvious reverence to the scripture and extreme caution when handling it are paradigmatic, as most of them wrap and place it on a raised surface in the house or in places of worship. However, they manifest, perhaps unaware, their conceptual irreverence for the sacred book in two ways: using it for lesser purposes and splitting it into pieces, which may amount to trivializing it.

Imprecise Use of the Qur'an

Qur'an (2:2) explicitly states: "This divine writ – let there be no doubt about it – is [meant to be] a guidance for all the God-conscious." Qur'an (2:38) proclaims, while relating humanity's fall from Paradise: "[For although] we did say, "Down with you all from this [state]," there shall, none the less, most certainly come unto you guidance from Me: and those who follow My guidance need have no fear, and neither shall they grieve." This would clearly mean that the Glorious Qur'an serves first and foremost as an instruction manual for human beings and contains, as its primary function, the provision of providential guidance to them. In view of this, *'adl'* requires that people (especially Muslims) approach it primarily as divine guidance, that is to say, they should read, appreciate, and implement its message in their daily life.

Although the Qur'an may have secondary, tertiary, quaternary and other non-primary applications, using it only for them instead of for its primary purpose is a kind of misdemeanor. This is true of many things. For example, a pen's main function is to write, a professor's main tasks are to teach and conduct research, and a president or prime minister is entrusted with running a country. But if the pen is used only to scratch one's body or make holes in a delicate surface, the professor is given only clerical assignments, and the president or prime minister is solely limited to ceremonial events and totally excluded from the administration and policy making, the end result is *zulm* because justice requires that an object/individual be used chiefly for the intended primary purpose.

Sadly, many Muslims do not apply this logic to the Qur'an. They often read it without comprehension and thus fail to approach it as the primary source for comprehensive guidance for all spheres of life. As it is believed that reading one letter of the Qur'an can give the reciter up to 10 units of virtue, they recite it only to acquire *baraka* or the divine rewards of doing so, again often without comprehension. They invoke its verses or hang them on the wall to shield their residence and its inhabitants from evil spirits and to protect them from hazards and possible break-ins. Business people recite or use its verses in their advertising campaigns in the hope of securing auspicious business activities, receiving God's blessings, and, most importantly, ensuring good profits. Students recite verses of the Qur'an to assist their memory and intellectual ability so that they can get good grades. Job applicants do the same to do well in interviews. Many Muslims use the Qur'an as remedial treatment for various diseases. For example, many read verses of *Surah Yasin*, when they fall sick. They recite it and then blow into water and have ill persons drink it, or blow directly on them, all the while believing that such ritualistic practices will cure them.

While all such uses of the Qur'an are not necessarily condemnatory and may even be good and sanctioned by earlier Muslims, these are not the primary reasons why God sent down the Qur'an. If these non-primary functions are considered more important and the Qur'an is not approached for its primary use at all, the end result can only be the trivialization and undermining of the holy writ.

Fragmenting the Qur'an

Another incorrect – yet common – approach is to fragment the Qur'anic text. Dividing the Qur'an into fragments can potentially result in exclusive emphasis on some parts of the Qur'an and negligence to or ignorance about the rest of the book. Muslims are obliged to abide by all of the rules and regulations contained within the Qur'an, as they are supposed to seek guidance from (authentic) Hadith literature as well as to emulate the Prophet's deeds and words. However, if they do not read the entire Qur'an, they will not be able to comprehend or implement its teachings in their totality. Unfortunately, most Muslims are very selective and mainly focus on those verses that talk about rituals and how to perform them or on those verses that are known to have healing powers or protective effects. This is prominently reflected in Friday *khutbahs* (sermons), for most imams emphasize certain verses, rituals, and routines while ignoring core concepts of Islam.

One dangerous practice is to divide the Qur'an into small sections, as it is believed that those segments supposedly carry special virtues that may benefit the reciter both materially and spiritually. To facilitate this practice, many publishers have printed various fragments (e.g., *Surah Yasin*) separately. Thus, many Muslims read only those small portions and rarely turn their attention to other parts of the Qur'an. Regrettably, slices of the Qur'an in print form are found in masjids in almost all countries around the world. Such fragmentation impedes the needed transmission of the entire Qur'anic message and leads to complacency with only hearing and reading a very small portion of it. Thus its primary function is ignored yet again.

Conclusion

Based on my own observations, the above-mentioned practices are very common among Muslims. This situation gives rise to the following question: Scholars unanimously agree that reform in Muslim society is long overdue, yet how can this occur if Muslims do not restore the Qur'an to its rightful place (do *'adl* to it) in their lives? They must approach it primarily for guidance and with the intention to act upon its teachings. In other words, the sacred text's non-primary functions cannot be allowed to triumph over its primary function.

Even many non-Muslim scholars acknowledge the fact that the Qur'an is a wonderful book, incomparable to any other work. It is, especially for Muslims, a precious gem whose proper value must be appreciated and acted upon. Unfortunately, among the vast majority of Muslims today this is not the case. Given this current reality, will Muslims ever manage to see a bright hope or a great future ahead for themselves? The desirable answer to this question perhaps lies, to a great extent, in their correct use and application of the Qur'an in its entirety. Therefore, the sooner they rectify their approach to the Qur'an, the better.

Note: Translations of Qur'anic verses are from Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1984).