



Reading Strategies for Introducing the Qur'ān as Literature in an American Public University

Author(s): CARL W. ERNST

Source: *Islamic Studies*, Autumn 2006, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Autumn 2006), pp. 333-344

Published by: Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, Islamabad

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20839025>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/20839025?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, Islamabad is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Islamic Studies*

JSTOR

Reading Strategies for Introducing the Qur'ān as Literature in an American Public University¹

CARL W. ERNST

No Muslim encounters the Qur'ān for the first time. It is part and parcel of life in Muslim societies from birth to death. In contrast, most Americans and Europeans have no acquaintance whatever with the Islamic sacred text, and it remains an enormous enigma, despite international controversies ranging from Salman Rushdie to Guantánamo. The educational task of introducing non-Muslims to the text of the Qur'ān is evidently important, yet most English-language scholarship on the Qur'ān either adheres to the forbiddingly technical norms of Orientalist scholarship or else serves an apologetic or polemical theological agenda. What is the best way of introducing readers to the Qur'ān, who are not likely ever to become either specialists on the Qur'ān or indeed Muslims?

By framing this as a pedagogical question about the goals of teaching a particular audience, I would like to suggest some effective strategies of literary interpretation that can actually be used in the classroom. The problem of understanding the Qur'ān in a non-Muslim context is particularly relevant in the context where I work, the American public university. Religious Studies has become a typical and omnipresent discipline in the American academy. There are over 1400 academic departments of Religious Studies in North American colleges and universities, yet barely 10% of these faculties claimed to have a specialist in the study of Islam. At the same time, in face of high recent demand for Islamic Studies, it has become necessary for specialists from other fields to develop courses on Islam, the Qur'ān, and related topics, as a secondary field. This pedagogical issue has recently been addressed by a volume entitled *Teaching Islam*, edited by Brannon Wheeler, which was

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference on “The Qur'an: Text, Interpretation and Translation,” held at the Centre of Islamic Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Nov. 12-14, 2005.

published under the auspices of the American Academy of Religion's "Teaching Religious Studies" series.²

It may be that the peculiar political experience of North America, including both the "separation of church and state" doctrine in the United States and the results of immigration from Asian and African countries over the past four decades, has created the need for Religious Studies as a way of addressing pluralism and diversity. It remains the case that Religious Studies in this academic sense is hardly a dominant category for European universities, despite the existence of theological faculties and specialized departments devoted to international area studies. Religious Studies is even less visible as a discipline in the universities of Africa and Asia. The pedagogical problem I am addressing arises, not surprisingly, from the characteristics of a particular audience rather than from the inherent nature of the topic.

In any case, I have to deal with this as a practical issue, as for instance in my doctoral seminar at the University of North Carolina entitled "Pedagogy and Methodology in Islamic Studies," in which each of the 13 Religious Studies graduate students (only four of whom are specialists in Islamic Studies) had as a principal task to construct a syllabus for an introductory course on Islam.³ While methodology today is frequently used to describe scholarly research, I have reminded my students that the word methodology was introduced by Leibniz (in 1669) as the key element in teaching concerned with the form of pedagogical presentation, and that the great debates over method in the 17th century were all about the best method for teaching students.⁴ I believe it is important to connect our most advanced research to the teaching process, and to discover methods for communicating the techniques of scholarship in a way that is accessible to non-specialists. Note that I do not advocate merely reciting the results or conclusions of scholarship in an authoritarian fashion, expecting students to regurgitate them as responses to exam questions; as Jonathan Z. Smith has cogently pointed out, we can only succeed in introducing students to the intellectual life of the university by

²Brannon Wheeler, ed. *Teaching Islam*, American Academy of Religion Teaching Religious Studies Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³The syllabus for this course, together with student projects, is available online at <<http://www.unc.edu/courses/2005fall/reli/299/055/>>.

⁴G. W. F. Leibniz, "Nova Methodus Discendae Docendaeque Jurisprudentiae" in *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, Reihe 6, *Philosophische Schriften* (Berlin: Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1930), I: 277; there he states of the three parts of teaching that "memory provides the material, methodology the form, and logic the application of material to form." See also Joannes Franciscus Buddeus, *Isagoge historico-theologica ad theologiam universam singulasque eius partes* (Leipzig: Thomas Fritsch, 1727), I: 251, where methodology is defined as a method of teaching (*methodum didacticam*) and an equivalent of the Greek *paideia*.

allowing them to “problematize narratives,” learning to think critically by analyzing selected examples and thereby understanding the consequences of particular arguments.⁵ I take seriously the notion of intellectual responsibility as not merely announcing solutions, but as clarifying the differences between arguments and what is at stake. At the same time, it is important to disclose the toolkit of scholarship by a limited number of cases that can be investigated in depth (thus avoiding the doomed attempt to “cover the material” with its inevitable superficiality). I would argue that this method can work not only in the classroom but also with larger public audiences.

But the climate of opinion in America for the study of the Qur'ān is complicated by a number of factors. Most forbidding is the pervasive negative stereotyping of Islam and Muslims in terms of terrorism and political violence. From this perspective, there is curiosity about the Qur'ān primarily as a manual for the assassination of non-Muslims! More generally, a confused combination of enlightened secularism and unselfconscious Protestantism makes for a constant unease and anxiety about the very existence of the Qur'ān, especially since scarcely anyone in the American political or cultural establishment seems to have any actual knowledge of the book at all. I was confronted forcefully with this issue in the summer of 2002, after I had innocently recommended to the Summer Reading Program Committee at University of North Carolina the assignment of *Approaching the Qur'an* by Michael Sells as the required book to be read over the summer by 3,500 incoming first-year students. My university was attacked as unpatriotic on right wing television programmes, sued in court by a Christian fundamentalist organization for trying to convert students to Islam, and accused in the North Carolina legislature of having assisted terrorism. Although the reading and discussion of the book in fact went off quite smoothly, the existence of this controversy indicates the magnitude of the problem of understanding.

In the popular sphere, the only way that non-Muslims generally encounter the Qur'ān is in terms of readings of an extreme fundamentalist character, whether emanating from Islamist circles or from Christian evangelical opponents of Islam. The assumption is that certain selected verses from the Qur'ān have an eternal and timeless authority which is to be obeyed unquestioningly by Muslims in all circumstances; it is ironic that this extremist hermeneutic of the Qur'ān is shared both by Usamah bin Ladin [Uthāmah bin Lādin] and by the Reverend Franklin Graham.⁶ If these are the

⁵Jonathan Z. Smith, “Narratives into Problems: The College Introductory Course and the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the Academy of Religion*, 56 (1988), 727–39.

⁶For a study of the non-contextual Qur'ān interpretations of Usamah bin Ladin, which contain a maximal notion of abrogation, see Rosalind Gwynne, “Al-Qa’ida and al-Qur’an: The ‘Tafsir’

only perspectives on the Qur'ān that our students have encountered, this makes our task all the more challenging. Then one must also consider the fact that, aside from our most advanced students, few in our classroom will have much acquaintance with the vocabulary and conceptual apparatus of the study of religion in general.

On the most practical level of teaching a class, the question arises as to which books one will assign. Considerations of price and availability are nearly as important as the quality and persuasiveness of the argument. For reasons which are readily acknowledged, much of the scholarship on the Qur'ān is difficult to locate and not written in a style that would be accessible to most readers. This is another example of the familiar distance between specialization and public knowledge. Yet there is a great advance in the current publication of the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (EQ), which is probably the most user-friendly encyclopedic work of reference ever published by E.J. Brill.⁷

Nevertheless, the most fruitful approaches to education begin not with the subject material considered in isolation but with reflection on the pedagogical goals and intended audience. I generally announce my goals for a course explicitly and list them on the course web page. In this case, goals would include gaining information and understanding about the Qur'ān as a text, its literary structure, historical development, and later interpretation. More broadly, I aim for an understanding of problems related to Religious Studies as a discipline that is pursued in a modern university context. Since a course on the Qur'ān will typically be an advanced class, one hopes that students will have taken an introduction to Islam previously. But in many liberal arts colleges, it is not possible to have prerequisites for humanities classes, and so instructors must face the possibility that students taking a course on the Qur'ān may approach the subject with very little background on Islam. Nevertheless, relating the Qur'ān to problems in Religious Studies suggests that students should become acquainted with the main scholarly debates over the Qur'ān and their implications; more on that later. Finally, in my view all humanities courses should be devoted to developing analytical skills in reading, writing, and presentation of argument.

But matching these goals to the intended audience is a challenge. As already indicated, it may be that students take a course on the Qur'ān with little background in either the study of Islam or in the study of religion in general. It is worth pausing to observe how a class on the Qur'ān differs both

of Usamah bin Ladin," unpublished paper available online at <http://web.utk.edu/%7Ewarda/bin_ladin_and_quran.htm>.

⁷Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed. *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2001–5).

from courses on the Bible in American universities, and from courses on the Qur'ān in Muslim societies. As Jane McAuliffe has pointed out, the study of the Bible is such a vast and specialized enterprise that it is broken down into many subspecialties, only a few of which could be mastered by the most ambitious scholar. Similarly, in universities in a country like Jordan, the study of the Qur'ān is what she calls a "multifaceted academic discipline."⁸ As a result, "any course on Qur'ānic Studies must inevitably be shaped by the academic context in which it is offered."⁹ In America, only in a handful of graduate departments of Near Eastern studies will one commonly find classes on the Qur'ān in Arabic and the use of commentary literature.

The changing demographics of North American universities include a significant proportion of Muslim students taking courses on the academic study of Islam. While I will mention later on the comparative study of the Qur'ān and Biblical texts, the presence of both non-Muslim and Muslim students in courses on Islam raises an issue that parallels the study of the Bible. North Carolina clearly belongs to the region of the US known as the "Bible Belt," and 83% of our students come from within the state. Among the 360 students who take my colleague Bart Ehrman's course in the New Testament every year, there are quite a few Christian fundamentalists, who reportedly form support groups to sustain their faith while taking this rigorously historical class.¹⁰ He and many other scholars of Biblical studies for years have faced the gap between academic Biblical studies and the Sunday school interpretations of the Bible that many students bring with them to college. The political and legal solution that governs American education distinguishes the academic "teaching about religion" from the authoritative "teaching of religion" that takes place in faith communities. Thus, while the teachings that students have received are interesting and worthy of study in their own right, the academic study of religion does not permit authoritarian claims to privilege one perspective over another. While perhaps difficult to implement in practice, the principle that governs this approach to religious studies in no way differs, whether one is speaking of the Bible or the Qur'ān. My assumption is that, while instructors certainly need to be aware of the sensitivities of all students, including Muslims, the organization of a class on the Qur'ān has to be based entirely on academic rather than faith-based standards.

⁸ Jane McAuliffe, "Teaching Qur'anic studies in North America" in Wheeler, *Teaching Islam*, 97.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁰ Ehrman's enormously successful textbook is seen as the first to adopt a strictly historical perspective; see Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

For this reason, in considering strategies and techniques for teaching the Qur'ān in the American classroom, I propose concentrating on chronological reading of the text, non-theological analysis, and emphasis on literary and rhetorical interpretation, in the following manner.

The question of the chronological order of the appearance of the verses of the Qur'ān is a thorny and contested issue. On the one hand, the 1924 Egyptian printed edition of the Qur'ān canonizes a particular chronology of the Makkan and Madīnan *sūrah*s that is widely accepted among Muslims. On the other hand, European scholars have built on the analyses of Theodor Nöldeke and his successors for a rather different chronology of the order of the *sūrah*s and indeed of individual verses. This problem needs to be faced directly, though it does not admit any easy solution.¹¹ That is, the standard order of the 114 *sūrah*s of the Qur'ān may be described, as far as reading practice is concerned, as the ritual order of the recitation of the text. The division of the Qur'ān into 30 equal parts for daily recitation during the course of a month illustrates this ritual practice quite clearly. As the Egyptian scholar al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) observed, the late Madīnan *sūrah*s so prominent at the beginning of the Qur'ān, were revealed to a Muslim society, unlike the Makkan *sūrah*s revealed in a non-Muslim context; therefore he argues that the canonical sequence of *sūrah*s is indeed aimed at a Muslim readership.¹² There is thus no apparent justification for reading the text of the Qur'ān in this order in an academic context, unless one has in mind its ritual performance. Thus in principle it is attractive to propose a reading of the Qur'ān that follows its presumed historical sequence. If the academic study of the Qur'ān does not aim to imitate the theological approach of the *madrasah*, I see no reason not to use the Nöldeke sequence as a baseline. The principle I appeal to here is that the academic study of religion does not simply replicate the views of any particular group of believers, though it certainly takes those views into account as an important factor; nevertheless, what distinguishes the academic study of religion is the impartial use of theoretical approaches without privileging one theological position over another.

Recent developments in this area of Qur'ānic chronology have demonstrated effective results that can be obtained from using a literary analysis to develop a cumulative sense of the evolution of the Qur'ānic text and its audience. An excellent example is Angelika Neuwirth's study of the "canonical process" illustrated by *Sūrat al-Ḥijr* (Qur'ān 15: 57 in the second

¹¹ For a survey of the problem, see Gerhard Böwering, "Chronology and the Qur'ān" in *EQ*, 1: 315–335.

¹² Jalāl al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Suyūṭī, *Asrār Tartīb al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'Abd al-Qādir Aḥmad 'Aṭā' (Cairo: Dār al-I'tisām, 1976).

Makkan period according to Nöldeke) as an epitome of the liturgical formation of the early Muslim community exemplified by the early Makkan *sūrah*s.¹³ This formidable illustration of scholarship can be used as a model to create directed student exercises of comparison and building up vocabulary as they follow a chronological reading of Qur'ānic *sūrah*s.

To be sure, one should not ignore the fact of traditional exegesis of the Qur'ān using the *sīrah* biographical tradition of the Prophet, and likewise one should draw attention to the “occasions of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) literature as well as the doctrine of abrogation. At the same time, it is necessary to point out the measure of hermeneutical circularity that is inherent in any biographical or historical reading of the Qur'ān. While it is essential to discuss the problems in European scholarship on Qur'ānic chronology, from Nöldeke to Bell, one should note the comment of Neal Robinson: “I am bound to conclude that for all its faults, the Nöldeke-Schwally *surah* classification, occasionally modified in the light of Bell's insights, is a better working hypothesis than the standard Egyptian chronology.”¹⁴ I take this not as an authoritative conclusion, but as a good indication that there is evidence and argument in the Nöldeke-Schwally hypothesis. This historical principle should be employed in reading selections from the Qur'ān just as if one were attempting to read the entire text sequentially. While such a selective reading cannot be exhaustive (and let us admit that it is not possible to read the entire Qur'ān closely in one semester), it can nevertheless use illustrations to make significant points that accomplish the desired model of analysis. Ideally, one can put students onto research projects charting particular circumscribed topics according to both the Nöldeke and the Egyptian chronologies, to demonstrate the consequences of both hypotheses. Robinson has suggested this as an agenda for scholarly research, but there is no reason that this method cannot also be modelled in a pedagogical context.

In combination with this historical approach to the sequence of reading the Qur'ān, an explicitly non-theological rhetorical analysis has much to offer. The renunciation of theological positions for pedagogical purposes can make it possible to move beyond what Arkoun refers to as the “dogmatic enclosure,” in order to trace the genealogy of articles of faith from a historical and

¹³ Angelika Neuwirth, “Referentiality and Textuality in *Sūrat al-Ḥijr*: Some Observations on the Qur'ānic ‘Canonical Process’ and the Emergence of a Community” in Issa J. Boullata, ed. *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'ān* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), 143–72.

¹⁴ Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'ān: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 95.

anthropological perspective, rather than assuming that there is such a thing as an uncontested notion of Muslim faith.¹⁵ This does not require that Muslim students should give up their faith, or that anyone should dismiss the religious significance of the text. But for the time being, students will need to consider texts of the Qur'ān while leaving aside debates about its status as the word of God. This is a well-established technique, though it can admittedly be fraught with consequences. To consider an example from the history of Christianity, the Spanish monk Fray Luis de Leon was imprisoned in 1562 by the Inquisition for composing an original translation of the Song of Songs directly from Hebrew, and for treating the text *as if* it were a non-allegorical pastoral poem.¹⁶ Scholars such as Nasr Abu Zayd have undoubtedly experienced harsh criticism for their recent literary approaches to the Qur'ān, even though Abu Zayd has not by any means renounced the sacredness of the text. Abu Zayd's insistence on pursuing a literary analysis in spite of controversy and persecution is a testament to his recognition of the importance of this task.¹⁷

Teaching the Qur'ān in a non-theological fashion means that one does not need to force anyone to take a theological or religious position in discussing the text. In this respect, I cannot go along with Farid Esack's delineation of the five types of lovers of the Qur'ān as a model for pedagogy. There are certainly some witty observations in his descriptions of the uncritical lover of the Qur'ān, the scholarly lover, the critical lover, the friend of the lover, and the voyeur as types of readers of the Qur'ān.¹⁸ Yet it should not be necessary to put everyone into such a theological box before they can study the Qur'ān. If the study of religion is to be a public space where differences can be discussed, there should not be a price of admission or precommitment. Literary analysis can proceed heuristically without dividing the world into a binary opposition between "Islamic" and "Western" scholarship, as if there were two totally opposed hermeneutics that were hermetically sealed from one another; the intellectual errors of Orientalism are only compounded by an Occidentalism that claims to understand an essentialized "West." At the same time, it is possible to advert to the possible theological implications of a non-theological analysis.¹⁹

¹⁵ Mohammed Arkoun, "Contemporary Critical Practices and the Qur'ān" in *EQ*, 1: 427a.

¹⁶ Fray Luis de Leon, *Obras Completas Castellanas* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1957), 1: 70.

¹⁷ Nasr Abu Zayd, "The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, Special Issue on Literature and the Sacred, 23 (2003), 8–47.

¹⁸ Farid Esack, *The Qur'ān: A User's Guide* (Oxford: One World, 2005), 1–10. Yet the psychoanalytic choice of a term for revisionists ("voyeur") clearly indicates a jaundiced view of that kind of scholarship.

¹⁹ Nasr Abu Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur'ān: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* (Utrecht:

On the rhetorical level, it can be a liberating experience to pursue a listener-response analysis of the process of transmission of the Qur'ān; instead of employing direct theological language, one can assist students to analyze the text in terms of sender, addressee/transmitter, and community. Understanding the Qur'ān as a living event of recitation is quite different from treating it as what Arkoun calls the Closed Official Corpus of later tradition.²⁰ As Neuwirth points out, "Thus, with its final canonization the Qur'ān as such had become *de-historicized*."²¹ Therefore, a historicizing analysis implies de-canonization of the text, making it contingent rather than final and authoritative.

For a consistent avoidance of theology, I would also suggest that it is necessary to make an effort to detheologize the categories and genres of literary analysis. Literary genre is still to me the preferred mode of analysis, since thematic and topical approaches to the Qur'ān lend themselves too easily to theological and legal conclusions. But even in literary analysis, the choice of terminology is a question of practicality and familiarity as much as it is of methodology. Terms such as eschatology, polemic, and apologetic are derived from the history of Christianity, as indeed is most of the vocabulary of religious studies. That in itself is not necessarily grounds for ruling out the use of these terms in Islamic Studies; the comparative approach to Religious Studies in fact demands that we use existing terms and refine them by stipulative definition. But in some cases, the technicality of language is in practice oppressive and not conducive to clarity for students, to whom the terms often remain arcane and forbidding. I base this on my own observation of looks of blank incomprehension when I use these terms with students. Moreover, I would argue that the theological aura of technical terms needs to be reduced whenever possible in this particular situation. This equally holds true for the vocabulary that Wansborough drew from the history of Judaism for his discussion of early Islamic history (*midrash*, *halakhic*, *haggadah*). While an argument can be made for using such categories, they may come at a cost of foreclosing the possibility of a *sui generis* approach to the Qur'ān. There are highly charged arguments about influence and authenticity that lend an air of religious disputation to many discussions of the relationship between the Qur'ān and earlier scriptures. If serviceable technical terms can be used that do not invoke such theological arguments of precedence and priority, that would be a useful achievement. The same observation applies to the traditional

Humanistics University Press, 2004).

²⁰ Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London: Saqi Books, 2002).

²¹ Neuwirth, "Referentiality and Textuality in *Sūrah al-Hijr*..." 145; her emphasis.

doctrine of the miraculous inimitability of the Qur'ān. Although phrased in terms of aesthetic appreciation, this is best viewed as a dogmatic assumption rather than an empirical conclusion.²²

In terms of literary interpretation of the Qur'ān, Robinson and Mustansir Mir have made persuasive arguments for the use of the *sūrah* as a literary unit. While it is true that this emphasis on the unity of the *sūrah* is relatively recent, it has practical advantages for literary analysis in the classroom. Particularly in the shorter *sūrahs*, one can address structural phenomena such as chiasmus to consider a reader response to the *sūrah* as a whole. This may not be identical with the most prominent ways in which these Qur'ānic texts historically have been or are now being read, but this is how literary study differs from official commentaries. Other practical considerations for literary study would include taking seriously the issue of orality, and the way in which the word *qur'ān* is used to signify the ongoing recitation as opposed to the Closed Official Corpus. There is also good reason for demonstrating the ritual use of the Qur'ān, including playing recorded recitations to assist students to grasp the elements of sound and rhythm that permeate the text.

In any class that has an introductory element to it, no matter how small, the question arises to what extent one needs to include hypercritical and revisionist theories. An overly enthusiastic application of critical theory can leave students befuddled and confused rather than enlightened. Those who are not at all sure of the basic elements of a standard narrative are not the ideal audience for an argument that seeks to overturn that narrative. So to what extent is it useful or important to discuss hypercritical theories? The goal announced above—acquainting students with the chief academic debates on the subject—demands that we do not ignore the theories of the history of early Islam propounded by Wansborough and others. Keith Lewinstein has argued persuasively for the judicious introduction of “revisionist” scholarship on the Qur'ān and early Islamic history in undergraduate courses, and Herbert Berg has suggested that Islamic Studies scholars have been reluctant to address these issues.²³ The important thing in this discussion is to model the relationship between evidence and argument, and to clarify the consequences that are at stake. While there certainly are invidious problems with the legacy of Orientalist scholarship, of which students should be aware, its polemical appropriation by ideologues should not in itself be the reason for ruling such

²²Navid Kermani, “The Aesthetic Perception of the Qur'ān as Reflected in Early Muslim History” in Boullata, ed. *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'ān*, 255–276.

²³Keith Lewinstein, “Recent Critical Scholarship in the Teaching of Islam” in Wheeler, ed. *Teaching Islam*, 46–60; Herbert Berg, “The Implications of, and Opposition to, the Methods and Theories of John Wansbrough,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 9 (1997), 3–22.

arguments out of court. Rather, the merits and rhetorical claims of revisionist scholarship should be laid out in a clear fashion, as for instance Jonathan Berkey has demonstrated in his cogent discussion of early Islamic history.²⁴

One more item which our American student audience requires, partly because of the dominant fundamentalist mode of interpretation that Christians often apply to Islam, is simply to introduce the notion of interpretation of the sacred text. That is, the notion that there is a fixed and standard meaning of the text that somehow floats above any historical context must be exposed to criticism. There are two principal ways in which this task may be accomplished. One is to have a minimum of two different translations in the classrooms at all times, and to call for frequent comparison of the translations to illustrate, from the difference between English versions, how the invisible and hidden original may be triangulated. The other way is of course to bring in selected commentaries from different sources on the same verse, to see a few examples of how different readers have interpreted particular texts.²⁵ These are well-known and tested techniques.

Finally, it seems to me that the modern study of religion requires an effort of comparison. Once again, it is necessary to make strenuous efforts to free this term from the theological burden which it has often carried (i.e., to compare and discover which religious view is superior, generally one's own). All too often, when the Qur'ān is to be compared to something else, the standards used are the conventional and official theological positions that in their current triumph are asserted to be the inevitable results of the history of religion. In other words, current forms of rabbinic Judaism, Catholicism, and Protestantism, are assumed to be somehow preordained essences rather than contingent outcomes. Recent research on monotheism in the Mediterranean region offers intriguing examples that range beyond the charmed circle of the Bible and its Islamic successor.²⁶ While the debates embedded within the Qur'ān have often lent themselves to stereotyped inter-confessional disputational arguments, it should be possible to envision the rhetoric of the Qur'ān not simply in terms of the old argument of influence from biblical sources, but as an ongoing example of what Donald Akenson terms "Judahistic" (not Jewish) reflection on and creative retransmission of the scriptural mode of thinking in a contemporary vein.²⁷ It is in a similar sense,

²⁴ Jonathan Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²⁵ This has been done by Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur'ān and Its Interpreters*, 2 vols. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984, 1992).

²⁶ Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

²⁷ I owe this reference and the accompanying insight to UNC doctoral candidate Peter Wright.

evidently, that Mohammad Arkoun envisions a comparative approach to monotheism in global context, to dogmatic orthodox frameworks, and to the role of modern sciences, as the conditions for a comprehensive contemporary approach to the Qur'ān.²⁸ The scope is obviously vast, and the challenge is considerable, in attempting to implement such a project in the framework of a classroom, but I believe it is worth the attempt.

I expect that this brief exposition of a pedagogical approach to the Qur'ān for American university students may elicit some objections, particularly from those who are called upon to deal with a different sort of audience. I would be particularly interested to hear what sorts of strategies for introducing the Qur'ān might be most appropriate, for instance, for British or French university students, with their different social legacies of the role of religion in education. But I will still argue that the most effective presentation of a challenging religious text like the Qur'ān must be strategized not from the nature of the text itself but from an understanding of the capacities, history, and inclinations of the audience.²⁹



See Donald Harman Akenson, *Surpassing Wonder: The Invention of the Bible and the Talmuds* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998).

²⁸ Mohammed Arkoun, "Contemporary Critical Practices and the Qur'ān" in *EQ*, 1: 412–31.

²⁹ My own effort at an introductory course on the Qur'ān may be seen at <<http://www.unc.edu/courses/2006spring/reli/161/042/>>.