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## The Voice of God

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*What the Qur'an Meant: And Why It Matters*

by Garry Wills

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Anyone who follows the news will be aware that the sacred book of Islam is the Qur'an (known to Muslims as the Noble Qur'an), or, as it was named for centuries in English, the Koran. The militants of al-Qaeda and ISIS proclaim their allegiance to this fundamental text of their religion with the same fervor and ignorance as the Christian Crusaders when they quoted the Bible. In a work of rare courage and humility, Garry Wills has brought the horrors of the Crusades into confrontation with the horrors of the Islamic State, in full recognition that Christian and Muslim warriors are alike in their deliberate repudiation of the basic tenets of the religions they profess.



*Georgui Pinkhassov/Magnum Photos*

*A Muslim family praying, Rockwood, Minnesota, 2003*

Wills, who had known little about Muslim scripture before he wrote his book, has undertaken the difficult task of learning about a text written down in the early seventh century CE in a language he cannot read, in order to show his readers that the Qur'an is utterly incompatible with the barbarous beliefs and conduct of those who have violently espoused an alleged caliphate in its name in the twenty-first century. Wills has succeeded admirably in conveying the meaning of Islam's earliest and most important text for modern readers. His analysis, laced with references to current controversies, is as relevant for those who are ignorant of Islam as it is for the millions who live in accordance with the revelations that Muhammad received, the Qur'an tells us, directly from God (Allah)

through the angel Gabriel. Those revelations are said to have begun in 610 CE and continued until Muhammad's death in 632.

As he is well aware, Wills had a famous predecessor in expounding Islam without the slightest knowledge of the Arabic language but after a careful examination of relevant translations. That predecessor was, astonishingly, Edward Gibbon, in the middle of the eighteenth century. In chapter 50 of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—a little-known chapter by comparison with the ones on the Roman emperors and early Christianity—Gibbon describes the divine messages transmitted in the Qur'an, candidly admitting that he does not know Arabic. His account remains arguably the best introduction to Islam in the English language. Wills rightly observes that Gibbon “was brilliant at discerning the core message of religions, before the multiple distortions and abuses that all religions suffer from.” Gibbon accurately reported that the Qur'an recognized Hebrew and Christian scriptures alongside the revelations of Muhammad as comprising “one immutable religion.” Muhammad, according to Gibbon, urged strangers of every tribe to worship a single deity: “He asserted the liberty of conscience, and disclaimed the use of religious violence.”

Fortified by his reading of Gibbon and by his own deep knowledge of Christianity, Wills undertook his analysis with the aid of a new and voluminous work, *The Study Qur'an* (2015) by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and four others, which fortifies his argument that the religious authority Islamic militants claim in justification of their cause has no basis in the Qur'an. The ultra-conservative Sunni sect of Salafis is not happy with *The Study Qur'an*, but it is by far the most useful resource in English for those who are uninitiated in Quranic study.

Wills points out, for instance, that the Arabic words “jihad” and “sharia” do not occur in the Qur'an with the implications attached to them now. In its Quranic usage “jihad” means simply “striving” or, as Wills prefers, “zeal,” but certainly not “holy war.” That meaning does indeed exist in modern Arabic, but it has no Quranic authority and tells us no more about Muhammad's vocabulary as a messenger of God than does the word “sharia,” which evokes for modern readers a complex legal system that did not exist in the time of the Prophet. In fact the word “sharia” appears, as Wills emphasizes, only once in the entire Qur'an (Q. 45:18), and there it means simply the right path, similar to the path (*hodos* in Greek) invoked by early Christians. Wills writes unambiguously that “the Qur'an never advocates war as a means of religious conversion,” and he quotes an apposite verse: “There is no compulsion in religion.”

The Qur'an is a marvel of early literary Arabic. Its name, from a root that implies reciting or reading aloud, recognizes the importance of recitation for how the book is received. The language of the Holy Book, which is both rhymed and rhythmical, is meant to be spoken,

or read as if spoken. Inasmuch as God addressed His messenger Muhammad in Arabic through the mediation of the angel Gabriel, the language of the Qur'an is the language God deliberately chose: "an Arabic Qur'an for a people who have knowledge" (Q. 41:3). In another verse (Q. 12:2) God said that he had sent down "an Arabic Qur'an, so that you might understand."

Translations of the Qur'an into modern languages came relatively late. Bruce Lawrence's new account of versions in English, in *The Koran in English: A Biography*,<sup>1</sup> necessarily starts with the first Latin translation by Robert of Ketton in the twelfth century. Latin renderings were certainly more accessible to the Europeans of the time than the Arabic original. The historian Thomas Burman has carefully traced subsequent Latin translations, which were for the most part produced to inform Europeans about their Muslim adversaries.<sup>2</sup> Lawrence's review of the English translations that followed those in Latin does not uncover any impulse to assist Anglophone Muslims.

The Qur'an accordingly lacks any translations that might be compared with the Greek Septuagint of the Hebrew Bible, widely used by early Christians, or the King James translation of the Hebrew Bible and Greek New Testament into English. Believers have regularly read those translations as if they were the actual words of scripture and have been undeterred by their inability to read the original texts. This was as true of Greek Christians in late antiquity as it is of Anglophone Christians today. The history of Quranic translations is utterly different, because it is generally accepted that the text must be read in Arabic in order to be understood properly. Translations can be used to help Muslims with little or no Arabic interpret the text, but the words of God are not considered convertible into another tongue.

In the penultimate verse of the nineteenth sura (chapter), God says to Muhammad, "We have made the Qur'an easy only in your language, to give good news to the righteous and to warn a hostile people." Arabic unites the Prophet's followers in a common linguistic culture and creates a barrier to those who might oppose them. The Qur'an does not anticipate a faith that would embrace, as Islam does today, 1.6 billion people, including many who are not Arabs. A simple Arabic phrase such as *Allahu akbar* (God is great) is all the Arabic many adherents know, although conscientious Muslims often make an effort to learn the language.

Judaism is similarly a religion that depends upon a sacred book that the devout try to master in the original, usually through religious schooling and domestic devotions. Above all Judaism is a religion of practice—of observance and abstinence—that affects daily life: the Hebrew Bible can be understood as a vehicle for its precepts. The Islamic Holy Book also prescribes both observance and abstinence, especially in diet, clothing, and relationships. To the extent that they live according to the Qur'an and hear it when it is

recited, even without full comprehension, Muslims are, they acknowledge, “a People of the Book,” like Jews and Christians, but their relation to their book is quite different.

Muhammad’s companions are said to have heard and recorded the words of the Qur’an as he received them from Gabriel and communicated them to those around him, leading to a proliferation of divergent texts. Twenty years after Muhammad’s death, the third caliph, Uthman, collated the available texts in an effort to establish a canonical version to be distributed to major cities in the early Islamic East. Until recently the Uthman text was regarded as definitive. A disquieting instability has recently emerged, however, in the history of the Qur’an’s transmission.

Inscriptions from 692 CE in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem have long revealed minor divergences from the Uthman text and once seemed to be the earliest quotations from the Holy Book. In recent years, an extraordinary manuscript, written in the so-called Hijazi script by five different scribes as a team in about 660 CE, a decade after Uthman, has been recovered from folios in St. Petersburg and Paris, and it suggests that Uthman’s text had not yet been fully established. More remarkable still is the discovery in the Great Mosque at Sanaa, in Yemen, of an overwritten parchment manuscript—called a palimpsest—in which the underlying text has turned out to be from a Qur’an that may very well have been inscribed during the lifetime of Muhammad and certainly before Uthman.<sup>3</sup>

The surprising implications for the text of the Qur’an call to mind the sensation caused by Erasmus’s initiative in 1519 to construct a text of the Greek New Testament by comparing the extant manuscripts. In the case of the Qur’an, scholars now regard the text as uncertain in some respects, although for the moment Muslims everywhere acknowledge the canonical version as the word of God. So far the variants are relatively insignificant; for instance, the pre-Uthmanic palimpsest leaves no doubt that the division into suras or chapters had already been made before the Prophet’s death. The message of the Qur’an overall continues to support the peaceable understanding of Islam that lasted for some two hundred years, until competing traditions (*ahadith*) gave rise to rival sects, most famously the Shia and Sunni, which all claimed adherence to the Prophet’s original message.

That message, as Garry Wills repeatedly points out, lacked the ferocity that the modern world associates with militant Muslim organizations. The Qur’an is well disposed to the other religions of the book and explicitly cites with approval the Torah and the Gospels, recognizing five “antecedent prophets” to Muhammad: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. “We make no distinction between any of His messengers” (Q. 2:285). The Qur’an has its own version of the annunciation to Mary, who is the only woman to be named in the entire book:

She said, My Lord, how can I have a son when no man has touched me? He [the angel] said, This is how God creates what He will, when He has ordained something.

He only says Be, and it is. He will teach him Scripture and wisdom, the Torah (*tawrah*) and the Gospel (*Injil*). He will send him as a messenger to the children of Israel.

Interestingly, the Arabic word *Injil* is a direct Arabicization of the Greek word for gospel, *euaggelion*, and it was clearly a familiar word in Muhammad's vocabulary.

Wills notes that the Qur'an accepts defensive war against aggressors to secure monotheistic worship: "If God did not repel some people by means of others, many monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, where God's name is much invoked, would have been destroyed" (Q. 22:40). The only trace of support for violence comes in prescribing war against those who violate the traditional period of truce in a sacred area: "Do not fight them at the Sacred Mosque unless they fight you there. If they do fight, kill them—this is what such disbelievers deserve, but if they stop, then God is most forgiving and merciful" (Q. 2:191). In another sura a more general directive is given for dealing with those "who wage war against God and His messenger and strive in spreading corruption (*fasadan*) in the land" (Q. 5:33). They are to be punished with death, crucifixion, the amputation of a limb, or banishment from the land.

Wills rightly stresses that these horrific measures are reserved for those who seek to undermine belief in the One God. That naturally excludes both Jews and Christians, whose monotheism is consistently recognized in the Qur'an, and leaves these punishments for polytheistic pagans. Wills aptly compares the appalling penalties meted out for heresy in Elizabethan England, including amputations of various kinds, beheading, and evisceration. Although Islamic terrorists have adopted such mutilations, they do so without scriptural support. We need to remember this now more than ever to avoid associating militant violence with observant Muslims everywhere.

Muhammad's consistent emphasis on the One God in the Qur'an is characteristic of the Judaism and Christianity of the northwest Arabian milieu in which he grew up, where polytheism was still widespread. This emphasis is shared with other monotheist prophets of the time, who delivered Qur'ans of their own that were absorbed into later Muslim tradition. The best known of these rival prophets is Musaylima, whose independent Qur'an survives in numerous fragments. These have recently been examined in detail by Al Makin, in an illuminating study of the larger world



Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul/Universal Images  
Group/Art Resource

*The angel Gabriel revealing the first sura of the Qur'an to Muhammad; illustration from the Siyar-i Nabi (Life of the Prophet), sixteenth century*

of pre-Islamic Arab prophecy.<sup>4</sup> The principal point, which Wills emphasizes, is that the Peoples of the Book are alike in many ways, but that Muslims must not expect to find protection with Jews or Christians—“as if,” says Wills, “the Qur’an were not a strong enough pledge on God’s part to protect his people.” This is a reasonable interpretation of Q. 5:51–52: “You who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies: they are allies only to each other. Anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them.”

As far as Christianity is concerned, the Qur’an recognizes Jesus Christ as a prophet but, like many Jewish texts, it cannot accommodate the notion of Jesus’s divinity, which seemed to represent a deliberate renunciation of monotheism: “People of the Book, do not go to excess in your religion, and do not say anything about God except the truth: the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was no more than a messenger of God. His Word went to Mary, and a Spirit (*ruh*) from Him. So believe in God and his messengers and do not say Three” (Q. 4:171). The language of this text (*Word, Spirit*) seems to reflect some acquaintance with the Greek New Testament, and Wills acutely remarks that the Qur’an is not so much hostile to Christianity as it is pre-Nicene, reflecting Christian doctrine before the Council of Nicaea in 325, which espoused the Trinity. The Qur’an views the Trinity as a kind of *shirk* (partnership) of God with other divine beings. It reveals enough knowledge about Christianity to protest those precepts that run the risk of forsaking the monotheism that is so precious to all three Peoples of the Book.

From his deep knowledge of Saint Augustine and his writings, Wills is able to draw arresting comparisons between Quranic Islam and Christianity. In a chapter about what he calls “conversing with the cosmos,” he eloquently describes the manifold ways God’s creation and His creatures converse with Him in the Qur’an: “Birds talk. So do ants. So do mountains and stars.” Wills draws attention to the speaking tree in Q. 28:30: “A voice called out to him [Moses] from the right side of the valley, from a tree on the blessed ground.” In the Qur’an Abraham is described as searching for the One God by turning first to a star, then to the moon, and then to the sun, until after seeing the setting of the sun he cried out in despair (Q. 6:79), “I have turned my face as a true believer towards Him who created the heavens and the earth. I am not one of the polytheists.”

This representation of Abraham as a monotheist or true believer (*hanif*) occurs elsewhere in the Qur’an and is fundamental to Muhammad’s message. Wills is able to bring out a magnificent parallel passage in the *Confessions* of Augustine (10:6): “I interrogated the earth, which replied, It isn’t me. . . . I interrogated the sea, its depths, with their slithery live things, and they informed me, We are not your God: seek above us.” Finally Augustine addressed everything that impinged on his body for news about God, and he received the loud and unanimous reply, “He made us.” The Quranic and Augustinian texts together make an unforgettable expression of God’s message through His creation.

Wills finds similar resonances in various tellings of other stories shared by all three traditions. In the Quranic creation, God makes Adam and a nameless woman, and Satan tempts both together with a promise of immortality. (Wills remarks that this can only mean they were already mortal.) They succumb and immediately discover that they are naked. In trying to cover themselves with leaves, they put on clothing, providing an example of modesty for Muslims: “O children of Adam, we have given you clothing to cover your genitals and as adornment. The clothing of righteousness is best. That is one of God’s signs, so that people may remember” (Q. 7:26). Adam repents and transmits to future generations that God is One and only One.

Noah follows as the second prophet, and although the Qur’an gives relatively little space to the flood, there is just enough to show that God saw it as an occasion to rid the world of sinners: “They were drowned and sent to hell” (Q. 71:25). Abraham, to whom the Qur’an devotes 245 verses, comes next as a defender of monotheism and a leader of the people. The aborted command to sacrifice his son Isaac, as told in the Bible, appears in the Qur’an as a dream in which Abraham agrees to sacrifice his son as God wishes. Although the son is given no name, he appears to have been Ishmael, Abraham’s child by Hagar the handmaid, and this provides Muslims with a line of succession through Ishmael. The prophets Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad follow. This grand procession is the spiritual genealogy of Islam.

Wills concludes his account of Quranic doctrine with a candid view of its treatment of women, which, as he rightly observes, arises from the ancient Arabian practice of “polygyny,” or men having many wives. The most troubling of the Quranic verses to address this topic is Q. 4:34: “If you fear bad conduct from your wives, advise them, then ignore them in bed, then strike them. If they obey you, you have no right to act against them.” This brutal verse evokes others that openly equate a woman with half a man. “In inheritance God ordains that a son should have the equivalent of two daughters’ share” (Q. 4:11). Yet such an archaic view of women can be balanced by the surprisingly evenhanded version of Satan’s temptation of Adam and the unnamed Eve, who is not blamed for the transgression as she is in the Hebrew Bible. Wills reminds us of Aristotle’s opinion that a woman is a defective man and of Thomas Aquinas’s description of a woman as an accidental man. The early Islamic attitude was not peculiar to the ancient Near East.

Inevitably the Qur’an is rooted in its time, just as the brutal parts of the Hebrew Bible are. Even so, much of what the Qur’an proclaims is more benevolent and less barbarous than many of the fundamentalist doctrines that emerged in later centuries. We must remember that there is no jihad in the sense of holy war in the Qur’an and that there is no legal system called sharia. The Muslim Holy Book undoubtedly affirms the need to destroy those who take up arms against the One God. But it proudly acknowledges its affinity with

the two other great monotheistic religions that preceded it and recognizes their prophets. This is why the Qur'an firmly anchors Islam among the Abrahamic religions.

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1 Princeton University Press, 2017. ↵

2 Thomas E. Burman, *Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom, 1140–1560* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). ↵

3 Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi, "Şan'ā' I and the Origins of the Qur'ān," *Der Islam*, Vol. 87 (2012). ↵

4 Al Makin, *Representing the Enemy: Musaylima in Muslim Literature* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2010). ↵