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Islam and the Arabic Language

by DSM

I. A Special Relationship

Throughout history the association between religion and language has taken different forms.¹ Some languages are regarded as sacred and are reserved for religious purposes. The Arabic language existed before Islam but the particular form in which the Qur'an is written has a special relationship with Arab life and culture. This is partly due to the fact that in Islam there is no separation between the sacred and the secular; the fundamentals of Islam are all-pervading.

Arabic is one of the world's great languages, mother tongue to about 320 million people. The vast majority of these are Muslims who inhabit Arab countries of the Middle East, the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa, but who in recent years are spreading abroad in their millions, mainly to Europe and North America. They speak one of the thirty or so forms of Colloquial Arabic and many also understand Modern Standard Arabic (or *fusha*, as it is known) that is used for general communication. Classical Arabic (or better, Qur'anic Arabic, termed *Al'Arabiyy'a* by Arabs themselves) refers to the Arabic of the Qur'an, from which Modern Standard Arabic differs only slightly, but Colloquial Arabic differs considerably. Arabic-speaking Muslims are far outnumbered by the one billion or so non-Arab Muslims, most of whose understanding of

Arabic is limited to a few key phrases of the Qur'an or other scriptures.

For Muslims the Qur'an is the final message of Allah to man (*kalam Allah*, Sura 9.6), recited in secret by an angelic messenger to Muhammad (believed to have lived from about 570 AD to 632 AD) intermittently over the last twenty-three years of his life. Others later wrote down the revelations. Muslims believe that every word given to Muhammad was entirely without error and is preserved in the Qur'an as it is available today. Many mistakes of all kinds in the Qur'an have had attention drawn to them. However Muslims refuse to discuss any matters related to the validity of the Qur'an because the Qur'an states that the original Qur'an is in heaven (Sura 85.21-22) in the form of the Mother book (*lauh el-mahfuz*, the 'preserved tablet'). It is uncreated and eternally divine (Sura 85.21-22) and was sent down (*nazala*) by God (Sura 17.105). The language of the Qur'an is said by the Qur'an itself to be "clear Arabic tongue" (Sura 16.103). Modern scholarship seriously challenges this.² The Qur'an issues a challenge (*tahaddi*) for anyone to attempt to excel its language (Sura 2.23-24). It is rather ironic that most Arab Muslims today are far from being adept in all aspects of Qur'anic Arabic. Just as the call to prayer (*adhan*), based on the Traditions of Muhammad, begins with *Allahu Akbar*

(‘Allah is greater’ than any other God), so it would seem true to say that for a Muslim, *Al’Arabiyy’a* is greater than any other language .

2. Arabic and Islam in History

Arabic belongs to the Semitic group of languages, which also includes many others, Aramaic, Syriac, Nabatean and Hebrew for example.³ The Semitic language family is a descendant of *proto-Semitic*, an ancient language that was exclusively spoken and has no written record. It is widely believed that the Arabic script, of which there are many variations (*kufic* and *naskh* are the main forms) is a descendant of the Nabatean script, which in turn probably came from one form of Aramaic. The few earliest inscriptions known that are recognisably Arabic date no earlier than the early fourth century. Most scholars accept that Arabic in pre-Islamic days was mainly an oral language in which tribal poetry of a very high quality is thought to have played a very large part. Others, notably Taha Husayn in the 1920s, concluded that ‘much of that body of work had been fabricated well after the establishment of Islam in order to lend outside support to Koran mythology’.⁴ The Qur’an has been generally considered to be the earliest substantial body of written Arabic, but modern scholarship in recent decades (See section 4 below) has thrown doubts on the dates and the nature of its origins as believed in Islam.

If the Islamic account of the origin of the Qur’an is accepted, it seems reasonable to assume that it was orally trans-

mitted in the local Qureish dialect and probably written down later by others in the *hijazi* script of the region. Some years after the death of Muhammad, a version of the Qur’an was eventually agreed by the community to be the original.

It is important to recognise that the Qur’an is not a book in the usual sense. It is a collection of recitations that are arranged in the approximate order of the length of their chapters (Suras); the longest Sura is first. For purposes of recitation this poses no problem during the times of prayer. Highly specialised schools have been formed to inculcate, practice and develop the extremely complicated art of *tajwid*, ‘the reciting of every letter of the Qur’an correctly, i.e. from its proper origin of pronunciation coupled with its stipulated attributes’.⁵ However, it presents serious barriers to theological study and predisposes to inconsistencies.

More than any other language, *Al’Arabiyy’a*, since its introduction until the present, has remained virtually without change with regards to alphabet, spelling and the majority of its vocabulary. This may be attributed almost entirely to two powerful forces for continuity in Islam. The first and always foremost is what the Qur’an says regarding itself (see above). The second force against change in Islam is human rather than divine, but has its roots in the latter. It has been in existence for around a thousand years and requires further explanation (see section 3 below).

3. The Closed Gates

During the course of the first few centuries of Islam there was much discussion and disagreement among scholars (*ulema*) as to many matters relating to theology, such as the *unicity* of God, the *uncreated* nature of the Qur'an, and *theopraxy* (practice) in Islam, especially concerning Shari'a (Islamic law) about which the Qur'an is silent on many issues.

Broadly speaking, two opposing schools of thought arose among the *ulema* and persisted for several hundred years. These became known as the Rationalist (of whom the Mu'tazilites were once the most powerful) and the Traditionalist schools. Gradually by about the year 1000 AD, Traditionalist *ulema* gained the ascendancy in Sunni Islam and they have retained it until the present day, but not in the Shi'ite schools. Generally accepted until the present, their doctrine of inimitability (*i'jaz*) of the Qur'an, in both form and content, underlies their inflexibility.

The consequences of the enduring triumph of the Traditionalists are extremely serious for Islam as a whole but most of these lie outside the remit of this paper. In one respect, however, some further consideration is necessary here. The Shari'a was developed by the *ulema* as a comprehensive body of rules guiding the life of all Muslims. Its moral provisions are made concrete through the discipline of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), which has four sources. These, in descending order of importance, are:

- a. the Qur'an
- b. the Sunna or traditions of the prophet Muhammad
- c. *qiyas* or analogical arguments
- d. *ijtihad* or individual thinking.

Ijtihad was a major source of law during the formative stages of Shari'a, but about the end of the tenth century the Traditionalist *ulema* outlawed it as a legitimate tool of exegesis. The action has been called *the closing of the gates of ijtihad*. This inflexible attitude has persisted and pervaded all aspects of Islamic life. But recently there is a growing movement among younger Muslim intellectuals, especially women, for reform, that is to say, the opening of the gates of *ijtihad* and the bringing back once more, after a whole millennium, of the right of individual thought in Islam.

4. New Light

In recent decades mainly western scholars of Islam have been casting doubts on the veracity of the traditional version of the origins of the Qur'an and Islam. The story is long and complex and has many sources which have been summarised by Warraq for the ordinary reader.⁶ Scholars have approached the subject from many different points of view and disagree a great deal among themselves. What is different about all their work is that they have applied modern scientific methods of scriptural criticism, that have previously thrown so much light onto the sources of other faiths such as Judaism and Christianity, to Islam. Their work has often been neglected and the little attention it has had from the Muslim world has, not

surprisingly perhaps in view of the closed minds of the *ulema*, been completely dismissive and even hostile.

If we start with the dating of the main written sources of Islam, there is no contemporary evidence to that time, i.e. late sixth and early seventh centuries AD, in existence from within Islam for the Qur'an, the Hadith (the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad), the *Sira* (biography of Muhammad) or the *Tafsir* (commentary and explication of the Qur'an). Such materials all date from around two centuries later. This was in the period following the work of al-Khalil bin Ahmad, (died 786), the founder of Arabic lexicography and of Sibawayh (died 796), to whom the grammar of classical Arabic is attributed. A few Jewish, Christian or other contemporary sources outside Islam tend to confirm such later datings. There is some evidence of an historic figure of Muhammad as a trader, but little else.

In 1972 a most extraordinary discovery of very early Islamic documents was made during the restoration of the Great Mosque in San'aa, Yemen.⁷ Included are parchment fragments of what appear to be the earliest Qur'ans in existence, dating to the seventh or eighth centuries AD. More than 30 years later, very little indeed of these finds has been published and the work has encountered frequent, serious obstacles. The previous research of Wansbrough^{8,9} suggested that the Qur'an evolved gradually over a considerable period of time; the definitive text had not been achieved as late as the ninth century; and that this

later dating coincides with evidence for the progressive rise of classical Arabic over these early years of Islam.

A large proportion of the Qur'an consists of material that is clearly related to older sources, particularly Jewish and, to a lesser extent, Christian New Testament sources. Both these communities had prominent presences in the northern part of Arabia. The most extreme form of the theory that has been developed of the gradual emergence of Islam from Jewish and other non-Arab origins has been put forward (although partially retracted in recent years) by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook.¹⁰

Yet other researchers in lexicography have claimed that there is a strong influence of the Syriac language throughout the Qur'an.¹¹ It has been claimed that hundreds of words are derived from Aramaic (Syriac) or other languages, or make more sense in these languages than in Arabic. For example, of great interest is the word *Qur'an* itself. This is said to be derived from *qeryana*, which was the word used in the Syriac church for a liturgical prayer book, with a purpose similar to that of the Qur'an itself (see Section 2 above). There is much evidence in this linguistic research against the claim of the Qur'an itself (Suras 42.7; 46.12 and many other verses) that it is an Arabic Qur'an.

A great tide of scholarship and interest, from both without and within, is now breaking on the gates of *ijtihad*. It remains to be seen how long, in the present climate of fear, reactionary

forces can continue to resist the probing of independent scholarship.

5. Some Contemporary Consequences

A well-educated Arab Muslim is brought up to claim linguistic superiority over several other groups of people, including all those who do not understand *Al'Arabiyy'a* and who cannot recite the Qur'an with *tajwid*. This includes Muslims as well as non-Muslims. A few of the many millions of speakers of Farsi (Iran), Pashto (Afghanistan), and Urdu (Pakistan and the great majority of British Muslims) might gain some respect if they could master *tajwid* because they could recite the Qur'an although they could not understand it. Linguists¹² do not recognise on technical grounds the right of any speakers of any particular language to claim that their language is in any way superior to other languages.

These are deep, largely unrecognised, divisions within Islam.

In many developing countries at the present time, best documented in Pakistan,¹³ the poorest families send their young boys for a minimum of education in a Qur'anic school (*madrassa*). Frequently this is confined to long daily hours for years of memorisation and repetition of verses of the Qur'an. Many are simultaneously or later trained as Taliban or al-Qaeda fighters.

Finally, in these days of tension there are frequent calls for dialogue with Islam. Little attention seems to be paid to the importance of the role of the Arabic language for the Muslim. If an encounter takes place, it can only be fruitful and not damaging if each side is well-informed and well-disposed toward the other. Until the gates of *ijtihad* are opened, how can this come about?

ENDNOTES

1. D Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).
2. P Crone, M Cook, *Hagarism: the Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge University Press, 1977).
3. K Versteegh, *The Arabic Language* (Edinburgh, 1997).
4. T Lester, 'What is the Koran?' *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1999.
5. QI. Abdul-Aziz, *The importance of tajwid* (Madrassah in'aamiyyah, Camperdown, 2006).
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7. T Lester, 'What is the Koran?', *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1999.
8. J Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies* (Oxford University Press, 1977).
9. A Rippin, *Literary Analysis of Koran, Tafsir, and Sira: the methodologies of John Wansbrough* in I Warraq, ed., *The Origins of the Koran* (Prometheus Books, Amherst 1998), 351-363.
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11. C Luxenberg, *Die Syro-Aramaische Lesart des Koran*, 2000.
12. D Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).
13. D T Blair, 'Pakistan's extremist religious schools "in mourning" for taliban's collapse', *Daily Telegraph*, February 18, 2004.