

## REVIEW ESSAY

*The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. Edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. New York: Harper One, 2015. lx + 1,988 pages. \$59.99.

*The Study Quran* is an impressive volume intended for scholars and teachers in various fields, as well as for students and general readers, both Muslim and non-Muslim. It is a vital addition to the existing translations of the Quran\* and to the not-so-vast body of commentaries on the Quran in the English language. The volume contains a comprehensive English translation and an extensive commentary on the entire Quran, as well as several essays on a range of topics, including Quranic ethics and law, branches of theology, death and dying, and art in the Quran. It includes useful appendices on hadith citations, a timeline of major events specified in the Quran, biographies of the commentators and the authors, a solid index, and a number of maps illustrating the ancient world and Arabia in the early years of Islam.

The volume is a great resource for students and scholars in the fields of theology and religious studies and can be a useful reference in other fields of the humanities. It is an essential resource for scholars, teachers, and students of Islam, both graduate and undergraduate. It provides students interested in reading the Quran in greater depth access to the rich commentary tradition in a single volume. Study of the Quran for those not familiar with Arabic or Persian (the major languages of the commentarial tradition) has presented quite a challenge. I often refer my students to online sources, as the print sources are at best piecemeal; a university or college library in the United States, for example, might have one or two volumes translated into English out of a massive twenty- or thirty-volume commentary. *The Study Quran* fills the void by providing an in-depth analysis of verses, Quranic phrases, and a variety of topics while incorporating multiple commentaries, among them the most prominent and influential works of *tafsir* (interpretation).

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the editor in chief, is a world-renowned scholar of Islam and comparative religion. He is a leading proponent of *religio perennis*, an ideology that perceives all religious traditions as sharing a single universal truth as a basis of the development of various doctrines. That perspective can find its rationalization in the Quran and its call to universality of revelation, particularly in its reference to Abraham and Jesus as *muslims*, “submitters.”

\* Editor's Note: In consultation with Dr. Davary, the editors decided to depart from the accepted scholarly transliteration of the Muslim sacred text as “Qur'an.” Instead we used the transliteration “Quran” throughout the review essay to adhere to the choice that Seyyed Hossein Nasr used in editing his volume.

This point is taken as a prelude to the beginnings of the development of *Religionwissenschaft* as it appears in the works of Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (d. 422/1048) and the theories of inner unity of religions in the works of Ibn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240) and Jalal al-din Rumi (d. 672/1273). Nasr is also the *shaykh*, "spiritual master," of the independent branch of the Sufi Shadhiliya-Alawiya order—namely, the Maryamiyya. The general editors, Caner Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, and Joseph Lumbard, and the assistant editor, Muhammed Rustom, are all Muslim scholars of Islamic studies. All have studied with Nasr and were recruited by him for this project. The nine-year project was intended as a Muslim effort rather than a Western or an Orientalist approach to the Quran, even as all the editors of the volume, including Nasr himself, are Western-educated with grounding in Islamic traditional teachings. The volume is not limited confessionally, ethnically, or geographically.

*The Study Quran* avoids fundamentalist or modernist approaches to interpretation developed in the past two centuries. Its goal is to be faithful to traditional interpretations and to be universal. It contains both Sunni and Shi'a commentaries. The essay contributors include scholars from various geographical and ethnic backgrounds (American, Egyptian, Iranian, French, Pakistani Canadian, and others). The contributors also represent different schools of Islamic thought and Islamic law. Some are Sunni, others are Shi'a (Twelver, or Isma'ili). Some have leanings toward *tasawwuf* (Sufism), and others place emphasis on linguistic, political-philosophical, or ethical perspectives.

The volume's introduction provides important information especially for those not familiar with the place of the Quran within Islam and Muslim intellectual and spiritual traditions. An effort has been made to ensure that the volume is not limited to historical, social, or linguistic interests alone, and that it remains true to "its sacred and revealed character." The volume emphatically represents the spiritual aspect of the Quran—a text that "brings Muslims from Sumatra to Senegal to tears" when recited (xxiv). Recitation of the Quran is one of the forms of Muslim piety and is commonly exercised by women and men. This volume highlights the importance of the Quran as revelation, and its stories not as historical accounts of events but rather as symbolic stories with ethical and spiritual lessons. The centrality of the Quran is highlighted, presenting the perspective that Islamic sciences would not have developed if it had not been for the advent of the Quran. From this perspective Nasr states that works such as the *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas Aquinas would not have existed in their current forms if not for the compilation of the Quran. He further maintains that words such as *algebra* and *algorithm* would not have existed without the Quran, because the flourishing of the Islamic sciences was dependent on the

Quran. At the same time, all Islamic thought, art and architecture, and science are in a way commentaries on the Quran.

This Quran-centric perspective is rooted in the idea that the Quran is about absolute Reality; it is a representation of that Reality which is the absolute Real. From a comparative perspective, the Quran is compared to the body of Christ. Just as Christ in Christianity is the representation of Divine Reality, the Quran within Islam represents the Real. To communicate this comparative point, Wilfred Cantwell Smith coined the term “inlibration”—“God becoming book”—in reference to the revelation of the Quran, as parallel to “incarnation”—“God becoming man.” Another debate among the founders of Islamic theology (*kalam*) has been the question of eternity versus the created nature of the Quran. There have always been theologians believing in either position, and those who believe that the Quran is both created (*muhdith*) and eternal (*qadeem*; that is, it has existed with God the Preserved Tablet).

Arabic as the language of the Quran is compared with bread and wine in the Eucharist, not to Aramaic, Greek, or Vulgate Latin as the languages of the New Testament. The significance of Arabic orthography and of *al-jafri* (the traditional science that deals with the numerical values of the letters of the Arabic alphabet) is quite interesting and highly important in the commentaries. For example, the numerical value of the letters for the word Allah is 66, the same as the numerical value of *Adam wa Hawwa'* (Adam and Eve), the representation of the androgynous human state—*insan* (human).

The gender-neutral Arabic term *insan* refers to both men and women. The Old English equivalent, *man*, although in the past referring to both men and women, has come under criticism in American usage. As a result, gender-neutral language has been used in literature of the past forty to fifty years (e.g., *humanity* is used instead of *mankind*, and *human* instead of *man*). The use of the word *man* even if *homo* or *insan* follows in parentheses may imply gender hierarchies in the readers' minds, hierarchies that may not be intended by the Divine Author.

Several English translations of the Quran are available both online and in print. The earliest of these, a translation from the French translation of the original Arabic, was produced in the 1600s.<sup>1</sup> In the nineteenth century, Cambridge scholar E. H. Palmer produced his English translation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Alcoran of Mahomet, translated out of Arabic into French by Andre Du Ryer* (London: England, 1649), <https://archive.org/details/alcoranofmahometoodury>.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Henry Palmer's translation was originally published in 1880 as part of a series of sacred texts of the East. It has been reprinted in part or its entirety by various publishers and is partially available on the Web at various sites, including: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/sbeo6/index.htm>.

Muhammad Pickthall's translation in 1930 was praised by A. J. Arberry,<sup>3</sup> whose own translation of the Quran was the first by a scholar of Arabic and Islam. Iranian woman poet Tahere Safarzadeh published *Quran: Arabic, English, Persian in Persian and English* in 2001.<sup>4</sup> Another Muslim woman, Laleh Bakhtiar, a student of Nasr's, published her translation, *The Sublime Qur'an*, in 2007.<sup>5</sup> The challenge faced by most translators, including those of the present volume, is not so much accuracy as how to convey the rhythm and the lyrics of the original text. Thomas Cleary's 2004 *The Quran: A New Translation* is one of the few texts that reproduces the semipoetic tone of the Quran while remaining true to its meaning.<sup>6</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali's 1934 translation<sup>7</sup> and Muhammad Asad's 1980 version,<sup>8</sup> along with that of Muhammad Pickthall (1930), are readily available on the Internet and provide various search options. I find the translation provided by *The Study Quran* to be similar in tone to Yusuf Ali's. The translators of the current volume did not aim to update the language, as the updated language "would soon become out of date" (xlii).

One of the difficulties in selecting a particular translation of the Quran is not the limitations of the translation. It is, rather, that because of their symbolic and figurative language sacred texts are ambiguous even in their original language. This makes recommending any translation that is not accompanied by a more detailed interpretation difficult. *The Study Quran* offers not only a translation that is close to the original Arabic, but also a detailed commentary.

The commentary in this volume brings together several works of *tafsir* (interpretation) produced by Shi'a and Sunni commentators, from the earliest commentary, by Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d. AD 767), to the twenty-volume collection by *allameh* Tabataba'i (d. AD 1981). *The Study Quran* has incorporated at least forty-one commentaries, listed in the commentators' key along with dates and abbreviations used in the text of the commentary for easy referencing. This is the most valuable part of the volume, as the individual works

<sup>3</sup> *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran*, trans. Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall. Originally published in 1930, Pickthall's translation was reprinted many times and is currently available on multiple websites, including <http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/pick>. A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, (London: Allen & Unwin, New York: Macmillan, 1955).

<sup>4</sup> *Qur'an: Arabic, English, Persian*, trans. Tahere Safarzade (Tehran: Soore Mehr, 2001); also available on Google books: [https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=cMEICgAAQB&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=cMEICgAAQB&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false).

<sup>5</sup> *The Sublime Qur'an*, trans. Laleh Bakhtiar (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Chicago: Starlatch Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1934), available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/yaq/index.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> *The Message of the Qur'an*, trans. Muhammad Asad (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andulus, 1980).

of *tafsir* are primarily in Arabic or Persian and represent an expansive body of literature, at times spanning twenty to thirty volumes. *The Study Quran* gives the English-reading audience the opportunity to access a thorough summary and analysis of the most important works of traditional *tafsir* in a single volume. It brings together various voices within the traditional perspective, along with the respect that has often been afforded to points of disagreements and discord. Ultimately, the volume ends with a common prayer attributing all that is good to the Divine, asking forgiveness for shortcomings of the effort, and concluding with the phrase “and God knows best.”

The *Study Quran* is printed on lightweight offset paper, which makes its nearly 2,000 pages manageable in both volume and weight and keeps its price low and highly affordable. The volume includes helpful suggestions on various ways of approaching the text, including reading the translation in a linear fashion, reading the translation with the commentary, or following the citations or cross-references from one part of the volume to the other.

Various keys, citations, and indexes enable readers to navigate the text with ease. *The Study Quran* can also function as a kind of encyclopedia of Quranic commentary. One can easily look up a particular verse or topic using the index and the various references provided and follow the citations to read all that is said on the topic in different parts of the book, to gain an understanding of nuance and context. The original Arabic text is all that is missing in this volume. Had the Arabic text been included, readers familiar with Arabic or in the process of learning the language of the Quran would have had the opportunity to read the English translation in parallel with the original Arabic.

BAHAR DAVARY  
*University of San Diego*