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The Qur'an's Guidance to Readers (through both principle and example) On How to Read the Qur'an

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Eric Voegelin begins his essay "The Gospel and Culture" with a reflection on "Man the Questioner" as presented in the *Dutch Catechism*. Voegelin argues that the Catechism is "a sensible first step toward regaining for the gospel the reality it has lost through doctrinal hardening."[1] An examination of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, provides example after example of men called by God who did not set their "inquiring minds" aside—Job and Abraham being two prime examples. Does the Qur'an encourage, through word and example, the same spirit of spiritual questing and questioning? To use Voegelin's phraseology, do the Bible and the Qur'an offer "an equivalence of experience and symbolization" of the Divine-human encounter?[2]

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[1] Eric Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 12: Published Essays, 1966-1985* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p. 175.

[2] Voegelin does not deal with this question directly, and his brief discussion of Muhammad in *The Ecumenic Age* emphasizes the patterns of spiritual and political power characteristic of the ecumenic age as reflected in Islam. Ecumenic religion is characterized by expansive religious institutions geographically coextensive with believers and a message of "the world transcendent God as the source of order that is universally binding for all men" rather than a regional focus. The revelation to Muhammad was a "blend of pragmatic conquest and spiritual apostolate" set within the following historical framework: 1) There is "a series of divine revelations to a succession of messengers." 2) There is a succession of messages—Torah and Gospel preceding the revelation to Muhammad, The Qur'an. 3) The history of the Book is one in which "the last one is superior to the preceding ones." 4) a progression of Prophets, with Muhammad, the last, as is the "Seal of the Prophets," 5) "The drama of creation is a struggle between truth and falsehood in which truth, with the aid of the messengers, will prevail." 6) "The struggle between truth and falsehood has to be conducted on the battlefields between the armies of Mohammed and his adversaries." 7) Falsehood will be removed from the world by energetic action by believers, 8) including the slaughter of infidels. See Eric Voegelin, *Order and History Volume 4: The Ecumenic Age*, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 17*, Michael Franz, ed., (Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), pp. 192, 198-201.

If we take the heart of the biblical experience of God to be found in the questioning spirit evinced by those encountering the Divine—the asking of questions of both themselves and of God—then the answer to my question about the equivalence of Bible and Qur'an experience might be affirmative. Ziauddin Sardar maintains that "The Qur'an does not ask me to accept anything passively; rather it invites me to engage actively in a process of questioning and reasoning. It is the only way, I think, of approaching and interpreting the Qur'an in our time, here and now."[3]

Before moving to a consideration of the Qur'an, I briefly outline David Weiss Halivni's discussion of "man's role in revelation." Halivni's discussion of revelation in the Torah provides a continuum of human-Divine interaction that will be useful as a framework to think about revelation in the Qur'an and the nature of the Divine-human encounter presented there. Halivni argues that there are historically three rabbinic positions on "the nature of revelation of the Oral Torah," which he identifies as the maximalistic, the intermediary, and the minimalistic. According to the maximalistic position, "God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai the entire Oral Torah consisting of all the legitimate arguments of, and all the legitimate solutions to, every issue that may arise."[4] The intermediary position holds "that God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai all the legitimate arguments of every issue that may arise but not their solutions."[5] The minimalist position moves even farther away from divine determination of religious and moral

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[3] Ziauddin Sardar, *Reading the Qur'an: The Contemporary Relevance of the Sacred Text of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 20.
[4] David Weiss Halivni, "On Man's Role in Revelation," in Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, and Nahum M. Sarna, eds., *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Intellect in Quest of Understanding*, v. 2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989): 29.
[5] Halivni, p. 29.

standards and behavior, maintaining "that God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai directions for man to follow, principles for man to implement, but not detailed stipulations."[6]

Within each of these positions man's responsibility differs, and as we move from maximalist to intermediary to minimalist man's authority to interpret the revelation—or set rules for conduct—increases. From the perspective of the maximalist position, since God has already stated all arguments and solutions, "Man merely needs to uncover them. True learning is rediscovering the given and the revealed."

According to the intermediary position, God revealed all of the legitimate arguments, but "the solutions were left for man to offer." Whatever man offers "becomes a part of 'the words of the living God'." According to some sources, these issues are to be decided by majority vote. Halivni concludes that, for this position, "Contradictions are thus built into revelation. Revelation was formulated within the framework of contradictions in the form of argumentation pro and con. No legitimate argument or solution can be in conflict with the divine opinion, for all such arguments and solutions constitute a part of God's opinion."[7]

The minimalist position holds that God revealed only general principles, and that these principles "embodied, in potential, all the legal details yet to be decided by generations of scholars," thus leaving us with an "organic relationship between divinely-revealed principles and humanly-determined details."

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[6] Halivni, p. 30.
[7] Halivni, p. 30.

At this point, I will keep as an open question the applicability of Halivni's discussion for understanding the Qur'an. Even if we accept his argument in relation to the Torah, the argument may not have application beyond that. A standard Muslim view of the Qur'an suggests that any attempt to apply standards and techniques of biblical interpretation to the Qur'an would be inappropriate. As the late scholar of Islamic thought Fazlur Rahman wrote, "the Qur'an, for Muslims, is the divine word literally revealed to the Prophet Muhammad . . . in a sense in which probably no other religious document is held to be so."[8]

Ibn Khaldun offers a classic Muslim comparison of the revelation of the Qur'an with the Hebrew and Christian scriptures in his introduction to history, *The Muqaddimah*. In his discussion of miracles Ibn Khaldun writes,

> the Qur'an is alone among the divine books, in that our Prophet received it directly in the words and phrases in which it appears. In this respect, it differs from the Torah, the Gospel, and other heavenly books. The prophets received them in the form of ideas during the state of revelation. After their return to a human state, they expressed those ideas in their own ordinary words. Therefore, those books do not have 'inimitability.' Inimitability is restricted to the Qur'an. The other prophets received their books in a manner similar to that in which our Prophet received (certain) ideas that he attributed to God, such as are found in many traditions. The fact that he received the Qur'an directly, in its literal form, is attested by the following statement of Muhammad on the authority of his Lord who said: 'Do not set your tongue in motion to make haste with (the revelation of the Qur'an). It is up to us to put it together and to recite it.'
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> The reason for the revelation of these verses was Muhammad's haste to study the (Qur'anic) verses, because he feared that he might forget (them), and because he wished to keep the directly and literally revealed text in memory. God guaranteed him and He (Himself) would 'keep' it in the following verse: 'We revealed the reminder, and we are keeping it.' This is the meaning of 'keeping' which is peculiar to the Qur'an. The meaning of it is not what the common people think. (Their opinion) is far off the mark.

[8] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 2.

> Many verses of the Qur'an show that He directly and literally revealed the Qur'an, of which every *surah* is inimitable. Our Prophet wrought no greater miracle than the Qur'an and the fact that he united the Arabs in his mission. 'If you had expended all the treasures on earth, you would have achieved no unity among them. But God achieved unity among them.'
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> This should be known. It should be pondered. It will then be found to be correct, exactly as I have stated. One should also consider the evidence that lies in the superiority of Muhammad's rank over that of the other prophets and in the exaltedness of his position.[9]

What are the implications of this understanding of the Qur'an as the exact words of God transmitted directly from God to Muhammad for approaching and understanding the text of the Qur'an and for the question of human freedom? Those questions will be the twin foci of this paper.

To the extent that we understand the Qur'anic revelation in Ibn Khaldun's terms, it appears that Halivni's framework can have no application for understanding the revelations to Muhammad collected in the Qur'an. Or, perhaps more accurately, only Halivni's category of "maximalistic revelation" applies to the Qur'an. This appears to be the perspective of many, if not most, Muslims today. Ziauddin Sardar acknowledges this when he writes, "As Mona Siddiqui notes in *How to Read the Qur'an*, most Muslims believe that the Qur'an is 'a closed book which one can only read, recite and obey'."[10] Later, in his own voice, he argues that the Muslim tradition of allowing only religious scholars to interpret the Qur'an "turned the Qur'an, the fundamental source of guidance for all Muslims, into a closed book for the vast majority of believers."[11]

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[9] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, 2nd ed., trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967): I: 192-194.
[10] Sardar, p. 21.
[11] Sardar, p. 31.

Sardar's study of the Qur'an is in part an autobiographical reflection on his own experience encountering the Qur'an as a child in Pakistan, first in lessons from his mother and later as a student at the local *madrasa*. As an adult, he returned to visit his childhood *madrasa,* and found that "It had not changed much, except for one thing. I could see that it had become a much more regimented and violent environment. . . .This was not about inspiring the love of a Sacred Text. It was about instilling the fear of God by brutal means."[12] He made a point of visiting other schools, and his impression was confirmed: "Here, the Qur'an was used not for meditation and inner reflection, questioning and thought, but as a tool of oppression."[13] Finally, Sardar relates his experience in Saudi Arabia, where he resided for a number of years. He spent time both at Mecca University and visited the university in Medina, where "You could hardly move a few yards without someone quoting the Qur'an at you. But the quotations were not meant to be discussed or explored: they were used explicitly to force you to behave in a certain way or accept certain unjust laws or unreasonable positions, or to shut you up. The Qur'an had become a stick frequently used for ensuring conformity and suppressing dissenting views. It was all so far removed from the Qur'an I had known during my childhood."[14]

APPROACHING THE QUR'AN

With this as background, I will now turn to the Qur'an itself to see what guidance it gives its readers on these questions. In this investigation it is essential to take Ziauddin Sardar's exhortation seriously: "The greatest challenge for both Muslims and non-Muslims

[12] Sardar, p. 7.
[13] Sardar, p. 8.
[14] Sardar, p. 9.

is to read the Qur'an on its own terms, to engage with its text unencumbered by prejudices and preconceived ideas, to free their minds as far as humanly possible from what we have been told to understand and encounter its words anew."[15]

Q 3: 6-7 is my beginning point, and it takes us to the heart of a number of crucial claims and difficulties. It reads,

> There is no God but Him, the Mighty, the Wise: it is He who has sent this Scripture down to you [Prophet]. Some of its verses are definite in meaning—these are the cornerstone of the Scripture—and others are ambiguous. The perverse at heart eagerly pursue the ambiguities in their attempt to make trouble and to pin down a specific meaning of their own: only God knows the true meaning. Those firmly grounded in knowledge say, 'We believe in it: it is all from our Lord'—only those with real perception will take heed . . .[16]

These verses make a number of assertions or assumptions: 1) The Qur'an was sent by God to Muhammad. 2) Everything in the Qur'an is true. 3) While everything in the Qur'an is true, everything is not equally clear. 4) Some "verses are definite in meaning." These are the foundation of the Qur'an (literally, "the Mother of the Book"). 5) Some verses are ambiguous. 6) True believers are "grounded in knowledge" and have "real perception." 7) True believers believe the entire Qur'an because it all came from God. 8) One way to identify "the perverse at heart" is to note those who "eagerly pursue the ambiguities." 8) Those that pursue ambiguity do so to make trouble, and not to learn. 9) Those that pursue ambiguity seek to impose their own meaning on God's revelation. 10) Only God knows the true meaning of the ambiguous verses.

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[15] Sardar, p. xiv.

[16] *The Qur'an*, translated by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, "Oxford World's Classics," 2005), p. 34. Unless otherwise noted all quotations from the Qur'an are taken from this translation. Hereafter references will be parenthetically inserted into the text noting both sura and verse followed by page number (e.g., Q 3: 6-7; p. 34).

Let us provisionally accept all of these claims and see where they lead us. Since everything in the Qur'an is true it contains no contradictions. Apparent contradictions may arise when we compare definite and ambiguous verses.[17] These apparent contradictions should be resolved by interpreting the ambiguous verses through the prism of the definite. From these claims one might formulate the following as a first rule in reading the Qur'an: Make verses "definite in meaning" the foundation of one's understanding of the Qur'an, and interpret ambiguous verses in light of the definite.

In order to apply this rule it is essential that one be able to identify verses as either definite or ambiguous. What are the criteria for making this determination? At this point it may be instructive to turn to a commentary on the Qur'an for assistance. Ibn e Kathir (1301-1373, c.e.) offers this formulation, which parallels my rule one:

> Allah states that in the Qur'an, there are Ayat [verses] that are Muhkamat, entirely clear and plain, and these are the foundations of the Book which are plain for everyone. And there are Ayat in the Qur'an that are Mutashabihat not entirely clear for many, or some people. So those who refer to the Muhkam Ayat to understand the Mutashabih Ayat, will have acquired the correct guidance, and vice versa.[18]

Here is Kathir's distinction between the two types of verses (Ayat): First, "The Muhkamat [definite] are the Ayat that explain the abrogating rulings, the allowed, prohibited, laws, limits, obligations and rulings that should be believed in and

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[17] Another difficulty arises if "definite" verses conflict. If all of our propositions above are true, then any conflict is only apparent, and we must misunderstand one (or perhaps both) of the verses, so we need to analyze these verses until we arrive at a complete understanding in which they are in agreement, or at least compatible with each other. If we must engage in this process of adjustment frequently, however, it may raise the question of exactly how clear the definite verses are. Alternatively, it may give rise to the question of which category of the three types of people identified by Averroës we fall into (see below).

[18] Tafsir of Ibn e Kathir, "The Mutashabihat and Muhkamat Ayat," at www.islamicstudies.info/ibnkathir/ibnkathir.php (accessed June 13, 2012). Additional quotations from Kathir's commentary will not be footnoted but will be clearly identified parenthetically and are from this source.

implemented." "Abrogating rulings" refers to the doctrine that certain passages in the Qur'an have been nullified by other passages. The remainder of Kathir's list appears to be rules for conduct, either positive (requirements) or negative (restrictions), which can be acted on. Second, "As for the Mutashabihat [ambiguous] Ayat, they include the abrogated Ayat, parables, oaths, and what should be believed in, but not implemented."

Compare Kathir's view to that of Sayyid Abul A la Mawdudi (1903-1979) in his commentary, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an*:

> "Ambiguous" verses are those whose meaning may have some degree of equivocation. It is obvious that no way of life can be prescribed for man unless a certain amount of knowledge explaining the truth about the universe, about its origin and end, about man's position in it and other matters of similar importance, is intimated to him. It is also evident that the truths which lie beyond the range of human perception have always eluded and will continue to elude man; no words exist in the human vocabulary which either express or portray them. In speaking about such things, we necessarily resort to words and expressions generally employed in connection with tangible objects. In the Qur'an, too, this kind of language is employed in relation to supernatural matters; the verses which have been characterized as "ambiguous" refer to such matters.[19]

What types of matters fall into this general category identified by Mawdudi's understanding of ambiguous things? I especially want to emphasize what he calls "supernatural matters," and ask what is included here? Does our understanding of God touch on "supernatural matters"? It seems to fall into that group of "truths which lie beyond the range of human perception." Accounts of Paradise would also seem to belong in this category, based on Mawdudi's description, rather than in the "definite" category.

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[19] Sayyid Abul A la Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding the Quran* (English Version of *Tafhim al-Qur'an*), trans. and ed. by Zafor Ishaq Ansari, fn. 6 to Sura 3: 7, at: http://www.islamicstudies.info/tafheem.php (accessed June 13, 2012). Additional quotations from Mawdudi's commentary will not be footnoted but will be clearly identified parenthetically and are from this source.

Concerning the definite verses, Mawdudi writes, "They embody admonition and instruction as well as the refutation of erroneous doctrines and the elucidation of the Right Way. They also contain the fundamentals of the true faith; teachings relating to belief, worship and morality, and mandatory duties and prohibitions. These are the verses which will guide the genuine seeker after Truth who turns to the Qur'an in order to find out what he ought and ought not to do" (Mawdudi, fn. 5, Q 3:7).

Both Kathir and Mawdudi emphasize duties and prohibitions—rules of behavior, actions to be carried out or to be avoided—in their discussion of the definite verses of the Qur'an. This emphasis on prescribed and proscribed actions is perhaps why, near the end of sura 2, it is stated that the faithful "believe in God, His angels, His scriptures, and His messengers. "We make no distinction between any of His messengers,' they say, 'We hear and obey" (Q 2: 265; p. 33).

Q 3: 7 was a key component for Averroës' argument in his *Decisive Treatise*. Averroës' purpose in writing this essay was to establish that "wisdom" (philosophy) and its method of proceeding (demonstration) is compatible with "law" (divine revelation as contained in the Qur'an). God's call to men through the revelation of the Qur'an "is determined for every Muslim in accordance with the method of assent his temperament and nature require." This differential call is necessary because "people's natures vary in excellence with respect to assent."[20] Averroës then delineates these different natures.

> Thus, some assent by means of demonstration; some assent by means of dialectical statements in the same way the one adhering to demonstration assents by means of demonstration, there being nothing greater in their natures; and some assent by

[20] Averroës, *The Book of the Decisive Treatise Determining the Connection between the Law and Wisdom*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2001), p. 8.

> means of rhetorical statements, just as the one adhering to demonstration assents by means of demonstrative statements.[21]

He then suggests that the Qur'an recognizes these three different natures by "containing [different] methods of calling to God (may He be exalted). And that is manifest in His statement, 'Call to the path of your Lord by wisdom, fine preaching, and arguing with them by means of what is finest'."[22]

All of this background is supplied by Averroës to undergird his crucial move in arguing that philosophers are not acting impiously if they do not agree with a consensus on the meaning of a Qur'anic passage. Here is where he makes use of Q 3: 7, with a different reading of the verse based on where punctuation is placed—as he writes, "we choose to place the stop after His statement (may He be exalted), 'and those well grounded in science'."[23] Since the written Arabic does not contain punctuation, the reader must insert the punctuation as he reads. Averroës argues that key sentences in should read as follows, "Those with deviousness in their hearts pursue the ones that resemble one another, seeking discord and seeking to interpret them. None knows their interpretation but God and those well grounded in science. They say, 'We believe in it. Everything is from our Lord.' And none heeds but those who are mindful."[24]

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[21] Averroës, p. 8.
[22] Averroës, p. 8. Averroës quotes sura 16: 126, which is translated by Haleem as follows, "[Prophet], call [people] to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good teaching. Argue with them in the most courteous way, for your Lord knows best who has strayed from His way and who is rightly guided" (p. 174).
[23] Averroës, p. 12.
[24] Charles Butterworth translation in Averroës, p. 53 fn. 20. Stefan Wild calls the reading favored by Averroës "the minority reading," and the reading that places the "full stop" after "None knows their interpretation but God" the "standard reading." Wild writes, "The text that the Islamic community finally accepted as canonical—the so called 'Uthmanic text, on which all existing qur'anic texts are based—is a version in which the Arabic script cannot distinguish between two contradictory interpretations . . . According to the Standard Reading, part of the qur'anic revelation is interpretable only by God; according to the Minority Reading, also some humans, namely those rooted in knowledge, know the interpretation of this part of the holy text. . . .The official qur'anic text in its written form, therefore, 'carries' the two contradictory interpretations. Perhaps we

Averroës uses Q 3: 7 to argue for an esoteric teaching in the Qur'an, available only to those firmly grounded in knowledge. He concludes with a brief summary of the three types of people in relation to "the Law" (the Qur'an). The first type, with no interpretive skill at all, is the "rhetorical people" who are tied to the literal meaning of the text. The second class is open to dialectical interpretation, while the third type, open to demonstration, consists of the wise.[25]

Thus Q 3: 7, designed to clarify the nature of the revelation contained in the Qur'an, itself appears to raise a number of crucial issues for which no consensus of interpretation or understanding exists. Rather than eliminating interpretation, however, this verse has been used at times to move the argument from the substance of revelation to a question of definition—if a verse is "definite" it is to be accepted without argument, but if "ambiguous" it is to be approached with great caution. As Leah Kinberg notes, this was in part the dynamic in the argument between the Mu'tazilis and the Sunnis over the question of free will versus predestination. Kinberg summarizes the dispute as follows:

> Both sides refer to the same verse, Q 18: 29 which states "Say, 'The truth is from your Lord.' So whoever wishes, let him believe and whoever wishes, let him disbelieve." The Mu'tazilis define the verse as *muhkam*, i.e. the kind of verse that should be followed since it favors the argument for free will. The Sunnis, who do

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may even go so far as to say that its whole point is this lack of decision for one of the two versions. The community could agree only on the opaque version of the qur'anic verse, because its ambiguity made it acceptable to the rival factions who had the power to decide on the canonical text." Stefan Wild, "The Self-Referentiality of the Qur'an: Sura 3: 7 as an Exegetical Challenge," in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering, eds., *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptual Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 424.

[25] Averroës, p. 26. While Averroës may not have been successful in defending the realm of philosophy from Islamic orthodoxy, the existence of a class "firmly grounded in knowledge" paved the way for the intellectual/spiritual hierarchy in Islam. Cf. Leah Kinberg, "Ambiguous," in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), V. 1, p. 75: "Had the Qur'an consisted only of *muhkam* verses, there would have been no need for the science of interpretation of the Qur'an to develop. Had every verse been clear to everyone, the difference in people's abilities would not have come to the fore. The learned and the ignorant would have been equal and intellectual endeavor would cease" according to some commentators.

> not accept the idea of free will, define this verse as *mutashabih*, i.e. the kind of verse that should not be followed. Q 76: 30 presents the opposite view: "You cannot will [anything] unless God wills it." The Mu'tazilis define this verse as *mutashabih* since it contradicts their view, but the Sunnis define it as *muhkam* because it favors the idea of predestination. By shifting the terms, it became possible to endorse or refute an idea according to one's needs.[26]

With a number of difficulties noted in relation to the definite and the ambiguous verses found in the Qur'an, but with none resolved, I will now turn to question of what we might learn from one example provided in the Qur'an of how it should be approached.

As many have noted, one of the differences between Qur'an and Bible is that the Qur'an contains very little narrative and has no overarching narrative structure. Since the Qur'an itself does not provide the context for specific revelations, the question arises as to whether every revelation, every statement from God to Muhammad contained in the Qur'an, is to have a universal application. Ziauddin Sardar offers a brief overview of the traditional understanding of context. First is "the context within the Qur'an,"[27] and to understand any passage it is necessary to place it into dialog with other passages on the same topic or theme. This approach raises the question of definite versus ambiguous verses discussed above, but Sardar raises a different issue using the example of the Qur'an's various statements concerning drinking alcohol. The Qur'an moves from a prohibition while praying to a prudential balancing of the properties and effects of alcohol with a conclusion that frequently the bad consequences outweigh the good but, "Finally, it asks the Muslim community not to drink at all." How is one to balance or order these differing positions? Sardar writes, "In this contextual analysis, traditionally, the last verse is

[26] Leah Kinberg, "Ambiguous," in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), V. 1, p. 74.
[27] Sardar, p. xviii.

accepted as the final injunction while the previous ones are said to be abrogated and therefore can be ignored."[28] Sardar means by "last verse" the verses of the latest revelation on a given question, but the Qur'an itself does not provide a chronology of revelation. Sardar also points to another important issue which I will not deal with in this paper, the abrogation of certain verses by others. I will simply note, and hope to return to on another occasion, the question of how, if all of the revelations of the Qur'an are true and not in conflict, some verses can abrogate (nullify) others.

The second traditional context for understanding the Qur'an "is provided by the life of the Prophet" because "Muhammad was not only the recipient of the revelation, but the revelation itself is a commentary on his life." Therefore his biography helps to provide context for the revelations contained in the Qur'an. Indeed, chronologies of the order of revelation (important for the internal context of the Qur'an discussed above) have been constructed based on Muhammad's biography, the sayings of the Prophet (hadith), and testimony of the Prophet's closest associates. It is important to emphasize that use of these resources take us outside of the Qur'an itself. Sardar offers an important caution on using Muhammad's life to contextualize the Qur'an: "Verses that apply specifically to the house-hold of the Prophet Mohammad, for example, may or may not have universal connotations." I would tend to expand this caution, and say that since all of the revelations contained in the Qur'an were given to Muhammad at specific points in his life and career, careful consideration must be given before concluding that any specific injunctions for action provide universal guidance. In any case, I am in full agreement with Sardar's final comment on the context of the Prophet's life: "Whether such verses have implications for other times

[28] Sardar, p. xix.

must be an act of interpretation, ideally the work of reason, reflection and questioning rather than a literal incitement."[29]

Sardar offers two additional contexts for understanding the Qur'an, both of which may be problematic from a traditional standpoint, "the context of history and the context of our time." Sardar writes, "The Qur'an is an eternal text—that its words are valid for all time and place is a basic Muslim belief. But it is also a text revealed in history, a history whose context—social conditions, norms and customs, political structures—it could not ignore." Sardar's conclusion from this is "that many of its verses, such as those on women and crime and punishment, should be read in this context; and understood in terms of their spirit rather than specific injunctions."[30] Finally, Sardar argues, "we as human beings can only engage with the Qur'an, and interpret it, according to our own contemporary understanding." Sardar recognizes that his "insistence on the context of our time actually inverts the traditional understanding of the Qur'an: most Muslims believe that morality ends with the Qur'an; I, on the other hand, argue that the Qur'an marks the beginning or morality."[31]

MOSES IN THE DESERT

I now turn to one story from the Qur'an to see what guidance it may give to the reader in approaching the Qur'an. One of the Qur'an's longest narratives relates a non-biblical story of Moses traveling in the desert, and is pertinent to the questions I am exploring. Moses encountered one of God's servants, "to whom We [God] had granted Our

[29] Sardar, p. xix.
[30] Sardar, p. xix.
[31] Sardar, pp. xix-xx.

mercy and whom We had given knowledge of our own" (Q 18: 65; p. 187). Moses asked if he might follow along so that God's servant "can teach me some of the right guidance you have been taught" (18: 66; p. 187). The response was skeptical: "You will not be able to bear with me patiently. How could you be patient in matters beyond your knowledge?" (Q 18: 67-68; pp 187-188). Moses says that, with God's help, he will remain patient, and promises not to disobey God's servant. He receives reluctant permission to tag along: "If you follow me then, do not query anything I do before I mention it to you myself" (Q 18: 70; p. 188).

As they travelled on, they came upon a boat, and the knowledgeable guide made a hole in it. The following exchange took place, because Moses totally forgot his promise and blurted out his question. Moses: "How could you make a hole in it? Do you want to drown its passengers? What a strange thing to do!" Guide: "Did I not tell you that you would never be able to bear with me patiently?" Moses: "Forgive me for forgetting. Do not make it too hard for me to follow you!" (Q 18: 71-73; p. 188)

As their trek continued they met a young boy whom the servant of God killed. Again Moses could not contain himself: "How could you kill an innocent person? He has not killed anyone! What a terrible thing to do!" Again the reply, "Did I not tell you that you would never be able to bear with me patiently?" Moses appears to be contrite, saying, "From now on, if I query anything you do, banish me from your company—you have put up with enough from me." (Q 18: 74-76; p. 188)

They continued their journey and came to a village in which everyone refused their request for hospitality. There was a wall in the village on the verge of falling and Moses'

guide repaired it without being asked, and Moses said that he could have been paid for the work he did. With this God's servant had had enough. "This is where you and I part company. I will tell you the meaning of the things you could not bear with patiently," which he proceeded to do, concluding, "I did not do [these things] of my own accord: these are the explanations for those things you could not bear with patience" (Q 18: 77-78, 82; p. 188). Briefly, the reasons for these actions were to protect the boat for its owners from being seized by a marauding king, to protect devout parents from a potentially impious son and allow God to give them a more worthy child, and to protect the inheritance of two orphans which was buried under the crumbling wall (Q 18: 79-82; p. 188).

For my immediate purposes, what is important in this narrative is not the explanation given by God's servant to Moses for his actions, but the condition he set forth before allowing Moses to accompany him: "If you follow me then, do not query anything I do before I mention it to you myself." As I reflect on this story the question I ask myself is, what guidance am I to take from this encounter of Moses with God's servant? Specifically, I wonder if the restriction God's servant put on Moses—you can come along, but don't ask any questions—is to be taken as the way in which one should approach the Qur'an.

The commentary *Maarif ul Quran* reinforces my question with its discussion of Moses' attitude under the heading "Following the teacher is incumbent on the student."

> In verse 66, Moses, despite being a prophet and messenger of great resolve, has most reverentially requested . . . if he could follow him to learn his knowledge from him. This tells us that the etiquette of acquiring knowledge is nothing but that the student should show respect for the teacher and follow him (as an individual who is eager to learn)—even if the student happens to be superior to his teacher.[32]

[32] Maarif ul Quran, p, 632, accessed at islamstudies.info/maarif/ on June 14, 2012.

As for the other commentaries that I have examined, the question of relationship between student and teacher is not explicitly raised, but the issue of private revelation is. Ibn e Kathir ("The Story of Musa and Al-Khidr") uses hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) and other commentaries to provide a more detailed account of the journey. He also identifies God's servant by name as Al-Khidr, and asserts that the Moses in the story is the Moses "of the Children of Israel."

Kathir also offers an expanded reading for comments made by God's servant. His first statement, "You will not be able to bear with me patiently," becomes "You will not be able to accompany with me when you see me doing things that go against your law, because I have knowledge from Allah that He has not taught you, and you have knowledge from Allah that He has not taught me. Each of us has responsibilities before Allah that the other does not share, and you will not be able to stay with me." His second statement was, "How could you be patient in matters beyond your knowledge?" Kathir's expanded comment is, "For I know that you will denounce me justifiably, but I have knowledge of Allah's wisdom and the hidden interests which I can see but you cannot."

The claim that "I did not do [these things] of my own accord" is expanded into, "These three things that I did, come from the mercy of Allah for those we have mentioned, the crew of the ship, the parents of the boy and the two sons of the righteous man; I was only commanded to do these things that were enjoined upon me." Kathir takes this statement, along with God's identification of the person Moses encountered as one to "whom We had given knowledge of our own," as proof that Khidr was a prophet.

Mawdudi is concerned about the legitimacy of Khidr's actions. He writes, "Two of the three things done by Khidr are obviously against those commandments of the law which have always been in force since the creation of man. No law allows anyone the right to damage the property of another and kill an innocent person. So much so that if a man were to know by inspiration that some usurper would illegally seize a certain boat, and that a certain boy would be involved in a rebellion and unbelief, even then no law, sent down by Allah, makes it lawful that one should bore a hole in the boat and kill the innocent boy by virtue of his inspiration" (Mawdudi, fn. 6, Q 18). Mawdudi concludes that Moses' guide, rather than being a prophet, must have been an angel or some other entity created by God "who is not bound by the divine law prescribed for human beings, for such commands as have no legal aspect, can be addressed to angels only. This is because the question of the lawful or the unlawful cannot arise about them: they obey the commands of Allah without having any personal power" (ibid.).

Mawdudi compares the will-less and mindless obedience of angels to man's responsibility. "In contrast to them, a man shall be guilty of a sin whether he does any such thing inadvertently by intuition or by some inspiration, if his act goes against some divine commandment. This is because a man is bound to abide by divine commandments as a man, and there is no room whatsoever in the divine law that an act may become lawful for a man merely because he had received an instruction by inspiration and had been informed in a secret way of the wisdom of that unlawful act" (ibid.). It strikes me that in this analysis man is much like a soldier operating under the Uniform Code of Military Justice which requires obedience of any "lawful order" or "lawful command" of a superior and "any

lawful general order or regulation."[33] What is left unstated in the UCMJ is the responsibility to resist unlawful or illegal orders, commands, or regulations. One of the difficulties, of course, is the soldier's usual presumption that every command issued by one's superior is lawful. If this is the presumption when dealing with a human superior, how much more difficult would it be to resist an unlawful command from God Himself, or to even consider the possibility that God would give an unlawful command?

Is it even possible to imagine God giving an unlawful command? Or is every command given by God by that fact alone to be understood as lawful? Based on Mawdudi's commentary, it is possible for God to issue an order that goes "against those commandments of the law which have always been in force since the creation of man" (see p. 19 above). It would be unlawful, however, for a man to obey such an order. The Qur'an, based on my reading of it, contains no example of a believer challenging God along these lines. In fact, the position of the Qur'an seems to be that anyone raising such questions could not be a follower of God.

As an example, consider the Qur'an's portrayal of Abraham and of Job, and contrast these portraits with images from the Old Testament accounts. The Qur'an offers the following thumbnail sketch of Job.

> Remember Job, when he cried to his Lord, "Suffering has truly afflicted me, but you are the Most Merciful of the merciful." We answered him, removed his suffering, and restored his family to him, along with more like them, as an act of grace from Us and a reminder for all who serve us. (Q 21: 83-84; p. 207)

[33] Uniform Code of Military Justice, 890 Art 90 (2), 891, Art 91 (2), 892 Art 92 (1), 892 Art 92 (2), accessed June 15, 2012 at www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/**ucmj**.htm.

Absent from the Qur'an's account is Job's calling God to account as recorded in Job chapters 29-31. When God comes to respond to Job, He at first chides him, "Will the one who contends with the Almightly correct him?" (Job 40: 2, NIV) But then God turns to Job's pious comforter Eliphaz and says, "I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (Job 42: 7).

The Qur'an characterizes Abraham as "forbearing, tender-hearted, and devout" (Q 11: 75; p. 141) when he pleads for "Lot's people." In the Qur'an's account God says, "Abraham, cease your pleading; what your Lord has ordained has come about; punishment is coming to them, which cannot be turned back" (Q 11: 76; p. 141). What makes the biblical account of the destruction of Sodom in Genesis 18-19 pertinent to Mawdudi's commentary on Moses in the desert, and a contrast to the Qur'an's treatment, are the details of Abraham's argument with God. Abraham asks God, "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" and then he begins to bargain: What if there are fifty people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?" What is crucial in the biblical account is Abraham's direct challenge to God: "Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Finally Abraham, who has recovered himself by saying, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number is less than fifty?" (Genesis 18: 23-27). He finally bargains God down to ten righteous people to save the entire city (Genesis 18: 32), but even ten righteous are not found and the city is destroyed (Genesis 19: 23-29). Abraham's argument

with God as recounted in Genesis suggests that God himself is bound by justice, and that the man who challenges God to act justly will not be punished for his audaciousness.

I conclude this section, in which I have raised a number of my own concerns about how to read the Qur'an, by offering as a counterpoint for reflection Ziauddin Sardar's argument concerning the open nature of the Qur'an. Sardar writes,

> Every Muslim can reel out a string of commonly held attributes about the Qur'an. It is Divine. It is Eternal. It is timeless, its words unchanged, it is ever present. It is unique, perfect, a literary miracle. It is complete, universal, the very proof of the existence of God. It is the Final Word of God. Yet, it seems to me, they forget an obvious fact: sacred texts, by their very nature, are complex, multi-layered, allegorical, metaphorical and an embodiment of pluralistic meanings. A Divine Text does not yield a divine meaning: the meaning attributed to it can only be the product of human understanding. A timeless book has meaning only in time. It can only speak to us in our own time and circumstances. Our understanding of "the Final Word of God" cannot be final. It can only be transitory and limited by our own abilities and understanding. It gives us intimations of the divine, the mind of God, but by definition, however perfectable we may think humankind is, we are not and cannot be the mind of God. Absolute understanding, absolute certainty, infallible knowledge—these are not attributes of humanity; our lot is wrestling with our all too evident limitations. Therefore the "Word of God" is not beyond question: only through questioning the text can we tease out possible answers to our moral dilemmas. This is precisely why one of the most insistent commands in the Qur'an is to think and reflect. The struggle to understand and interpret Scripture is perpetual.[34]

Sardar characterizes his relationship to the Qur'an as that of an "argumentative lover": "I think the Qur'an should be approached through questions and arguments. That's what the text itself demands. The Qur'an is full of questions . . . Cleary, God loves a good

[34] Sardar, p. 10.

argument."[35] Sardar concludes, "This . . . means that no interpretation of the Qur'an is itself absolute and forever. All interpretation is limited and time-bound. The meaning of the Qur'an is not fixed, even though it is universal. . . . All generations stand in the same interpretive relationship to the Qur'an. The inspiration and interpretations we draw from the Qur'an constantly return us to the Divine source to think and reflect and be prepared to do things differently, to change and be changed, to remain consistent to the meaning of the eternal message of the Qur'an."[36]

To the extent that Sardar points to and uncovers the foundation of Qur'anic thought and experience, I arrive at two tentative conclusions related to questions I raised earlier. First, there is "an equivalence of experience" represented in Bible and Qur'an. Second, there is a robust role for man in revelation that goes beyond simply "hearing and obeying." I emphasize that these are tentative conclusions—or perhaps better, hypothesis to be investigated—because I am still in search of the underlying foundations that Sardar intimates in his poetic and autobiographical recounting of his encounter with the Qur'an.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE QUR'AN AS THE FOUNDATION OF ISLAM

In this concluding section I simply offer a straightforward argument for why, if we have an interest in Islam either as a religious or a political movement, we should concern ourselves with The Holy Qur'an. We can arrive at the necessity of focusing on the Qur'an by asking the following question. If one wishes to address questions of liberty and responsibility in Islam, isn't reading and reflecting on Islamic philosophy and social

[35] Sardar, p. 22.
[36] Sardar, p. 29.

thought, or on the dynamics of contemporary politics in the Middle East and on the problems of Muslim migration into western nations, or on the historical Islamic foundations of western ideas in philosophy or economics enough? The answer is no—as important as those topics might be, limiting attention to those historical and secular topics is not enough.

The reason for this answer was clearly articulated by the Turkish writer Mustafa Akyol on a visit to the Liberty Fund offices on December 7, 2011, during a book tour of the United States. In a question and answer session dealing with the status of the Bible and the status of the Qur'an Akyol said, "One can be a Christian and accept all of the higher criticisms of the Bible, one can be a Jew and not believe that the story of Israel as God's Chosen People is historically true, but one cannot be a Muslim and not believe that the Qur'an is God's exact words delivered to His Prophet Muhammad. When one stops believing that, one is no longer a follower of Islam."

In *Islam Without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty*, Akyol argues primarily on historical and philosophical grounds. I offer two brief examples of his approach. Akyol's discussion of the Mutazilites is intended to show, first, that there are historical roots for "Islamic liberalism," and second, to offer their position as an exemplar for today. According to Akyol, all Mutazilites "subscribed to the free-will idea." He continues, "For them, this was not just a preferred view—it was a logical outcome of one of God's crucial attributes: justice. Since God was absolutely just, they reasoned, He would not reward or punish His creatures without reason. Thus, humans would receive reward in heaven or punishment in hell as a result of their free choice. Anyone who believes in a just God, the Mutazilites

concluded, had to accept that man is 'the creator of his deeds'."[37] A second example of Akyol's approach can be found in his discussion of "the curse of political power." He writes of the development of Islam after Muhammad's death as follows,

> Only a quarter of a century after the Prophet's time fellow Muslims were spilling each other's blood. What happened to the idea that all believers were brothers in faith? The answer lay not in faith but in another factor that created trouble for Islam from the very beginning: political power. No theological dispute made enemies out of Ali and Muawiyah . . . Rather, they disagreed over a somewhat mundane question: Who had the authority to rule?[38]

He goes on to suggest that only in the case of Muhammad was religious and political power merged appropriately. In an earlier discussion of the life of Muhammad, Akyol attempts to downplay the connection between politics and religion in Islam and argues that the political dimension of Muhammad's mission developed very late in his life. Acknowledging that Muhammad did rule, he then asks a key question, "Are all things that Muhammad did normative for Muslims? Or do some of them reflect not the everlasting rules and principles of Islam but rather those of the Prophet's time and milieu?"[39]

Both of the propositions that Akyol defends, the independent role of reason in the life of man, and the disjunction of political and religious authority, may be essential for the development of a liberal society. And it is conceivable that both of these principles also lie at the heart of Islam. If that is the case, a crucial element in establishing them as operative principles in today's world is to show their foundations not in logical analysis of concepts or through the presentation of historical episodes in Islam, but as a part of the revelation of the Qur'an.

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[37] Mustafa Akyol, *Islam Without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), p. 90.
[38] Akyol, p. 82.
[39] Akyol, p. 58.

I will not attempt to argue out either of these positions here but simply show that Akyol's position is not uniformly accepted as representing the essence of Islam. In *The Qur'an and the Secular Mind: A Philosophy of Islam*, Muslim professor of philosophy Shabbit Akhtar characterizes the relation between religion and politics very differently than does Akyol. Akhtar maintains that Islam's "self-image" is as a "'meta-religion' of intentionally comprehensive scope" and that this has been so "from the very day of its twin birth as faith and empire"[40]—the intertwining of religion and politics is not simply an accidental biographical fact of Muhammad's life but is central to Islam as a "meta-religion." Kenneth Cragg, a sympathetic Christian cleric and long-time student of Islam, also comes to a conclusion closer to that of Akhtar than Akyol. In *The Event of the Qur'an: Islam in Its Scripture* Cragg writes, "The Qur'an understands Muhammad's political campaigns and purposes as synonymous with the divine ends and the vehicle of the divine power."[41]

As to the status of reason in Islam, it is true that the Qur'an recognizes man as a reasoning creature and continually exhorts man to exercise his reason. However, these exhortations generally take the form of saying, "Man, if you only use your reason you will see that the revelation given to Muhammad is true." According to Q 2.285, when "the faithful" are confronted with a revelation delivered by any of God's messengers their response is, "We hear, and we obey." This view of apparently passive acceptance of revelation seems to be reinforced in Q 33.36: "When God and His Messenger have decided

[40] Shabbir Akhtar, *The Qur'an and the Secular Mind: A Philosophy of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 18.

[41] Kenneth Cragg, *The Event of the Qur'an: Islam in Its Scripture* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1994), p. 38.

on a matter than concerns them, it is not fitting for any believing man or woman to claim freedom of choice in that matter: whoever disobeys God and His Messenger is far astray."[42]

None of this is designed to deny that, as Akyol desires to show, there may be "a Muslim case for liberty." It is simply intended to emphasis the point that any argument for Islamic liberty that will be persuasive to Muslims must be grounded in the text of the Qur'an, not in philosophy or in (non-Qur'anic) history. Kenneth Cragg captures the reason for this in the introduction to *The Event of the Qur'an*. Contemporary Muslims, Cragg argues, "to be guided or persuaded about modernity at all, will need to be guided and persuaded Quranically. . . .Even where secularity has gone far among them or irreligion presses, their judgments and their sanity, their priorities and ideals, will always be in large measure with the mind of the Qur'an whether for definition or for impulse and will."[43]

There are two routes one might take in dealing with Islam and liberal society. One is to "make Islam safe for liberty" by showing that it recognizes a sphere of freedom for religion. The other, more strenuous, path is to establish that true Islam is itself liberal. The first approach may be satisfied by emphasizing that "there is no compulsion in religion" (Q 2.256) and by showing the inherent pluralism of recognizing the other legitimate

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[42] On this question, consider the following: "A key feature of Al-Shafi'i's work is the emphasis on redefining the term 'sunna' to restrict it to the words and actions reported from the Prophet alone. Others had interpreted the term in the older, broader sense to include the practice of other authorities, in addition to the Prophet. Al-Shafi'i sought to convince them that God had singled out the Prophet as alone qualified to pronounce on the law. He amassed from the Qur'an evidence that God insisted on unquestioning obedience to his Prophet (e.g., Q 4: 13, 65). Appealing to a series of verses linking Muhammad's commands and prohibitions to the divine will, and culminating in a verse which identified Muhammad's will with the divine will (Q 4: 80), al-Shafi'i succeeded in recovering the unique prophet-figure central and partner in the processes of divine revelation" (John Burton, "Abrogation," *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, V. 1, p. 13). This view also has implications for "man's role in revelation" discussed earlier.

[43] Cragg, p. 23.

revelations to "the People of the Book."[44] While these two principles may establish a Qur'anic foundation for at least limited religious toleration, the argument necessary to establish a liberal Islam must go far beyond this. To argue for a liberal Islam requires one to establish a sphere of freedom not just for "nonbelievers" but also for followers of Islam. The approach taken by Mustafa Aykol may appeal to contemporary western liberal sensibilities, but to be convincing in the world of Islam such an argument will have to be fully grounded in the Qur'an itself, along the lines argued by Ziauddin Sardar. As Sardar himself admits, given the force of tradition such an argument from the Qur'an also faces an uphill battle within Islam. While history and philosophy may lend secondary support to this effort, they themselves can never be the foundation stone of the argument. For this reason, to the extent we are concerned with understanding the relation of Islam to liberty and responsibility, we must engage the Qur'an itself as part of general effort to engage and understand Islam.

Nothing in this paper is intended to suggest that the approach to the Qur'an I am exploring is intended to be an effort from outside of Islam to set both the record and Muslims straight. Rather, my investigation is undertaken in an effort to understand the dynamic internal to the Qur'an and its revelation, and to understand the nature of the Qur'anic revelation. Indeed, if it were not for Muslim scholars and thinkers whose writings

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[44] These two issues, no compulsion in religion and respect for "People of the Book," are brought together in some commentaries on the Qur'an. There appears to be a consensus that "no compulsion in religion" applies only to "People of the Book," and not to all religions in general, or to atheism and denial of religious truth. Some commentators argue that Q 2: 256 is abrogated by later revelations: "Mujahid said, 'This was before the Apostle of God was commanded to fight against the People of the Book. God's saying, "There is no compulsion in religion' was abrogated and he was commanded to fight against the People of the Book in [Q 9: 29]'." See Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters Volume 1* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1984), pp. 252-256; quotation from Mujahid at p. 253.

are uncovering and exploring trails in the same terrain that I am interested in traversing, I might wonder whether there was any path to be followed at all.[45]

[45] I should acknowledge the importance of M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, Ziauddin Sardar, Fazlur Rahman, and Abdullah Saeed (*Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* [London: Routledge, 2012]) in thinking through the issues raised in this paper. In some cases they are acknowledged in footnotes, but whether acknowledged or not they have helped shape the "deep background" on which my reflections are built.