In the Qur’an, God is a great debater

The Qur’an is not a description of God. It’s a call to conversion.

by Gabriel Said Reynolds in the February 26, 2020 issue

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In 1947 an Egyptian Muslim thinker named Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah (d. 1991) completed a dissertation in Cairo with a thesis that would hardly seem radical to most students of the Qur’an in the West. He argued that the Qur’an includes many aspects of storytelling.

By his own account, Khalafallah’s motivation in advancing this argument was to defend the Qur’an against “atheists, Orientalists, and missionaries.” Some Muslims in Egypt, however, were outraged by his claims. The Qur’an is not a bunch of stories, they insisted (caricaturing his argument), but rather the true, revealed word of God. The outrage grew to the point that Khalafallah was never allowed to defend his thesis, and his reputation (along with that of his doctoral supervisor) was forever tarnished.

A worse fate awaited a later Egyptian scholar, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010). He argued that the Qur'an can be understood in some places to be metaphorically, and not literally, true. For this he was criticized and eventually (in 1995) declared an apostate in an Egyptian court. Forcibly divorced from his wife (since a non-Muslim man cannot be married to a Muslim woman), he fled with her to Holland.

What both Khalafallah and Abu Zayd were addressing is the quality of Qur'anic speech. They both held that the Qur'an needs to be understood in light of its particular rhetorical and linguistic qualities. I would make a similar argument.

Furthermore, I would argue, the Qur'an is not a theological guidebook that describes God in a precise and coherent manner. It is closer to a sermon, an exhortation, or an argument meant to persuade humans to believe. Another way of putting this is to say that the Qur'an is more interested in humans and their response to its message than it is interested in God.

This may seem surprising. After all, the Qur'an speaks constantly about God; the word *Allah* appears about 2,700 times in the text. And yet the way the Qur'an invokes God tells us something about the Qur'anic author's ultimate concern. The scholar Fazlur Rahman puts it this way: "The Qur'an is a document that is squarely aimed at man."

The French Dominican scholar of Islam Jacques Jomier has gone still further. He insists that the key to understanding the Qur'an is to appreciate its process of argumentation. The Qur'an, in his opinion, proceeds with an almost constant series of arguments, "exposing, questioning, calling one to reflect." He adds: "The Qur'an itself is the echo of discussions which took place at the time of Islam's appearance. It reports objections, responds to them, exhorts, blames, and sometimes speaks ironically."

This makes the Qur'an fundamentally different from the great majority of the Bible. For the most part the Bible is made up of historical narratives, poetic or wisdom literature, and prophetic discourses. Only in certain sections, for example in the divine discourse in the Book of Job or in a number of Paul's epistles, do biblical authors develop systematic arguments.

The Qur'an, by contrast, is almost ceaselessly involved in an argument. Indeed, one of the terms that the Qur'an uses to refer to itself is *maw'iza*, meaning "admonition" or "awakening." The Qur'an is simply not concerned with abstract discussions

regarding the origin of evil or philosophical reflections on the path to avoiding suffering or to living a flourishing life. The Qur'an is concerned above all with vindicating its own divine origin and with persuading its audience to submit to God and obey the Prophet, to join the community of believers and oppose the community of unbelievers.

The divine voice in the Qur'an is constantly confronting the positions of its opponents.

Many of the Qur'an's arguments involve setting up binary options. As Jomier puts it, the Qur'an constantly offers a series of choices: "There is God or there is not God, there is the blind and the seeing, truth and falsehood, the believer and the unbeliever, the good to do and the evil to avoid, paradise and hell."

The Qur'an's strategies of argumentation have been explored still further by Rosalind Gwynne. In her book *Logic, Rhetoric, and Legal Reasoning in the Qur'an*, Gwynne identifies a number of logical strategies that the Qur'anic author uses to advance his argument. She writes that these sorts of arguments "all turn ultimately on the ontological difference between good and evil, faith and disbelief, virtue and sin." Gwynne notes that in the Qur'an God doesn't simply debate unbelievers; he also encourages the Prophet Muhammad (Q 16:125) and all of the believers (Q 29:46) to debate (Arabic *jadala*) them.

As a graduate student I studied under the guidance of a Muslim imam in Lebanon. Twice a week we met to read the Qur'an and Qur'anic commentary. During those lessons my instructor frequently departed from the subject matter in order to criticize Christian teaching in an attempt to persuade me to convert to Islam. These attempts grew tiresome, and one day I asked him, "Shaykh, why do you keep on arguing against Christianity? Aren't we simply here to read the Qur'an?" He responded, "But the Qur'an itself instructs me to do so," and he quoted the opening of Q 29:46: "Do not argue with the People of the Book except in a manner which is best, except such of them as are wrongdoers."

This Muslim imam saw his zeal for debating or arguing as a response to this Qur'anic injunction. In some ways, however, he was simply following the example of God. Allah is the great debater in the Qur'an. The divine voice in the text is constantly addressing its opponents and confronting their positions.

If one opens the Qur’an at the beginning, it won’t take long to come across the first argument. After the opening prayer (Sura 1, *al-Fatihah*), the opening section of Sura 2 includes the following:

> Among the people are those who say, “We have faith in God and the Last Day,” but they have no faith. They seek to deceive God and those who have faith, yet they deceive no one but themselves, but they are not aware. There is a sickness in their hearts; then God increased their sickness, and there is a painful punishment for them because of the lies they used to tell.

Here the Qur’an, arguing against some unnamed group that it accuses of hypocrisy, does not use the techniques of comparison or contrast which interest Gwynne, but rather a type of argument that is closer to defamation: it explains the apparent deviance of this group not as a difference of opinion but as a result of a “sickness” in their hearts (one that God has increased). The force of this argument is evident: the audience is presented with a choice of siding with those who are “sick” or of submitting fully to God.

The Qur’an is so interested in advancing arguments that in certain cases this concern seems to shape its formulation of doctrine.

For example, the Qur’an teaches that at the moment of punishment, or when unbelievers lie on their deathbeds, it will be too late to convert and believe. This doctrine seems to be implicit in the way the Qur’an speaks of the death of Pharaoh. In Sura 10 the Qur’an reports that Pharaoh came to believe at the end of his life but suggests that his belief did not save his soul:

> We carried the Children of Israel across the sea, whereat Pharaoh and his troops pursued them, out of defiance and aggression. When overtaken by drowning, he called out, “I do believe that there is no god except Him in whom the Children of Israel believe, and I am one of those who submit [to Him]!” [He was told,] “What! Now? When you have been disobedient heretofore and were among the agents of corruption?! So today We shall deliver you in your body so that you may be a sign for those who come after you.” Many of the people are indeed oblivious to Our signs.

A story that Muslim commentators told about this passage explains that the angel Gabriel actively prevented Pharaoh from receiving mercy: “Gabriel thrust mud from the sea into his mouth, lest [God’s] mercy embrace him.” There is, however, no need to imagine an angel shoving mud into the mouth of Pharaoh. The Qur’an’s point is simply that at the moment of death it is too late to repent and believe.

The rejection of conversion at the last moment is explicit in Sura 4: “But [acceptance of] repentance is not for those who go on committing misdeeds: when death approaches any of them, he says, ‘I repent now.’ Nor is it for those who die while they are faithless. For such We have prepared a painful punishment.”

Why, we might ask, would the Qur’an develop this notion that it is too late to repent and believe when one is in the throes of death? Why wouldn’t God accept repentance at the last moment if he is truly merciful and just? The answer seems to be that the author of the Qur’an wants the audience to convert and believe now, not to postpone conversion and think that they can go on disbelieving and then save themselves on their deathbeds.

The Gospel of Luke contains the story of a rich man who is punished in the flames of hell for his neglect of the poor beggar Lazarus, who used to sit at the rich man’s gate. From his place of punishment, the rich man sees Lazarus in the “bosom of Abraham” and calls out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames” (Luke 16:24). It is too late for him to receive mercy, however. Abraham responds, “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony” (16:25).

The point of Luke’s story of the rich man is to encourage people to have mercy on the poor now, before one is damned to hell and it is too late. The Qur’an takes this idea a step further, insisting that it will *already* be too late at the moment of death. The message is thus more urgent.

The work of Khalafallah might help us further understand the Qur’an’s intent. The title of his dissertation, *Min asrar al-i‘jaz*, “On the Secrets of [the Qur’an’s] Inimitability,” suggests that Khalafallah meant to defend the traditional Islamic doctrine that the Qur’an is a perfect book (a doctrine known in Arabic as *i‘jaz*). But he did so by arguing that its perfection is often connected to the way that it tells

stories. In the end, he found himself accused of blasphemy.

The Qur’an is more interested in convincing people than in describing God.

Khalafallah was worried by those who held that the Qur’an is not historically accurate. How could it be, for example, that prophets in the Qur’an who lived years apart and in different lands all resemble each other? On occasion, prophets separated from each other by hundreds or thousands of years (and who presumably spoke different languages) say precisely the same things. This does not seem to reflect historical reality.

Moreover, different versions of the same account in the Qur’an sometimes differ in their details: For example, the Qur’an in some cases blames Satan for the downfall of Adam and Eve (Q 2:36, 7:20), but in other cases it blames Adam (Q 20:121). In certain passages Pharaoh is drowned (Q 17:103, 28:40, 43:55), but in one passage (Q 10:92) he is not. In Sura 19 only one angel gives the annunciation to Mary (Q 19:17–21), but in Sura 3 (Q 3:45) more than one angel does so. In several passages the Qur’an speaks of the world being created in six days (e.g., Q 10:3), but in another passage (Q 41:9–12) God creates the world in eight days.

In response to these problems, Khalafallah contends that the Qur’an is not always concerned with articulating a strict historical truth but rather with articulating a message that will lead its audience to accept Muhammad as a true prophet of God. Khalafallah explains that different passages were revealed on different occasions and for different reasons. It is only natural, then, that they should differ in their details. The Qur’an’s author—who from Khalafallah’s perspective is God himself—shaped his message according to the particular expectations and the psychology of the audience at any given moment.

Khalafallah illustrates this “rhetorical shaping” with reference to the Qur’anic account of the Companions of the Cave in Sura 18. This account relates how some young men took refuge from hostile unbelievers in a cave where they fell asleep for 309 years. They were “woken up” only at a time when the people of the town were no longer hostile.

The account, which is connected to a Christian legend known as the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, is meant to act as a sign that the Qur’an’s promises of the resurrection of the body are to be believed. If God can wake up the “companions” after hundreds of years, he can resurrect dead bodies on the Day of Judgment no matter how much

time has passed. In his discussion of this account, Khalafallah argues that it is told not to relate “historical truth” (*al-haqiqa al-ta’rikhiyya*) but to confound the pagans and to vindicate God’s prophet.

When Khalafallah published his dissertation in 1951, he gave it a new title: *Al-Fann al-qasasi fi al-Qur’an al-karim*, “Narrative Art in the Noble Qur’an” or “The Art of Story-Telling in the Noble Qur’an.” This title reflects the importance to Khalafallah of the idea of a “story”—in Arabic, *qissa*. As he points out, the Qur’an in places seems to refer to its own revelation as a qissa, as in the opening of the Companions of the Cave account, “We tell to you their story (*qissa*) in truth” (Q 18:13). Yet to Khalafallah a qissa is more than a story. He turns to the medieval Muslim exegete Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209), who describes *qasas* (plural of *qissa*) as “a collection of statements comprising whatever leads one to religion and guides one to the truth and commands one to seek salvation.”

Another example Khalafallah gives of the Qur’an’s distinctive narrative art is the case of a prophet named Hud and his unbelieving people, known as ‘Ad, in Q 54. In this Sura, as Khalafallah notes, the Qur’an does not offer any details of the life and mission of Hud. Nothing is told of his deeds or words among the people of ‘Ad except “‘Ad impugned [Hud].” On the other hand, the Qur’an offers some vivid details in its description of the punishment of ‘Ad: “Indeed, We unleashed upon them an icy gale on an incessantly ill-fated day, knocking down people as if they were trunks of uprooted palm trees. So how were My punishment and warnings?!” (Q 54: 19–21).

Khalafallah comments:

> [The Qur’an] does not mention their houses or dwellings. It does not mention for us the debate and discussion that happened between Hud and his people. It leaves all of that out and rushes to describe the punishment. It presents this with a brilliant literary description using expressions which move one to sympathy.

The point of the story, according to Khalafallah, is not to teach a historical lesson about an ancient people but rather to make an impression on the Prophet Muhammad’s audience: “The Qur’an has done all of this for a simple reason . . . to transmit into the hearts of the contemporaries of the Prophet fear of divine punishment. It seeks to pass on to them images which will make that fear strong and violent.”

Stories in the Qur’an are crafted in a way that aims to guide people to the truth.

In Khalafallah’s opinion, such passages also show the Qur’an’s particular interest in touching human emotion more than the human intellect. “The Qur’an takes narrative materials which include historical events and occurrences, but it presents them in a narrative manner and it conveys them in an *emotional* manner.” Here it is important to mention again that the Qur’an not only describes itself as a *qissa*, “story” (Q 3:62, 12:3), but also as a sermon or an admonition (Arabic *maw‘iza*). Its stories are crafted in a way that aims to guide people to the truth.

All of this was too much for Khalafallah’s religious colleagues in Egypt. Even though his goal with his dissertation was essentially Islamic apologetics, the idea that the Qur’an was less than a perfectly accurate historical document put him in hot water. A number of critical articles about the dissertation were published in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Risala*. Professors from the powerful religious institution Al-Azhar University also intervened, claiming a right to comment on all work dealing with Islam in Egypt. Khalafallah was relieved of his teaching position at Fuad University.

Jomier (who was living in Egypt at the time) explains the controversy:

> The traditional perspectives of Islam are extremely clear. If a document contains elements of style which are overly characteristic of an historical epoch or an individual, the divine origin of this document is excluded. No middle term can be recognized between two things: either the author is God, or the author is man.

For Khalafallah, the author of the Qur’an was certainly God; however, he held that the Qur’an is not a newspaper article or a news report but a literary work that shapes the stories of the prophets with its audience in mind. Its interest is not in describing God, but in converting humanity.

This essay is excerpted from Gabriel Said Reynolds’s just released book Allah: God in the Qur’an*, published by Yale University Press. Used with permission of the publisher. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “God the great debater.”*