

(In the Name of God, Merciful, Compassionate. Praise be to God. Blessings be upon the Messenger of God)

Address at the Inauguration and Installation of Dr. Iain Torrance as President of Princeton Theological Seminary and Professor of Patristics, Friday 11<sup>th</sup> March 2005

Theme: Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scripture Together

## **Reading Scripture Together: Towards a Sacred Hermeneutics of Togetherness**

**Aref Ali Nayed**, Visiting Fellow at the Center for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies, Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge University

Reading, along with writing, is a fascinating activity that is foundational for our very humanity. The many activities we call 'Reading' have been studied by so many fields from so many angles. One of the fields fascinated by reading and the associated activities of interpretation and understanding is General Hermeneutics.

Ever since Schleiermacher's pioneering work, General Hermeneutics has tended to assume that all reading activities (and by association, interpreting/understanding activities) are essentially the same.

General Hermeneutics is often built on the assumption that it is possible to give a general and universally valid account of what reading/interpreting/understanding basically is. Normative General Hermeneutics has even strived to dictate how reading/interpreting/understanding ought to be conducted.

Prior to Schleiermacher's foundation of General Hermeneutics, it was quite common to sustain that the reading/interpreting/understanding of scriptures was a unique activity (due to the unique nature of

scriptures as revelation). In those pre-Schleiermacher days *hermeneutica sacra* was often contrasted with *hermeneutica profana*. Schleiermacher started a trend, that continues until today, and which is quite evident in the works of such different thinkers as E.D. Hirsch and Hans-Georg Gadamer, to see *hermeneutica sacra* only as a special application of a universal General Hermeneutics.

While, I very much respect the quest for a General Hermeneutics, I find that the leap to it is often too hasty and too facile. I know of only one recent thinker who has truly attempted to first carefully classify different types of activities that go by the name of reading/interpreting/understanding, and only then go on to put forth a General Hermeneutics. That thinker is Emilio Betti whose approach was definitively, but unfairly, undermined by Gadamer and his school.

General Hermeneutics, before hastily generalizing, must carefully study and phenomenologically describe the many activities that go by the names reading/interpreting/understanding.

I believe that the activity, or rather many activities, of reading scriptures, as scriptures, (and a lot depends on which scripture, and who is reading it, and with whom) is of a radically different kind from other activities that go by the same name.

Furthermore, I believe that the activity, or rather many activities, of reading scriptures together (and, again, a lot depends on which scripture and with whom) is also radically different from reading scriptures alone (if that was ever possible).

Reading scriptures is quite different from reading non-scriptures. Reading together is, in general, again, quite different from reading alone. Reading scriptures, in particular, alone, is yet again, quite different from reading scriptures together.

It is this last 'reading scriptures together' that is the theme of this happy occasion of inter-religious togetherness in this esteemed place of togetherness. Reading together is a most fascinating kind of reading, and today, in our cruel and torn-apart world, it becomes a divine imperative for all of us. We urgently need a sacred hermeneutics of togetherness. Such a hermeneutics would set as its main task that of describing how reading scripture together works, and how it can mend and repair our shattered world.

Urgent as the description of reading together is, it is perhaps very difficult, or even impossible, to undertake before each one of us attempts to explicate what reading scripture is like for him or her. In the short time I have, I will do my best to describe to you what reading my scripture (the Qur'an) is like for me, and then hope to find indicators in that of how I can possibly describe reading scripture together.

Phenomenological description, when it does not make pretentious universalizing leaps, is necessarily personal and quite local. Thus my attempt at a description of reading scripture alone will necessarily be personal. The personal witnessing that I learned from in the papers of my most esteemed teachers who spoke before me encourages me to

share with you, as best as I can some of my personal experiences of reading my scripture: the Qur'an, first alone, and then together.

My approach is based on the fact that the character (*khuluq*) of our dear Prophet (Allah's Peace be upon him) was described by his wife (A'isha, May Allah be pleased with her) as being the Qur'an itself: "His character (*khuluq*) was the Qur'an." Much of my work on understanding the activity of reading the Qur'an has been an attempt to come to terms with this important Hadith that affirms that reading the Qur'an, for a Muslim, ultimately means actively striving to be transformed and 'characterized' by it. The great writings of such Muslim sages as al-Ajuri, al-Makki, al-Muhasibi, and al-Ghazali on what they termed 'bearing the Qur'an' (*haml al-Qur'an*) have been quite helpful in coming to understand this notion of 'reading as being transformed in one's very character'.

As a Muslim, I am certain that the Qur'an is the very speech of Allah, and I strive to live the full implications of this certitude. I strive, all the days of my life, to bear the Qur'an in my heart, and to allow it to transform me from the inside so as to become my very character.

Following a clear tradition of the Prophet (peace be upon him), I believe that the difference between the Qur'an and mere creaturely books is like the difference between Allah Himself and mere creatures. I approach the Qur'an with the reverence and respect that is ontologically and morally due to the very Speech of the Creator.

I take this Speech (which is the expression of an eternal divine capacity to speak, a speech which was already spoken by Allah to Himself in eternity, and which was from eternity in His divine Knowledge) to be a personal letter addressed especially to me, by my loving and compassionate God, in my present day circumstances.

Through the Qur'an, I strive to hear my very Creator speak to me personally. I receive the Qur'an as a personal gift from Allah, a gift that is freely given, and that demands of me, (precisely because it is so freely given!) a life-long task of thanksgiving and righteousness.

I learned from my tradition that the Qur'an in the heart is like the inhabitant of a house who transforms it into a 'home' by living in it and maintaining it. I know that without the Qur'an my heart, mind, and body would collapse just as a deserted house eventually degenerates. I know this because my beloved Prophet of Allah told me so, and because I experience the rejuvenation and degeneration first hand as I maintain or neglect my daily recitations. I invite the Qur'an to inhabit my heart, and to strive to let it eventually become my very *habitus*.

I do not merely read the Qur'an as I would read intellectually stimulating books. I do not even recite it in the way poetry is recited. I recite it in that very special way called '*tilwah*.'

This *tilwah* is a devotional and ritual activity that can be practiced only after ritual purification has been performed. It is to be practiced while sitting or standing facing the Ka'ba in Makka. Like ritual prayers,

*tilwah* or Qur'anic recitation must be performed with that intentionality and directedness that facing the Ka'ba fosters, and with the prerequisite proper manners (*adab*).

I do not recite with my *nous* or *ratio*, but with my heart (*qalb, lubb*). My *tilwah* does involve intellection, but my intellection (*'aql*) is an activity of my heart, and not of my calculative mind. My heart is the center of my whole concrete being and includes my corporeality as well as my spirituality. I recite the Qur'an with my center letting its transformative effects flow through my body and soul. I sway with it, bodily and spiritually, and go where the spirit of my Lord takes me.

I respect the sequential order of the Qur'an and recite it in cycles as my forbearers did. I submit my heart to its sequential operations just as a piece of wood submits to the sequence of cutting operations of a lathe. I let my heart be shaped, transformed, and worked into a new heart: a Qur'anic heart. I do not pretend to wield the Qur'an instrumentally in the name of 'applying' it to this or that project of mine, but simply yield my heart to it as a divine instrument of guidance and salvation.

I do not think of the Qur'an as a deposit of ready-made off-shelf solutions to my problems. I know that Allah has endowed me with the intelligence and faculties necessary to solve my own problems. However, I do realize that my own solutions can become Qur'anic and divinely blessed if I would only let myself become a Qur'anic being by letting the Qur'an shape my very humanity and character. If I can ever

become truly Qur'anic, my activities and solutions will be Qur'anic ones.

I strive to keep my heart-sight on Allah throughout the commotion and flux I see in my outer and inner travels because I see everything as an *aya* (or operative sign) of Allah. The Qur'an, itself a sequence of *ayat* (operative signs), speaks about and illustrates the transformative power of *ayat* on every page.

The Qur'an teaches me to see the mountains, the heavens, and the earth as *ayat* of Allah. It teaches me how to see processes of alteration and growth as *ayat*. It teaches me to see the Prophets of Allah and the heavenly books they are given as *ayat*. It illustrates the operative capacity of Allah's *ayat* by calling the *asa* of Musa that becomes a snake, and that opens up the sea an 'aya'. I strive to see the operative signs of my Lord everywhere. I strive to be constantly aware of God's presence.

The Qur'an further teaches me that, besides the outer *ayat* (*ayat* of the horizons) there are also inner *ayat* (*ayat* within persons). The more I manage to bear the Qur'an, the more I become a wonder-struck watcher of the signs of my Lord that operate within and upon my own soul. My appreciation of the *ayat* within me, lead me to wonder about and appreciate the operative *ayat* in the persons around me. I come to see others too as divine signs.

The world, my soul, and all other persons become an ocean with an incredible variety of *ayat*. I learn from the Qur'an to live concretely the realization that diversity is a wonderful gift. I experience, first-hand, the fact that my Lord celebrates the variety that is present in things ranging from trees, to different types of honey, to clouds, to people them-selves.

Seeing variety as a divinely gifted operative sign in things and persons, I respect it, cherish it, and celebrate it. This seeing increasingly becomes a seeing 'with the eye of compassion' (*bi'ayn al-rhima*). It is a seeing that is the condition of possibility for my reading of scripture together with others.

As I read the Qur'an alone, I find out that I am never really alone. As I read, the Prophet of Allah (Peace be upon him) and all his testimonies (*hadiths*) are with me. As I read, my beloved teachers are with me. As I read, scholars and sages from the fourteen hundred years of Muslim living are with me. My family, my friends, my neighbors, and my entire community (*umma*) are with me. It turns out that my reading alone is really a reading together!

As a matter of fact, it turns out that my reading companions, as I read 'alone' are not just Muslims. My Calvinist teacher from Guelph is with me, my Catholic teachers from the Gregorian and the Biblical Institute in Rome are with me, my Orthodox teachers from Lebanon are with me, my Jewish teachers from Guelph and more recently the Scriptural Reasoning community are with me. My reading companions



even include all my teachers of Philosophy, Engineering, and all the topics that I have learned over my entire life.

A sage once told me, when I complained to him that I was about to leave and not see him for quite sometime, that space and time have no power over things of the spirit. He said to me that all I needed to do to be with someone in my heart was to love them. He cited our beloved Prophet (Peace be upon him) who has taught us that "Everyone is with the one he loves". I learned that if I truly appreciate and love all the people that have ever taught me (formally and informally), they will be together with me as I read the Qur'an 'alone'.

Allah has given me the gift of a very strange and rich life. In my life, I have been privileged to read scriptures together with others, not only in the above sense, but also in the sense of concretely reading with others.

I have often read the Qur'an with other Muslims in Malaysia as a teacher, and in Libya as an occasional attendant of a recitation group that has been meeting every single evening (without fail) since the early fifties. The experience of hearing Allah speak to His community (*umma*) and of the response of the community to its Lord has been transforming.

I have also read the Qur'an with Christians and Jews in Rome as a teacher at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies and as a participant in Scriptural Reasoning meetings. The experience of the

mutual illumination that comes about through the sharing of scriptures has been nothing short of a divine grace.

I have also read the Bible with Muslim students as a teacher in the Islamic College in Libya. The experience of learning more about others and about ourselves through studying their scriptures has been wonderful.

I have also read the Bible and the Torah with teachers and friends who truly believed in them as scriptures. The experience and honor of partaking in the transformation that you see in the other as he or she is transformed by his/her scripture has been most illuminating. The experience of spiritual deepening in my own tradition has been humbling.

I need to reflect more deeply on my experiences of reading alone and reading together in order to even begin to outline the 'sacred hermeneutics of togetherness' that I truly believe we should seek to articulate. However, I do believe that there are a few simple things which I have learned over the years that can be offered as a rudimentary contribution towards such a hermeneutics.

1. Reading scripture is radically different from any other kind of reading.
2. Reading scripture demands a sacred hermeneutics that respects the sacred origin and nature of scripture.

3. Togetherness is already present in the reading of scripture to the extent that love of God and of others is present in our hearts.
4. Reading scripture together makes such love in God stronger and makes the togetherness deeper and more lasting.

May we emerge from this blessed concrete togetherness of today with a heart-felt togetherness that can only get stronger and stronger, through love, beyond the limits of time and space.

Thank you very much.