PART I

APPROACHING THE QUR’AN
Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error; whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things. Allah is the Protector of those who have faith: from the depths of darkness He will lead them forth into light. Of those who reject faith, the patrons are the Evil Ones: from light they will lead them forth into the depths of darkness. They will be companions of the fire to dwell therein (for ever).

_Surah 2:256–57_

Being introduced to the Qur’an is somewhat like being introduced to another person. One or both may have heard about the other. Each may have expectations, perhaps anxieties, about the meeting and its results. Introductions are often arranged and guided by an intermediary. He or she can serve as an interpreter, mediator, and critic as the persons communicate or fail to communicate with each other. In the ebb and flow of the introduction, the introducer may inform either or both sides more fully about the character, background, and intentions of the other, set the scene for the meeting, and start the initial conversations.

The dynamics of introductions match our preparing to open the Qur’an. Part I is essential to the rest of our study. Chapter 1, “Perspectives,” recounts some risks and opportunities for those who engage in religious studies, interfaith relations, and related sociopolitical issues. Questions raised in the chapter are recalled in the last chapter. Because I do not assume that readers are religiously committed or have a deep knowledge of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam even if they include themselves in one of those faith families, chapters 2 and 3 cover those religions’ basic beliefs. I present “master narratives” for each in which the major accounts of the religions are told. “Covenant” is cited as a significant motif common to all three. In the instances of Judaism and Christianity, I angle the beliefs toward concerns relevant to Quranic responses. Chapter 3’s master narrative is
long enough to range through God’s plan for the cosmos and history from before the world’s creation to the Hereafter and broad enough to include Islam’s Five Pillars and Teachings.

Part I introduces the writer-interpreter to the reader-meeter, provides basic religious positions that are woven throughout the study and brings us to the point of approaching the Qur’an in its original setting, first listeners, and traditional shape.

Mankind was one single nation and Allah sent messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent the Book in truth to judge between people in matters wherein they differed; but the People of the Book, after the clear signs came to them, did not differ among themselves except through selfish contumacy. Allah by His grace guided the believers to the truth concerning that wherein they differed. For Allah guides whom He will to a path that is straight.

*Surah 2:213*
RISKS, PERSPECTIVES, AND UNDERSTANDINGS

To each is a goal to which Allah turns him; then strive together (as in a race) toward all that is good. Wheresoever ye are, Allah will bring you together. For Allah hath power over all things.

Surah 2:148

Being introduced to and introducing others to a religion involves risks and opportunities. We come with culturally conditioned understandings about ourselves and the faith we are about to consider. Those understandings are confirmed, corrected, adapted, or amended as we engage the other religion and its believers. No matter how “objective” a person may think he is or how committed he feels he is to his own position, the other faith challenges with its questions and causes us to rethink that which we hold and why. As we prepare to open the Qur’an, I mention three sets of general risks and opportunities I have encountered. The key questions are “Do Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God? Is Islam the true religion? Is the Qur’an God inspired? Is Muhammad a genuine prophet?” The several options for answering these questions color how we consider the Qur’an and Islam. The chapter concludes with three Muslim perspectives on the Qur’an.
THREE SETS OF RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The first set is a double confrontation. The Muslim college student from Pakistan was irate. Since I introduced the Qur’an, spoke respectfully of Muhammad, and presented Islam accurately to the class, he assumed that I would convert to Islam. When I remained a Lutheran-style Christian, he reproached me with a Quranic forecast for my fate: “As to those who reject Faith, it is the same to them whether you warn them or do not warn them: they will not believe. Allah has set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing, and on their eyes is a veil. Great is the penalty they (incur)” (Surah 2:6–7). Almost simultaneously, the born-again Christian student from New Jersey demanded that I denounce Islam as blasphemy, Muhammad as a lecherous fraud, and the Qur’an as a satanic ploy to delude the gullible. As an ordained member of the clergy, she said, I was obligated to proclaim Jesus as the only Lord and Savior for, according to John 14:6, Jesus said, “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Each student was convinced that his and her own religion was the only truth and insisted that the introducer respond as each expected. They called for answers that neither equivocated nor took refuge in bland relativism nor feigned “objectivity.” Yet within the risks to my academic accountability and personal integrity were opportunities for us to assess our positions through study and dialogue.

The second set of risks and opportunities involves self-examination and the possibility of changing one’s views. The testy parishioner intended to argue with the Muslim couple I invited to address the congregation’s adult forum. His opposition faltered when the wife-mother-veterinarian spoke of her daily reading of the Qur’an for guidance in raising their children and in her own spiritual life. She shared her worry about the spread of vulgarity and obscenity in the media because she felt the morals of all adults and children were being corrupted. The husband-father-businessman witnessed that he began each day by prostrating himself before the Lord of all and repeated often the opening words of the Qur’an, “In the Name of God, most gracious, most merciful,” as he undertook daily routines. He strove to direct his attitudes and actions toward clients and employees in light of the Qur’an’s ethical standards. The parishioner started to rethink his
earlier hostility to Islam and Muslims, then began to recalibrate at a higher level how his faith could be expressed in his whole life. He realized that in spite of sharp differences, Muslims and non-Muslims shared common concerns and aspirations and might even risk cooperating with each other.

The third set puts the study of religion, specifically Islam, in socio-political context. A student in our seminary class on Christian-Muslim relations took a copy of Yusuf Ali’s translation to her office. A coworker saw her reading the Qur’an in the company’s cafeteria and promptly reported her to the security guards as someone who might blow up their building. Subsequently the personnel director criticized her for causing her fellow workers consternation, advised her to keep “that book” at home, and told her to assure the others that she was a loyal American. Opening the Qur’an is indeed risky.

**Basic Perspectives**

Since we are preparing to open the Qur’an together, it is appropriate at the outset to share some perspectives that are both explicit and implicit in our study. Our endeavor is to understand the Qur’an, not for me either to persuade readers to convert to Islam or to denigrate it. At the same time, we will not ignore areas that are difficult and contentious among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims. Neither will I discuss whether or not Muhammad existed, or question the historicity of Muslim accounts about his life and the developments of the early Muslim community, or make judgments on the validity of the Muslim traditions about how the Qur’an came to be written and collated, or venture opinions about the morality of Quranic principles. Those matters are highly controversial, and when positions contrary to Muslim beliefs are advanced, Muslims deem them largely slanders on the part of Western “Orientalists” and blasphemies proffered by apostates from the Faith.¹ For those interested in the views of several critics and criticisms, I have provided chapter 14. Instead, I deal with the Qur’an as we have it and with respect for Muslim views of it, the Messenger, and the Message. Further, while I recognize and occasionally refer to the serious differences and contrasts between Sunni and Shi’ia Muslims
as well as the divisions within those two broad groups, I focus on positions on which they agree. Where that is not possible or relevant, I defer to generally accepted Sunni positions.

The question at hand is, “Do Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God?”

**PERSPECTIVES OF PERSONS WHO ARE NEITHER JEWISH NOR CHRISTIAN**

Persons who are neither Jewish nor Christian consider the question on at least three grounds. First, if those persons are religious, they implicitly ask if they and Muslims worship the same God in some manner. Islam claims to absorb and fulfill their religions, as well as Judaism and Christianity. To some degree, non-Muslims will open the Qur’an with attention to its resonance with their own belief systems. Second, much of the scholarship in Western languages has been undertaken by Jewish, Christian, and religiously uncommitted scholars. Their methods and conclusions are colored by their responses to the question. All readers need to be sensitive to the perspectives of those who introduce readers to the text. Third, Jews and Christians are mentioned prominently in the Qur’an and in the foundation of the Muslim community. How those Muslims, Christians, and Jews regarded each other and how they are presented as relating to each other is part of the Qur’an’s content. For the theistically inclined, Tibetan Buddhism’s leader, the Dalai Lama, may provide a general response applicable to the question and its corollaries:

How are we to resolve this difficulty [that each religion claims to be the one “true” religion]? It is true that from the point of view of the individual practitioner, it is essential to have a single-pointed commitment to one’s own faith. It is also true that this depends on the deep conviction that one’s own path is the sole mediator of truth. But at the same time, we have to find some means of reconciling this belief with the reality of a multiplicity of similar claims. In practical terms, this involves individual practitioners finding a way at least to accept the va-
lidity of the teachings of other religions while maintaining a whole-
hearted commitment to their own. As far as the validity of the meta-
physical truth claims of a given religion is concerned, that is of course
the internal business of that particular tradition.²

THE MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE

Muslims answer the question in the affirmative:

Say: “We believe in Allah and in what has been revealed to us and what
was revealed to Abraham, Isma’il, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in
(Books) given to Moses, Jesus, and the Prophets from their Lord; we
make no distinction between one and another among them and to
Allah do we bow our will (in Islam).” (Surah 3:84, al-Imran, Family
of Imran)

They insist that Islam is the oldest and most natural of all religions and that
it supersedes and draws into itself all other religions. Judaism and Chris-
tianity have a special relationship to Islam because they are the religions
closest to Islam with regard to prophets, Scriptures, and practices. At the
same time, Jews and Christians are considered to have misunderstood,
corrupted, and been led astray from the clear truths proclaimed to them
through those prophets and Scriptures. Nevertheless, the “People of the
Book” (the Quranic term for Christians and Jews) worship Allah, even if
mistaken and misguided.

THE TRADITIONAL JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

Although it is difficult for Jews and Muslims to divest themselves of the
twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ political-military-social developments
focused on Israel-Palestine, Jews follow the precedent stated by Maimoni-
des (1135–1204). He conceded, somewhat grudgingly, that Christians and
Muslims worship the same God as do Jews:
But it is beyond the human mind to fathom the designs of the Creator, for our ways are not His ways, neither are our thoughts His thoughts. All these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite (Mohammed) who came after him, only served to clear the way for King Messiah, to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord, as it is written For then will I turn to the peoples a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord to serve Him with one consent (Zeph. 3:9).3

**CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES**

Throughout their history Christians have struggled with their relationships with other religions and the cultures that are part of those religions. Some Christian attitudes have remained constant; others have changed. A substantial body of literature has emerged dealing with those relationships.4 Since our focus is on the Qur’an and the perspectives through which it is seen and interpreted and not on interfaith relations, the following is intended to provide us with a basic context. The history of Christian–Muslim relationships is fraught with war, conflicting missionary efforts, political-economic domination, and heated rhetoric on both sides. It is also marked by mutual respect, reciprocal cultural enrichment, and humanitarian cooperation. Both Muslims and Christians have made claims about theirs being the only true faith through which a person may have blessed eternal life, and both have traditions that respect the other’s religious sincerity, leaving questions of salvation to the mercy and justice of God.5 How Christians respond to the question and its corollaries clearly influence and sometimes determine what they see and hear when they open the Qur’an. Generally, Christian considerations of the question may be grouped in three perspectives: exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist.6

**The Exclusivist Perspective**

The exclusivist perspective is maintained by many conservative Protestant Christians, including Christian missionaries and American evangelicals.
The core position holds not only that there can be no salvation apart from faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior but also that since Jesus’ death and, as Christians believe, resurrection, God may be known only through him. That core may be extended to posit that prior to God’s revelation in Jesus, Jews were God’s covenanted people, but they did not discern the prophecies concerning the coming Messiah-Jesus in the Scriptures God gave them and did not accept him as the Messiah. As a result, such Christians believe, the Jews have forfeited their covenanted role as God’s Israel, even though they continue to worship the Creator. Jews and Judaism have been superseded by the Christian community. The Church is now the true Israel. The “New Testament” is the proper interpretation of the earlier Hebrew Scriptures (“Old Testament,” as Christians call it), and both Testaments are the inspired word of God. No other writings may be accepted at the same level of inspiration, just as there can be no other person or spiritual being who supersedes, supplements, or corrects the “good news” (gospel) of Jesus. Logically, then, every saving action and prayer is to be in and through Jesus to God the Father.

Exclusivists appeal for support to numerous passages in the New Testament and may cite the writings of past and modern Christian theologians. The core position can be extended to ask, Who or what, then, do believers in religions apart from Judaism and Christianity worship? One response is to claim that the object(s) of that worship are false gods (often termed “idols”) and on occasion demons. Applied to the key question and its corollaries, exclusivists are clear: Muslims worship a false god, and neither Islam, nor the Qur’an, nor Muhammad is divinely inspired, and Muslims are in danger of being eternally damned on the Day of Judgment.

Inclusivist Perspectives

The inclusivist position is expressed in three major ways. Each holds that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship and seek to serve the same God and are in some way included in God’s inscrutable saving will—yet the Christian way of worshiping and serving the one God is the clearest and closest to God’s revealed truth about Godself. Frequently the expression “Abrahamic Faiths” is used to relate the three monotheistic religions through a
common “father.” Again, biblical and historical precedents may be cited to support the inclusivist perspective.

Roman Catholicism’s Second Vatican Council (1962–65), while definitely affirming that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God and are embraced in God’s plan for salvation, did not address the thornier issues of the Qur’an and Muhammad. At the same time, the Council held that religions other than the form of Christianity as professed by Roman Catholicism are “not on an equal footing with Christianity. These other religions contain many authentic values, although they are mixed with error, and hence need to be purified.”

Eastern Orthodox theologians emphasize that God in God’s being is unknowable, but humans see the light of God’s revelation in terms of God’s wisdom and glory throughout creation. Humans are able to do so because they are created in the divine image and likeness. All religions share in testifying to some degree to God’s glory-light-wisdom and in their own ways respond to God through worship and service. So Muslims and Jews worship the same God as do Christians. As may be expected, the Orthodox hold that God has revealed the heart and source of God’s light and wisdom as the Word made flesh (John 1:14) who is the Light of the world (John 8:12) and the Wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24). The Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I, gave the basic Orthodox position: “Whether we are Christians, Moslems or Jews, we are children of God and our efforts as peacemakers will be blessed and rewarded by the one God whom we share as common Creator.” One contemporary Orthodox theologian summed up the Orthodox view as follows: “The salvation of all people, including non-Christians, depends on the great goodness and mercy of the Omniscient and Omnipotent God who desires the salvation of all people. Those who live in faith and virtue, though outside the Church, receive God’s loving grace and salvation. Saint Paul reminds us, ‘O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!’ (Rom. 11:33).”

Protestant theologians who take the inclusivist approach often do so on grounds that reflect some agreement with Roman Catholic and Orthodox positions, and on their own grounds. A focus on Genesis 1–2 and John 1:1–14 provides others with a creation-based starting point that moves...
toward an Orthodox-type focus on the unity of humanity under the gracious sovereignty of the one God who is revealed gradually in cultural contexts, yet with Jesus Christ as the fullest revelation of God.\textsuperscript{19} Within the circle of inclusivists are theologians who see Islamic monotheism as rigid and requiring Muslims to submit fatalistically to God while Christianity emphasizes divine grace and love.\textsuperscript{20} Nevertheless, a number of scholars deeply involved in interreligious dialogue, especially in predominantly Muslim societies, are making significant contributions to deepening understanding of Islam, the Qur’an, and the implications of interfaith cooperation intellectually, socially, and politically. W. Montgomery Watt states his position clearly: “Muhammad was a prophet chosen by God for a particular task and also that God was behind the spread of Islam throughout the world,” and “Not all the ideas [of Muhammad] are true and sound, but by God’s grace he has been enabled to provide millions of men with a better religion than they had before they testified that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.”\textsuperscript{21} The Anglican bishop Kenneth Cragg holds that Muslims, Jews, and Christians worship the same God, that the Qur’an resonates with the biblical insistence on the oneness of God, and that Muhammad was in some way inspired by God, and he encourages Christians to open and engage the Qur’an.\textsuperscript{22}

Pluralist Perspectives

Pluralists agree with inclusivists that the three religions (and often all life-affirming religions) worship the same God, but pluralists do not acknowledge that God has granted Christianity the fullest or truest revelation. In other words, all religions are valid journeys to God. Pluralists often propose understandings of “God” quite different from many other theists, as well as from traditional Jews, Christians, and Muslims.\textsuperscript{23} A number of those who hold the perspective have been deeply engaged in “traditional Christianity” but found it too intellectually or emotionally confining and immaturely focused on particular doctrines or ecclesiastical structures.\textsuperscript{24} They often move away from a concentration on Christology (doctrines related to the nature and functions of Jesus) as expressed in the traditional creeds and structures of the Christian churches. Instead, holding that they
are “theocentric,” they examine humanity and the human role in the cosmos. They note that people construe God and the gods differently in different times and cultures but that there is always an awareness of an inner yearning to transcend the self. That inner yearning or consciousness may be the constant rather than an ineffable transcendent being called “God.” For the purposes of our study, such pluralists will aver that the inner yearning and experience for transcendence, sometimes called the Ultimate Concern or God beyond God, is present in men and women and that they seek to externalize it through rituals, traditions, accounts, Scriptures, teachings, and so on. “God” is the unity that is behind the fragmentation and heterogeneity of the perceived world and of the individual. Therefore, humans seek the same “God,” and the heroic or seminal figures of a religious tradition are persons who have a significant measure of insight into that unity-transcendence that is within and beyond the person.25

Other pluralists advocate a theocentric rather than christocentric view of God that is unencumbered by the traditional doctrines and rituals and encourages humans to think and act creatively. They emphasize a broad cosmic theology rather than a particularist formulation centered on Jesus as Savior. Religion is seeking truth, and faith is confidence that humans are free to seek and to come to know that which is beyond them. These pluralists admit that there is a transcendent Being but not one of judgment, wrath, and damnation.26 In that theocentric light, all religions share the quest, are limited by their times and cultural loci, and ought to understand deeply their accounts about God as expressive of the unifying cosmic theology and not limited “truths.” Pluralists answer the question and its corollaries with guarded affirmatives and with the condition that no one religion has a monopoly on knowing God fully, and none is to impose its version of God on others.

THE EXCLUSIVIST PERSPECTIVE answers the basic question and its corollaries with a resounding “No.” At the same time the exclusivist view rejects the reasons and conclusions of the inclusivist and pluralist positions. For exclusivists, Islam, the Qur’an, and Muhammad are wrong, even tinged with evil. The proper response by Christians, accordingly, is to expose
Islam’s errors, contradictions, and alleged designs to dominate the world, then to seek to convert Muslims to Christianity. As a result, exclusivists who open the Qur’an will be alert to finding in it those errors, contradictions, and designs. Inclusivist Christians answer the question about worshiping and serving the same God with a “Yes” nuanced by holding that the Christian understanding of God takes precedence over Judaism and Islam. An affirmative response to the question, however, raises critical issues for inclusivists: Does saying “Yes” lead logically to the conclusion that Islam is a/the “true” religion; that the Qur’an is divinely inspired and presents God’s revelation of truth that might lead to viewing it as scripture; and that Muhammad is a post-Jesus Messenger of God? As inclusivist Christians open the Qur’an, they will enter into a dialogue with themselves about the essentials of Christianity and seek a dialogue with Muslims. Pluralist Christians shift the ground of Christian perspectives from scriptures and Christology to a cosmological theology, proposals to understand God in radically different ways, and address the depths of human experience and aspirations even apart from traditional conceptions of God as a transcendent Being. As pluralists open the Qur’an, they will affirm the universal factors, identify the cultural specifics, and seek to extend universal ethical norms.

To be forthright with readers, I am within the circle of those inclusivist Protestants who answer “Yes” to the question of whether Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship and seek to serve the same God. I hold that in key areas God’s ways and truth may be discerned in and through Islam, the Qur’an, and Muhammad’s devotion to God. I am still pondering how far and with what reservations and affirmations that response reaches. Therefore, I open the Qur’an as a seeker and listener, inquiring into its message, and asking what that message means personally and for our present and future. Having surveyed some perspectives by non-Muslims, we turn to those who believe that the Qur’an is from God and for the world.

**Three Basic Muslim Perspectives on the Qur’an**

As we study the Qur’an, we will encounter a number of views by Muslims about it, its role in shaping Islam, and its claims on all humanity. Three
perspectives are lenses through which Muslims view the Qur’an and even how many believers handle the Book. I offer the perspectives in three long, linked, and layered sentences.

First, the Qur’an is the very word of God transmitted to Muhammad ibn Abd Allah ibn Muttalib by God through the angel Gabriel over the course of twenty-two to twenty-three years (610–32).

Second, Muhammad spoke, recited, proclaimed, and dictated the Revelation in the Arabic language to early Muslims who, in turn, memorized and committed it to writings that were collated into the Book that contains no errors or variants from the original revealed to Muhammad and dictated by him to his Companions and Helpers.

Third, Islam is now the religion of that Book; that is, the Qur’an is both Islam’s framework and the content within that framework so that the Quranic Message orders, instructs, guides, consoles, and energizes the Muslim community while also challenging, inviting, warning, and summoning non-Muslims to hear and obey God’s will or face the consequences.

The perspectives may be called respectively the Qur’an as Revelation, Book, and Criterion. Although each sentence runs through the Qur’an and our engagement with it, each calls for preliminary comment as we prepare to move forward.

THE QUR’AN AS REVELATION

Islamically considered, Muhammad was neither the founder of a religion nor the author of the Qur’an. God established Islam, and God authored the Qur’an. God established Islam when He created spiritual beings, the cosmos, and humans, endowing everything with the capacity to know and serve Him. The gracious and merciful Lord of all has revealed His existence and will to all peoples through nature, events, prophets, and books from the time of Adam until a night toward the end of the month of Ramadan, 610:27

We have indeed revealed the (Message) in the Night of Power. And what will explain to thee what the Night of Power is? The Night of Power is better than ten thousand months. Therein come down the
angels and the Spirit by Allah’s permission, on every errand. Peace! This until the rise of Morn! (Surah 97, al-Qadr, Night of Power)

On that night a heavenly event occurred: God caused the Qur’an to descend to the Bait al-Izza, the heaven immediately above the earth. Obedient to God’s command, Gabriel came to Muhammad, the man whom God had been preparing to receive the Revelation, and began to impart to him the content of the Qur’an. The angel commanded the retired merchant to recite, say, and proclaim the Message to his fellow Arabs and to the world. The one Voice in the Qur’an, therefore, is that of the one God. Since that night nature and events still point to the one God, but there will be no further prophets, messengers, or books from God.

Because of his relationship with God through spiritual beings, Muhammad himself became the living model of the totally fulfilled prophet-messenger. His manner of life, words, and actions all pointed to the one God, how that God willed to be obeyed and served, and how the community of believers was to relate to God, one another, and nonbelievers: “Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern of (conduct) for anyone whose hope is in Allah, and the Final Day, and who engages much in the praise of Allah” (Surah 33:21, Al-Ahzab, The Confederates). The term sunna (also sunnah) means literally “custom and usage,” and is most often applied to Muhammad. It connotes what he said and did, including “what he approved, allowed, or condoned when, under prevailing circumstances, he might well have taken issue with others’ actions, decisions or practices; and what he himself refrained from and disapproved of.” Muhammad’s sayings, deeds, and conduct gathered from the remembrances of his followers were collected and compiled by scholars in books termed hadith (sayings and reports). The Hadiths are important as aids in interpreting the Qur’an and the Quranic principles that are the basis of Islamic law (Shari’ah). Nevertheless, the Qur’an remains the chief authority and interpreter by which all others are judged. Muhammad was given other revelatory words through Gabriel that are not included in the Qur’an. These sayings, authorized by God, were to be spoken by Muhammad when and where he thought appropriate. Those special sayings from God not in the Qur’an are called Hadith Qudsi (also Hadees-e-Qudsi, that is, Pure or Sacred Hadith).
THE QUR'AN AS Revelation is the Noble or Glorious Book (al-Qur'an al-Karim) of the most authoritative, complete, and never to be surpassed words of God revealed to the most authoritative and final Messenger-Prophet of God.

THE QUR'AN AS BOOK

Traditions about how the Qur'an went from Muhammad's disclosures to his followers to becoming the official and printed text of Islam are taken up in more detail in chapter 6. The present sketch considers the circumstances under which the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad, its use during his lifetime, and brief mention of its collation into a book.

Hadith references cited in chapter 6 indicate that Muhammad spoke many of the revelations in the presence of believers when he was in a distinct revelatory state that was preceded by painful ringing in his ears and included profuse perspiration and reverent posture. Others could not hear the angel speaking to him but were aware that he was listening to another presence. God assured him and all who read the Qur'an that Muhammad was not deranged: “Thou art not by the grace of thy Lord mad or possessed. Nay, verily for thee is a reward unfailing. And thou (standest) on an exalted standard of character” (Surah 68:2–4, al-Qalam, the Pen or Nun).

Because he sometimes spoke rapidly, he was cautioned:

Move not thy tongue concerning the (Qur’an) to make haste therewith. It is for Us to collect it and to promulgate it: But when We have promulgated it, follow thou its recital (as promulgated): Nay, more it is for Us to explain it (and make it clear). (Surah 75:16–19, al-Qiyamah, the Resurrection)30

Those who wrote the Revelation were questioned and tested by Muhammad to determine whether they took down the words exactly. Sometimes Muhammad was alone when the Revelation came, as on the Night of Power. He repeated the words to those who wrote them down and then were tested by him. On other occasions, Muhammad was engaged in a controversy when he received a timely Revelation that was recorded ei-
ther immediately or later. Several times the community was troubled or he was uncertain about resolving an issue when God spoke clarifying ayas through the angel. Worship provided another occasion for a Revelation, as when he was told to change the direction faced during prayer from Jerusalem to Mecca (Surah 2:142–52). Regardless of the place and conditions under which the Revelation was bestowed and recorded, Muslim traditions generally (yet not unanimously) hold that God also told Muhammad through Gabriel in what order to place the surahs and where in each surah every aya was to be placed. Passages of the Qur’an were recited in public by Muslims during the Messenger’s lifetime. He often tested his followers and had them recite portions. He, too, was interrogated and recited the whole that had been revealed to that point each year by Gabriel, except in the year of his death; then the angel required two tests.

Several years after Muhammad’s death the accounts that were written on various media and from the hearts of persons were collected and compared with one another, then written and bound in books that had exactly the same text. It is that book which Muslims believe we have now as the Glorious Qur’an. Later scholars added divisions to indicate sections for daily reading. Because Arabic, like Hebrew, is basically consonantal, scholars added vowel and accent indications to assist reading and chanting. The Qur’an, like modern Arabic, may be read without such markings.

THE QUR’AN WAS revealed to one person under circumstances that met the needs of the Muslim community. It went from Muhammad’s recitation to being written and eventually put into book form without any errors or variants. The words read today are believed to be the same words that were given by God through Gabriel to the Messenger and the same words that he recited to believers.

THE QUR’AN AS CRITERION

From one angle the Qur’an is the frame around the faith–practice of Islam. Every Muslim is to memorize in Arabic at least twelve ayas, including the first surah, al-Fatihah, the Opener. Al-Fatihah is included in every prayer.
Muslims are encouraged to memorize as much of the Qur’an in Arabic as they are able. Many Muslims gladly memorize whole surahs and sections; others commit the entire text, about 6,400 to 6,600 ayas, to memory. Those who memorize the whole are called *huffaz* (i.e., protectors, preservers, memorizers; sing. *hafiz*). The formal recitation of the Qur’an is a developed science with numerous rules, traditions, and forms. A person who has memorized the text and is recognized as a “reciter” is a *qari* (pl. *qurra*). Qurra often declaim at public events, at celebrations, and on radio and television. In a home, *masjid* (mosque), and *madrassa* (religious school affiliated with a masjid) a Qur’an is often placed on a distinctively carved *rihal* (a stand about eight or ten inches high) and given a prominent, honored place. Often and alternately, the Qur’an is wrapped carefully in a cloth. The Book is to be handled reverently for it is God’s word. Readers are not to write across or highlight any of the Arabic text. Abusing, tearing, soiling, or damaging a Qur’an is a serious sin and may provoke punishments. Indeed, one passage seems to discourage non-Muslims from obtaining the Qur’an. The context appears to be a call for Muslims to guard against infidels from desecrating or disparaging the Revelation.

Before opening the Book, devout Muslims wash their hands and prepare themselves spiritually and intellectually to listen to the God who addresses them in their present, and then they pray that they will take refuge in God against the wiles and whisperings of Satan. The reading concludes with a prayer of thanks to God for giving humanity the Qur’an. Some religious leaders provide advice or protocols about handling the Book, such as cleansing one’s mouth, as well as one’s hands, before reading aloud from the Qur’an; facing the Ka’bah while reading; and not putting other objects on top of the Qur’an. During a devotional reading or while listening to a recitation, Muslims may stop and prostrate themselves as the ayas include references to bowing before God. The devotion and care Muslims show for the Book and its pronunciation and recitation begins to indicate the awe they feel toward the Revelation in all its forms.

From a second angle, the Qur’an contains the substance on which Islam’s teachings and Muslim life are based. God’s Revelation discloses His mercy and justice, His will for and expectations of humans in this world,
and His promises and warnings about the Judgment and Afterlife. The Qur’\'an combines intense concern for individual, communal, and wider social attitudes and actions in this world with straightforward encouragement for persons and the Islamic community to deepen their devotion and awareness of God’s gracious will:

These are ayat of the Wise Book, Guide and a Mercy to the Doers of Good, those who establish regular prayer and give regular charity and have (in their hearts) the assurance of the Hereafter. These are on (true) guidance from their Lord; and these are the ones who will prosper. (Surah 31:2–5, Luqman)

The Qur’\'an contains the principles and often specifics regarding family relations, inheritance, divorce, sexual conduct, speech and dress, and personal privacy, along with stipulations about war, treatment of captives and slaves, and punishment of criminals. These are interwoven with exhortations to prayer, care for the poor, acknowledging God’s sovereignty, and the divine plan for the cosmos. God calls on the believers to study the Qur’\'an for knowledge of the nature of the world, history, and the proper functioning of a God-ruled society, and through that study to come to know and be obedient to the God in Whom is genuine freedom. The Qur’\'an and therefore Islam know no separation between sacred and secular, material and spiritual, reason and revelation, politics and worship. The Qur’\'an gives directions, at times commands, to believers and, if they will but heed it, to potential believers as well.

THE QUR’\'AN IS the Furqan, the Criterion: “O ye who believe! If ye fear Allah He will grant you a criterion (to judge between right and wrong) remove from you (all) evil (that may afflict) you and forgive you: for Allah is the Lord of grace unbounded” (Surah 8:29, al-Anfal, the Spoils of War). The Qur’\'an frames and then gives the content, structure, and standards for living the Islamic life for individuals, the whole Muslim community (ummah), and relations to other people under the gracious and just rule of God.
Conclusion

Non-Muslims and Muslims open the Qur’an from different perspectives and have different expectations of what they will find there. Non-Muslims approach the Book with attitudes ranging from curiosity and skepticism to possible partial acceptance to outright opposition. Muslims approach the Qur’an as believers eager to hear again and to deepen their understandings of the will of the God who speaks—proclaims life and guidance to them and has given them the pattern for life in Muhammad and the community he established. The one set of readers opens the Qur’an with questions, the other to find answers.

Among His signs is this: that He created you from dust; and then, Behold! Ye are men scattered (far and wide)! And among His signs is this: that He created for you mates from among yourselves that ye may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts). Verily, in that are signs for those who reflect. And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the variations in your languages and your color. Verily, in that are signs for those who know. (Surah 30:20–22, al-Rum, the Romans)