

Introduction

There is no benefit in recitation without contemplation;
there is no benefit in worship without comprehension.

Imam 'Ali¹

Universal Significance and Contemporary Relevance

The Qur'ān describes itself in one of its verses as a 'clarification of everything' (*tibyānan li-kulli shay'*; 16:89). This implies that the scope of the guidance found in the Qur'ān cannot be restricted to any particular time or place; it must contain, not a blueprint for each and every situation that might arise in any time or place, but a set of guiding principles which are universally valid and can thus be applied appropriately in any time or place. The universal significance of the Qur'ān therefore strictly implies its contemporary relevance, and this relevance can be brought to light only by a creative interpretive engagement with the revealed text. Rather than uncritically regurgitating the literal meaning of the verses, and imagining that they can in and of themselves provide 'clarification' of everything, Muslims are called upon to ponder thoughtfully the principles embodied in the verses, and to use their intelligence to arrive at solutions—moral, intellectual and spiritual—to the complex issues generated by ever-changing conditions. In other words, *taqlīd*, or simple 'imitation', is to give way to *taḥqīq*, personal 'verification', in the quest for meaning. Such a quest for personal verification, in relation to the meaning of the Qur'ān, cannot dispense with established traditional principles of commentary, needless to say. But neither can the quest for personal meaning be satisfied by merely studying the interpretations of one's predecessors, however compelling they may be. Muslims of all major schools of thought are encouraged to engage with the Qur'ānic revelation creatively, intelligently and sensitively; Qur'ānic prayer will then be

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accompanied and deepened by both rational comprehension and intuitive understanding. This all-embracing intellectual engagement enhances receptivity to the sacramental presence of the revealed Word (*kalām*)—and thus to the theurgic power granted by the Speaker (*al-Mutakallim*) of that Word.

This monograph offers some reflections on certain chapters of the Qur'ān which are recited by Muslims in their daily prayers (*al-ṣalāt*; in Persian, *namāz*). I begin with a discussion of the opening chapter of the Qur'ān, *al-Fātiḥa*, which is the very foundation of the daily prayers, the closest equivalent in Islam to the *Pater Noster* ('Our Father') in Christianity. Then I reflect upon some of the chapters of the Qur'ān recommended for prayer within the broadly defined Shi'i tradition—encompassing the Ja'fari, Ismaili, Zaydi and Bohra branches of Shi'i Islam. The attention given to these short chapters does not in any way imply a confessional prejudice on my part. These chapters are recited by all Muslims, Sunni and Shi'i, but my remit here is to focus on the depth of meaning which can be discerned in those chapters specifically recommended for prayer within the Shi'i traditions of Islam.

There is nothing exclusive about the list of chapters given here: Muslims of all schools of thought and praxis recite these chapters, either in the course of their canonical daily prayers, optional prayers, or as part of a litany or in their personal supplications. The sole difference between Sunni and Shi'i practice in regard to recitation within the formal canonical prayer is that Sunni Muslims are free to recite any verse or set of verses or chapters, whereas Shi'i Muslims are enjoined to recite only entire chapters in their prayers. The reflections offered here, therefore, are not intended to pertain only to Shi'i Islam; rather they are intended to give some idea of the kind of spiritual, intellectual and ethical dynamics with which all Muslims engage, to one degree or another, when they recite and meditate upon the chapters of the Qur'ān presented here.

The universality aimed at here pertains not only to all denominations within Islam; it also concerns the temporal dimension, that is, we are concerned with quintessential principles of spirituality which, being timeless, apply just as much today as they did at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān. Moreover, the very nature of the Qur'ānic message transcends religious boundaries, delivering a message of wisdom which

unites rather than divides: the basic message of *tawḥīd*—not just ‘Oneness’ but ‘declaring One’, ‘affirming One’, and at the deepest level, ‘realising One’—cannot be restricted to the formal framework of Islam. Rather, it resonates with all those whose quest for meaning and fulfilment is rooted in faith—that is, in faith as such, and not only such and such a faith. As I hope to show in the reflections which follow, one of the central themes of the Qur’ānic discourse is the affirmation of religious diversity in the very bosom of spiritual unity—a theme which needs to be stressed more than ever in our troubled times.²

Moreover, the Qur’ānic message reaches out beyond even religious boundaries, with its repeated insistence upon the unity of humanity: ‘Your creation and your resurrection [O mankind] are but as [the creation and resurrection of] a single soul’ (31:28). This essential unity of the human race derives from the God-given and inalterable nature of the human soul: ‘So set thy purpose for religion with unswerving devotion—the nature [framed] of God (*fiṭrat Allāh*), according to which He hath created man. There is no altering God’s creation. That is the right religion, but most people know not’ (30:33). This primordial nature is the foundation upon which all truth and virtue, wisdom and holiness arise; following a particular religion is of value only insofar as it brings to fruition these spiritual seeds contained within the *fiṭra* of each and every human soul.

Reflection and Comprehension

I would like to make it clear that the reflections offered here do not constitute a formal commentary, in the manner of a traditional *tafsīr*. Such a task is quite beyond the competence of this writer, presupposing as it does mastery of a host of traditional sciences, for which formal training, under a range of teachers qualified in their respective disciplines, is essential. Rather, the intention here is far more modest: addressing a general readership, I aim to present a series of philosophical reflections, guided by exegetical principles drawn from the teachings of Imam ‘Alī, while referring occasionally to traditional spiritual commentaries. The purpose is not to be comprehensive but illustrative: to illustrate some of the ways in which verses of the Qur’ān, when ‘prayerfully’ reflected upon, might be brought into sharper focus

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by means of an intellectual mode of reflection on the chapters and verses under discussion.

Such an approach might be considered as a personal response to the repeated Qur'ānic injunctions to reflect and meditate on the verses of the Qur'ān: 'God hath made clear unto you His verses [or: signs, *āyāt*] in order that ye might reflect' (2:219; repeated almost verbatim at 2:266). Or again: 'Truly, herein are signs for those who reflect' (13:3). The insistence of the Qur'ān upon *tafakkur*, reflection or meditation, is one of the most remarkable 'intellectual' features of this scripture: 17 verses contain an explicit or implicit encouragement to engage in *tafakkur*.³ There are several other key notions underscoring the need to engage intellectually with the Qur'ān, such as *tadabbur* (to ponder),⁴ *tafaqquh* (to comprehend), *'aqla* (to use one's intellect), *ta'allum* (to learn), etc. To take the latter term alone: its root, 'l-m (to know), together with its derivatives, occurs no fewer than 856 times in the Qur'ān.⁵

In this light one appreciates more clearly Imam 'Alī's succinct statement on the relationship between action and contemplation, or outward worship and inward comprehension: 'There is no religion for one who has no intellect.'⁶ The importance of prayer in the Islamic tradition, likewise, is summed up in one verse of the Qur'ān: *I created the jinn and mankind only that they might worship Me* (51:56).⁷ The following sentence of Imam 'Alī can be read as a comment on this verse: 'I enjoin you to pray, for it is the pillar of religion and the foundation of Islam. So neglect it not.'⁸ Neglecting the prayer means not only failing to pray, it also means praying in a mechanical fashion, paying lip-service to the prayers without making any effort to engage in meditative reflection upon what one is saying. The active processes of contemplation (*tadabbur*) and comprehension (*tafaqquh*)—the *tadabbur* and *tafaqquh* mentioned in our opening citation above—are not regarded by Imam 'Alī as being confined to some elitist minority of 'thinkers' within the community; they are an intrinsic part of the performance of prayer, without which prayer itself is truncated or emasculated—deprived of its full efficacy. Therefore every Muslim who prays, and not just the 'contemplatives', should engage in meditative reflection as an essential component of the prayer. Without this effort of thought, only the *zāhir*, or 'outwardly apparent' meaning, will be discerned; the Imam urges each Muslim not to remain content

at this level, but to penetrate into the depths of meaning, the *bāṭin*, or 'inwardly hidden', doing so by means of that mode of esoteric interpretation, *ta'wīl*, for which he was renowned. The Prophet said that while he had to struggle to establish the *tanzīl*, 'descent' or 'revelation', of the Qur'ān, Imam 'Alī was the one who would have to struggle for its *ta'wīl*.⁹ Indeed, throughout the history of Islamic spirituality, Sunni and Shi'i alike, Imam 'Alī is cited as the companion most renowned for his stress on meditation of the verses of the revelation.

Al-Ghazālī, for example, cites the following saying of the Imam: 'There is no good in a devotional act that is not understood, nor in Qur'ān reading that is not pondered over.'¹⁰ Another saying of the Imam's, cited by al-Ghazālī, alludes to the unlimited scope of knowledge that can be attained through deep meditation on the meanings embedded in the depths of the Qur'ānic verses: 'One who understands the Qur'ān can thereby explain the totality of knowledge.'¹¹ He also said, famously: 'The Qur'ān consists of a book inscribed, between two covers; it speaks not with a tongue, it cannot do without an interpreter (*tarjumān*).'¹² That he saw himself as the interpreter par excellence of the Qur'ān, following the death of the Prophet, is made clear in several sayings. For example, he claimed to be 'the speaking Qur'ān (*al-Qur'ān al-nāṭiq*)' for the community when his opponents at the battle of Šiffin called for the Qur'ān to be used as the basis of arbitration.¹³ He also claimed to be able to load 70 camels with the pages of the commentary he could give on the *Fātiḥa*.¹⁴ The foundational role of Imam 'Alī in the formation of the discipline of scriptural exegesis in Islam is undisputed, both in Shi'i and Sunni traditions of Islam; Ibn 'Abbās, often referred to in Sunni sources as the founding father of the science of exegesis, claimed that he learnt this discipline from Imam 'Alī.¹⁵

The voluminous sayings attributed to Imam 'Alī in respect of the exalted status of the intellect bear impressive testimony to the intellectual thrust which animates the heart of the 'Alid tradition: the Imam's knowledge, however vast and authoritative it may be, is intended to be a stimulus for individual intellectual creativity, not a substitute for it. 'The Truth cannot be known through others: know the Truth, and then will you come to know who are its people (*ahl*).'¹⁶ Rather than accepting what a person says merely on account of his authority, one

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is urged to critically evaluate what the person says, to verify it for oneself: 'Consider not who said it, rather, consider what he said.'¹⁷

Sacred Presence

For Muslims, the Qur'ān is not just a book containing teachings, narratives, injunctions and prohibitions. It is indeed regarded as comprising all of these elements, but it is also grasped as something infinitely transcending them: it is deemed to be both revealed truth, explicitly articulated through words, and sacred presence, mysteriously conveyed by the divine Word. It is this element of presence which bestows upon all the other *informative* aspects of the text a dimension of *transformative* power. This helps to explain why it is that Muslims maintain that the Qur'ān is untranslatable, as well as having the quality of 'inimitability' (*i'jāz*). What can be translated, to some degree of accuracy or another, is the literal meaning or semantic content of the text; but what cannot be translated is the element of *presence*—conveyed by the Word of God which is spoken in 'clear Arabic ('*Arabī mubīn*') (16:103; 26:195): 'We verily have established it as an Arabic Qur'ān . . .' (43:3).¹⁸ It also helps to explain why the canonical prayer, *ṣalāt*, cannot be recited except in Arabic: the sacramental efficacy of *ṣalāt* in Islam is inextricably woven into the very texture of the Arabic language of the Qur'ānic Revelation.¹⁹ While it is permissible—and indeed recommended—to express personal supplications (*du'ā'*) in one's own language, the formal *ṣalāt* is valid only if it be Qur'ānic in verbal form, as well as spiritual substance: the prayers must be drawn from the Qur'ān and uttered verbatim, in the original language of the Revelation.

There is therefore a balance, a synthesis and a complementarity between the element of revealed truth—the doctrinal content of the text—and the element of sacred presence. Without making an attempt to comprehend the truths of the Revelation, the sacred presence of the text will make only an existential impact, and therefore remain in large part unintelligible on the doctrinal plane. But without the element of presence, the 'truth' of the doctrines, the didactic narratives and the legal precepts will not go beyond the purely conceptual plane. When truth is joined to presence, however, these teachings make an impact on the soul which is both intellectual and

existential: their meaning penetrates not just the intelligence but also the very heart and soul of the receptive listener/reciter. The whole being of one who is attuned to the divine 'music' of the Qur'ān is opened up to the spiritual power of the Revelation—the theurgic power unleashed by an inimitable symbiosis of sensible sound and intelligible light: sonoral presence of the sacred and enlightening exposition of the truth.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr sums up well what the Qur'ān's truth and presence, form and substance, spirit and matter, mean for Muslims who are sensitive to the sacred:

For Muslims, everything about the Qur'ān is sacred—its sound, the very words of the Arabic language chosen by God to express His message, the letters in which it is written, and even the parchment and paper that constitutes the physical aspect of the sacred text. Muslims carry the Qur'ān with full awareness of its sacred reality and usually do not touch it unless they have made their ablutions and are ritually clean. They kiss it and pass under it when going on a journey, and many carry small copies of it with them at all times for protection. The Qur'ān is that central sacred presence which determines all aspects of Muslim life, and the source and fountainhead of all that can be authentically called Islamic.²⁰

It is on account of the importance of the aspect of *presence*, conveyed through sound, that so much emphasis is placed by the Prophet and the Imams of his Ahl al-Bayt ('People of the House' or 'family') on reciting the Qur'ān beautifully. The Prophet said that among the greatest of the beauties of creation is 'the fine intonation of a beautiful voice (*naghmata'l-ṣawt al-ḥasan*)'.²¹ He also said: 'Everything possesses its own adornment (*ḥilya*); and the adornment of the Qur'ān is a beautiful voice.'²² Such was the beauty of the Qur'ānic recitation of Imam Zayn al-'Ābidīn ('Alī b. Ḥusayn) that, according to various reports, those hearing his recitation would 'swoon away due to the beauty of his voice (*ṣa'īqa min ḥusni ṣawtihi*)'.²³ It should not be thought that it is only the aesthetic effect of the beautiful recitation that so deeply struck those who heard it; rather, it is the alchemical combination of enchanting musicality, profound meaning, and above all, theurgic power, that results in the soul being overwhelmed and possibly intoxicated by the divine Word.²⁴

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The Qur'ān refers to the unimaginable immensity of its own celestial 'gravity': if the Qur'ān were to descend upon a mountain, it would be 'humbled in awe and rent asunder by the fear of God' (59:21). The effect of this revelational descent upon a mountain might be compared with the effect of the self-manifestation (*tajallī*) of the divinity as such, as the following dialogue between God and Moses demonstrates. It is interesting to note that the same word (*ṣa'īqa*) which was used to describe how the listeners of the Imam Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn fell into a swoon is used here to describe how Moses was thunderstruck by the theophany he experienced. Moses asks to see God. The reply comes: 'Thou wilt not see Me, but look upon the mountain. If it stand still in its place, then thou wilt see Me. And when his Lord revealed Himself to the mountain, He caused it to collapse. And Moses fell down unconscious' (7:143).

Revelation as Self-Disclosure

The concept of *tajallī*—the theophany, self-revelation, self-manifestation or self-disclosure of God—takes us to the heart of the transformative power of the Qur'ān. It is a concept strongly associated with the principle of light, its root meaning being 'making evident', 'bringing to light', as the following verse makes clear: 'By the day when it shineth forth (*wa'l-nahāri idhā tajallā*)' (92:2). Just as God describes Himself as 'the Light of the heavens and the earth' (24:35), so the Qur'ān refers to itself as 'a manifest light' (4:174); 'a light from God' (5:15); and the biblical scriptures preceding it are referred to as 'guidance and light' (5:44 and 5:46). Since there is only one light—that of God, who is 'the Light of the Heavens and the earth'—it follows that the light of the Qur'ān can only be a prolongation of the Light of God. This light is associated with, but not reducible to, the principle of 'guidance'. This formal mode of guidance, rather, is itself an aspect of the light, so that one becomes 'enlightened' by the Qur'ān not just through its teachings but also by its luminosity. The light of the Revelation is that by which one 'sees' the Truth, and also that by means of which one comes to understand it. Spiritual vision, however, transcends comprehension, in the very measure that realised wisdom transcends conceptual knowledge: 'Eyes see Him not through sight's observation', said Imam

‘Alī in one of his most renowned utterances, ‘but hearts see Him through the verities of faith (*lā tudrikuhu’l-‘uyūn bi-mushāhadati’l-‘īyān, wa lākin tudrikuhu’l-qulūb bi-ḥaqqā’iq al-īmān*)’.²⁵

Imam ‘Alī uses the concept of *tajallī* to emphasise the real presence of God conveyed by the Qur’ān, and shows thereby the extent of the error of regarding the Qur’ān as simply a text like other texts: ‘He has revealed Himself to them [His creatures] in His Book (*fa-tajjalā lahum fī kitābihi*)’.²⁶ This simple affirmation can be read in conjunction with the statement that God has similarly revealed Himself to His creatures by means of His creatures (*mutajallī li-khalqīhi bi-khalqīhi*),²⁷ which implies that the Qur’ān is an encapsulation of the whole of creation.²⁸ The Qur’ān is thus concretely perceived—and not just abstractly conceived—as a sonoral and textual recapitulation of the entire cosmos, and the cosmos is perceived as the Qur’ān writ large. It is not just the entire cosmos and the Qur’ān, but also man, the Adamic substance, that constitute stages or screens whereupon God reveals Himself. The following remarkable lines of poetry by Imam ‘Alī reveal the subtle relationships between the human being, the cosmos, and the revealed scripture: ‘You consider yourself to be an insignificant body, but within you is encapsulated the greatest universe; and you are the “the manifest book” (*al-Kitāb al-mubīn*), whose letters reveal what is hidden’.²⁹

The following prophecy of the Imam is worth reflecting upon, as it stresses the indispensable role of the Qur’ān, taken as a whole, in the spiritual and intellectual lives of the Muslims:

Certainly, a time will come upon you, after I have passed away, when nothing will be more hidden than the Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*), and nothing more manifest than falsehood (*al-bāṭil*) . . . the people of this age to come will consider nothing of less value than the correct recitation of the Qur’ān (*ḥaqq tilāwatīhi*), and nothing of more value than distorting its text . . . The holders of the Book will cast it away, its memorisers will forget it . . . at this time the Qur’ān, and those who were true to it, will be among the people, and yet not among them; with them, and yet not with them . . . Nothing of the Qur’ān will remain except its name; people will know nothing of it except its script and letters . . .³⁰

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This prophecy of the time of ignorance to come can be read as a commentary on the following injunction of the Prophet. He was asked how his followers would be delivered when they would be plunged in the prophesied age of tribulation (*fitna*), and he replied, citing 41:41–42: ‘The exalted Book of God, to which falsehood has no access, neither in front of it, nor behind it; [it is] a Revelation from the Wise, the Praised.’³¹

Just as Imam ‘Alī indicated the correspondence between the Qur’ān, the universe and man, so the Prophet alluded to an equally mysterious correspondence between the Qur’ān and the Imam: ‘The Qur’ān is incumbent upon you, so take it as an *imām* and a leader (*qā’ida*).’³² In this light, the meaning of the famous *ḥadīth al-thaqalayn* assumes a deeper significance: the Prophet said he was leaving behind as his heritage ‘two weighty things (*thaqalayn*), the Book of God, and the people of my household (*ahl baytī*).’³³ The Qur’ān is that which conveys most directly the presence, light and guidance of which the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt are perfect embodiments. It is for this reason that Imam ‘Alī can refer to himself, as noted above, as the ‘speaking Qur’ān’; and that the Prophet said: ‘‘Alī is with the Qur’ān and the Qur’ān is with ‘Alī. They will not separate from each other until they return to me at the [paradisal] pool (*al-ḥawḍ*).’³⁴ These sayings indicate a correspondence between the perfect *walī Allāh* and the revealed *kitāb Allāh*, the ‘Friend’ or saint of God, and the ‘Book’ of God, a correspondence which is made even more explicit by the Imam in the following saying, which we will use as the hermeneutical basis of our own reflections:

The Book of God is that by means of which you see, speak and hear. Parts of it speak through other parts, and some parts of it bear witness to other parts (*yanṭiqu ba’ḍuhu bi-ba’ḍ, wa yashhadu ba’ḍuhu ‘alā ba’ḍ*).³⁵

Taking this saying together with the previously cited one, according to which he himself is the ‘speaking Qur’ān’, one observes that Imam ‘Alī is claiming that he is one who sees, speaks and hears by means of the Qur’ān, and is inviting each of his followers to become like him, and not just be guided by the light, the presence and the meaning of the Qur’ān: rather, one is made aware of the possibility of becoming

one with that light, presence and meaning. This leads us to observe the subtle relationship between assimilating the presence of the Qur'ān and entering into the sphere of *walāya* ('sanctity'); for this latter principle is described in a *ḥadīth qudsī* (a 'holy utterance' spoken by God, but transmitted by the Prophet) in terms which evoke Imam 'Alī's invitation to see, speak and hear through the Qur'ān.

My slave draws near to Me through nothing I love more than that which I have made obligatory for him. My slave never ceases to draw near to Me through supererogatory acts until I love him. And when I love him, I am his hearing by which he hears, his sight by which he sees, his hand by which he grasps, and his foot by which he walks.³⁶

There is, therefore, a correspondence between the realised saint, through whom God sees, hears, speaks and acts, on the one hand, and, on the other, the divine presence conveyed by the Qur'ān, through which, according to Imam 'Alī, one sees, speaks and hears: the holiness of *walāya* and the theophany of *tajallī* are both at work in the *walī Allāh*, and in the Qur'ānic Revelation; the 'two weighty things' are as one in their substance and in their transformative and enlightening function of rendering God present.

We find the Prophet saying: 'Whoever yearns for God should listen to the speech of God (*kalām Allāh*, i.e., the Qur'ān).³⁷ The role of the recitation of the Qur'ān in view of spiritual realisation is of great importance. Imam 'Alī refers to this in the following sayings: 'Learn the Book of God, for it is the best of speech and the most eloquent exhortation. Meditate deeply upon it (*tafaqqahū fīhi*), for truly it is the spring of hearts; and seek to be cured by its light, for indeed it is "a remedy for what is in the hearts" [referring to 10:57].³⁸ Also: 'In it [the Qur'ān] there is a cure for the greatest sickness, which is infidelity and hypocrisy, deviation and error.'³⁹

At the highest level, the spiritual impact of the Qur'ān is described in terms of a process of infusing Prophethood into the soul: 'For one who recites the Qur'ān, it is as if Prophethood is being woven into his very being (*fa-ka'annamā udrijat al-nubuwwa bayn janbayhi*), except that he cannot be the recipient of the Revelation [i.e., cannot be regarded as a Prophet in the strict sense].⁴⁰ This

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kind of statement can only be explained in terms of the immensity of the divine presence which is conveyed by the recitation of the divine discourse. The reciter is being penetrated by the divine presence, and for this reason it is *as if* he were being transformed into a Prophetic being; but only one who receives the Revelation directly and immediately from God is a Prophet in the full sense; all of those who receive the Revelation as mediated by the Prophet cannot therefore be qualified as Prophets, hence the phrase *ka'annamā*, 'as if'. This phrase comes again in a saying attributed to the Prophet: 'For one who recites a third of the Qur'ān, it is as if he were given a third of Prophethood; and he who recites two-thirds of the Qur'ān, it is as if he were given two-thirds of Prophethood; and he who recites the whole of the Qur'ān, it is as if he were given the whole of Prophethood.'⁴¹

Such is the realisational force proper to immersion in the divine Word that later mystics would assert, along with Abū Madyan (d.1198), the seminal Maghribi spiritual authority from whom many Sufi orders claim descent: 'The aspirant (*al-murīd*) is not a true aspirant until he finds in the Qur'ān everything to which he aspires.' This statement is cited by Ibn 'Arabī in his magnum opus, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, and in the same passage, he writes himself that when the Qur'ān truly 'descends' upon the heart, and not just the tongue, the result is a sweetness (*ḥalāwa*) beyond all measure, surpassing all delight (*ladhdha*).⁴² As Martin Lings notes: "The Sufis speak of "seeking to be drowned" (*istighrāq*) in the verses of the Qur'ān . . . What they are seeking is, to use another Sufi term, extinction (*fanā'*) of the created in the Uncreated, of the temporal in the Eternal, of the finite in the Infinite; and for some Sufis the recitation of the Qur'ān has been, throughout their life, their chief means of concentration upon God."⁴³

Finally, let us note the following saying of the Prophet, which brings together two key spiritual or methodical principles, namely, intensity of prayer and the assimilation of the Qur'ān: 'The most noble of my community (*ashraf ummatī*) are the bearers of the Qur'ān, and those who keep vigil at night (*aṣḥāb al-layl*).'⁴⁴ One of the chief spiritual practices of the night vigil (*qiyām al-layl*) is, precisely, the recitation of the Qur'ān; the other being the invocation of the Name of God (*dhikr Allāh*). Both practices are mentioned in the following verses from the chapter entitled *al-Muzzammil* ('The Enwrapped'); these

verses are among the most important as regards exhorting the Muslims to engage in nocturnal devotion. First, as regards the recitation:

O thou enwrapped in thy cloak,
Stand in prayer all night, save a little—
A half thereof, or lessen it a little.
Or add to it, and recite the Qurʾān in measured recitation (73:1–4).

Then, as regards the invocation:

So invoke the Name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him [or ‘it’,
the ‘Name’] with utter devotion (73:1–8).

* * *

The first chapter of this monograph will be devoted entirely to the *Fātiḥa*, the cornerstone of daily prayer in Islam. The second will then present, one after the other, the chapters which are most often recited by Shiʿi Muslims in their prayers, after having recited the *Fātiḥa*. The Shiʿi practice of reciting entire chapters is based on the precept inherited from the Shiʿi Imams, to which al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, the leading Fatimid jurist and theologian, refers in his classical work, *Daʿāʾim al-Islām*: ‘Begin each unit of prayer with the *Basmala* [the formula: *Bismiʾllāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*] and then recite the *Fātiḥa*. And in the first two units of every prayer, recite a chapter of the Qurʾān after the *Fātiḥa*.⁴⁵ This means that, in practice, the shorter chapters, coming towards the end of the Qurʾān, are the ones recommended for recitation. As regards which chapters in particular are to be recited, considerable leeway is given to the individual to choose whichever he or she wishes. The following saying of Imam Jaʿfar, cited by al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, indicates the extent of the flexibility granted to the individual on this issue: ‘When you are praying by yourself, lengthen the prayer,⁴⁶ for verily it is worship; when you pray with the congregation, lighten it [that is, make it short] and pray with [for the sake of] the weakest of them . . . The Messenger of God’s prayer was the most brief, although it was perfect.’⁴⁷ Al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān sums up the attitude towards the prayers: ‘In this matter [which chapters are to be recited] there are no hard and fast

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rules.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, some recommendations are given as regards which *Sūras* ought to be recited, and the selection given in this essay represents a broad cross-section of those most commonly recited in the major schools of Shi'ism.