

FOURTEEN

CHALLENGES TO THE QUR'AN

But the misbelievers say: "Naught is this but a lie which he [Muhammad] has forged, and others have helped him at it." In truth it is they who have put forward an iniquity and a falsehood. And they say: "Tales of the ancients which he has caused to be written, and they are dictated before him morning and evening."

Surah 25:4–5

In the beginning there was ridicule and rejection. Meccans scoffed at Muhammad's claims to have received revelations through an angel, dismissed his calls for them to forsake their ancestral gods, and opposed the Message that threatened to change their lives and livelihoods. Some medieval Christians theorized that the Qur'an was written by a devil named Mahound and branded the religion grossly immoral. Until the mid-nineteenth century Western scholars generally approached the Qur'an as defenders of their own faith positions in Judaism and Christianity. They mounted polemical theological arguments against the Qur'an rather than engage in textual and historical analysis. But it was only a matter of time before some would approach the Qur'an grammatically, historically, and critically.¹ Polemical defenders of Christianity, usually conservative Protestants, have already been discussed. More recently the challenges have expanded to

textual and historical skeptics, advocates of free expression, and social analysts. This chapter presents two contemporary types of challengers that I term rejecters and disparagers.

REJECTERS

In essence, the rejecters deny the historicity of what may be called the traditional Muslim account of Islam's origins. They reject what Muslims hold concerning pre-Islamic Arabia, the Qur'an, Muhammad, Hijra, the first four caliphates, and the authenticity of the Hadith collections; the existence of Muhammad's Meccan and Medinan families and Companions and Helpers; the Battle of Badr, Uhud, and the Trench; the centrality of Mecca; and the paradigmatic role of the Medinan umma. In place of the traditional account, the rejecters propose radically different scenarios that they claim are based on hitherto ignored and misinterpreted archaeological evidence (or the lack thereof), datings, variant and reinterpreted Qur'anic texts, non-Muslim references, arguments from silence, and, in one instance, admitted speculation. They argue that there are no clear, surviving passages from the Qur'an prior to the 690s, that archaeological remains of pre-Islamic Arabia do not confirm the Muslim version of active trade routes or the social conditions of what Muslims term the Jahiliyyah, or that a Meccan merchant named Muhammad ever existed, or that a series of Muslim victories united the Arabs during or immediately after the traditional dating of Muhammad's life. Instead, they maintain that contemporary and near-contemporary evidence cuts the ground from under the historical basis for Islam. The key rejectionist arguments may be summarized as follows:²

1. Polytheistic Arabs from Arabia began to assert themselves in southern Palestine in the late 630s and through the 640s, slowly taking control of Palestine, Syria, and Egypt by 643.
2. During the period 643–680, under Damascus-based Mu'awiyah, coins were struck that reflect an indeterminate monotheism that could fit Jews, Christians, and other monotheists.

3. The first coins mentioning Muhammad appear in 691. Quranic (with variants to traditional text) ayas first appear inscribed inside the Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock, and these aim to refute Christian claims. The religion the inscriptions support appears to be a melding of Judaism with Christianity plus Muhammad but lacks Islamic specificity.
4. By 720–50 biographies of the “traditional” Muhammad appear. The first official mention of the “Book of Allah” appears in 752, and by 780 there are inscriptions indicating beliefs and practices that may be defined as Muslim.
5. Therefore, “Muhammad is not a historical figure, and his biography is the product of the . . . 2nd century A. H.” He “entered the official religion only ca. 71/690. . . . The Qur'an is a late compilation; it was not canonized until the end of the 2nd century A. H. or perhaps early in the 3rd”; and
6. Islam grew out of the need for Arab rulers to stabilize their new state. Later storytellers developed the traditions about Muhammad the merchant from Mecca, using the name of a desert prophet named Mahmet who was linked to a Jewish-based Abrahamic messianic-apocalyptic monotheism.

The rejectionist version has the caliph Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705) introduce the “traditional” Muhammad as the Messenger of God. The Qur'an, then, was composed from various sayings derived from various sects and groups in the Arab empire and evolved over time. One could read the Qur'an as featuring an unnamed prophet or prophets who proclaimed a basic monotheism, justice, judgment, and rewards/punishments without identifying that prophet as the traditional account's Muhammad. Specific references to Muhammad would then be explained as interpolations by pious (or deliberately fraudulent) scribes. Islam is, therefore, a fabricated religion, Muhammad a fictitious character, and the Qur'an “strikingly lacking in overall structure, frequently obscure and inconsequential in both language and content, perfunctory in its linking of disparate materials, and given to the repetition of whole passages in variant versions.” The appraisal continues: “On this basis it can be argued that the book is

the product of the belated and imperfect editing of materials from a plurality of traditions. At the same time the imperfection of the editing suggests that the emergence of the Koran must have been a sudden, not to say, hurried event."³

The rejectionist conclusion is that the Qur'an evolved over time among Western scholars since the late nineteenth century. Some terms related to legal prescriptions appear to have been generated after the traditional dating of Muhammad's death. Other Westerners posited that the Qur'an "developed" or "evolved" into its present form but that Muhammad's religious experience was still its source.⁴ The more negative approach began to emerge in the 1970s with views that the Qur'an as a whole was a late document and that Muhammad may never have existed. The modern scholarly repudiation of the traditional account was mounted in the 1970s by Western academics. The significant leader in the investigation of the Qur'an that is the basis for the above summary was John Wansbrough. He and two colleagues, Michael Cook and Patricia Crone, concluded that the Muslim version did not match the available archaeological and other manuscript materials and that the contradictions in some of the Muslim materials could not be reconciled with the Muslim version.⁵ Wansbrough himself was not interested in proving or disproving the validity of Islam. His focus was on the process by which the scripture called the Qur'an emerged. He concluded that the Qur'an as a written document came into being long after the traditional account says it was revealed. He sought to make an extended and complex case about oral proclamation, existing oral-literary materials common to Judaism and Christianity, and the process of developing written texts using words from later times. Yet if Wansbrough did not intend to disprove the authenticity of Islam as a religion and the Qur'an as the proclamation to Muhammad, he can be read as giving grounds for those who want to take the position further.

Crone and Cook went further.⁶ They mounted an assault on the nature of Islam, admitting that their *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* is "a book written by infidels for infidels."⁷ As did Wansbrough, they employ arguments from the silence of archaeological texts and surmises from admittedly murky archaeological tribal remains in Arabia. They concluded,

as did Wansbrough, that there are no surviving references to the Qur'an prior to the end of the seventh century. They then posit the existence of a heterodox Jewish sect living in Arabia that featured Hagar and Abraham. Citing post-632 Jewish sources about a prophet-warrior among the Arabs who proclaimed a messianic message about the end of the age, Cook and Crone referred to other Jewish sources about a group of Jews who left Edessa and settled among the Arabs ("children of Ishmael") around 628. Combined with an Armenian chronicle dated in the 660s that mentioned a monotheistic Ishmaelite prophet named Mahmet who knew much concerning Moses and Abraham and summoned his followers to live under his law that prohibited idolatry, alcohol, and fornication, the two modern scholars speculate that there was an Abrahamic-Ishmaelite-Hagar-centered sect in Arabia that they call the "Hagarenes." The sect was also heavily influenced by the Samaritans and Zoroastrians. From the former they derived an attachment to the Pentateuch and from the latter the dualism that developed into Dar al-Harb and Dar al-Islam.

While the details of Crone and Cook's construction are not germane to our focus, they maintain that the Hagarenes were disappointed by being rebuffed by Jews and, after a period of positive relations with Christians, decided to combine their religion of Abraham and Moses' Pentateuch with a version of Christian messianism-apocalypticism (minus Christology) to "elaborate a full scale religion of Abraham."⁸ By a theological transposition of biblical geography to Arabia, Mecca replaced Jerusalem, the Ka'bah became the Ishmaelized Mount Moriah-Temple, Mount Hira was the new Sinai, the Jahiliyyah was the period of Egyptian bondage, the Hijra is the Exodus, the Medinan period was the shaping of the community in the wilderness, and the return to Mecca was the entry into the Promised Land. Muhammad, a construction of Hagarenes plus Abd al-Malik's advisers, was the prophet greater than Moses, and the Qur'an was the new and superior Pentateuch-Gospel that gave theological credibility to the new Arab state. Whatever one may think of Cook and Crone's scenario, they were right in stating that no believing Muslim would accept their version of Islam's origins. Nevertheless, Wansbrough's and Cook and Crone's points about the archaeological evidence and silences, as well as variant texts, raise significant questions about the traditional account.⁹

Another rejectionist approach began in the 1920s among those who, like Wansbrough, built on a linguistic basis. Alphonse Mingana wrote in 1927 that it was time to subject the Qur'an to the same kind of analysis used in biblical studies.¹⁰ He posited that the Qur'an is a pastiche of texts drawn from Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian sources. He believed that Syriac was the most important language that influenced the growth and development of the Qur'an. Simply by positing that there was growth and development in Quranic texts runs counter to the traditional account and the role of the Messenger. Others also have noted the appearance of loanwords from other languages and the possible use of terms from times subsequent to Muhammad's life.¹¹

The most recent attempt to show that the Qur'an is not from Muhammad and is greatly misinterpreted is that of the pseudonymous Christof Luxenberg (sometimes given as Luxenburg), rumored to be a Lebanese Christian.¹² He claims that he is working on a "critical edition" of the Qur'an. Logically, that means he is working through variant texts in order to produce a composite text. Also logically, that means the person(s) working on the project assume that there was not one definitive, inspired, and uncorrupted Qur'an revealed to Muhammad that was transmitted and copied without error by his secretaries. Luxenberg has also published in German a work that seeks to prove that the Qur'an is heavily indebted to Syriac and Aramaic, which is later than the traditional account posits.¹³ Luxenberg noted that he is translating *houri* not as the virginal beings in the Gardens but as white raisins or white grapes. This would certainly be interesting news to future jihadists. Luxenberg is reluctant to emerge publicly because of the fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie. Cook, Crone, and Wansbrough, as well as other Westerners scholars, seem not to fear such condemnations for their conclusions about the Faith, the Messenger, or the Book.

DISPARAGERS

Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasrin represent different, yet related challenges to the Qur'an. They were born into Sunni Muslim families, know

Muslim practices, and are acquainted with the Qur'an. Both are writers who state openly their personal rejections of Islam and the Qur'an, are atheists, and are living under condemnations and death threats for their published work concerning the Qur'an, Muhammad, and Islam. Neither is an Islamic or Quranic scholar, nor has either engaged in deep study of the Qur'an and Hadith. Yet both have gained worldwide attention, sympathy, and enmity. Their disparagements of the Qur'an, however, have been different.

SALMAN RUSHDIE

Salman Rushdie is an Islamic "outsider" who is perceived as an "insider" or as someone who could be regarded as a "cultural Muslim," but most Muslims consider him an apostate.¹⁴ He claims that he never intended to insult or blaspheme Islam, Muhammad, or believers but writes only about the immigrant experience.¹⁵ The publication of his *Satanic Verses* (1988) provoked widespread, violent, and deadly responses. A complex book, it raises numerous issues ranging from its literary merits and authorial intentions and responsibilities, an author's freedom of and accountability for expression, racial and religious antagonisms, political and communal authority, and life and death.¹⁶ Hewing to our Quranically focused purpose, I forgo any attempt to discuss the novel per se or the dynamics of British and American responses to the storm it and Rushdie generated.

The novel's title signals that it involves the highly controversial account of the Satanic Verses concerning allegations that Shaytan deceived Muhammad into making a positive statement about the three daughter-wives of Allah. The so-called Satanic Verses have been deemed blasphemous, and blasphemy against God, Muhammad, and the Faith is punished by God with eternal death. The novel has convoluted plot lines and important dream sequences. A major character named Gibreel recalls in a dream that his mother sometimes referred to him as Shaytan. Another major character, Saladin, grows horns and hooves. Two related dream sections of the novel especially provoke Muslims. Briefly, a prophet named Mahound

establishes a new religion in the city of Jahili. His scribe is Salman, a Persian. Mahound begins with stirring revelations that he claims come from God. A new character, Salman, becomes Mahound's secretary and begins by recording Mahound's "revelations." Salman alters, then fabricates revelations into the text, sometimes making one contradict another and then making some outrageous statements. Neither Mahound nor anyone else notices the false revelations. Mahound engages in sexual excesses with a dozen prostitutes who become his wives. Their brothel, the Covering or Veil, is circumambulated by those who believe Mahound. There also are references to a deranged prophetess named Ayesha who leads her followers in a suicidal mission to make a pilgrimage from India to Arabia by walking into the sea. The revelations and religion promulgated seem to make God a petty businessman. Throughout the novel characters confuse good and evil, morality and immorality, God and Satan, revelation and delusion.

Rushdie's claims about his purposes and artistic freedom notwithstanding, I think the novel disparages Islam, the Messenger, and the Qur'an. Neither Rushdie nor his publisher responded to requests by British Muslims to insert a clear and prominent disclaimer in the book's opening pages that it is totally fictional or to withdraw it from publication. Some Shi'ia Muslims brought the book to the attention of the Ayatollah Khomeini. In February 1989 he issued the fatwa: "I inform the proud Muslim people of the world that the author of the *Satanic Verses* book which is against Islam, the Prophet and the Koran, and all involved in its publication who were aware of its content, are sentenced to death." An Iranian-based foundation established a \$2.5 million fund to reward the assassin or assassins who carried out the fatwa. Because the issuer of the fatwa died, it cannot be rescinded. Still Ayatollah Khomeini spoke only for Twelver Shi'ites. The general response of Sunni Muslim leaders was that the author should be brought to trial. Both Sunni and Shi'ia spokespersons demanded the withdrawal of the book from circulation and the destruction of all copies. In the West the Muslim response to Rushdie made Islam appear intolerant, repressive, and menacing. From the Muslim side, the Western press, publishers, and public disclosed how secularized, Godless and irreverent the West really is in the name of "freedom" and is intent on mocking Islam.

TASLIMA NASRIN

Born in 1962 in what is now Bangladesh, Nasrin was raised in an upper-middle-class family. Her autobiographical reflections tell of her moving from childhood acceptance of religious practices to blunt denunciation of Islam and outright atheism. According to Nasrin, her mother was an unquestioningly devout, repressed, even superstitious person who frequented spiritual advisers whom Nasrin describes as domineering and abusive to females. On the one hand, her physician father encouraged her to study science and become a physician. On the other hand, he beat his wife and children, apparently using religion as justification, and restricted his daughters' freedom to be out of the house or to read books not connected to their studies. Nasrin recited and memorized portions of the Qur'an in Arabic, but only when an early teenager did she obtain a Bengali translation of the Book. Her reaction was entirely negative, especially concerning what she perceived as the Qur'an's and Islam's views and teachings on women:

Islam does not consider woman a separate human being. Man was the original creation and womankind was created secondarily for the pleasure of man. Islam considers a woman as a slave or sexual object, nothing more. Women's role is to stay at home and to obey her husband, for this is her religious duty. Women are considered weak, so they should be taken care of, their body and mind, their desire and wishes, their rights and freedom must be controlled by men. Islam treats women intellectually, morally and physically inferior. . . . Islam considers women psychologically inferior.

And after all the rights and freedom, after getting all the sexual pleasure and pleasure of being the master, Allah will reward the men with wine, food, and seventy-two virgins in Paradise, including their wives of the earth. Allah said, *Eat and drink happily, in return for your works. They relax on luxurious furnishings, and we match them with beautiful virgins (52.19–20). Near them, shall be blushing virgins with large beautiful eyes who will be like hidden pearls (37.48–49).*

And what is the reward for the pious woman? Nothing. Nothing but the same old husband, the same man who caused her suffering while they were on earth.¹⁷

Told to be silent or risk hellfire, Nasrin's doubts grew about the Qur'an's cosmology and versions of creation. Yet it was the issue of the treatment of women that ignited her psychological and literary ire. She began to write for newspapers, and had poetry and novels published. All the while she concluded:

I came to suspect that the Qur'an was not written by Allah but, rather, by some selfish greedy man who wanted only his own comfort. Then I read the Hadith, the words of Muhammad. I found different events of Prophet Muhammad's life in which, when he had problems, Allah solved them right away. For example, he was sexually aroused by seeing his daughter-in-law, so Allah sent him a message saying he could marry her because his son was adopted and not a real son, so the marriage was therefore justified. Further, he created a new rule, that Muslims would not be allowed to adopt any child. Muhammad married thirteen times, one of his brides being six-year-old Ayesha. Allah, he said, told him that he was allowed to enjoy his wives, his female slaves and all the captive women he had. He put Ayesha in a veil because he was jealous and did not want his friends looking admiringly at her. Allah, he said, told his friends that they should not go to the Prophet's house any time they want but if they go, they should not look at any of his wives or ask any of them for something. He was so jealous that he introduced the veil for his wives and, ultimately, for all Muslim women. . . . It became clear to me that Muhammad had written the Koran for his own interest, for his own comfort, for his own fun. So I stopped believing in Islam. When I studied other religions, I found they, too, oppressed women. When I stopped practicing religion and made some offensive comments about religion to my mother, she became both nervous and furious, sure that I would go to Hell, and she started praying for me.¹⁸

Her antipathy to Islam and all religions appeared in her writings. Although given awards for Bengali literature by Indian literary societies, she was criticized, then vilified in Bangladesh. She claimed she proposed changing the Shari'ah with regard to women but was understood as seeking to change and possibly undermine the Qur'an. In 1993 a shaykh in the militant Bangladeshi organization Soldiers of Islam issued a fatwa condemning her and called for her arrest, trial, and execution by hanging. Whatever she may have said, it is clear that she had rejected all religions and had harsh words for Islam:

Then I studied the Koran. . . . I found it total bullshit. The Koran, believed by millions, supported slavery and inequalities among people—in other countries the equality of women had been established as a human right. . . . Men had the right to marry four times, divorce, have sex with female slaves, and beat their wives. Women were to hide their bodies because the female body is simply a sexual object. Women were not allowed to divorce their husbands, enjoy inheritance, or have their testimony in court considered as seriously as men's. I found that Allah prescribed Muslims to hate non-Muslims and kill apostates. . . . With my own conscience I found religion ridiculous because it stops free thought, reason, and rationality. . . . So I don't accept Allah, His cruel unholiness. I have my own conscience, which inspired me to support a society based on equality and rationality. Religion is the cause of fanaticism, bloodshed, hatred, racism, conflict. Humanism can only make people humane and make the world livable.¹⁹

Encouraged by friends, family, and the Bangladeshi government, Nasrin has gone into exile, living usually in Sweden or France. A number of her novels and poems have been published. In addition, she lectures widely on the plight of women, what she understands is the wicked conjunction of religion and politics, and on the need for a humanism gives opportunities for persons to fulfill themselves in freedom and peace. The prospects of returning to Bangladesh or of having the bans on her writings dropped seem remote under present conditions.

CONCLUSION

The rejecters and disparagers share an aggressive defensiveness and a defensive aggressiveness. The rejecters take the Qur'an and Islam seriously, then undercut its foundations so that it is either a fraud or a mistake based on wrong readings. The disparagers denounce the Qur'an and Islam as repressive, ludicrous, and, in Nasrin's inelegant expression, bullshit. Do the Islamicist militants and these critics have the last words? Or can we go further? That leads us to the final chapter.

Praise be to Allah to Whom belong all things in the heavens and on earth: to Him be Praise in the Hereafter: and He is Full of Wisdom acquainted with all things. . . . The Unbelievers say "Never to us will come the hour": say "Nay! But most surely by my Lord it will come upon you by Him Who knows the unseen from Whom is not hidden the least little atom in the Heavens or on earth: nor is there anything less than that or greater but is in the Record Perspicuous: That He may reward those who believe and work deeds of righteousness: for such is Forgiveness and a Sustenance Most Generous." (Surah 34:1-4)