A Concluding Appreciation

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In April 1985, Andy Rippin hosted a conference in Calgary, Canada. It was an ambitious undertaking, gathering a group of internationally-renowned scholars for three days of papers and presentations on “The history of the interpretation of the Qurʾān.” Those who participated included many of the leading figures in the field. They arrived from the United States, from Canada, and from Europe: Charles Adams, Mahmoud Ayoub, Issa Boullata, Gerhard Böwering, Fred Denny, M.J. Kister, Fred Leemhuis, and David Powers, among others. Most of their presentations were later reworked as chapters in an influential book, *Approaches to the history of the interpretation of the Qurʾān* (Oxford 1988).

Andy himself was then a recently-tenured Associate Professor at the University of Calgary, eager to introduce his university and his newly-adopted city to those of us who had never ventured to the province of Alberta. My (admittedly fallible) memory tells me that this was the first time that I ever met Andy. It was certainly not, however, the first time that I had ever heard about him. In those years, the 1970s and 1980s, Canada could boast of two major graduate programs in Islamic Studies, one in Toronto, the other in Montreal. I was a student in the Toronto program, the Department of Middle East and Islamic Studies (MEIS) at the University of Toronto. This department was launched in the 1960s by a group of Oxbridge and SOAS expats, and included such luminaries as Roger Savory (Persian history), G.M. Wickens (Arabic and Persian literature), Eleazar Birnbaum (Turkish literature), Michael Marmura (Islamic philosophy and theology), and G.M. Meredith-Owens (Islamic art). Visiting scholars frequently supplemented this cohort of permanent faculty, invited either by MEIS or by the neighboring graduate Centre for Religious Studies. I especially enjoyed seminars that I took with both Peter Brown and William Montgomery Watt.

As students at Toronto, we were keenly aware of our sister department in Montreal, the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University. The Institute was founded about a decade before Toronto’s MEIS and from its inception it housed an excellent departmental library, a major asset for any graduate program. The vision of the Institute was shaped by some of its first faculty, scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith (comparative religion and founder of the Institute), Charles Adams (Islamic religion), Issa Boullata (Arabic literature), Hermann Landolt (Sufism), and Donald Little (Mamlūk history). Andy, who benefited from the opportunity of working with these scholars, received his
Ph.D. from McGill’s Institute of Islamic Studies in 1981 with a dissertation entitled *The Quranic asbāb al-nuzūl material. An analysis of its use and development in exegesis*. By the time his degree was conferred, he was already well-known beyond the city limits of Montreal. Certainly, his reputation as a young star in Qur’anic studies had reached those of us at the University of Toronto who were also writing dissertations on the Qur’ān and its commentaries.

In his introduction to the aforementioned volume, Andy linked the 1984 Calgary conference to the lectures that Ignace Goldziher had prepared for presentation in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1913. Although never actually delivered, Goldziher’s lectures were published in 1920 as *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*, the most influential volume on Qur’anic ṭafsīr to be published in the early twentieth century. Recognizing that Goldziher’s work had been supplemented by the studies of others, but never supplanted, Andy embraced the challenge of bringing ṭafsīr studies to a new level of coordination and comprehensiveness. Rereading this introduction after the passage of almost thirty years, I was struck by the way it provides a prelude and prolegomena to the major themes and topics of Andy’s subsequent scholarly achievements.

For scholars in the humanities, particularly those in literary studies, the 1980s saw an explosion of interest in critical theory. It is not surprising, therefore, to find Andy wading into issues like “the author’s intention” and the quest for the “original” or “real” meaning of a text, as he embarks upon the project of reassessing the Islamic exegetical enterprise. Acknowledging the complexity of these hermeneutical dilemmas within the domain of Qur’anic studies, Andy takes the concept of “reader reaction” or “reader response” – that is, “the notion that a text does not exist in any real sense without a reader to react to and with the text”¹ – as a promising perspective on the study of the Qur’ān:

To re-create a history of the reaction to the Qur’ān in terms of what people have actually thought it means, through an analysis of exegetical texts, appears to be a most appropriate, intellectually convincing, and rewarding task for the modern scholar of the Qur’ān.²

Andy imagined *Approaches* to be the first step in such a monumental project, an overview of Qur’anic exegesis, not, in the manner of Goldziher, as a single-authored monograph, but rather as a multi-authored collection of essays that

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² Ibid.