QUR'ANIC EXEGESIS
IN MEDIEVAL ISLAM AND MODERN ORIENTALISM

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We read that “the Orientalist enterprise of Qur'anic studies, whatever its other merits and services, was a project born of spite, bred in frustration and nourished by vengeance.” If this is indeed the case, we might expect livelier reading. As it stands, the field of Qur'anic studies has not inspired a great response from scholars and students of Islam. The study of Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir, pl. tafsir) has received far less attention than the text of scripture itself, and in so far as it has been studied, it has seldom been treated on its own terms, but more as a reference tool for individual scriptural verses. There are a number of reasons for the lack of attention to tafsir, and in what follows I will note some of them. This essay was motivated in part by what appeared to me an unremarked lacuna in scholarship, and it will suggest some reasons for this lacuna. The first section will introduce the treatment of the genre in the medieval Muslim context, with emphasis on the writings of several major intellectual figures from across the centuries. The second section of the paper deals with the treatment of tafsir by non-Muslims in the West.

If one can make it through the hyperbolic vitriol of S. Parvez Manzoor, with whose article I opened, his article does contain

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1 I would like to thank William Graham, Wolfhart Heinrichs, and Roy Mottahedeh for their help in the early formulations of this article. I also benefited from the comments and criticism of Shahab Ahmed, Tim Fitzgerald, Bernard Haykel and Everett Rowson.

some pertinent observations. The most predictable of these involves the shadow of Biblio-centrism in the Orientalist tradition, but he is equally contemptuous of secular biases in the study of the Qur’an. As will be seen below, I would agree that Orientalism has been a much less secular endeavour than is usually supposed.3 On the other hand, I will argue that one of the main features of Orientalism has been not the distortion of data (though this has occurred), but the fact that many scholars, at various stages and for apparently different reasons, tended merely to copy their medieval sources, and thus conveyed uncritically the methodologies, assumptions, and prejudices of the medieval authors. This is particularly so in the study of Qur’anic interpretation.

I will begin with a number of the more basic and practical reasons for the neglect of exegesis, and then move on to a consideration of that science within the premodern Islamic tradition, ending with a survey of its Orientalist reception. Historically, tafsīr as a genre occupies a somewhat marginal or at least subordinate place in the Islamic sciences, and we can see some recognition of this amongst Muslim scholars. Western scholars were influenced by factors prevailing first in the development of the study of Arabic philology, and later in what may be called the history of religions. In both cases, the result has been a tendency to let the texts speak for themselves, a necessary first step, perhaps, but one that leaves Muslim exegesis isolated and unintelligible to all but the specialist.

The genre is a very formal one. It almost always proceeds according to well-established norms, as a section of scripture—anything from a single word to several verses—is cited, then commented upon. Within the variety of approaches, two characteristics predominate. The first is the exegetical use of reports from the Prophet Muhammad or other early authorities. The second, which occasionally overlaps with the first, is a strong philological orientation. That is, whatever the exegete decides to tell us, it usually includes lexical and often syntactical explanations. Theological

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3 I do not mean the terms “Orientalist”, “Orientalism” in any pejorative sense; rather, I am using them only to refer to the study of Islam as it has developed in Europe and North America, primarily among non-Muslims.