

Book Reviews

A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'an

Muhammad al-Ghazali

Virginia: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2000. 804 pages.

There has been an increasing interest in the Qur'an's literary aspects within the field of Qur'anic studies over the last few years. In the past, western scholars have devoted a great deal of energy to tracing foreign influences in the Qur'an or reconstructing the chronology of its verses and *surahs*. However, the trend now is shifting toward textual studies, a development indicated by the proliferation of articles, anthologies, and books on the Qur'an as a composed literary ornament.

This shift is both refreshing and welcome, particularly for those who are more interested in understanding the Qur'an in its present form, rather than learning about its textual history or compilation. Classical Islamic scholarship developed a body of exegetical material on the Qur'an's miraculous nature (*i'jaz*) from a literary perspective. This approach has taken a primarily microscopic linguistic viewpoint (*balaghah* [eloquence]) of studying the choice of words and how the verses are constructed.

Although it has always been accepted that the Qur'an's *surahs* are distinct literary pieces with their own style and content, comprehensive attempts to present entire *surahs* as thematically independent entities have been rare. With increasing pressure from western scholars that the Qur'an is incoherent and haphazardly arranged, a new genre of exegetical material is developing, both in Muslim and western circles. This new genre focuses upon explaining why the *surah* should be considered as a distinctly composed piece with its own dynamic of sound and meaning. Muhammad al-Ghazali's work falls within this emerging category of Qur'anic exegesis.

A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'an is a translation from al-Ghazali's *Al-Tafsir al-Mawdu'i*. The print is well typeset and easily legible, not cramped together, with a glossy green cover commanding an elegance

worthy of the title. The work is arranged in 114 chapters, one for each surah. Each surah is discussed within the context of life in the Arabian peninsula as well as the particular circumstances confronting the Prophet. The subject matter is expertly woven together, thereby highlighting a central theme in relation to which the surah should be read and interpreted.

The author is careful to contextualize those verses related to war and women, exemplifying his moderate and mature stance on critical and sensitive issues. At times he supports his ideas from Prophetic traditions and stories from the Companions' lives, and often relates the Qur'anic verses to contemporary situations to guide the troubled Muslim Ummah. His treatment of subjects is often by cross-referencing other parts of the Qur'an in order to reach a holistic understanding. A valuable index at the end contains a list of all cross-referenced verses. Another index with a list of important words and phrases adds to the value of the book as a reference work.

A number of things need to be considered while treating the surah as a unity, such as rhythm and rhyme, structure, and meaning. Although al-Ghazali makes rare reference to style (e.g., Surah *Maryam*, which has "a unique and distinctive rhythm" or Surat al-Tur, which has "a gentle and soothing effect on the human spirit"), he devotes almost exclusive attention to meaning. This approach leaves someone who is already familiar with the Qur'an wanting more.

Attempts to show coherence also have kept in mind the surahs' arrangement by placing them in thematic clusters or showing links between surahs that proximate each other. Shaykh al-Ghazali makes a stray reference to these groupings at times (e.g., Surat al-An'am, which he identifies as the first Makkan surah of the "initial seven long surahs," or Surah Ghafir, which is "the first of a group of seven surahs opening with the two Arabic letters ha' and mim"), but does not elaborate much upon the relationships between them.

Historical contextualization, which plays a major role in the book, is done within the generalized grand narrative provided by Muslim historians, often without reference to specific events, and almost never citing source material. Such a style demands that the work be categorized as "polemical" rather than "academic." It is a work by a devout Muslim from within the classical tradition seeking to make it relevant to life in the modern world.

Overall, the book is excellent reading for a wide-ranging audience interested in the Qur'an, but also Islam in general. It is a good companion for Muslims looking to make sense of the Qur'an through moderate and mature streams of Qur'anic interpretation within their tradition. It is also a

fine means for the general public that has little or no knowledge of Islam to approach the Qur'an.

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**Wholeness and Holiness in Education:
An Islamic Perspective**

Zahra Al Zeera

*UK: The International Institute of Islamic Thought,
and Biddles Limited, 2001. 158 pages.*

Wholeness and Holiness in Education: An Islamic Perspective is a very interesting book. Although the book is a result of her experience as a Muslim graduate student in Canada, she does not mention any personal reasons for writing this book, but rather tackles it very lightly without mentioning the hard experiences she faced when her faith was questioned. A Muslim who has taken her faith for granted for years and had had little or no communication with the West was questioned for the first time in her life about many aspects of her faith and found herself unable to provide adequate answers. Her book is the result of such an experience, one which many others in her circumstances and situation have faced and will have to face. Although the author frequently tackles abstract ideas, she always provides scholarly explanations and discussions by quoting and elaborating upon many well-known figures in various disciplines.

The book is divided into four parts and has a total of nine chapters. The first part, "Reflection on Personal Experience," includes two chapters. In them, she tries to take the reader from her own personal experience to the book's goal: preparing Muslim students in their homelands' educational systems to think and question their faith so that they can stand on solid ground. In chapter 1, "The Spiritual and Intellectual Journey," she apologizes for including her personal experience growing up as a Muslim. Actually, more elaboration upon such experiences and on the conflicts she faced while studying in Canada would have been appreciated, as such a topic requires that personal experiences be shared, given that they are not limited to one person but rather to millions of individuals. Chapter 2, "Spirituality: Woman's Best-Kept Secret," further analyzes the significance of such experiences to women specifically.