

Book Reviews

JACQUES JOMIER, *The Great Themes of the Qur'ān*, tr. From the French by Zoe Hersov, London: SCM Press, 1997, Paperback, xii+129 pp.

REVIEWED BY DR. ZAFAR ISHAQ ANSARI, Islamabad.

Some twenty years ago Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) published one of his main works, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (Minneapolis, Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980). In his 'Introduction', Fazlur Rahman noted that modern [Western] literature on the Qur'ān falls into three broad categories: (i) works that seek to trace the influence of Jewish and Christian ideas of the Qu'rān; and (ii) works that attempt to reconstruct the chronological order of the

¹⁴² Muhammad Iqbal Bhutta. *op. cit.* P.145

¹⁴³ Ali Ahmed *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁴ Hafiz Noor Ullah who has introduced the Lahori style of Nastaliq in Lacknow with Qazi Naimat ullah Sahri.

¹⁴⁵ Syed Ikram-al-Haq. *op. cit.* P6

¹⁴⁶ Muhammad Iqbal Bhutta, *op. cit.* P.145

Qur'ān; and (iii) works that aim at describing the content of the Qur'ān, either the whole or certain aspects to receive the most attention, it has had the least" (p. xii). He also felt that the Western scholars "consider it a Muslim responsibility to present the Qur'ān as it would have itself presented, retaining for themselves the work of objective analysis..." (ibid., p. xii).¹⁴⁷

Fazlur Rahman himself tried to fill in this gap and to fulfill this "Muslim responsibility to present the Qur'ān as it would have itself presented" by writing *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* is a coherent work, whose myriad elements are tied together by certain frequently recurring themes, has found increasing articulation and emphasis.¹⁴⁸

The present work by Jacques Jomier, a Dominican friar, originally appeared in 1978 in its original French under the title *Les grands thèmes du Coran* (Paris: Editions le Centurion). Now, after the laps of about two decades, its English translation *The Great themes of the Qur'ān* (London: SCM Press, 1997) has been published. *Inter alia*, the work attempts to fill in the lacuna pointed out by Fazlur Rahman. Attractively produced (with an elegant and sober cover design laced with an attractive calligraphy of Qur'ānic verses), concise in volume (excluding the 'Introduction', but including an index, it consists of nine chapters spanning some 129 pages) and is characterized by a lucid style that addresses a broad readership. Its avowed purpose is to assist those Western non-Muslims who "live in the Muslim world, work with Muslims and would like to understand and be on friendly terms with them..." (p. ix). The best way some of the great themes developed in the Qur'ān returns again and again (p. xi).

¹⁴⁷. For an informative and critical survey of the relatively recent writings on the Qur'ān roughly until 1979, see Fazlur Rahman's 'Introduction' in the above-cited work, pp. lxi-xvi.

¹⁴⁸. It would be of interest to mention that one of the chapters contributed by Khuram Murad (d. 1996) in "The Foundations of Islam", the first in a series of six volumes on Islam scheduled to be published by UNESCO, has exactly the same title: "The Major Themes of the Qur'ān". It would be of further interest to know that Muhammad Abdul Haleem's recent book is entitled *Understanding the Qur'ān: themes and Style* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999). Likewise, the recently-published *tafsir* of the late Muhammad al-Ghazālī, is titled *A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'ān*, (Herdon, VA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2000). In South Asia, the idea that the Qur'ān as well a search of its sūrah centres around a set of themes which endows the Qur'ān with coherence, has been developed to a much greater extent than elsewhere. For a study of this trend see Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1986)

The author, who has written extensively on the Qur'ān¹⁴⁹ shows a sensitive awareness of the importance given, and the veneration shown, to the Qur'ān by Muslims. Jomier both perceives and draws attention to the sanctity of the Qur'ānic text for the Muslims. To mention a few instances, the author points out that while translations of the Muslim. To mention a few instances, the author points out that while translations of the Qur'ān are used to make “the ideas of the Qur'ān known to the faithful”, it is only its Arabic text which is considered “the ideas of the Qur'ān known to the faithful”, it is considered “truly sacred” and therefore that alone “is used in liturgical recitations”. This sanctity constitutes the basis for the veneration that “surrounds the Qur'ān” in Muslim circles. This, for instance, is evident from the fact that any mistake made in reading the Qur'ān, even “mispronouncing the smallest letter...” is followed by “immediate, almost brutal [sic] reaction of those around if ever such an error occurs” (p. xi) (Emphasis added.) It is, again, owing to this sanctity that ritual purity is demanded of those who touch the Qur'ān. For the same reason, the Qur'ānic verses are chanted on the most moving occasions in family and social life as well as at the times of national crises (ibid). Jomier vividly describes the place of the Qur'ān in, and the nature of its impact on, the lives of the Muslims in the following words:

...the endless liturgical recitations; the tension of the crowd that listens and expresses its admiration for the virtuosity of the reciter as much as for the meaning itself; the continued repletion of certain verses in ritual prayer; the use of entire phrases as decorative motifs in the most magnificent monuments of Islamic art; the masterpieces of calligraphy that it has produced; the appeal to its authority to end all discussion...the continual affirmation of its miraculous character and its inimitable qualities, so that it alone offers a solution to the gravest problems in every time and place; the unfailing acceptance of the text

¹⁴⁹. Jacques Jomier's first work in the area of Qur'ānic studies in 1954: *La Commentaire Coranique du Manār* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1954). This was followed by a number of articles, and monographs including his *Bible et Coran* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1959). See also his article “Aspects of the Qur'ān Today” in A.F.L. Beeston, et al., eds., *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge, New York, etc.: Cambridge University press, 1983), pp.260-79. For his introductory work on Islam see his *How to Understand Islam* (London: SCM Press, 1989).

as the supreme criterion of literary aesthetics... all this creates an atmosphere that is difficult for non-muslim to imagine... *It is not only the intellect that is affected [by the Qur'ān] but all the fibres of one's being*" (pp. xi-xii). (Emphasis added).

Being the Word of God, the Qur'ān is without doubt for Muslims, "the most sacred object on earth", and "God's supreme gift to humanity" (p.1). No wonder, certain rules of etiquette are followed and due respect shown in handling it. "If there are other books, the Muslim always places the Qur'ān on the top of the pile" (p.2). If the Qur'ān is dropped by mistake, it is picked up at once and wiped, and its cover is kissed (p.2). Respect for the Qur'ān and meditation on the verses that are remembered and which sustain the faithful in their relationship with God are two characteristic aspects of the Muslims' attitude towards the Qur'ān (p. 3).

In the first chapter entitled "What is the Qur'ān?" (pp. 1-7), Jomier explains that to the Muslims, the Qur'ān is the climax of the guidance provided by God to mankind through the prophets; "an encyclopaedia that contains the essence of the revelations made to the prophets, preserving them so perfectly that the reader has no need to have recourse to other sacred books. All the essential points, in every way, are given to him in the Qur'ān" (p.1).

The Qur'ānic teachings, simple in their essentials, according to the author, revolve around:

...certain central ideas that it repeats insistently so that they are imprinted on the mind and especially the heart of the believers, like example, God is all-powerful; He is the sole creator, infinitely good and forgiving. All that man has is a gift and grace from God. Men are good and bad; God guides them by His messengers and His books. All the communities that preceded Islam possessed the truth for a time. Then they fell away and were unfaithful to their vocation, so that today Islam alone is the criterion of all truth. *The world has been entrusted to the Muslim community to reign peacefully, but if need be by war; this is the Law of God* (p. 3). (Emphasis added).

A part of this chapter is devoted to briefly describing how the Qur'ān was collected into a composite text and thereby preserved (see pp. 4-7). Jomier's account, however, shows little appreciation for the *en toto* preservation of the Qur'ānic text in such manner that its integrity has commanded a remarkable consensus over the centuries. That this is a history achievement with no parallel in human history can scarcely be doubted. It is thanks to this consensus about the integrity of the Qur'ān that it has continually shaped the outlook and behaviour of Muslims. Equally remarkable, the Qur'ān has held them together by a strong bond of common belief in, and devotion to, a shared worldview and has provided them the fundamental principles of their way of life. Surprisingly though, Jomier also makes no mention of, let alone show any appreciation for, the otherwise astonishing fact that for fourteen centuries since the advent of Islam a large number of Muslims in each generation has memorised the entire text of the Qur'ān, thus interiorizing, as it were, the Word of God. It would take little effort to appreciate how spiritually enriching such an experience has been for Muslims, or how very significant a role it has played in preserving the Qur'ān and spreading its teachings. In Jomier's work, however, this great saga is rounded off in a manner that seems to miss out this whole dimension regarding the Qur'ān:

The Arabic script then in usage was still rather like shorthand, less accurate than the present script and open to ambiguous interpretations. The orthography was slowly perfected and *two centuries later the text was definitively established*" (p. 5). (Emphasis added).

The last sentence, *inter alia*, categorically owns the extreme scepticism to which a section of Western scholarship has lately tented, and which is epitomised in John Wansborough's Qur'ānic Studies.¹⁵⁰ To put it succinctly, this group of scholars has come forth with the thesis that, to quote Fazlur Rahman, "as it [i.e., the Qur'ān] stands, it is post-Muhammad".¹⁵¹ Jomier unequivocally accepts this thesis and shifts the date of the centuries later" [than its revelation]. He does so in disregard of overwhelming evidence to the contrary and in opposition to the findings of the generality of both Muslim and Western scholarship that the Qur'ānic text that we have in our hands goes back to a very early period of Islam. Jomier's scepticism certainly

¹⁵⁰ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹⁵¹. See his Major Themes of the Qur'ān, p. xiii.

strikes one as odd, especially because the extreme scepticism of John Wansborough and some other scholars about Qur'ān from 1977 onwards is at best a hypothesis, and a tenuous one at that. It is also surprising that this hypothesis was uncritically presented by Jomier in 1978 as an established historical fact.

In chapter 2, “Mecca and the Early Days of Islam” (pp. 8-24), the author attempts to highlight the basic teachings of Islam, mainly with the help of the *Makkan sūrahs*, especially *sūrahs* 105, 106, 93, 94, 96, 53, 110. Jomier sees these *sūrahs* describing God “as the Lord who is very powerful and *good to those who are closely or remotely touched by prophecy and who submit obediently to His guidance*. Then comes the attitude that is demanded, explicitly or implicitly, from man in return” (p.8) (Emphasis added). One is left wondering whether a serious reading of the Qur'ān impresses one with the image of God Who is good, merciful and compassionate, and loves, sustains and cherishes all his creatures, or of a God who is good only “to those who are...*touched by prophecy and who submit obediently to his guidance*”. One perhaps has just got to go through *Sūrat al-Rahmān* (*sūrah* 55) to come a clear conclusion on the point.

The Qur'ān being, among other things, a record of the teaching imparted by the Prophet at various stages of his early *sūrahs* are a reliable source to appreciate the Prophet's state of mind, the problems of his life, and the manner in which his Message was received by his people during the early years of his mission. The most momentous incident during this period was when, in the course of his retreat in the Cave of Hirā', he heard a voice: “Recite: In the Name of thy Lord who created...” (p. 15). This was the beginning of the “call”. On returning home in a state of perplexity and perturbation, the Prophet narrated the incident to his wife, Khadijah. It is significant how Jomier describes the sequel of this holiest and most overpowering experience of the Prophet: “Muslim tradition goes into fairly crude detail when it reports how Khadijah encouraged her husband. When he returned to the house, having seen the angel again, *Khadijah embraced him in an uninhibited fashion permitted only conjugal intimacy*” (p. 16).¹⁵² (Emphasis added).

¹⁵². To appreciate what Jomier is alluding to, see Ibn Hishām, *al-Sirah al-Nabawīyah*, eds., Mustafa al-Saqā et al, Part I comprising vols. 1-2, 2nd edition (Cairo: Mustafa al-Bābi al-

The ‘crude detail’ comprises the following: (i) The Prophet, during these days, was seized with a deep sense of perplexity on account of the extraordinary experience that he had in the Cave of Hirā’: his vision of an angel, who communicated to him an unusual message. (ii) Khadijah, who knew her husband quite thoroughly, expressed her full faith in his veracity, uprightness and benevolence, and endorsed, on that account, that his experience was true and that there was no occasion for him to entertain any fear because God could not let any harm come upon a person such as he. (iii) Khadijah also tried, by a variety of means, to have the Prophet turn his mind off that experience. She also took him to her relative Waraqah who had embraced Christianity and was versed in the Scriptures. Waraqah assured the Prophet that he who had visited him was no other than the angel who had come to Moses before. (iv) The Prophet, however, continued to observe this strange figure with his “feet astride the horizon” even after his return from the Cave of Hirā’ and naturally felt much perturbed. Khadijah, wanted to make sure that he whom the Prophet first saw at Hirā’ and continued to see subsequently was an angel rather than an evil spirit. In order to ascertain that, she made the Prophet sit, by turns, on each of her two thighs. Then she made him sit in her *hijr* (lap), and “disclosed her face and having cast aside her veil while the Prophet was sitting in her lap”.¹⁵³ But when Khadijah asked him, after having him sit in her lap, and after disclosing her face and casting aside her veil,¹⁵⁴ he confirmed that he could no longer observe that figure.

Hablabi, 1955), pp. 238-239. For its English translation see Ibn Ishāq, *The life of Muhammad*, tr. A. Guillaume (Lahore, Karachi Dacca: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 107. Among the early Islamic sources on the life of the Prophet I have not been able to locate these two traditions mentioned by Ibn Hishām in any other work of note. Among the writers of a relatively later period I was able to locate these traditions in Abū Bakr Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Bayhaqi, *Dalā’il al-Nubunmah*, ed., ‘Abd al-Mu ‘ti Qal’ji (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1985), vol.2, pp. 151-152 and Abū al-Fidā, Ismā’il ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373), *al-Sirah al-Nabawiyyah*, ed., Mustafa ‘Abd al-Wāhid, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1978), vol.1, p.410.

¹⁵³. Ibn Hishām, *al-Sirah*, p.239; *Life of Muhammad*, p.107.

¹⁵⁴. The Arabic word used in the original for the word translated into English as veil is *khimār*, i.e. head covering. Loc. cit. According to another tradition, Khadijah took the Prophet between herself and her *dir’*. *Dir’* according to Lane (see q.v. D R ‘ in his *Lexicon*) is “a garment or piece of cloth, in the middle of which a woman cuts an opening for the head to be put through and to which she puts arms (sleeves) and the two openings of which (at the two sides) she sews up, or a woman’s garment to be worn above the *qamis*”.

Thereupon, she confidently assured the Prophet: “O son of my uncle, rejoice and be of good heart, by God he is an angel and not a Satan”.¹⁵⁵

The reason underlying the statement of Khadijah is not difficult to grasp. Had this figure whom the Prophet observed been an evil spirit, the prospect of an amorous encounter, the anticipation of manifestations of intimacy between a man and a woman, of which sitting in the lap and taking off the veil could have been construed as preliminaries, would have made the evil spirit linger on. On the contrary, such matters would be of scant interest to angels who have an overly spiritual disposition. Thus the disappearance of the figure clearly indicated that the one whom the Prophet saw was an angel and not an evil spirit. All that was done by Khadijah was, quite evidently, to make the Prophet feel reassured.

Be that as it may, it seems to be an unhappy choice of expression on Jomier’s part to describe the incident in the words that follow: “... *Khadijah embraced him in an uninhibited fashion made possible only by conjugal intimacy*”. It is surprising that Jomier should have portrayed the simple incident, in total disregard of its context, into some kind of an erotic encounter. Surprisingly, he does not even remotely hint that Khadijah gave any expression to that warmth and love which form an inalienable part of the life of normal, healthy spouses – a warmth and love which, one might say, stem from God’s infinite love and mercy. For sure, there would have been nothing objectionable if Khadijah had shown something of the warmth and love that characterised the relationship between her and the Prophet. Interestingly, however, nothing to the effect is reported in the Muslim tradition. The reason for this, apparently, was not that a warm conjugal relationship between the spouses is frowned upon by Islam, or that the relationship between the Prophet and his wives was a frigid one. Far from that, but on this particular occasion there was no display of “conjugal intimacy” from either of the spouses. This is understandable because there was no occasion for any ‘embrace’, let alone for an embrace in an ‘uninhibited fashion’ because the attention of both was focused on the very unusual experience through which the Prophet was then passing, and which was making him uneasy. One is at an utter loss at Jomier’s strange interpretation of the event. It seems to be an instance of interpreting acts in total disregard of both their intent and context.

¹⁵⁵. Loc. Cit.

In the chapter the author also deals with the Makkan sūrahs of a somewhat later period. He treats them, and rightly so, as shedding light on the Makkan opposition to the Prophet and his followers. So, as shedding light on the Makkan opposition to the Prophet and his followers. This is evident, among other sūrahs, from sūrah 96, especially its verses 6-29. The severity of the Makkan unbelievers' opposition increased over time. This is reflected, for instance, in sūrah 110, which embodies a curse to Abū Lahab, the Prophet's uncle, who was his inveterate enemy (p. 22). Faced with intense opposition and hostility, sūrah 110 indicates that the reaction of the fact that this violence was "tempered ... when clemency is possible or preferable" (p. 23).

Chapter 3 is entitled "Hymns to God the Creator" (pp. 25-360). Creation, says Jomier, has a place of paramount importance in the Qur'ān. God is emphatically presented as the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and creation is mentioned as the most characteristic manifestation of God's power and goodness (p. 25). No wonder, the Qur'ān exhorts men to meditate on creation (see Qur'ān 3:190-191, and often). The creation of the universe as presented in the Qur'ān, according to Jomier, is broadly in line with the Biblical tradition except that the former puts emphasis on "the lesson to be learned" from it (p.26). presumably for this reason, unlike the Bible, there is no coherent account of creation in the Qur'ān (ibid). The Qur'ānic account also has no reference to God's resting on the seventh day, though it does mention that God created the world in six days (p.26).¹⁵⁶

In Jomier's view, the reference to God's creation – the creation of the heavens and the earth, of plants and animals, etc. – is mentioned in the Qur'ān in such manner that man "turns at once to God" (p.27). I personally share this perceptible observation of the author. In my now view, descriptions of God's creation and its wonders, which one encounters very frequently in the Qur'ān, are not them meant *per se*. instead, such descriptions

¹⁵⁶. The Qur'ān emphasizes that the act of creating the world did not wear God out (Qur'ān 50:38). God was not tired, and hence did not need a day of rest. (This implication of the above-quoted verse was pointed out to me by my colleague, Professor Muhammad al-Ghazali, which is acknowledged with thanks. I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the useful comments on the first draft of this review by some of my colleagues and friends, especially by Dr S. Nomanul Haq, Mr. S.M.A. Iqbal and Modassir Ali).

seem to be invariably related to some of the underlying purpose of the Qur'ānic Message such as summoning man to respond to his Creator who is full goodness, benevolence and compassion to all his creatures in gratitude and obedience. I find Jomier's statements here quite enriching.

In the "Hymns to God the Creator" (see, e.g., the Qur'ān 16:3-18), the verses in question emphasised God's "goodness, mercy and forgiveness" (p.3), or His "power and wisdom" (p.35). In consideration of all this, man is required to respond to his Creator in gratitude (16:14). On the whole, one finds a great deal in the chapter that enables one to understand of the Islamic concept of God better.

Chapter 4, "Adam, Father of Humankind" (pp. 37-51), attempts to articulate the Qur'ānic vision of good life. After recounting the narrative of Adam and Eve in the Qur'ān, the author concludes: "Among men, there are good and bad. Adam is good; temptation took him by surprise and he fell, but he got up at once, trusting in divine forgiveness and mercy. He surrendered to God. His experience ends with God's promise to guide men" (p.47). At this stage the prophetic dimension is introduced: "God's mercy which, in the hymn to the Creator, gives men the benefits of nature, will grant them a series of prophets to guide them, with Muhammad as the glorious culmination of the series"(ibid).

The chapter also has some insightful observations about the view of sin in Islam and Christianity. The author notes, and rightly so, that "sin is seen in a different light" in the two religions (p.49). In Islam, man is "the servant of God, a servant who loves to serve his master. He is alone before him and Islam emphatically rejects any mediator. Each man will bear his own burden..."(p. 49). These observations, however, are rounded off with the somewhat startling statement that Islam "*stresses the fact that God is too exalted to be affected by human acts...*"(p.49). (Emphasis added).

The author's statement that the Christian concept of sin is at variance with the Islamic one can hardly be disputed. For one thing, human beings are not conceived in Islam to have been born with the burden of sin: Adam and Eve whom Satan had caused to stumble in Paradise were taught by God himself the words they ought to use to seek God's forgiveness. They sought forgiveness and were forgiven by God before they said farewell to Paradise

and set their feet on earth. In stead of being born with a burden of sin, human beings are born on that true, pure spiritual state which the Qur'ān at this point calls “*the fitrah of Allah*” (30:30). However, had the author briefly highlighted at this point to some of these salient features of Islam, a fuller picture of the Islamic viewpoint would have emerged. I would venture to point out a few things which, in my view, should have been mentioned to help the reader understand the distinct Qur'āic/Islamic perspective on sin and some of its implications. For instance, it would have been illuminating to point out that since man is born free of sin, there remains no need for Good to sacrifice his son for man's redemption.

It is true that, as the author observes, Islam emphatically “rejects any mediator”. It is also true that the Islamic worldview emphasises man's status as God's servant. It is also true that man is the servant of his Lord who is the Nourisher, the Cherisher, who routinely describes Himself as “The Compassionate, the Meriful”. This Lord, according to the Qur'ān, is *Ra'ūf* (Intensely Kind) (2:143; 2:207; etc.) and *wadūd* (Intensely Loving) (11:90;85:14). One only wishes that the author had dilated on the matter a bit and given a fuller picture of things of things by stressing these aspects of God in Islam which, in our view, have not been sufficiently stressed. Even so, the remark that the God in Islam is “*too exalted to be affected by human acts*” (p.49) sounds to me odd and jarring unless it be meant that man's good acts can neither benefit God nor can his evil acts cause him any harm. But the context in which the statement occurs rules out the possibility that this is what the author means.

The Islamic view of sin could have been further illuminated if the author were to cast a cursory glance at the *ahādith*, which emphasis the notion of repentance in Islam.¹⁵⁷ According to a number of Ahādith, God simply yearns that his servants turn to him in repentance and indeed rejoices when they actually do so.¹⁵⁸ Whenever a sinner repents and seeks pardon from his

¹⁵⁷. It can be said that we should not expect Jomier to refer to non-Qur'ānic sources to understand Qur'ānic concepts. This can hardly be sustained in view of the fact that in his book Jomier does refer to various non-Qur'ānic sources such as *Tafsīr Jalalayn* to explain Qur'ānic concepts.

¹⁵⁸. See Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-Da'wāt*, Bāb al-Tawbah; *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Tawbah, Bāb fi al-Hadd 'alā al-Tawbah wa al-Farh bihā; *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, Kitāb al-Da 'wāt 'an Rasūl Allāh, Bāb fi Fadl al-Tawbah wa al-Istighfār wa mā Dhukira min Rahmat Allah.

Lord, he needs no intermediary to approach him since God is very closer to him “then his jugular vein” (Qāf 50:16); and even if a person as perverse as a hypocrite were to seek God’s forgiveness, he is assured that he would find God “Most Forgiving, Most Clement” (al-Nisā’ 4:64). This act of repentance purifies a sinner to a degree that he becomes, in God’s sight, as one who did not sin at all.¹⁵⁹ One only wishes that the author had introduced this information, which is so vitally relevant to the question of sin for it helps one understand the characteristically Islamic concept of sin.

Chapter 5, entitled “Abraham, the Muslim” (pp. 52-62), opens with the statement that throughout the ages there has been only one religion. The essential element in religion is “ active, free and trusting submission to God, who is all-powerful and compassionate”(p. 52).¹⁶⁰ (Emphasis added). It is presumably for this reason that the Qur’ān emphasises Abraham as a glorious embodiment of Islam: “Abraham was not a Jew, neither a Christian; but he was one pure of faith [a hanif], a Muslim...”(3:67). The highest point in Abraham’s total devotion to God came when he was asked to sacrifice his son in God’s cause. Abraham accepted the suggestion heartily and went out to do the bidding. Miraculously, his son was saved: God delivered the son, replacing him with a ram. Who was this son whom Abraham, in compliance with God’s command, was prepared to sacrifice? Was he Ishmael or Isaac? The disagreement between Muslims on the one hand and Jews and Christians on the other regarding this question is well-known: Muslims have tended to the view that Abraham took Ishmael, his son from Hagar, for sacrifice, whereas the Jews and the Christians believe him to be Isaac, Abraham’s son from his other wife, Sarah. Jomier claims that many Muslim commentators in the early centuries admitted that it was Isaac, but the unanimous opinion in the Muslim world is inclined to the view that son was Ishmael (p.56).

Be that it may, Abraham is hailed in the Qur’ān as the “direct forefather of the religious movement launched by Muhammad” (p.58). It is clear that this belief provides a strong basis for kinship and a rallying point for the spiritual “children of Abraham”, for all those who look upon Abraham for inspiration as an ancient standard-bearer of monotheism, as the patriarch of

¹⁵⁹. See Ibn Mājah, *al-Sunan*, Kitāb: al-Zuhd, Bāb: Khikr al-Tawbah.

¹⁶⁰. This characterisation of islām (“submission”) merits appreciation, especially because at times even Muslim scholars fail to express this point.

all those who are unwavering in their commitment to God's unity. One only wishes that the ecumenical and reconciliatory potential of this doctrine will not fail to inspire all those who, despite their mutual differences, cherish the monumental historical role and inspiring figure of Abraham.

In chapter 6, "The Prophets who were 'Saved' " (pp. 63-79) the author explains the Islamic doctrine concerning the prophets and their mission. Prophets call their people to worship one God. They are found all over: they were sent to, and spoke the language of their people (p.67). A part of this chapter is devoted to drawing the reader's attention to the well-known objections raised by the non-Muslim, especially Jewish and Christian, scholars to the Qur'ānic statements regarding some of these prophets, or their parents and relatives (pp. 75-79). For instance, the Qur'ān mentions 'Imr'ān as the father Mary, the mother of Jesus. "It resembles the name Amram, Moses' father in the Bible..." (p. 75). In the Qur'ān, however, we find Mary mentioned as Aaron's [Hārūn's] sister (p.75). similar questions have been raised concerning Korah and Haman (p.78). whatever has been said by Muslim scholars to explain these matters, has been mentioned perfunctorily and has been construed to be a means to get over a theoretical difficulty (see pp.75 and 78 f.). It appears that the author summarily rejects the Muslim explanations on these matters without even caring to consider them seriously.

Chapter 7, "Jesus, son of Mary" (pp. 80-92), is useful chapter and brings out the Muslims' attitude towards Jesus, son of Mary. A great deal of material presented in the chapter would perhaps come as a surprise to many Christians who are not aware of the Muslims' great veneration of Jesus. Such is the state of misinformation about Islam that the Prophet and the Qur'ān are generally viewed as hostile to everything associated with Christianity. Many Christians would probably be astonished to find that the Qur'ān portrays him as a "true Muslim" and extols him for his filial devotion and his praying and almsgiving. In fact, the Qur'ānic portrayal of Jesus is at times very moving. Let us just consider one such instance where Jesus says the following about himself:

Behold, I an God's servant; He has given me the Book, and made me the Prophet, and has made me blessed wherever I may be; and has enjoined upon me prayer and almsgiving as long as I live, and to be

dutiful to my mother; and he has not made me arrogant, bereft of grace. Peace be upon me the day when I was born and on the day I die, and the day I shall be raised to life [again]. (Qurʾān 19:30-33).¹⁶¹

To be sure, notwithstanding the distinct position of Muhammad who represents the culmination of Prophethood, the Qurʾān shows ample respect to all Prophet: Each of them received truth from God and hence Muslims may not make any distinction, as regards the authenticity of the Message of Messenger of God from another (Qurʾān 2:285). Also, all Prophets are held in the Muslim religious tradition as impeccable, and hence Muslims tend to reject, as the author rightly says, “any exegesis that would impute grave offences to the sinless, infallible prophets” (p.82). Even so the reverence in which Jesus is held and the warmth and fervour which pulsate through the Qurʾānic portrayal of him are far too conspicuous and powerfully expressed to be missed by any reader.

All this does not detract from the fact that the Qurʾān is absolutely uncompromising on the question of Jesus’ divinity, strongly rejecting every suggestion that he was either God or son of God. True, Jesus has been titled in the Qurʾān as ‘Word’ (or ‘Speech’) of God, and a spirit from God (p.88), The author looks very carefully at the statements relevant to this question in the Qurʾān and does not fail to note that the Qurʾānic expression, ‘Word of God’ for Jesus represents the idea “that he was created by a word of God” (p. 87), that is, Jesus represents the idea “that he conveyed to Mary” (p. 88). Jomier even perceptively notes the use of “the definite and indefinite articles” by the Qurʾān when it calls Jesus at one place “a word from God” and at another, “a spirit of God” (p.88), emphasising thereby that Jesus, according to Muslims, is “‘a’ and not ‘the’ spirit of God” (*loc.cit.*).

This is quite true. For the Qurʾān draws a clear and impregnable line of demarcation between the Creator and every genre of his creation, both animate and inanimate. This is an issue of most vital importance for Islam on which it would not brook compromise. Admiration respect, veneration for God’s Messengers, and holding them as impeccable, yes. All this is admissible, but only as long as the line of demarcation before the Creator and

¹⁶¹. Even though the translation conveys the meaning of these verses, it fails to reflect much of their extraordinary literary force and splendor one finds in the original Arabic.

his creatures is not blurred. This also explains the significance of the Islamic shahādah which affirms God's uniqueness, but then goes on to add "...and Muhammad is his [i.e. God's] servant and his Messenger".

Chapter 8 "The Muslim Community" (pp. 93-107) delineates the vocation of the community that comes into existence by the commitment to live by the Message of the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān alludes to the various stages through which this community passed during the life of the Prophet and the problems with which it was confronted. All this forms the background against which the Qur'ān provided the community with necessary attitudinal and behavioural guidelines.

The Qur'ān declares Muslims to be the "best community" (33:110). The reason for it, as indicated in the verse itself, is none else than that they "enjoin what is right, forbid what is wrong, and believe in God". This lays down, as the author points out, the "Muslim's mission in society" (p.105). The author refers to a parallel in the Christian religious tradition to explain what is meant by the expression "best community". He points out that "it is the counterpart of the phrase 'You are the salt of the earth, addressed by Jesus to his followers in the sermon on the Mount" (p.105).

Chapter 9 "Argument and Persuasion" (pp. 108-120) sets out the thesis that the Qur'ān does not simply present a set of doctrines, but also constantly argues in support of those teachings so as to persuade its audience, including its detractors. These were mainly the pagans of Arabia and the People of the Book – i.e. Christians and Jews. The chapter attempts to highlight the salient features of the Qur'ānic style of argument and persuasion which are, *inter alia*, its simplicity, its concreteness, its arousal of admiration and fear by the frequent evocation of God's omnipotence and occasionally, the induction of an emotional element in this discourse.

The Qur'ān constantly returns to the affirmation that God is one and has no equal or associate. To fix this truth firmly in the hearts and minds of the faithful, according to the author, the Qur'ān appeals to their experience. To illustrate: the pagans of Arabia acknowledged that the heavens and the earth had been created by none other than God. The Qur'ān makes them repeat: If thou asked them, "Who created the heavens and the earth?", they will surely say, "Allah" (Qur'ān 39:39).

Jomier goes on to add:

Hence the Qur'ān emphasises the impotence of other gods who are incapable of creating even a fly, providing benefits or opposing the decisions of the creator God. If they are so powerless and incapable, what good is it to treat them as gods and believe in them? (pp.109-110).

God's omnipotence also provides a basis for several Qur'ānic arguments. Thanks to faith in God's omnipotence, for a Muslim credibility of "doctrines like the resurrection of the resurrection of the dead or the triumph of the prophets is not at all extraordinary when viewed from this perspective. God can do anything" (p. 112).

The author finds the Qur'ānic arguments to refute polytheism and affirm monotheism are on a ground "common to all monotheistic religions" (p. 113). "Indeed, in many respects Muslim apologetic has resembled certain Jewish or Christian apologetics. In the face of the surrounding paganism, Islam sided with the biblical religious that also believe in one God and resurrection of the dead, doctrines rejected by the biblical religious when it proclaimed the "(they) had been corrupted that it had come to proclaim the true religion in all its purity... Hence there is a second order of apologetic arguments intended to establish the authenticity of Muhammad's prophetic mission and hence the authenticity of the Qur'ān" (p. 114).

The book also has a short 'Conclusion' (pp. 121-124). In 'Conclusion', the author points out that in the Qur'ān one finds "the sense of God the Creator and the grandeur of creation singing the praises of its author, a theme that is also present in the old testament, as it is in Christianity..." (p. 121). In the Qur'ān one also encounters "fundamental religious values, with their openness to God, that are very similar for Christian and Muslim" (p. 121).

At the same time, the author also emphasises that:

...the essential differences between Christianity and Islam: a different sense of the majesty of God, a different view of the way God approaches men, vocation... All these differences could be said to come down to one: the way in which Christians and Muslims conceive

of Christ and his role. Or, to revelation: is the pinnacle of revelation realised in a sacred book like the Qur'ān or in a living person like Christ? (pp. 112-122).

Here, indeed, the author has put his finger on the very core of the difference between the two major religious traditions – Islam and Christianity.

The book ends with these words, which are very illuminating indeed.

It is difficult to understand the fascination that the Qur'ān exerts without mentally putting oneself in the place of the Muslim, who finds God when he recites it, looks to it for guiding principles, and finds God when he recites it for guiding principles, and for whom the Qur'ān is the presence of God. Even minute descriptions of a region will remain incomplete if they do not allow for the light. In reality the most insignificant landscape takes on another aspect as soon as the colours glow in the sun, or when the rain, despite brilliance as it falls, casts a pall over human beings and forms. A description of the Qur'ān must reflect this light, which is the encounter with God. (p.124)(Emphasis added).

In the foregoing pages we have extensively surveyed Jomier's 'The Great Themes of the Qur'ān, giving a chapter-by-chapter expose of its contents. As we went along, we also expressed our appreciation for a significant number of insightful observations by the author which enrich the reader's understanding of the Qur'ān. At the same time, we also gave vent to our critical observations whenever they seemed called for. (These critical observations were, on occasions, clearly expressed; on others, they were simply hinted at by adding our emphases while quoting some of the author's statements). Now that we are trying to wrap up the trees; to evaluate the book as a whole after having gone through its different parts.

To begin with, this work obviously forms part of the Western scholarly tradition on Islam. The rudiments of this tradition can be traced back to the very first century of Islam, the earliest work being the polemical treatise of John of Damascus. John saw with his own eyes a triumphant Islam rise to ever new heights of glory, winning a multitude of converts, including his Syrian fellow- Christians. His treatise clearly aimed at demolishing the

theoretical foundations of Islam so as to stem its rising tide. During the millennium and a half since its advent, Christendom has perceived Islam as its foremost adversary, at both the theological and political levels. During the medieval period, Christian Europe's hatred against Islam was no fiercer than almost any fairy tale, any legendary gossip, any juicy hearsay was seized as gospel truth.¹⁶² This is also true of the 'scholarly' findings of the medieval literati who seemed ready to accept even trash as long as it was in tune with the deeply entrenched bias against Islam that pervaded the European Christian milieu.¹⁶³

One of the most outrageous manifestations of Christian Europe's rancour against Islam was Dante's consignment of the Prophet to the lower layer of Hell. But as the tradition of serious scholarship on Islam developed especially from the 17th century onwards, the more fantastic stories about Islam naturally began to recede into the background. By the last quarter of the 19th century, when a fairly dependable base of relevant material on Islam had been formed, a more objective and positive picture of Islam and its Prophet

¹⁶². The baseless stories about Islam and the Prophet which gained currency among the Christians of Europe are just too many, and quite a few are in a very bad taste. To mention some: the Prophet had trained a dove who picked grain in his ear to signify his reception of revelation; he had a bull with documents on its horns to support his claim to be a Prophet. Both the Prophet and his followers were described as idolaters! The Prophet was also depicted as one who originally a Christian but later became a heretic. According to some accounts, the Prophet was a cardinal who had failed in the election process to become pontiff and seceded from the church in revenge. Another embodiment of this consuming hatred was the disgusting story regarding the Prophet's death: that it occurred as a result of him being devoured by pigs. See J.M. Bauben, *Image of the Prophet Muhammad in the West: A Study of Muir, Margolionth and Watt* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation 1996), chap 1. See also Mahomet Aydin, "Contemporary Christian Evaluations of the Prophet hood of Muhammad" in *Encounters*, vol.6, no.1 (2000), pp.25-69, esp. 26 f. See also Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960), *passim*.

¹⁶³. Out of the many, let us mention a few instances from what was believed by the Europeans in the 6th century: The name Muhammad (= *Mahomet*), they thought, signified in Arabic 'Deceit'. Consider another account: "Mahomet's stomach grew weak, and one sort of meat began to loath him; (Chodaige = Khadijah) was state, and others fancied him; he therefore purposed in his law (then in hatching) to allow all sorts of carnal liberty; and to encourage them to his example, solemnly ... espoused *Aysce*(= 'Ā'ishah) ..." Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, p.282.

began to emerge. It needs nevertheless to be remembered that, in the words of Norman Daniel:

...even when we read the more detached of scholars, we need to keep in mind how mediaeval Christendom argued, because it has always been and still is part of the make-up of every Western mind brought to bear upon the subject.¹⁶⁴

While the stride towards better standards of scholarship on Islam is noticeable in several fields, advance towards a more positive direction in studies pertaining to the Qur'ān and the Prophet has been, relatively speaking, both difficult and slow. About half a century ago, W. Montgomery Watt noted the following:

None of the great figures of history is so poorly appreciated in the West as Muhammad. Western writers have mostly been prone to believe the worst of Muhammad, and wherever an objectionable interpretation of an act seemed plausible, they have tended to accept it as fact.¹⁶⁵

Even if the progress was slow there can be no doubting the fact that progress has been taking place quite steadily.¹⁶⁶ The base of knowledge

¹⁶⁴. Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, rev. ed. (Oxford: 1993), p.326, cited by Ismā'il Ibrāhīm Nawwāb, "Muslims and the West" in Zafar Ishaq Ansari and John L. Esposito, eds., *Muslims and the West: Encounter and Dialogue* (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, and Washington, D.C.: Centre for Muslim Christian Understanding, Georgetown University, 2001), p.33. Unfortunately this revised edition of Daniel's work not available to us at the time of writing.

¹⁶⁵. Montgomery W. Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 52.

¹⁶⁶. A part from the purely academic aspect of things, a basic change that has taken place is the abandonment of the notion that the Prophet was an impostor. The turning-point was Carlyle's vigorous affirmation of the Prophet's sincerity. In the course of time this virtually became a point of consensus among scholars and generated, on the whole, a more respectful attitude towards the Prophet as well as the Qur'ān. In fact quite a few prominent Western scholars and theologians (e.g. Watt, Hans Küng, David Kerr, etd.) who have, in recent decades, declared that Muhammad was indeed a Prophet through whom God spoke to humanity. This is definitely indicative of a growing positive attitude towards Islam and paves the ground for better understanding of Islam. See Mahmut Aydin, "Contemporary Christian Evaluation of the Prophet Muhammad" in *Encounters*, pp.25-60, passim. It needs to be pointed out, however, that even those who affirm the prophet hood of Muhammad do not,

derived from the primary sources of Islam today is much more solid and extensive and is available to those concerned by Western Islamists who set about to carefully study, understand and grasp the significance of the vast accumulation of relevant material. In fact the academia is heavily indebted to the Western scholars who edited and published some of the most important and primary sources of Islam, and a deal else of much academic value.¹⁶⁷ Thus, in several respects many contemporary scholar' works on the Qur'ān and the Prophet appear more solidly grounded in facts and-if this is not considered to patronising – generally embody more mature judgements. Jomier's seriousness of effort to understand the Qur'ān and a high degree of awareness of its contents are evident from the numerous flasher of insight that are found interspersed throughout the book.

We have, however, also indicated to elements in work which we found to be disconcerting. These, however, are by far outweighed by his achievement- a more enhanced understanding of the Qur'ān Message, both its core and details.

in fact, mean precisely that which is meant by Muslims when they affirm his prophet. See *ibid*, esp. 32-35, where the author discusses the position of Watt. See also pp. 46-48 where the author discusses the position of Hans Küng.

¹⁶⁷. This would be quite evident if we were to compare the writings of the last century's Western scholars of repute such as Hamilton Gibb, Louis Massignon, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Montgomery Watt, Marshall Hodgson, Ignaz Goldfziher and Joseph Schacht with the writings of their predecessors, their predecessors. It needs, however, also to be pointed out that during the last quarter of the 20th century, these has emerged a group of Western scholars who display an extreme form of scepticism. The best known scholars amongst them are John Wansborough, Michael Cook and Patricia Crone. In studying early Islam, these scholars tend to place their primary reliance on the Greek and Syriac sources of the period concerned, relegating the Islamic texts to a position of near-insignificance. Apart from developing a new methodological approach, albeit of questionable validity, these scholars seem to be devoid of the empathy and richness of imagination, let alone an overall respect for the Islamic tradition, which characterised the works of some of the earlier mentioned scholars such as Gibb, Massignon and Smith. Nothing perhaps would illustrate the mood of these authors than the following statement of Patricia Crone and Michael Cook in the 'Preface' of their jointly written book, *Hagarism* (Cambridge, New York, etc: Cambridge University Press, 1977): "This is a book written by infidels for infidels, and it is based on what from any Muslim perspective must appear an inordinate regard for the testimony of infidel sources" (p. viii).

Given the many positive features of The Great Themes, we are hard put to explain some of the things which, in our opinion, are apparently discordant both with Jomier's scholarly stature and the overall tone and tenor of his work. One of these is the story about Khadijah's attempt to set the Prophet at rest soon after his experience of receiving revelation of Hirā (see pp.6-9 above). The manner in which Jomier has presented this account can only be described as infelicitous.¹⁶⁸ There are also a few instances where we felt that Jomier fell short of mentioning things that would have given a fuller and more adequate view of the matters under discussion.¹⁶⁹ How does one explain these alongside the fact that much in the book is of considerable merit?

I am confident that it does not detract a whit from Jomier's scholarly merit to say that the explanation for this, at least partly, might be found in what Norman Daniel calls "the survival of medieval concepts".¹⁷⁰ As we are well aware, highly negative images of Islam have been embedded in the minds of Westerners for well over a millennium. It is beyond all doubt and who have made a consciously biased to interpret things negatively.¹⁷¹ This, to the best of my surmise, has happened in this case.

Notwithstanding this, the book is likely to serve the avowed purpose of its writing: to assist the Westerners to find their way to a better understanding of the Qur'ān.

¹⁶⁸. It would be interesting to see this story as known to San Pedro Pascal of Spain and also his denigrating remarks about the Prophet in that regard. See Daniel, *Islam and the West*, pp.29f.

¹⁶⁹. See for instance pp. 4-6 and 11-12 above.

¹⁷⁰. Title of the last chapter in Daniel's *Islam and the West*, pp. 271 ff. Cf. Watt's remark: "In medieval Europe there was elaborated the conception of Muhammad as a false Prophet who merely pretended to receive message from God, and this other medieval war propaganda are only slowly being expunged from the mind of Europe and Christendom". W.M. Watt and Richard Bell, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburg: Edinburgh University press, 1970), p.17. (emphasis added.)

¹⁷¹. To be fair, we Muslims too might be harbouring some negative images of the West and it would not at all be surprising if even some of our well-informed scholar's judgements about Christianity and the West might occasionally be affected by these images, without even realising that.