Urvoy Dominique, Urvoy Marie-Thérèse
Enquête sur le miracle coranique

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Many contemporary English speakers versed in Enlightenment philosophy will be familiar with David Hume's maxim that "No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless it is of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact that it tries to establish."(1) This concept of miracle, largely associated with a violation of the laws of nature, is not absent from Arabic or Islamic tradition. Similarly, Arabic also contains the concept of miracles as "signs" (*āya*, pl. *āyāt*; akin to the Syriac *rāzē*, signs or symbols that point to the creator(2), and also the term for a verse of the Qur'ān). In Arabic, and larger Islamic tradition, there is a rich literature on various "miracles" (*karāmāt* of the "friends" of God, and the *mu'jiza* associated with his messengers, p. 32-46). Regarding the former category, which resonates with "charisma", Islamic tradition found difficulties distinguishing the "true" *karāma* of a *walī* (friend) of God from that of a charlatan. The miracles of God's messengers, however, are associated with their public preaching (*da'wa*) and issue a challenge to their detractors to produce something akin to that which they have demonstrated, thereby showing the impotence (*'ajz*) of these opponents (p. 38).

As the Urvoys note in the *Avertissement* (p. 7), discussions of the "miracle" of the Qur'ān emphasize its auditors' failure, or inability, to produce anything like it – the so-called "inimitability" of the Qur'ān. This is a claim rooted in the qur'ānic text itself, with the so-called "challenge" (*taḥaddi*) verses (Q 52:33-34; 17:88; 11:13; 10:38; 2:23-24; p. 29), which defy its opponents to produce a *qur'ān* themselves, or even one *sūra* (chapter) – or 10 (chapters) – like it. Over the course of the next centuries, Islamic tradition would develop a rich discourse around the inimitability of the Qur'ān i'jāz *al-qur'ān*.

These discussions in the early Islamic centuries (ca 600-900 CE) developed in a confessionally, culturally and linguistically diverse environment that was gradually Arabizing. For, unlike the Bible, which came to be translated into the languages of the various Christianized peoples, the language of the Qur'ān, Arabic, came to be the *lingua franca* of both Muslims and non-Muslims who came under Islamic rule. This enabled an increased communication among diverse confessional groups, one consequence of which was the emergence of a rich body of polemical and apologetic literature.(3) In this context, a robust literature on the "proofs of prophecy" emerged.(4) Al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869) reflects this situation and the early stages of the theological discussions, noting that each prophet had a miracle appropriate to the age in which he lived: Moses used magic; Jesus used medicine; and Muhammad used eloquence – the linguistic miracle of the Qur'ān (p. 58). As science had advanced since the times of Moses and Jesus, and as the Arabs valued linguistic proficiency, a literary miracle was the most appropriate for Muhammad.

Over the course of the 200 scholarly, yet accessible, pages, Dominique and Marie-Thérèse Urvoy take their readers on a journey through time and space that highlights various ways in which the "miracle" of the Qur'ān has been understood, both in terms of its style and its content. Their engagingly-written book is accessible to specialists and non-experts alike. Their light, almost conversational, discussion skillfully weaves key figures and themes from fourteen centuries of Islamic history with anecdotes from recent (largely local) encounters as only scholars who are masters of their subject can do.

As the Urvoys have set out in their wide-ranging exposé, this discourse has been multi-valent. Muslims in different times and places, of different philosophical, theological and linguistic backgrounds, have had a range of understandings about the nature of the "miracle" of the Qur'ān. Reflecting the multifaceted history of Islamic civilization (p. 190-191), there have been varied, and various, understandings of the nature of this qur'ānic miracle: is it a linguistic, rhetorical miracle? If so, is it one only able to be appreciated by Arabophones? Does the miracle of the Qur'ān extend to, or is it shaped by, the Arabic language itself? Is the miracle one of content, e.g. predictions of things to come? Can non-Muslims appreciate the miracle (i.e. is it the belief that the Qur'ān is from God that shapes the understanding of its miraculous nature?)? What are the implications of the belief in the literary miracle of the Qur'ān? These are among

(1) Hume David, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748), Section X: Of Miracles.

(2) See, e.g. Buck, Christopher. *Paradise and Paradigm: Key Symbols in Persian Christianity and the Baha'i Faith*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999. p. 124-125

(3) For a discussion of the effects on various Christian communities, see Griffith, Sidney H. *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*. Vol. 45. Princeton University Press, 2010.

(4) Stroumsa, S. (1985). The Signs of Prophecy: The Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature. *The Harvard Theological Review, 78* (1/2), p. 101-114. Retrieved October 31, 2020, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/1509595

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the questions the Urvoys address, drawing on their own considerable expertise in Arabic thought and culture, especially classical and medieval, as well as philosophical.

They have divided their work into 6 chapters, with an introduction and epilogue framing the discussion, highlighting the outline of their argument. They bring the reader from a general presentation of "miracle" (in the Introduction) to "Miracle in Islam" (Chapter One), followed by two chapters on the "Various perceptions of the qur'ānic miracle". Chapter Two discusses the classical era, while Chapter Three brings the discussion to the present day. This overview is followed by a reflection on the implications of the stylistic inimitability (Chapter Four) and a rather psychological exploration of the "scientific" miracle of the Qur'ān (Chapter Five). A discussion of historiography concludes the book (Chapter Six), followed by a brief epilogue (headed by a telling quotation from Ionescu), in which the authors state that "the miracle only convinces those who are already persuaded" and that, in brief, "the Qur'ān is a miracle because God has said it!" (p. 190).

It is in the Epilogue that they put forth an argument for detachment from the "materiality of texts" (invoking a diverse set of figures: the renowned Pakistani thinker, Fazlur Rahman, a contemporary Tunisian and a Lebanese Melkite priest), and sound a critical note against the unparalleled "doctrinal saturation" achieved by Islam (using the concept noted by Arthur Pellegrin in 1940) and the "absolute certainty [of Muslims]" that stems from the understanding of the Qur'ān as a literary miracle (an observation of Fr. Jacques Jomier, a French Dominican who spent many years in the Middle East). Although it could be argued that both Pellegrin's and Jomier's observations about Islam could apply to any ideological system, including secularism or democracy.(5)

Much of the book reads as a comprehensive and accessible overview of various elements of Arabic and Islamic thought. The first four chapters are embedded in classical Arabic and Islamic tradition, the areas of the authors' expertise. Here, the authors expertly weave non-Muslim Arabic texts and thinkers, as well as non-Arabic Islamic texts and thinkers into their sweeping discourse. By contrast, the chapters on the Qur'ān and history (Chapter Six) and its "scientific" miracles (Chapter Five) present as a more superficial survey. Here, the interested reader would benefit from greater reference to the works of Qur'ān scholars such as Angelika Neuwirth(6) or other international scholars, such as those associated with the International Qur'ānic Studies Association.

At times, the reader has the feeling of being drawn into the home of a friend hosting a large gathering of friends – there is an assumption of familiarity with both the people and ideas present, meaning that formal introductions are not needed. As with any well-orchestrated gathering, the food (for thought, in this case) is ample and varied, with enough to satisfy you – or leave you with a taste for more, to explore on your own. Particularly for the classical period, the footnotes provide a range of texts (largely, but not exclusively, in French or Arabic) for the interested reader, while the body of the text provides adequate details of the named individuals for the interested reader to do further research. While indices of authors and doctrinal schools are provided, additional indices, for qur'ānic citations and also for key terms, would further help the reader navigate the text.

And, as at any gathering, there is the possibility that one might leave a bit confused by the relationships of those present. At times, the authors' clear vision of the trajectory of their argument (the dangers of too close an attachment to a given text, especially in times of civilizational decline) lends itself to an, arguably, uneven presentation of "facts". For, in support of their arguments, the Urvoys adduce evidence from a wide range of sources whose validity could, for the novice, be difficult to estimate. While such a focus makes for a clear presentation of the main themes, it also runs the risk of a non-critical acceptance of every point and individual presented as being of equal "scholarly" value. For example, based on the amount of space devoted to their thoughts and the sparse information given about each, there is the danger that a non-specialist might finish the book with the perception that the contemporary Hārūn Yahyā (Adnan Oktar, p. 187) is as authoritative as, for example, Ibn Mujāhid (d. 324/936, p. 69). While it may indeed be the case that more Muslims today, especially those interested in the inimitability of the Qur'ān, know more Hārūn Yahyā than Ibn Mujāhid, the latter's establishment of seven canonical readings (*qir'ā'āt*) of the Qur'ān has a deeper scholarly resonance than the theories (and lifestyle) of a controversial televangelist. Particularly when the authors delve into modern, especially internet, discussions, the criteria

(5) See, e.g. Reus-Smit, Christian. "Liberal hierarchy and the licence to use force." *Review of international studies* 31 (2005): 71-92; Brandt, Mark J., Christine Reyna, John R. Chambers, Jarret T. Crawford, and Geoffrey Wetherell. "The ideological-conflict hypothesis: Intolerance among both liberals and conservatives." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 23, nº. 1 (2014), p. 27-34.

(6) See, e.g. Neuwirth, Angelika. "Qur'an and History–a Disputed Relationship. Some Reflections on Qur'anic History and History in the Qur'an." *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 5, nº. 1 (2003), p. 1-18.

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for their selection of the sites or authors would help the reader assess their relative merits. Readers interested in the use of the internet for dissemination of "information" would, for example, want to know more of the history of the sites' establishment, how often the sites are visited, and who maintains them, among other questions. Further, as hyperlinks frequently expire, any revised edition (or translation) would need to substitute the references to the now-seemingly-unavailable www.miraclesducoran.com website (at least in New Zealand) with other sites; for example, https://miraclesofthequran.com/predictions_13.html (which speaks of the ant robot technology, p. 188).

But, the authors do state (p. 191) that the nature of the explanations of the qur'ānic miracle parallel the trajectory of Islamic thought in general, with the most constructive (even if contradictory) analyses found at the apex of Islamic civilization, while the most arbitrary extrapolations (which, without doubt, always existed) dominating the lower periods. Although the reader is not provided with a clear scheme to determine the apex or nadir of Islamic thought, the tenor of the discussion gives even a non-Francophone reader a sense of the authors' estimation of the various positions put forth (despite their claims to present, rather than judge, the material they present, p. 17).

Although they state (p. 17) that their intent is to show "all the aspects of the question, past and present, in terms of language, history, dogma and psychology", the themes and characters they have highlighted tend to emphasize the importance of the qur'ānic "miracle" for Islamic tradition. While the views of early critics and skeptics are presented (e.g. Ibn al-Muqaffa', d. 140/757 or the Christian polemicist, 'abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī, p. 54-70), readers hoping to find deep discussion of counter-arguments, or the views of individuals who may have questioned, or de-emphasized, the "miracle" of the Qur'ān (e.g. al-Hallāj; Rūmī; Salman Rushdie; Naṣr Hāmid Abū Zayd), or its codified form, will want to pursue the works (often in Arabic or French) or names mentioned in the text or its footnotes, or look elsewhere.(7)

This, however, is not a short-coming of the book: the authors' engaging style and clear trajectory prompt greater engagement with the topic than an encyclopaedic litany of authors and ideas could have done.

As with any cross-cultural encounter, when one reads a text in a language that is not one's own, nuances of phrases and stylistic differences stand out, or become lost in translation. "[L]e Dieu du Coran affirme sa version d'un fait comme la seule vraie, contre toute autre conjecture humaine" (p. 176). The authors follow this assertion with a discussion that, to me, a non-native French speaker, suggests that later Islamic tradition used the Qur'ān as the ultimate repository of "facts", thereby stifling human inquiry, as in the 'disgrace' of Averroes when he denied the existence of the 'Ād, a people mentioned by the Qur'ān (p. 176-177).

In addition to the example of Averroes, they also present the Qur'ān's insistence on the "veracity" of the legend of the Sleepers of Ephesus (the Companions of the Cave of Q 18) as an example of the problematic relationship of the Qur'ān to "history". Their presentation of the Companions of the Cave (p. 177) focuses on the "derisive character" of the Qur'ān's treatment of the "numbers" associated with this story: how many were in the Cave? how long did they stay there? The authors assert that the Qur'ān's intervention on a detail of this sort could have the psychological effect on many believers of attributing the same degree of factuality to everything that comes from a text claiming to be revealed. This may be the case, but in the view of this (Anglophone) reader such speculations might be better left to psychologists than to historians and linguists. Further, as in their discussion (in Chapter Five) of the "scientific" inimitability of the Qur'ān, they are selective, rather than comprehensive, in the evidence they bring from Islamic tradition in support of their argument. While they highlight a 1966 French translation of the Qur'ān that "incriminates Jews and Christians who were discussing this legend and might have dragged the Prophet into their polemic" (p. 177), their discussion of the Companions of the Cave could have been deepened and nuanced by reference to Sidney Griffith's recent discussion of the qur'ānic and early Islamic reception of the Sleepers of Ephesus. Griffith's careful discussion of the engagement of early Islamic tradition with Syriac versions of the legend portray an aspect of Islamic tradition very far removed from a "blind" acceptance of the Qur'ān as the sole judge of any

(7) See, for example, Modarressi, Hossein. "Early debates on the integrity of the Qur'ān: a brief survey." *Studia Islamica* (1993), p. 5-39; Cook, Michael. *The Koran: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press Oxford, 2000. See also Lamein Alinda Abū Zayd, Naṣr Hāmid, and Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbele. *Reformation of Islamic thought: a critical historical analysis*. Amsterdam University Press, 2006 and Abū Zayd, Naṣr Hāmid. *Rethinking the Qur'ān: Towards a humanistic hermeneutics*. Humanistics University Press, 2004.

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matter.(8) Rather, in this depiction, the Qur'ān and early Islamic tradition testify to, and actively engage, a variety of narratives present in their milieux, evidencing the dialectic nature that would characterize early Islamic civilization.

In October 2020, a series of tragic events in France highlighted the tensions between secular (laic) culture and "fundamentalist" interpretations of Islam. While the attacks (on a school teacher and church goers) may be attributed to other factors, such as alienation or psychopathy, they highlight the dangers of "absolute certainty" and "doctrinal saturation" of which the Urvoys warned. As an alternative, the Urvoys point to the value of the rich Islamic intellectual tradition.

German, French and English are the languages of much contemporary Qur'ān scholarship in the historically non-Muslim world (although significant contributions are found, of course, in Italian, Spanish and other languages). But, while specialists read the works of their colleagues in these and other languages, there is also an increasing interest among non-specialists in the Qur'ān. The Urvoys cite Jacques Jomier. In the aftermath of 9/11, his *Bible and Qur'ān* was issued in paperback English translation. I have used this and other of Fr. Jomier's works in undergraduate courses in Qatar, the Netherlands, New Zealand and the United States. Reflecting today's polarized, yet interconnected, world, students benefit from a diversity of viewpoints that challenge some of their own culturally-determined views. An English translation of *Enquête sur le miracle coranique* is therefore a desideratum. For, were the Urvoys' thought-provoking expose more widely accessible, curious readers would wish to learn more about the views and authors presented, perhaps starting their own investigation into the nuanced and multi-valent discussions of the "miracle" of the Qur'ān. And, increased knowledge of the rich and varied intellectual history of the Islamic world – by Muslims and non-Muslims alike – would prove a vital ally in the struggle against narrow and exclusivist interpretations of the Qur'ān and Islamic tradition.

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(8) Griffith, Sidney. "Christian lore and the Arabic Qur'an: The "Companions of the Cave" in Surat al-Kahf and in Syriac Christian tradition." In *The Qur'an in its historical context*, ed. Gabriel Reynolds, p. 125-154. Routledge, 2007, esp. p. 130, which alludes to the "abundant evidence that early Muslim commentators on the Qur'ān" were "indebted to" "Syriac sources for many of the details they included in their commentaries" on this topic. In notes 97-98, Griffith highlights an early example - the *Kitāb al-mubtada'* of Muhammad Ibn Ishaq (d. c. 767). His "Companions of the Cave" narrative - as it has been recovered from the works of later writers (e.g. al-Tabari, d. 310/923) - "owes an obvious debt to the Syriac account of the 'Youths of Ephesus' as it appears in the Ecclesiastical History of Zacharias of Mitylene."

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