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Learning through Experience: Memorization and Recitation

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Teaching the Qur'an can be a formidable undertaking. Even though the Qur'an is an abiding research interest of mine, it makes teaching the scripture no less challenging. What do I choose to cover and how should I go about it in the course of a single semester? There are innumerable ways to shape such a class. One could spend the entire semester reading carefully through the Qur'anic text alone. Of course, that would mean many other topics and approaches would be left out. In fact, whenever I do offer my Qur'an course, I find myself – unfailingly – tinkering with the syllabus in the weeks leading up to the beginning of the semester trying to shoehorn judiciously far too much material into far too short a span of time. The possibilities are manifold:

- the structure and arrangement of the text
- aspects of rhetoric and style
- the compilation and dissemination of the first codex
- issues in translation
- historic and current trends in interpretation
- intertextuality
- comparative scriptural analysis

- calligraphy, illumination, and artistry

While this list could certainly stretch on, what these sample topics all have in common is an emphasis on the written, visible word. In these instances, the Qur'an is presented primarily as a text to be seen and read. The Qur'an, however, is far more than this. The "life" of the Qur'an extends beyond exegesis and the materiality of a bound book. There is a rich orality and aurality that is also intimately tied to it. What are the implications of classifying the Qur'an as an oral scripture? What does it mean for the Qur'an to be recited aloud and reverentially committed to memory in its original seventh-century Ḥijāzi Arabic? What is it like to enter a space filled with the reverberating sounds of a steady and somber recitation? What value does the Qur'an's memorization entail?

Fortunately, there is a growing list of resources pertaining to Qur'anic recitation. For example, the audio CD included with Michael Sell's book *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (White Cloud Press, 1999) provides a sampling of suras recited by both male and female reciters in a number of different styles. Of course, the Internet offers an even wider range of audio and video recordings of Qur'an recitations in performance. While resources like these are incredibly helpful in exposing students to the Qura'nic soundscape, I was interested in engaging my students with the orality of the Qur'an at a deeper and more involved level. What I turned to was the practice of memorization and recitation. I ask my students each semester to memorize and recite the first chapter of the Qur'an, *al-fātiḥa* ("the Opening"), in its original Arabic.

Admittedly, the announcement of this particular assignment on the first day of class has the effect of removing the chaff from the wheat, so to speak. The prospect of having to memorize and then recite aloud a scriptural passage in a language that most students are unfamiliar with can seem quite daunting at first. Obviously, the Arabic component can be off-putting, but it is only part of the reason for the assignment's initial intimidation factor. The request to memorize is also at work, because frankly, memory has seen better days. Arguably, memorization is a disappearing pedagogical art, at least in the humanities. Dates and key terms aside, memorization plays a relatively minimal role in today's classroom, when in times past the memorization of biblical passages, poetic verses, and dramatic lines were once part and parcel of a person's formation and education. Our appreciation of memorization seems dramatically diminished when set against our increasingly digitized culture. To press home the point to my students I ask them how many phone numbers they have memorized. Without fail, the answer is very few at all. What was once a common practice not so long ago is now a task outsourced and offloaded to the contact lists on our smart phones and computers. Why memorize something when we can so easily access that information on our electronic devices?

Nonetheless, in much of the Muslim world, memorization and recitation remain the predominant ways that Muslims experience the Qur'an. In fact, it is the very orality of the scripture that continues to buoy, if not sustain, the value of memorization. Moreover, the vast majority of Muslims do not speak Arabic; Arabs account for less than 15% of Muslims worldwide. This lack of familiarity with Arabic, however, has not stopped billions of non-Arab

Muslims from learning and memorizing the *fātiḥa* especially because this first chapter is an integral component in the performance of prayer. While much of the Qur'an might go unmemorized, children are exposed invariably to the *fātiḥā*. It is a common starting point and a good one at that.

For the sake of my students, I take a variety of steps to assuage the potential anxieties that such an assignment might prompt. We spend several weeks becoming familiar with hearing and then reciting altogether in class the seven verses that constitute chapter one of the Qur'an. The students view, discuss, and then write on the 2011 documentary *Koran by Heart*, in which Muslim children from across the world compete in a Qur'an recitation competition. I use the transliteration, sound cues, and explanatory essays in Sells' *Approaching the Qur'an* to great effect in addition to the above-mentioned audio CD. The performance of the recitation itself takes place outside of the classroom during office hours where each student is given as many attempts and as much time as needed. I stress that how a recitation "sounds" is irrelevant for the purposes of this assignment. I assure my students repeatedly that am not looking for a particular style of delivery, rhythm, or the proper implementation of *tajwīd*, the traditional rules governing recitation. Rather, all that the assignment asks for is the demonstration of a sincere effort to memorize and recite. I am more interested in exposing them to the experience than getting practiced precision.

I continue to use this assignment for two main reasons. Firstly, its impresses upon my students in an experiential way that scripture has a life outside of the written word. For the diverse communities of adherents, the lived Qur'an extends beyond page or screen. It is more than the visual arrangement of letters and words. It also encompasses a world of sound brought to the fore by mindful, listening hearts and vigilantly practiced tongues. The Qur'an has an aural presence that can be felt as viscerally as other manifestations of its physical embodiment, be that a bound book, adornment, or inscription.

Secondly, the task of memorization and recitation serves an important pedagogical role in the classroom. As each student endeavors to accomplish the assignment, they are discovering in turn more about themselves as learners. Immediately after a successful recitation, I always ask what worked and did not work for them in the days leading up to the performance. As students over the semesters have attested, what "works" runs the full gamut. Some find themselves to be visual learners and need to see the Arabic written out phonetically. Others listen continuously to select reciters on their phones and computers. A choice is made between the memorably melodious recording and the clearly enunciated and well-paced one. Lines are copied out painstakingly over and over. Flash cards are produced. Rhyming sounds identified. Pneumonic devices invented. Muslim and Arabic-speaking friends and roommates are enlisted as ad hoc coaches and audiences. I end up entertaining requests from some students to be able to write out the *fātiḥa* while they are reciting it back to me. Through all these many possibilities, my students end up gaining further insights about themselves as they immerse themselves further into the fluid soundscape of the lived Qur'an.

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