

BOOK REVIEW

***The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life*, by Ingrid Mattson, Malden MA, Blackwell, 2008, 262 pp, £15.99 (paperback), ISBN978-1-4051-2258-0**

With great scholarship and style, Ingrid Mattson – a North American convert to Islam who is currently Professor of Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary, Connecticut (see <http://macdonald.hartsem.edu/mattson.htm>) – has written a book on the history and place of the Qur'ān in Muslim life that will be of interest to both academics and informed general readers.

In six chapters – 'God Speaks to Humanity', 'The Prophet Conveys the Message', 'The Voice and the Pen', 'Blessed Words: the Qur'an and Culture', 'What God Really Means: Interpreting the Qur'an', and 'Conclusion: Listening to God' – Mattson covers a wide range of material: the historical context in which the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad took place, the production of the Qur'ānic text, Arabic language and poetry, the significance of the *ḥadīth* and *sīrah* literature, principles of Qur'ān interpretation, memorisation and recitation, the development of schools of thought, the impact of colonialism and modern technology, contemporary issues relating to Qur'ānic interpretation, and so on.

In doing so, Mattson shows herself to be a masterful communicator. In chapter 3, for example, in order to explain and contextualise the concept of *isnād* (sing. *sanad*; the 'golden chain of transmission' through which the authentic recitation of the Qur'ān has been passed on to the present day) she takes the case of a modern American girl who receives her *ijāzah* (certificate) from a Sheikh in Damascus. In the rest of the chapter, she then traces the line of reciters back to the prophet Muhammad, giving full historical detail as she does so.

She is skilled at explaining difficult concepts, like that of *qirā'ah* (pl. *qirā'āt*) – the ten different styles of Qur'ānic recitation that some Muslims, having memorised the whole Qur'ān, then seek to master. Whenever she can, she draws analogies and examples from the contemporary world. Thus, for example, she refers to the Guantanamo Bay prisoners' attitudes to their copies of the Qur'ān, drawing a parallel with general American attitudes to their flag.

But of particular interest is the way in which the author counteracts the Western tendency to think of the Qur'ān primarily as *text* by showing how the sound of the Qur'ān has entered Muslim life, spirituality and culture in an almost bodily sense. Thus:

Across the centuries, as Semitic, European, Asian, and African peoples embraced Islam, their soundscapes and landscapes too were

transformed with the words of the Qur'an. Qur'anic recitation fills the air of Muslim societies as schoolchildren repeat verses after their teachers, loudspeakers broadcast morning and evening prayers from the mosques, groups gather to recite Qur'an upon the death anniversary of relatives, and shopkeepers play recitations of famous Qaris ("Reciters") for their customers. (p. 144)

But it is in developing this, to take account of modern technological developments and its impact on traditional notions of authority and styles of learning (including learning the Qur'ān), that Mattson shows herself to be someone who has a role to play in mediating between traditional, historical Islam and the contemporary, post-modern world. And all the more so because of the sensitivity and flair with which she does this, at times drawing in subtle allusions that capture the imagination of the reader. So, for example:

Technology has made it possible for individuals to access the Qur'an without having to be in direct contact with a scholar or a religious institution. Recordings of the best reciters are heard by isolated individuals going about their daily business: a New York taxi driver plays cassettes in his car, an Indian housewife listens on her iPod as she exercises on a treadmill, a business traveller listens on headphones on Gulf Airlines, a Malaysian teenager listens from a webcast streaming through his home computer. Qur'anic recitations bring peace, tranquillity, beauty, and meaning into their lives. And for some of them, perhaps, the disembodied recitation allows them to feel a relatively direct connection with the original source of the words – with the headphones on, it is almost as though an angel were whispering the words in their ears. (p. 131)

Take, too, her explanation of Arabic calligraphy and the 'elevation' of the Qur'ān in architecture:

Where they are inscribed on buildings or hung on walls, Qur'anic verses are generally elevated, in keeping with the superiority of God's Word over the words of humans. (p. 150)

And also the way in which, she says, Arabic calligraphy can suddenly come alive for the Muslim trying to decipher a particular example:

In some cases, the script is so elaborate that it might appear illegible to some observers. However ... because many Muslims have memorised significant portions of the Qur'an or at least have listened to it recited dozens, if not hundreds of times, they need only to 'decipher a word or two in order to identify the verse being quoted'. (p. 147)

For the educationalist, Mattson has also some interesting observations to make on the place of rote learning within Islamic culture, noting that, within the context of European colonialism:

... memorisation of the Qur'an was often dismissed as "rote learning" and characterised as an unthinking absorption of tradition. Indeed, there are many today who hold the same opinion. (p. 123)

Beyond a fairly weak argument that the lives and work of great scholars like Al-Ghazālī showed that traditional forms of rote learning were not an impediment to the development of intellect (p. 123), Mattson takes this no further. On the other hand, she suggests that other Muslim traditions – such as rituals associated with the physical handling of the Qur'ān – should not be dismissed lightly:

Certainly there can be excesses ... however, one cannot help but feel that the traditional approach yields a richer spiritual culture in which the sacred words of God infuse one's surroundings and ... have a deep visceral effect on the individual. (p. 153)

Mattson is a careful scholar, a skilled communicator and a sensitive writer. As such, she has produced a book that will provide knowledge and insight for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

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