

UNDERSTANDING

The

Qur'an

THEMES AND STYLES

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CHAPTER 2:

Al-Fatiha:

The Opening of the Qur'an

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ
الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
مَالِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ
إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ
اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ
صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ

In the name of God, The Most Gracious, The Dispenser of Grace: All praise is due to God alone, the Sustainer of all the worlds, The Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace, Lord of the Day of Judgment! Thee alone do we worship; and unto Thee alone do we turn for aid. Guide us the straight way. The way of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy blessings, not of those who have been condemned [by Thee], nor of those who go astray!

The Opening of the Qur'an

The above passage, *al-Fati'a*, is the opening *surah* of the Qur'an. It comes also at the beginning of each *rak'a* (section) of the Islamic formal daily prayers; without it the prayer is not complete. On account of these first two functions, it has developed a third, more wide-ranging function in the social and cultural life of Muslims. Chronologically, these three functions came into being in this order and it is in this order that we shall deal with them.

This compact passage, an independent *surah* of the Qur'an, consists of seven verses, divided into three groups: invocation, affirmation and petition, in a sequential progression that exemplifies the conclusively convincing logic of Qur'anic material. As will be demonstrated, the passage embodies the essence of Islam, which is *tawhid* (oneness of God).

a) THE INVOCATION:

1- بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of God, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful

The invocation 'In the name of Allah', is a dedication to God. In Arabic it is also an expression on the part of the reader that s/he begins his/her act with the invocation of God, so that the act begins with, and is accompanied by, His name (blessings). The Arabic preposition *bi* has several meanings: beginning, dedication, accompaniment, and instrumentality. In this passage all these are applicable, so the preposition has multiple meanings. Unfortunately there is no equivalent word in English that carries the same range of meanings, and consequently, there is an inevitable loss in translation: the translator has to opt for one word that carries only

one of these. Coming at the beginning, the preposition *bi* demonstrates one of the major problems in translating the Qur'an: the limited possibilities of conveying the wealth of the original that resides even in the smallest word. There are several examples of this even in this short *surah*.

In Islam, 'Allah' is the name of God in the absolute sense, the only 'personal' name. All other 'beautiful' names are adjectives or attributes. In this

Qur'anic verse we meet the first description of God as *al-Ra'man al-Ra'im*, in Arabic, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful/ The Most Gracious, The Dispenser of Grace:. They are the most frequently recurring attributes of God in the Qur'an. Both are intensive forms of the adjective in Arabic. *Al-Ra'man* in particular is used in Arabic exclusively for God. Translators give a variety of renderings: Gracious and Merciful, Compassionate and Merciful, Beneficent and Merciful, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Both words derive from the same root in Arabic *r-h-m* the general meaning of which is 'mercy'. From the same root comes the word *rah'im* – 'womb'. Thus there is a *'adith (qudsia)* in which God says: I have created the *rah'im* and given it a name derived from my name. Whoever keeps the bond (of the womb/kinship) connected I will keep him connected to me and whoever severs it I will sever him from me.

Because *ra'man* and *ra'im* derive from the same root, translating them into two words with different roots, like 'Compassionate and Merciful' loses the connection. Exegetes of the Qur'an have given different opinions of the meanings of these words. Some take *ra'man* as 'showing mercy in this world and the next', with *ra'im* applying only to the next. Others see *ra'man* applying to believers and non-believers, and *ra'im* to believers only; or *ra'man* as 'Provider of Mercy' in relation to large-scale things and *ra'im* to small scale things; or *ra'man* as provider of mercy which only God can provide while *ra'im* can also be provided by humans. In my opinion, the most likely meaning of *al-Ra'man* can be derived from *Surah* 55 named *al-Ra'man* where manifestations of God's beneficence and bounty are illustrated. In any case, the combination *al-Ra'man al-Ra'im* – frequent in the Qur'an – is used only for God and together they encompass all meanings of mercy and are therefore the most fitting first attributes of God in the Qur'an.

2. الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

*Praise belongs to God, the Sustaining Lord
of all the Worlds/ All praise is due to God alone, the Sustainer of all the worlds,*

Following the dedication, the reader's relationship with God is shown as one of praise. The generic *al-* in Arabic makes the word *hamd* encompass all praise.

The Qur'an explains elsewhere:

تُسَبِّحُ لَهُ السَّمَاوَاتُ السَّبْعُ وَالْأَرْضُ وَمَنْ فِيهِنَّ ۚ وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا
يُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِهِ وَلَكِنْ لَا تَفْقَهُونَ تَسْبِيحَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّهُ كَانَ حَلِيمًا غَفُورًا

The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, and the earth, and all that they contain; and there is not a single thing but extols His limitless glory and praise: but you [O men] fail to grasp the manner of their glorifying Him! Verily, He is forbearing, much-forgiving! 17:44

In such a compact passage as the *Fati'a*, used at the beginning of the Qur'an and the ritual prayer, the choice of this word, *al-Hamd*, is very fitting. This is reinforced in Arabic by the choice of the nominal rather than verbal sentence which would have limited it to a certain person or tense. *Al* which has this generic, general sense can also be understood as referring to a pronoun 'my or our' i.e. my praise is to God. *Oamd* is followed by *li*, the first meaning of which is 'belongs to', but it can also mean 'is due to'. It is a declaration, an affirmation, rather than a tentative wish like the subjunctive 'be' in 'praise be to him'. The literary multiplicity of meaning observed in the very first word of the passage is discerned here too, as 'amd in Arabic means both 'praise' and 'thanks'. The reader of Arabic understands both meanings, whereas the English translation again narrows the word to one single sense.

Praise belongs to God who has three attributes:

Rabb al-'alamin *Rabb* is normally translated as 'Lord' but this is rather limiting, since the Arabic word carries within it the root meaning of 'caring' and 'sustaining'. Again there is no equivalent single word in English carrying all these meanings. *Al-'alamin* is translated as 'the worlds' being the plural of 'alam. The exegetes state that God is the Lord of the worlds of humans, plants, earth, heavens, this world and the next, the physical and spiritual, etc. In short, He is the Lord of everything: *Rabbu kulli shay'*

قُلْ أَغَيْرَ اللَّهِ أَبْغِي رَبًّا وَهُوَ رَبُّ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ ۚ وَلَا تَكْسِبُ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ إِلَّا
عَلَيْهَا ۚ وَلَا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ ۚ ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُم مَّرْجِعُكُمْ فَيُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ
فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ

(6:164) "Say: "Am I, then, to seek a sustainer other than God, when He is the Sustainer of all things?" And whatever [wrong] any human being commits rests upon himself alone; and no bearer of burdens shall be made to bear another's burden. And, in time, unto your Sustainer you all must return: and then He will make you. [truly] understand all that on which you were wont to differ.. *Al-'alamin* occurs sometimes in the Qur'an meaning

only 'all human beings'. Again, whoever reads the words in Arabic understands a multiplicity of meaning. Through praising the Cherishing Lord of all beings, one becomes aware that one is, like everything else, part of this vast creation of God, under the Lordship and care of God. The word 'alam, is defined in Arabic and Islamic theology as meaning *ma siwa Allah* (what is other than God). Therefore *Rabb al-'alamin* singles God out as the one and only God, encapsulating in a short compact

phrase this most central belief in Islam, for which the Qur'an gives many proofs.

3. الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ

(the Most Beneficent the Most Merciful) repeats, for emphasis, this important epithet which is central to the description of God in this *surah*. All *surahs* (except for 9) begin with *Bismillah al-Ra'man al-Ra'im* but here the description is also incorporated into the *surah* itself. Placing mercy in the middle makes it extend to encompass His Lordship and His mastery of the Day of Judgement.

4. مَالِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ

Master/Sovereign/King/Ruler/Owner/Wielder of the Day of Judgement.

Here again the central theme of oneness is emphasized since no sovereignty will stand on the Day of Judgement other than God's

يَوْمَ هُمْ بَارِزُونَ ۖ لَا يَخْفَىٰ عَلَى اللَّهِ مِنْهُمْ شَيْءٌ ۚ لِمَنِ الْمُلْكُ الْيَوْمَ ۖ لِلَّهِ الْوَاحِدِ الْقَهَّارِ

(40:16) "the Day when they shall come forth [from death], with nothing of themselves hidden from God. With whom will sovereignty rest on that Day? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists!.

Din is translated variously as judgement, reckoning, requital, doom, recompense.

This last attribute of God is so fundamental in the Qur'an and Islamic theology and so frequently recurring ('Life and Beyond'), that a prominent place was reserved for it in this brief *surah*. It is natural that 'Master of the Day of Judgement' comes chronologically as the last of the three attributes of God.

Adjectives are prominent in the structure of this *surah*. We have three attributes of God here in this first part of the *surah*. There will be two adjectives describing the path or the 'way' in the latter part of the *surah*, and three describing the followers of that path. This adjectival scheme is important for the progression of ideas. The passage (like others in the Qur'an) has its own internal logic: God is praised, because He is Lord of all the Worlds, Most Beneficent, Most Merciful, Master of the Day of Judgement. Who, then, should be more worthy of praise than the One described in this way?

B- AFFIRMATION:

5. إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ

It is you we worship and it is you we ask for help/ Thee alone do we worship; and unto Thee alone do we turn for aid.

This comes at the centre of the passage, and follows logically from the earlier part. Only when the first part has been conceded can the second follow naturally. Who is more worthy of being singled out for worship, and in seeking help, other than the caring Lord of all the Worlds, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful, the Master of the Day of Judgement? Because there is judgement, the judgement should be prepared for by worship. Placing the object 'you' (*iyyaka*) before the verb singles God out for worship and makes Him the only source of help, again the essence of worship and religion in Islam. In the first part of the *surah*, praise in general is affirmed as belonging to God, whether the specific reader or worshipper is there or not. It is confined neither to a verbal subject nor a tense. It can be affirmed by humans, the angels or even by God Himself, at the beginning of the Qur'an. Moving to the second section, however, the reader or the servant has to affirm that s/he worships God exclusively and seeks His help. The first section prepares him for this and brings him nearer to God, to address Him. Here we have the shift from the third person to the second person – an example of *iltifat* as an important feature of the style of the Qur'an discussed later under 'Dynamic Style'. In this central section, God is worshipped, but He also provides help. A remote God from whom help cannot be expected is not the Islamic conception of God. This is also psychologically helpful to those who are inclined to always expect something for anything they give.

C- THE PETITION:

6. اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ

Show us the right way

Having invoked God and affirmed His attributes, and His worship, and sought His help, the reader can naturally move on to seek that help more specifically in the final part of this *surah*. Here we have one single, but crucial, request – guidance – and who can give it better than God whose praise and worship have already been affirmed? The request is not for worldly gain, but relates fundamentally to the function of the Qur'an – guidance;

ذَٰلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ ۚ فِيهِ ۚ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ

"THIS DIVINE WRIT - let there be no doubt about it is [meant to be] a guidance for all the God-conscious. "(2:2). The single request is for guidance to the right way, and this is expressed in the concrete, tangible and definite image of *'irāṭ* (path or way). This image shows the believer to be moving forwards and coming to a crossroads, where only one road leads to the desired destination – God and His pleasure. It thus connects the text and leads the believer to God. The believer is active in searching and praying for divine guidance to show him that path.

The path is not described as that of Islam but it has two attributes: firstly,

it is straight/right, this is the surest and shortest way to the destination;
secondly, it has been tested before and proved right, taking the person to
the good company of 'those whom you have blessed'; these are described
elsewhere in the Qur'an

وَمَنْ يُطِعِ اللَّهَ وَالرَّسُولَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ
النَّبِيِّينَ وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالشُّهَدَاءِ وَالصَّالِحِينَ ۖ وَحَسُنَ أُولَٰئِكَ رَفِيقًا

"For, all who pay heed unto God and the Apostle shall be among those upon whom God has bestowed His blessings: the prophets, and those who never deviated from the truth, and those who [with their lives] bore witness to the truth, and the righteous ones: and how goodly a company are these! "(4:69) as the prophets, those who do not deviate

from the Truth, martyrs and the righteous ones, 'and how goodly a company are these!' (an illustration of the principle, 'Different parts of the Qur'an explain each other'). The sequence of material makes the *surah* convincing throughout. Who is more worthy of being praised than the Lord of the Worlds, the Merciful, the Master of the Day of Judgement? Who is more worthy of being worshipped and asked for help than Him? In the same way, who would reject a path described as being straight, leading to proven success with excellent company?

The followers of the path are described in three ways: (i) they are blessed/favoured by God. Consequently, (ii) they are not the object of anger and (iii) they are not astray. This is the persuasive nature of Qur'anic language, which in this passage does not include anything repellent or discouraging. Every section, in the way it is presented, is acceptable in itself and leads naturally to the subsequent section. The request of the believer, then, appears to be significant and perfectly acceptable to right-minded people.

Blessing the followers of the path is attributed to God: 'the way of those You have blessed'. Being the object of anger and being astray are not related to God in this way. The second group is those who incur anger. Anger can be from God, the angels, human beings or other creatures. It is wrong to say, 'With whom you are angry or wrathful', as many translators do, since this deviates from the original Arabic and adds a quality of God which does not appear anywhere in this passage. In fact the entire picture of God in *Suraht al-Fati'a* is benign and beautiful, the Most Beneficent, Most Merciful, Caring Lord. Even as the Master of the Day of Judgement, He is the Source of Help, who gives guidance and blessings. He is not said to be angry or leading people astray. Non-Muslim believers can without difficulty appreciate such a picture of God, and the sentiments expressed throughout the *surah* are equally acceptable to believers in God whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims.

Some translators render v.6 as 'Guide us into/along the straight path' meaning Islam. This is a possible meaning, with the believer (already guided

to Islam as a religion) asking to be confirmed within that path, and guided along it, but it does not have to be confined to that meaning. *Hidaya*, or guidance to the right course, is required at any moment in any person's life. It is not only moral or religious guidance but the correct way of taking any action. It occurs in this sense in certain verses of the Qur'an. It is those who are already Muslims who plead to God in their prayers, seventeen times spaced throughout the day, to be shown the right way in any situation. In the same way as a believer at the beginning of the *surah* is aware of the whole creation of God, at the end of the *surah* he is aware of the company he prays to be joined with, but also aware of others with whom he does not wish to be joined. His vision is not confined simply to his own group, and the three groups at the end of the *surah* actually encompass all people, since anyone is either blessed on the right course or not blessed and astray from the right course.

The *Fati'a* opens the Qur'an and contains its Essence. The Prophet called it *Umm al-Qur'an* (the Mother/Essence of the Qur'an). It is seen by Muslim scholars as encapsulating the Qur'an's whole message – on God and his attributes, the relationship between Him and the world, the message that comes from Him through prophets and is to be followed, and the variety of responses and destinations of the different groups. It is natural, therefore that this 'table of contents' comes at the beginning of the Qur'an, to open it. The request, 'Show us the right way' in this first *surah* is answered immediately at the beginning of the second: 'This is the book, there is no doubt about it, a guide for all the God-conscious' (2:2), and the rest of the Qur'an goes on to explain this. With the *Fati'a* at the beginning, the Qur'an does not begin chronologically like the Old Testament or genealogically like the New Testament.

The Function of the *Fati'a* in Islamic Prayers

It was the Islamic formal daily prayers that gave the *Fati'a* its most prominent role in Islamic worship and life. Reciting it is essential to prayer, as the Prophet said, 'A prayer performed by someone who has not recited the Essence of the Qur'an in it is deficient [and he repeated the word three times], deficient, deficient, deficient.'

As it encapsulates the essence of the Qur'an, and of Islam, it is a most fitting passage as an obligatory part of Islamic prayer. It became part of the prayer very early in Islam and with the introduction of the five daily prayers during the Prophet's mission in Mecca, the *Fati'a* had to be recited by practicing Muslims at least seventeen times a day – one of the names of the *Fati'a* is *as-saba' al-mathani* (the often-repeated seven verses). Prayer is the second pillar of Islam after the confession of faith, and as such it remains an obligation on all Muslims from early life right to the point of death.

As part of the prayer, the Prophet reported that God, Almighty and Sublime, said: 'I have divided prayer between Myself and My servant into two halves, and My servant shall have what he has asked for.' When the servant says: 'Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds,' God (mighty and sublime be

He) says: 'My servant has praised Me'. And when he says: 'The Merciful, the Beneficent', God (mighty and sublime be He) says: 'My servant has extolled Me', and when he says: 'Master of the Day of Judgement', God (mighty and sublime be He) says: 'My servant has glorified Me' – and on one occasion He said: 'My servant has submitted to My power.' And when he says, 'It is You we worship and it is You we ask for help', He says: 'This is between Me and My servant, and My servant shall have what he has asked for'. And when he says: 'Guide us to the straight path. The way of those whom you have blessed; not those who incur anger or those astray', He says, 'This is for My servant, and My servant shall have what he has asked for.' (Hadith: Muslim)

This shows the *Fati'a* to be a remarkable experience of worship indeed, involving believers and God throughout. The believer recites each of these short verses, knowing that God responds to every statement s/he makes in this way. The believer repeats, 'Master of the Day of Judgement; It is you we worship' – the Prophet affirmed that the first act to be evaluated at the Judgement will be the prayers.

The request, 'Show us the right way', makes the prayer of daily and hourly significance in the life of the believers as they plead repeatedly to be guided in their beliefs, in their morals and practical judgements. This makes the *Fati'a* vital both as a plea and as a spur to seek and follow the right way. In their prayer, the believers see themselves as part of all humanity – indeed all creation – under the caring hand of God, the *Rabb al-'alamin* (Lord of all the worlds). They pray to be part of the company of the blessed servants of God from the beginning of the world and in the future; to be shown, along with other blessed servants of God, the right way. This is not just the way of the Muslims, followers of Muhammad; indeed God speaks in the Qur'an as having favoured Moses and Aaron and shown them the right way (37:118) ARABIC "and guided them the straight way,". The Qur'an speaks of eighteen earlier prophets in one passage

وَتِلْكَ حُجَّتُنَا آتَيْنَاهَا إِبْرَاهِيمَ عَلَىٰ قَوْمِهِ ۖ نَرْفَعُ دَرَجَاتٍ مِّنْ نَّشَأٍ ۖ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ حَكِيمٌ عَلِيمٌ
وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُ إِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ ۖ كُلًّا هَدَيْنَا ۚ وَنُوحًا هَدَيْنَا مِن قَبْلُ ۚ وَمِن ذُرِّيَّتِهِ دَاوُدَ
وَسُلَيْمَانَ وَيُوسُفَ وَمُوسَىٰ وَهَارُونَ ۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ
وَزَكَرِيَّا وَيَحْيَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ وَإِلْيَاسَ ۚ كُلٌّ مِّنَ الصَّالِحِينَ

(6:83–87) having been chosen by God and shown the right way, as well as their ancestors, descendants and brethren. This large company of believers, which Muslims pray in the *Fati'a* to join, is reinforced at the end of the Islamic formal prayer (*ṭalah*), with the formula: 'Peace be to us and to the righteous servants of God.' This is followed by another invocation of the blessing of God on the Prophet Muhammad and his family, saying, 'as You have blessed Abraham and his family *fi 'l-'alamin* (among all humankind)'. The singularity of God is emphasised throughout: in the dedication, praise, in His names and attributes, and in being the sole object of worship and of seeking help. In contrast, the affirmation and petition are put in the plural, not the singular, so that even if an individual is praying on his own, he sees himself as part of a company of believers. The Muslim theologian and interpreter of the Qur'an, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d.606/1209) expressed this succinctly:

The believer in effect is saying to God: 'I have heard Your Prophet say, "Being together is a mercy and being separated is a grief, so when I intended to praise you, I mentioned the praise of everybody, and when I wanted to worship you, I mentioned the worship of everybody, and when I asked for guidance, I asked for guidance for everybody, and when I prayed to be kept away from those rejected, I fled from all those who incur anger and all those who are astray."'

The Prophet stated that 'praying together is twenty-seven times better than praying alone.' Thus, if a Muslim enters the mosque and finds one person praying, he stands behind him taking him as 'leader', each finishing in his/her time and each gaining the special reward for praying together.

Style of the *Fati'a*

The passage comes in a style that suits its important functions both as a condensed summary of the Qur'an and as the centrepiece of Islamic prayer and devotion. It is short, comprising 29 words in Arabic, and it is divided into seven short verses, written in rhythmic rhymed prose. The second sentence, for instance, consists of four words comprising God's name, praise, power, and status as Caring Lord of everything. The centrepiece, v.5, written as four words in Arabic, sums up the entire relationship of the servant to God: "Thee alone do we worship; and unto Thee alone do we turn for aid.". The choice of words and structures allows for remarkable multiplicity of meaning difficult to capture in English. All existing translations show considerable loss of meaning. The words are very simple and familiar. In the first part about God they are composed of soft-sounding consonants which contrast with the latter part about human beings, especially as it reaches those who incur anger and those who are astray. There is a high degree of voicing and nasality, which gives a pleasing effect, including consonants such as l, m, n, and long u. The rhyme scheme alternates between '... *im*' and '... *in*' throughout. The quality of consonants and vowels does not allow for the passage to be hurriedly pronounced, and the rhymes come at crucial points, to make the reader pause where God will comment on the statement as mentioned above in the prophetic *ḥadith*. In congregational prayer this is recited aloud by the *imam* in a resonant voice. The congregation

listen to the recitation and do not join him in reciting aloud, until he comes to the end of the passage, when they all respond with a long, drawn out, resonant '*amin*', which has the same quality of sounds and length as the preceding rhymed words. The total effect makes the *Fati'a* particularly fitting for the atmosphere of prayer and devotion. Its brevity and auditory qualities make this passage, which has to be recited by all Muslims of any linguistic background, easy to learn by heart and recite.

The *Fati'a* and the Lord's Prayer (Christian prayer)

1. Our Father, Which art in Heaven
2. Hallowed be Thy name
3. Thy Kingdom come
4. Thy will be done in earth as it is in Heaven
5. Give us this day our daily bread
6. And forgive us our trespasses
7. As we forgive them that trespass against us
8. And lead us not into temptation
9. For Thine is the Kingdom
10. The Power and the Glory
11. For Ever and Ever, Amen

Christian scholars in the West have often compared the *Fati'a* with the Lord's Prayer, some seeking to belittle Islam and to show the Christian origins of Islamic teaching. H. Winkler (1928) tried to show that the *Fati'a* on the whole was 'modelled on the Lord's Prayer', although Paret (1965) considers Winkler's attempt to have failed. Muslims, on the other hand, at least in the Arabic tradition, do not show any interest in comparing these two prayers. Muslims experience no difficulty if they find similarities – in fact quite the reverse – since the Qur'an repeatedly affirms that it has come to confirm previous scriptures, all of which have the same central message. The Qur'an uses this argument with non-Muslims and with Muslims to endorse its teachings, and reinforce the faith of Muslims.

However, before going into comparisons, it should be noted that there are some textual problems. First the *Fati'a* is known to us in the Arabic original, and Muslims repeat the very words of the prayer read by the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, and successive generations of Muslims up to now. The Lord's Prayer, on the other hand, is known to us only in translation. Second, whereas there is only one version of the *Fati'a*, there are two of the Lord's Prayer, one in Matthew 6:9–14 and a second in Luke 11:2–4, the first being longer than the second. According to Sperl, they appear to have derived from diverse liturgical origins and to have undergone a period of evolution and change before entering the gospel. Sperl goes on to say that 'a reconstruction of the Aramaic originals as attempted, among others, by Lohmeyer (1946) is therefore problematic.'

Moreover, it should be remembered that the contexts of the *Fati'a* and the Lord's Prayer are very different. The *Fati'a* was revealed first as part of the Qur'an, as its name indicates: the opening part, encapsulating its whole

essence. In their prayer, Muslims read the *Fati'a* as the opening chapter of the Qur'an. As we have seen, the petition 'show us the right way' is answered immediately in the following *surah*: 'This is the book ... wherein is guidance ...' The fact that it was adopted for daily prayer does not change its original function.

The context of the Lord's Prayer is completely different. In St Matthew's gospel, Jesus had been directing his disciples to pray in a different way from those who make a show of it or pray at great length, thinking that by doing this they will have their prayers answered. Differences in context between the *Fati'a* and the Lord's Prayer must have a bearing on the intention and text of each prayer, leading to differences even in shared elements that defy any claim of similarity and influence. The similarities that have been noted by earlier scholars appear to have more to do with form and quantity.

A Muslim would view the content of the *Fati'a* as being acceptable to Christians. There are, however, elements in the Lord's Prayer that pose difficulties for a Muslim nurtured on the *Fati'a*, which is universal. 'Our' limits God to a particular community and to a particular relationship of fatherhood, compared to 'the Sustaining Lord of all the Worlds' not the Lord of the Muslims, or the Arabs. And although 'father' is a very intimate term to Christians, Muslims would not speak of God as a 'father' or a 'son'. 'Which art in Heaven' distances God from the earth as compared to the 'Sustaining Lord of all the Worlds'. Being in heaven does not in itself justify praise in the same way as His being Sustainer, Merciful and Master of the Day of Judgement does.

Then a Muslim will find a problem with the mood of the verbs as they occur in English: 'Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done'. In English this is all placed in the subjunctive which is rather tentative and sounds to a Muslim as if you are praying *for* God, not *to* Him. The description of God in the *Fati'a*, in Arabic and in English, is more affirmative: praise *belongs* to God, He *is* the Sustaining Lord of All, Master of the Day of Judgement. The affirmation at the core of the *Fati'a* – 'It is you we worship and it is you we ask for help' – central to the Islamic experience of worship and prayer, is not contained in the Lord's prayer. The petition is also different: there is one request in the *Fati'a* – for guidance – compared to 'Give us our daily bread, forgive our trespasses, lead us not into temptation'. Guidance is forward-looking, required by anyone in any action to be done, whereas forgiveness is more to do with sins already done. Moreover, 'Guide us' is positive; by comparison 'Lead us not into temptation' is not so positive: it merely keeps them away from temptation, but does not advance from there. 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us', (rendered by C. W. F. Smith⁷ 'as we have also forgiven them') could appear to turn the human action into an example to be followed by God. In the Qur'an, 'God's is the highest example'

لِّلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ مَثَلُ السَّوْءِ ۚ وَلِلَّهِ الْمَثَلُ الْأَعْلَىٰ ۚ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

“Thus it is that] the attribute of evil applies to all who do not believe in the life to come -whereas unto God applies the attribute of all that is most sublime: for He alone is almighty, truly wise!” (16:60). It is of course more binding for the believer to think that in order to be forgiven by God, he Himself should first forgive others. The Qur’an states this in

وَلَا يَأْتِلْ أُولُو الْفَضْلِ مِنْكُمْ وَالسَّعَةِ أَنْ يُؤْتُوا أُولِي الْقُرْبَى وَالْمَسَاكِينَ وَالْمُهَاجِرِينَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ ۚ وَلْيَعْفُوا وَلْيَصْفَحُوا ۚ أَلَا تُحِبُّونَ أَنْ يَغْفِرَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ ۚ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

“Hence, [even if they have been wronged by slander,] let not those of you who have been graced with God’s favour and ease of life ever become remiss in helping [the erring ones among] their near of kin, and the needy, and those who have forsaken the domain of evil for the sake of God, but let them pardon and forbear. [For,] do you not desire that God should forgive you your sins, seeing that God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace?”24:22 and

إِنْ تُبْدُوا خَيْرًا أَوْ تُخَفُّوهُ أَوْ تُعْفُوا عَنْ سُوءٍ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَفُورًا قَدِيرًا

“whether you do good openly or in secret, or pardon others for evil [done unto you]: for, behold, God is indeed an absolver of sins, infinite in His power”4:149, but it does not use the form, as it appears in the English text of the Lord’s Prayer, which seems to make humans an example for God to follow.

A Muslim who is used to the logical and conclusive sequence of ideas in the *Fati’a* would not understand the final part of the Lord’s prayer in Matthew: ‘for Thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory’, coming as it does after, ‘As we forgive them that trespass against us’. According to the logic of the *Fati’a*, this line should have come right at the beginning, together with ‘hallowed be Thy name’, not as a reason for forgiving us our trespasses as in the English version. Justification in the *Fati’a* is more obvious: you praise God because He is the ‘Lord of ...’, and only after such praise does it come naturally that He is the One to be worshipped and from whom help is to be sought. Only after this is it natural to ask for help. The request for guidance to the way is justified by its being straight and proven, wishing to be with that particular company is justified by its being blessed, and not the object of anger, or astray. The sequence is logical and conclusive. This does not come out clearly in the English version of the Lord’s prayer. The *Fati’a* also contains belief and worship and the way of living; it is a summary fitting for the beginning of the scripture as well as for repetition by the believers in daily life.

The Lord’s Prayer has a different purpose and is different in scope from the *Fati’a*. The frequency of use of the *Fati’a*, and its social function, are wider than those of the Lord’s Prayer. In the end, it is salutary to repeat Muslim scholars’ affirmation at the end of discussions *wa’llahu a’lam* (and God knows best). As stated above, Muslims do not take an interest in comparing the two prayers. Nor should comparison be pursued with disregard to the different contexts of the two texts. Each prayer has sustained, in its own way, and will continue to sustain, the spiritual life of countless believers

throughout their history; and both have in common the earnest desire to glorify God and eagerness to please Him.

The *Fati'a* in Muslim Life

As it is the first *surah* in the Qur'an and the centrepiece of Muslim daily prayer, this concise passage plays a much wider role in Muslim life. It is the first part of the Qur'an that children learn – and it opens their education. In schools they can be heard chanting it in groups. Learning it in Arabic gives it a unifying function between Muslims throughout the world, and it inspires non-Arabs to start learning more Arabic later in life. Its blessing is sought on numerous occasions in Muslims' lives.

Other names of the *Fati'a* are *al-Shafi'a* (the Healer), and *al-Kafiya* (the Sufficient). When asking God earnestly to heal a sick person, or to lighten a difficulty, Muslims resort to the *Fati'a*.

The concept of 'opening' in the name of the *Fati'a* is ever present in the life of a Muslim

Short prayers such as, 'May God open for you' (*Allah yifta' alayk*) are part of everyday language, and the Prophet recommended, when entering the mosque to pray, 'Lord open the gates of Your mercy for me' (*Allahumma ifta' li abwab ra'matik*). If a deal falls through, in a shop for instance, the vendor will say '*yafta' Allah*' when declining to sell, meaning 'God will open other opportunities for me'.

Individual verses, or parts of a verse, play an important role, especially '*bismillah*' (in the name of God). As the Prophet said, any serious matter that does not begin with '*bismillah*' would be imperfect and incomplete. On the instruction of the Prophet it is the grace before eating, before speaking in public (even as a panellist on TV), on leaving the house in the morning, or returning to it, before sleeping, or sexual intercourse with one's spouse. Indeed, as Razi explains in a beautiful passage, quoting prophetic authority: When the midwife receives a new baby she should say *bismillah*, or the deceased is being laid to rest, those doing it should say *bismillah*. On rising from the grave, and again on reaching the place of Judgement, each person should repeat *bismillah*. Reciting this phrase invokes the help and protection of God in every task. The *Fati'a* is the opening to all good things.