

Article

Memorising and Reciting a Text without Understanding Its Meaning: A Multi-Faceted Consideration of This Practice with Particular Reference to the Qur'an

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Abstract: The joint activities of memorising and reciting the Arabic Qur'an are deeply embedded within Islamic tradition, culture and educational practice. Despite this, for many western non-Muslims, particularly those engaged in educational activity themselves, to learn that memorisation of the Arabic text of the Qur'an does not always—or, indeed, often—go hand-in-hand with understanding the meaning of the words can come as both a surprise and a shock. It is not uncommon to hear a response from such people to the effect that to memorise texts without understanding their meaning is pointless. There is also sometimes the implication that such practice is anachronistic: 'behind the times', as it were, and thus not worthy of serious consideration. This article is framed as a 'general' riposte to such a dismissive response in that its motivation lies not in straightforward apologetics (that is, defending the practice of memorisation without qualification and at all costs), but, rather, in bringing together a number of key elements (or factors) that cumulatively carry sufficient weight to challenge such a raw response, or at least to give pause for thought and promote a more informed consideration. Following a brief introduction that locates Qur'an memorisation and recitation within Islamic faith and practice, five facets will be explored: first, the growing recognition that there is not just one legitimate form of literacy but, rather, a plurality of literacies; second, the ambiguity within the concept of 'meaning' itself; third, an acknowledgement that memorisation has not only held an esteemed place in western history, but remains valued in some aspects of contemporary life and culture; fourth, a recognition of the emotional power of high-quality recitation, irrespective of a literal comprehension of the words being recited; and, finally, the growing body of research evidence that suggests that the involvement of Muslim children and young people in Qur'anic memorisation and recitation might very well equip them with valuable social and educational capital. The article will end with a brief personal account showing the complex position that a contemporary British Muslim 'insider'—as individual, teacher and parent—has adopted towards his own and others' practice of memorising the Qur'an. This account has been included to show that, within the Muslim community itself, different opinions are held about the weight and meaning to be placed on memorisation in general and on Qur'anic memorisation and recitation in particular.

Keywords: memorisation; *Qur'an*; *hifz*; recitation; rote learning; literacy and literacies; transfer of skills

1. Introduction

There is much that non-Muslims might find puzzling or enigmatic with the ways in which Muslims, whether in a Muslim-majority or Muslim-minority social context, live out their lives. Take, for example, the centrality of the Qur'an within the life, devotion and worship of the Muslim community,

or the centrality of the Qur'an in the Arabic language which Muslims believe was revealed cumulatively to the Prophet Muhammad over the course of the last 23 years of his life. Furthermore, it is their understanding that the Prophet memorised each part of the Arabic text that was being revealed to him, memorised it, and then recited it to other members of the growing Muslim community, who then repeated the same three-fold sequence of hearing, memorising and reciting to others. Therefore, in that the term *hafiz* (based on the Arabic consonantal root *h-f-z* with its implications of 'guarding', 'preserving', 'taking care of', 'protecting', and so on) refers to a person who has memorised the whole Qur'an so that it can continue to be transmitted by being recited with all the reverential power of its original revelation, the Prophet Muhammad can be regarded as the first *hafiz* (Halilovic 2005, pp. 30–34), with a stream of other *huffaz* following from his time to the present day and beyond.

Much in the Islamic tradition is consequent on the above. It is an obligation on all Muslims (*Fard Ayn*), for instance, to memorise parts of the Qur'an in its original Arabic, the language in which it was first revealed. Indeed, to do so is also a *practical* necessity for Muslims in that each of the five periods of daily prayer (*salah*) includes recitation, in Arabic, from parts of the Qur'an, including the opening *surah* ('chapter'), the *Fatihah*. Through the ages, some Muslims who have possessed both the drive and a retentive memory have chosen to go further: to undertake *hifz* (Gent 2011, 2015, 2006), the process by which the whole Arabic Qur'an—in size, often compared to the Christian New Testament—is committed to memory so that it can be recited according to all the traditional rules of Qur'anic recitation (*tajwid*: Nelson 2001, p. 14 & *passim*). (This is seen as a collective obligation—*Fard Kifayah*—which, if some individuals do, the whole community is thereby absolved of the responsibility.)

To non-Muslims, of course, usually with little understanding of the historical, religious and ritualistic context of the above, both the daily use of an ancient language, which, for the majority of Muslims world-wide, has little or no connection with their everyday language of discourse, can appear surprising (at best) or odd (at worst). Indeed, some non-Muslim European travellers into Muslim lands in past times have done little to hide their puzzlement and incredulity. Take, for example, the description of what the British author and traveller, James Augustus St John (1795–1875), saw and heard when visiting a madrasa boys' class in Alexandria, Egypt, towards the middle of the nineteenth century:

While studying, or rather learning to repeat, their lessons, each boy declaims his portion of the Koran (*sic*) aloud at the same time, rocking his body to and fro, in order, according to their theory, to assist his memory: and as everyone seemed desirous of drowning the voices of his companions, the din produced by so many shrill discordant notes reminds one of the 'labourers of Babel'. (St John 1845, pp. 31–32)

Additionally, when the observation and audition of such practice was enflamed by a Christian censure and apologetic, the comments could be even more acerbic or disdainful—as in the case of Samuel Marinus Zwemer (1867–1952), US missionary, traveller and scholar, and so-called 'Apostle to Islam':

A Moslem (*sic*) lad is not supposed to know what the words and sentences mean which he must recite every day: to ask a question regarding the *thought* of the Koran (*sic*) would only result in a rebuke or something more painful. Even grammar, logic, history, and theology are taught by rote in the higher Mohammedan (*sic*) schools . . . Thousands of Moslems lads who know the whole Koran by heart, cannot explain the meaning of the first chapter in everyday language. (Zwemer 1915, pp. 137–38)

Even today, in the contemporary western world—a world in which, in academic circles at least, there is a much more conscious awareness of the need to be hyper-reflexive in commenting on religious and non-religious traditions and worldviews other than one's own—the last implied criticism picked up by Zwemer (that of the putative pointlessness of learning something in a language that you cannot understand) still resonates. In some otherwise very helpful texts (e.g., Lewis 2002, pp. 77–81; Lewis and Hamid 2018, p. 63), indeed, this is implicitly suggested through reference to the low or absent

literacy of communities in which Islam first grew and developed, with the implication that, under such circumstances, memorisation was a necessary process in order to retain passages of text. (It might also carry the inference that the current practice of Qur'anic memorisation is anachronistic—a now unnecessary hang-over from a bygone preliterate age—and which will no longer be necessary with the growth of social literacy).

In general, at least in western circles, there can be no doubt that memorisation as a form of learning is not only treated with a certain disdain and is grouped with other practices or processes associated with poor or outmoded educational practice: notably 'rote learning' or learning 'parrot-fashion'. It is not difficult to see why, for some, when it is learned that—as in traditional Muslim practice—the memorisation is of an 'ancient' language no longer used by most Muslims as the language of everyday discourse, the situation appears bleaker still. For, as Michael Rosen, the well-known British children's author and educational commentator, recently commented, 'After all, the ultimate purpose of reading is to understand what it is you're reading, isn't it?' (Rosen 2017).

What follows is neither a blanket defence of the process of memorisation per se—though the authors do agree that in western, liberal educational contexts, the role of memorisation *as one form of learning amongst many others* is generally over-looked and under-rated—nor a straightforward repudiation of those many concerns about the negative impact of over-reliance on memorisation, in Muslim and other contexts, that have been voiced through the ages to the present day. Rather, it is an attempt to place memorisation within a wider historical, cultural, and educational setting so that a more balanced and nuanced appraisal of its role is possible.

This will be achieved through looking at memorisation through five lenses or prisms: first, through looking at the claim made by a number of scholars associated with the field of New Literacy Studies that there is not one, but rather a number, of 'literatecies'; second, through unpacking the ambiguity in the concept of 'meaning' (as in reference to the need to 'understand meaning'); third, through acknowledging that memorisation has not only held an esteemed place in western history, but also remains valued in some significant aspects of contemporary life and culture; fourth, through recognising the emotional power of high-quality recitation, irrespective of a literal understanding of the words; and, finally, through the growing body of research evidence that suggests that the involvement of Muslim children and young people in Qur'anic memorisation and recitation as part of their supplementary education can have positive consequences for their learning at school and life beyond.

2. Insights Offered by New Literacy Studies

In recent decades, pupils' progress and achievement in 'literacy' have been taken as one of the principal measures of schools'—or, indeed, nations'—relative effectiveness in educational provision. Reflecting this, the language of the English educational world of the 1990s was peppered with terms such as 'the literacy strategy', 'the literacy hour' and 'the literacy coordinator'. Behind such trends in thinking lay, of course, a vast corpus of literacy-related literature, practice and research. For those unfamiliar with such a field of enquiry, a brief review of some key texts quickly reveals that, as in all fields of enquiry, there has been ongoing contestation and debate. Within the British field of literacy studies, a significant player in recent years has been Brian V. Street (1943–2017), who, as one of the founders of 'New Literacy Studies', contributed significant new insights to both literacy theory and practice.

In terms of this study, the principal significance of Street's work (e.g., Street 2013) is three-fold. First, he came to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy—as perpetuated, he believed, in the work of notable scholars like Walter Ong (e.g., Ong 1982) and Jack Goody (e.g., Goody 1977), for example—that a 'great divide' existed between literate and oral societies, with the former (it is assumed) being more 'advanced' and less 'primitive' than the latter. Second, as he had seen demonstrated in various national literacy projects, the thinking enshrined in the notion of the 'great divide' could have practical implications for the distribution of power and influence within society. Furthermore, as one of the

consequences of the latter point, he thirdly rejected the idea that there was but one basic form of literacy in favour of their being a variety of *literacies*, the logic of which had to be understood in their own particular contexts.

It was in the context of this world view, and particularly the third point, that the former teacher and specialist in educational literacy, Andrey Rosowsky, made a very fruitful contribution to the area being explored here by identifying one form of literacy as being ‘liturgical’ or ‘faith’ literacy (Rosowsky 2008). This, he suggested, was a form of literacy found within particular religious and cultural communities, in which the transmission of a ‘religious classical’—a revered text using language other than the conversational mother tongue passed on from one generation to the next—was a fundamental need of the community. If Latin within the history of the Roman Catholic Church (Rosowsky 2013b, p. 2) matched this description then, clearly, so does Qur’anic Arabic within the ongoing life of Muslim communities. However, more than this, Rosowsky posited that liturgical literacy refers to a particular type of literacy in which children in particular communities learn to read/decode a religious classical without the need to understand its word-for-word meaning; its value to the community lies elsewhere:

Though Qur’anic literacy, and other similar liturgical literacies, do not need justifying, central activities such as accurate decoding, melodious reciting, extensive and faithful memorisation and artful performing should be considered as valuable cultural and linguistic resources these young people acquire and then employ, in various extents, in their lives. (Rosowsky 2016, p. 158)

Indeed, so important is liturgical literacy to some communities that the ability to decode the religious classical form, he suggested, forms a valued, central and significant part of the identity-formation of the young. As such,

Faith literacies . . . rather than being peripheral social processes and activities, take their place alongside other, more mainstream, literacies playing an important role in the social and cultural lives of those for whom faith, language and literacy are intertwined and complementary. In a contemporary world, where, contrary to many expectations, religious life and practice have not withered away, but are still playing a full role in the lives of citizens across the planet, faith literacies remain an integral part of people’s identities, collectively and individually. (Rosowsky 2015, p. 180)

The central significance of the work being developed in New Literacy Studies for our thesis, then, is that we must beware of uncritically absorbing the notion that there is only one ‘proper’ form of literacy (usually associated with school learning) in favour of a more varied and textured understanding of plurality. In short,

the Rolls-Royce version of reading, where accurate decoding is accompanied by attention to meaning, is not necessarily the default mode of reading in all contexts. In faith settings, where reading has other purposes, decoding is sufficient and most apt. (Rosowsky 2013a, p. 76)

Though particular aspects of Rosowsky’s work have been faulted (e.g., Moore 2011, p. 294), his general point here would appear to be well made.

3. Unpacking the Concept of ‘Meaning’

Rosowsky has also made comments on the concept of ‘meaning’ in terms of understanding the significance of memorising and reciting a revered text within the tradition of some faith communities. In doing so, he encourages moving beyond a mindset that only equates meaning and significance with a one-to-one literal meaning of the words of a text.

As a Muslim revert himself, he undoubtedly draws on his own personal experience when he states that, for Muslims, reading

is a cultural activity, not about seeking knowledge from books in order to inform faith, but the very stuff of religious worship. A Muslim believes that he or she is participating in a sacred act whilst reciting the Qur'an. (Rosowsky 2008, p. 209)

As such, though many teachers of the Qur'an through the ages have admitted that the ideal of learning to read, memorise and recite the Qur'an in the above sense is to understand as much of the word-for-word meaning as possible—or at least the general sense of what is being read and recited—this is not the main or only criterion for 'success' in this field. Furthermore, the subtlety (and, for many non-Muslims, unfamiliarity and also potential for confusion) of this context and its associated practice explains why, in everyday language, Muslims often use words like 'read', 'pray' and 'worship' interchangeably, employing phrases like 'reading' or even 'praying' the Qur'an when reciting from memory. The malleable nature and poetic rhythm of the Arabic language—in which groups of words can often be derived from a common root, for instance (see Kassis 1983)—is also an important contributory factor.

Given what has already been said above, it is not surprising that many scholars of the Qur'an, particularly when writing for a non-Muslim audience, have, each in their own way, also sought to expand the concepts of both 'meaning' and 'understanding' beyond a one-dimensional, reductionist and limiting word-for-word interpretation. This is both exemplified and modelled in the work of the American scholar, William A Graham.

In 'Voicing the Qur'an: Questions of Meaning', a Muslim-focused section of his masterful study *Beyond the Written Word: Oral aspects of scripture in the history of religion* (Graham 1987), Graham poses the 'perplexing' (*sic*) question of whether the meaning of a text is available to someone who holds it sacred, but understands few specifics of its actual text because of ignorance of its language. Conversely, phrased more longitudinally, 'is the meaning of the Qur'an available only to the learned person who has added to the rote memorisation of the holy text some years of additional study?' (Graham 1987, p. 111). His response is an emphatic 'No'. In explaining this, he draws a distinction between a 'discursive' and a 'non-discursive' understanding, by which he means that, for Muslim believers, their experience of or encounter with the Qur'an is *greater than* through only a literal, content-driven understanding of its words:

The discursive understanding, at whatever level, of qur'anic teaching is not the only access to meaning in the interaction of the faithful with the text. There is also a nondiscursive understanding or meaning that is part of the experience of overt encounter with the text itself—an encounter that is primarily oral/aural, rooted as it is in the recitation, or listening to the recitation, of the text. (Graham 1987, p. 111)

Anna Gade chooses another binary—*affirmation* rather than *comprehension*—to make a similar point (Gade 2004, p. 116). Both she and Kristina Nelson also highlight the concept of 'sound' to capture this same experience:

the Qur'an is not the Qur'an unless it is heard (Nelson 2001, p. xiv)

While the meaning of the Qur'an is central to Islam, the divine origin and power of the *sound* of the Qur'an is something experienced on a purely aesthetic level, particularly in a society where few understand the Arabic language. (Rasmussen 2001, p. 42)

It is also of interest to note, in passing, that there is significant evidence that the capacity of the recited Qur'an to pluck the heart-strings of listeners has not been confined to Muslims—Arabic-speaking or not—alone. Take, for example, the instance of a non-Muslim academic recollecting his experience whilst learning the Arabic Qur'an at an academic center in the English Midlands in the late 1970s:

Arabic was an integral part of the programme, so I first heard and read the Qur'an in its original tongue. Instead of the clumsy, inelegant English of a translation, I listened to the

beauty and rhythm of the Arabic, This seminal experience of the Qur'an coloured all my later engagement with the scripture with a love for the tone and sound of the Arabic language. (Bennett 2010, p. 12)

4. The Place of Memorisation within Western History and Culture

To say that, in historical Islam, the place of memorisation in Qur'anic practice has been central and that memorisation (as well as dictation) has also occupied a strong place in learning practice in general is not to deny that there has also been an ongoing debate and contention concerning about the appropriate use of memorisation.

In the same way, the recognition that, at least within western culture and education, there is currently a general antipathy towards memorisation as a mode of learning, cannot then be taken to imply a historical dislike of memorisation on the part of those living in the non-Islamic west. Indeed, the situation has been quite the opposite, since the ancient classical period, for the role of memorisation (linked with recitation, oratory and rhetoric, and often employing visual order and imagery) has been valorised, if not cherished, as shown in a number of notable historical studies, such as F. A. Yates' *The Art of Memory* (Yates 1966). Indeed, within the early modern period, some European scholars—including Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) and Matteo Ricci (1552–1610: see Spence 1984)—gained an international reputation for their work on memory, including the formulation of 'systems' through which knowledge could be retained and recalled.

Moreover, from a more general perspective, a host of people from across a diverse range of times, backgrounds and locations in western history have gained a positive reputation for their prodigious memories: from the Roman orator and advocate Quintus Hortensius (114–150 BCE); the Tudor statesman Thomas Cromwell (1485–1540), who knew the New Testament by heart (Borman 2014, p. 26); and the eighteenth/nineteenth poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Sachs 2017, pp. 113–14), to the twentieth century politician and statesman, Winston Churchill (Robson 2012, p. 139).

Certainly up to the late nineteenth century and into the first half of the twentieth century in Britain, memorisation and rote learning—some commenters are very keen to differentiate the two, with the former often being advocated as a more positive enterprise than the latter (see, for example, Hughes 1997, p. ix)—formed a significant part of the daily educational diet of schoolrooms, from prestigious public schools to local ragged schools. Indeed, a whole genre of books was to come into fashion, whereby literary types published whole collections of poems that they had committed to memory from a young age onwards (see, for example: Murray 1997; Wavell 1944), a process for which they usually expressed fulsome gratitude. In her memoir, *An Education* (Barber 2009), the British journalist and writer, Lynn Barber, traced the role of memorisation in the education and culture of both her husband and herself. Indeed, shortly before he died, when he was hospitalised and his mind was failing, she said that her husband was still able to recite Coleridge's notoriously lengthy poem 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' from memory (Barber 2009, pp. 170–71).

In her remarkable study, *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem* (Robson 2012), Catherine Robson shows the extent to which juvenile vocalisation in general, and the memorisation and recitation of poems in particular, were a salient feature of both British and US elementary schooling in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—though for slightly longer in the US. Interestingly, she suggests that public attitudes to rote learning and memorisation are markedly different in Britain compared to the US: in the former, she detects a very 'conflicted response' associated with negative attitudes towards 'Victorian education' in general (Robson 2012, p. 233), whilst, in the latter, she detects a much more relaxed and affirmative view.

However, it is clear that there remain many advocates of memorisation and 'learning by heart' (as already noted, not to be automatically equated with rote learning) as a creative and effective form of deep (as opposed to 'surface') learning. Indeed, this includes Catherine Robson herself who, in her post of an English lecturer at New York University, encourages students to commit passages of literature to memory (Robson 2014), a simple process which she believes has the capacity to 'open doors in the

mind' (Robson 2012, p. 181). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that in her sensitive analysis of this thesis, there are clear parallels to the world of Qur'anic memorisation and recitation. Whereas, for instance, the metaphor of 'embodied knowledge' is often used in Muslim literature on education in general and on Qur'anic memorisation and recitation in particular (Ware 2014; Gent 2018), Robson (Robson 2014) refers to the 'somatic experience' of poetic recitation and points out that the title of her book—*Heart Beats*—was carefully chosen so as to remind people of the *physicality* involved in public recitation (the heart pounding in anticipation, and so on).

To close this section, reference will be made to two further examples of how, despite its low esteem in some educational and other circles, memorisation is still to be found embedded within western life and culture.

First, if the number of Qur'anic recitation competitions that are held world-wide is a signal that the value of Qur'anic memorisation and practice remains a powerful force across the contemporary Muslim world, then there is no finer example of a non-Muslim parallel than the annual 'Poetry by Heart' competition, which, involving many thousands of British secondary school and college students, flags itself (using, be it noted, quasi-sacramental language) as

an inspiring competition for students in schools and colleges to learn and to recite poems by heart. Not an arm-waving, props-supported thespian extravaganza, but as the outward and audible manifestation of an inwardly-understood and enjoyed poem. (www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/)

A brief look at the material on the suite of Poetry by Heart websites—including inspiring comments by people like Andrew Motion (Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, 1999–2009)—leaves one in no doubt that, in the contemporary world, there are still many aware of the subtle but profound difference between (simply) reading out a text and committing it to memory and then reciting it 'by heart'.

Second, there are many fields of life in which memorising material is a requirement. Take, for example, the need for those in the acting profession to be constantly committing new material to memory. If this is so for the general actor, how much more significance does it take on in the one-person recital? In the latter part of his life, Charles Dickens (1812–1870), created a vast international following through his tours, which involved him giving public recitals of passages from his writings. His audiences—like those at a recital by a famous Qur'anic reciter, for example (Hirschkind 2006)—'knew what to expect', in that they had been brought up in a culture in which this kind of aural/oral experience (including appropriate means of audience response), was customary (Andrews 2006, pp. 19–20). Whilst such a feat of memorisation might create wonderment on the part of those listening, it will clearly also have an impact on the mind and sensibilities of the reciter. Reflecting on his one-man show beginning in the late 1970s, which consisted of him reciting, over two hours, the whole of St Mark's Gospel from memory, the author and actor Alec McCowen was later to reflect that

Learning St Mark took me sixteen months and, for the most part, was a great pleasure ... because until I *learnt* the lines, I didn't fully understand them. Until I was forced to examine each sentence with the utmost care, I didn't understand the choice of words or the construction. (McCowen 1980, pp. 142–43)

Additionally, though not professing a Christian belief of his own, he was able to say of the whole experience that

Whenever I needed it, I was blessed; and blessed specifically with light and warmth. (McCowen 1980, p. 198)

5. The Sound as More Than the Sum of the Words

The case of Alec McCowen's one-man recital cited above is only partially helpful to our developing thesis, however, in that the Marcin words that he committed to memory were in English, albeit in the form of the Elizabethan English of the Authorised Version. To find a more exact parallel to the

experience of the majority of Muslims who commit parts or the whole of the Qur'an to memory without being familiar with the Arabic language of either today or of the Prophet's day, we would have to imagine McCowen learning Mark's Gospel in *Koine Greek*, the language used by all four canonical Gospel writers.

However, this point, in the overall scheme of things being set out here, is somewhat pedantic for—as we have already alluded to above—it puts too much stress on understanding the words in a grammatical, propositional and literal sense. An examination of Muslim experience through the ages, both in memorising and hearing the Qur'an recited, would suggest that the impact of the Qur'anic words being recited is *greater than the sum of its grammatical parts*. However, given the historical tendency in the west to regard the Qur'an as a written text (see, e.g., Nelson 2001, p. xix; Smith 1980; Ayoub 1993), this is a point that, as Neal Robinson made clear in his introduction to his study of the Qur'an, needs repeating:

It may surprise them [Muslims] that I devote so much space to describing the acoustic qualities, the contexts in which it is heard, the part played by rote-learning and the importance of calligraphy. I am convinced, however, that this is necessary if the non-Muslim reader, with little or no first-hand experience of Islam, is to appreciate how much is lost when the Qur'an is encountered merely as a written text, out of context, and in translation. (Robinson 2003, p. 2)

It is for this reason, perhaps, that so many of those researchers who have spent time 'in the field' in large Muslim communities—scholars such as Anna Gade (Gade 2004) and Anne K. Rasmussen (Rasmussen 2010) in Indonesia—are keen to point out the omnipresent sound of Qur'anic recitation as part of the everyday Muslim soundscape.

There is a considerable amount of evidence drawn from the many types of literature—Muslim and non-Muslim, past and present—that can be used to illustrate the impact that hearing the *sound* of Qur'anic recital can have on Muslims. Very striking are those accounts by non-Muslim observers. Take, for example, an incident recalled by Alan Billings, in which he said he became aware of the awesome power of hearing the Qur'an being recited for Muslims:

This was brought home to me many years ago when as a young priest I was asked by members of Attercliffe mosque in Sheffield to come and meet the new imam. He was very young, immaculately dressed in white robes, and had only recently flown in from Pakistan. He spoke no English. I asked him why they wanted an imam who could not speak English. They invited me to sit down with them, and all became clear. The young man began to recite the Qur'an. His voice was confident and very beautiful. He knew the (Arabic) Qur'an by heart. As he recited, I looked at the old men who sat round him in a half circle. Tears streamed from their eyes. This was a moment of supreme religious experience; for they were hearing the very speech of God. To hear the Qur'an is to hear God speak. It is but a short step from believing this is the speech of God to believing that what Allah is saying in one context is being spoken directly into the contemporary context. (Billings 2009, pp. 120–21)

Again, to take one Muslim example from the many sources available,

The whole experience of the Qur'an for Muslims remains to this day first of all an auditory experience and is only later associated with reading in the ordinary sense of the word. There is an ever-present, orally heard, and memorised Qur'an in addition to the written version of the Sacred Text, an auditory reality which touches the deepest chords of the souls of the faithful, *even if they are unable to read the Arabic text*. (Nasr 1992, p. 1: stress added)

Much could be said here about parallels to be drawn from everyday western non-Muslim culture. It is interesting that Andrey Rosowsky (see Section 2 above) clearly also felt identifying such parallels to be a useful exercise. In his case, he looked for examples from the world of music, drawing parallels with both opera singers and choir members, singing in a variety of languages (such as the medieval

Latin of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*), which neither they nor some members of their audiences knew the exact meaning of. However, in the big picture, he believed this not to be an impediment in that

through the art form of opera a meaning is communicated which transcends the literal meaning of the words sung. (Rosowsky 2001, p. 60)

6. Memorisation as Social and Educational Capital

From the above, it can be appreciated why so much time and energy have been traditionally devoted to teaching Muslim children to decode Qur'anic Arabic; to read the Qur'an itself (for a child to complete one or more readings of the whole Qur'an is matter of great celebration and pride within Muslim communities); and then, for most young people, to memorise key passages or sections of the Qur'an. For some, as we have already noted, this would be followed by *hifz*, the process of committing the entire Arabic Qur'an to memory.

Though there is a great corpus of literature on the history, nature, and underlying philosophy and theology of Muslim education in general, there is relatively little material that relates to the actual experience of Muslim children and individuals who go through the above process in its varied historical and cultural incarnations. It is here that Muslim autobiographies, such as Taha Hussein's *An Egyptian Childhood* (Hussein 1981) and Sayid Qutb's *A Child from the Village* (Qutb 2004), can sometimes provide fascinating first-hand material which is hard to obtain (including children's feelings about learning the Qur'an and going to Qur'anic classes). Cheikh Hamidou Kane's ground-breaking African novel, *Ambiguous Adventure* (Kane 1972), also provides a graphic picture of life in a traditional open-air Qur'an class in a Senegalese village.

From within the research community in Britain at least, it has been increasingly recognised that there is a dearth of ethnographic material about the nature and experience of contemporary Muslim education. However, some researchers—including the lead author of this article—have set up a number of ethnographic research projects over the last decade that are beginning to provide some interesting first-hand perspectives about, for instance, the process and impact of Qur'anic memorisation, which have the potential to challenge what we have already noted: the often perfunctory dismissal of memorisation as a learning mode.

One such piece of research focused on the role of *huffaz* (plural form of *hafiz*: see *Introduction* above) within the contemporary British Muslim community (Gent 2006). Within the conversations that the author had with individual *huffaz* in various parts of England—some 19 in total—there was a discussion about the role of memorisation of the Qur'an in particular and then on its impact on memorisers' own lives in general. Regarding the latter, the general pattern that emerged was that, on reflection, interviewees said that it had had an impact. The examples given to demonstrate this included the following: that the process had sharpened one hafiz's memory (of phone numbers, for instance), so that he thought that

'there has to be some kind of element where, if you train you brain to remember something, then it sharpens your brain and you pick up things that normally you would not pick up'.
(interview with 40-year-old male hafiz, December 2011)

Another male hafiz said that it had helped him at university and with examinations, and meant that he could sit and study in a noisy environment (experienced male university academic, interviewed January 2010). A female *hafiza* also claimed that it had had a positive effect on her university studies, which she found easy to complete (33-year old female *hafiza*, interviewed February 2011). A further *hafiz* said that he could visualise things more rapidly than his friends at school and it had also helped with his commitment to learning. Furthermore, he could now recall things such as medical notes and car routes with ease (interview with 44-year-old male medical worker, June 2011).

There has also been a growing interest amongst researchers in Europe and elsewhere (e.g., Moore 2012) about how their experience in Muslim supplementary education (such as mosque after-school classes) might impact on Muslim young people's experiences and learning in mainstream school.

As such, the lead author and a Swedish colleague have carried out several ethnographic research projects amongst Muslim pupils in British community schools. The first of these (Berglund and Gent 2018) involved working with 27 15–17-year-old Muslim students at a very large mixed-ethnic high school in north-east London, with the project design including participants completing an individual questionnaire, taking part in group work, and finally engaging in a one-to-one interview with one of the researchers.

Again, as with the previous *hafiz*-related research project, the general pattern that emerged was that the students, upon being given the opportunity to reflect on this, particularly during their one-to-one interviews felt that their experience of Qur'anic memorisation had supported their learning in school and elsewhere. For example, one late sixteen-year-old male student said that he revised at school through repeating his notes in the same way that he repeats the Qur'an; a seventeen-year-old female student said that memorising the Qur'an (which was 'difficult') helped her school memorisation to 'get better'; a sixteen-year-old male student said that his Qur'anic memorisation helped him to obtain very high marks in school German-speaking assessments (which involved learning and then reciting passages in German); and a 17-year-old female student, who had been born in Italy before coming to England four years previously, said that, in her Italian school, each day began with an oral test on what had been learned the day before and that learning Qur'anic surahs (chapters) at home had helped her in this. However, because she learned to focus when reading the Qur'an, she also learned that, at school, she needed to be 'focused and less distracted'. The latter is an interesting response in that, like many other of the students' responses to the question of how involvement in Muslim supplementary education benefited them at school, it moved away from reference to memorisation skills as such to more *implicit* benefits. Other examples of this included the development of patience, tolerance, perseverance and humility; the habit of being precise; being well-organised through developing a daily routine; and encouragement to 'strive away' from ignorance because

when you're more intellectual, more educated, more understanding, your approach becomes different to life, how you would respond to situations and things like that. (a late sixteen-year-old male student)

7. Diversity within Muslim Attitudes towards Memorisation and a Contemporary Case-Study

Lest it be assumed that there is a standard or univocal Muslim position on matters related to the memorisation and understanding of the words of the Qur'an (which, of course, would be a form of essentialism), it must be stated that this is simply not the case. Indeed, there is abundant evidence to show that, though the capacity to memorise and properly recite the Qur'an has been accepted as an obligation incumbent on Muslims from the earliest years of Islam, there has also been divergence in opinion about the *balance* to be sought between memorising the Qur'an and the developing capacity to understand what the words signify. Take, for example, the position adopted by the Mu'tazili theologian, Al-Jahiz (c776–868 CE), who advocated striking a balance between deductive reasoning and reliance on the achievement of predecessors. Of the older student, he said,

when he neglects rational reflection, ideas do not come quickly to him, and when he neglects memorisation, [these ideas] do not stick in his mind or remain long in his heart. (Günther 2006, p. 370: see also Al-Zarnuji 1947, [d1223 CE])

Moving to the present day, there can be no doubt about the cynical attitude towards over-reliance on memorisation as a general learning device in the writing of a contemporary Muslim commentator such as Ziauddin Sardar (Sardar 2016, pp. 147–48). The view of Abdullah Sahin, suggesting that memorisation and text-centred Islamic education might contribute to the formation of 'foreclosed' forms of religiosity and worldviews, is also increasingly well-known (Sahin 2013, 2018).

However, such critical stances—within the context of real-world living in general and 'living religion' in particular—emerge and develop within the complex life-story of a specific person, with all its certainties, changes, and inconsistencies. To illustrate this, we will take a contemporary British

Muslim, a *hafiz*, and an experienced teacher, as well as parent, as a case study. His statement on the value of Qur'anic memorisation in general and on *hifz* in particular demonstrates just how labyrinthine a coherent approach can become, how personal ideals can become toned down in practice, and how some traditions that have developed historically (concerning the role of *huffaz* during Ramadan *taraweeh* prayers, for instance) do not meet with the approval of all:

As a thoughtful Muslim, I have tried to be sympathetic to the idea of Qur'an memorisation and recitation without understanding and recognise that it is important for mainstream educationists not to be judgmental or dismissive of other cultural traditions but rather seek to build on and complement the learner's experience in their lesson planning and delivery. As a madrasah teacher myself, however, I am more critical of the prevailing methods within madrasah *hifz* classes and am advocating a change. Personally, I memorised the Qur'an in my late teens from an evening *hifz* madrasah but I did not pursue the same ambitions as my peers and stood apart.

Unlike my colleagues, I took the initiative to memorise word-for-word the meaning of the first part (*juz*) of the Qur'an, which made me understand at least a third of the Qur'an given its repetitive vocabulary. I was fascinated by the meaning of the Qur'an and read many translations and commentaries on it. Knowing the meaning of the Qur'an also enhanced my *hifz*, helping me to remember passages better (especially in the context of narratives), as I was able to recall difficult verses not by way of sound pattern, but through their meaning. I also refused to lead the special *Taraweeh* prayers, performed in congregation in the nights of Ramadan, whereby *huffaz* play a leading role in reciting the whole Qur'an from memory over the course of the month, thereby giving the worshippers an opportunity to listen to the whole Qur'an being recited during prayers. I questioned why *huffaz* should be given such prominence during Ramadan and virtually dismissed it during the rest of the year. I also did not see why *huffaz* should exhaust so much time and effort throughout the year essentially to facilitate the listening of the Qur'an during *Taraweeh* prayers. I saw this as a waste of opportunity and talent when much more could have been achieved following the completion of *hifz*.

The Qur'an plays a central role in my life, as is the case of most Muslims. Although I rebelled against the prevailing system of *hifz*, nevertheless, I saw significant value in it in enabling its bearers to build a positive relationship with the Holy Book and making a significant contribution to the wider society. I would like my own children to do *hifz* as the 'starting point' in their pursuit of knowledge and not the end journey, just like the earlier Muslims. Therefore, I have closely supervised the *hifz* of my own daughter and another girl in her early teens, who both have now completed memorisation. It is true that I did not get them to simultaneously learn the Qur'an's meaning in order that they might have exclusive focus on their *hifz* and avoid diversion. Nevertheless, the learning of the Qur'an's meaning was part of my agenda for follow-up studies to both complement and retain the *hifz* and to understand the Qur'an's message with a view to acting upon its teachings. With my own daughter, I have got her to start learning word-by-word meaning of the first part of the Qur'an, using the very same book that I used three decades ago! Complementary to this, she also now regularly attends monthly Qur'an seminars at a nearby university college, which are attended by Muslims and non-Muslims from diverse backgrounds with a view to understanding and reflecting on key passages and different themes in the Qur'an.

Like most Muslims, I would say that there is some value in the recitation and memorisation of the Qur'an without understanding and these are not completely meaningless exercises. Nevertheless, there is even greater value and potential for significantly enhancing one's life and making a greater impact on society if the Qur'an's meaning is also simultaneously understood (from learning the gist of what one is reciting, to learning the literal word-for-word meaning, to deeper reflections).

Many Muslims are too complacent in seeing *hifz* as the completion of a journey, when it should rather be the beginning of a greater journey—a means rather than an end in itself. In fact, it could be seen as a reprehensible 'innovation' (*bid'ah*) to just focus on *hifz* and not to care about its meaning. As

the medieval Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328 CE), in his short treatise on *An Introduction to the Principles of Tafseer*, says,

‘Everyone knows that a book is meant for understanding, not just for reading. This is all the more true of the Qur’an. No one ever reads a book on a subject: medicine, mathematics or any other, without trying to understand it. The same is true of the Qur’an, on which rests our well-being and happiness, our religion and life’. (1993, p. 13)

Based on Qur’an 16:44, Ibn Taymiyyah also says that it is obligatory to know that the Prophet explained to his companions the meaning of the Qur’an just as he taught its words. Ibn Taymiyyah goes on to say that the Prophet’s companions and their successors would learn ten verses at a time and would not proceed further until they had understood and acted upon these verses. An example is given of Prophet’s prominent companion Abdullah b. Umar, who took eight years to memorise the second chapter of the Qur’an (Ibn Taymiyyah 1993, pp. 12–13).

The Qur’an is primarily a book of guidance (2:185). If people are content with simply memorising the Qur’an, despite numerous personal and communal benefits deriving from this act alone, they are depriving themselves of the real reason for the revelation of the Qur’an. Believers agree that any connection with the Qur’an brings about blessings. The more one is engaged with the text (reciting, listening, memorising, understanding the meaning, reflecting on the verses and acting upon its teachings), the more blessed one will be and the greater the impact will be for the individual and for the society.

8. Conclusions

The starting point of this study was the general perception that many in the west today are sceptical of the value of memorisation in general as a mode of learning and that this might result in the implication that it is anachronistic (something belonging to a bygone age), its simplistic reduction to ‘rote learning’, or it being parodied as learning ‘parrot-fashion’. For two reasons, such negative attitudes have a particular consequence for Muslim communities. First, because traditional forms of Islamic education and learning—particularly at the elementary stages, but later on also—have historically relied heavily on processes associated with memorisation (and recitation). For many non-Muslim critics, the response to this situation is worsened when they learn that most Muslims who learn to read and recite the Qur’an in Arabic, the language of its original revelation to Muhammad, do not have a literal word-for-word understanding of the text. Second, negative feelings such as these can only compound a situation in the west, where, post-9/11, there has been a rise in Islamophobia, with some publicly declaring that there is a causal link between rote learning and terrorism/so-called Islamist extremism (see Hirschkind 2006, pp. 11–16). However, we must be wary of over-simplifying the situation for, both in south-east Asia and elsewhere, there is great variety in the style and provision of madrasa-type institutions. Furthermore, as we have seen, finding the right balance in the use of memorisation as a learning tool has been a matter of contention across Islamic history, and remains so today.

The complexity of this situation is such that there can be no single or simple response to negative attitudes related to the place of memorisation within Islam. A blanket defence of memorisation as a mode of learning would certainly neither be effective nor appropriate: most would agree that there are real issues to be addressed concerning aspects of its use in practice. Rather, as this study has suggested, any response has to be multi-layered so that, *taken as a whole*, a counter-argument or alternative mind-set can develop. In applying this principle, this article has suggested that there are (at least) five ‘layers’ of response: through showing that there is not only one legitimate form of literacy, but many, including forms—such as ‘liturgical literacy’—within which the literal, propositional understanding of a text is not paramount; through ‘unpacking’ concepts such as ‘meaning’ and ‘understanding’; through acknowledging the key role that memorisation has had within western culture and beyond, with activities remaining within contemporary society which still retain and valorise the memorisation of

text; through acknowledging that the memorisation of text can lead to a deeper, internal relationship with the text but, even when the word-for-word meaning of the text is not known, its recitation can create a powerful sound experience for both reciters and listeners; and, finally, through acknowledging that there is a growing body of evidence that the use of memorisation as a mnemonic and learning tool by Muslim children and young people in their supplementary education might have benefits for them in both mainstream schooling and in other aspects of their lives.

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