politics of this increasingly volatile part of the Muslim world. Given the poor state of our knowledge and dismal quality of analysis of crucial issues on Central and South Asian Muslim states’ relations, it is hoped that these and other important topics will be revisited with a fresh and intellectually more rigorous look, in a new forum, soon.

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Before dipping into the contents of this book, the reviewer is immediately swamped with favourable comments on the beautifully designed cover by a number of prominent scholars. These praiseworthy comments place one in a somewhat awkward position because the question which arises: “What more is there to say if respected scholars such as Karen Armstrong and Issa Boullata have fully endorsed the publication?” Well, the only option was to carefully peruse its contents and see whether their remarks are valid or have to be rejected or modified.

Michael Sells is well known among Arabists for his numerous literary studies with respect to the classical Arabic odes. The close relationship between the style of Arabic poetry and that found in the Qur’ān seemed to have prompted him to embark on this project. Sells divides his *Approaching the Quran: The Early Revelation* into five chapters. This includes a lengthy introduction (pp. 1–31), wherein he states that he “tried to bring across the same sense of that particular majesty and intimacy that makes the Quranic voice distinctive”; and he wanted “the reader who is unfamiliar with the details of Islamic history to approach the Quran in a way that allows an appreciation of its distinctive literary character”.

When one considers the first objective, it may be argued that it is no different from what the translators of the Qur’ān such as Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Arthur Arberry, Muhammad Asad, Aisha Bewley, Thomas Irving and many others had in mind. Most of the translators, with the exception of George Sale and N.J. Dawood, conveyed the Qur’ānic message as best as they could. This contribution of Sells is very much the same. However, he confined his selection to certain Makkah chapters only; each of these is accompanied by a description of each chapter’s unique literary features. As far as one can recall, none of the earlier mentioned translators have specifically focused their effort
on bringing out the literary features of the various chapters of the Qurʾān. In that respect, Sells’ contribution stands out as unique.

In the opening paragraphs of the ‘introduction’, Sells takes the reader on a trip to Cairo where he briefly relates how Muslims and non-Muslims are attracted to the beautiful recitation of the Qurʾān. In his description he urges the reader to appreciate the Qurʾān’s distinct literary character through a selection of translated texts. Most of these are of the short rhythmic type that are easily memorised, recited, and occasionally quoted when the need arises. He summarises three inter-related issues in his ‘introduction’. The first takes the reader on a brief historical excursion of the poet’s position during the seventh century Arabia, the Prophet’s life story, and the revelation of the Qurʾān. The second shares with the reader the “Quran as recitation”. The third and the last journeys through the early Makkan chapters of the Qurʾān.

The translator consciously chose the word ‘approaching’ as a part of the text’s title because he expects the reader to enter the Qurʾān with a particular frame of mind. But before doing that, he has appropriately inserted an annotated glossary of crucial concepts (pp. 35–40), which were preceded by an acknowledgment page, and notes on the transliteration method. The list of useful concepts has been explained to assist the reader to have a better insight and comprehension of the chapter and its specific verses. For example, one of the terms he lists is taqwā, a term which he translates as ‘mindfulness’. He briefly clarifies the term, cautions the reader against the notion that it means ‘fear of the lord’, and explains why this is the case. In fact, this method of introducing the Qurʾān helps many a reader to avoid misunderstanding the words used in God’s last Revelation and also puts one in a position of appreciating its contents.

For this publication, Sells selects the first chapter, the fifty third chapter (verses 1–18), and chapters 81 through 114; all of which are early Makkan chapters. He has rendered each of these chapters in readable, comprehensible, contemporary English. Here and there he tries to retain a word or two in the Arabic; he does this to demonstrate that it is difficult, at times, to render the word, which has multilayers of meanings, into English. In fact, for chapter 112, which he titled ‘sincerity/unity’, he offers three different versions (p. 136). This is because it contains an extremely rich word, al-Šamad, which is extremely difficult to translate. He thus translates the verse “Allah al-Šamad” as “God forever” (version 1), “God the refuge” (version 2), and “God the rock” (version 3). In his carefully and clearly worded commentary, which appears on the opposite side (of each) of the translated chapter(s), Sells provides adequate reasons for these three versions.

The translator, being unsatisfied with the reader remaining absorbed in the English translations, takes the reader into a new chapter, appropriately
titled “Hearing the Quran” (pp. 145–180). In it he included “the Call to Prayer” — as rendered by the Sunnī and Shi‘ī schools respectively — and six Qu’ānic chapters (1, 82, 91, 97, 99 and 101). After repeating the translation of each of these chapters separately, he gives a transliteration of each of the verses in these chapters; and below each word in the verses he inserts the literal meaning. Thereafter he acquaints the reader with a list of ‘sound cues’, which appear in the respective chapters, and elaborates upon their importance and meaning. During this tasteful journey, the reader listens attentively to the attached 33 track compact diskette on which the earlier mentioned chapters are recorded. Male and female reciters melodiously recite the different chapters with their enchanting voices. This specific section shows that Sells has gone a long way to get the reader to listen attentively to the recitation of these chapters and fully appreciate the sounds and rhythmical recitation.

In “Sound, Spirit, and Gender in the Quran” (pp. 183–207), which is the final section of the book, Sells not only continues with his fascinating discussion of the ‘sound’ of the Qur’an, but also brings into it the ‘spirit’ captured in the sacred text. Additionally, he examines and elaborates on the issue of gender in the Qur’an. He neatly closes his book with a “Selected (list of) Further Resources” (pp. 208–217) and “Biographies of (nine) Quranic reciters” (pp. 218–219) whose voices are heard on the CD.

Indeed there is not much to find fault with in this illustrated book. The only minor criticism this reviewer has is that Sells does not opt for the capital letters when he refers to God. For example, he renders the words ‘lord’, ‘he’ and ‘him’ in small letters; the impression, which the (Muslim) reader gets, is that God is no different from any of His creatures. It is, however, assumed that Sells is only conforming to contemporary English usage and thus prefers not to capitalize the nouns, pronouns, and adjectives.

Not having substantial criticisms and after carefully scrutinising the work, this reviewer wishes to return to the blurbs on the dusk jacket of the book. He tends to agree with Ebrahim Moosa who has stated that “It is an indispensable aid for all students or religion and Islam...”, and accepts Boullata’s remarks that the book has succeeded in providing “...an analytical study of the auditory and literary aspects of selected Surahs...” And he finally fully supports Armstrong’s view that “Michael Sells has performed an invaluable service in making the beauty, spiritual energy, and compelling power of the Quran accessible to a Western audience...”

Muhammad Haron

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