
Of late, a number of books has appeared on the “basic themes” of the Qur’an, indicating the trend to study the Qur’anic teachings around a variety of subject clusters. This is understandable and helpful especially in view of the known fact that the surahs of the Qur’an do not aim at a systematic treatment of specific subjects. The Islamic Foundation itself published *The Basic Teachings of the Qur’an* by T.B. Irving, Khurshid Ahmad and M. Manazir Ahsan in 1979. Fazlur Rahman’s important work, *The Major Themes of the Qur’an*, appeared in 1980 and led to considerable discussion and debate. Jacques Jomier also wrote his *Grands thèmes du Koran* in 1978. Its translation titled *The Great Themes of the Qur’an* was published by SCM Press London in 1997. Another book of the same genre is Faruq Sharif, *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur’an* (London: Ithaca Press, 1985). All this is in addition to the relatively recent work of Muhammad al-Ghazâlî, which attempts a thematic exegesis of the Qur’an, *A Thematic Commentary on the Qur’an* (Herndon, VA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1421/2000).

The book under review has recently appeared from the pen of a well-known Indian Muslim scholar, Abdur Raheem Kidwai. Kidwai has attempted to present the Qur’an’s “essential teachings” under the following twenty heads: (1) Almighty Allah; (2) Allah’s Messengers; (3) The Prophet Muḥammad; (4) Life and Afterlife; (5) The Qur’an; (6) Al-Ghayb (the unseen); (7) Creation; (8) Mankind; (9) Prayer (ṣalāḥ); (10) Fasting; (11) Charity (ṣadaqah and zakâh); (12) Pilgrimage (Hajj); (13) Believers; (14) The Straight Way; (15) Man’s Obligations Towards the Fellow Human Beings; (16) Treating Parents; (17) Treating Children; (18) Treating Husbands/Wives Well; (19) Good Social Behaviour; and (20) Making Supplications to Allah.

There is, of course, nothing special about the figure twenty; the number of chapters could have been more or less. But the delineation of the Qur’anic themes under these heads seems reasonable and efficacious in so far as the most important subjects which the Qur’an addresses over and again are, by far and large, well covered. On an average about ten pages are given to each chapter. The size of the chapters as well as the author’s simple, jargon-free, albeit elegant and free-flowing style makes each chapter and the book as a whole quite engaging and easy to read.

Each chapter attempts to highlight the Qur’anic teachings on a specific subject by intelligently bringing together the verses pertinent to it and trying
to look at them integrally. In attempting to do so the author occasionally, but not too frequently, has recourse to explanatory notes on the relevant Qur’anic verses by a few of the twentieth century’s famous commentators of the Qur’ān available in English, especially ‘Abdul Mājid Daryābādī and Sayyid Abul A’lā Mawdūdī. Occasionally the author also draws on traditions from the Prophet (peace be on him) to elaborate the teachings of the Qur’ān.

Each chapter opens with a passage or more from the Qur’ān of pivotal relevance to the subject. The choice of the opening Qur’ānic passage(s) evinces both aptness and good taste. Each chapter ends with the author’s suggestions about the “Related Qur’ānic Passages for Self-study.” This last feature heightens the usefulness of the chapters apart from making the reader an active participant in the effort to better comprehend the message of the Qur’ān. There are also some useful references at the end of several chapters. They, however, are relatively limited.

The book is addressed to people of all intellectual levels and not just to the intellectual elite. Hence the simplicity of style that characterizes the book is its forte, and does not detract from the author’s sharpness of perception and his ability to highlight the salient characteristics of the Qur’ānic worldview. Also, the author abstains from occupying himself with details and subtleties and keeps his attention single-mindedly focused on presenting the basics of the Qur’ānic message. All this has made the book a very useful introduction to the Qur’ān, and indeed to Islam.

It might be instructive for illustrative purposes to take up the very first chapter “Almighty Allah” and cast a cursory glance at it. The author chooses Sūrah 112 to introduce the Qur’ānic view of Godhead for it “offers the quintessence of His unique being ... [and] focuses exclusively on Him” (p. 1). “His first and foremost attribute is that He is the only true God ... [which] does away with all false notions of polytheism. Equally significant is His uniqueness. There is nothing like Him .... in His nature, person and attributes, no one is equal to Him” (p. 1).

Another noteworthy fact about Allah, “His all-embracing power and authority,” (p. 2) is very well reflected in Qur’ān 2: 255 known as Ayat al-Kursī which shows the utter dependence of everything on the “Ever-Living, Self-Subsisting” (p. 2) and eternal “God whose Throne extends over the heavens and the earth” (p. 2).

The most prominent among God’s numerous attributes include, besides His absolute power and authority, “His all-embracing knowledge, and total control over life and death” (p. 3).

The author highlights 13 of the Beautiful Names of God (see p. 4) in order to shed light on His attributes and help man both to understand Him
and relate to Him. The Qur’an, according to the author, “also brings home the following truths about Him” (p. 4):

Allah knows all that is evident as well as hidden. Nothing escapes His notice (p. 4).

He is man’s only patron, protector and helper. Therefore, man should not turn to anyone else for help and support (p. 4).

The entire universe is created, governed and regulated by Him... [It is erroneous to think] that after having created the universe, He no longer has any role in it... His might and wisdom account for the perfect working of the interrelated yet complex and awe-inspiring natural phenomenon (pp. 4–5).

He alone is the Creator of all that exists. This underscores both His Oneness and creative power (p. 5).

He exercises absolute authority over all that exists. It is He Who causes life and death (p. 5).

As He alone enjoys all authority, it is He Who passes judgement as He wills ... On the Day of Reckoning He alone will reward or punish everyone. Notwithstanding His absolute power and authority... His judgement is characterized by fairness and leniency (pp. 5–6).

Allah’s providing sustenance to every living being stands out as irrefutable proof of His lordship and power. Countless creatures, since the beginning of creation and up to the Last of Day, have been, are, and will be ... fed by Him out of His inexhaustible resources created by Him.... Even His [God’s] worst enemies are provided with all they need in life (p. 6).

The entire universe represents a testimony to Allah’s... creative power. Natural phenomena, in particular, are evidence of His creativity and might (p. 6).

Allah, apart from being the sole Creator, is man’s guide and patron as well... He has made elaborate arrangements for man’s guidance. He has sent down a large number of messengers.... [to convey] the divine message to man.... and revealed scriptures embodying His extensive guidance (p. 8).

[God’s]... mercy embraces, all that exists.... [Also,] since He is ... Merciful He overlooks man’s sins and keeps on granting ... respite.... His mercy also accounts for all joys and happiness.... Out of ... kindness He will pardon many culprits [on the Day of Judgement] and bless the pious ones, condoning their occasional
lapses, with the interminable joys of Paradise. Only a very small part of His mercy is at work in the bond of love and affection between parents and children, spouses and family members and friends (p. 8).

As for man’s relationship with Allah, the following features are underscored: (i) Overflowing love and respect for Him in view of His numerous favours and His magnificence…. Man should be thankful to Him for His countless bounties (p. 9). (ii) Obedience to Allah should be the cornerstone of man’s way of life (p. 10).

While appreciating the useful points that have been brought together in about 10 or 11 pages for a better understanding of the Almighty, one is reminded of the fact that every human endeavour to fully comprehend the Infinite Lord is bound, by the very nature of things, to be inadequate. This has been most forcefully expressed in the Qur’anic as follows:

Say: “If the sea were to become ink to record the words of my Lord, indeed the sea would be all used up before the words of my Lord are exhausted, and it would be the same even if We were to bring an equal amount of ink” (18: 109).

Before concluding, one critical observation seems pertinent. The author tends to engage in comparing Islamic teachings with those of other religions, especially Christianity. Wherever such comparisons are essential in order to highlight something distinctive about Islam’s teaching they are perfectly legitimate. However, while perusing the comparisons made by the author one gets the impression that they represent attempts to score easy points for Islam against Christianity. I would like to illustrate this by pointing out the recurrent references to Christianity’s low esteem for womenfolk (see pp. 66f., and 156f.), or Christian views on gender relations (pp. 85f.), or the author’s comments on Christianity in the course of highlighting the Islamic position on sex (see p. 116), or on marriage (see pp. 160f.), or on the relationship between the spouses (see pp. 163f.). Can the significance of the Qur’anic teachings on these issues be fully appreciated only when a contrast is drawn with Christianity wherein Christianity is consistently portrayed in negative terms? In my own view, on such occasions the requirements of fairness ought to be strictly observed for one is apt to compare one’s ideals with the realities of others and in so doing one might be inclined to put one’s hands on only the most sordid of those realities. There is a long tradition of acrimonious polemics that the proponents of various religious faiths have inherited from the past. Is it not time to eschew much of that? It would be worthwhile for Muslims to take the lead in this regard for a variety of reasons, not the least in view of the fact that presenting Islamic teachings in a polemical manner is
likely to arouse chauvinistic reaction among the addressees. After all, is it not
the Qur’ān that laid down the following as a basic requirement of da’wah
“And call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and
reason with them in the best possible manner” (Qur’ān 16: 125).

This critical observation does not detract the least from the fact that the
book is indeed a valuable addition to the available literature on the Qur’ān in
English.

The production of the book hardly leaves anything to be desired. It bears
the mark of good taste that has become an established feature of the Islamic
Foundation’s publications. The book not only provides one’s mind with food
for thought but is also a treat for the eyes.

Zafar Ishaq Ansari

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