
Hamid Algar, born in England in 1940, received his formal training in Islamic studies at Cambridge University, where he received his Ph.D. in 1965. Since then he has been teaching a wide range of courses in Islamics including *Tafsir*, Sufism, Shi’ism, Islamic history, let alone courses in Arabic, Persian and Turkish literature. He has richly contributed to Islamic literature by authoring a number of new titles and translating important works, both contemporary and classical, on a large variety of subjects. Since 1977 he has been publishing a series of lectures. *Surat Al-Fatiha: Foundation of the Qur’an* is one of them. In it he says: “I do not put myself forth as an independent commentator upon the Qur’an, but merely as a transmitter of certain understandings which *insba’ allah* will be helpful to us when we approach this very fundamental text of Islam” (pp. 4–5).

In line with most of the exegetes of the past and the present, Algar contends that: “...the *Fatiha* can be regarded as a concise summary of the principal themes of the Qur’an” (p. 1). He elaborates this contention while explaining the title:

> We should not think that the title *Surat al-Fatiha* is simply a reflection of the fact that the *Sura* comes at the beginning of the Qur’an. Indeed it is the opening of the book, but not only in the sense of coming at the beginning but also in the sense of being a key, an unlocking. *Fatiha* in the Arabic language is an active participle. We can therefore say that by means of the *Fatiha*, the opening, that which is opened to us, is an understanding of the principal themes of the Qur’an itself; it provides us with a certain preview of the contents of the book as a whole (p. 5).

Many of the commentators have sought, in fact, to draw out the implications of *al-Fatihab* in great details, even to the extent that Maulānā Abū ‘l-Kalām Āzād (d. 1378/1958) devoted a complete volume to it.¹ Algar, however, has beautifully summarized all the principal themes of the Qur’an contained in *al-Fatihab*, while justifying some of its designations, as follows:

> First comes *taubid*, the unity of Allah (swt), expressed through the uttering of praise to Him and the mention of certain of His key attributes. Then follows

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nubuwwa, prophethood, in the sense that we ask Allah (swt) for His guidance, guidance which comes to us by means of the revelation entrusted to His prophets. *Surat al-Fatiha* also contains the theme of *ma’ad*, the return to Allah (swt), and the hereafter, for the straight path which we beseech Allah to guide us upon, is the path which will lead to His satisfaction and to reward in the hereafter. These three key themes of the Qur’anic revelation are thus contained explicitly and implicitly in *Surat al-Fatiha*, so the designations al-Asas, al-Kanz, al-Wafiya, al-Kafiya are all clearly appropriate (pp. 11–12).

Then, at a deeper level, *Surat al-Fatiha* ... opens up to us ... an understanding of our own beings, of the source from which we have come and of the destination towards which we are traveling. So it unlocks not only the book itself, the Qur’an, but an understanding of our position as the creatures of Allah, as His servants, as beings destined to travel towards Him by following the path He has revealed to us (pp. 5–6).

The author states that: “There are of course a whole host of other titles by which the *Fatiha* has been known. Suyuti in his great work on the sciences of the Qur’an, *al-Itqan*, has enumerated no fewer than twenty five such titles” (p. 6). Then he makes a serious attempt to understand *al-Fatiha* as umm al-kitāb, the mother of the book, stating:

But if we understand that the Qur’an itself originates outside of time and that the chronological order of revelation does not necessarily represent the causative relationship of various parts of the Qur’an to each other, then we can indeed understand that the Fatihah is umm al-kitab, the mother of the book, for whatever is contained within the womb of al-Fatiha is ultimately born, brought forth in visible and explicit form, elsewhere in the Qur’an. Sometimes it is asserted that the expression umm al-kitab, when it occurs within the Qur’an itself (13: 39), refers not to the Fatihah but rather to the *Laub al-Mahfuz*, the Preserved Tablet upon which the archetype of the Qur’an and of all revelation is inscribed, preserved in the Divine Presence near to the divine throne (see Qur’an, 85: 22). For this reason some authorities reject the designation of the Fatihah as umm al-kitab. However, it is possible that umm al-kitab might refer both to the Fatihah and to the divine archetype of all revelation.

Here two observations are in order: (1) The expression umm al-kitāb, occurs in the Qur’an only thrice. The first occurrence refers to āyāt muhkamāt as being the umm al-kitāb, meaning the foundation of the book (see Qur’an, 3: 7) whereas the second and third occurrences refer to *Laub Mahfūz*, the Preserved Tablet (see Qur’an, 13: 39 and 43: 4). None of these, however, refers to *Sūrah al-Fatiha*. The third occurrence, however, specifically mentions that the Qur’an is inscribed in the umm al-kitāb, in the Divine Presence, which is a reference to its archetype preserved in the *Laub al-Mahfūz*, the Preserved
Tablet, as specified in Qur’an 85: 22, “Nay It is the exalted Qur’an preserved in the Lawh al-Mahfūz, the Preserved Tablet.” (2) The title umm al-kitāb is not given to Sūrah al-Fātīhah in the Qur’an itself; rather, it is assigned to it in the sunnah. The same is true for the title umm al-Qur’an.2

The author agrees with and supports the view that basmalah is both a part and an āyah of Sūrah al-Fātīhah. He states: “...our concern here is more with the general function of bismillahir rahmanir rahim and with its specific function in Surat al-Fatiha where uniquely it counts as an aya. This means that it is not simply a preface or an introduction to the Sura but an integral part of the Sura itself” (p. 13). This is the view of some of the Shāfi‘iyyah and the famous reciter Hamzah (d. 156/776) and it is also ascribed to Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 241/855). However, Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687), Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797), and Makkans like Ibn Kathīr (d. 120/737), Kufans like ‘Asim (d. 127/745), al-Kasa‘ī (d. 189/805) and others except Hamzah, and most of the Shāfi‘iyyah and Imāmiyyah consider basmalah to be a part and an āyah of all suwar except Sūrah al-Barā‘ab. Medinese scholars like Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), and Syrian scholars like al-Awzā‘ī (d. 157/774), the scholars of Baṣrah like Abū ‘Amr (d. 154/771) and Ya‘qūb (d. 205/821) and the Ḥanafī scholars consider basmalah to be an independent āyah which was revealed to mark the beginning of the suwar and a demarcation between them.3

The author painstakingly argues that the name Allah, because of its intrinsic relationship with the Divine Essence, is not translatable. He states:

Now when one comes to the name Allah clearly the relationship between name and named cannot be a comparable one; it cannot rest upon either accident or convention. There must be an intrinsic relationship between the named, namely Allah, and the name by means of which He designates Himself; He is the namer and named. Very frequently Muslims regard it as permissible, either when talking among themselves or when addressing non-Muslims, to “translate” the name Allah into God or what they imagine to be the equivalent in some other language. In point of fact, although there may be a pragmatic reason for doing that when talking to non-Muslims, the name Allah because of its intrinsic relationship with the Divine Essence is not translatable. This relationship forbids us from regarding God, Khuda, Dieu, Gott, Bog, Tanrı, Tuhan or whatever other word we may use as equivalent to the name Allah. This is an important matter (p. 18).

2 Imam al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd, Ahmad b. Ḥanbal, al-Dārāmī, and al-Dārquṭnī have reported and authenticated it from Prophet (peace be on him) on the authority of Abi Hurayrah. See for example, Abū ‘Īsā Muhammad ibn ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī, al-Sunan al-Tirmidhī, Kitāb Tafsir al-Qur’ān, Bāb wa min surat al-hijr.

Algar goes on to argue the point from another angle:

The name Allah is sometimes referred to as *ism al-dhat*, as the name of the Essence... It is also designated as *al-ism al-jami‘* the comprehensive name. It is the name that gathers together in itself all the other names and attributes of Allah (swt). This goes back to the interrelation of the Essence with the Attributes... They all are contained within, drawn together into, or proceed from, the Essence (p. 21).

He then adds yet another angle to his arguments:

However, according to another view, which has not much to be said in its favor, the name Allah does not have any derivation. In just the same way that the Divine Essence is itself the originator of all things and not subject to origination, because of the intrinsic relationship between the name and the Essence it names, the name also must be non-originated; that is to say, it has no etymological relationship with anything outside of itself. The Divine Essence originates, it is not itself originated; and the name that designates the Essence must likewise be non-originated, cannot be regarded as, for example a coalescence of *alif*, *lam* and *ilah* or any other of the theories that have been put forward...This is to emphasize that there is an intrinsic relationship between the name Allah and the Essence, which prevents us from regarding it either as the derivative of some other word or as being capable of translation into another language. To approach the matter from the point of view of a speaker of English, it is not simply that *Allah* is the Arabic word of God, or that God is the word with which we may adequately translate Allah into English (pp. 19–20).

The maturity of Algar’s scholarship also manifests itself when he takes up the lexical aspect of the words of the Qur’an and brings forth the intricate rationale of some subtle meanings. For example, in explaining the divine names *al-Rahmān* and *al-Rahim* he states:

Immediately after the name of the Essence, Allah, here in the *basmalah* and on numerous other occasions in the Qur’an, these two cognate names appear together... They both derive from *rabma*, “mercy,” and that they therefore represent different aspects or different expressions of Divine Mercy... According to the majority of the exegetes *rabman* has the sense of Allah who exercises His mercy and His compassion towards the entirety of His creation by providing that creation with that which it needs for its material and non-material existence. In other words, the manifestation of *rabman* reaches every particle of created being, all orders of being; it reaches the mineral realm, the vegetable realm, the animal realm and the human realm. And within the human realm it makes no distinction between the believer and the non-believer, between the virtuous and the sinner; everyone and all things benefit from the attribute of *rabman*... *Rahim*
by contrast is more discriminating in its manifestation. It is that dimension of the Divine Mercy which consists in conveying to men the means of their guidance, the means of their salvation, of proceeding to the desired destination in hereafter. This attribute \textit{rahim} does not extend itself to the non-human dimensions of creation, and among humans it is only the believer who benefits from its manifestation. It is therefore said that the attributed \textit{rahman} relates primarily to this world and the attribute \textit{rahim} to the hereafter (pp. 22–24).

Another example of his refined treatment of lexical questions is his commentary on the word \textit{al-hamd}. He states:

... it should be noted that \textit{hamd} is used only for the praise of Allah (swt) so that even on an elementary lexical leve, \textit{al-hamdulillah} is patently true; \textit{hamd} goes only to Allah (swt)... In Arabic the letters are reversed when it comes to praising other than Allah. Then we use \textit{madh} (mim, dal, ha) instead of \textit{hamd} (ba, mim, dal). So lexically \textit{hamd} belongs exclusively to Allah... Not only the recipient of \textit{hamd} differs from the recipient of \textit{madh}; the content of the praise in question also differs. \textit{Hamd} means a recognition that all perfections, all virtues, reside in Allah (swt) and are His in exclusivity (pp. 25–26).

Yet another telling example manifests from his treatment of the word \textit{al-‘alamin}. He states:

\textbf{Al-‘alamin: “the worlds” or “the universes”} ... “World” here means an order of being, an aspect or dimension of Allah’s creation. Now the word ‘alam is related to ‘ilm meaning knowledge, and to ‘alama, meaning sign or indication, Hence the ‘alam is so called, in the view of many commentators, because it is a sign, an indication, a means of knowledge. By looking at each of the ‘alamin, each of the worlds or orders of Allah’s creation, or at lest those that may come within our cognition, we gain knowledge of their Creator (p. 29).

The exegetical skill of Algar reaches its climax while elucidating the linkage (\textit{rabīt}) within an \textit{āyab} and in between the \textit{āyāt}. He explains that: “In virtually every English translation of the Qur’ān one sees “bi” translated as “in,” so that the formula as a whole is translated as “In the name of Allah, the Compassionate the Merciful” (p. 14). He proceeds: “\textit{Al-rabman al-rahim}. Immediately after the name of the Essence, Allah, here in the \textit{basmalah} and on numerous other occasions in the Qur’ān, these two cognate names appear together” (p. 22). He then raises the preliminary question: “...why after the name of the Essence two names are mentioned both of which relate to mercy” (p. 22), and then answers as follows: “...no doubt that although all the divine names relate equally to the Divine Essence and are in a sense conterminous with that Essence, still there is a certain primacy among them of these two
attributes of mercy. There is indeed an aya (17: 110) which says: ‘we may call upon Allah or we may call upon al-Rahman’” (pp. 22–23). He then hurries to clarify: “This does not mean that al-Rahman is the name of the Essence but that it comes closer than any other name to being a name of the Essence” (p. 23). He concludes thus: “It is therefore fitting that the name of the Essence should be immediately followed here by the name al-Rahman. Rahma, mercy in a very broad and comprehensive sense, thus represents the primary mode in which Allah manifests Himself, by means both of revelation and of creation” (p. 23). He later adds: “Al-hamdu lillah: praise of Allah takes place by means of the name of Allah, not simply in the name of Allah but by means of the very name of Allah. The utterance of the name of Allah, when combined with some comprehension of the meaning of this name, its uniqueness and indissoluble link with the Essence, is in itself a form of praise” (p. 25)... “Next we come to rabb’l-‘alamin. First, there is a mention of the Essence, in exclusivity, the name of the Essence, Allah, without reference to any other attribute. Now we come to an attribute, rabb’l-‘alamin, one indicating the manifestation of the Essence by means of the revelation which is inaugurated here through the Surat al-Fatiha as well by means of creation. More concretely, the attribute rabb’l-‘alamin suggests the purpose underlying both modes of manifestation... For rabb indeed means one who has authority, ... but the authority in question is one exercised not for the sake of domination but for the purpose of nurturing, developing, moving forward in the direction of a set goal. Allah is rabb in that He nurtures the creation that He has brought into being and that stands ineluctably under His authority” (p. 28). “Now the Sura proceeds, “al-hamdu lillahi rabbi’l-‘alamin arrahmanir rahim,” with the two attributes rahman and rahim occurring together once more. Why are they repeated at this point? Because, perhaps, the attribute rahman connects with the attribute rabb’l-‘alamin which has just been mentioned. Allah is rahman precisely through His exercise of rububiyya, through His exercise of nurturing authority over the entirety of His creation...The attributes rabb’l-‘alamin and rahman are not synonymous, but there is a close semantic connection or even an overlap. Likewise rahim anticipates the next attribute that is mentioned, maliki yaumi’ d-din ‘the Possessor or the Lord of the Day of Judgment.’ Rabim... is an attribute relating to Allah’s Mercy manifested in His Guidance through the sending of the prophets and of revelation the active acceptance of which will lead man to salvation in the hereafter. It is therefore appropriate that rahim should come second in this aya and immediately before the mention of the name maliki yaumi’ l-din. This aya thus links the verse preceding it with the one following it” (pp. 31–32)... “Maliki yaumi’ d-din: ‘The Lord, the King, the Master of the Day of
Judgment.’ Obviously enough, Allah is at all times *malik*, not simply on that particular day; there is no temporal limitation on any divine attribute...He is at all times Sovereign but His possession of that attribute will become immediately perceptible, in fact undeniably so, on the Day of Judgment. The Day of Judgment is designated here as *yaumi’ d-din* because *din* has as its ultimate outcome man’s fate in the hereafter which will become apparent to him on the Day of Resurrection. *Din* of course does not signify a set of inherited beliefs or communal loyalties, but a mode of orienting one’s life in accordance with (or, on the contrary, in defiance or ignorance of) divine precepts" (pp. 32–33). “Now... the Sura advances in a different direction in that Allah (swt) is addressed in the second person: ‘You alone do we worship and from You alone do we seek help’” (p. 33). “Further, *iyyaka na’budu wa iyyaka nasta’in* establishes a direct connection between *isti’ana*, between the seeking of Allah’s help, and *’ibada*, engaging in His worship. The relationship between these two activities can be understood in two ways. First, the *aya* informs us that *’ibada* precede *isti’ana*. We cannot legitimately or reasonably seek the help of Allah unless we first engage in the worship of Him... The second linkage between these activities or concepts is that in order to engage successfully in *’ibada*, whether in the limited or broad sense, we are dependent on the help of Allah (swt)” (pp. 36–37). “We next proceed with our petition to Allah by saying *ihdina ’s-sirat al-mustaqim*, ‘Guide us upon the straight path’. The straight path, ... may be regarded as synonymous with Islam, the Shri’a, or the Qur’an itself, for all of these are ultimately interchangeable” (p. 38). “The straight path is defined further in the following *ayas*, first positively, as ‘the path of those whom You have shown favor,’ and then negatively as not [of] those who have incurred anger and those who are straying” (p. 39). “It is worth noting that in the phrase... Allah associates Himself directly with *in’am*, the bestowal of favor; He is the subject of the second person verb *an’amta*. By contrast, in the negative description of the straight path, He does not associate Himself verbally with either anger or misguidance” (p. 40).

It would seem pertinent to point out a theoretical dichotomy that is reflected in Algar’s treatment of the “...very concept of the interpretation of the Qur’an, its principles and methods, as well as the limitations that are inherent in any attempt at the understanding and the elucidation of the Qur’an” (p. 1). As far as defining *Tafsir*, he states that it “may be defined as the attempt to discover the divine purpose or meaning inherent in the words of the Qur’an” (p. 2). Then without attempting to elucidate the principles and methods of the interpretation of the Qur’an, he brings forth its foremost limitation in the following words: “...the divine intent, the divine meaning of the Qur’an, is not only infinite but also absolute, while our understanding of
the divine word is necessarily partial, finite and, by that very same token, fallible” (p. 3). He then emphasizes this position making an exception: “Indeed, other than the Qur’an itself the only infallible material that we have for the understanding of the Qur’an are the sayings of the Prophet (saw) concerning the Qur’an. Everything that we cite for the understanding of the Qur’an other than the Qur’an itself and the Sunna of the Prophet (saw), the Hadith that he uttered concerning the meanings of the Qur’an — everything else necessarily constitutes an act of interpretation. An act of interpretation is partial, finite and limited” (p. 3). To emphasize the same he adds: “…it cannot be said of any understanding of the Qur’an except [the] one that relies upon the Qur’an itself or upon a relevant Hadith of the Prophet that it is complete, comprehensive and authoritative” (p. 4), and concludes: “Thus there is generally a certain tentativeness to our understanding of the Qur’an” (p. 4). He takes another position regarding the limitations of any attempt at the understanding of the Qur’an, stating: “…although the Qur’an is indeed the word of Allah (swt), it is a word that is infused into the necessarily limited form of a human language. There is therefore a certain inescapable disparity between the infinitude of divine speech and meaning and the inevitably constricted form of the verbal revelation into which it is infused. This is an important fact to remember: the divine meaning and truths are infinite and their expression in the revealed form of the Qur’an (or, for that matter, in the preceding scriptures in so far as they are still extant) is necessarily limited” (p. 2).

Both these positions may be taken as true and acceptable in case of āyāt mutashābihāt, especially those with respect to the unseen world (‘ālam al-ghayb), but as far as the āyāt mubkāmat are concerned and especially those regarding the ‘aqā’id and ahkām, it is extremely difficult to accept the positions taken by the author. For example sūrah Ikhlāṣ āyah one states: Qul biwa Allāhu ‘Ād (Say Allah is alone), sūrah al-Shūrā āyah nine states: laṣa kāmi‘ihlihi shay’... (Nothing is similar of Him ...), sūrah al-Baqarah āyah 21 states: Yā ayyuha ‘l-nūs u‘budū rabbakum alladhī khalaqakum wa ’l dibna min qablikum la‘ālikum tatqīn (O mankind! Perform the ‘ibādah of your rabb alone, Who has created you and the ones before you, so that you may be saved), sūrah al-Baqarah āyah 43 and many other āyāt state: Wa aqīmū ‘l-ṣalāh wa ātī ‘l-zakāh.... (And establish the ṣalāh and pay the zakāh.....), is there any fallibility or tentativeness in Allah’s being alone, or in there being none similar to Him, or in Him being the creator of all mankind the present generation as well as the previous ones, or in the injunction that the entire mankind is obliged to perform the ‘ibādah of Allah alone, or in the injunction that they are obliged to establish the ṣalāh and pay the zakāh? Can we entertain in any of
these َّيَات any “disparity between the infinitude of divine speech and meaning and the inevitably constricted form of the verbal revelation into which it is infused?” Infect accepting the two positions to be true in all cases leaves any attempt of understanding the Qur’ān invalid and consequently its revelation in vain.

In an attempt to escape this inevitable difficulty the author tries to rescue himself by stating: “It should not be taken as discouragement; it should not be taken in any way as an invalidation of the attempt to understand Qur’ān” (p. 3). Acknowledging that: “If Allah revealed the Qur’ān it was indeed to convey certain comprehensible meanings;” but then the philosophical puzzle of absolute versus limited takes over and in the same sentence he tries to water down what he had just acknowledged stating that: “it was for the purpose of arousing in men the aspiration to understand the divine intent. It is therefore incumbent upon us to strive to do so, even though the strivings we undertake are necessarily fallible, necessarily partial,...” (pp. 3–4). Whereas Qur’ān claims for itself that it is the guidance for entire mankind (hudā َّيَّ َّنَّā), containing clear proofs of guidance (wa َّيَّ ِمْبَى َّبَى َّبَى), and the criterion (wa َّيَّ َّفْرَقَى)4 between right and wrong, the two logical prerequisites if Qur’ān is to serve as the guidance for entire mankind.

The disparity surrounding the author on this issue compels him to contradict his two positions once again and to contend:

This is not to say that we cannot be certain concerning many meanings that we extract from the Qur’ān by means of interpretation, nor does it mean that every interpretation put forward is equal in value. There are certain necessary preliminaries to an understanding of the Qur’ān which once met will entitle a given interpretation to more consideration than others: command of the Arabic language, awareness of the particular usage of the Qur’ān knowledge of the occasions for revelation, and so on (p. 4).

At yet another place he supports the same contention putting it in different words:

And in fact if we believe, as we do believe, that the Qur’ān is the word of Allah, then there is significance in every aspect of it, not simply in meanings that we extract from the words, but in each word and each letter. There is nothing accidental about any part of the Qur’ān (pp. 15–16).

4 All of these three characteristics are mentioned in Qur’ān 2: 185. There are tens of other َّيَات that mention the Qur’ān as a clear book (kitāb َّبَى َّبَى), revealed in clear Arabic language (ب َّبَى َّبَى َّبَى َّبَى), and that it provides pure knowledge (أَّيَلْبَى).
The same disparity manifests itself between his position that: “it cannot be said of any understanding of the Qur’an except [the] one that relies upon the Qur’an itself or upon a relevant Hadith of the Prophet that it is complete, comprehensive and authoritative” (p. 4), and between his statement:

My attempt here to explain some of the meanings of al-Fatiha should not be taken as a claim to authoritative learning. What I present is simply a summary and synthesis of certain authoritative understandings of the Qur’an that I have derived from my own readings and contacts over the years from a number of sources which it is not necessary to list here (pp. 4–5).

This disparity creeps in here and there in his interpretations, for example, in determining the ones who have incurred anger, and those who are straying, he says: “...Many commentators suggest relatively restricted interpretations. ‘Those who have incurred anger’ are said to be the Jews and ‘those who are straying’ are said to be the Christians” (p. 41). At first, he reluctantly supports this idea: “These interpretations can indeed be justified by cross-reference to ayas. 2: 61 establishes a connection between misdeeds of the Jews and the anger” (p. 41). Later, however, he negates it by stating: “However, there is another aya in which vulnerability to anger from Allah is more broadly distributed:... (16: 106)” (p. 41). He avoids to refer the interpretation of the two groups to the saying of the Prophet (peace be on him) in this regard, perhaps to keep it “tentative and fallible,” devoid of “authoritativeness and completeness.”

Leaving this disparity and other shortcomings aside, which will hopefully be revised in future editions, the booklet is a valuable addition to tafsir literature in general and the exegeses of al-Fatiha in particular. A brief Glossary of Arabic terms and a short bibliography are helpful additions and enhance the value of the lecture.

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