of the Veda are in India). The study of *qirā'āt* and *tajwīd* opens out automatically into the public domain in Muslim society. Here it finds practical application in the highly popular artistic and devotional forms of oral recitation that have been one of the hallmarks of Islamic culture wherever it has spread.[21] In turn, the formal and public recitation of the Qur'ān, whether as a pious act of worship or as artistic performance (and the two are never easily separated), is but one segment of the larger role of the Qur'ān as an oral/aural reality in Muslim life more generally. It is in consideration of this larger role that we come at last to the heart of the functional role of scripture as spoken word in Islam.

The Recited Qur'ān in Everyday Piety and Practice

An anonymous Muslim devotional pamphlet describes the Muslims as those "whose gospels are in their hearts while others read them from sacred volumes."[22] The formal sciences of readings and cantillation could not have been sustained as vibrantly as they have been over the centuries had not Qur'ān memorization, *ḥifẓ*, and recitation, *qirā'ah* or *tilāwah*,[23] always been central to the daily and seasonal round of life in Islamic societies. Here we can only touch briefly upon memorization and recitation and their place in Muslim life, but any discussion of the Qur'ān as scripture – especially with regard to its oral qualities – would be sorely deficient without some indication of its active recitative role among "average" Muslims of diverse times, places, and stations.

In Worship (Ṣalāt)

First and foremost, the Qur'ān has been the one absolute essential of Muslim ritual and devotional life. The qur'anic and other early evidence of the fundamental orality of the Qur'ān points, as we have seen, to the primary importance of this function of scripture in Islam. In a way that, for example, the Jewish or Christian Bible (with the notable exception of the Psalter) is not, the Qur'ān is prayerbook, lectionary, and hymnal rolled into one. Furthermore, unlike the Vedas, the qur'anic text (or at least some part of it) is the common property of all the faithful, whatever their social status or education, even those who do not speak Arabic; for in the formal worship of *ṣalāt* and also in individual devotional and prayer life, no Muslim can function without being able to recite a minimal amount of the Arabic scripture.[24]

An oblique but therefore perhaps all the more telling indication of the liturgical centrality of the Qur'ān occurs in the earliest extant work on the qur'anic sciences, the *Kitāb al-Mabānī* (425/1033). The passage in question attempts to distinguish specifically qur'anic words from the extra-qur'anic words of God reported in the so-called Divine Sayings – those *ḥadīth*s that

relate non-qur'anic words of God. This passage characterizes the Divine Saying as a divinely revealed text, but then proceeds to differentiate it from the Qur'ān as follows:[25]

> It is not permissible to recite any of it [the Divine Saying] in the *ṣalāt*, for it was not sent down in the same form in which all of the Qur'ān was sent down – which [Qur'ān] we have been commanded to recite [*umirnā bi-tilāwat*^{i}*hi*], which is written in [our] copies [*al-maṣāḥif*], and the transmission of which has come to us generally attested in every generation [*mutawātir*].

The functional orientation of this distinction between qur'anic and other divine words is striking. Here it is the Qur'ān's form as a text intended for recitation in the daily ritual of worship that distinguishes it. Later theological distinctions of "inimitability" (*i'jāz*) or the like notwithstanding, it is above all the practical, ritual function of the Qur'ān as recited word in worship that sets it apart from any other text.

Indeed, the recitation of the Qur'ān is what one student of Muslim piety has called "the very heart of the prayer-rite."[26] No *ṣalāt* is valid without recitation of at least the Fātiḥah, or "Opening" (S. 1), and it is expected that one or more shorter *sūrah*s or verses will also be recited.[27] It is quite common to precede or to follow the *ṣalāt*-rite proper with substantial recitation from the Qur'ān,[28] just as most major Muslim festival and commemorative occasions (e.g., funerals)[29] involve recitation of shorter or longer segments of the divine word. Qur'ān recitation in general is a highly preferred form of religious devotion at any time – in many ways an extension of the *ṣalāt* into the other parts of the day for its practitioners.

The Sacrality of Recitation

As we have seen, the fact that the Qur'ān is the sacred word of God in the form of "an Arabic recitation" (*qur'ān*^{an} *'arabīy*^{an})[30] has deterred Muslims from translating it from the original Arabic. Conversely, it has spurred even Muslims who know no Arabic to memorize shorter or longer passages as they are able in order to be able to worship in *ṣalāt* and apart from *ṣalāt* by reciting the Qur'ān. Among many possible examples illustrative of this latter phenomenon is a delightful anecdote recounted by a French traveler to Singapore over a century ago. He tells of walking one day in the Malay quarter of the city and hearing children's voices apparently chanting a lesson from a nearby house. Going in, he found an old Malay with a white beard sitting on the floor together with over a dozen children and leading them in recitation – he from a book, they from pieces of paper. Questioned by the visitor as to what was being recited, the old man replied that it was the Qur'ān, in Arabic, which he admitted he did not understand, but could sound aloud from the script on the written page. The European found this intriguing or amusing and asked

further why they would be learning words they could not understand. The old teacher replied at once that in reading them aloud, the children learn them by heart, and they do this because

> the sons of the Prophet ought to have this word in their memory so that they can repeat it often. These words are endowed with a special virtue. . . . In translating [them] we might alter the meaning, and that would be a sacrilege.[31]

Here the inherent sacrality of the original Arabic sounds – and of their meaning as well, even if that meaning is not understood in a literal, word-by-word or sentence-by-sentence fashion – is affirmed in no uncertain terms. The sense of the sacrality, or *barakah* ("blessing"), of the very sounds of the holy text is something that seems to penetrate into every corner of the Islamic world. The family of a longtime Ismā'īlī friend of mine begin each day in their East African home with the strains of Radio Pakistan's morning broadcast of qur'anic recitation filling the entire house. His explanation of the clearly understood purpose behind this is that *barakah* permeates the house from the Arabic recitation (which, in this instance, is carried by shortwave from an Urdu-speaking Islamic land to Gujarati and Swahili-speaking Muslims on another continent!). The sounded strains of the word of God – and they are only powerful when sounded with full voice – start everyone's day on the proper note, even before the performance of the day's first prayer-rite in the local mosque.

To dismiss the qur'anic presence in such situations as either the fulfillment of superstitions, or as merely "background noise", or even as only a taken-for-granted habit, is to miss the perceived power and genuine spriritual function of such recitation quite apart from an understanding of every word or sentence. Here we are up against a particularly intransigent and thorny problem of the meaning of scripture, one to which we shall return in Chapter 9.

Muslim Education

Beyond this issue, however, the story of the Malay recitation lesson points us to the role of qur'anic recitation as the backbone of Muslim education, in its earliest as well as its most advanced stages. In this we have a vivid expression of the enduring Muslim conviction that Muslims need to be able, as early in life as possible, to recite from the Qur'ān in its original form with some ease.[32] This conviction is succinctly expressed in the tradition, ascribed to the Prophet himself, that says "it is a grievous mistake to take the written page as your *shaykh*."[33]

Memorizing from the Qur'ān has always been basic to bringing up children in every Muslim society, and there are few sounds more constant in diverse parts of the Islamic world, from Morocco to Indonesia, than the mesmerizing singsong chant of tiny children as they recite the Qur'ān for their teacher in

the neighborhood Qur'ān school known commonly as *kuttāb* or *maktab*. Even though only a small percentage of such children ever stay in school long enough (typically five to eight years) to memorize the whole Qur'ān or become literate in Arabic,[34] the learning of at least some part of the divine word by heart is the single most common early learning experience shared in some degree by all Muslims.

Ibn Khaldūn remarked long ago that "teaching the Qur'ān to children is one of the signs of (the) religion that Muslims profess and practice in all their cities."[35] More significantly, the universal presence of some kind of childhood "rote" learning of the Qur'ān – principally by boys, but also commonly by girls – has traditionally given to the participants in Islamic societies a common cultural heritage as well as a common religious training. Shared familiarity with some or all of the qur'anic text and especially its values and shared appreciation for the melodic cadences of its recitation have been not only signs of Muslim faith, but the essential common thread in the diverse fabric of the myriad different cultures of the Islamic world – the identifiable tie binding Muslims across barriers of language, color, and custom, as well as time and place.

The *kuttāb* has thus been traditionally a major part of the formative experience of Muslims. Whatever its shortcomings, it has been a key influence in the early stages of the "islamization" of the Muslim individual. In Islamic societies, "the Muslim does not put a child in a qur'anic school in order to teach him, but in order to form him according to the immutable tradition that was that of his own parents and that of theirs."[36] In his study of qur'anic schooling in Cameroon, Renaud Santerre has written of the role of this schooling as "a mechanism of total formation" of the person, which socializes the child in diverse ways.[37] Similarly, Dale Eickelman trenchantly observes that "a firm discipline in the course of learning the Quran is culturally regarded as an integral part of socialization. . . . the discipline of Quranic memorization is an integral part of learning to be human and Muslim."[38]

Taha Ḥusayn (1889–1973), the great modern Egyptian educational reformer, gives particularly striking testimony in his autobiography to the centrality of qur'anic memorizing and recitation in the earliest experience of the children of rural Egypt some ninety years ago.[39] The picture he paints of his first education was still largely valid for most of the Islamic world until quite recently, when modern, state-sponsored school systems, most of them secularized to some degree, have begun to compete with or to replace the traditional *kuttāb* as the locus of primary education. Even today in Muslim countries, qur'anic education is often still offered alongside, as preschool preparation for, or even as a part of, government-sponsored public education based on more secular models.[40]

Memorization of the Qur'ān has traditionally been an accomplishment of great pride and status in Muslim communities. One of the most cherished

honorifics a Muslim can earn is that of *ḥāfiẓ* (fem.: *ḥāfiẓah*), one who "has by heart" (lit.: "preserves", *ḥafiẓa*) the entire scripture. Sometimes the one who has learned the whole Qur'ān is even accorded the honor of being addressed as *shaykh*, or "master". Traditionally, complete mastery of the entire text has been the necessary prerequisite to becoming, through further study, an accomplished religious scholar (*'ālim;* pl.: *'ulamā'*) in any of the religious sciences (it is, needless to say, a sine qua non for entry into serious study of *tajwīd*). Of those children who stay more than a few months or years in school, some already manage this kind of mastery of scripture by the age of ten or twelve, a few earlier. Even those who never truly control the entire text nor aspire to become themselves schoolteachers or more advanced scholars can quote and recite substantial portions from it, if they have studied for a long time in the *kuttāb* and, especially, beyond it. Certainly it is not unusual for a "layperson" without advanced religious and legal education to be a *ḥāfiẓ* or *ḥāfiẓah;* one of my first Muslim Qur'ān teachers, and a creditable *ḥāfiẓ*, was a chemist from Medina, Saudi Arabia. The most accomplished members of a given local gathering of Qur'ān reciters may not be professionals, nor even very educated or literate persons.[41]

At higher levels of education, knowledge of the Qur'ān is essential and presumed. The correct contextual application of its verses is an art that one develops only over time, and its technical interpretation is a science that must be learned through laborious study.[42] Among religious scholars, the international language is not so much Arabic qua Arabic as the classical qur'anic Arabic, which is the ideal standard of Arabic literacy. The writing and the speech of scholarship in the traditional Islamic context is based to a degree that we can hardly imagine on the vocabulary, phraseology, and diction of the Arabic scripture. One does not have to read long in Muslim texts nor listen often to an *'ālim* speak to discover how the ring of the qur'anic text cadences the thinking, writing, and speaking of those who live with and by the Qur'ān. Mastery of the Qur'ān is a baseline for the scholar: Completely aside from knowledge of *tajwīd*, the *'ālim* has to be able to quote and to recite from the Qur'ān at will even to begin to hold his own among compatriots. It is by no means excessive to say that Muslim scholarship is based to a significant extent upon acceptance of the Prophetic adage from the *Ḥadith* that claims that "knowledge shall not perish so long as the Qur'ān is recited."[43]

Permeation of Communal Life

Anyone who has lived for a time in a Muslim society will have remarked also the degree to which the lilting refrain of qur'anic recitation occupies a prominent place in the public sphere, forming a significant part of the auditory "background" of everyday life. The virtual omnipresence of the sound of qur'anic cantillation has been, if anything, intensified by radio and other

electronic media by comparison with earlier eras, although the competing sounds of the media and modern technology in general have flooded the aural universe of Muslim society with many distractions unknown in an earlier day. Apart from the many modern Muslims for whom the Qur'ānic word is *primarily* in the "background", there are also many others who cling to traditional piety and strive to preserve the lilting strains of the chanted Qur'ān as a prominent element in the "foreground" of their lives. When I think of my traditionalist, or *salafī,* Muslim friends in Damascus, my memories of time with them is inseparable from the sound of the Qur'ān – in their worship, their conversation, and their special efforts to recite for me and each other. It is safe to say that the *ḥadīth* that says, "the most excellent form of worship and devotion [*'ibādah*] among my people is reciting the Qur'ān,"[44] has been taken to heart in traditional Muslim practice.

In that most social and communal of all Muslim religious events, the month of fasting in Ramaḍān, the nights are filled with the sound of Qur'ān recitation in the mosques. Muslim interpretation has traditionally found in S. 96, "al-Qadr" ("The Power"), a specific description of the night in which the Qur'ān was first revealed – in part or all at once, depending upon the particular tradition followed. The text reads: "Truly, We have sent it down on the Night of Power. And what has revealed to you what the Night of Power is? The Night of Power is better than a thousand months. Peace! Until the breaking of the dawn." Various dates have been given to the "Night of Power" (*laylat al-qadr*), most commonly the 27th of Ramaḍān, but also variously any one of the odd-numbered days of that month from the 21st onward. As a result, the latter third of the month is counted an especially auspicious time for reciting. In general, recitation of the Qur'ān has been strongly linked to the observance of Ramaḍān, an observance that ranks at the top of Muslim holy days and rituals in personal and communal significance. The basic recitative division of the Qur'ān into thirty parts is sometimes said to be designed especially for the purpose of reciting one "part", or *juz'*, in each night of Ramaḍān.[45] In practice, the whole is often recited in shorter cycles ranging down even to a single night by unusually zealous individuals or groups who repair to the mosques for this purpose.[46] Anwarul Haq tells of an Indian Muslim woman, the mother of the Indian Sūfī leader Muhammad Ilyās (d. 1943), who not only knew the Qur'ān by heart, but used to recite the whole Qur'ān *plus* ten "parts" *each day* in Ramaḍān, for a total of forty complete recitations, or "completions" (*khatamāt;* pl. of *khatmah,* "sealing") of the holy book during the sacred month every year.[47]

Another popular form of public *tilāwah* is the group chanting associated both with the formal *dhikr*-sessions of the Sūfī brotherhoods and with the popular *dhikr*-sessions at certain mosques, especially tomb-mosques. *Dhikr,* the "remembrance" of God in litanies of devotion, involves the chanting of formulas and texts steeped in the language of the Qur'ān. Qur'ānic recitation

itself commonly begins or is woven into such sessions.[48] I have witnessed one popular *dhikr* held each Friday after the evening prayer at the tomb in Damascus of "Sīdī Maḥyiddīn," the great mystical thinker Muḥyī' l-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240). In this gathering, the men who crowd into the tomb chamber to sit on the floor all join in a singsong recitation in popular *dhikr* style, focusing at least in the first hour or so on favorite *sūrah*s of the Qur'ān.

In contrast to such group chanting is the session in which listeners and reciters come together to hear the Qur'ān recited by a series of individual practitioners of *tajwīd*. Cairo is especially well known for its varied forms of this kind of event, which is called a *maqra'*, or "recitation session" (from the root *Q-R-'*). Most of these are associated with particular mosques and take place regularly one or more times a week. The most prestigious are those at places like the Imām Shāfi'ī tomb-mosque and the Azhar University mosque, but there are many smaller, more private, or local-mosque settings for the *maqra'*.[49] Still another kind is the *nadwah*, or "gathering", a listening session held often in private homes and attended by cognoscenti of the recitative art.[50] In this latter type of session the musical aspects of recitation often receive special attention, although it is never easy to distinguish the aesthetic from the religious elements of Qur'ān recitation and listening. Thanks to the works of Nelson and Denny, we have interesting documentation of some of the inner dynamics of varied *maqra'*s in Cairo today. These studies point up the degree to which *tilāwah* is at once a demanding art form, a popular entertainment, and sometimes even a performing contest, as well as always an act of devotion and piety and a formal part of the transmission of the Qur'ān in its most perfect possible form.[51]

Permeation of Family and Personal Life

The foregoing reflects something of the variety of the ways in which the Qur'ān's vocal presence in the Muslim community is felt; yet the active role of the Qur'ān as spoken word among Muslims is still more pervasive than even these examples from ritual, devotional, and public life can adequately convey. From birth to death, virtually every action a Muslim makes, not to mention every solemn or festive event in his or her life, is potentially accompanied by spoken words of the Qur'ān, whether these be entire recited passages or simply discrete qur'anic words or phrases that have passed into everyday usage. Such a qur'anic word may be the simple *basmalah*, "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate" (*bism allāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*) that precedes countless daily acts such as drinking or eating, just as it precedes all but one *sūrah* of the Qur'ān. It may be the words of S. 2.156, "Truly, we are God's and, truly, unto him we are returning," which are uttered as a statement of resignation to fate and recognition of God's power over and guidance of all earthly affairs. Alternatively, it may be the ubiquitous *mā shā' llāh* ("whatever

God wills!") of S. 18.39 and *al-ḥamdu lillāh* ("Praise be to God!") of S. 1, both of which punctuate Muslim speech even outside of the Arabic-speaking world, as do qur'anic expressions invoking God's mercy (*raḥmah*) or forgiveness (*istighfār*).[52]

As an example of longer qur'anic passages heard in daily life, one thinks immediately of the *Fātiḥah*, S. 1, which every Muslim knows by heart and which is recited not only in every *ṣalāt* but on virtually every formal occasion, be it the signing of a wedding contract, closing of an agreement, or prayer at a tomb, not to mention at informal moments such as when one approaches a tomb.[53] There is also the powerful *sūrah* of "Unity", or "Purity", S. 112, which enters into most prayers and forms the basis of countless litanies of praise; or the final two *sūrah*s, S. 113 and 114 (*al-Mu'awwidhatān*), that "deliver from evil" and hence figure prominently as talismanic recitations; or the prayer for forgiveness in the final verses of S. 2, "The Cow" (*al-Baqarah*), which are known as "the seals of the Baqarah" and often are recited before going to sleep; or the powerful and moving strains of S. 36, *Yā Sīn*, which one recites at burials, on the approach of death, and also on the "Night of Quittance" (*laylat al-barā'ah*, a kind of Muslim All-Soul's Night, when life and death in the coming year and the deeds of the past year are popularly held to hang in the balance).[54] These are but a sampling of those that could be mentioned, as anyone knows who is aware of how popular the "Throne Verse" of S. 2.255 and the *sūrah* of "Light" (S. 24) also are.

What Ghazālī said of the Qur'ān nearly nine hundred years ago still holds today: "Much repetition cannot make it seem old and worn to those who recite it."[55] The powerful presence of the rhythmic cadence of qur'anic *tilāwah* is everywhere evident in traditional and much of modern Muslim society: ". . . the book lives on among its people, stuff of their daily lives, taking for them the place of a sacrament. For them these are not mere letters or mere words. They are the twigs of the burning bush, aflame with God."[56]