

Review: Dr Martyn Oliver: *Introduction to the Qur'an*, The Great Courses, Chantilly, VA, 2019

Min: 420

One-Sided Overview

A high-level, somewhat shallow, and proselytising introduction to Islam.

The status of Muhammad as a ‘prophet’ is accepted by default under the cover of a neutral ‘scholarly’ outlook. Likewise, the text (including large plagiarisms from the Bible deemed ‘new’ revelations) is assumed to be preserved, however, at the same time aspersions are cast on the Bible.

Muhammad’s deeds of polygamy, paedophilia (with nine-year old Aisha), and beheading the Bani Quraiza Jews are never mentioned. The lecturer also buys into the myth he was illiterate (Muhammad was already a well-established merchant trader and caravan raider, plus he signed war treaties with the Meccans).

The lecturer believes in “traduttore, traditore” (i.e. that there can be no perfect translation of a text in any other language).

When commenting on Christianity he errs often, e.g., that by the seventh century Christians were unsure whether spirit alone spirit and body would be resurrected, or whether Jesus was God or not.

A conflict is also put between Genesis 1.26-27 and 2.7,21-23 in the Bible, that in the former God creates Adam and Eve simultaneously, but in the latter sequentially. He goes further, saying that Genesis 1 says they both came from the dust, but in Genesis 2 Eve came from Adam’s rib. This is very poor exegesis; Genesis 1 merely says God made male and female (referred to by the collective noun “man”), while Genesis 2 details how this was done; first man from dust, then woman from man. Since woman came from man she is therefore also of the same substance he was derived from, i.e. dust. (Eve is not mentioned in the Qur’an (she is called “Hawa”

in Arabic tradition). It is this lack of data is somehow claimed to be informative or evidential).

A Sufic interpretation of Satan as potentially innocent in Sura 15 is given, i.e., that he did the right thing in not bowing to Adam since that would be idolatry (the question of why a ‘holy’ Allah would command and expect a being to sin is neither asked nor answered).

The frequent Qur’anic readings and sound intros add nothing for non-Arabic speaking viewers. Also, given the frequent references to Sufism, it seems the lecturer belongs to this smaller sect of Islam. If true, he should have disclosed this in the first lecture to viewers rather than pitching the course as a neutral view of Islam.

I) Finding a Path Into the Qur’an

Muhammad received his first demonic revelation at the Hira cave in 610AD when he heard a voice saying “iqra” (Arb. “recite”).

Muhammad’s revelations spanned twenty-two years (AD610-632).

II) 7th Century Mecca Religion

Pre-Islamic Arabian tribes would suspend hostilities once a year and convene inside Mecca at the Kaaba (“house of gods”). Kaaban deities were thought to include Human, Allah, Al-Lat, Al-Uzzah, and Manat (daughters of Allah), even “Isa” and “Maryam”.

Persian Mazdaism (a.g. the “Magians”) has little influence in the Qur’an. Ahura is pictured as a winged man-eagle creature.

III) The Qur’an Becomes a ‘Book’

Arabic was not an orthographically stable language during Muhammad’s time.

The Hejazi script is the earliest Qur’anic writing which lacked diacritical and punctuation marks. The Kufic has similar problems and is very difficult to read.

“Traduttore, traditore” is the central tenant of modern scholars.

Al-Qur’an means “the recitation”.

Early scripts are said to be a mere *aide memoire*.

The Qur’an is said to be untranslatable due to its ‘sound vision’.

The earliest whole Qur’an is dated from the tenth century.

The Meccan Surahs were revealed from AD610-622.

The Qur’an could be read backwards to loosely follow the order of revelation.

IV) From Mecca to Medina, the Revelation Transforms

Yawm ad-din is “Day of Judgment”.

Sura 2.125 is the reason Allah changed the prayer direction from Jerusalem to Mecca. Revealed in Medinah, it tells of Hagar fleeing with Ishmael to Mecca, then Abraham visiting on and off where he and Ishmael built the Kaaba.

V) God and Tawhid: *Divine Nature in the Qur’an*

VI) The Qur’anic Creation Story

Al-fatihah means “the opening”.

Sura 96 says Allah created man of a blood clot.

Sura 32 says Allah created everything in “six days” but Martyn eschews a literal creation.

An interpretation of Satan as potentially innocent in Sura X is given, i.e., that he did the right thing in not bowing to Adam since that would be

idolatry (the question of why a ‘holy’ Allah would command a being to sin is not asked or answered).

Eve is not mentioned in the Qur’an (she is called “Hawa” which is only from Arabic tradition). Martyn claims this lack of data (compared to the Bible) is somehow informative or evidential.

A conflict is also imagined between Genesis 1.26-27 and 2.7,21-23 in the Bible, that in the former God creates Adam and Eve simultaneously, but in the latter sequentially. He goes further, saying that Genesis 1 says they both came from the dust, but in Genesis 2 Eve came from Adam’s rib. This is very poor exegesis; Genesis 1 merely says God made male and female (referred to under the collective noun “man”), while Genesis 2 details how this was done; first man from dust, then woman from man. Note since woman came from man she is therefore also of the same substance he was created from, i.e. dust.

Finally, by eschewing Genesis and Eve’s failing, the unnamed innocent Qur’anic wife of Adam is penalised by Allah without just cause by being kicked out of the garden.

VII) Judgment Day and the End Times: Yawm ad-Din

Pre-Islamic Arabian beliefs were that existence ended with death and this life was all there is.

The author states of Christianity that by the 7thC Christians were unsure whether spirit alone spirit and body would be resurrected!

He also raises up the Apocryphal Book of Enoch as an acceptable source.

Al-janna is the garden (or Paradise).

The pornocracy of the Islamic heaven is justified by being a necessary “counterbalance” to an equally sensuous but painful eternal hell.

VIII) Abraham, Moses, and the Qur’anic Faith

Moses is the person mentioned most in the Qur'an which reflects Muhammad's delusion that he was following in his footsteps.

An apocryphal story in Sura 18 has Moses following a man around ("Al-Kidr" or The Green One) who sinks a boat, kills a young boy, who then explains these actions to Moses.

IX) From the Qur'an to Islam: Creating a Practice

In the Qur'anic story of Noah's Ark one of Noah's sons doesn't make it on due to hesitation and is drowned.

In Sura 12 Potiphar parades Joseph in front of her slaves who then cut their hands due to his 'physical beauty'! He is then put in prison for his on protection.

X) Sharia and Jihad: The Qur'an as Legal Text

The Qur'an, sunnah, Hadith and itjihad ("struggle to understand") combined make up the Islamic identity. The Sunnah is more than just the Hadith since some are disputed and there were more than what was just recorded.

"Rasul" means messenger.

Sura 62 mentions an unknown "day of prayer".

The Night Journey is called *Mi'raj*.

Sura 2 prescribes payment of the Zakat but never says how much it is! Muslims simply decided by tradition on 2.5%.

According to one view, Muhammad chose Ramadan because it was the traditional month of truce between warring Arabian tribes.

XII) Qur'anic Philosophy, Theology, and Mysticism

The Qur'an is said to be eternal ("qadim")

Al-Hasan al-Basri founded Sufism.

“Kalam” means Islamic theology.

“Ayah” means sign.

The two observing (omniscient and omnipresent?) angels are “Mumkar” and “Nakir”.