



Cross- Religious Literature

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Cross-religious literature concerns the type of literature whose narratives and percepts are derived from and concern religious themes, all taken from religiously confident sources. Dealing with the accounts of pre-Islamic peoples and prophets, this type of literature encompasses both Islamic and pre-Islamic accounts and incidents. As they contain significant notions and the types of human experience whose lessons and wisdom can prove significant for almost everybody, they qualify as world classics. Derived mainly from the Quran, and as the Quran is the intact Divine Word, the Quranic versions of the accounts and parables can be regarded as the very *urtexts* and the most reliable versions. As such, they can benefit researchers and inquirers who are followers of other, mainly Abrahamic, religions.

Keywords: cross-religious literature, Islamic literature, literature of religious proximity, Abrahamic faiths, Islamic/historical *urtexts*, the Quran.



The Holy Quran is the so-far-intact Divine Scripture that directs all people to the path of felicity, both in this world and in the Hereafter. It invites the followers of the Abrahamic faiths to converge to one and the same fundamental doctrine (word) common to the followers of these faiths; this fundamental doctrine is monotheism. Likewise, the Holy Quran, as the intact Word of Allah, is replete with fragments of the accounts of pre-Islamic peoples and certain discourses and exchanges of the Divine prophets who preceded the Prophet Muḥammad. Likewise, the hadiths remained from the Infallibles, from the Prophet Muḥammad through to the last Infallible Imam al-Mahdī, shed light and contain quotations from the supplications and exchanges of pre-Islamic Divine prophets and messengers. All of these indicate that Islam has since had a global and cross-religious attitude and perspective. The main points of a great majority of these pieces of religious instructions can

be summarized in terms of lessons of monotheism, belief in the afterlife and the Resurrection, and the moral teachings for which Allah has dispatched His prophets and messengers.

Viewed from another perspective, and never to disregard its Divine and revelation-based nature, the Holy Quran counts as an extraordinary literary work, in fact a mega-literary work whose multifaceted value can address a wide range of literary genres. The literary miraculousness of the Holy Quran in Classical Arabic is a factual phenomenon beyond any doubt. Apart from the Infallibles, both the Divine prophets and the Infallible Imams in Islam, there are certain great teachers of morality whose names and/or attributes are mentioned in the Holy Quran. The pre-Islamic, presumably African, sage Luqmān and the Pharaoh's wife are some positive instances.^(1, 2) Other similar figures, though not mentioned by name in the Quran, include al-Khiḍr who used to be a teacher of Moses in the latter's pre-prophetic phase of life. Al-Khiḍr is described as "one from amongst Our [i.e., Allah's] servants whom We [i.e., Allah] had vouchsafed mercy from Us [i.e., Allah] and We [i.e., Allah] had taught him knowledge from Ourselves [i.e., Allah]." (The Holy Quran, Sura al-Kahf [18]: 65). Certain dialogues between Moses and al-Khiḍr are quoted verbatim in the Holy Quran.⁽³⁾

There have been several branches of literature. These branches include, inter alia, the following: epic, romantic, national, regional, aesthetic, biographical, educational, historic types of literature, and so forth. From amongst a wide-ranging spectrum of religio-literary genres, one may discern and come up with cross-religious instances of literature, or simply cross-religious literatures. Drawing mainly on Islamic sources and evidence, the present paper seeks to explore some aspects of this type of literature.

Cross-religious literature deals with the topics and themes

covered in the Divine scriptures and those words of the sages that never stand in opposition to the Divine teachings. Here it deserves mention to make a reference to what is commonly called “advice” or “wisdom” literature. Such kinds of literature that travel from this part of the world to another have certain characteristics: they convey positive human values, have universal appeal, prove insightful, have pedagogical quality, and convey many untold lessons. They can be regarded as classics, too. Examples of such literature abound. The accounts of the pre-Islamic prophets and people as well as the tyrant rulers that committed sins and crimes can all be regarded as instances of cross-religious literature that have universal appeal and educative merits simultaneously. It is barely surprising that the accounts of the tyrants and oppressors can readily provide the audience of the Holy Quran with negative characters and examples by way of admonition and warning so as not to be taken as role-models. There are various reasons for including their accounts in the Holy Quran, calling people’s attention to the dark and ignoble end of overlooking the Divine instructions and following Satan. While the good-doers and the followers of the Divine instructions are described as “the dwellers of the Paradise” (*aṣḥāb al-jannah*) (The Holy Quran, Sura al-Ḥashr [59]: 20) and also as “the people of the Right-hand” (*aṣḥāb al-yamīn*) (The Holy Quran, Sura al-Wāqī‘ah [56]: 38). On the other hand, the negative examples are portrayed as “the dwellers of the Hellfire” (*aṣḥāb al-nār*) (The Holy Quran, Sura al-Ḥashr [59]: 20); elsewhere, they are also referred to as “the people of the Left-hand” (*aṣḥāb al-shimāl*) (The Holy Quran, Sura al-Wāqī‘ah [56]: 41). It is clear that “the Right” and “the Left” are metaphorical references to the paths of “felicity” and “wickedness”, respectively.

There are a number of good examples in the Holy Quran. A case in point is the account of the Jewish prophet Joseph as

mentioned in the twelfth surah of the Holy Quran in that the whole account is described as the “most beautiful account/real-life story” (*aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*) (The Holy Quran, Surah Yūsuf [12]: 3). It is held that the beauty of this Quranic account is “because it is understood to bring together all of the truths that pertain to one’s religious life as well as one’s worldly affairs.”⁽⁴⁾ Another account pertains to the story of the People of the Cave, or the Seven Sleepers, as called in Christian sources (*Aṣḥāb al-Kahf*) (The Holy Quran, Surah al-Kahf [18]: 9-26), for they were ancient Roman monotheist Christians who were living in the time of the Roman ruler Decius (Caius Messius Quintus Tarajanus (ca. 200, r. 249-51) [in Arabic texts referred to as Daqīyānūs]. They are praised in the Holy Quran for their pious conduct, religious steadfastness, and concealing their true monotheistic faith for security reasons; they are referred to as the “youths who had faith in their Lord (i.e., Allah) and We (i.e., Allah) increased them in guidance.” (The Holy Quran, Sura al-Kahf [18]: 13).⁽⁵⁾

Based on these classic-like/ classical features, Islamic cross-religious literatures benefit both Muslims and non-Muslims. It is beneficial for Muslims in that it increases Muslims’ awareness of the true history of other, pre-Islamic peoples as recounted in the Holy Quran. The inclusion of these factual accounts in the Holy Quran has been for various purposes. These accounts were known to the pre-Islamic people but in different versions. The Holy Quran has rendered their true versions. On the other hand, their inclusion in the Holy Quran can convince the followers of other Abrahamic faiths, e.g., Jews and Christians, that the Holy Quran has been the Divine Scripture that safeguards the accounts of their prophets, respects those prophets, and quotes the gist of their monotheistic faiths, plus deriving lessons that benefit mankind. A distinction must be made within the realm of

“classics” or “classic works”. While the French critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve maintains that “[a] true classic [...] is an *author* [emphasis added] who has enriched the human mind, increased its treasure, and caused it to advance a step; has discovered some moral and not equivocal truth [...]; has expressed his thought, observation, or invention [...]”, and so forth,⁽⁶⁾ T. S. Eliot points to “greatness” and “gravity” of style, plus making a distinction between “the universal” in contrast to “provincial” classics, in that while “the universal classic” is supposed to have far wider appeal, the “provincial” classic is limited to a special language, time period, and region.⁽⁷⁾ In addition to the above, Italo Calvino holds that “[a] classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say.”⁽⁸⁾ For a good encyclopedia entry with a canon-oriented approach to classics, see E. Renker, “Canon,” p. 187.⁽⁹⁾ For a book-length treatment of the same subject, see Kermode, *The Classic*⁽¹⁰⁾. Here it deserves mention that while Eagleton observes that it is impossible to come up with “an exact definition of literature”⁽¹¹⁾, any educated reader can be expected to read and appreciate literary classics.

In addition to the Quranic cross-religious accounts, there is also a hadith-based version of cross-religious literature. The latter pertains to the supplications pre-Islamic prophets offered to Allah as well as the Divine answers and instructions they received. Some of such exchanges whose fulcrums are the Divine answers and instructions can be found in a number of Shiite hadith collections, e.g., Muḥammad-Bāqir al-Majlisī’s (d. 1110 AH/ 1698) extensive and voluminous hadith collection, *Biḥār al-anwār* (recent Iranian and Lebanese editions in 110 vols.) based on which shorter collections are derived. For a sound, one-volume source concerning Quranic accounts, supported by reliable and sound hadiths, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* of Quṭb al-Dīn Sa’id b. Hibat Allāh al-Rāwandī (d. 573 AH/ 1177)

can be consulted. Both of them are in Classical Arabic. In Persian, Balāghī's *Qiṣaṣ-i Qur'ān* is still a reliable work.

These two versions of cross-religious literature may function as bridges between Islam and other faiths, world religious, and universal wisdom literature. In addition to explicating them as Islamic versions of certain aspects of their histories, the Quranic versions are presented in an educative way such that the audience would take numerous lessons both for life in this world and for reaching felicity in the world hereafter. Viewed from this perspective, the Quranic stories can benefit non-Muslims, too. As a result, its stories can function as cross-religious *urtexts* of the accounts of pre-Islamic prophets. An *urtext* is, by definition, "an original version of a text..."⁽¹²⁾

The *urtext* feature of the very text of the Holy Quran is not any hypothetically constructed text. It is not the result of a series of ages-long historical reconstruction of earlier parallel or variant versions of the same text. The *urtext* of the Holy Quran has since been so, for there has not been any variant wording or phrasing of it. Therefore, the very text of the Holy Quran has remained the same since its revelation and shall never be changed in any way.⁽¹³⁾ It follows that Quranic accounts come from the intact nature of the Quranic wordings. According to the Holy Quran, it is entirely the precise Divine Word in which no human intervention has ever taken place. As such, both Muslims and other followers of the Abrahamic faiths can refer to the Quran for receiving the most reliable version of the accounts that pertain to their prophets. Here, the Quranic *urtext* encapsulates both the narrative and religious aspects in terms of form, content, and educational aims. Whether or not non-Muslims might sense in themselves an inclination to convert into Islam, such a literature, replete with abundant timeless and universal lessons, can benefit all humanity, hence a true cross-religious literature.

A final remark concerns how to make such a universally insightful cross-religious literature available to as many people as possible in the world. As not everybody may be able to learn Arabic to benefit from this treasure, it is the responsibility of committed and expert translators to accomplish this mission. By “committed”, it is meant that a translator discharges her or his duty conscientiously for rendering the spirit of the material and for helping the audience.⁽¹⁴⁾ By “committed translation”, it is meant a translation that not only conveys the gist and message of the original text but also provides the target or intended reader with the required background information to enable him or her to read the text with appreciation. Also, by “expert”, it is meant a translator who has acquired enough scholarship and experience in translating such a kind of literature with ease and fluidity of expression. This kind of “committed and expert translation” of “cross-religious Islamic literature” must be done from Islamicate languages, chiefly Arabic, and Persian, into (at least) English to be later re-translated into other, more far-fetched, languages.⁽¹⁵⁾



Notes

1. Negative instances include transgressors, tyrants, and those who went astray and led other people awry, e.g., Satan, Cain, Decius, Noah's son who was drowned in the Deluge, the Pharaoh, and Abu Lahab.
2. For an English version of Luqmān's apothegms in English translation, see Francis Foster Barham (1808-71), *Lokman's Arabic Fables*, Bath, 1869.
3. See The Holy Quran, Sura al-Kahf [18]: 65-82; also Stefan Wild, "al-Khidr," in *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman, London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 343-45.
4. *The Study Quran*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, New York, HarperCollins, 2015, p. 591, n. 3.
5. It is indicated that Decius persecuted and chastised faithful Christians in his empire "[i]n an attempt to strengthen the *state religion* [emphasis added]." See *Fact Index*, 2 vols., London: Mitchell Beazley, 1978, s.v. Decius. While he deliberately confronted Christianity and tortured its followers, it seems pointless to speak of a "state religion" in his reign and territory. For a mention of Decius in a short English commentary of the Holy Quran, see S. V. Mir Ahmed Ali, trans., *The Holy Quran* (Karachi, 1975; New York: Tahrike Tarsile Quran, 1988), pp. 915-16.
6. Charles Augustin Saint-Beuve, "What is a Classic?," trans. Elizabeth Lee, in *Gateway to the Great Books, Vol. 5: Critical*

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7. T. S. Eliot, "What is a Classic?", in T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, London: Faber and Faber, 1957, pp. 53-71.
 8. Italo Calvino, "Why Read the Classics?", in Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature: Essays*, trans. Patrick Creagh, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1986, p. 128.
 9. E. Renker, "Canon," *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed., ed. Roland Greene, et al., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, pp. 186-88.
 10. Frank Kermode, *The Classic*, London: Faber and Faber, 1975.
 11. Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012, p. 32.
 12. Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, s.v. *urtext*.
 13. For the unchanged and unchangeable nature of the Holy Quran, see Ma'rifat, *Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an*; and Sayyid Abū al-Qāsim al-Mūsawī al-Khū'ī, *The Prolegomena to the Qur'an*, trans. Abdulaziz A. Sachedina.
 14. I have adopted the term "committed" and basically the notion of the "literature of commitment" from Jean-Paul Sartre and his work *What is Literature?* (1948/ 1950) and Theodor Adorno, "Commitment", in *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*, 2nd rev. ed., ed. Norman Walder, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 103-13.
 15. Damrosch speaks of "effective translation" (p. 167) that is expected to be done on world literatures. However, it seems that "committed and expert translation" would suit cross-religious literature better, for it encompasses both religio-moral commitment and expertise in the literary-cum-cultural aspects of the work(s) in question.



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