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Muslim Qur’ānic Interpretation Today: Media, Genealogies and Interpretive Communities. By Johanna Pink. Sheffield: Equinox, 2019. Pp. 334. Hb ISBN 9781781791431, £75/\$100; Pb 9781800500273, £24.95 / \$32.00; eBook 9781781797051, £75.00/\$100.00.

Johanna Pink’s timely monograph turns on a single powerful thesis: that the degree of focus on the Qur’an in contemporary Muslim thought is unrivalled since the earliest years of Islam. Many centuries of Islamic scholarship and practice have been characterised by a blending of disciplines and discourses within which the Qur’an was always present but never dominant. Modernity, with the epistemic pressure of colonialism and the advent of mass literacy, has foregrounded the Qur’an within Muslim consciousness. The further extension of media through first television, and then the internet, has only consolidated it.

Pink does not so much seek to explain the reasons for this modern Qur’anic centrality as to explore its consequences for scholarly exegesis, community pedagogy, and identity formation in the globalised world. That is not to say that Pink fails to address the factors leading to its (in her words) ‘shift to the centre’. Over several pages (pp. 17–21) in the first of seven main chapters (excluding a prologue, introduction and epilogue), she outlines the elements that came together to produce the phenomenon. Eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century revivalists, notably including Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1762), sought to reform beliefs and practices within Muslim societies. An important part of this was the return to the fundamental religious sources of the Qur’an and Sunna, as well as the opinions of early authoritative figures, the *salaf*. In the

nineteenth century, this tendency was accelerated by European imperialism and the adoption of the printing press. The result was that both 'conservative scripturalists' and modernists alike were to place the Qur'an and the conveyance of its guidance (*hidāya*) at the heart of their programmes for the renewal of Islamic civilisation under the conditions of the emerging globalised world. The intellectual transformations and tensions wrought by placing the Qur'an at the heart of Muslim intellectual life and increasingly deriving 'practical' guidance from it, rather than scholastically explaining it, drives the story Pink tells in the following chapters. The result is a nuanced account of the genealogy of contemporary Muslim interpretation of the Qur'an.

The second chapter examines changes of emphasis in the exegetical tradition flowing from these new circumstances. Although Pink pays some attention to the continuance of tradition through the '*ulamā*', the thrust of her argument concerns the revivalist Salafī movement in its various manifestations. One of the important aspects of her case concerns the rise to prominence of the *tafsīr* written by the premodern exegete Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373). Pink argues that while this Damascene scholar, a student of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), was a comparably minor figure before modernity, he has been catapulted to a position of pre-eminence, such that his commentary 'currently stands unrivalled as the one work that is most often sold, translated, abridged and cited' (p. 35). Later the reader is told: 'It seems to have replaced the exegeses of al-Rāzī and al-Bayḍāwī as the new standard work, and one that is not only used by scholars, but also by students and lay Muslims' (p. 52). While this claim is somewhat plausible, especially regarding the accessibility of Ibn Kathīr's work due to its promotion by the religious establishment of Saudi Arabia, it is important enough to deserve more substantiation than is offered in the text. It is much less clear that Ibn Kathīr's *tafsīr* has become central to the education and scholarly reference of the '*ulamā*' at a global level. Perhaps in the new environment of mass literacy, the '*ulamā*' have become relatively marginalised so that popularity online, in printed Arabic, and in translation, weigh more heavily in the scale than the curriculum of the *madrasa*. Nonetheless, it does seem important to carefully delineate the remits of these two kinds of authority. (Also, Pink is incorrect to state that Safiur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri is the translator of *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* into English [p. 52]. A publisher's note mentions that whereas he was responsible for the Arabic abridgement, a separate group of translators worked on the English version. Thanks to Azhar Majothi for pointing this out to me).

Chapter 3 leans into the popular consumption of Qur'anic interpretation, examining a range of media, from print to television, and the now ubiquitous YouTube. The idea of the Qur'an as guidance comes across strongly in the popular preaching and lessons delivered through these formats. Pink makes excellent use here of a technique that is to be found throughout her book, the presentation of short case studies to illustrate the

analyses. Such studies usually present the reader with several pages of primary source material in grey boxes to distinguish them from the main text and feature excerpts, including the reproduction of cartoons, video screenshots, and transcripts of recordings of various kinds. Qur'anic verses are cited in Arabic script, while translations of interpretation are skilfully rendered as needed from Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Indonesian, French, and German. Needless to say, the multilingual sources informing this book are a great strength. In the middle of the third chapter, Pink discusses eight of the most-viewed YouTube videos interpreting Q. 1, *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa*, featuring a range of well-known popular scholars and preachers, some based in Western countries and others in the Muslim world (pp. 104–107). She constructs a typology of 'YouTube as an exegetical medium' and distinguishes between the use of three types of exegetical performance given by these figures (all of whom are male): the sermon (*khuṭba*); the religious lesson or teaching session (*dars*); and the public lecture that borrows from the techniques of motivational speakers. Her discussion in this section, which is framed by her wider theoretical concerns, could become a model for future academic study of online Qur'anic interpretation.

In the fourth chapter, Pink examines the different hermeneutic techniques utilised within modernist interpretation of the Qur'an. If the core project of modernist *tafsīr* is to extract points of guidance from scripture, it stands to reason that the methodologies used will seek to be integrative in various ways. That is, as opposed to classical polyvocal techniques for the linguistic, rational, and tradition-based analysis of individual verses, they apply one or more master principle(s) to interpret the text. Examples of such principles that Pink discusses include situating the Qur'an in its historical context; reconstructing its chronological order of revelation; adopting or rejecting abrogation; semantic, literary and thematic analysis; intratextual interpretation; and rejection of the Sunna. Of course, as Pink observes in her discussion, many of these have roots in earlier discourses within the Islamic exegetical tradition. What distinguishes their modern manifestation is the purpose to which they are put, the openness to synthesis with contemporary Western forms of knowledge, and the willingness to adopt a chosen principle in a thoroughgoing way. Pink's summary of these methods is perceptive and balanced. It would serve as an excellent reading for students.

Chapter 5 covers the apologetic discourses that seek to defend the Qur'an, and by extension Islam, from its detractors and to vindicate it as an inimitable text. Pink's selection of materials is again eclectic, and her sources include the Egyptian media personality turned author Karīman Ḥamza, the 'Islamist' commentators Sayyid Quṭb (1906–1966) and Abū al-A[°]lā Mawḏūdī (1903–1979), the preacher [°]Amr Khālīd, and an anonymous website called 'Miracles of Quran'. The themes covered are equally diverse: the defence of the Qur'anic permission for polygamy, the ideal of Qur'anic

social justice, the structural arrangement of the Qur'an and its suras, and the quintessential topic of contemporary *i'jāz*, the scientific miracle. Weaving these topics together, Pink exposes interesting ironies, such as 'the application of modernist methods while following a non-modernist and partly even anti-modernist agenda' (p. 191). Here she astutely conveys a tension often generated in the application of the hermeneutic techniques discussed in Chapter 4 by scholars or preachers who wish to retain basically traditional readings of the text's meaning, yet need to justify their interpretation of the Qur'an in the holistic way that modern, educated audiences expect.

The sixth chapter moves from the process and function of Qur'anic interpretation to the 'interpretive communities' that both generate it and make up its audiences. The focus is global, which, as is typical for the book as a whole, means in practice looking mainly at the West, the Arab world, Turkey, and Indonesia. Pink reflects on how different national contexts influence the approaches taken towards interpretation, especially the production of exegetical works by the state, or scholars sanctioned by it. She also writes fluently on the authorial choice of whether to use the local vernacular, Arabic (still the prestige language of traditionally inclined Islamic scholarship), or English, the global academic language (pp. 208–209). Another angle that proves important is Pink's consideration of the different impulses in the Muslim body politic, including the distinctions between Sunni, Shii, Sufi, and other discourses. An interesting case study concerns the Ahmadiyya, a twentieth-century sect from the Indian subcontinent that is widely considered to fall outside the fold of Islam for denying the finality of Muḥammad's prophethood. Pink studies polemics raging on websites between Ahmadis and Salafis over the interpretation of Q. 3:55, *God said, 'Jesus, I will take you / cause you to die (innī mutawaffika) and raise you up to Me ...'* (Pink's translation on p. 232). While the common Islamic understanding of this verse is that Jesus was taken up to God alive and will return at the end of time, the interpretation of the founder of the Ahmadiyya, Mirza Ghulām Aḥmad (d. 1908), is that he lost consciousness on the cross, eventually recovering, travelling to India, and receiving a natural death in Kashmir (p. 234). While Pink covers the arguments and counterarguments over Q. 3:55 adroitly, this seems to be a rare occasion in which she fails to pin down the underlying problematic. She concludes the discussion with a note of puzzlement that the debate over the death of Jesus is so intense when there are 'more fundamental issues at stake' (p. 239). Her explanation is that it is a symbolic point of contention, one that is highly specific to the Ahmadiyya, and has retained its relevance due to the prevalence of Ahmadi communities in the 'Christian' West. It seems, however, that the main reason for Sunni emphasis on this point is (as mentioned by an interlocutor in the excerpt on p. 234) that if Jesus did indeed ascend alive and will have a literal second advent, it is not possible for the scriptural texts alluding to his return to be metaphorically fulfilled by Mirza Ghulām Aḥmad. Seen thus, the polemic over the death of Jesus is central to Ahmadi claims to legitimacy.

Chapter 7 turns to areas of conflict in the contemporary interpretation of the Qur'an. Pink looks at debates over gender and queerness, contextualising them in today's globalised society and pointing out that the focus upon them is novel in the history of exegesis. She also examines the emergence of 'postmodern' approaches that emphasise the subjectivity inherent to reading and understanding any text, including the Qur'an. These prove an important contrast to the modernist approaches that characterise the book up until this point. While the modernist believes she is objective in placing the text within a rationally consistent paradigm to provide guidance suitable for the conditions of modernity, the postmodernist knows she is subjective in selecting the exegetical framework that will lead to a given desired outcome (p. 280). This is an extremely important insight and Pink makes it with panache, though it seems a pity that it only comes at the end of the final chapter. If the category of postmodernism had been introduced at an earlier juncture in the book, it would have furnished the opportunity for further exploration of its discontinuities with modernism.

The closest that the reader gets to such an investigation comes in the epilogue, which examines varied responses to Q. 4:34 'a verse that seems to give permission to a husband to beat his wife' (p. 284). Pink here ably contrasts modernist apologetics with the postmodern strategies brought by 'feminist' exegetes to the text, though there is not much new content for those familiar with these debates. Nonetheless, it allows her to make several important concluding points about the nascent postmodernist approach. First, the work of interpretation is always enmeshed within wider frameworks of meaning and to some extent the postmodernist is just more self-aware about this reality. Second, the postmodernist may seek to de-centre the Qur'an to make use of other sources of knowledge and even standards of justice. Third, the postmodernist may even be open to questioning the preservation of the Qur'anic text and the perfection of its meaning. While Pink perhaps wisely refuses to speculate on whether this postmodernist tendency will expand from its currently marginal position, she leaves ample conceptual space for others to build on her assessment of the field with their own analytical and constructive approaches.

Muslim Qur'ānic Interpretation Today has many excellent qualities. Pink's critical eye ranges over material in several of the major languages used for contemporary exegesis in the Muslim world and in a vast array of registers, from cartoons and blog posts to multi-volume *tafsīrs* and academic monographs. This review has only been able to touch on some of the authors, works, and positions studied in the book, which truly is a global snapshot. Moreover, Pink maintains an admirable level of clarity and analytical precision in expressing the various positions she investigates. She addresses the main issues, outlines them clearly and, to the mind of this reviewer at least, almost always puts her finger on the key questions at stake.

Any author that draws synoptically from such a large body of primary source material necessarily must be selective about what they present to the reader. Yet, they are open to questioning with respect to their selection criteria: why these specific texts and Qur'anic verses? Pink's implicit answer seems to be that the texts and excerpts chosen are representative of certain wider trends and exemplify her analysis of them. The obvious danger is that of circularity, the selection of evidence that merely supports one's existing preconceptions. Although this is perhaps unavoidable to a degree, some 'postmodern' acknowledgement of this challenge within the author's own project would not have gone amiss.

One place where Pink's personal inclinations seem noticeable is her vision of the contemporary scholarly landscape, which arguably over-inflates the 'success' of the Salafī paradigm at the expense of the resilience of the approach of more traditional Sunni '*ulamā*'. While there is no doubt that Salafism and modernism have been major players on the globalised exegetical stage, one of the significant features of scholarship in the modern world is, relatively speaking, the abiding influence of the '*ulamā*'. Pink writes in the introduction about her adoption of a Foucauldian genealogical method that emphasises continuities ahead of ruptures and change, and that this is especially appropriate to the field of *tafsīr* (p. 8). One might contend that the phenomenon of contemporary use of classical exegesis within the *madrasa*, the mosque, and online could have featured more in the book than it does. Arguably, however, one reason that the continuing influence of traditional '*ulamā*' may have been sidelined is that it speaks against her main thesis of Qur'anic centrality. It seems possible that for such '*ulamā*', and for the large numbers of Muslims who still take a cue in religious matters from them, the Qur'an has never shifted from its classical position in the matrix of intellectual disciplines. If this is true, it means that there is room for the account given in this book to be complemented with another focusing on contemporary opponents to modern (and postmodern) exegesis. But these critical points should not be read as undermining Pink's notable achievements in this monograph, which is an innovative addition to Equinox's promising 'Themes in Qur'ānic Studies' series.

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