

CHAPTER 19

The rhetoric of uncivil society: Deviance labelling as uncivil discourse

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INTRODUCTION

In his 1993 T B Davie Lecture at the University of Cape Town, Professor Charles Long of the University of California at Santa Barbara proposed that South Africans desperately required a civil discourse. Such a discourse would allow the various factions in a highly polarised and conflictual society to begin talking to one another in an effort to resolve their differences in a civil manner. This, he maintained, was a prerequisite for the creation of a civil society in which individuals and groups learned to respect one another and behave with decency and toleration towards each other.

If, as Long proposes, a civil discourse is essential for the creation of a civil society, then it follows that uncivil discourse helps in the creation of uncivil society. When we examine early Christianity through its written remains, this certainly appears to be true. The writings of the New Testament contain a great deal of uncivil discourse; that is, discourse intended to demean, insult, or attack real and imagined enemies. Paul, for example, disparages his competitors in Galatia with the rather shocking words, 'I wish those troubling you would castrate themselves' (Galatians 5:12), and in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 he describes certain fellow Christian missionaries as 'ministers of Satan disguised as ministers of righteousness'. Jesus, according to the Gospel of Matthew, inveighs against the scribes and Pharisees, designating them as 'hypocrites', 'blind guides', and

'children of hell' (Matthew 23:15-16). In John's Gospel, even the Jews who are reputed to believe in Jesus, but presumably in an inadequate manner, are excoriated as 'offspring of the devil' (John 8:44). But perhaps the most vitriolic language of all occurs in the Book of Revelation, where the writer denounces Jews who constitute a 'synagogue of Satan' (Rev 2:9), excoriates a fellow Christian leader for instructing the servants of Christ 'to practice fornication' (Rev 2:20), and condemns Rome as 'Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations' (Rev 17:5).

Freyne (1985) has noted the uncivil discourse of several New Testament writers and connects it to the ancient rhetorical practice of *vituperatio*. *Vituperatio* was taught by the rhetorical schools as a means of 'destroying the social and political persona of one's adversaries' (Freyne 1985:118). According to Freyne, the vilification of the Jews in both Matthew's and John's Gospels has the social function of defining 'the identities of the communities for whom they wrote' (Freyne 1985:119). For the early Christians, who were a relatively small and powerless group within a highly competitive society, vituperation provided an invaluable rhetorical tool, not only for its ability to isolate and vilify the outsider who was perceived as an enemy, but also for its ability to reinforce group identity among insiders. Freyne (1985:132-140) shows that, by discrediting their Jewish competitors in situations where they wished to make exclusive claims for their own communities, and by underscoring their rivals' failures and shortcomings, Matthew and John sought to strengthen their own communities' identities in relation to their competitors. A similar process can be shown to have taken place in other early Christian writings, notably the Book of Revelation (see Collins 1986).

Interesting though it is, Freyne's approach to uncivil discourse is not completely satisfactory. His focus on vilification, what I am describing in this paper as 'uncivil discourse', for creating group identity fails to recognise a more fundamental problem. Group identity is particularly important only when that identity is contested by other groups in conflict situations. Conflict situations inevitably involve competition for 'scarce and valued resources' (Boissevain 1974:228). Uncontested group identity does not require serious reinforcement because it is already tacitly accepted by the group. The problem for both the Matthean and Johannine communities was that Jewish Christians were being marginalised in relation to their traditional Jewish identity. To use Freyne's type of language, the Jewish community was in the process of defining Jewish Christians as 'others' or 'outsiders'. Thus, Jewish Christians had to decide whether they were going to be Jewish or Christian. They could not be both at the same time. In such a conflictual situation, language vilifying others has a powerful negative significance as part of a complex social interaction.

What is lacking in Freyne's interesting analysis is a theory which enables us to appreciate the full complexity of the social interaction lying behind the vilifications found in the New Testament. In deviance and labelling theory, contemporary social theory provides a much more sophisticated and nuanced tool for analysing the uncivil discourse of the New Testament. The usefulness of deviance and labelling theory for understanding early Christianity has been demonstrated by Malina and Neyrey (1988 & 1991).¹ It will provide us with a way of understanding a particular type of uncivil discourse found in the New Testament, while raising wider issues about the role of uncivil discourse in conflict situations.

LABELLING AND DEVIANCE THEORY

Deviance theory has had a long history in the social sciences (Edgerton 1976), with different disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology developing their own particular perspectives on the subject. Underlying each is the awareness that in every society explicit, as well as implicit, social rules and moral norms exist. While these are, ostensibly, created, and maintained to ensure the proper functioning of the social order, in actuality they change over time and serve the interests of those who make and enforce them. Inevitably, some individuals and groups break the rules or ordering principles of their society. The response of the society, if it seeks to enforce its rules and norms, is to identify, label, and treat such people as deviants, or outsiders.

The key tool in controlling what is defined as 'deviant' is the labelling process. Individuals and societies are constantly engaged in the process of labelling. Labels are potent designations because they determine the way the person or group labelled is perceived. This perception is not only that of the labeller or labelling group, but of both the labelled themselves and third parties. Further, it determines the way in which those who are labelled are treated. Labelling may either be positive, as when someone is called 'professor', or negative, as when someone is called a 'communist' in white South Africa. Persons or groups who are able to label and have their labels taken seriously are called 'moral entrepreneurs' by Becker (1973). These possess considerable power to shape people's perceptions and the social interactions deriving from those perceptions. In this sense, labelling, or name-calling as Malina and Neyrey (1988:35) term it, is a powerful social tool for those who control it. Hence, deviance labelling is a tool wielded to protect the interests of the negative labellers against perceived and real threats (Malina & Neyrey 1991:100).

If the negative label sticks, the individual to which it is applied begins to be perceived almost exclusively in terms of the label. The label comes to define the

person and his or her actions. This is what Becker (1973:31-34) refers to as a 'master status'. It completely overshadows any good that might be done by the labelled person. A good example of this is the way in which some individuals and groups in the United States first attempted to label President Clinton as sexually promiscuous, and therefore deviant, and now are trying to portray him as dishonest. If they succeed, no matter how successful his presidency is in political terms, he will very likely not be re-elected. The electorate will perceive him negatively as someone who cannot be trusted. In effect, Clinton will be viewed as an 'outsider' in relation to the moral order of mainstream American society. This last point is important. By making someone an outsider to society or to a particular social group, the individual becomes a danger to all those who remain inside the group.

Now that I have provided some clarity as to what is meant by deviance and labelling theory, I wish to present a model of deviance labelling. This model is derived principally from Becker (1973) and Malina and Neyrey (1988 and 1991).

A DEVIANCE LABELLING MODEL

Deviance labelling is an interactive process requiring participants who follow certain well-defined roles. Malina and Neyrey refer to those who engage in the labelling process as 'the agents of censure'. First, every society or social grouping requires moral entrepreneurs. Moral entrepreneurs perform several functions, though it need not be the same individuals or groups in a society who perform all of the tasks. Every society has individuals or groups who seek to formulate the rules constituting the moral code of the society. They do this in terms of some shared vision of what the social order should be and how it should function. In Western democracy, parliaments (or other forms of legislative assembly) serve this function. In antiquity, it was the prerogative of the rulers (or ruling elite) of the society. By creating rules, the rule creators define the character of normative behaviour as well as of deviance. This sets up the boundaries of civil society - beyond which people become deviants and outsiders. Rule creators essentially operate in a self-interested manner. Control of the rule making process grants them considerable power to shape the society for their own ends. We need think no further than what was done in South Africa by the Afrikaner elite to see the truth of this. The moral entrepreneurs who create the rules then encourage their enforcement to protect and enhance their individual and class (or group) interests. Deviance, therefore, is that which the moral entrepreneurs perceive to threaten their interests, and so declare to be aberrant.

Rule creation naturally requires a second function of the moral entrepreneurs. There must also be rule enforcers (Becker 1973). Malina & Neyrey seem to divide the function of the rule enforcers into two roles. First, *rule enhancers* must propagate and inculcate the rules and meanings of the rule makers to society, especially when new meanings and rules are developed. In first century Palestine, for example, the scribes and Pharisees seem to have performed this function (see Saldarini 1988). The success of the rule enhancers is crucial to obtaining broad support for the constructs of the rule creators and mobilising opposition to deviants. Second, *deviance-processing agents* must monitor and evaluate beliefs and behaviour in order to identify those who threaten or undermine the established moral order. When individuals or groups are perceived as threats to the moral entrepreneurs of a society, then they must be processed as deviants. Malina and Neyrey (1988:42-52), drawing on the work of Becker (1973), Schur (1971), and Pfuhl (1980) among others, suggest that this process has several important stages.

- (1) The individual or group perceived as dangerous must be denounced and successfully demarcated as standing outside the accepted world of meanings and the moral order. The ability of the moral entrepreneurs to do this hinges on their credibility and ability to convince people of the need to reject the perceived deviant(s).
- (2) A process of retrospectively interpreting the life of the perceived deviant occurs. The goal is to identify not only the offending behaviour, but the whole life and being of the person in terms of the master status of deviance (for example: 'pervert', 'criminal', 'mentally deranged', 'communist', 'racist', 'male chauvinist'). This labelling of the person as a deviant is at the heart of deviance-processing. If the label adheres to the person then he/she becomes an outsider who must be symbolically and physically removed. From the perspective of this paper, it is this stage which often generates uncivil discourse as the moral entrepreneurs seek to destroy the social acceptance of the person viewed as and labelled a deviant.
- (3) This process culminates with a status degradation ritual or a symbolic destruction, and often physical removal, of the newly created deviant from society. This is a ritual 'publicly categorising, recasting and assigning a moral character to deviant actors, resulting in a total change of their identity to that of a deviant' (Malina and Neyrey 1988:51). Effectively, a person successfully labelled a deviant is thereby given a new identity as an outsider. Malina and Neyrey (1988) show that this is precisely what the trial of Jesus sought to accomplish. The Jewish elite

successfully labelled Jesus 'a deviant without honour' who deserved death for the threats he made to the moral order of God as understood by the religious/political elite of Jewish society.

Deviance labelling does not always succeed. It is possible to interrupt the process of deviance labelling through a variety of techniques, and then to neutralise it. Malina and Neyrey, drawing on Pfuhl's (1980) five techniques for neutralising constraints, suggest five procedures which may be used to counteract attempts at deviance labelling:

- (1) denial of responsibility (as when external factors, such as poverty, forced the person to act in a manner considered to be deviant);
- (2) denial of injury (when, for instance, no one experienced a loss or injury, then the behaviour is not considered a serious act of deviance);
- (3) denial of the victim (when the victim of deviance is defined as morally deviant, deviant behaviour towards them is thought to be justified);
- (4) condemnation of condemner (as when the person labelled deviant condemns his/her condemners for their moral turpitude);
- (5) appeal to higher loyalties (when the person is in conflict between two sets of claims, such as those of human origin and those coming from God, and of necessity must choose loyalty to the higher claims).

These are important to note because the writers of the New Testament sometimes engage in uncivil discourse in response to deviance labelling by powerful opponents. While this was an attempt to turn the tables on their labellers, the effect historically was to exacerbate already existing uncivil relations.

DEVIANCE LABELLING AND THE RHETORIC OF UNCIVIL DISCOURSE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

I now wish to offer a case study of deviance labelling in the New Testament. My goal is to show the applicability of the deviance labelling model outlined above. This, in turn, will enable us to understand the social interactions giving rise to some of the uncivil discourse of the New Testament - which has proved extremely embarrassing to some contemporary Christians.

Paul: the moral entrepreneur

Because of the dominance of theological discourse in the reading of the New Testament, Christians are accustomed to thinking of the apostle Paul as a

theologian. But another way, more appropriate to the context of this conference and equally valid, is to think of him as a moral entrepreneur. Paul believed that God had commissioned him as God's special representative or apostle, to use his own language, for announcing the new divine message about universal redemption through Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. For Paul, his message was absolute truth revealed to him by God (Galatians 1:11-12, 16-17). The message involved an interpretation of humans as radically alienated from God through sin, but with a dramatic new opportunity to overcome their alienation through faith in Jesus Christ as God's agent for human redemption. Those accepting Paul's version of the gospel received a completely new definition of themselves, as well as a new set of doctrinal and behavioural imperatives to regulate every aspect of their lives - from personal sexuality to community ritual. The claim of divine origin for his gospel obscured Paul's own role as a moral entrepreneur, asserting divine legitimation for what was, in reality, his own version of the Christian symbolic world and moral order.

Paul and his missionary colleagues, such as Silvanus and Timothy, functioned as rule enhancers. They disseminated Paul's gospel, with its new world of meanings and its attendant moral code, among their largely Gentile converts. Once they had made converts, they urged and encouraged them to live their lives according to the new Christian moral order (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12), and insisted upon compliance to its norms as a necessary pre-condition for group membership (1 Corinthians 5:1-5; 2 Thessalonians 3:14).

Social conflict in Corinth and deviance labelling

What interests me in this paper is to see how Paul, as a moral entrepreneur, responded when he perceived a threat to his interests. This is the point at which Paul took up the role of deviance processor. A clear example of this is to be found in 2 Corinthians 10-13, where Paul finds himself in conflict with other Christian moral entrepreneurs for the important status of apostle - which bequeathed important authority on its holders. But, equally important, the status of apostle was related to a claim upon the loyalty of the Corinthian Christian community. If Paul were to lose the battle for the status of apostle among the Corinthians, it would imply the loss of their loyalty to him. This, in turn, would threaten to undermine his entire missionary work outside of Corinth as well.

The beginnings of this conflict can be seen in 2 Corinthians 1-9, where several things become clear. After Paul left Corinth, other missionaries arrived who expected (and, in fact, probably demanded) that they receive material support from the community in return for their missionary work (as 2 Corinthians 2:17

implies). These individuals arrived with letters of commendation which, as Marshall (1987:268-272) has shown, were intended to establish a relation of friendship and trust between the interloping apostles and the Corinthian Christian community. So successful were they in establishing this relation that they undermined Paul's own relation of trust with the community. This may well have been their intention, especially if Theissen (1982:40-54) is correct in saying that they represented a competing type of missionary understanding, opposing that advocated by Paul. Since Paul alleges that he had intentionally refused missionary support (see 1 Corinthians 9), his competitors were able to claim that he lacked the character of a true apostle who should be supported by those who benefit from their activity (Sumney 1990:146). They also appear to have claimed that the unimpressive character of Paul's activity refuted his claims to apostleship (2 Corinthians 6:1-10).

Judging by the angry tone of 2 Corinthians 10-13 (which I take to have been written after 2 Corinthians 1-9), the conflict must have intensified. In a recent study of Paul's opponents in 2 Corinthians 10-13, Sumney (1990) has provided a careful analysis of the issues between Paul and his rivals. A clear conflict situation had emerged as a group of Christian missionaries arrived in Corinth sometime after Paul's departure. They proffered an alternative definition of what a Christian apostle should be to the one presented by Paul when he was there. While we do not have direct access to what Paul's competitors maintained, Sumney (1990:181) concludes, from a methodologically sound reading of the evidence in 2 Corinthians 10-13, that:

the crux of the matter is the difference between Paul's and his rivals' understanding of the manifestation of the Spirit in apostles' lives. The central issue is the appropriate way of life for Spirit-endowed apostles. The issues that arise in connection with this debate are: pay for apostles, spiritual gifts, and presenting evidence of apostolic status.

Paul confronted the impugnations of his apostleship with a variety of counter attacks and counter claims against his competitors for the loyalty and support of the Corinthian Christian community. For example, he threatens his adversaries with divine power directed against their disobedience (2 Corinthians 10:1-6); he claims a higher set of motives for his actions than those of his antagonists (2 Corinthians 10:12-17); he makes a virtue of the charge that he did not receive financial support, as a true apostle would have (2 Corinthians 11:7-11); he offers his apostolic credentials in terms of suffering for the sake of the Gospel of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:23-29) and his exalted experience of paradise as an example of Spirit-endowment (2 Corinthians 12:1-10). In short, Paul appears to contest

the attempt of his missionary rivals to label him as a deviant in terms of their definition of what an apostle should be. This constitutes an interruption and attempted neutralisation of deviance allegations.

Paul goes a step further by 'condemning his condemners' directly, bringing his own deviance labelling process to bear on his detractors. He labels them 'false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ' and 'ministers of Satan in disguise'. He assures his readers that 'their end will match their deeds' (2 Corinthians 11:13-15). His deviance label is attached and justified on the grounds that his rivals claim apostolic status similar to his without being worthy of it. They have deviated from the apostolic norms established by Paul for the Corinthians. The implication of this is that the rival apostles must be eliminated from the community as they are rank outsiders who belong to God's arch competitor, Satan.

Paul's concluding remark in 2 Corinthians 13:10 warns that he is prepared to come and used his God given authority to resolve the matter. Presumably Paul is threatening a status degradation ritual in which he would expel his adversaries from the congregation. Nevertheless, his preference is for the Corinthians to do it themselves (2 Corinthians 13:11).

CONCLUSIONS

From the above, we may conclude that Paul and his antagonists at Corinth engaged in a complex set of social interactions dominated by negative labelling involving claims of deviance. Both Paul and his competitors, in battling for control of the Corinthian Christian community, sought to enforce their own definitions of 'apostle' upon the Corinthians. Their uncivil discourse (and the incivility it created within the community, judging from such texts as 2 Corinthians 12:19-13:4) was a manifestation of their conflict with one another.

Based on the case study of Paul and his interactions with the Corinthian community, we may conclude that uncivil discourse is a marker for conflictual situations that create uncivil society. It follows that we can hardly expect civil discourse to exist as long as conflict predominates in a society.

Long is correct. South Africa needs a civil discourse. But civil discourse does not create civil society in and of itself. Rather, agents of conflict must first recognise that the reduction in conflict and eventual resolution of major conflicts is in their own interests. This is what led to the change in discourse between the Nationalist Party and the African National Congress in 1990. With this recognition, a civil

discourse emerged which has slowly but surely led to a more civil society in South Africa. But the process is far from complete. Only when all the major groups who find themselves in conflict with the emerging centre begin to perceive that their own interests can best be served by reducing the level of conflict in society will an inclusive civil discourse emerge. If and when this happens a truly civil society may develop in South Africa.

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NOTES

- ¹ Saldarini (1991) employs deviance theory in the study of the Gospel of Matthew. He seems to be unaware of the work already done by Malina and Neyrey (1988) with this concept. His own use relies on a structural-functionalist orientation, while Malina and Neyrey use a more radical approach based on conflict theory.

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CHAPTER 20

Buddhist ethics and the South African situation

Michel Clasquin

Religion is a phenomenon with many faces. Even the most cursory examination of religions and religious people show many dimensions, such as experiential, mythical, and theoretical. This paper will focus on one such specialised area within the broad field of Religious Studies; namely, the ethical dimension of religion - understood here as the field of interpersonal relations rather than as wider ethical concerns, such as political or ecological ethics. The question raised here concerns how I should act towards other people, not in the abstract, but concretely, to the very flesh-and-blood people with whom I come into contact every day. Furthermore, this paper will focus on interpersonal relations within the Buddhist religion, and, even more specifically, as these are dealt with in the Buddhist text called the Singalovada Suttanta.¹

ETHICAL CODES AND THE CRISIS OF RELIGION

Contemporary research into ethical codes is not a luxury, but a necessity. Right across the modern and modernising world, traditional religion has lost its firm grasp on human minds. This is called 'secularisation', and it is as true of formerly Christian Europe as it is of formerly Buddhist Japan. Nor have people adopted nominally non-religious humanist codes to guide their behaviour, as was predicted by some in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Institutionalised Marxism has collapsed. Liberal humanism, despite the claims of some

fundamentalist Christians, has not been adopted as an explicit ethical philosophy by a large proportion of the world's population.

Thus, a considerable, and growing, part of the world's population has no explicit code of conduct on which to base their behaviour. The results are clear, including escalating violence, overcrowded jails, and drug abuse on an unprecedented scale. In South Africa, we may add political violence to this list. Furthermore, I maintain that religious traditions should abandon any hope of regaining their previous hegemonic positions. Modern, urbanised, technocratic society is a fact of life, and if present trends continue, it will become increasingly more difficult for any religion or secular philosophy to force its ethical code on people.

But the *need* for such codes of conduct still exists. While we may be quarrelsome, semi-carnivorous beings, we are also social animals who need to relate to our fellow-humans. What people have rebelled, and are still rebelling, against is not so much the existence of such a code as a code being imposed on them without their informed consent. The modern, democratic consumer-citizen is used to being able to 'pick and choose', to examine the various options and select the most appropriate based on the evidence. Why should ethical codes and their religio-philosophical presuppositions be different? Yet, to 'choose' an ethical system requires knowledge of what is available, and this implies a thorough search through the teachings of the great ethical thinkers.

THE SINGALOVADA SUTTANTA

The Singalovada Suttanta is particularly well suited to such a project. The themes of ethics and interpersonal relations, while present in Buddhism, are not this religious tradition's prime concern - as is the case in, for example, Confucianism. Moreover, most Buddhist texts on ethics fall in the category of Vinaya literature: that is, they deal with the monastic way of life. The Singalovada Suttanta, however, is one of the few ethical scriptures in Buddhism that is specifically directed at the layperson. In the Theravada tradition, it has in fact become known as the *gihivinaya*, that is, the 'householder's code of discipline' (Ahir 1989:20). The very last verse of the Suttanta makes it clear that Singala, the Buddha's interlocutor in this text, became a lay follower of the Buddha and not a monk, unlike so many of the Buddha's interlocutors in other Theravada texts. This alone would indicate that its primary message is intended for the layperson, rather than for the monk or nun.

The Singalovada Suttanta is well known and often quoted, both by contemporary Theravadin authors and western experts on Theravada Buddhism. The Singalo-

vada Suttanta is also known in Mahayana Buddhism: it is however less often quoted and discussed there than in the southern school.

Early Buddhism taught that life was a process in which all phenomena were mutually interrelated and causally related to each other. Reality was not to be seen in terms of discrete 'things', whose relationship to each other was philosophically highly problematical, but as a vast 'web' of interrelated events. Any event on the gross scale of human experience should be seen, not as a mere instance of one causal pattern, but as a subtle interplay between them. As the contemporary Buddhist thinker and social activist Ken Jones (1989:67) has very strikingly put it:

... the Buddha declared that although he taught that every willed action may produce an experienced effect he did not teach that all experienced effects are products of willed action. Thus, for example, a fatal but unexplained aeroplane crash may occur because of metal fatigue, or an oversight on the part of an overworked ground controller, or even a covert suicide wish by the pilot The (personal karma) of each of the passengers is surely the least likely cause. And it is contrary to the whole spirit of Buddhism to go hankering after some 'meaning' for the 'coincidence' that it was those particular passengers ... who booked onto that 'fateful' flight.

Among most western, and indeed among most eastern philosophies, such a theory would indeed be the death-knell of ethics. But Buddhists have nevertheless managed to be ethical people; texts like the one examined in this paper exhort people to behave in ways that are similar to those proposed by other religious and ethical systems. This gives us an initial clue that Buddhists do not see their philosophy and their ethics as irreconcilable.

'Skilful means' (Skt: upayakausalya) is the term used in Buddhism to denote the way in which one attempts to introduce Buddhist concepts and practices to those who are not Buddhists. A certain sensitivity is required for this. As Conze (1982:50) notes:

'Skill in means' is the ability to bring out the spiritual potentialities of different people, by statements or actions *which are adjusted to their needs and adapted to their capacity for comprehension* [emphasis added].

At times, this 'if it works, use it' methodology could go to some quite extreme points to achieve its goal: even to the point of denying such apparently fundamental Buddhist teachings as the Four Noble Truths.² A common corollary of this practice is the contention that Truth, and its experiential realisation in nibbana, is ultimately inexpressible and that *all* Buddhist teachings are to be considered as mere skilful means (Conze 1982:50; Pye 1978:159).

It is true that skilful means is a doctrine usually associated with the later Mahayana development of Buddhism.³ But it is equally true that the seeds for this important Buddhist concept were sown by the Buddha himself. John Hick (1991:142) has shown how instances of the concept can be found in the Pali canon in such well-known tales as the Parable of the Raft.⁴

As far as ethics is concerned, the implications of the concept of skilful means are as follows: ethics, seen as a normative system guiding human behaviour according to certain previously laid-down rules, is itself a skilful means and is therefore bound to disappear, eventually, when 'every blade of grass' attains enlightenment. But this does not mean that the compassion that is the hallmark of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will disappear. Enlightened ones act spontaneously, drawing their inspiration from the deep reservoirs of wisdom and compassion that are at their disposal. For them, there can be no question of obeying arbitrary rules of behaviour: all their existence is a continuing series of skilful means. But until we reach this point, rules do have some instrumental value, some utility for us non-enlightened beings.

The Singalovada Suttanta itself is an excellent example of this process. In this text, addressed to a layperson who apparently had little interest in religio-philosophical discourse, there is little of the abstruse philosophy and intricate psychological analysis found in so many other Pali Suttas - which were presumably aimed at a monastic and intellectual audience. Instead, there is practical, down-to-earth, ethical advice on behaviour in society, choosing friends, and interacting with others in daily life. Clearly, the style, and even the content, of the message have been adapted to the audience. While 'skilful means' may at this stage not yet have been elevated to a fundamental Buddhist doctrine, as it would be at a later stage, this text does show the Buddha's ability to adapt the delivery of his message to his audience.

THE QUESTION OF BUDDHIST ETHICS

Before we take a detailed look at the Singalovada Suttanta, it is necessary to ask what the religio-philosophical status of ethical injunctions is in Buddhism. Ethics

is not the central concern of much Buddhist or Buddhological literature. Frank Reynolds (1979:47 - cf 40), in his bibliographical essay on Buddhist ethics, is forced to admit that Buddhist ethics is an under-researched field, neglected by both ethicists and Buddhologists.

There is, however, a growing awareness of this deficiency. Jones (1979:85) suggests that:

as Buddhism becomes more influential in the West, it will need to examine, *as carefully as have the Christians*, where it stands in terms of the great social, economic, political and environmental questions ... [emphasis in original].

A similar awareness seems to have arisen among Buddhologists (Reynolds 1979:47-48).

Some scholars attempt to divorce ethics from the rest of Buddhist philosophy. Gananath Obeyesekere (1968:27), for instance, states that the Buddhist five precepts, unlike the Christian ten commandments, 'are not rooted in the salvation ideology (soteriology) of the religion'.⁵ Other authors, however, try to demonstrate that there is indeed a close link between Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist ethics. The ethical theory of bhikkhu Buddhadasa (1989), particularly as it appears in the collection of his essays named *Me and mine*,⁶ is an example. In contemporary western terminology, what Buddhadasa appears to be saying is that the Buddhist theory of not-self is not a form of nihilism precisely because it emerges from the teaching of dependent origination, which is a philosophy of endless relationality. Thus, what emerges from a thorough realisation of the Buddhist anthropology of not-self is an ecological understanding of reality, since it is by analogy to the processes of internal change that one can come to understand the nature of processes elsewhere. Trevor Ling (1979:96) suggests that:

... the notion of an un-social Buddhist is a contradiction in terms. The Buddhist is one who has accepted, in theory at least, that the isolated individual is a fiction.

In such an understanding, it is precisely the fact that I am composed of ever-changing factors which makes it possible for 'me' to relate to the dynamic complexes of factors that comprise what we conventionally refer to as other people (Reynolds 1979:41-42). The ecological mentality engendered by Buddhist practice, moreover, does not merely explain *how* it is at all possible that we can relate to others, but also *why* we should treat them well. If we are all part of the same great ecological complex, then there can be no question of treating *other*

persons well: what I am responding to positively is another temporary node in the great web of inter-relatedness. More poetically, it is another aspect of myself, if 'myself' is understood to mean neither a self-existent monad, nor as a spiritual 'higher self' identical with the universe as a whole, but as the particular way that certain factors have combined to shape the universe at this particular point on the space-time continuum. Thus, the Golden Rule can be viewed in a new light: in treating others well, we are, in a manner of speaking, so treating ourselves.

We are fortunate in having at our disposal not just one but five versions of the Singalovada Suttanta; one in Pali and four in Chinese. Unlike the dissertation on which it is based (Clasquin 1992), this paper restricts itself to the Pali version of the text.

EXPOSITION OF THE TEXT

The Singalovada Suttanta opens with the meeting between the Buddha and a young man called Singala, who is performing a ritual involving the worship of the six directions: East, South, North, West, below, and above. Upon the Buddha's inquiry, Singala admits he is performing this rite only because it was his father's deathbed wish. The Buddha says that the ritual is not the correct way to worship the directions, and upon Singala's prompting, he proceeds to preach the Suttanta.

He begins by enumerating the four active defilements. These are general ethical injunctions that are clearly in accord with more widely known Buddhist ethical formulas, such as the five precepts (*panca sila*). The taking of life, of that which is not given, sensual misconduct, and the telling of lies are strongly discouraged. The prohibition of the consumption of alcohol is missing from this list, but this is the usual way of condensing the fivefold ethical code. In any case, it reappears in a later list, making its presence in this one unnecessary.

It is important to note that these precepts should not be understood as Buddhist equivalents of the relatively rigid and legalistic injunctions found in some other religious and philosophical traditions. The precepts are voluntary commitments on the part of each individual Buddhist, and the degree to which each of them is followed depends on an individual's personal commitment to the Buddhist way of life. The ultimate level of commitment would, of course, be to join the monastic order, in which case this simple scheme is expanded to over two hundred exceedingly precise rules.

Once the ethical groundwork has been laid, the Buddha names psychological factors that hinder people from obeying. The first three (desire, anger, and

delusion) are familiar to Buddhists as the three 'unwholesome roots', but this text goes further by adding a fourth factor; namely, fear. This, in my opinion, is a valuable addition to the more traditional threefold formula.

Next, the Suttanta discusses certain types of behaviour that are said to be conducive to 'loss of wealth'. While it may initially seem an anomaly in a sermon given by a radical world-renouncer like the Buddha, the term 'wealth' can actually be seen as a metaphor for a life that is improved on all levels, from the purely physical to the highest level of spiritual attainment. The six types of behaviour are the following:

- (1) Careless addiction to liquor and drugs.
- (2) Being about on the street at night.
- (3) Frequenting fairs.
- (4) Careless addiction to gambling.
- (5) Joining evil friends.
- (6) Idleness.

The great disadvantages that will flow from each of these forms of behaviour are described in some detail. Here, the text proposes a sober, disciplined, almost puritanical lifestyle, centred on the home and family, rather than on public entertainment or nocturnal socialising. Gambling and intoxication are frowned upon, since these activities tend to dissipate wealth. They are incompatible with the pursuit of Buddhist ideals of un-impassioned activity. The discussion of the dangers of sloth show a kind of prosperity ethic, rather than a work ethic, emerging from the Suttanta.

The next section of the text discusses four types of bad, or false, friends and four kinds of true friends. Each of these is defined in terms of four characteristics. But while the four bad and four true friends do show a certain thematic connection to the general ethical injunctions discussed above, they do not form a perfect symmetry (such that, for example, the first type of true friend is the direct converse of the first type of false friend). Instead, the eight types of friend are each defined on their own terms and do not form a cohesive scheme.

The Suttanta then moves to its main message: the Buddha takes Singala's existing ritual and gives it a new, ethical interpretation: to 'worship the eastern direction' does not mean literally bowing down to that direction - or to any divine entity believed to reside there - but rather treating one's parents in a certain way. Firstly, the child should support its parents, presumably in the parents' old age. Apparently, this injunction was necessary even in a society in which parents were theoretically accorded the highest reverence: a case is

recorded of a widow who became a bhikkhuni (Buddhist nun) purely to escape the ill-treatment she received from her children and their spouses (Commentary on Dhammapada, verse 115. Quoted in Horner 1975:15). Secondly, one should 'fulfil [one's] duty towards them'. It is not clear just which duties are meant here.

The child should 'maintain the family lineage', which presumably means that one should marry and produce offspring. This is a rather unusual dictum for a religion emphasising the ideal of a celibate, monastic existence, but consider that no Bodhisatta in his final life can set about attaining full Buddhahood until he has married and produced offspring.⁷ While this condition was certainly not applied to non-Bodhisattas,⁸ it does show a certain deference to the generally accepted belief in an orderly movement from youth, to full maturity, to the renunciation of the world in one's old age. In addition, since the Buddha's interlocutor was a layperson, procreation and maintenance of the family lineage would not be a contentious issue between them. In the lay society of the time, a male was not considered a complete person - a condition symbolised by his ability to offer the Brahmanic sacrifices - until he was married and had produced (preferably male) offspring (Lee 1967:290). Thus, this apparent endorsement of marriage and parenthood can be seen as a 'tactical' move by the Buddha to facilitate the acceptance of Buddhism by members of society: in other words, a form of skilful means. It does not negate the fact that celibacy would have been required if Singala were to enter the monastic order.

The last two requirements of the child refer primarily to actions that should be undertaken after the parents' deaths, although the first of these two might also be undertaken when the parents had renounced the world, or had merely relinquished control over the family business to the child. The first is an undertaking to spend or invest one's inheritance wisely. This underscores the theme of frugality which runs through the entire Suttanta - for instance, in verses 7, 11, 13, and 19.

The child's duty to 'give offerings to propitiate (the parents') spirits' may also be a deferring gesture to popular religious practices - it must be remembered that Singala was not yet a Buddhist, and funerary rites were an important feature of Brahmanic religion as they are of great importance in contemporary Hinduism. On the other hand, it may simply signify a Buddhist 'transference of merit' ceremony to be performed upon the parent's death, a canonically sanctioned rite which is still performed in certain Buddhist countries today (Gombrich 1971:207-210).⁹

None of the various duties towards the parents, except the last, strike one as particularly 'religious'. If Singala treats his parents in the sensitive and

compassionate ways recommended by the Buddha, they will naturally respond by treating him in a similar way: they will 'restrain the child from evil' and 'establish him in goodness'. These are once again general ethical pronouncements of the kind with which we have already become familiar in previous verses.

Parents will also instruct the child in a branch of knowledge (*sippam sikkhapenti*). A disagreement between different translations arises here: *sippam* can be understood as an art or a branch of knowledge (as we might put it, a science), but also as a craft (Rhys Davids and Stede 1986:710) and, by extension, a trade or vocation. This latter interpretation has been preferred by many commentators (De Silva 1988:45, for example). If this latter interpretation is correct, and the general tenor of the Suttanta suggests that it is, then this should not be interpreted as a plea for education for its own sake, as Subasinha appears to do in his translation.¹⁰ The parents are here said to perform this task themselves, instead of sending the child to an *acarya* or *guru* for instruction in Vedic lore, as was the custom at least among the wealthy (Basham 1963:164-166; Crawford 1982:61-63). In a society which was already becoming stratified into what would later become known as the caste system, this kind of vocational training would tend to reflect the father's own occupation, at least as far as boys were concerned. Girls were almost inevitably expected to become wives and mothers.¹¹ True, the pursuit of knowledge, especially of a metaphysical kind, was accorded the highest reverence in Indian society, but only when it was being pursued by those who had renounced the world. Householders were expected to concern themselves with practical affairs.

While the term 'arranged marriage' may strike the modern person as a violation of one's freedom and dignity, we should not imagine that this was inevitably a case of a marriage between two youngsters who had never previously seen each other. In the Buddha's time, most people lived in small villages, and even cities were not the vast, impersonal agglomerations we know today. Child marriage, common in later Indian history, was apparently rare in this period (Horner (1975:28-29; Basham 1963:167). Horner (1975:30) believes that both the family's and the girl's consent played a role in the eventual choice of a spouse. If so, one imagines that this must have applied equally or even more so to boys.

The parents' final response to the child's caring ministrations was to hand over an inheritance in due course. As we have already seen, one of the child's duties was to administer this inheritance responsibly. At first sight, and considering the difference between the child's *duties* and the parent's *response* to the execution of these duties, this appears contradictory: how could the child administer an inheritance which the parent would only hand over if the child administered it

well? But causal relations in Buddhism are never an all-or-nothing affair. The increasing performance, by the child, of moral duties would increasingly influence the parent to respond in all five ways mentioned here. Therefore, the child would receive increasing portions of the inheritance when the child had evidenced ability to administer it.

The actions of the parents discussed here refer clearly to how they would treat grown children. This shows how the Suttanta was never intended as a universal declaration of Buddhist ethics, but is intensely contextualised and centred on the person of Singala. It can, however, be said that small children in ancient India were treated with great indulgence until the age of five, when they would either commence their studies or start working the fields, as the case might be (Basham 1963:162).

Singala is overjoyed at having heard this Suttanta pronounced. He praises the Buddha effusively and becomes a lay Buddhist. That, then, is the Singalovada Suttanta.

DISCUSSIONS OF THE SINGALOVADA SUTTANTA IN CONTEMPORARY BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS

Authoritative figures in the field of Buddhist studies have not hesitated to belittle this text and disparage it as a non-Buddhist intrusion into the canon. I quote two passages by Winston L King (1989:21; 1964:204):

[The Singalovada Suttanta] seems quite un-Buddhist in its language of Brahmins and heaven; and the route by which it made its way into the canon may have been devious.

On such meagre and non-Buddhist material they would seek to erect a total social philosophy. This witnesses to [the] meagreness of social-ethical materials in the Buddhist scriptures and tradition.

However, Pali scholars like Pande (1974) believe the Singalovada Suttanta to be an early addition to the Canon, though not one of the very earliest. If we can accept as a methodological rule that an early text has a higher probability of being a fair reflection of what the Buddha, his retinue of monks, and their immediate successors thought, then the onus is on King to show the way in which this text made its way into the canon in a 'devious' way.

While it is fair to describe the specifically ethical material in the Pali canon as 'meagre' and to question the possibility of constructing a 'total social philosophy' from it, I would dispute King's description of the Singalovada Suttanta as 'non-Buddhist material'. The fact that many of the injunctions encountered here are also taught by many other religious traditions is not in itself sufficient to deny this text its Buddhist status - this merely reminds us that all religious teachings arise from a shared matrix of human experience.

Ethics and interpersonal relations, I believe, cannot be seen as derived entirely from a particularly 'religious' dimension, but come into being from our experience of encountering others, only afterwards being codified in structured and idealised form by great religious teachers. This can be seen clearly from the way in which the Vinaya came into being. In almost every case, the Buddha pronounced a new rule only after a monk had been caught doing something which was considered to be against the spirit, if not yet against the letter, of the teachings.

But that codification should then be integrated with the philosophical principles of the religious tradition if it is to make any sense and play a meaningful role within that tradition. In addition, a particular text should show an awareness of other texts dealing with the same, or closely related, topics. If this is not the case with the Singalovada Suttanta, then King would be justified in calling it 'un-Buddhist'. Even then, we should still have to account for the fact that this text has *historically* been accepted as an authentic Buddhist document by the Buddhist tradition itself. One should ask whether a modern Buddhologist has the authority to override a religious tradition's decision on what is genuine and what is not, especially from within the phenomenological tradition of scientific investigation. But I believe that this text does reflect central Buddhist philosophical themes sufficiently to warrant the appellation of 'Buddhist text'.

To start with, it must be admitted that none of the main Buddhist philosophical theories, such as impermanence, insubstantiality, unsatisfactoriness, and dependent origination,¹² are explicitly named in this text. In this, the Singalovada Suttanta differs from many other Buddhist canonical texts. But this does not necessarily imply that such conceptual strategies cannot exist in the style or presentation of the text. A reading which looks beyond the immediately apparent is called for.

The four 'active defilements' in verse 3 are identical to the first four aspects of the fivefold morality (panca sila) that is a common Buddhist motif. Furthermore, it is conventional in that the missing regulation is the one concerning the abuse of intoxicating substances, and this is the usual way in which the fivefold

formulation is condensed in other parts of the canon. Moreover, these four injunctions are also connected to 'right speech' (*samma vayama*) and 'right action' (*samma kammanta*), both of which are specifically ethical aspects of the noble eightfold path.

The four 'conditions of wrong action' in verse 5 are likewise a traditional formulation. Desire, anger, and fear are the traditional 'three unwholesome roots' - to which fear is added in this text. The six 'causes of loss of wealth' are not themselves a traditionally well known list,¹³ but the way in which they are presented does show the influence of Buddhist philosophy: the motivation for correct behaviour is consistently presented as an extrinsic one. For example, we are not told to refrain from gambling because it will make us feel morally superior to gamblers. On the contrary, the undesirable results of gambling are spelled out in detail. In other words, the philosophical theme expressed in this section is the vital Buddhist one of causality. The same is true of the sections which deal with the various kinds of friends and, especially, the verses on the true meaning of the six directions. It is remarkable how the basic structure of these verses reflects the very Buddhist concept of causality. In every case, the phrasing can be translated as 'you *should* treat these people in such-and-such a way, and if you do, they *will* reciprocate in certain other ways'. In the first case, the term used is 'paccupatthatabba', which is the future passive participle of 'paccupatthahati', meaning 'to stand up before' (Rhys Davids, and Stede 1986:385) and, in this context, more figuratively 'to tend'.¹⁴ As the future passive participle denotes something which should be done, it is here translated as '[they] are to be tended'. But the term used to express the other party's response to Singala's action is *anukampati*, which is simply the present indicative active of a verb meaning 'to have pity on, to commiserate, to pity, to sympathise with' (Rhys Davids and Stede 1986:34). Again, this should be understood in context: an action in response is implied here, and it can therefore be translated as 'responding in sympathy'.¹⁵

But perhaps the most important Buddhist philosophical theme to be noted is that of skilful means. Here I should like to refer to Krüger's work on the *Tevijja Sutta*,¹⁶ where it is shown how the non-Buddhist idea of 'companionship with Brahma' is not summarily rejected, but is instead 'gradually eroded by means of good-humoured yet relentless cross-examination' (Krüger 1988:57; cf Krüger 1989). Singala was evidently less intellectually-inclined than the Buddha's interlocutors in the *Tevijja Sutta*, since he received a far more authoritative and less argumentative sermon than they did.

Despite this, we can see something of the same process at work. The Buddha must have regarded Singala's ritual as religiously meaningless, and wished to

convert him to a lifestyle more congenial to Buddhist ideals, for there is no evidence that Singala's early-morning devotions had effected any changes to his general way of life. But how easily the Buddha could have charged in with a statement like, 'Young man, you really ought to treat people better ... your parents, for instance. And while you're at it, drop this ridiculous morning ritual; you might catch pneumonia or something.' But not the Buddha. Instead, we see him using the very categories so highly revered by Singala, then subtly redefining them.

First, however, the Buddha begins with a discussion of general ethical principles. Then he expounds on the value of good friends and the dangers of false ones. Only when an atmosphere congenial to the discussion of ethical and interpersonal relationships has been created does he return to the 'worship' of the six directions. And just as the *Tevijja Sutta* subtly transmutes the ideal of 'companionship with Brahma' into a consideration of the Buddhist ideal of *nibbana*,¹⁷ so does the *Singalovada Suttanta* change a physical ritual performed purely out of a sense of filial duty into a sense of consideration for Singala's fellow-humans. This is a sense of consideration, moreover, accepted because Singala has been convinced that it is the right thing to do by dint of the desirable results that originate from it.

Even this, it could be argued, is not quite exclusive to Buddhism. After all, were not the anonymous authors of the *Upanisads* simultaneously 'interiorising' the Brahmanic rituals into the practice of 'internal sacrifice' that would later be called *yoga*?¹⁸ But the mere fact that the process of re-interpretation can also be found elsewhere does not obviate the importance which Buddhism has always assigned to the 'skilful' handling of religious differences. Indeed, skilful means could well be seen as the prime teaching device of Buddhism, just as the trio of impermanence; insubstantiality, and unsatisfactoriness form the basis of its metaphysics, anthropology, and psychology.

LEARNING FROM THE SINGALOVADA SUTTANTA

The *Singalovada Suttanta* is strongly contextualised. It is clearly directed at a specific person. The Buddha is here not making an *ex cathedra* pronouncement on human relations that is meant to be true for all human beings at all times. He is giving concrete advice to a specific individual, advice tailored especially to this individual's circumstances. Its teachings are difficult to generalise, even to another person in the same society, let alone to us who live so much later. Lengthy as the *Pali Canon* may be, however, it cannot possibly contain all the events of the Buddha's career of forty-odd years of teaching and proclaiming the

dhamma. Innumerable exchanges between the Buddha and other people must have been lost to us. So why has this one been preserved?

There are a few indications within the text that point towards the possibility that the message contained in it was meant to be generalised and universalised after all,¹⁹ although these are far outnumbered by the indications that refer the message specifically to Singala. But when we consider that Ananda's presence is not mentioned, it seems likely that the Buddha must have made a point of re-telling the story to him, thus ensuring that it would be retained, for it is through Ananda, so tradition holds, that the canon came into being.²⁰ If so, this would indicate that the Buddha regarded the message of the Singalovada Suttanta as an important one for the future of the Buddhist teaching, and by extension, for all human beings.

Thus, we have established that the Singalovada Suttanta does have a general, as well as a specific, relevance. But let us be more precise. What relevance does this ancient text have for us in the late twentieth century and especially in South Africa?

Like many ethical systems, the one presented by the Singalovada Suttanta can be summarised by a Golden Rule.²¹ But it is a Rule that may at first strike non-Buddhists as rather strange. For it does not say, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you', as does the Christian ethic. It does not say, 'Do not treat others as you would not have them treat you', as does Confucianism. In both of these, the justification for ethical behaviour is deontological. The moral or ethical is seen as a closed category of concepts, with a converse, perhaps, in the immoral, but with no relation to the amoral, the general course of nature which has precious little interest in humankind and its affairs.

The ethics of the Singalovada Suttanta may at first seem like an afterthought stuck on an otherwise imposing system of philosophical subtleties. Closer examination, however, reveals that the text is in fact completely integrated into that philosophical system. For its Golden Rule could be formulated as follows:

Do unto others as you wish - you *will* be done to accordingly.

Neither the Christian nor the Confucian examples mentioned above contain such a guarantee of results. Neither provide a clear link to the natural world of impersonal cause and effect. In other words, the ethical prescriptions of the Singalovada Suttanta function within the same causal framework as the rest of the world, as seen by the Buddhist teachings. Human beings and their interpersonal relationships are not uniquely 'moral' agents who are somehow

separated by this from the rest of the universe. On the contrary, we function in the same ecological 'web' of causal relations as do the largest stars and the tiniest subatomic particles. Buddhist ethics follows inexorably from Buddhist philosophy.

It follows, then, that ethical injunctions, and the legal and other codified systems of rules and regulations that emerge from them, are not carved in some meta-physical granite. On the contrary, they are subject to change (*anicca*), have no substantial existence independent of the circumstances that brought them about (*anatta*), and are forever unsatisfactory and subject to revision (*dukkha*). Above all, they must be applied skilfully, for in themselves they are only a means to an end, the end being the liberation that results from the radical insight into the true nature of this fluid, impermanent reality that Buddhism seeks to awaken us to.

What we should take from the *Singalovada Suttanta*, then, is not so much a specific set of rules, but the skilful means, the compassion and sensitivity which it exemplifies. If a specific injunction in this text can still be shown to be broadly applicable to our life, then it should by all means be accepted and acted upon. But Buddhist ethics, like all of Buddhism, remains a question of 'come and see' (*ehipassika*). A text like the *Singalovada Suttanta* may be useful in sensitising us to the variety of relationships in which we are engaged, the possible ways in which we can act within those relationships, and the possible results of those actions: it is not, and should not be seen as, a blueprint for all human behaviour for all time.

And this, too, is the *Suttanta's* message to us in South Africa. While rules, regulations, and constitutional blueprints are important insofar as they can help us to direct our behaviour in ways that will hopefully be harmonious and agreeable, there can be no ethical behaviour unless it derives from an ethical attitude towards our fellow citizens. It is not from a rigid adherence to a set of rules that a 'kinder, gentler' South Africa will arise, but only from the wisdom and compassion that lies inherent in the hearts and minds of individual South Africans.

NOTES

- 1 Sutta Piaka, Dgha Nikaya, Sutta 31.
- 2 This occurs, for instance in the famous Heart Sutra, where it is said that 'there is no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path' (Conze, trans ed 1983:163). A little closer investigation, though, reveals that this sutra is stating that this is the case 'in emptiness', and thus the denial of what would seem to be the fundamental teaching of the historical Buddha is in fact a polemical device to point towards the Mahayana interpretation of these teachings as 'emptiness' (Skt: *nyat*).
- 3 As Pye (1978:118) has put it: 'The term skill in means occurs only rarely in the Pali Canon, and then incidentally or in late texts.'
- 4 Compare chapter 7 of Pye 1978.
- 5 See also King (1964:38), who states that 'in common with atheistic humanism Buddhism proclaims that there is no metaphysical backing for moral values nor any great overall purpose by which man should be guided and to which he should conform his ways'.
- 6 Some of the relevant essays have also been printed in *Dhammic Socialism* (Buddhadasa 1986).
- 7 The historical Buddha is said by Buddhist tradition to have been married to a princess named Yasodhar and to have sired a son, Rahula, before he renounced the world.
- 8 Consider in this respect how the Buddha ordained his son Rhula at a tender age, and how many other important bhikkhus entered the order while still young, presumably unmarried men.
- 9 But see the criticism of this practice, and its canonical orthodoxy, by Horner (1975:10n8).
- 10 'They would educate them in arts and sciences' (1982: 15).
- 11 With the singular exception of prostitutes, who did train their daughters to enter their mothers' profession (Horner 1975:20).
- 12 Pali: *nicca, anatta, dukkha, paticcasamupada*.
- 13 Except for their similarity to the list in the Vyaggapajja Sutta (Anguttara Nikaya, Atthaka Nipata, Chapter vi, verse 53).
- 14 See Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids (1977:171) for an explanation of this figurative derivation. Both Walshe (1987:467ff) and Rhys Davids & Rhys Davids (1977:180) translate this term as '(he) ministers'.
- 15 Walshe (1987:467ff) translates this as 'reciprocates'; Rhys Davids & Rhys Davids (1977:180) as 'loves'.
- 16 Sutta Nipata, Digha Nikaya, Sutta 13.
- 17 Admittedly, this is not spelled out in the Sutta, but as Krüger (1988:55) states, there are pointers within this text that strongly suggest it.

- ¹⁸ Eliade (1970:111). For a Buddhist confirmation of Eliade's theory, see the Kadanta Sutta (Sutta Pitaka, Digha Nikaya, Sutta 5).
- ¹⁹ Such as the inclusion of Singala's dead father in the list of people with whom Singala was to deal in various ways.
- ²⁰ Ananda is renowned in Buddhist tradition as the one monk who had the most perfect recollection of all that the master was supposed to have said.
- ²¹ While this method runs the risk of oversimplification, it does have the advantage of expressing the kernel of a text's message in stark outlines.

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CHAPTER 21

The Qur'ân in Muslim society: The case of early Islam

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INTRODUCTION

The chanting of the Qur'ân in unison in a mosque school, or its exegesis in a religious seminary (*dâr al-'ulûm*) are familiar images of the sacred text of Islam in society. The Qur'ân is well-known as a clearly defined and bounded text with which things get done in Muslim society. This study is a proposal to investigate the manner in which the Qur'ân is manifested in Muslim society. Taking the early Islamic reception of the Qur'ân as an example, the paper explores the notion of both a continually recited Qur'ân as a closed book, and continually re-cited Qur'ân as an open text in communal contexts.

The book, assumed to be a complete and final book, is a central image of Islam. William Graham (1989), in his analysis of religious scripture in comparative perspective, singles out Islam as a religion of scripture, written and spoken, par excellence. He (1985:5) writes:

whereas the divine presence is manifest for Jews in the Law and for Christians in the person of Christ, it is in the Qur'ân that Muslims directly encounter it.

Graham stresses the oral and aural aspects of this experience, as opposed to simply its experience as calligraphy. Both, however, imply the centrality of a revealed text.

I do not believe that this notion of a spoken text, liberating as it may seem from the perspective of a book studied, analysed, and dissected, exhausts the Muslim experience of the Qur'ân. Coburn's study of Hindu scriptures has gone beyond the notion of scripture as a final and closed book by pointing out the difficulty of separating the original text (*sruti*) and the subsequent explanation and interpretation (*smṛti*) in Indian sacred literature. He (1989:11) concludes that:

India, it would appear, wants both the literal preservation and the dynamic recreation of the word, and the movement between these two foci - whether or not they be called *sruti* and *smṛti*, respectively - is both subtle and continuous.

I believe that by looking carefully at the reception of the Qur'ân in Muslim society, a similar complexity will be found. The Qur'ân in Muslim society is expressed in religious vectors which emphasise its indivisibility and completeness. At the same time, more subtly, the Qur'ân is also manifest as an open and dynamic text. In order to emphasise the textual and receptive link between the two, I am calling the literal reproduction, 'recitation', and the second 'a re-citation'.

THE QUR'ÂN AS RECITATION: CLOSED AND COMPLETE

The literal recitation of the Qur'ân as book is manifested and reinforced in a host of vectors, ritual and non-ritual, in Muslim society.¹ The most common and well-known of these vectors emphasising the boundary of the Qur'ân is the beautiful and melodious recitation of the Qur'ân from 'cover to cover'. The recitation is especially pronounced during the month of Ramadân during which the Qur'ân is believed to have been revealed all at once.² The literal recitation of the Qur'ân as one 'book', is appreciated by all Muslims, whether they understand the word of God or not, and whether they can read Arabic or not. The literal recitation of the Qur'ân reinforces the notion of the Qur'ân as a fixed and closed book between two covers (*mushaf bayn al-daffatayn*).

The recitation of the Qur'ân is also inextricably linked with the Muslim tradition of memorising the Qur'ân. Muslim apologetics often argues that this practice preserved the Qur'ân from getting lost like other scriptures, and links memorisation in modern times to early Islam when the Qur'ân was transmitted orally.

Clearly, however, the memorisation of the entire Qur'ân (recitation) from a printed book emphasises the boundaries of the book as it does its contents.

The closedness of the Qur'ân is also reinforced in Muslim scholarly discourse. It is the first source of Islamic law and theology and the conscious point of departure of mystical speculation. The 'Book' is the central point of reference of Islamic discourse. All other hermeneutical and interpretive devices, including the *sunnah* (example of the Prophet), come second and subsequent to the Qur'ân.

Central to the appropriation of the text as a bounded unit in Islamic discourse is a Muslim history of the text. This history registers the transmission of the Qur'ân from Gabriel to Muhammad, from Muhammad to the scribes, from the scribes to Zayd b. Thâbit, from Zayd b. Thâbit to the authoritative *Mushaf* 'Uthmân (the copy of 'Uthmân), and from the copy of 'Uthmân to the diverse regions (*amsâr*) which preserved the Qur'ân into acceptable readings (*qirâ'at*); and from thence to the present day. Many traditions about the history of the text of the Qur'ân underline the notion that a full text was transmitted. The following account (Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalânî nd 9:10.) illustrates and emphasises the book:

Zayd b. Thâbit reports the following: Abû Bakr called for me after the battle of Yamâmah and 'Umar was with him.

He said: 'Umar came to me and said: "The loss of life among the readers (*qurrâ'*) has been high and I fear for the readers of the Qur'ân with whom it may disappear. I therefore, suggest that you order the collection (*jam'*) of the Qur'ân."

I told 'Umar: 'How can I do something which the Messenger of Allah did not do.' But 'Umar replied: 'By God, this would be a good thing.' And 'Umar persisted with this view until God opened my heart to his view, and I was convinced.

Zayd said that Abû Bakr (turned to him) and said: 'You are a young man blameless among us. You used to write the revelation (*wahî*) for the Messenger of God. Follow the Qur'ân and collect it.'

Zayd said (to his audience) that if they (Abû Bakr and 'Umar) had asked me to carry mountains, that would not have been heavier than the task of collecting the Qur'ân. So I told them: 'How can you do something that the Messenger of God did not

do.' But Abû Bakr replied: 'By God, this would be a good thing.' And he persisted with this view until God opened my heart to his and 'Umar's view, and I was convinced.

So then I found the Qur'ân on palm branches, stones and the hearts of men (*rijâl*)

Then the pages (*suhuf*) were entrusted to Abû Bakr until he passed away; then with 'Umar during his life; then with Hafsa daughter of 'Umar.

The story of the 'book' then continues during the reign of 'Uthmân. According to al-Suyûtî (d. 911/1505), 'Uthmân was advised to control the readings (*qirâ'ât*) of the Qur'ân, so he requested Hafsa's copy and:

called upon Zayd b. Thâbit, 'Abd Allah b. al-Zubayr, Sa'îd b. 'As and 'Abd al-Rahmân b. al-Hârith b. Hishâm. They made a number of copies (*masâhif*) then 'Uthmân returned Hafsa's copy and distributed the new *masâhif* to each and every region. Furthermore, he ordered that all other pages and copies other than these new *masâhif* should be burnt.

The story of the Qur'ân, then, is that the copies (*masâhif*) of 'Uthmân came into being and replaced the pages and readings. The history of the text of the Qur'ân is intended to show that the Qur'ân was not victim to the same fate as the earlier scriptures. It thereby reinforces the notion of a full and bounded book of revelation.

The notion of a book is closely related to the understanding of religion in the Qur'ân as well as in subsequently Islamic thought. Islamic scholarship regards religions with a 'revealed book' in a special light. The Jews and Christians, as 'people of the Book' (*ahl al-kitab*), are both honoured and taken to task for what they did with the 'book' given to them.

Finally, the boundedness of the scripture is displayed in the very form of writing the Qur'ân. Different styles of calligraphy are used for the text of the Qur'ân and its interpretation. Furthermore, ornate arabesque decorations mark off the text of the 'Book' from commentary or translations. Whether it is the beautiful borders that bound the text or a simple ruler line, the body of the Qur'ânic text is set apart from the reflection and commentary upon it.

It is clear, then, that the boundedness of the Qur'ân as a book is promoted in the myth of its collection, oral recitation, memorisation, and its role as preeminent source in Islamic scholarly discourse. It is also displayed in the calligraphic conventions developed in the writing of the Qur'ân.

THE QUR'ÂN AS RE-CITATION

Vectors for open and dynamic readings

As much as the recitation of the Qur'ân is manifested in Muslim society, its re-citation is also coded within rituals, symbols, and discourse. In the first instance, the re-citation of the Qur'ân lies beneath the surface of the symbols and myths of the Qur'ân as bounded text. However, it is also present quite explicitly in certain religious practices. An exploration of the re-cited Qur'ân in early Islam will illustrate this openness.

The problem of a simple and pure recitation of the Qur'ân is emphasised in standard Arabic lexicons concerning the meaning of the Arabic word for recitation, *tilâwah*. The root meaning of the word means a sense of 'following' and 'coming after'. It would appear then, that *tilâwah* would be the repetition of the text, literally speaking, in the sequence of historical stages of God, Gabriel, Muhammad, Companions, Zayd b. Thabit, readers, and Muslims. However, the lexicons insist that *tilâwah* is not only the literal reading of the text, but also practice (*'amal*). Following the word of God by reading (*tilâwah*) includes both word and deed (al-Isfahânî, 1961:75). We can see, then, how the recitation (*tilâwah*) incorporates the significant sense of doing things with the text. And this 'doing' opens up a window to a whole plethora of meanings from ethical responses to the text as well as the magical use of the text.

Recent studies on the Qur'ân in early Islam confirm this re-citation. Graham has pointed out the close relationship between Divine word and Prophetic word in early Islam. He contrasts the interiority of the revelation, and therefore its lack of text, with the exteriority of 'a book in which the signs are explicated, an Arabic recitation for a people who know' (Qur'ân 41:3). Graham argues that both notions are present in the early Islamic understanding of revelation. Contrasting the literal reading from Gabriel to Muhammad, Graham relates the following story from Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845) which emphasises the priority of the non-literal 'recitation':

The Apostle of God used to say, 'Revelation used to come to me in two ways, [Sometimes] Gabriel would bring it to me and

tell it to me as one man speaking to another, and that would [afterwards] be lost to me. And [sometimes] it would come to me as with the sound of the bell, so that my heart would become confused, [but] that would not be lost to me.³

This contrasts sharply with the idea of a literal reading of the Qur'ân emphasised as a complete and bounded scripture in the following:

On the authority of Ibn Sirîn, the Prophet used to present the book to Gabriel every year during the month of Ramadan. And in the year in which he died, he presented it twice to Gabriel. And Muhammad b. Sirin said, 'I hope that our recitation corresponds to the final presentation' (Ibn Sa'd, 2:195).

The interiority of the revelatory event in the first report contrasts sharply with the notion that revelation took the form of a book. In the former, there is a link between the particular historical experience and revelation, while the latter attempts to set the book, qua book, apart from the experience, historical and psychological, of the first receiver, the Prophet Muhammad.

This experience of the Book was not restricted to the Prophet as the first recipient of the text. The following example cited by Graham (1977:13) of a recitation by one of his companion develops a similar relationship with revelation:

... (a) Companion had a horse that tried to bolt away one night from his courtyard when (he) began to recite the divine word. He went out to see what had happened to the animal, but found nothing that could have frightened it. When he told this to Muhammad the next morning, the latter explained the incident by saying: 'That was the *sakînah* that descended with the recitation (*qur'ân*).'

And Graham adds in his note (#14, p21):

I understand Qur'ân in this context to mean not 'the Book' as a whole, but the specific 'recitation' (i e, the act of reciting the particular *âya* or *sûrah*) that the man was engaged in on the occasion in question.

The notion of a *qur'ân*, particular to the companion, on a specific occasion points to the re-citation of the Qur'ân. In the example cited here, the Prophet confirms

the recitation, which was a *qur'ân* and not simply a reading of the companion. The descent of the *sakînah* conferred a divine element to the companion's *qur'ân*, similar to the descent of the spirit (*al-rûh*) during the *qur'ân* of the Prophet.

The re-citation of the Qur'ân, however, was not restricted to the changing and creative context around the full and bounded text. This link between historical experience and revelation is emphasised in the idea that certain verses were revealed in response to certain situations. A careful look at some 'occasions of revelations' (*asbâb al-nuzûl*) reveal how the boundedness of the Qur'ân in its literal dimension was broken.⁴ The following example will show how a phrase of the Qur'ân is changed in response to a particular historical moment. The phrase is from 4:95:

Those among the believers who sit back without handicaps, are not equal to those who strive in the path of God with their wealth and their lives

In regard to this verse, al-Tabarî (1984/1405: 4:5:228), one of the earliest Qur'ân exegetes cites a report with the following interesting 'occasion of revelation' (*sabab al-nuzûl*):

On the authority of al-Barrâ', the Messenger of God (may the peace and blessings of God be upon him) said: Bring me a shoulder and a board. And then he wrote on it 'Those who sit back among the believers are not equal to those who strive ...'. But 'Amr b. Umm Maktûm was standing behind him and asked: 'Do I have exemption, O Messenger of Allah?'. And upon this, it was revealed 'without handicaps'.⁵

This particular example underscores the relation between history and the Qur'ân. Ibn Umm Maktûm's query resulted in a changed text, a re-citation, which broke the closedness of the *literal* text to real historical experience. The great Islamic scholar, al-Suyûtî (1:34-35), collected a few more of these instances under the heading 'that which has been revealed in accordance with the words of some companions'.

This re-citation of the Qur'ân was also evident in a consideration of the early understanding of *ahruf* and *qirâ'ât* (readings). Muslim scholars accept a number of readings (*ahruf*) of the Qur'ân as authentic reflections of revelations:⁶

U bayy b. Ka'b narrates the following: I was in the *masjid* when a man entered and began his prayer. He recited something which I did not recognize; and then recited another which was like the first. When we completed the prayer, we both went to the Messenger of God, and I said: This person has recited something which I cannot recognize; and read another which was worse than the first.

The Messenger of God requested both to recite; and then praised them both.

(Ubayy continued his narration): I felt a sense of doubt and wished that I was still in *jâhiliyyah* (pre-Islamic ignorance). But when the Messenger of Allah saw my reaction, he struck my chest, and I perspired profusely. It was as if I was looking at God, the almighty in detail (*faraqan*). He (Messenger) then told me: 'Gabriel was sent to me to recite the Qur'ân with one letter (one reading)', but I replied: 'Be kind to my community.' Then he (Gabriel) came back to me and said: 'Recite it in two ways'. But again I requested that my people should be spared. And (Gabriel) responded: Recited it seven ways (*ahruf*) (Al-Nawawî 6:102).

This quotation stressed the fluid nature of the revelation with the Prophet himself. The letters referred to in the quotation as *ahruf* imply a multiplicity of texts as part of the revelation, and hence militate against the notion of one closed and bounded text.

Muslim scholarship has distinguished between these variant *ahruf*, in which the Qur'ân was revealed, and the readings (*qirâ'ât*) which spread with the writing of the Qur'ân (al-Zarqânî 1:139-192; 412-488). The former seems to set the principle for the variant revelation of the Qur'ân to Muhammad, while the latter captured the variant readings as manifested in the historical transmission of the Qur'ân, both oral and written. Muslim scholars maintain that the readings (*qirâ'ât*) are the historical carriers of the letters (*ahruf*), but are not identical to them. The *ahruf* are all related to the experience of the Qur'ân in the presence of the Prophet, while the *qirâ'ât* express the experience of the early scholars. In both cases, the Qur'ân is assumed to be a fixed bounded and preferably written text, first imperfectly and later accurately. The closedness and boundedness of the text seems to guide the understanding of both terms.

More likely, I would like to argue, the fluidity of the readings was an expression of re-citation which became unacceptable in an orthodox creed which fixed the

vocalised text (or body of texts). If, on the contrary, we begin with open-ended *qirâ'ât* of one oral and written text from the beginning of revelation, confirmed by the Prophet and continued with the early scholars later up to the establishment of a fully vocalised text, then what we have is one category: an open-ended 'text' where recitation and re-citation are both present. While many of the readings may be attributed to the vagaries of transmissions, quite a few point out the interpretive element in the re-citation.

A brief analysis of a few variant readings will indicate their hermeneutical context, and thereby the possibility that the recitation was not impervious to change. Without abandoning his general bias for tracing a reading to the earlier companions, al-Tabarî often states that readings may be recited if they conform to one of the readings well-known among Arabs:

And the correct reading in this case is that both readings are well-known; and (both are) grammatically sound in the language of the Arabs; so whichever a reader recites will be correct (1984/1405:12:22:2).⁷

Al-Tabarî cites both the familiarity of recitation as well as the grammatical correctness as supports for a correct reading. He would certainly give the genealogical support (*isnad*) of a reading more credence than grammatical correctness. Nevertheless, the idea that grammar is a proof for a correct recitation meant that the social context filtered into the recitation of the Qur'ân.

The following example (Al-Tabarî 1984/1405:14:28:10) indicates that the recitation (*qirâ'ah*) of the Qur'ân was not impervious to a post-Muhammadan interpretation:

On the authority of Ibrahim, he said that 'Abd Allah [ibn 'Abbas, a well known commentator] used to recite/read it as *fa 'mdû ilâ dhikr Allah* [go to the remembrance of God] and used to say: 'if I had read/recited it *fa 's'aw* [rush], I would have rushed and dropped my cloak'.

The alternative readings of *fa 'mdû* and *fa 's'aw* were not simply two possible readings. 'Abd Allah preferred that reading not in accordance with the contemporary recitation of the Qur'ân. His choice arose directly out of a hermeneutical consideration, in this case, one that had only to do with a particular manner of dressing. In effect, the hermeneutic gave rise to a re-citation. Later exegetical

activity of the Qur'ân may celebrate the variety of interpretative insights that may germinate out of the readings, but here we can see how the interpretation gives rise to a different reading.

The place of re-citation

The importance of the process of interpretation and the event of interpretation in the new re-citation points to the importance of the reception of the text. Moreover, the re-citation of the Qur'ân takes place in a formal religious space, and not in a religious vacuum. The religious context of the recitation was as important as the ingenuity of interpretation. Bowman's study of the Qur'ân in early Islam is helpful in elucidating the place of the re-cited Qur'ân. He has suggested that the 'keryane' of Jewish and Christian Arabs was the communal reading of scripture, and the immediate model for the recitation of the Qur'ân among the early Muslims. Moreover, he suggested that the Qur'ân did not only refer to the entire recitation, but to the recitation (*qur'ân*) on a special occasion in a gathering.

In the context of pre-Islamic Arabia, the gathering was none other than the pre-Islamic gathering called *majlis*. Duri (1983:19) has pointed out the social nature of the tribal *majlis* which played a major role in Arab social and religious life:

The *ayyâm* stories had originated in evening tribal gatherings (*majâlis*), and were an orally transmitted assemblage of collective tribal accounts.

The most eminent of such *majâlis* in Western Arabia was the Dâr al-Nadwa of the Quraysh. Ibn Hishâm (1955:1;24) relates that it was the legendary founder of the Quraysh, Qusayy, who established it and assumed its leadership. The notables who met in the Dâr al-Nadwah, the so-called *mala'*, formed the oligarchy of Meccan Arabia. Even though they were not always effective, their meeting represented a significant assembly. As Watt (1953:8) noted:

(it was) an assembly of chiefs and leading men of the various clans. The council was merely deliberative and could go its own way, and therefore the only effective decisions of the *mala* were the unanimous ones.

When the Prophet Muhammad began preaching in Mecca, he often addressed his '*qur'ân*', re-cited from Gabriel, to the assembly of notables, quite plausibly

the *majlis* of the Dâr al-Nadwah. The oligarchy's desperation to force the Prophet into at least some conformity was matched by his desperation to be heard in their *majlis*. The Prophet made a conscious effort to bring his message, his *qur'ân* and re-citation, to the assembled Dâr al-Nadwah. As the supreme religious and social space in Mecca, the Prophet sought to bring the Qur'ân to the chief *majlis* in town.

The recitation of the so-called Satanic verses indicate the Prophet's re-citing of the Qur'ân in the *majlis* of the Dâr al-Nadwah. An extract from one of al-Tabarî's accounts (1984:10:17:186-188) illustrates the re-citation in the context of a gathering:

The Quraysh said to the Messenger of God: Those who sit beside you are merely the slave of so-and-so and client of so-and-so. If you made some mention of our goddesses, we would sit beside you, for when the nobles of the Arabs come to you, and when they see that those who sit beside you are the nobles of your tribe, they will have more liking to you.

So Satan threw (something) into his formulation [while reciting the particular *qur'ân*] and these verse were revealed: 'Have you considered al-Lat and al-'Uzza, and Manat, the third, the other?' and Satan caused to come upon his tongue, 'These are the swans exalted, whose intercession is to be hoped for, such as they do not forget (or "are not forgotten")?'

This report puts together the major elements for a re-cited Qur'ân where meaning, interpretation and text come alive in the context of a *majlis*. The particular verse was recited in the context of a political and social context. But more particularly, the Qur'ân was re-cited, taking on a new form and a new meaning under pressure of the Quraysh.

The Meccan cases I have cited are located in the *majlis* of the Quraysh. But the Prophet organised his own gatherings (*majâlis*) among the minority of believers in Mecca where the recitation/re-citation took on a different form. In Medina, this small *majlis* was transformed in the formal gatherings in the mosque of the Prophet. In particular, the institution of the Friday sermon in Medina becomes the supreme example, but not the only one, for the re-citation of the Qur'ân. It is a gathering (*majlis*) and a *qur'ân* (re-citation) for the Muslim community.

The image of the Prophet explaining the 'meaning' of the Qur'ân to the companions has probably been overlaid by Muslim scholars trying to find justification for their own particular views. Nevertheless, the re-citation of the Qur'ân is conveyed in the recollection of these gatherings. The following verses of *Surah Jumu'ah* captures the nature of the re-cited Qur'ân on a Friday:

O you who believe, when the call is given for worship on Fridays, hasten to the remembrance of God (*dhikr allah*) (Q 62:9).

The reference to *dhikr allah* in the verse may be a reference to the Qur'ân, being one of its names. Moreover, there are a number traditions which report that the Prophet recited verbatim Qur'ânic chapters to his companions. As an address directed to a particular audience in a particular context, this reading of the Qur'ân would be the re-citation in a gathering that I have been developing. The following report from Muslim's collection of *hadîth* (Nawawî *Sahîh Muslim* 7:102) illustrates the *dhikr allah* as recitation/re-citation of a Qur'ân in Medina:

Once a tribe newly converted reached Medina. The Prophet felt that they had to be helped. When the Muslim were assembled at the mosque, he delivered a sermon 'O mankind! reverence your guardian Lord, who created you from a single person.' Then he read out another from the chapter Hashr: 'And let every soul look to what (provision) he hath sent forth for the morrow.' (v 18) Lastly, he said, 'Cash, cloth, or corn whatever you may spare - even a bit of date - offer charity for the sake of God.'

Muslim proposed a context for the recitation in which the meaning of the two verses and the words of the Prophet are part of one re-cited Qur'ân. In the particular context of a drought and the religious space of a gathering, a new Qur'ân was re-cited in Medina.

Re-citation routines after the Prophet

A few examples would indicated that, in terms of the re-citation of the Qur'ân, the Prophetic period was not unique. The *majlis* in the post-Prophetic period, especially in the latter half of the Umayyad period, indicates that the re-cited Qur'ân took place in the circles of scholars that were beginning to meet in the various cities of Islam. These circles ranged widely in subject matter; or rather, the subject matter of the Islamic disciplines took shape in these circles. The

circles were often at bitter odds with each other. Sometimes, the differences raged on in the same broad area, like the jurisprudence of 'Iraq and Medina. Sometimes, however, there was a deliberate attempt to discredit some groups like the story tellers (*qussâs*) and the early Sufis. The conflict between the story tellers and the more 'respectable' scholars provide a hint that the circles, in addition to everything else they might have been, were also about different readings (re-citations) of the Qur'ân.

The *qussâs* (story-tellers) were wide-spread in the early history of Islam. They seem to have been popular preachers who dipped freely into the folk-lore of Yemen and the Fertile crescent to expand, explicate and embellish the stories alluded to in the Qur'ân (Duri 1983:16). In fact, they may be understood to be taking the following verses to their natural consequences:

If you are in any doubt about what we have revealed to you, then ask those who have read the book before you; verily, truth has come to you, so do not be among the doubters ... (Q 10:94).

Before you (singular) too, we only appointed mortals whom we inspired, so ask the people of remembrance (*dhikr*) if you (plural) do not know (Q 21:7).

As much as the Qur'ân was relating (*yaqussû*) the stories of the previous Prophet, the preacher 'continued the work of the Prophet' (Pedersen 1955:15). This preaching was located in a pre-Islamic custom of the tribal *majlis*. Later, a resistance against such 'intrusions' developed among the majority of Muslim scholars (Newby 1979:685-697). Al-Tabarî's exegesis of the following verse (Qur'ân 16:43-44) cannot better illustrate the strain of the new reading:

And we always sent messengers before you to whom we revealed. So ask the people of remembrance (*dhikr*) if you do not know. About clear proofs and the psalms (*zûbur*)

Ibn 'Abbâs (in al-Tabarî) said: He (God) told the disbelievers among the Quraysh that Muhammad is mentioned in the Tawrah and Injil

Instead of continuing with the subject as the Prophet, Ibn Abbâs changed it to the Quraysh in the second part of the sentence so that the verse would now be read (re-cited really):

We have certainly sent messengers before you (O Muhammad) and revealed to them. So (O, people of Quraysh) ask the people of the Remembrance (*dhikr*) if you do not know.

Furthermore, Ibn Abbâs (Al-Tabarî 1984:8:14:109 then specified and limited the content of the enquiry which may be sought from the Jews and the Christians:

About the clear signs and the Psalms (*zabur*) in which Muhammad is mentioned).

The first reading of the Qur'ân together with the detailed embellishment of its stories had taken shape in the gatherings (*majâlis*) of the preachers; and the second reading arose in scholarly exegesis. Under the influence of *hadith* schools, which were also gatherings (*majâlis*), material which made no pretence of any Prophetic source was suppressed. The *hadith majâlis* (gatherings) were the major instruments for the control and curtailment of the early preachers. More importantly, they replaced the re-citation of the preachers with their own re-citation.

Pedersen's (1955) study of the early preachers point to another aspect of the re-citation of the Qur'ân. He suggested that the early gatherings of the preachers lay the seeds for the growing asceticism among Muslims. In general, these gatherings may be perceived as the location for reading the world-denying verses in the Qur'ân. Ibn Sa'd's report underlines the close relation between recitation and preaching:

The first preacher was 'Ubayd b 'Umayr at the time of the 'Umar b. al-Khattâb. On the authority of 'Atâ he says, 'I went with 'A'ishah who asked "Who is that?". He said, "I am 'Ubayd b. 'Umayr". She asked, "The qâss of the people of Mecca?" He said, "Yes". She said, 'Make little of it (khafif), for the *dhikr* is weighty".⁸

Pedersen (1955:217) identifies the *qasas* (story-telling) in this quotation with the *dhikr* (remembrance) of the Sufis. Accordingly, 'A'ishah seemed to have supported the *dhikr* of the Sufis over the *qasas* of the story-tellers. Without wishing to deny the connection between some preachers and the Sufi gatherings (*majâlis*), it seems that to me better to understand 'A'ishah's statement as a reflex of the *dhikr allah* in the Friday sermon mentioned in the Qur'ân. Accordingly, the *qasas* of Abu 'Ubayd would be the *dhikr* about which A'ishah cautions him. In the terms of this study, this *dhikr Allah* as a sermon would be a re-citation of the Qur'ân.

With the emergence of clearly-demarcated disciplines with clearly demarcated bodies of text in the form of the Qur'ân (and its readings) and *hadîth* (and its narrations), the preachers found themselves increasingly marginalised. The scholarly circles during the second and third centuries of Islam produced the closed and bounded text of the Qur'ân together with rituals and a mythology that supported it. The vectors of recitation, however, did not completely eliminate re-citation. The creativity of an open-ended Qur'ân (or rather *Qur'âns*) continued in the new *majâlis*. First, the story-tellers re-cited the narratives of the Qur'ân in the earliest gatherings. Then, the ascetic Sufis grew from within the old story-tellers' (*qussâs*) gatherings. Later, in order to distance themselves from the negative stigma attached to the story-telling circles from the *ulamâ*, the Sufis became the most virulent critics of the *qussâs* (Pedersen 1955:221-222). Clearly, the Sufis wanted to distance themselves from the story-tellers in the eyes of the *hadîth* scholars. More significantly, however, it was the Sufis who took over the mantle of the *majâlis*. And it is they who provided a new location (*majlis*) for the re-citation of the Qur'ân. The following statement in Abû Tâlib al-Makkî's (d. 386/996) *Qât al-qulûb* attributed to Anas b. Mâlik addressing two preachers shows the transmission from a *qâss* re-citation to a Sufi re-citation:

The *dhikr*-meetings are not like your meetings. One of you tells tales (*yaqussu*) and preaches (*yakhtubu*) to his listeners and steadily continues the tale (*hadîth*), but we are sitting commemorating (*wanadhkuru*) the faith and considering the meaning of the Qur'ân (*wanatadabbaru*) and endeavouring to understand the religion (*wanatafaqqahu*) and enumerating the benefactions of God, most High, to us.⁹

For the later Sufis of the 3rd and 4th century, Mâlik was distinguishing between two types of *dhikr*-meetings: that of the story-tellers who simply lecture (*yakhtub*), and that of the Sufis engaged in *dhikr*, *tadabbur*, *tafaqquh*, and counting the blessings of God. Each of these activities are reflexes of activities recommend in the Qur'ân. The quotation legitimates the various disciplines and activities of the schools whilst denying the story-teller a space in the fraternity.

I have so far tried to uncover the re-citation of the Qur'ân within the gatherings wherein Sunni thought was developed. This re-citation is even more explicit in Shi'i thought. According to Imami Shi'i understanding, the true understanding of the scripture is reserved for the Imams, the descendents of the Prophet Muhammad. Ayoub (1988:178,181) notes that the Imams are believed to be *muhdathun* (addressed), 'possess(ing) the true and limitless meaning of the Qur'ân'. This understanding of the Qur'ân is clearly open-ended; even though it may privilege the openness for a select few. The continuous flow of the

Qur'anic recitation continues with the Isma'ili propagandists for the Fatimid caliph. But the most daring re-citation of the Qur'ân in Islamic history has been the work of Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirâzî, the Bab (d. 1850). According to Lawson, Ibn a'-'Arabi's concept of the perfect human (*al-insân al-kâmil*) provided first the Shaykhis and then Bahâ' Allah with the necessary step to relate themselves to the universal cosmos. In a Shi'î version of the 'perfect human being', Baha' Allah re-cited a Qur'ân that was unique in the history of Islamic exegesis of a closed, bounded text. Without the usual *ay* ('that is') or *ya'anî* ('this means'), ruler line, or calligraphic convention, which usually separates the closed text of the Qur'ân from interpretation, Baha' Allah's 'exegesis' has been described as 'usually a simple paraphrase of the Qur'ân in which the Bab makes various substitutions with words which give a meaning much more specific to his own claims and situation' (Lawson 1988:230-231, 247). While this may be unusual for the history of a bounded text, it is in fact re-citation of the Prophet, the re-citation of the story-tellers in early Islam, and the re-citation of the Sufis.

CONCLUSION

The Qur'ân as a book is received in Muslim society in a number of rituals and myths. On the one level, the Qur'ân in Muslim society is a recitation of a full, bounded, and closed book. This book is expressed and reinforced in the literal recitation of the Qur'ân, the myth of its historical genealogy, the convention of Qur'anic calligraphy, and the principles of Islamic scholarship. There is, however, another Qur'ân in Muslim society. A bit more difficult to detect, this Qur'ân is also present, but as an open-ended, dynamic text that is most clearly visible in gatherings, *majâlis*. Through the oral and aural context, new meanings and revelations are interwoven into the text. The re-cited Qur'ân was clearly present in Prophetic society. At one level, the particular experiences of individual Muslim readings of the Qur'ân were their *qur'âns* (re-citations). In addition, the particular interpretations of texts in given circumstances lead to highly idiosyncratic re-citations. The Prophet was engaged in a re-citation, and not only a recitation, in the context of Arabia and his Meccan opposition. I also believe that the gathering, the *majlis*, was the most likely place where such re-citation took place. In the case of early Islam, the *majlis* of re-citation became the mosque gatherings of the Prophet Muhammad. In post-Prophetic Islam, the re-citation was most evident in the various conflicting approaches and disciplines of experiencing the Qur'ân.

NOTES

- ¹ The term 'vectors' is borrowed from Folkert (1989:173) who speaks about the dual canons in Christianity and Hinduism in terms of the kinds of rituals and behaviour that surrounds the texts. I am using it in the sense that the ritual or mythical story reinforces one or the other Qur'ân.
- ² As Fazlur Rahman (1979:14) argued, this was the revelation of the Qur'ân onto the heart of the Prophet Muhammad.
- ³ Graham points out that Bukhari's version omits the notion that the non-literal is retained to a greater extent than the literal. Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqât al-kubrâ*, 1:197.
- ⁴ Rippin (1985:14-15) draws attention to the late development of the *asbâb al-nuzûl* as a hermeneutical tool.
- ⁵ Cf also Bukhari, *Kitâb Fadâ'il al-qur'ân Bâb Kâtib al-nabî* (4) in Ibn Hajar nd 9:22.
- ⁶ According to al-Suyûti (1:75), it is possible that not all of the reading found in the 'seven readings' (*qirâ'ât*) can be traced back authentically to the Prophet. But variant readings are in principle confirmed, their variation being sanctioned by the Prophet himself, i.e. the revelation in seven *ahruf*.
- ⁷ See also 12:23:55.
- ⁸ Cited by Pedersen 1955:217 from Ibn Sa'd, *al-Tabaqât al-kubrâ*.
- ⁹ Quoted by Pedersen 1955:219. Abû Tâlib al-Makki (1985/1405: 1:146-162) devotes a large section in his work to argue against the authenticity of the story-tellers' gatherings (*majâlis*).

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