APPROACHING THE QUR'ÂN

CALL TO PRAYER (Sunni)  
(adhān)

Allāhu Akbar (God is most great) (four times)
I testify that there is no god but God (twice)
I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God (twice)
Come (alive) to the prayer (twice)
Come (alive) to flourishing (twice)
Allāhu Akbar (God is most great) (twice)
There is no god but God (once)

allāhu akbar  (four times)
God is most great

ashhadu an la ilāha illa llāh (twice)
I testify that (there is) no god but God

ashhadu anna muḥammadan rasūlu llāh (twice)
I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God

ḥayy 'ala ṣ-ṣalā (twice)
come (alive) to the prayer

ḥayy 'ala  l-falāḥ (twice)
come (alive) to flourishing

allāhu akbar (twice)
God is most great

lā ilāha illa llāh
there is) no god but God

HEARING THE QUR'ÂN

THE CALL TO PRAYER begins with Allāhu Akbar (Allah or God is most great), a phrase that orients the worshipper toward God as the center of reality. The first two repetitions are quick and staccato. In the third and fourth repetitions, the ā sound is extended and modulated, setting the tone for the rest of the call to prayer and reflecting in amplified form a distinctive feature of all Qur'anic recitation.

After the repetitions of Allāhu Akbar, known as the takbir, the Muezzin then recites: I testify that there is no god but God. The phrase “no god but God” is used in the Qur'an and contains, in a particularly condensed form, the Qur'anic use of sound:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>lā</th>
<th>ilāha</th>
<th>illa</th>
<th>llāh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no</td>
<td>god</td>
<td>but</td>
<td>God</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The entire phrase, known as the tahālīl, is based on the ā, 1 and h sounds in various combinations. The tahālīl is the first part of the Islamic testimony or shahādā, which is the first of the five pillars of Islam. The second part of the testimony then follows, repeated twice:

“I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God.”

After the completion of the shahādā, the Muezzin calls the faithful to prayer. Ḥayy, usually translated as “come,” also connotes “come alive” or “live.” The word for flourishing, falāḥ, indicates the fulfillment (in this world, the next world or both) promised in the Qur'an to those who carry out the prayer and work for justice.

The adhān then ends with the repetition of the takbir (allāhu akbar) and the tahālīl (lā ilāha illa llāh). The last phrase is drawn out in a sustained, emotive cadence. It embodies the Qur'anic sound quality of ḥuzn, or existential sadness at the separation of humans from their source. The reminder of that separation is also a call to turn back to home.
THE OPENING

In the name of God
the Compassionate the Caring
Praise be to God
lord sustainer of the worlds
the Compassionate the Caring
master of the day of reckoning
To you we turn to worship
and to you we turn in time of need
Guide us along the road straight
the road of those to whom you are giving
not those with anger upon them
not those who have lost the way

BECAUSE OF ITS ELOQUENT STATEMENT of devotion and the manner in which it pervades religious life, The Opening has been called the Islamic equivalent of the Lord’s Prayer in Christianity.

The word translated “opening,” fātiha, means the opening in the sense of the opening of a chapter or a story. Unlike the other early hymic Suras, The Opening occurs not at the end of the Qur’anic written text, but at the very beginning. It is the most recited of all Qur’anic Suras, not only in prayers and liturgy, but also in everyday life. After business transactions, for example, The Opening is recited by both parties as a mark of good faith and a solemn affirmation of the responsibilities affirmed by each partner.

The Opening is the only Sura in which the phrase “In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring” does not occur before the Sura, but is actually considered part of the Sura itself. Just as that phrase is woven into the pattern of simple activities as a form of reminder so “Praise be to God” (al-ḥamdu li llāh) has become part of everyday speech. It is used after any good news or any praise, and as a response to the greeting “How are you?”

The two qualifications of God are “lord of the worlds” (the creator deity) and “master of the day of reckoning” (the deity who brings finality to all acts and all lives). The response for those hearing or reciting The Opening is to turn toward God in worship and for refuge.

The “the road straight” frequently is translated as “the straight path.” The term rendered here as road, sirāt, would have connoted something grand to the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula. There are many words in Arabic for paths; the Arabs of Muhammad’s time traveled through the desert on barely discernible paths. By contrast, the word sirāt means a paved road, such as the roads of the Romans which the Arabian travelers might come across in their journeys.
The Tearing, Verses 1-8

1 bi smi In the name  
llāhi of God r-raḥmāni the Compassionate r-raḥim the Caring

1 idha when  
s-samā‘u the sky nfatārat is torn

2 wa idha and when  
l-kawākibu the stars ntatharat are strewn

3 wa idha and when  
l-bihāru the seas fujjirat are poured forth

4 wa idha and when  
l-qubāru the tombs bu’thirat are burst open

5 ‘alimat then will know  
nafsun a soul mā qaddamāt wa akhkharat what it has given and held back

6 yā ayyuha oh, o  
l-insānu human mā gharraka what has deluded

7 al-ladhi who  
khalaqaka created you fa sawwākā then formed you fa ‘adalak then set you right

8 fi ayyī in whatever  
sūratīn form mā šā‘a he wished rakkabak he set you

The pure of heart will be in bliss  
The hard of heart will be in blazing fire  
the day of reckoning, burning there —  
they will not evade that day

What can tell you of the day of reckoning  
Again, what can tell you of the day of reckoning  
A day no soul has a say for another  
and the decision is at that time with God
THE MOST HIGH

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

Holy be the name of your Lord most high
Who created then gave form
Who determined then gave guidance
Who made the meadow pasture grow
then turned it to a darkened flood-swept remnant

We will make you recite. You will not forget
except what the will of God allows
He knows what is declared
and what lies hidden
He will ease you to the life of ease
So remind them if reminder will succeed

Those who know awe will be brought to remember
He who is hard in wrong will turn away
He will be put to the fire
neither dying in it nor living
He who makes himself pure will flourish
who remembers the name of his lord and
performs the prayer

But no. They prefer the lower life
Better is the life ultimate, the life that endures
As is set down in the scrolls of the ancients
the scrolls of Ibrâhîm and Mûsâ


Those who cannot be brought to remember their essential role and responsibility as human beings are said to prefer the lower life (al-ḥayât ad-dunyâ). The word for “lower” here is also the word, when used as a noun, for “world,” a meaning that has led some translators to render the phrase “the life of the world.” Although there may be a play on the two senses of dunyâ here, grammatically the term cannot mean “life of the world” and I have adhered to the more immediate meaning of the term. The other problem with terms like “life of the world” or “worldly” is that the Qur’ân generally does not view the world in negative terms, seeing it instead as the gift of an infinitely generous creator that, however transitory it may be, is to be cherished rather than despised.

The final verse suggests that the central message of The Most High is the same one that was revealed to Abraham (Ibrâhîm) and Moses (Mûsâ).
THE EMBRYO

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

Recite in the name of your lord who created—
From an embryo created the human

Recite your lord is all-giving
who taught by the pen
Taught the human what he did not know before

The human being is a tyrant
He thinks his possessions make him secure
To your lord is the return of every thing

Did you see the one who stopped a servant
from performing his prayer?
Did you see if he was rightly guided
or commanded mindfulness?
Did you see him call lie and turn away?
Did he not know God could see?

But no. If he does not change
we will seize him by the forelock
the lying, wrongful forelock
Let him call out his gang
We will call out the Zabāniya
Do not follow him
Touch your head to the earth in prayer
Come near

THE EMBRYO IS NUMBERED among the first revelations, if not the first, given to Muhammad. The opening words of the Sura, “recite in the name of your lord,” are interpreted as an announcement to Muhammad of the beginning of his prophecy. The site of the original revelation is believed to be the cave of Hira’, near Mecca, where Muhammad used to retire alone for meditation and devotions.

The word ‘alaq, translated here as embryo, has also been translated as blood clot. The word refers to something that clings, or more specifically to a coagulation of blood or other liquid. While the exact biological sense of the term is vague here, the larger meaning seems clear enough. The human being is created from humble beginnings—a drop of semen, a blood clot, an embryo. That a being with consciousness, with the ability to communicate and understand, developed from such a beginning is, in Qur’anic terms, yet another sign to be meditated upon. It is another indication of mystery, another indication that human beings, despite their rational ability and apparent self-sufficiency, are dependent on another force, both for further understanding and for being itself.

The reference to the pen is one of several Qur’anic metaphors involving instruments of writing and the tablets on which the writing occurs. Later Islamic authors interpreted the pen and the tablet (lawh)—Sura 85, final verse—in a variety of ways. Some considered the pen to be the divine intellect and the tablet the world soul on which the eternal, heavenly Qur’an is inscribed.

The Sura ends with a warning and an invitation. In the warning, those who engage in oppression are told that one day they will be judged, and that if they try to call out their gang of helpers, they will be met with a group of Zabāniya, believed by some to be a species of jinn (genies). The refer-

(Continued on page 99)
THE SMALL KINDNESS

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

Do you see him who calls the reckoning a lie? He is the one who casts the orphan away who fails to urge the feeding of one in need Cursed are those who perform the prayer unmindful of how they pray who make of themselves a display but hold back the small kindness

THE SMALL KINDNESS relates a series of activities in a way that grounds much of Islamic moral theology. The first act is rejecting or calling a lie the *din*, a word that can mean either the religion or the day of reckoning. Just as the word often translated as “believe” is more passive than the Qur’anic conception of holding fast to the belief or keeping the faith, so the concept of calling the reckoning (or religion) a lie is more active than standard English translations such as “unbelief.” Those who reject the reckoning—which, in early Meccan revelations, is the foundation of religion—are those who abuse the orphan, who are indifferent to those suffering in their midst, and who are neglectful in performing the prayer. This neglectfulness has been interpreted in two ways by Qur’anic commentators: either as neglecting the proper timing and posture in performing the physical movements or as performing them mechanically while thinking about other things, without following through on the implications of the prayer for other aspects of life and behavior. The second interpretation is supported by the fact that the verse on prayer is followed by two verses on self-display and neglecting the small kindness.

Display, particularly of one’s own acts of worship or piety, betrays a lack of true generosity. Self-display ends as a form of self-delusion, as a person ignores what the Qur’an announces will be ultimate in the evaluation of each life at the moment of reckoning: a genuine act of kindness, however small it might seem. There is a moral circle of causality implied in the Qur’anic passages on this issue. The refusal to acknowledge the moment of reckoning results in blindness to the small act of kindness. On the other hand, the true weight of that small act will be revealed on the day of reckoning to those who have carried it out and to those who have neglected it alike.