Chapter-4

Watt’s Thoughts on Quran
W.M. Watt’s Thoughts on Quran

Watt has contributed to the understanding of the revelation not only among Christians but also among Muslims. His view differs from the traditional Muslim understanding of revelation. He produced two significant works directly related to the Quran. The first was Islamic revelation in the Modern World (1969) and the second was the revised edition of his teacher Richard Bell’s ‘Introduction to the Quran’ (1970). Watt has also dealt with the issue of Islamic revelation in a number of places in his other publications. In the analysis of his views on revelation, I will focus my attention mainly on his “Islamic revelation in the Modern World”, since an examination of the related passages of his other works has shown that there are no major changes in his views on this issue.

William Montgomery Watt points out the possibility to believe that Muhammad had received some knowledge of the Quranic stories or events which were not earlier known to him. Through some informant who had acquired his knowledge from the books and this connection he misinterprets Quranic verses.

On one hand he says that there is no difficulty in understanding the verses of the Quran that convey the factual historical information which was earlier not known. On the other hand, he points out another
possibility by saying that these Quranic verses in question, were probably understood in a slightly different way. He emphasizes on the absence of information by the usual channel of oral tradition in Quranic verses and he highlights the possibility that they have been some information received by someone whom he does not name. He calls it the extraordinary channel of written books.

What the reader is made to understand is that there are contradictory statements here as well as and the interpretation of Quranic verses given by Watt don’t carry weight for example the lost word of Sura Joseph.

"In telling the story of these (people) there was indeed a lesson for men of insight, it was not an invented tale, but the confirmation of what (revelation) was present already, and the exposition of everything, and guidance and a mercy to a believing people".4

He concludes that the Quran does not claim to give information which is not known to any human being. Further Watt says that it is only form of lesson of the stories that comes by revelation is really well grounded in itself.

Dealing with the same topic he quotes different verses from Quran which gives the account of the unseen that God revealed to Muhammad was neither known to him nor to any Prophet’s people before this. To
mixup two different verses of the Quran and to interpret it in a different connotation shows the text of Quran needs to be understood properly. God's words cannot be taken for granted whether we are able to understand it or not, the text cannot be exploited at any cost.

Watt provides a detailed discussion on the presuppositions of the Quranic revelations. In doing so apparently, he discusses all aspects, but when the reader goes into the fact, he would sometime find the writer has understood certain facts to a greater extent. For example the Quran gives similar message through Muhammad what other Prophet's communicated to their people it is related to essentials of the message, for example, the belief in God, the last day, the belief in Prophet's their books and the Angels.

Going into the depth one notices Watt analyzing the Arabic language. He finds it linked with a special cultural Milieu and much of the Quranic text is addressed specifically to Arabs, for example, the address to the tribe of the Quraysh, the great success at Badar, the reverse of Uhud. All this is mentioned to discuss the relation of divine universality to human particularity. He himself says:

"It might be held, for instance, that the particular events of Muhammad's life time were spoken of in the Quran because they exemplified and typified fundamental aspects of human experience".
Watt also says:

“There is a short reply, however, to the claim that Islam is for man universally, namely, that there are many cultural regions which it has not yet penetrated or not to any significant degree. There are the cultural regions where the other great world-religions are dominant.”

It is not impossible, of course, that some day the majority of the inhabitants of these regions will be converted to Islam; but it is also possible that Islam will fail to make any appreciable headway there. All that one is justified in concluding, then, is that in the past Islam has expanded far beyond the Arab milieu in the strict sense, and that there is nothing to show that further expansion is impossible.\(^6\)

What the reader may conclude is that the importance of the text of the Quran can not be determined on the basis of Islamic expansion in a particular period, whether related to Arab or non-Arab regions. According to Watt certain cultural dissimilarities caused hindrance in the way of Islamic expansion. For examples:

“There are certain East African tribes where circumcision was thought to make a man unfit for marriage, and, while this belief continued to be held, it was difficult for the men to become Muslims”.\(^7\)

Watt held that “I am not a Muslim in the usual sense, though I am a “Muslim” as “surrendered to God”.\(^8\)
In declaring himself a ‘Muslim’ Watt seems to have an intention in his mind to misguide people. Although the basic meaning of the Word ‘Muslim’ is to surrender to God’ but Watt has forgotten that to be a Muslim one must believe in five pillars of Islam, the very first of which is to believe in Almighty Allah and His Prophet. He himself has criticized the Prophet which a sensible Muslim can never ever dream of. Therefore there is no point in considering him a Muslim spending life time in the study of Islam, leaving the basic pillars of Islam, how can one declare himself a Muslim. The intention is obvious, Watt wanted to misguide the people with the help of his fabricated words.

"When he went to Medina, Muhammad was surprised and dismayed to find that the Jews there, with one or two exceptions, for from regarding him as a Prophet, used their knowledge of the old Testament to criticize his claim to prophet hood. In the closing years of his life he appears to have met Christians whose attitude was similar. This led to a change of attitude among the Muslims. Originally the Quran had presented Islam as a religion parallel to Judaism and Christianity and confirming their scriptures".

Watt has confirmed the identity of Torah, Bible and other Holy books with the help of the Holy Quran which was revealed to Muhammad (P.B.H.U.). But here again he deviates from the truth by way of
exploiting the facts. The logic given by him is that Muhammad was surprised to see that Jews in Madina did not regard him as a prophet and their knowledge of old Testament helped them to criticize Muhammad’s claim of Prophethood.

If we go into the history of religion we find that Adam and Eve followed God. After them many other prophets were sent to the world. Some of them were chosen to have the Holy books were as per requirement for a particular period which God did not feel necessary to preserve. Most probably because the last and final book was to be revealed to Prophet Muhammad for the whole humanity, for ever. So there is no question of ‘Christianity’ and ‘Jewism’ because such works do not feature in any of the Holy books. They all followed God and surrendered their will to God.

While discussing Christian attitude to Islam Watt has pointed out the distorted image of Islam on the basis of violence, self-indulgence, moral and sexual weakness especially in connection with the practices of Prophet Muhammad who was popularly identified with the devil. As Watt say “The image of Islam which they produced for Western Europe was distorted one. This was probably because even the scholars had a feeling of cultural inferiority, and so by way of ‘defence’ had to show that as a religion Islam was much inferior to Christianity. Among the points
which went to compose this 'distorted image' of Islam was a religion of violence, spread by the sword. It was a religion of self-indulgence, especially sexual; and since Muhammad, besides exhibiting moral weaknesses, was the author of a false religion be must he a tool or agent of the devil".  

Similar kind of argument is given in his article "Thoughts on Muslim Christian dialogue" in "Hamdard Islamicus", where he has spoken mainly about his efforts of understanding Islam in a better perspective. He goes to the extent to confirm that the 'Christians of today are in no position to condemn outright the sexual ethics of Islam'.

Actually what appears is that Watt is trying his best to understand certain aspects of Islam comprehensively but if not altogether, at times, he seems to have failed. In reality Islam is a religion of peace, Justice, non-violence and morality. And all these points can be confirmed from various direct references from the Holy Quran. Whether it is about polygamy, mutual differences on various fronts, moral degradation, sexual ethics or any other issue, Islam provides solution to all these issues.

The contradictory statement about the names and attributes of God, have been thoroughly discussed by Watt himself. At one place he says:
“The Quran also speaks of the Jews and Christians as having deviated from the pure religion of Abraham in various ways, it fully accepts that God who gave revelations to Moses and Jesus and is worshipped by Jews and Christians is none other than the God who revealed the Quran to Muhammad and is worshipped by Muslims”.¹³ Watt has quoted George Sale thus:

“That both Mohammad and those among his followers who are renowned orthodox, had and continue to have Just and true notions of God and his attributes (always excepting their obstinate and impious rejecting of the Trinity), appears, so plain from the Koran itself and all the Mohammedan divines, that it would be loss of time to refute those who suppose the God of Mohammed to be different from the true God”.¹⁴

It is almost impossible for the common man or for scholars to understand the existence of God understood by major religions as the Writer has presented. At one place he is mentioning the rejection of Trinity, at the other he admits that God who gave revelations to Moses and Jesus and is worshiped by Jews and Christians is the same God who revealed the Quran to Muhammad and is worshiped by Muslims.

Watt is able to perceive the Islamic concept and understanding of the ‘Holy book’ called Quran which was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (P.B.H.U.) who was just a messenger chosen by God to carry the
message. Initially the messages communicated through Quran were only limited to the people of Mecca or Arabs but, later on, after the spread of Islam, world wide Watt confirmed its global relevance.

Watt says “The message was directed in the first place to the people of Mecca, and then more generally to all the Arabs, and thus it takes the form of ‘an Arabic Quran’. Yet there are few verses in the Quran which indicate that it is even more widely relevant and has a message for the whole of mankind. This universal relevance is indeed confirmed by the world wide spread of Islam and its acceptance by men of nearly every race”.

At various places in his book ‘Islamic Revelation to the Modern World’. Watt defines revelation as an activity of God which is directed towards human beings. Further he emphasizes that a ‘mode of divine activity by which the creator communicates himself to man and, by so doing, evokes man’s response and cooperation’. The mode of revelation however in Christianity is slightly varied, for example.

‘They have not usually supposed that the words were brought, externally as it were, by an angel to the writers of the sacred books, but they held that these writers were inspired in such a way that the words they wrote were in fact the words of God. The prophets of the old Testament who unhesitatingly proclaimed ‘Thus saith the Lord...’ must
have believed that the words they spoke were in some sense truly the speech of God. The Bible, as a whole is called ‘the word of God’. But Watt believes that according to Islamic theology also the human response to divine activity is also, at the same time a mode of divine activity. Therefore he accepts that the assertion of Muslim about the Quranic revelation are accepted totally, and particularly he admitted that the Quran can not be treated as the product of Muhammad’s consciousness. Watt elaborated the novelty in the content of the Quran by pointing out that Prophet Muhammad was sent as a warner to bring the message of Islam from God to his fellows. The remaining messages have been derived from Judaism and Christianity because these message are God’s power and essential good character. Test of accountability on the day of Judgement, apart from this man’s duty to worship God and his generosity with his wealth and power, are the remaining two points that are already contained in the book of Judaism and Christianity. Therefore the originality lies only with the existence and the teaching of Prophet Muhammad. Watt holds:

“In these passages five main points appeared to be insisted on (1) God is all-powerful and good; (2) men will appear before God on the last day to be Judged and assigned to heaven or hell according to their deeds; (3) man ought to be grateful to God and Worship him, (4) man should be
generous with his wealth and upright, (5) Muhammad has been sent as a warner to bring this message from God to his fellows. Now the first four of these points might be said to be derived from emphasis; for example, the older religions usually lay for less emphasis on generosity with wealth. The pivot of new religious movement, however, was the fifth point; and through the idea of conveying a divine message may be derived, the assertion that in particular Muhammad is such a messenger cannot be derived. Here at least is one element of originality.  

If we look into the truth about these points mention above, we can easily make out the lack of understanding about the basic concept of Islam in terms of its originality. Islam is a religion where the messages of God’s existence and the rules and regulation for the then people have been communicated through various messengers right from Adam down to Prophet Muhammad (P.B.H.U.) Jesus, Moses, Abraham, David, Isaq, Noah, and various others have communicated the truthful messages to their people accordingly. Their sincere efforts have been duly acknowledged in the Quran. The complete form of Islamic constitution has been propagated by Prophet Muhammad who is declared in the holy book as the last and final messenger. Regarding the existence of Adam and Eve we get references in other Holy Books also. Therefore there is no question of any message being derived from either Judaism or
Christianity. And the fact is that we don’t get any example even in Bible where Jesus declared that he was either a Christian or Muslim. In a nutshell the requirement is that one must have a comprehensive knowledge of Islam right from Adam down to Prophet Muhammad.

As quoted by Watt in his ‘Islamic revelation in the modern world’ ‘one of the point… . of the scriptures.  

Basic reasons of the opposition between Jews or Muhammad and between Christian or Muhammad was the fact that they had deviated from the original or pure form of their religion Quran promoted pure religion and discarded the corruptions of Jews and Christians as a result they rejected Quran also.

Watt further identifies the similarities between Islam and Jews, and Islam and Christians by pointing out the religion of Abraham which is considered to be the pure religion. It insists on the fact that Jacob and Moses both were the descendants of Abraham who was neither a Jew nor a Christian. Besides this, Watt has confirmed the claim that Islam was a restoration or revival of the religion of Abraham in its purity and also that in these related matters the Quran shows originality and practical guidance for the community. For example:

‘From all this it will be clear that the Quranic interpretation of contemporary events and situations was no academic exercise, but was
practical guidance for the community in the handling of actual problems. The guidance was no mere mechanical application of some rule, but was a creative response to the particular challenge. There can be no question but that in these matters the Qur'an shows originality.\(^{21}\)

According to Watt, another un-Biblical feature of the Quranic account of Abraham is his connection with Mecca and his foundation of Kaba there \([2.124/18-128/3]\). Again, though this does not provide material for scientific history of the Abrahamic period,\(^{22}\) and he further says that despite the connection of Abraham with Mecca, the Quran does not specifically state that any Arabs descended from him.\(^{23}\)

The religion of Abraham denounced idol worship which was a regular practice of Muhammad’s Mission. Even the old Testaments Prophets rejected idol worships.

Watt has been able to make out the urgency of complete mutual understanding between the great religions Christianity Islam and Judaism, which is necessary for a better future and better prospects Watt quotes: “In the achievement of such understanding it would seem that the concept of ‘the religion of Abraham’ has an important part to play. For one thing this concept places the three religions on an equal footing, and avoids the appearance of making Islam the poor relation of Judaism and Christianity. It also indicates how the essential experience or ‘pure
religion’ of Abraham—a positive response to divine prompting—is the basic element shared by Jews, Christians and Muslims”.

Watt has given a detailed account of the influence of the revelation specially elaborating a form of the Quran and the Islamic way of life. The expansion of Islam resulting into the expansion of Islamic state was done by way of military support.

These kinds of accusations or blames regarding the course of military operations are the result of partial or incomplete understanding of the facts. As he himself says that the main expansion of Islam was actually observed after Muhammad’s expiry, therefore we must witness the examples of Holy wars (so called) in the Quran which was revealed to Muhammad (P.B.U.H.). Watt says:

“The aim of the holy war was not simply to defeat the enemy, but, once that had between done, to bring him to accept Islam if he was an Arab Pagan, and to bring him to accept the status of ‘ Protected Person’ (dhimmi) if he was a non-Arab and a member of a scriptural religion. Those who become Muslims or dhimmis could not longer be attacked by Muslims, and therefore the warlike energies of the Arabs, which had been developed through life in the desert, and which could not simply be suppressed, had to be directed continually outwards. This gave impetus to the expansions.”
Factually there is no terminology as ‘Holy War’ in Quran. What the author refers here is very different from that of real facts. The orders of fighting bravely to the extent to killing the enemies were for self defence in the actual battle field which was caused by the enemies only, since they had broken the peace treaty. There, too, further orders were to protect people and escort them to safe place if they decided to come back to the mutual treaty. So it appears that the facts are distorted for reasons better known to the author. Probably one must have a fresh understanding of the Quran if there is some doubt or confusions.

History bears witness that all the wars waged by the most noble messengers, were defensive in nature. The purpose was always to respond to the attacks of the enemy, with the exception of certain cases where the Muslims were convinced that the enemy would persist in its aggressiveness and treachery and were correspondingly ordered to take the initiative in defending themselves.

In the following verses from the Quran the initial reason for legislating Jihad is mentioned:

“Permission is given to the followers of Islam to against their enemies, for fight against their oppression at their hands God is able to aid them and they are people who have been expelled from their
homeland without due reason. Their crime was that they said, “God is our Lord” (V 22: 39-40).

Fight in the way of God against those who battle with you, but be careful not to transgress the bounds, for God loves not the transgressors. (V-2:190)

The war waged by Muhammad, was a war of monotheism against polytheism. It was a struggle of fight against darkness, and represented the last resort for the destruction of misguidance and diffusion of virtue and justice.

In “Islamic Fundamentalism and Modernity” (1988), he underlines that he has no objection to the Muslim belief that the Quran came to the Prophet Muhammad from God. “What he objects to is the belief that there is no human element in the Quran”. By arguing this, it seems that Watt implies that while the Quran was not produced consciously by the Prophet but came to him from God, it contains both divine and human elements together. Watt strongly claims that there are human elements in the Quran since it contains errors and mistakes. For that reason he argues that it cannot be the verbatim speech of God which was revealed to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. To support this view, he develops the following arguments. The first is that being in the Arabic language naturally proves that the Quran has a human element, since “a
language does not happen to exist, but has been made by a human community in a forgotten past”. Secondly by comparing the Quranic presentation of events with the Bible, Watt concluded that there are the errors and mistakes in the Quran. According to Watt, these errors are: the confusion of the mother of Jesus, Mary with the sister of Aaron, the rejection of the historical events of the crucifixion of Jesus, and the assertion that Christians worship three gods.28

Thirdly, he argues that the Prophet Muhammad deliberately revised the Quran. For example, in Medina when Muhammad encountered the Jewish opposition, he took some verses which condemn only the Jews, but later when the Christian opposition arose he might have revised those verses again by addition of words “and Christian”. On this point, Watt claims that Muhammad himself or those who collected the Quran after him put the later verses in the Quran and omitted the former ones.29

Watt argues that in the light of the modern western historical critical method, it becomes clear that the Muslim belief that the Quran as the verbatim speech of God revealed to the Prophet through an angel can no longer be defended. Instead of this understanding, he suggests that Muslims advocate that “God had adapted the wording of the Quran to the outlook of the people of Mecca, among whom these erroneous opinions
were current, and that it was not part of the purpose of the revealed message to correct such errors.\(^3^0\)

Watt advocates that messages of the Quran came to the Prophet Muhammad from both his personal and cumulative unconsciousness. This means that Muhammad found the content of Quran in cumulative unconsciousness, and then he experienced them by responding positively.\(^3^1\) According to Watt “most religious ideas emerge from the collective unconsciousness into consciousness, and most religious practice is the conscious response to these ideas”.\(^3^2\)

By generalizing this understanding of the nature of revelation, he concludes that “the revelation on which Judaism, Christianity and Islam are based are ‘contents’ which have emerged from the collective unconsciousness” then he clarifies what he means by this conclusion: while in Judaism and Christianity the development of those collective unconscious ideas and images emerged in continuity with each other because of their familiarity to people, in Islam, too, since the region where they emerged was “only slightly influenced by Judeo-Christian ideas, there was a sudden and largely unprepared for emergence of contents from the collective unconsciousness”.\(^3^3\)

When we think of Watt’s thoughts on the status of the Quran as a whole, we may argue that Watt arrives at the following conclusion that
the Quran is not the Prophet Muhammad's own product which came to him from God, by following a scholarly approach to the Quran. He explains this conclusion by citing the findings of modern social science.

Further, as has been seen, Watt does not only reject the orthodox Muslim' understanding of the Quran that it is the verbatim speech of God, but also wants to illustrate that in several points there are errors and mistakes in the Quran by taking the Biblical accounts as criteria. This argument seems to contradict his own understanding of revelation. For, as has been observed, according to him, revelation in the Bible and the Quran is the positive response of the Prophets to what is found in their hearts. In this sense, a Muslim quite rightly asks would it be fair to claim that there are mistakes and errors in the Quran in the light of the Quran. It seems that here Watt contradicts himself. Concerning the source of content of the revelation, on the one hand, he says that the content of revelation was totally, from beyond Muhammad's consciousness; on the other hand, he argues that the Prophet or those who collected the Quran revised its verses deliberately.
References


11. Ibid., p. 45.


