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# The Discovery of Paradise in Islam

**Universiteit Utrecht**  
*Faculteit Geesteswetenschappen*



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European Research Council



The here and the hereafter in Islamic traditions



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## **Oratie**

Uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van Hoogleraar in Islam en Arabisch aan de Universiteit Utrecht op maandag 16 april 2012

*Mijnheer de Rector Magnificus,  
Leden van het Bestuur,  
Beste studenten,  
Geachte toehoorders,*

## I.

I learned from Harry Mulisch that the language spoken in paradise is Dutch. In *De ontdekking van de hemel* (1992), Mulisch, keen as ever to convey his encyclopaedic knowledge, relates the following:

In het mensenjaar 1580 publiceerde een zekere Joannis Goropius een boek waarin hij aantoonde, dat Adam en Eva nederlands hadden gesproken in de hof van Eden, – en inderdaad, Nederland is het paradijselijke ideaal van de wereld, zo zou elk land willen zijn, zo vredelievend, zo democratisch, verdraagzaam, welvarend en geordend...<sup>1</sup>

Goropius, a physician and linguist from Gorp near Tilburg who lies buried in the Franciskanerkerk in Maastricht, theorized that in order to identify the most ancient language on earth one would have to establish what the earth's simplest language is, because *that* would be the language from which all other languages had evolved. And, he reasoned, since Dutch, particularly the Brabantic dialect spoken in Antwerp, is simpler than any other language, it must be the language spoken by Adam and Eve at the beginning of time, in the garden of Eden. Goropius produced a number of etymologies to prove his point. For example, the name Adam, he suggested, derives from the Brabantic *Hat-Dam*, “dam against hatred”.<sup>2</sup>

Unsurprisingly perhaps, Goropius' proposals were met with ridicule; the German philosopher Leibniz coined the French term “goropisme” and the corresponding verb “goropiser” to indicate a learned but absurd etymology.<sup>3</sup> Poor Goropius. Perhaps the fact that today we remember him and his search for the primordial language makes him feel a little better as he looks down on us, Leibniz and the angels peeping over his shoulder, still poking fun at him.

I am not, however, a follower of Goropius. Although my inaugural lecture, through which I officially accept my chair, deals with paradise, I shy away from Dutch on this occasion. What makes me hesitate to employ the idiom of the Brabantic Adam, besides the fact that I do not find it as easy as Goropius would have it, is that there are other languages that claim the honour Goropius reserves for Dutch. The most prominent example is, arguably, Arabic. Not only do Muslims believe that God speaks Arabic to humankind through the Qurʾān, but according to the medieval Arab theorists of language, this was also the language in which Adam and Eve conversed.

Different views circulated in this regard. Some said that Adam spoke as many as 700,000 different languages simultaneously, of which Arabic was merely “the best”.<sup>4</sup> More in line with Goropius’ model, the Egyptian polymath al-Suyūfī, writing some 75 years before Goropius, relates the opinion of Ibn ‘Abbās, the most famous of early Islam’s Qurʾān interpreters, that Adam’s language in paradise was Arabic. “But”, Ibn ‘Abbās is quoted as saying, “when Adam disobeyed his Lord, God deprived him of Arabic, and he came to speak Aramaic” – the language of Jesus and the Eastern Church Fathers. “Then, however,” Ibn ‘Abbās continues, “God restored Adam to his grace and gave him back Arabic”.<sup>5</sup> Presumably, somewhere in between Adam’s deprivation from Arabic and the restoration of Arabic to him, some of his progeny split off, carrying with them the 699,999 other languages, and this accounts for the fact that to this day, the nations of this world must speak in so many different tongues. Arabs on the other hand, and with them all Muslims, are still connected to Eden, linguistically speaking, and they are reminded of this primordial bond with God every time they listen to the Qurʾān, that “recitation” (Arab. *qurʾān*) of divine speech first performed by the Prophet Muḥammad and ever since, without interruption, by his Muslim followers. In this perpetual global concert of simultaneous voices, a piece of paradise is present all the time among Muslim believers. In this sense, the Qurʾān flows uninterruptedly between the otherworld and this world, like a ceaseless radio transmission that people can tune into at their leisure.<sup>6</sup>

This boundary-crossing, this slippage between the here and the hereafter, this sense of an intimate connection between this world and the otherworld, is the leitmotif of the research project in which I have been engaged, together with four colleagues, since taking up

my position as Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies here at the University of Utrecht. This project, which is entitled “The here and the hereafter in Islamic traditions”,<sup>7</sup> seeks to investigate the extent to which Islamic traditions favour a view of human existence as directed toward the otherworld. The ultimate aim of the project is to write a fuller, more nuanced history of the Muslim paradise and hell than currently exists.

Why do we do this research? Because we are convinced that the way in which a religious tradition imagines the hereafter has profound consequences for how it pictures *this* world, and the place of the human race within it. Arguably, and in contrast to the dominant Western Christian tradition, there was never a developed sense of “paradise lost” in Islam. Not only do Muslims continue to speak the language of paradise but also the idea of original sin is alien to the Islamic tradition. According to the Qur’ān, Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise, but received God’s full forgiveness immediately after their fall (20:122-3). They did not pass on any essential, inherited human depravity to their descendants; for, as the Qur’an says, “every soul only bears its own burden” (6:164).<sup>8</sup> The “fall from paradise” in Islam, therefore, does not signify an ontological shift from a state of grace to one of sin and damnation but rather, a momentary loss of divine favour.

It is a loss that is both momentary and reversible. Paradise, in the Islamic tradition, remains accessible, even during one’s life on earth. Humans retain the capacity, *hic et nunc*, to achieve a paradisaical state of both spiritual and physical bliss. Famous for this kind of vision are the religious virtuosi, the mystics of Islam, the Sufis, whose flights of ecstatic fancy at times took them to paradise, in emulation of the famous, legendary “ascension” (*mi’rāj*) of the Prophet Muḥammad. However, Muslims more generally speaking live with the expectation that paradise is, as it were, around the corner. As a saying attributed to the Prophet has it, “paradise is closer to you than the strap of your sandal.”<sup>9</sup>

A strong image indeed. Paradise cuts through earthly reality, in the same way in which the strap of a sandal penetrates the cavity between the two toes of the foot. The horizontal and the vertical become fused. This world and the other world mix freely: there is immanence of the divine in creation.<sup>10</sup> If this outlook on the world

and on life, this optimistic cosmo-anthropology as one might describe it, is indeed a salient characteristic of Islamic religiosity, as I submit here, where does it originate? What are its roots? How deeply is it woven into the tradition?

These question direct our attention to the Qur'ān. As always when one tries to make any kind of generalizing statement about Islam, the Qur'ān is a good, perhaps the only place to start. It is, after all, the only text that Muslims living as far apart as in Indonesia, Nigeria and Canada share as a common point of reference. And as others have observed before me, the Qur'ān gives to the Muslim consciousness the basic elements of a religious comprehension of the world.<sup>11</sup> In the remainder of my lecture, let me therefore go with you on an "ontdekking van de koranische hemel". Let us do this in four steps:

First, I will demonstrate that the Qur'ān conceives of a paradise that is not created at the end of time, but of one that co-exists with this world. This is the dimension of time.

Secondly, I will show in what ways the Qur'ān pictures an otherworld that co-exists with this world not only in time but also in space, how, according to Qur'ānic cosmology, this world and the otherworld are in fact entangled, how they embrace each other. This is the dimension of space.

Thirdly, we will explore the physical contents of the Qur'ānic paradise, its architecture and material culture. The Qur'ānic paradise is based on worldly imagery, but, as I will argue, rather than being the result of a primitive bedouin's imagination, this signals a deliberate strategy to create an overlap between this world and the otherworld. This is the material dimension.

Fourthly, I will suggest that the hereafter is built into the very structure of the Qur'ān, that the Qur'ān, when appreciated as a piece of literature, constantly challenges and indeed subverts such binaries as "here" and "there", "now" and "then", "this world" (*al-dunyā*) and "the otherworld" (*al-ākhirā*). This is the structural and literary dimension.



## II.

The temporal synchronicity of paradise and the world we live in was not simply assumed in the Islamic tradition. To the contrary, a sizeable group of theologians, in particular those attached to the rationalist school of the Mu'tazila of the 8th to the 11th century, argued that paradise will only be created at the end of time, because only then will people be judged and their final destiny known. Imagine, said the Mu'tazilites, a king who built a splendid palace filled with all sorts of beautiful things to delight the senses, and then did not allow anybody to enter it. This would be pointless. All of God's acts, however, have a purpose. He creates paradise in order to reward certain humans. Therefore, paradise will only be created after the Final Judgment has been passed on the Day of Resurrection.<sup>12</sup>

The common response to this argument was that humans cannot claim to be able to assess the purpose of God's actions. In fact, to say that all of God's actions are directed by purpose would limit God's free will, an absurd notion.<sup>13</sup> Besides, a purpose of the present existence of paradise is conceivable, namely, that it inspires hope and thus strengthens faith.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, even if one accepts the principle that God's purpose can be measured by human reason, the future creation of paradise does not logically follow.

The defenders of the present existence of paradise found important support for their view in the Qur'ān. Indeed, little in the Qur'ān suggests that paradise will be created or populated only at the end of time. The synchronicity of life on earth and in the otherworld is stressed. Adam and Eve were in the garden of Eden, after all, and the notion that God destroys this garden and then recreates it at the end of time is certainly more absurd than the idea that the garden simply continues to exist, as an empty palace, throughout the ages. This argument assumes, of course, that the garden inhabited by Adam and Eve is identical with the eschatological garden. This was sometimes denied by Muslim theologians.<sup>15</sup> But the Qur'ān itself makes no such distinction: it refers to both the primordial and the eschatological abode of the blessed as "*the Garden*" (*al-janna*, cf. 2:35 and 2:82), the usual Qur'ānic term for paradise.

Secondly, some verses in the Qur'ān seem to express the idea of synchronicity directly. For example, the Qur'ān enjoins the believers

to “hasten to a garden that has been prepared for the godfearing” (3:133). This was usually understood to mean that paradise is already in place, waiting to receive the believers.<sup>16</sup> A verse that was revealed after the battle of Badr, in which several of Muḥammad’s companions were killed, reassures the survivors that those who have fallen are not dead but rather “living with their Lord, well provided for” (3:169). Presumably, this indicates that paradise is entered immediately after death,<sup>17</sup> in the same way in which Jesus, in Luke 23:42-43, promises the thief on the cross next to him that they will be together in paradise “to-day”.<sup>18</sup>

Thirdly, in the Qur’ān, the time of this world and the time of paradise overlap also in the grammatical sense. Descriptions of paradise in the Qur’ān are generally formulated in the present tense. The Qur’ān states, for example, that “the godfearing are in gardens and bliss, rejoicing in what their Lord has given them; their Lord has guarded them against the chastisement of hell” (52:17-18). Now, let me point out that Arabic does not distinguish precisely between present and future tense; it only knows two aspects of time, complete and incomplete.<sup>19</sup> This is a phenomenon that all first-year students of Arabic are familiar with. But there *are* certain extra particles in Arabic, such as the prefixes *sa-* and *saufa*, which, if they are added to verbs, unequivocally refer to future events, and it is striking that these particles are *not* used, as a general rule, in Qur’ānic descriptions of the otherworld. It is as if the line between the time of the here and the time of the hereafter is intentionally blurred.<sup>20</sup> This observation squares with the fact that the Qur’ān challenges the fatalistic conception, common among pre-Islamic Arabs, of time (*dahr*) as an irreversible power and process to which all humans must yield. In contrast, the Qur’ān disempowers chronological time and subjects it to God’s sovereignty.<sup>21</sup> From the perspective of God’s power and knowledge, present and future are collapsed into one.

### III.

In this reading, therefore, the Qur’ān points in the direction of a synchronic understanding of the relationship between this world and paradise. However, the Qur’ān not only provides support for the

temporal but also for the spatial co-existence, and indeed the contiguity and intermeshedness, of the two realms.

According to the Qur'ān, the garden of Eden is located somewhere above the earth: Adam and Eve are told to “go down” (2:36, 7:24) from it, as if from a mountain. This suggests that there is a physical connection between paradise and earth. Another verse tells us that paradise is accessed through the “gates of heaven” (7:40). One ascends towards these gates (or descends from them, as in the case of Adam and Eve) over stairways (70:4) or ropes (40:37). These ropes—“sky-ropes” they have been termed<sup>22</sup>—hold the edifice of the cosmos in place, like a tent.

This is a cosmological metaphor that makes a lot of sense in the context 7th-century Arabia, heavily influenced as it was by bedouin culture. Indeed, when God created the world, according to the Qur'ān he set up mountains like tent poles (78:6-7) to support the heavenly dome, and then spread out the earth like a rug (2:22), covering the inside of the cosmic tent. The “sky-ropes” literally offer an escape through gates in the roof of the tent (21:32), toward the other side of the firmament. Particularly prophets and angels travel along them, while evil spirits and demons<sup>23</sup> with sky-walking pretensions who try to breach these gates are repelled by star-hurling angels (37:6-10). Paradise, “a great kingdom” (76:20), stretches out over the entire width of the cosmic roof: it is “a garden the breadth of which is as the breadth of heaven and earth” (57:21).

The Qur'ān is known for its powerful evocations of the havoc wrought on earth during the apocalypse. Creation is undone: the mountains are set moving and become like tufts of wool, the sun disk is rolled up, the stars are thrown down, heaven will be rent asunder, split open and full of gaping holes, the earth empties its bowels, ejecting the dead from their graves.<sup>24</sup> What, then, happens to paradise? The Qur'ān suggests that on the Day of Resurrection, paradise and hell do not perish together with “whosoever is on the earth” (55:26). Instead, they survive the re-ordering of the cosmos in their original form. As the Qur'ān puts it, they are “brought near” (26:90-1)<sup>25</sup> to the place where the resurrected are gathered. There they are shown to those who are waiting to be judged. On the Day of Resurrection, in other words, it is as if the sticks on which the cosmic tent rests are knocked out, so that the roof collapses onto the tent's foundation. Paradise and hell are then

so close that their inhabitants can see each other and talk (57:13-5); only a “barrier” (7:46) or “wall” (57:13) separates them.

In sum, the spatial divide between this world and paradise is far from clear-cut in the Qurʾān. Paradise, though located in the heaven, is contiguous with the earth, to the extent that to-and-fro movement remains possible. What is more, the otherworld exercises a certain apocalyptic pressure on this world. This explains the obscure Qurʾānic verse, which otherwise is difficult to understand, that states that hell is an “ambush” (78:21). The otherworld always threatens to infiltrate this world, in fact it will overflow and completely fill it on that momentous day “when the sky is stripped, when hell is set ablaze, and when the garden is brought near” (81:11-13). The world that humankind inhabits is squeezed in between heaven and hell, while all three realms are an integrated whole: they equal reality *in toto*. They form, to use a term from rhetoric, a *merismos*.<sup>26</sup>

#### IV.

Now that we have situated the Qurʾānic paradise in time and space, and after the horrors of the apocalypse, let us finally enter into the eternal garden. The Qurʾān tells us that there is “neither [excessive] sun nor cold” (76:13) in paradise but rather, the refreshing comfort of a landscape characterized by green meadows (30:15), springs (16:31), rivers (47:15) and shaded cool (77:41). The flora of this fantastic space includes palms and pomegranate trees (55:68), as well as acacias and a thornless version of the evergreen jujube tree (56:29). The Western botanical name of the jujube tree (Arab. *sidr*) is *ziziphus spina christi*, “Christ’s Thorn Jujube”. This is a plant that originates in the Sudan but is found in the lands from Syria to the Yemen. Its fruit is an important source for honey-making bees, which may explain its association with paradise.<sup>27</sup>

The material culture of the Qurʾānic paradise is rich: the inhabitants of paradise are clad in “green garments made of silk and brocade” (18:31, cf. 76:21, 22:23), and they wear bracelets of silver and gold (76:21, 22:23). They dwell in palaces (25:10) and luxurious tents (55:72), lounging on “raised couches” (56:34) that are arranged in rows (52:20) and bedecked with cushions and carpets (88:15-6),

an image that conjures up an Epicurean *symposium*. Without going into too much detail, let us note that of physical pleasures there are plenty. Paradise is not just a picnic, it is a banquet. The famous houris, “white ones, with beautiful eyes” (*hūr ʿīn*, 44:54), also belong into this context of a paradisaical banquet, where they act as the catering staff.<sup>28</sup> The inhabitants of paradise are wedded to these “untouched” maidens (52:20, 56:31, 78:31) as a “recompense for what they have done” (56:24). However, in comparison with the culinary pleasures and the extravagant material riches enjoyed by the blessed, sexuality in the Qurʾānic paradise is a rather subdued affair: the houris, as the Qurʾān says, look around themselves modestly (37:48-9; 38:52; 55:56); they are “restrained in tents” (55:72) “like hidden pearls” (56:23).<sup>29</sup> This is perfectly in line with what the Qurʾān enjoins upon pious men and women on earth, that is, to “lower the gaze” in order to safeguard chastity (24:30-31). As for the married couples who enter paradise together, the Qurʾān delicately intimates congress by noting that “they recline in shade on couches” (36:56).

Thus the Qurʾān. A lot of moralizing ink has been spilled over the perceived wordliness and sensuality of these images and ideas.<sup>30</sup> Rather than taking aim at this, perhaps we ought to ask why sensuality is so conspicuously absent in most of Christian eschatology.<sup>31</sup> Here I would like to stress a different point, however. It is unmistakable that the Qurʾānic paradise is derived from the observation of this-worldly phenomena. However, as I would like to argue, this does not reflect the poverty of the Qurʾān’s imagination, but rather a deliberate strategy to highlight how thin, how exquisitely permeable the line is that separates humans from the blissful state of an ideal existence. The Qurʾānic paradise is not a form of *dilectatio morosa* but a creative act of reordering the cosmos and filling it with meaning. It is a piece of *bricolage*, to use Lévi-Strauss’ term, an assemblage of worldly images used to build a new deep structure of meaning, a mosaic in which all those dimensions of human life that are experienced as transcending time and space are combined into one glorious picture.<sup>32</sup> The sensuality of the Qurʾānic paradise does not result, in other words, from a bedouin’s vision of a decadent life filled with wine, women and poetry. Rather, it evokes an ideal, a perfectly structured and ideally harmonious world, a world that humans, in the happiest moments of their life, can already see before them.<sup>33</sup> The Qurʾānic paradise celebrates, in concrete images,

the fulfilled utopia of human life on earth.

## V.

This brings me to my last, “structural” point about the slippage between heaven and earth in the Qur’ān, between this life and the afterlife, between the here and the hereafter. Let me note that in the light of what has been said so far, translations of the Qur’anic term *al-ākhirā* as “afterlife”, “afterworld”, or “hiernamaals” all fall short. They all imply a chronological sequence that is alien to the Qur’ān,<sup>34</sup> not to mention the subsequent eschatological literature in Islam. The Qur’ānic *al-ākhirā* does not follow “after” life on earth. Rather, the time of the Qur’ānic paradise is a kind of ever-present “dreamtime” akin to that of the Aboriginal peoples. The time of *al-ākhirā*, to use the expression of the Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner, is “everywhen”.<sup>35</sup>

The Qur’ānic paradise is not part of the “afterworld” in a spatial sense, either. It does not come “after” this world, in the same way in which, if one arrives walking from Utrecht Centraal Station, the Academiegebouw in which we are gathered is situated “after” the Dome Tower. Rather, this world and paradise are intertwined. If one looks around oneself, one sees flashes of the divine, tangible physical reminders of paradise. Trees such as the jujube or the acacia branch out, as it were, from paradise into this world; the dates, grapes and pomegranates reaped from *this* garden echo the pleasures in *that* garden; the rain that falls on the earth to revive it flows directly from the reservoir of water in paradise (50:9; cf. 7:96);<sup>36</sup> etc.

If the creation of a divine/immanent overlap is characteristic of the Qur’ānic descriptions of the otherworld, is it perhaps even characteristic of the Qur’ān as a whole? Here I would like to suggest that indeed, the overlap is built into the very fabric of the Qur’ān. Already on the surface of things, the Qur’ān is a uniquely eschatological scripture: Roughly a tenth of the Qur’ān, perhaps more, deals with matters eschatological.<sup>37</sup> But also in the other nine tenths, there is a constant to-and-fro between “here” and “there”, between “now” and “then”. Western readers of the Qur’ān have observed, and critically commented upon, this phenomenon for centuries. They have pointed out, usually in complaint, that the Qur’ān is not particularly

interested in linear story-telling. On the level of the chapters, or surahs, the stories from the pre-Islamic past are not told in chronological sequence. Rather, they are split up into fragments and then dispersed, in seeming disorder, over all the surahs of the Qur'ān. Nor does the Qur'ān, on the macro-structural level, run from Genesis to Apocalypse like the Bible.

For a long time, this peculiar structure of the Qur'ān has been viewed as the haphazard result of a chaotic process of editing of the Qur'ānic text in the decades after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, a view that recalls the perception that the Qur'ānic paradise is the result of the crude imagination of a bedouin. Both notions are problematic, and both are increasingly challenged by students of the Qur'ān in the West.

An early pioneer in this regard, the great French Orientalist Louis Massignon, has spoken, not of the haphazard, but of the *systematic* anachronism of the Qur'ān.<sup>38</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Irano-American scholar of Islamic mysticism, has offered the following *aperçu*:

The text of the Qur'ān reveals human language crushed by the power of the Divine Word... as if human language were scattered into a thousand fragments like a wave scattered into drops against the rocks at sea.<sup>39</sup>

The American scholar of literature Norman Brown has drawn attention to what he calls the “apocalyptic style” of the Qur'ān. In the Qur'ān, states Brown, there is “systematic violation of the classic rules of unity, propriety and harmony; bewildering changes of subject; abrupt juxtaposition of incongruities.”<sup>40</sup> Far from perceiving this as a deficit, Brown celebrates this “destruction of conventional prophetic piety and style”. By “conventional prophetic style”, Brown understands a style based on linear story-telling, a style that rests on the very idea that “understanding takes the form of a story... [a]nd that history is the story of what actually happened.”<sup>41</sup> This, however, is not what you find in the Qur'ān. Instead, in the Qur'ān, “it's all there all the time”,<sup>42</sup> and “every sura is an epiphany and a portent”. In consequence, what the recipient of the Qur'ān experiences is a “*totum simul*, simultaneous totality: the whole in every part.”<sup>43</sup>

In a daring move, Brown even compares the Qur'ān to an *avant-garde* piece of literature, one that is on a rank with James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, with which, according to Brown, it shares more than just a superficial resemblance. (This is a resemblance of which Joyce, who jokingly referred to himself as a Mohammedan Irishman, seems to have been fully aware: in his novel, he constantly plays with Qur'ānic themes, for example, he reproduces the titles of 111 of the 114 surahs of the Qur'ān.<sup>44</sup>) Like *Finnegans Wake*, the Qur'ān, to quote Brown's rhapsodic piece one last time, is

dumbfounding. Leaving us wonderstruck as a thunder, yunder.<sup>45</sup> Well, all be dumbled!<sup>46</sup> The destruction or the deconstruction of human language. It's the Qur'an, it's Joycean defiant exultation and incomprehensibility.<sup>47</sup>

In sum, Brown maintains that Westerners cannot understand the Qur'ān unless they understand (something about) *Finnegans Wake*.

If I have given some room to Brown's discussion of the Qur'ān, it is not because I believe everything he says. In fact I think he rather exaggerates when suggesting that the Qur'ān is utterly incongruent, non-sequential and incomprehensible. At any rate, naturally, different readings of the Qur'ān remain possible at all times. In my view, however, Brown does put his finger on an important dimension of the Qur'ān: it is a text that undoes people's common sense of progress and order and as such conceives of the boundary separating this world from the otherworld as fluid and permeable, or even collapses both worlds into one. How post-Qur'ānic Muslim traditions have negotiated this potential, how immanentist conceptions have competed with transcendentalist ones, I do not have the time here and now to explore. But the question will occupy me and my co-researchers in the years to come, and I'm looking forward to sharing our thoughts and results with colleagues across the university and beyond.



## VI.

To conclude, let me say that of course, we must ask critical questions of the Qur'ān, in the same way in which we have learned to ask critical questions of the Bible. But let us not reduce the Qur'ān to less than what it is, let our own ignorance not push us to giving up on this difficult text, or worse, to defaming it with absurd comparison. Let us look closely at the Qur'ān, let us look at it with curiosity and, yes, with empathy. Let us take the Qur'ān seriously for what it is: a text that has inspired fourteen centuries of intense devotion and intellectual effort, a linguistic and stylistic wonder, a great conundrum and quarry of meaning.

My point in talking about the slippage between paradise and earth in the Islamic tradition is not to offer evidence whether paradise is 'really' connected to this world; it is not for science to pass judgment on such issues. Nor is my intention of an archival kind. I have not delved into Qur'ānic mythology with you in order to delight in its quirkiness, in the same way in which one looks at beautiful and strange butterflies pinned on needles. The point I am trying to make is anthropological: I am interested in showing the Qur'ān as the fountainhead of a discursive tradition in which salvation of humankind toward a better world is a dominant theme, but not in the sense of future salvation from an innate state of sin and impurity. Rather, we are talking about a recovery from a momentary lapse of focus, about a switch from ordinary life to the simultaneous, accessible reality of an existence in which all material and spiritual potentialities are realised and lived to the full.

Think of that most common ritual uniting Muslims, prayer. The narratives underlying the ritual washing that precedes ritual prayer point in the direction of a slippage between this world and paradise. In Eden, Adam and Eve existed in a state of perfect purity: they did not urinate or defecate, they did not even sleep. Now, according to the Muslim scholars, urination, defecation and sleep are the three main types of impurities that the Islamic ritual of ablution (*wuḍūʿ*) does away with.<sup>48</sup> The state of purity achieved by the Islamic ablution ritual, in other words, enacts the state of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Religious narratives spun around other Islamic rituals, such as fasting and pilgrimage, also establish a conceptual link to paradise.<sup>49</sup>

For example, according to a Prophetic saying, the breath of a person who fasts smells like musk, the perfume of the garden of Eden.<sup>50</sup> Such notions are anchored, it seems to me, in that peculiar Qur'ānic *Weltanschauung* according to which life in this world always leaves a door open to the otherworld.

It is my conviction that in our attempt to uncover such deep layers of cultural meaning, we must pay close attention to how Muslim religious thought and practice is expressed through language. Knowledge of Islamic languages, Arabic, Turkish and Persian, but also Indonesian, Urdu and a score of other languages (though perhaps not 699,999 other languages), is an essential ingredient in the study of Islam. It is indispensable for the encounter with Muslims, whether in the past or in present times. I am hopeful that the university of Utrecht will remain a garden in which Arabic and other Islamic languages can flourish. I am particularly grateful to the board of our faculty for working together with me and my colleagues to keep ourselves committed to teaching Arabic and Turkish at this university, and to do so at a competitive level. I also take heart in the fact that Islamic Studies will be firmly profiled as a salient research and teaching emphasis in the newly configured department of Religious Studies.

It is no coincidence, after all, that I should have been appointed professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies in a department of Religious Studies. The methodological pluralism of Religious Studies has always appealed to me, as has the comparative study of religions. I have not had the time in my talk to say much about the Judeo-Christian parallels and subtexts in the Qur'ān, but such cross-disciplinary explorations are part of my current research and certainly deserve to be pursued further, preferably in collaboration with those colleagues at the university who have expertise in these areas. What I hope my talk *has* demonstrated is that the study of Islam has the potential to branch out into all kinds of directions. Islamic Studies is in itself a well-established academic discipline in Western universities, with roots going back centuries, but it has not been known for its interest in interdisciplinarity. It is high time to change this. So let me say to my esteemed colleagues in anthropology and the social sciences, the historical disciplines and literary studies and linguistics: Islamic Studies is closer to you than the strap of your sandal. Just put the sandal on.

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Ten slotte wil ik graag enkele woorden van dank uitspreken:  
aan de Faculteit Geesteswetenschappen en het College van Bestuur van de Universiteit Utrecht voor mijn benoeming en het daarmee in mij gestelde vertrouwen, en voor de voortvarende manier waarop ze mijn verhuizing van Edinburgh, het “Athene van het noorden”, naar de niet minder verlichte Domstad Utrecht hebben geëffectueerd;

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Ik heb gezegd.



## Notes

- 1 Mulisch continues, "... maar ook zo gelijkgeschakeld, provinciaal en saai." See *De ontdekking van de hemel* (Amsterdam: De bezige bij, 1992), 674.
- 2 Johannes Becanus Goropius (d. 1572), *Origines antwerpianae, sive Cimmeriorum becceselana novem libros complexa* (Antverpiae: ex officina Christophori Plantini, 1569), 539: "Vox ergo *hat*, vocali longa, odium & inuidiam notat; *dam* verò aggerem signat, vel obstaculum vndis obiectum. Adam igitur... idem est, quod agger inuidiae fluctibus obiectus."
- 3 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (d. 1716), *Sämtliche Schriften* (Darmstadt: O. Reichl, 1923-), 6th ser., VI, 285. Cf. D.P. Walker, "Leibniz and Language", in *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: critical assessments*, ed. R.S. Woolhouse (London: Routledge, 1994), 421-35, *ad* 443.
- 4 Al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035), *Al-Kashf wa-l-bayān*, ed. A.M. Ibn 'Āshūr (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1422/2002), IX, 177 (*ad* Q 55:4), from an anonymous source.
- 5 Al-Suyūfī (d. 911/1505), *al-Muzhir fī 'ulūm al-luġha wa-anwā'ihā*, eds M.A. Jādd al-Mawlā, M.A. Ibrāhīm and 'A.M. al-Bajāwī (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, 1958), I, 30. See the English trans. by Andrzej Czapkiewicz, *The views of the medieval Arab philologists on language and its origin in the light of as-Suyūfī's "al-Muzhir"* (Cracow: Nakład. Uniw. Jagiellońskiego, 1988), 66. Similarly in 'Abd al-Malik b. Ḥabīb (d. 239/853), *Kitāb al-Tā'rikh*, ed. J. Aguadé (Madrid: CSIC, 1991), 27-8; Ibn 'Asākir (d. 571/1176), *Tā'rikh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. 'A. Shīrī, 80 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995-2001), VII, 407. Cf. Ignaz Goldziher, *Nyelvtudomány történetéről az araboknál*, trans. and eds K. Dévényi and T. Iványi, *On the history of grammar among the Arabs* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: J. Benjamins Pub. Co., 1994), 44-5; Henri Loucel, "L'origine du langage d'après les grammairiens arabes", *Arabica* 10 (1963), 188-208, 253-81; 11 (1964), 57-72, 151-87 (*ad* 167-8).
- 6 On the concept of a Qur'ānic *lingua sacra*, which is closely related to the doctrine of the inimitability (*i'jāz*) of the Qur'ān, see John Wansborough, *Qur'anic studies: sources and methods of scriptural interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 85-118. According to the early exegete Muqātil b. Sulayman (d. 150/767), those Muslims who are not native speakers of Arabic are washed in two rivers situated at the entry to the eternal garden. One purifies their bodies, the other purifies their heart, so that they emerge with bodies as beautiful as that of the prophet Joseph, with hearts like that of the prophet Job, and speaking Arabic like Muḥammad. See Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, ed. A. Farīd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1424/2003), III, 432.
- 7 <http://www.uu.nl/impact/hhit/>
- 8 Quotations from the Qur'ān follow the classic translation of Arthur Arberry (1955), with minor emendations.
- 9 Al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), *Ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. M.D. al-Bughā (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr,

- 1407/1987), V, 2380; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), *Musnad* (Cairo: Mu'assasat Qurṭuba, n.d.), I, 287, 413, 442. The tradition continues: "... and so is hell". Here, however, I am only interested in exploring the interpretive horizon opened up by the first half of this well-known saying.
- 10 It is therefore not surprising that the Sufis seem to have particularly liked the *ḥadīth*. For example, Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d. c. 615/1220) quotes it in his *Asrāmāmeḥ*. See Hellmut Ritter, *Das Meer der Seele. Mensch, Welt und Gott in den Geschichten des Farīduddīn 'Aṭṭār* (Leiden: Brill, 1955), 187.
  - 11 Cf. Paul Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique. Nouvel essai sur le lexique technique des mystiques musulmans* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq Editeurs, 1970), 8. See, however, for a critique of the scripturalist bias in the Western study of Islam, Devin DeWeese, "Authority", in *Key Themes for the Study of Islam*, ed. J. Elias (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2010), 26–52.
  - 12 Binyamin Abrahamov, "The creation and duration of paradise and hell in Islamic theology", *Der Islam* 79 (2002), 87–102, ad 91; Josef van Ess, "Das begrenzte Paradies", in *Mélanges d'Islamologie. Volume dédié à la mémoire de Armand Abel*, ed. P. Salmon (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 108–27, ad 115. As Abrahamov points out, not all Mu'tazilites, however, rejected the present existence of paradise, e.g. al-Jubbā'ī (d. 303/915) and Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d. 436/1044).
  - 13 Al-Āmidī (d. 631/1233), *Ghāyat al-marām*, ed. H.M. 'Abd al-Laṭīf (Cairo: s.n., 1971), 305.
  - 14 Al-Samarqandī (d. between 373/983–4 and 393/1002–3), *Sharḥ al-fiqh al-absaṭ li-Abī Ḥanīfā*, ed. H. Daiber, *The Islamic concept of belief in the 4th/10th century* (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1995), 186. Cf. al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), *K. al-Irshād*, ed. A. Tamīm (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqafiyya, 1985), 319.
  - 15 Cf. the arguments presented by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), *Ḥādī l-anwāḥ ilā bilād al-afrah*, ed. Z. 'Umayrāt (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2007), 24–34.
  - 16 Al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935–6), *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, ed. H. Ritter (Istanbul: Devlet Matbaası, 1929–30), 475; al-Pazdawī (d. 493/1100), *Uṣūl al-dīn*, ed. H.-P. Lins (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, 1963), 170.
  - 17 Note, too, that according to the Qur'ān unbelieving sinners, such as the wives of Noah and Lot (66:1) and "the family of Pharaoh" (3:10–11), are *already* in hell.
  - 18 This creates the conundrum why a final judgment is still needed at the end of time. However, this is not a problem that the Qur'ān cares to address and that was therefore left to the following generations of exegetes to solve. It is possible that the Qur'ān echoes a Judeo-Christian idea here, namely, that there are two different categories of the saved, martyrs and the rest. According to Bernhard Lang, *Himmel und Hölle. Jenseitsglaube von der Antike bis heute* (München: Beck, 2009<sup>2</sup>), 30–31, this notion is already present in the Book of Revelation (late 1st century CE).

- 19 See Wolfgang Reuschel, *Aspekt und Tempus in der Sprache des Korans* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996), 211-17. Cf. Gerhard Boewering, "Chronology of the Qur'ān", in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* [= EQ], eds J.D. McAuliffe et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2001-2006), I, 316a-335a, ad 318b: "The Qur'ānic text reflects an atomistic concept of time, while lacking a notion of time as divided into past, present and future."
- 20 In the words of Sells, this is what gives the Qur'ān its "depth, psychological subtlety, texture, and tone". See Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'ān* (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 2007<sup>2</sup>), 24.
- 21 I borrow this phrase from George Tamer, *Zeit und Gott. Hellenistische Zeitvorstellungen in der altarabischen Dichtung und im Koran* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 187-214. Tamer speaks of the "Entmachtung der Zeit" in the Qur'ān (197-205) while also noting that "Eschatologie ist die Lanze, die im Koran gegen die Heiden gerichtet wird" (198). Cf. Louis Massignon, "Le temps dans la pensée islamique" (1952), republ. in *Opera Minora*, 3 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969), II, 606-612, ad 606: "Pour le théologien musulman, le temps n'est ... pas une 'durée' continue, mais une constellation, un 'voie lactée' d'instants...".
- 22 Kevin van Bladel, "Heavenly cords and prophetic authority in the Qur'an and its late antique context", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 70,2 (2007), 223-46, ad 231.
- 23 This includes the "outcast" (*rajīm*) angel Iblīs (Satan). On the meaning of *rajīm* as "outcast", see Gabriel Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and its Biblical subtext* (London: Routledge, 2010), 54-64.
- 24 Qur'ān 81:1-4, 99:1-2, 101:1-5 and *passim*. Cf. Frederik Leemhuis, "Apocalypse", EQ, I, 111b-114b; Rudi Paret, *Mohammed* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1991<sup>7</sup>), 70-73.
- 25 To be precise: paradise is "brought near" (*uzlifāt*), while hell is "brought out [from underneath the earth]" (*hurriyat*).
- 26 Anglika Neuwirth, "Spatial relations", EQ, V, 104a-108b.
- 27 As its name indicates, in the Christian tradition the tree is associated with the passion and resurrection of Christ. Cf. Amots Dafni, Shay Levy and Efraim Lev, "The ethnobotany of Christ's Thorn Jujube (*Ziziphus spina-christi*) in Israel", *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 1,8 (2005), <http://www.ethnobiomed.com/content/1/1/8> (accessed 23 January 2012).
- 28 Josef Horowitz, "Das koranische Paradies", in *Scripta Universitatis atque Bibliothecae Hierosolymitanarum* (Jerusalem 1923), repr. in *Der Koran*, ed. R. Paret (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), 53-75, ad 64-73; Charles Wendell, "The denizens of paradise", in *Humaniora Islamica* 2 (1974), 29-59.
- 29 Cf. Angelika Neuwirth, "Qur'anic readings of the Psalms", in *The Qur'ān in context*, eds A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 733-78, ad 762: "In spite of the prominence of the maidens' virginity (vv. 56.74), no erotic dynamics is perceivable between them and the blessed, who remain as unmoved as the maidens themselves, fixed to their luxurious seats."

- 30 The classic account of the history of Western polemics against Islam is still Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: the making of an image* (first publ. 1960, rev. ed. Oxford: Oneworld, 1993). For the Islamic paradise, see esp. 172-176. The pleasures of consorting with friends and family in paradise as well as the spiritual joy of seeing and conversing with God are also a prominent feature of the Qurʾān. Cf. 52:21, 13:23 (interaction with friends and family); 52:23, 78:35, 88:11, 19:62, 13:24, 36:58 (respectful manner of speaking in paradise); 7:43, 21:102-3 (serenity of minds of the inhabitants of paradise); 75:22-3, 83:24, 88:8 (vision of God).
- 31 Stefan Wild, “Lost in philology? The virgins of paradise and the Luxenberg hypothesis”, in *The Qurʾān in context*, 625-47, ad 643. Already the Church Father Tertullian (d. ca. 225) complained about the derision of those who mockingly ask what the point of the resurrection of bodies is if these bodies, according to Christian doctrine, have “absolutely nothing to do” in paradise. See Tertullian, *Concerning the resurrection of the flesh*, tr. A. Souter (London: SPCK, 1922), 153-154.
- 32 This theme is explored with regard to the Qurʾān’s moral-commercial vocabulary by Andrew Rippin, “The commerce of eschatology”, in *The Qurʾān as text*, ed. S. Wild (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 125-35.
- 33 Cf. Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010), 439: “Die irdische Manifestation der Schöpfung ... hebt sich ... von der Natur im Weltbild des vorislamischen Dichters ab, für den die Umwelt gerade nicht zugänglich ist, sondern erst durch heroischen Einsatz der Verfügung des Menschen unterworfen werden muß. Die ‘Welt’ unterscheidet sich vom jenseitigen Paradies weniger in ihrer Mangelhaftigkeit als in ihrer Kontingenz, in der jederzeit widerrufbaren Sicherheit, die sie dem Menschen nur auf Zeit gewährt...”
- 34 Cf. Norman O. Brown, “The apocalypse of Islam”, *Social Text* 3,8 (1983-84), 155-171, republ. in *The Qurʾān: style and contents*, ed. A. Rippin, 355-80, ad 372-3.
- 35 W. E. H. Stanner, “The dreaming (1953)”, in *The dreaming and other essays* (Melbourne: Black Inc. Agenda, 2009), 57-72, ad 58. Cf. Hans Peter Duerr, *Dreamtime: connecting the boundary between wilderness and civilization* (first publ. 1978, Engl. tr. by F. Goodman, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 118: “What happens in the ‘dreamtime’ never happens and never will happen... the ‘dreamtime’ is that perspective of perception when an event is what it is regardless of the point in time where it might be located.”
- 36 Matthias Radscheit, “Springs and fountains”, *EQ*, V, 121b-128b, ad 126b: “From above, God sends down water which is blessed (q 50:9; cf. 7:96), pure (q 25:48) and purifying (q 8:11) and which makes gardens flourish, whose description is reminiscent of the gardens of paradise (q 23:19; 50:9-11).”
- 37 Cf. William C. Chittick, “Muslim eschatology”, in *The Oxford handbook of eschatology*, ed. J.L. Walls (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 132-150 ad 132: “The Koran speaks of death, the end of the world, and resurrection more than any other major scripture.”



- 38 Louis Massignon (d. 1962), “Les ‘sept dormants’. Apocalypse de l’Islam” (1950), republ. in *Opera Minora*, III, 104–118, ad 109, 113ff.; idem, “Elie et son rôle transhistorique, Khadiriya, en Islam” (1955), republ. *ibid.*, I, 142–161, ad 154f. Cf. *ibid.*, I, 16–17, II, 606–612, III, 119–180.
- 39 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and realities of Islam* (first publ. 1966, Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2000), 36.
- 40 Brown, “Apocalypse”, 374.
- 41 Norman O. Brown, *The challenge of Islam: the Prophetic tradition. Lectures, 1981* (Santa Cruz–Berkeley: New Pacific Press & North Atlantic Books, 2009), 55.
- 42 Brown, *Challenge*, 52.
- 43 Brown, “Apocalypse”, 374.
- 44 James S. Atherton, *The books at the wake: a study of literary allusions in James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake* (first publ. 1959, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 201–217.
- 45 See *Finnegans’s Wake* (1939), Book I, ch. 3, 57:15.
- 46 *Ibid.*, Book II, ch. 2, 262:9.
- 47 Brown, *Challenge*, 51.
- 48 Scholars differ as to whether the human body in Islam is considered “pure” by default (and only temporarily “contaminated” by ritual impurity) or whether it is by default “impure” (and only temporarily “decontaminated” by ritual washing). The first position is outlined by Kevin Reinhart in a groundbreaking article from 1990. See Kevin Reinhart, “Impurity/no danger,” *History of Religions* 30,1 (1990), 1–24. More recently, Brannon Wheeler has challenged Reinhart’s interpretation and defended the second position. See Brannon Wheeler, *Mecca and Eden: ritual, relics, and territoriality in Islam* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), 47–70, esp. ad 56.
- 49 Wheeler, *Mecca and Eden*, 59–67.
- 50 ‘Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827), ed. Ḥ. al-R. al-A‘zamī (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1970–72), X, 42; cf. Arent Jan Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* (Leiden: Brill, 1936–1988), II, 69 and *passim* for more references.



## Curriculum vitae

Christian Lange (born 1975 in Berlin, Germany) studied Comparative Religion, Islamic Studies and Law at the universities of Tübingen, Cairo, Paris (EHESS), Musqat (*Ma'had al-'ulūm al-shar'iyya*) and Harvard. After earning his doctorate from Harvard University in 2006 (Committee on the Study of Religion), he was a lecturer in Islamic Studies at Harvard Divinity School (2006-7) and at Edinburgh University's School of Divinity (2007-2011). Since March 2011, he is Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Utrecht University. His publications include *Justice, Punishment and the Medieval Muslim Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), *Public Violence in Islamic Societies: Power, Discipline and the Construction of the Public Sphere, 7th-19th Centuries* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) and a historical novel, *Der geheime Name Gottes* (Mainz: Zabern, 2008). His forthcoming book *Paradise and hell in Islamic traditions* will be published by Cambridge University Press in 2014.



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