

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The Islamic Word

THE SOURCE: “The Interplay of Technology and Sacredness in Islam: Discussions of Muslim Scholars on Printing the Qur’an” by Mohammed Ghaly, in *Studies in Ethics, Law, and Technology*, Aug. 2009.

IN THE EARLY 18TH CENTURY, a small group of Turkish diplomats proposed the establishment of an Ottoman printing house. The Ottoman Empire had allowed Jews and other minorities to print books in Hebrew and other languages for decades, but many Turks thought it was a sin to print the Qur’an and other books about Islamic law. Constantinople’s scribes (perhaps as many as 90,000) protested the possible loss of their livelihoods. Anticipating religious resistance, one of the diplomats requested a fatwa (religious pronouncement) from the Shaykh al-Islam, the head of the Ottoman religious bureaucracy, endorsing printing. The shaykh complied in part: Secular Arabic books could roll off the presses, but

Islamic texts must continue to be transcribed by hand. In 1727, the first Arabic printing house opened in Constantinople (now Istanbul).

Mohammed Ghaly, a professor of Islamic law and theology at Leiden University in the Netherlands, writes that the Islamic scholarly community of that time had four major objections to printing Islamic texts: the use of materials regarded as impure (such as brushes made from boar bristles) in the printing process; the heavy pressure required for printing, which was considered inconsistent with the manner in which sacred texts should be handled; the possibility of mass-producing errors; and the risk that non-Muslim printers would come into contact with the Qur’an, which was strictly forbidden.

Beyond these legal arguments, Ghaly writes that printing was “needless” in Islamic society because of the primacy of a Qur’anic oral tradition. In fact, the word *Qur’an* is related to the Arabic verb meaning “to recite, read aloud.” The oral tra-

dition, not written texts, was authoritative, and it was incumbent upon all Muslims to memorize the Qur’an. Even today, Ghaly writes, Qur’anic recitation forms “a significant part of the ‘auditory’ background of everyday life.” So while common people in the Christian world had little access to the Bible until Gutenberg’s printing press (mid-15th century), the text of the Qur’an was well known by Muslim believers.

With time, the legal arguments subsided. Impure materials were removed from the printing process, the risk of errors was diminished by careful editing, and Muslims were trained to do the work. In 1832, more than a century after Shaykh al-Islam’s decree, the first printed edition of the Qur’an came off the presses in Egypt, although it was recalled shortly thereafter because it contained errors. Today, of course, the Qur’an is widely available, not just in printed form but all over the Internet on sites such as www.Quran.com.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Better Science Through Failure

THE SOURCE: “Accept Defeat: The Neuroscience of Screwing Up” by Jonah Lehrer, in *Wired*, Jan. 2010.

WANT A NOBEL PRIZE FOR physics? Try this: Build a radio telescope to search the far reaches of

space, curse at it because all it ever seems to pick up is static, attempt to fix the problem by coating it with aluminum tape and scrubbing it clean of pigeon droppings, and then—when you’re finally convinced the contraption is a com-

plete failure—place a call to a fellow scientist who’s trying to figure out how to measure cosmic debris left from the Big Bang. Pause while it sinks in that cosmic debris is causing your telescope’s irritating static. Fourteen years later, book flight to Stockholm.

According to *Wired* contributing editor Jonah Lehrer, what happened to Bell Labs astronomers Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson, winners of the 1978 Nobel Prize for physics, is often the way science works. He cites the work of Kevin