Al-salaamu alaikum, peace be upon you. I am honoured and delighted to be invited back to Fordham to offer a brief response to the splendid Fall McGinley lecture from Fr. Ryan. A very simple and a very sincere “thank you” to all of you who are reading these words. I need to single out, as always, Fr. President Joseph McShane for his hospitality, Provost Stephen Freedman for his support, Sr. Anne-Marie Kirmse for her help with the arrangements, Rabbi Polish for his wise words, and of course to Fr. Ryan for inviting me to respond to his lecture.

I keep my remarks brief, as Fr. Ryan has done a superb job with his lecture. I am, as ever, amazed by his erudition, and can only congratulate you, yet again, on your wise decision to make him the Laurence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society. I offer my remarks this evening in memory of three Muslim scholars who have passed away since our Spring meeting: Professor Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. July 5, 2010), Dr. Fathi Osman (d. Sept. 11, 2010), and Professor Mohammed Arkoun (d. Sept. 14, 2010). Professors Abu Zayd and Arkoun were mentioned by Fr. Ryan as prophetic scholars of Islam. And it is important to note that there are prophetic scholars of Islam. Almost twenty years ago, one of my teachers, Jane McAuliffe, ended her first book with these words about commentary on the Qur’an:

The commentators, both classical and modern, do not speak with one voice. Although the formative power of intellectual conservatism is undeniable, it is not inescapable. As with the Muslim religious sciences generally, the Qur’anic scholars may be more shaped by their enterprise than able or willing to reshape it. Yet within the inherited contours a healthy profusion of interpretive perspectives has flourished. Those multiple tones and notes sound the necessary prelude for new exegetical voices, voices that can again recast the traditional refrains with both fidelity and freedom.¹

One of those new exegetical voices that I would put in the prophetic category is the South African scholar Farid Esack. His first book, Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism, took the methods of Christian liberation theology and applied them to the Qur’an. Both Farid and I grew up working class poor, and it was Farid’s experience of hunger as a child that taught him to work for justice in the world. He did that as an adult in the struggle of Muslims against apartheid. As an academic, I rage against the immorality of the notion of “academic neutrality.” All too often, we academics are silent when our voices need to be heard. We are, at bottom, afraid. It is Farid Esack who has helped me to conquer this fear, to help me realize the links that I need to make my voice heard against oppression and injustice. One of the men that we both admire is the deceased Archbishop Dom Helder Camara of Brazil. Archbishop Camara’s most famous saying speaks about the nature of telling the truth and making a difference. “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” This is also Esack’s gift, the ability to ask the difficult questions, which are often the most basic questions. Why is there oppression? Why do we oppress each other? Why do we not link oppression on the basis of race with oppression on the basis of gender or sexuality?
Another prophetic Muslim voice to be mentioned is that of Amina Wadud, a feminist scholar, whose first book, *Qur’an and Woman*, examined the very simple question of how women hear and understand the Qur’an.

In his lecture, Fr. Ryan mentioned the incident of the Satanic Verses. I did my MA thesis on Salman Rushdie’s novel, so this has long been an interest of mine. It’s instructive to read the lines of Sura 53: 1-20 (*Sura al-Najm*, the Star) where the incident occurs. They open with a description of the Prophet’s ascension to heaven:

By the star when it goes down
Your companion [Muhammad] is neither astray nor being misled
Nor does he speak out of desire
It is no less than inspiration sent down to him
He was taught by one mighty in power
One vigorous, and he grew clear to view
While he was in the highest part of the horizon
Then he approached and came closer
And was at a distance of two bow-lengths or even closer
And God revealed unto God’s slave that which God revealed
The heart lied not (in seeing) what it saw.
Will you then dispute with him concerning what he saw?
And certainly he saw God in another descent
By the farthest lote-tree
Near it is the Garden of Abode
When that which covers, covered the lote-tree
The eye did not turn aside, nor did it exceed the limit
Certainly he saw of the greatest signs of his Lord
Have you seen al-Lat and al-‘Uzza
And Manat, the third, the other?

The transition is clear, a confirmation of what the Prophet saw, and a challenge to the pagan Arabs of Mecca. Of these verses, Professor Carl Ernst (a fellow traveler with Fr. Ryan and Rabbi Polish at Harvard, and a fellow student with Fr. Ryan of Professor Annemarie Schimmel (*radi allahu anha*, may God be pleased with her) has written: “Many questions have been raised about the story. Is it conceivable that the Prophet Muhammad, who devoted his career to establishing monotheism, would embrace polytheistic worship for the sake of momentary political gain? Is it possible that such a flagrant reconciliation with idolatry would occur in the same sura with the most sublime account of the Prophet’s spiritual encounter with God? Much of the debate centers on issues outside the text of the Qur’an itself.”

As discussed by Professor Shahab Ahmed, also at Harvard, and the leading modern authority on the historical incident of the Satanic Verses (who incidentally I would include in the category of prophetic Muslim voices), “the vast majority of early commentators on the Qur’an and biographers of the Prophet until relatively recent times accepted the authenticity of the story. It seems likely that, with the confidence of an emerging religious community in a period of
expansive empire-building, these early Muslim interpreters never considered the story of the cranes\(^4\) to cast any blemish on the prophetic credentials of Muhammad. On the contrary, the story was appreciated as a dramatic example of how God could rescue God’s followers and God’s Prophet even from the wiles of the devil.”\(^5\)

It challenged the pagan Meccans who had not seen their goddesses with the vision of the Prophet who had seen his Lord. “Later on, however, Muslim scholars gravitated towards the view that genuine prophets would be protected by God from any error, and such a notion of infallibility gradually led to the complete rejection of the story of the cranes as an impossible fiction.”\(^6\) And here, I should add that I’m glad that we Muslims are the only ones who have issues with our leaders being infallible. That’s not something I would wish on anyone else.

“To make things more complicated,” Professor Ernst continued, “European Orientalists practically without exception considered the story of the Satanic Verses to be true, on the grounds that it was so damaging to Muhammad’s reputation that it could not conceivably have been fabricated; in other words, they embraced it because it confirmed their worst suspicions about Islam. This hostile reading was hardly a recommendation, as far as Muslims were concerned. In such a situation, it is not surprising to find that contemporary Muslim scholars universally condemn the story of the Satanic Verses as false”.\(^7\)

Prophethood unites us as Jews, Christians and Muslims. The stories in the Qur’an are intimately linked to those in the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible. The audience that first heard the revelation in Mecca must have been familiar with Jewish and Christian stories, for without them, the Qur’an is hopelessly enigmatic. So, for example, when the Qur’an speaks of the end time, when the heavens are rolled up as a scroll (interestingly enough, in the chapter called “The Prophets, *Al-Anbiya*”, 21:104), this echoes the same image found in both Isaiah 34:4 and Revelation 6:14. I learned about this parallel in an article published 35 years ago by Fr. Ryan in the *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*.\(^8\)

From you, Jews and Christians, we Muslims can learn prophetic words of self-criticism. You can help us with this. Admittedly, there is a lot of criticism of Islam, but that is very different from Muslim self-criticism. And of course this is also part of our own Islamic traditions. November 15 this year was the day of ‘Arafah, when the pilgrims in Mecca spent the day standing in prayer and supplication, asking for the forgiveness of God. November 16 was Eid al-Adha, celebrating what Jews refer to as the *akida*, the binding of Abraham’s son. In each of our daily prayers, we ask God to send blessings on Muhammad and the family of Muhammad, just as God sent them on Abraham and the family of Abraham. St. Thomas Aquinas described the relationship between Jews and Christians as two phases of the same covenant. To the Angelic Doctor’s words, I would add Islam as a third phase of that covenant. With all of the hysteria about Islam these days, threats to burn the Qur’an and opposition to the Park 51 Mosque (although not, I’m glad to know, from Manhattanites who support it), it is instructive to turn to the Qur’an, to Sura 5: 1-9 (*Al-Ma’ida*, The Table), which contains the last verse revealed (5:3), and is perhaps the last sura to be revealed. These words describe the newer phase of the covenant, in words that may sometimes be quite familiar to you:
O you who have faith! Fulfil (all) obligations. Lawful unto you (for food) are all four-footed animals, with the exceptions named: But animals of the chase are forbidden while you are in the sacred precincts or in pilgrim garb: for God does command according to God’s will and plan.

O you who have faith! Violate not the sanctity of the symbols of God, nor of the sacred month, nor of the animals brought for sacrifice, nor the garlands that mark out such animals, nor the people resorting to the sacred house, seeking of the bounty and good pleasure of their Lord. But when you are clear of the sacred precincts and of pilgrim garb, you may hunt and let not the hatred of some people in (once) shutting you out of the Sacred Mosque lead you to transgression (and hostility on your part). Help you one another in righteousness and piety, but help you not one another in sin and rancour: fear God: for God is strict in punishment.

Forbidden to you (for food) are: dead meat, blood, the flesh of swine, and that on which has been invoked the name of other than God; that which has been killed by strangling, or by a violent blow, or by a headlong fall, or by being gored to death; that which has been (partly) eaten by a wild animal; unless you are able to slaughter it (in due form); that which is sacrificed on stone (altars); (forbidden) also is the division (of meat) by raffling with arrows: that is impiety. This day have those who reject faith given up all hope of your religion: yet fear them not but fear Me. This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion. But if any is forced by hunger, with no inclination to transgression, God is indeed oft-forgiving, most merciful.

They ask you as to what is allowed to them. Say: The good things are allowed to you, and what you have taught the beasts and birds of prey, training them to hunt—you teach them of what God has taught you—so eat of that which they catch for you and mention the name of God over it; and be careful of (your duty to) God; surely God is swift in reckoning.

This day are (all) things good and pure made lawful unto you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful unto you and yours is lawful unto them. (Lawful unto you in marriage) are (not only) chaste women who are believers, but chaste women among the People of the Book, revealed before your time—when you give them their due dowers, and desire chastity, not lewdness, nor secret intrigues, if any one rejects faith, fruitless is his work, and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost.

O you who have faith! when you prepare for prayer, wash your faces, and your hands (and arms) to the elbows; Rub your heads (with water); and (wash) your feet to the ankles. If you are in a state of ceremonial impurity, bathe your whole body. But if you are ill, or on a journey, or one of you come from the toilet, or you have been in contact with
women, and you find no water, then take for yourselves clean sand or earth, and rub therewith your faces and hands, God does not wish to place you in difficulty, but to make you clean, and to complete God’s favour to you, that you may be grateful.

And remember the favor of God on you and God’s covenant with which God bound you firmly, when you said: We have heard and we obey, and be careful of (your duty to) God, surely God knows what is in the breasts.

O you who have faith! Stand out firmly for God, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety: and fear God. For God is well-acquainted with all that you do.

To those who believe and do deeds of righteousness, God has promised forgiveness and a great reward.

Thank you!
NOTES


3 Carl Ernst, How to Read the Qur’an (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming), 123.

4 The Arabic word that is rendered as “swans” in Fr. Ryan’s text can also be translated as “cranes.”

5 Ibid., 124.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.