# Why does the Qur'an open with Iqra' (recite, read)?

The Divine command to proclaim Islam opens with the sublime imperative: iqra'. Usually translated as “recite,” it also means to “rehearse aloud” or to “read.” It is addressed to humanity, as the Prophet represents humanity in its relationship to God. Iqra' is thus a universal injunction, an opening for each individual to move away from imperfection and toward virtue and happiness both in this world and the next.

Iqra' is a command to read the signs the Creator placed in creation so that we can understand something of His Mercy, Wisdom, and Power. It is a command to learn, through experience and understanding, the meaning of His creation. Moreover, it is an infallible assurance that the creation can be read, that it is intelligible. The better we learn to read it, the better we grasp that the created world is a single universe whose beauty and harmony reflect the Guarded Tablet (85:21) upon which, by the Divine decree, all things are inscribed.

Every created thing resembles a pen that records its actions. But only humanity can read what is written. That is why the Qur'an tells us to “read” instead of to “behold” We are to know the creation, not just to experience it, as is the case with all other creations.

Science is the study of nature, of how the universe functions, and of the harmony and principles governing all interactions. It accumulates knowledge via observation and classification, explanation and experiment. The balanced order, delicate interrelatedness, and prolific dynamism thereof cannot be attributed to chance. Logic dictates that a Single, Supreme Being created and sustains all of this.

Every order or system is conceived and designed before it is established. Think of the Guarded Tablet as a detailed design, and the Qur'an as its verbal exposition. Given this, the universe may be considered a reflection in our world of that final design. We hardly can think of creation as a single universe, let alone conceive of a design and then produce one. Our duty is to read it and seek the full meaning of everything. We do this through trial and error, for that is the only way we can learn.

What sort of knowledge are we trying to acquire? There are many types of knowledge and understanding: that based on beholding or actively seeing something, inner (comprehensive knowledge) or outer (description and measurement), implementation of the lesser understanding (technology) or of the spiritual understanding (contemplation and worship, which yield wisdom), learning and teaching, self-based or other-based, the learner's or teacher's belief in independence of action or being, and of the believer's surrender and trust to the Creator.

Such diversity happens side by side and continually, for the universe contains certain laws and categories that condition all being and action within it. These laws and categories are placed therein by the Creator, Who administers and sustains their harmonious operation. Among them are the following:

* A movement from one to many, from simplicity to complexity
* A process of becoming, the coming into existence (within the many) of similar, diverse, or opposed elements
* A dynamic, enduring balance among the many
* Succession or alternation, the transfer of property, vigor, power, or knowledge from one to another
* Acquisition, loss, and reacquisition, or learning, forgetting, and relearning
* Striving and persevering, or energy and commitment
* Breaking down and recomposition, or analysis and synthesis
* Inspiration that uncovers and reveals, or intuition that pierces and makes clear.

Since humanity is subject to these and other conditions, people are very diverse in all aspects. However, as these natural differences and contrasts are in a dynamic, prolific balance, people have different (and changing) conceptions of and approaches to such matters as science and faith.

As a result of such diversity, some teachings—even those of the Prophet—may be lost sight of for a time. But one day they will be recollected and taught again. After such a large increase in the number and variety of people, the loss of traditions and histories, as well as fragmentation, is natural. All of these will be repaired, though, for this process has happened many times in the past and will happen again in the future.

Divinely inspired Scriptures, Prophets, and laws were sent successively, in part as an assurance of this process. The Prophet was blessed with a character that harmonized something of the distinguishing excellence of all previous Prophets. In him were blended the most profound spiritual knowledge and wisdom, the will to move and decisively order collective affairs, to inspire human hearts and direct their spiritual craving, to heal differences between people, and to achieve lasting reconciliation. He demonstrated the ideal balance, in individual as well as in collective affairs, between the claims of justice and compassion. His life is full of suffering, forbearance, steadfastness in defeat, and of relief, success, and victory. His style of expression was always brief, to the point, memorable, and perfect. Alongside the Qur'an, he was the fountainhead of a spiritual awakening and of a great and enduring civilization.

That is why responding to iqra' means wider responsibilities and a greater degree of inner and outer trial and striving for Muslims than for members of other religions. This greater trial is a means of grace and honor, for it enables a richer harmony of more diverse virtues in each Muslim and in the community.

Recent scientific discoveries have clarified certain Qur'anic verses. Such advances in knowledge occur successively, as the universe proceeds upon its decreed course and in the measure of understanding appointed for us. We must acknowledge and praise the efforts and achievements of researchers and scientists, but they should not lead us to ingratitude and insolence (the roots of unbelief). Rather, we should reaffirm our dependence upon the Creator for guidance both in our quest for and application of knowledge. We must not idolize ourselves, lest we be forsaken and left with the human will to power as the only judge in our affairs.

Should that happen, scientific research and achievement will remain with those who seek to use them for their own temporary advantage. Science will become a weapon against religion, a helpless servant of selfish and generally atheistic and materialistic ideologies. The end result might be an irretrievable degradation in the quality of individual and community life. We can see all around us that applying new technologies is making more and more people increasingly impatient, arrogant, irresponsible, and hard-hearted. Some even claim that they are answerable only to themselves, as if they were self-created! And yet their lives remain full of unhappiness, stress, anxiety, unsatisfied needs, and the delusion that they are free.

The sheer pace of the current scientific advance has turned human societies and individuals into laboratory experiments with no sure knowledge of the consequences or final outcome. To counteract this, we must see that the Divine command of iqra' is reunited with contemplation, that we relearn how to “read” consciously so that we can acquire true understanding and wisdom.

If we can do this, we will begin to deliver science from the futility and dry formalism in which it is bound, and help to clarify its philosophical foundations and social and moral relevance. We also will be able to indicate the true range of human perception, intellect, and intuition, and make people aware of their proper balance and use. Then, those who consciously study creation will read its signs with a religious seriousness and humility, and will acquire knowledge that is civilizing and beneficial for humanity.

That we are meant to read in this way and for this purpose is beyond doubt. The first thing created was the Pen, and the first word of the Revelation was iqra'. But to read in such a way requires that our inner and outer faculties be alert and harmoniously directed to the phenomena. Any defect in our inner faculties impacts the proper functioning of the others.

When referring to a malaise of the spirit, the Qur'an speaks of blindness, deafness, and dumbness. The Creator's signs are first “read” with the eyes. The first sounds of Revelation are “heard” with the ears, which then channels them to the understanding. All that is seen and heard is expounded, interpreted, and communicated by the tongue, so that understanding can be deepened.

If people have a poor inner life, they will be able to see, hear, or give voice to only that which affects their immediate survival or pleasure. Reading the signs will be impossible, for they will see only mechanically related bodies and surfaces, and their minds will focus on the rules and laws that will place them under control. As their inner life atrophies, contemplation and compassion will be replaced by ugliness, triviality, and barbarism. Left to themselves, such people will master neither their immediate needs and pleasures, nor their constant insecurity, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. In truth, they are blind, deaf, and dumb, and the universe is no more than a narrow prison for them.