

Recite!

The Sound of the Qur'an



Qur'an; Calligrapher: Ahmad Sayri; Iran, Safavid period, 1598 (1006 AH); Ink, color, and gold on paper; Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment; National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection, F1932.65



Fragment of a Qur'an, sura 2:191-233; Near East, 9th-10th century; Ink, color, and gold on parchment; Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment; National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection, F1937.6.1-33

Class Activity: Listen to “The Opening,” the first chapter of the Qur’an.

As you listen to a one-minute recitation, try to answer the questions below. We will listen to the recitation three times.

1. What basic sound patterns do you notice?
2. How might its rhyme make the listener feel more solemn, prayerful, or meditative?
3. This chapter has been called “a microcosm of basic Qur’anic beliefs.” What three basic Islamic beliefs are presented in this chapter?

1. What basic sound patterns do you notice?

1 1 Al-Fatihah 5 سُورَةُ الْفَاتِحَةِ 5
5 7 (The Opening)

إِهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ

5. Guide us to the Straight Way.

5. 'hdinā ṣ-ṣirāṭa l-mustaqīm²

1 1
5 7

Al-Fātiḥah
(The Opening)

سُورَةُ الْفَاتِحَةِ

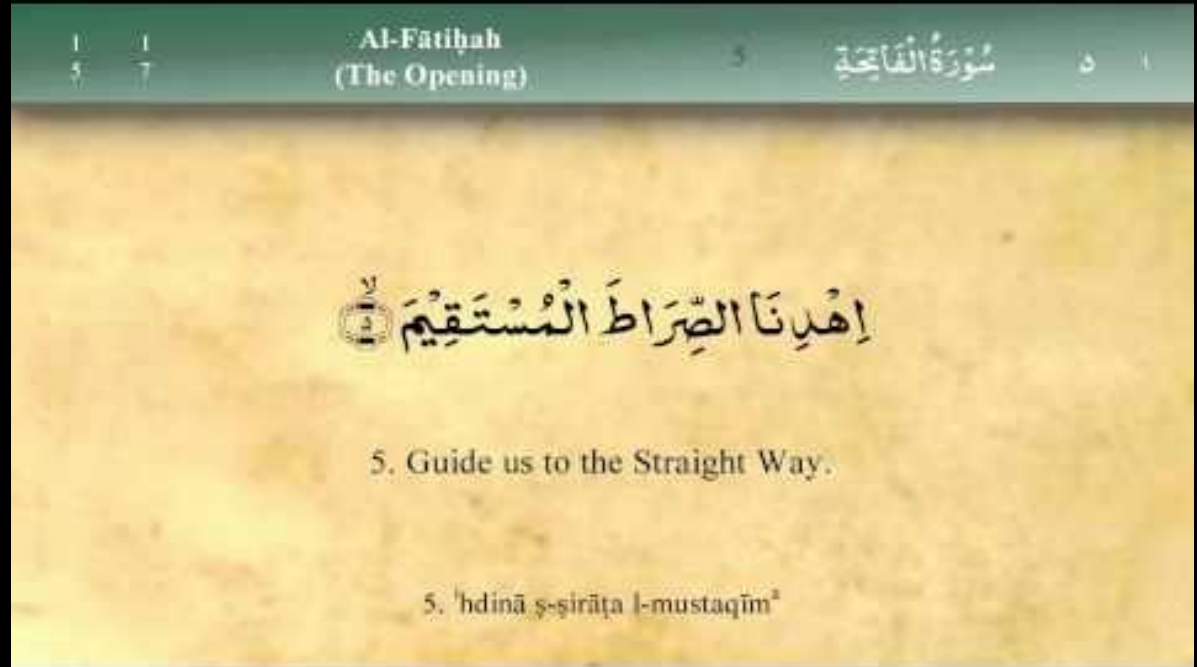
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Check your responses:

“The Opening” is recited in short passages with a long “A” sound and an “een” end-rhyme.

The elegant simplicity and rhyme pattern create a prayerful atmosphere for many Muslims. What were your impressions as you listened to the recitation?

“The Opening” presents three key Islamic beliefs:

1. The belief in a compassionate creator God
2. The belief in a day of reckoning or judgement
3. The belief in humanity’s need for moral guidance

Extended Learning:

How is the recited Qur'an experienced in Indonesia?

Maria Ulfah is a longtime recitation teacher in Java, Indonesia, and a veteran of international competitions as both contestant and judge. This podcast was recorded in 2016 at the National Museum of Asian Art.



Images from the NMAA website

What regions and countries have the largest percentage of Muslims?

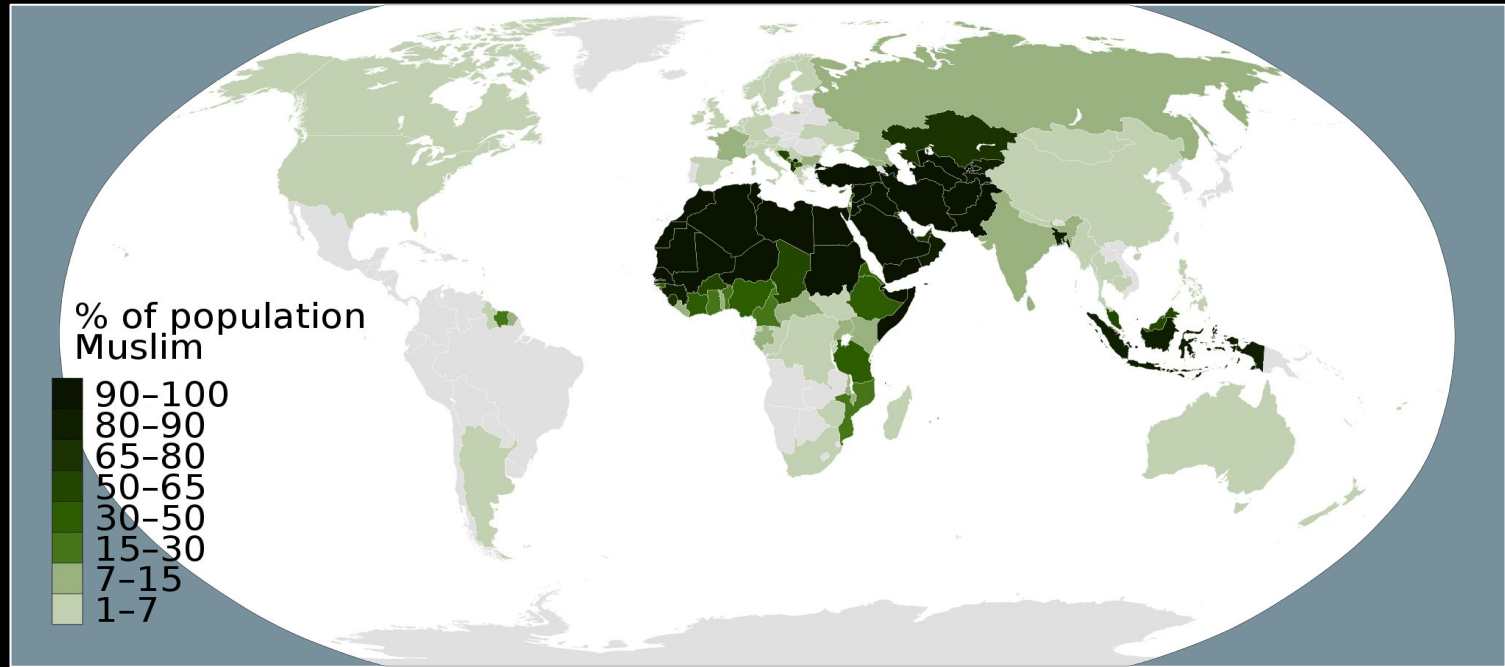


Photo credit: M Tracy Hunter; [Wikimedia Commons](#); CC BY-SA 3.0



Photo credit: Rei-artur; Original: Vardion; A large blank world map with oceans marked in blue; [Wikimedia Commons](#); CC BY-SA 3.0

Comparison: Qur'an 1:1–7 in Tahqiq style for beginners

Listen to the following minutes from the podcast:

Introduction: 14:32–15:56

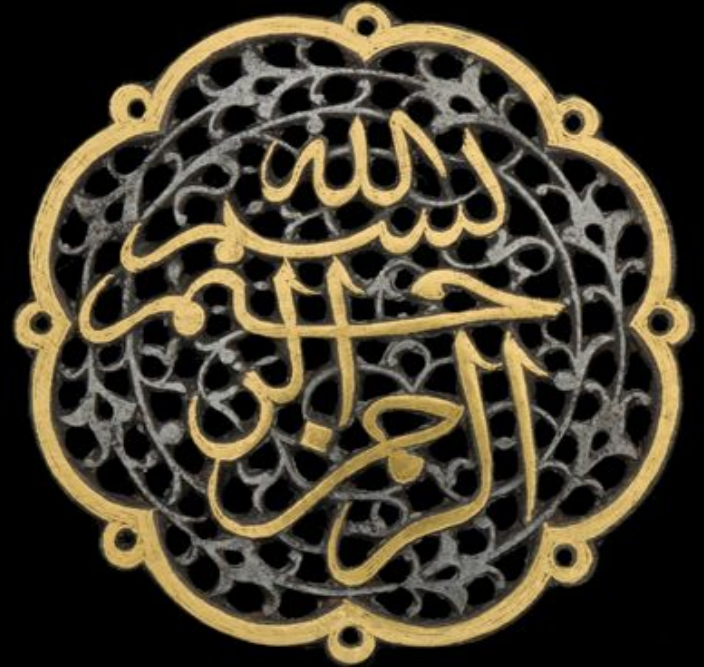
Recitation: 15:56–17:39

Maria Ulfah uses a Javanese melody in this recitation rather than an Arabic melody. How does this recitation sound similar or different to the previous recitation we listened to together?

Extended Learning: Bismillah

Circular Ornament

- Geography: Iran
- Period: 16th–17th century
- Material: Steel overlaid with gold
- Dimensions: H x W x D: 4.7 x 4.7 cm (1 7/8 x 1 7/8 in)



National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection,
Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1940.9

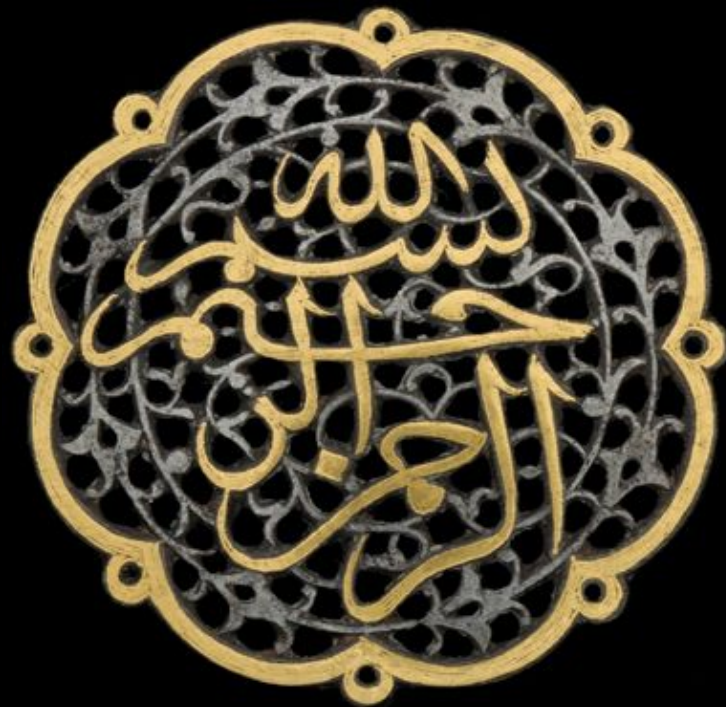
Reflection on Bismillah

Identify a word, phrase, or saying that is important to a group or community of which you are a part. How does this common belief or saying create a sense of community and belonging for you? We will discuss this topic at the end of the lesson.

Close Looking

What do you see as you look at the ornament? What do you notice about the patterns? How many different patterns can you identify? What do you notice about the colors?

Why do you think the artist uses gold to highlight the Arabic script? What might this use of gold convey about the meaning of this phrase?

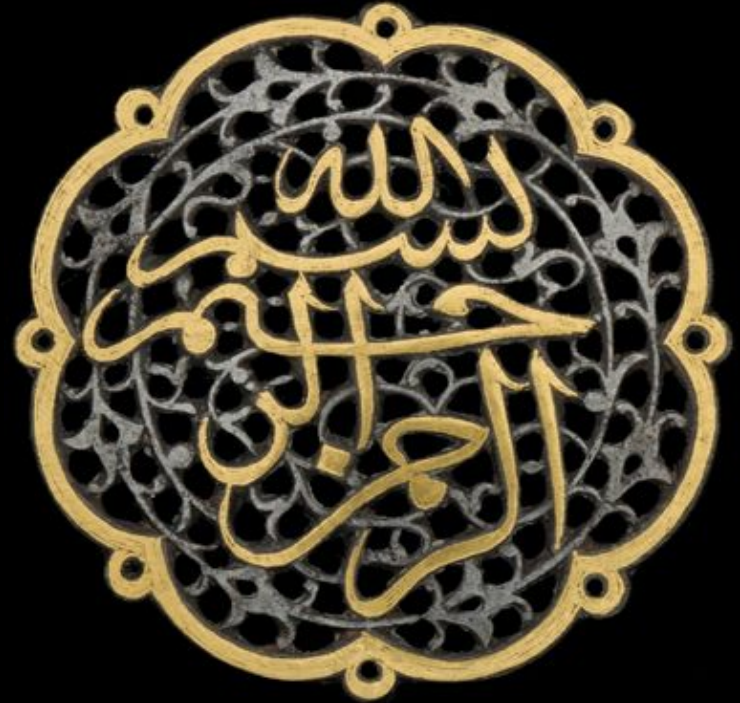


National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection,
Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1940.9

About this object

The Arabic inscription in gold at the center of this ornament reads "*bism Allah al-Rahman al-Rahim*" and can be translated as "In the name of God, The Most Compassionate, Most Merciful."

Based on its opening three words, this phrase is called the bismillah. It appears at the beginning of every chapter of the Qur'an but one and serves as an introductory invocation.



National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection,
Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1940.9

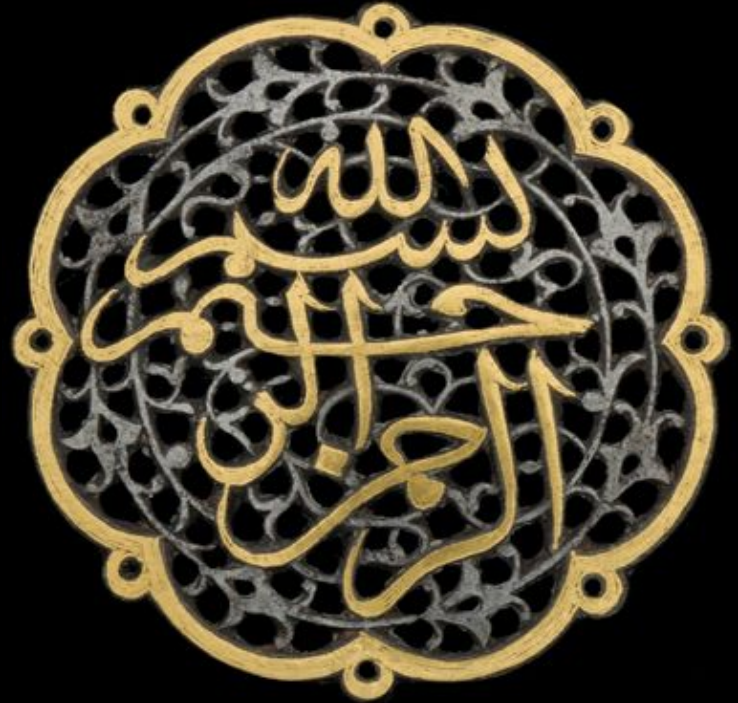
About this object

The small eight-lobed medallion is cut out of a sheet of hammered steel.

The inscription and the band framing the medallion are overlaid with gold.

The holes surrounding the plaque served to affix it to something else.

It could be used either in a religious or secular context because the bismillah is meant to remind Muslims of God's protection in all their deeds.



National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection,
Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1940.9

Further inquiry

- What religious beliefs of Muslims are conveyed by the bismillah?
- In what moments of religious practice or daily life could the bismillah be spoken?

Religious beliefs

- As a central concept in Islamic belief and practice, the bismillah reminds believers that God has spoken to humankind in the words of the Qur'an.
- The bismillah also includes the first three of the ninety-nine names of God in Islam: Allah, *al-Rahman*, *al-Rahim*. God is the one and only God (Allah). In relationship to humanity, God is the Most Merciful (*al-Rahman*) and the Most Compassionate (*al-Rahim*).

Religious practice or daily life

Today, as in the past, Muslims continue to invoke God's name in all aspects of their daily lives. They pronounce the bismillah before reciting the Qur'an, saying their prayers, or beginning a task, whether it is familiar or unfamiliar and whether it is special or mundane.

Religious practice or daily life

The bismillah is also associated with aspects of food culture. Muslims speak the name of God when preparing or consuming halal (“permitted,” in Arabic) food. In other words, the bismillah is invoked any time Muslims wish to call upon God for a blessing or protection.

Religious practice or daily life

The bismillah is expressed not only verbally but it also appears on many surfaces, from hard steel to soft silk. It adorns the interiors and exteriors of structures and is inscribed on tiles affixed to entrances. Today, the phrase is also frequently displayed on the windshield of cars!

Reflection on Bismillah

As a class, DISCUSS a word, phrase, or saying that is important to a group or community of which you are a part. How does this common belief or saying create a sense of community and belonging for you?