

Revelation and Tradition in Islam

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One needs no excuse in the twentieth century for studying the beliefs and customs of other people. Our world, at once both shrinking in travel and communication time and expanding in population, can only survive as we know it through increased mutual understanding and creative coexistence. To the Christian an examination of the great thought options of the whole world will shed light on the nature of the Gospel and how he may fulfill his role as a witness to its transforming power. This study of the concepts of revelation and tradition in Islam is presented as an example of the reflective value of an examination of the beliefs of other faiths.

In Islam there are four main sources of religious thought and practice: The *Qur'an*, the sacred book of the Muslims; the *Traditions*, primarily the sayings of the Prophet; analogy, or the deductions made by competent authorities from the *Qur'an* and Tradition to gain guidance for questions not treated specifically in these two primary sources; and consensus, the unanimous agreement of the specialists of the Islamic community on the rightness of an act or belief. It will be clear to the reader that the first two sources are the primary ones. Both of the other two sources must be based on these and cannot contradict them.

This paper will deal specifically with the *Qur'an* and the Tradition of the Prophet.

THE ISLAMIC CONCEPT OF THE QUR'AN

The original of the *Qur'an* is thought to be a book preserved on a tablet in the seventh heaven.¹ This book is also the heavenly prototype of the Torah, the Psalms and the Gospels, the books sent by God with other

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1. *Qur'an* 85:22. All *Qur'anic* quotes are taken from *The Koran Interpreted*, translated by Arthur J. Arberry (London, 1964).

prophets to other people. "Every term has a Book . . . and with God is the 'Essence of the Book.'"²

The Qur'an itself is the clear Arabic form of this book, which was sent down in numerous separate revelations through Muhammad as a means of grace to guide those who would understand.

By the Clear Book, behold We have made it an Arabic Qur'an . . . ; and behold it is in the "Essence of the Book with Us."³

These separate revelations were given to Muhammad by God at various points in his career, frequently by means of the angel Gabriel. He evidently memorized them, repeated them, and finally, delivered them to the people.⁴

Move not thy tongue with it to hasten it; Ours it is to gather it, and to recite it. So when we recite, follow thou its recitation. Then Ours it is to explain it.⁵

Here Muhammad is being cautioned against being anything other than a passive recipient of the message. The words of the Qur'an are the words of God himself. Even where there are words of Muhammad, they are usually prefaced by the imperative verb spoken by God: "Say!" For example,

And when our signs are recited to them, clear signs, those who look not to encounter Us say, 'Bring a Qur'an other than this or alter it.' Say: 'It is not for me to alter it of my own accord. I follow nothing, except what is revealed to me. . . .'⁶

In fact, this conviction that the Qur'an is the words of God became a central philosophical and theological problem in the development of Islamic thought. As the speech of God, the Qur'an became involved in the philosophical discussions of other qualities of God as to whether they were eternal and uncreated or not. A rationalist sect, called Mu'tazilites, emphasizing as it did the absolute oneness of God, denied that the qualities or attributes of God were eternal and uncreated. They also denied the uncreated nature of the Qur'an.⁷

2. *Qur'an* 13:39. See A. James Powell, "The Qur'anic view of other scriptures," *The Muslim World* LIX /2 (April, 1969), 95-105.
3. *Qur'an* 43:1-3.
4. Richard Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh, 1953), 38.
5. *Qur'an* 75:16-19.
6. *Qur'an* 10:15 ff.
7. See T. J. DeBoer, *History of Philosophy in Islam*, translated by Edward R. Jones (London, 1961), 46-49.

However, the majority position in opposition to the Mu'tazilites became the orthodox doctrine and was expressed in the various Islamic "creeds".⁸ For example, article nine of an early creed reads as follows:

Art. 9: We confess that the Qur'an is the speech of Allah, uncreated, His inspiration and revelation, not He, yet not other than He, but His real quality, written in the copies, recited by the tongues, preserved in the breasts, yet not residing there. The ink, the paper, the writing are created for they are the work of men. The speech of Allah on the other hand is uncreated, for the writing and the letters and the words and the verses are manifestations of the Qur'an for the sake of human needs. The speech of Allah on the other hand is self-existing, and its meaning is understood by means of these things. . . .⁹

Here it is clear that to the orthodox Muslim the Qur'an is not other than the "speech of God."

One of the interesting and logical corollaries of this belief is that the Arabic of the Qur'an is lexically and grammatically the perfect standard for the Arabic language. It is, for example, orthodox doctrine in Islam that there are no non-Arabic words in the Qur'an—that it is pure Arabic. Al-Shafi'i, the great Islamic theorist in jurisprudence, (d. 820 A. D.) wrote in his *Risalah*, "The Qur'an indicates that there is no portion in the Book of God that is not in the Arabic tongue."¹⁰ He points out that while there are no words from other languages in the Qur'an, there may be words which are not understood by some Arabs, or maybe by most Arabs. This is due to the wealth of the Arabic vocabulary, since "of all tongues that of the Arabs is the richest . . . Do we know any man except a prophet who apprehends all of it?"¹¹ He does not allow that there may be words in foreign tongues, acquired or transmitted which may be like some of those found in Arabic.¹²

In addition, the Qur'an is both grammatically pure and stylistically inimitable. A simple example of the high level of Qur'anic Arabic in the estimation of Muslims is the case of the "redundant *mā*." The indefinite pronoun *mā* is often inserted after prepositions without altering the

9. Given as translated in A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed* (London, 1932), 127.

10. Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i, *al-Risalah*. English translation: *Islamic Jurisprudence: Shafi'i's Risalah*. Translated with an introduction, notes and appendices by Majid Khadduri (Baltimore, 1961), 88.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 90 and note 25, p. 95.

meaning of the prepositional phrase in any essential way or the regimen of the preposition at all.¹³ But since nothing in the speech of God can be considered redundant or superfluous, this construction when found in the Qur'an is called by pious Muslim grammarians, *ma as-silah* or the *ma* of connection.

The style of the Qur'an, being the style of the speech of God, is also of the order of perfection. This concept is called in Arabic *i'jaz al-Qur'an*. The meaning of the word, *i'jaz*, in this context is that the language of the Qur'an is so sublime as to render all attempts at imitating it incapable of success.

When Muhammad was taunted by his adversaries because he could not perform miracles, his answer was the Qur'an. *It* was the miracle he brought—he needed no others.

They say, "Why have signs not been sent down upon him from his Lord?" Say: "The signs are only with God, and I am only a plain warner." What, is it not sufficient for them that We have sent down upon thee the Book that is recited to them? Surely in that is a mercy, and a reminder to a people who believe.¹⁴

The sections of each chapter which correspond to verses in the present copies of the Qur'an are called "signs," the same Arabic word that is used in the Arabic Gospel of John for the familiar word "sign." Hence it is virtually synonymous with the word "miracle."

In summary, then, the Qur'an itself plainly teaches that it is *not* the speech of Muhammad, inspired by God, or taught by God; but, the *words of God* given to, and then through, Muhammad. There is also mention in the Qur'an itself of the "Essence of the Book" and a "Preserved Tablet," which has developed into the theory that there is a heavenly prototype for the various copies of the Qur'an. We have seen that this concept has developed into the orthodox doctrine of the perfection of the language of the Qur'an as well as the uncreated eternal nature of the speech of God that is the "Essence of the Book."

Reflection on this view of Qur'anic revelation reveals that the role of the Qur'an in Islam is not parallel to the role of the Bible in Christianity but rather to the role of Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh. And it may be interesting to note that the same philosophical influences which gave rise in Eastern Christianity to various Christologies, gave rise later in Islam

13. W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*. 3rd. ed., rev. by W. Robertson Smith and M. J. de Geoje (Cambridge, 1967), I, 277; II, 215, 224.

14. *Qur'an* 27:48 f.

to the controversy over the nature of the Qur'an as to whether it was created or uncreated.¹⁵

THE ROLE OF TRADITION IN ISLAM

While the Prophet Muhammad lived, the Qur'an was a living revelation. Any new question of ritual or law, whether it related to individuals, the community or even to his own wives, could be settled by the sending down by God of a revelation that would finalize the matter. This made the community during the Prophet's lifetime a pure theocracy. With Muhammad's death Qur'anic revelation ended. What was to be the authoritative guide for the community after his death? First, of course, the Qur'an itself was collected from memories and even from scraps of bone, leather and other materials upon which some of its verses had been written. But also the Prophet's own words and deeds were remembered and used as models for deciding the proper course of behaviour, belief, and thought in the many new situations that arose. These preserved records of what the Prophet had said and done, the Prophetic tradition, in the course of time became second in authority only to the Qur'an itself as a source of law and practice for the Muslim community. Indeed the sanction to follow the Prophet's "Way" was found in the Qur'anic command to obey Muhammad.¹⁶

We do not have space here to examine in detail the interesting subject of the authenticity of the great wealth of Prophetic traditions.¹⁷ Our main interest is in the role of these traditions and their significance in orthodox Islam.

Every formal tradition from the Prophet can be divided into two parts: the text of what Muhammad is reported to have said or done and the chain of authorities down through whom the tradition has come. Here is an example of such a tradition:

Abu al-Walid Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik informed us (saying); Shu'ba informed us (saying): Sulayman al-A'mash told me as follows: I heard Zayd ibn Wahb on the authority of 'Abd Allah say: The Apostle of God (may God bless and preserve him . . .) told me as follows: Verily (each) one of you is assembled in his mother's womb forty days; then he becomes a clot for a similar period, and then a lump of flesh

15. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, 149 f. and W. C. Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (New York: Mentor, 1959), 25 note 13.

16. *Qur'an* 4:82; 33:36. al-Shafi'i, *al-Risalah* (Trans. Khadduri), 109-122.

17. N. J. Coulson, *A History of Islamic Law* (Edinburgh, 1964), 64 ff.

for the same period. An angel is sent to him and given four commands with reference to: his sustenance, the duration of his life, and whether he is to be wretched or happy. . . .18

The desire to hear, record and evaluate these Prophetic traditions motivated scholars to travel throughout the great Islamic Empire. They established careful guidelines for the handing down, recording and reading of traditions. Entire books were compiled describing these methods in great detail, virtually every detail being supported by a tradition from the Prophet himself. No less than eight methods were detailed for handing down traditions. Each method had its own set of rules.¹⁹

Various kinds of collections of traditions were made. Some were organized according to the persons on whose authority the traditions were based. Others had their traditions grouped around the topics dealt with in Islamic jurisprudence. There are six canonical collections of traditions in Islam. The most important of these are called the *sahihān*, that is the two *sahih*s. They are the *Sahih* of al-Bukhari (d. 870, A. D.) and the *Sahih* of Muslim (d. 875, A. D.). The word *ṣaḥīḥ* means "sound". These collections are so designated because they are an effort at compiling a complete collection of the reliable or sound traditions.

The scholars of tradition, like Muslim and al-Bukhari, developed a very detailed science for the criticism of traditions. Most of their activity in this area centered upon the chains of authority, much less attention being given to the text or content of the traditions themselves. Traditions were categorized according to levels of reliability. There are, for example, in relation to the number of separate chains of authority which can be given for the same tradition six levels of reliability. There are at least eight kinds of traditions described according to the relative perfection of their chains of authorities. With reference to other special features of either the chain of authorities or the text of the tradition there are at least sixteen main categories into which a tradition may be classed. This list, of course, should not be thought to have exhausted the number of special terms by which a tradition can be described.²⁰ Al-Bukhari and Muslim have provided the Islamic world with a convenient collection of traditions, carefully, if not thoroughly, criticized and established as reliable, to which the faithful can look for an authoritative guide for faith and life.

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18. From al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, "Kitab al-Qadar," 82. English translation in Alfred Guillaume, *The Traditions of Islam* (London, 1924). 171.
 19. James Robson, "Hadith" *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., III, 27.
 20. *Ibid.*

This careful consideration of the men upon whose authority traditions were handed down necessitated a thorough knowledge of the lives of these men. Thus, it is from the concern with Prophetic Tradition that the great wealth of biographical literature in Islamic civilization sprang.

In fact, the method of the Tradition-scholars became the method of historiography for most of the great medieval Muslim historians. Journeys made in search of traditions together with the duty of every Muslim to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca once in his lifetime stimulated a wealth of Arabic travel literature. Indeed there is a sense in which most of the intellectual endeavor of Islamic civilization is an outgrowth of this concern with Prophetic Tradition.

This enthusiasm for and devotion to the Tradition had two corollaries which are of special interest to the purpose of this paper.

First of all, it resulted in a slavish *imitation of the Prophet Muhammad*. The thoughts and actions of the Prophet became more prominent in Islam than the thoughts or actions of Jesus ever have been for Christendom. Christians have tried to develop the mind of Christ through devotionally meditating upon the principles of the life and teachings of Jesus.²¹ They have made an attempt to let their lives be guided by the principle "What *would* Jesus do?"²² But for the Muslims, the effort has been to find out just how Muhammad did each and every action demanded by nature and society and to copy it. For example, a Muslim scholar of the tenth century compiled a book entitled "Actions for Night or Day."²³ Some topics among the many that catch the reader's eye are "What to say when one puts on a robe," or "How to put on a robe," or "How the greeting should be given by one passing another who is standing." A modern Arab writer on the science of Tradition, states that every believer among the Muslims who did not constantly keep his heart and mind attentive to the person of the Apostle and did not conform himself to his deeds had no true faith. The believer should be careful to follow the Prophet in such matters as how to gird up his loins and where and how to sit at an assembly.²⁴ This has resulted in an astonishing uniformity among modern Muslims even in such matters as how they wash their hands.

The other corollary is that the *Tradition*, although the second source of authority next to the Qur'an, is *actually in some sense more authoritative than the Qur'an* since the Tradition, according to al-Shafi'i

21. e.g. Thomas A Kempis' *Of the Imitation of Christ*.

22. e.g., Charles Sheldon. *In His Steps*.

23. Abu Bakr Ahmad Ibn al-Sunni, *Kitab 'amal al-yawm wa al-laylah*. al-tab'ah

24. Subhi al-Salah, *'Ulum al-hadith wa mustalah-hu*, (Bayrut, 1959), 8.

and later orthodox thought, is the elucidator of the meaning of the Qur'an. Al-Shafi'i stated, "Everything in the Tradition of the Prophet is a clear explanation for the divine communication in the Book of God."²⁵ The traditionists after al-Shafi'i categorically stated the principle that the tradition of the Prophet prevails over the Qur'an, but that the Qur'an does not prevail over the Tradition.²⁶ That is, where an established, reliable tradition from the Prophet is in apparent contradiction with the Qur'an, the Qur'an is to be understood in terms of the tradition, since the Prophet, being the most likely to understand the Qur'an, is the best authority for its interpretation.

SACRED OR HOLY TRADITION

As a kind of postscript and to complete the circle of this discussion of revelation and tradition in Islam, I wish to add some remarks about what is called sacred tradition. A sacred tradition is a tradition which contains "what God told his Prophet by direct revelation or in a dream or the Prophet conveyed its meaning by means of an expression of his own." That is, the sacred tradition is one in which the communicated truth or message is from God, but it comes in the words and style of his prophet, Muhammad. The sacred tradition is not miraculous and not revealed in the way the Qur'an was revealed. It is not handled ritually in the same careful way as the Qur'an. Neither is it introduced by the familiar, *qūla Allāhu, ta'āla. . .* "God, who is exalted, said. . ."; but is introduced by a formula of its own, "the Apostle of God said. . . in what he related from his lord. . ."²⁷

This selective survey of revelation and tradition in Islam makes four observations possible in view of the purposes of the paper:

1. A look at the Islamic understanding of the nature of the Qur'an provides the Christian observer with a glimpse of what a belief in a Holy Book as the very words of a perfect and sovereign God is really like. The difference between the Islamic view and that of even fundamentalist Protestants in regard to the nature of Scripture should stimulate Christians to ponder anew what the Christian doctrine of revelation really is.

2. The Christian student will also be careful to note the correspondence between the role of Jesus Christ in Christianity and the role of

25. al-Shafi'i, *al-Risalah* (Trans. Khadduri), 76.

26. Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammedan Jurisprudence* (Oxford, 1953), 46 and 47.

27. S. M. Zwemer, "The So-called Hadith Qudsi," *The Muslim World* XII (1922), 236-275.

the Qur'an in Islam. Muhammad, usually compared with Jesus, might better parallel a figure like Paul or Peter; and the New Testament parallel either the Prophetic or Sacred Tradition.

3. The survey of the role of Prophetic Tradition in Islam shows that such a "high view" of scriptural revelation is neither an assurance against the growth and authority of tradition, nor against its becoming more significant in practice than the role of the revelation itself. In fact, in Islam the standard of behavior becomes the example, real or imagined, of a *man*.

4. And finally, completing the circle, the parallel between the Sacred Tradition and the "Thus saith the Lord" of the biblical prophets is interesting.

In the light of these observations, what can we say about Christian revelation and tradition? And what can we say to the Muslim about revelation and tradition?