

This article was written by Fazlur Rahman to clarify his position on the process of revelation of the Qur'an. It was published simultaneously in the two English-language Pakistani national newspapers *Dawn* and *Pakistan Times* (from which this has been transcribed, it being published in the Supplement in Lahore on 25 August 1968). It represents the clearest statement of Fazlur Rahman's position, written after he had attracted nationwide attacks, after a period of rest enforced on medical grounds and soon before he felt the need to go into voluntary exile from his homeland.

Divine revelations and the Holy Prophet

Fazlur Rahman

(Editorial introduction) In this article, Dr Fazlur Rahman has justified his stand on divine revelations. He says:

I reiterate that the Holy Quran is the Word of God revealed to the Holy Prophet. I believe in the proposition that the Holy Prophet was the recipient of the final verbal revelation of God. Without this belief no Muslim can be a Muslim even in name.

It is, indeed, shocking that this argument of mine which is based on Shah Waliullah and Iqbal should have provoked such an unthinking reaction amongst certain circles. It is clear to me that certain persons and groups are deliberately trying to mislead people. A dust storm is being created to conceal and confuse the real issues from the eyes of the public to gain extraneous ends. In my judgement this bespeaks of an alarming state of affairs. The clouds of confusion which are being deliberately generated by obscurantist circles are a great challenge to our intellectual, integrate and spiritual honesty. Iqbal tells us on the authority of Maulana Rumi that a nation, when it loses discernment and mis-judges essentials, has gone far enough on the road to decay.

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Every Muslim since the dawn of Islam has believed, that the Qur'an is the Word of God revealed to the Holy Prophet. Without this pivotal belief no person can even be a nominal Muslim. Nevertheless, a controversy has always been there in Islam as to how the Word of God was conveyed to the Holy Prophet.

Those who are conversant with the religious history of Islam even in a casual manner will recall that this question first of all took the form. Is the Quran an uncreated, eternal attribute of God, in so far as it constitutes His Word (or Speech), or is it something created and not an eternal attribute? The Mu'tazila school of thought believed that the Qur'an belonged to the created world and was not the eternal Speech of God. This was a consequence of the Mu'tazila denial of any other eternal - even if it be a Divine Attribute - besides God.

Imam Hanbal

The orthodoxy - led by Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal - vigorously opposed this view and

ultimately succeeded in getting the doctrine accepted that the Qur'an was uncreated and belonged to the realm of the eternal attributes of God. For the orthodoxy, however, it then became a problem to formulate and explain as to how an eternal attribute of God came into touch with the Holy Prophet in order to be revealed to him. The great leaders of the orthodoxy, like Abul Hasan al-Ash'ari and others, were then led to declare that "the Qur'an as it is heard and read and seen is not the Word of God". They explicitly stated that the eternal Word of God is "a simple, eternal, invisible mental act of God (*Kalam-i-Nafsi*)" of which the Qur'an and other Revealed Books are the *effects* - the Qur'an being the latest and the final in the series of Revelations. One variety of the Sunni orthodox view is set out by Mujaddid-i-Alf-i-Thani in the 17th century as follows:

[Fazlur Rahman cites the original Persian couplet and then translates:]

"By God, the Word of God is, in truth, one single (mental act).

Externally, the effects appear as diverse (like the Tora, the Evangel and the Qur'an)."

[Another translation:

By God the Book of God in truth is one

Though revealing differently changed the tone.]

So far so good. This way of posing and solving the problem did not however, prove entirely satisfactory. It was, in fact, so abstract and scholastic that Iqbal poured ridicule and scorn on it in one of his famous poems where he regards this controversy, (i.e. whether the Qur'an is created or uncreated) as one of the "idols of Muslim theology".

[Fazlur Rahman cites the original Urdu quatrain, which might be translated as follows:

Which of the two beliefs is one that absolves

One that affirms eternal are the words of God

Or the one that says nay created they are,

All such deist craft made the idols Lat, Manat

Do the Muslims in this age need the idols this apart]

The question now assumed a more realistic form and it was asked as to how the Holy Prophet's mind came into touch with a set of words which had divine and eternal origin.

Shah Waliullah of Delhi, in his work *Fuyu'z-ul-Haramain* states:

The laws of the Sharia are always formulated in accordance with the customs of a people... Such customs as are harmful and evil, God removes them but customs and mores which are sound and good are confirmed. Similarly, the Verbal Revelation occurs in the *mould of words, idioms and styles which are already existent in the mind of the Prophet.*

This clearly means that the Revelation of the Holy Qur'an occurred in those very terms, idioms and words which were already in the possession of the Holy Prophet's mind before he assumed the office of Prophet. In his Persian work entitled *Sata'at*, Shah Waliullah goes further:

When God wished to communicate a guidance which is intended to abide to the end of the world, He subdued the mind of the Prophet in such a way that in the pure heart of the Prophet He sent down the Book of God in a nebulous and undifferentiated manner (*Ijmalan*)... The Message comes to be imprinted in the pure heart of the Prophet as it existed in the *supernal realm* and thus the Prophet came to know by conviction that this is the Word of God... Subsequently, as the need arose, well-strung speech was brought out from the rational faculties of the Prophet through the agency of the angel.

We have now reached a point where the problem of the manner of revelation has been raised and answered in psychological terms. We are told clearly here that the Book of God is sent to the heart of the Prophet from where it emerges from time to time in the language of the Prophet in the idioms and style that was the property of the Prophet's mind already. A new question now arises: If the words, style and the idioms were already possessed by the Holy Prophet, how is it that they become eternal, divine and uncreated Word? How is it that the Word of God has come to the Prophet not merely in inspirational form but the very words of the Qur'an are revealed divinely? This question was tackled by Iqbal briefly in the first chapter of his *Reconstruction*. Let me quote Iqbal *in extenso*:

It must, however, be noted that mystic feeling, like all feeling, has a cognitive element also; and it is, I believe, because of this cognitive element that it lends itself to the form of idea. In fact, it is the nature of feeling to seek expression in thought. It would seem that the two - feeling and idea - are the non-temporal and temporal aspects of the same unit of inner experience.

Iqbal then goes on to quote from Professor Hocking:

What is that other-than feeling in which feeling may end? I answer the consciousness of an object. The feeling is instability of an entire conscious self: And that which will restore the stability of this self lies not within its own border, but beyond it. Feeling is outward-pushing as idea is outward-reporting: And no feeling is so blind as to have no idea of its own object. As a feeling possesses the mind, there also possesses the mind, as an integral part of that feeling, some idea of the kind of thing which will bring it to rest...

Having quoted this passage from Prof. Hocking, Iqbal comments:

But Prof Hocking's passage, just quoted, has a wider scope than mere justification of idea in religion. The organic relation of feeling and idea throws light on the old theological controversy about Verbal Revelation which once gave so much trouble to Muslim thinkers. Inarticulate feeling seeks to fulfil its destiny in an idea which, in its turn, tends to develop out of itself its own visible garment. It is not mere metaphor to say that the idea and word both simultaneously emerge out of the womb of feeling, though logical understanding cannot but take them in a temporal order and thus create its own difficulty by regarding them as mutually isolated. There is a sense in which the word is also revealed.

It is abundantly clear from these passages of Iqbal that, psychologically speaking, the feeling, the idea and the word are an organic entity and are born in the mind of the Prophet at once. Nevertheless, since the origin of the feeling-idea-word complex lies outside the control of the Prophet and is a *creative act*, it is to be regarded as Revelation from some source which is beyond the Prophet himself. However, a new question arises with this particular statement of the solution as given by Iqbal. For all inspirational phenomena and in all creative acts of mind including that of a poet, an artist and, indeed, a mystic, this theory would hold good. Indeed, it would hold good in all acts of creative knowledge where an original piece of knowledge is discovered - for example, the Theory of Relativity of Einstein. In a sense, then, all new knowledge is given from some source beyond the ordinary reach of the recipient. The question, however, is: What, then, is the distinctive mark of Qur'anic Revelation which will set it apart from all other forms of original cognition including the mystic?

Iqbal

My statement contained in my book *Islam*, Chapter II, is an attempt to answer this very question which arises from the passages just quoted from Iqbal. If the Qur'an is unique Revelation, then it must be distinguished from other forms of original cognition where something new is discovered. Iqbal has not elaborated this theme, but has given a hint and a direction. I have further elaborated and developed this very line of argument to demonstrate the uniqueness of the Verbal Revelation which is the Qur'an. I quote from this book:

For the Qur'an itself, and consequently for the Muslims, the Qur'an is the Word of God (*Kalam Allah*). Muhammad too was unshakably convinced that he was the recipient of the Message from God, the totally Other (We shall presently try to discover more precisely the sense of this total Otherness), so much so that he rejected, on the strength of this consciousness, some of the most fundamental historical claims of the Judaeo-Christian Tradition about Abraham and other Prophets. This 'Other', through some channel, dictated the Qur'an with an absolute authority. The voice from the depths of life spoke distinctly, unmistakably and imperiously. Not only does the word 'Qur'an' meaning 'Recitation', clearly indicate this, but the text of the Qur'an itself states in several places that the Qur'an is 'Verbally Revealed' and not merely in its meaning and ideas. The Qur'anic term for 'Revelation' is *Wahy* which is fairly close in its meaning to 'Inspiration', provided this latter is not supposed to exclude the verbal mode necessarily. (pp.30-31)

Further, even with regard to ordinary consciousness, it is a mistaken notion that ideas and feelings float about in it and can be mechanically clothed in words. There exists, indeed, an organic relationship between feelings, ideas and words. In inspiration, even in poetic inspiration, this relationship is so complete that feeling-idea-word is a total complex with a life of its own. (p.33)

So far, I have given the same account of the 'psychology' of the creative process of

mind as Iqbal had given. It is clear from this account that whereas the source and the origin of this creative process lies beyond the ordinary reach of the human agency, nevertheless this process occurs, in some definite sense, as an integral part of the agent's mind. If the entire process occurs in his mind, then, in an ordinary sense, it is his word, in so far as the psychological process is concerned, but is Revealed Word in so far as its source lies beyond his reach. In saying this, I am only reiterating explicitly what Iqbal and Shah Waliullah had said.

Psychological account

But the psychological account of the Qur'anic Revelation is not the whole story and it cannot exhaust the meaning of Divine Revelation. To give only a psychological account is to include the Revelation of the Qur'an in the same category as other forms of poetic, artistic and mystic inspiration. How, then, do we establish the purely Divine character of the Qur'anic Revelation and its uniqueness. For this purpose, I have given the following argument which I quote from the same book of mine:

We have explicitly stated in the preceding chapter that the basic *élan* of the Qur'an is moral, whence flows its emphasis on monotheism as well as social justice. The Moral Law is immutable; it is God's 'Command', man cannot make or unmake the Moral Law. He must submit himself to it, this submission to it being called *Islam* and its implementation in life being called *iba'da* or 'service to God'. It is because of the Qur'an's paramount emphasis on the Moral Law that the Qur'anic God has seemed to many people to be primarily the God of justice. But the Moral Law and spiritual values, in order to be implemented, must be known.

Now, in their power of cognitive perception men obviously differ to an indefinite degree. Further, the moral and religious perception is also very different from a purely intellectual perception, for an intrinsic quality of the former is that, along with perception, it brings an extraordinary sense of 'gravity' and leaves the subject significantly transformed. Perception, also moral perception, then has degrees. The variation is not only between different individuals, but the inner life of a given individual varies at different times from this point of view...

Now, a Prophet is a person whose average, overall character, the sum total of his actual conduct, is far superior to those of humanity in general. He is a man who is *ab initio* impatient with men and even with most of their ideas and wishes to recreate history. Muslim orthodoxy, therefore, drew the logically correct conclusion that Prophets must be regarded as immune from serious error (the doctrine of *Isma*). Muhammad was such a person, in fact, the only such person really known to history. That is why his overall behaviour is regarded by the Muslims as Sunna or the 'perfect model'. But with all this, there were moments when he, as it were, 'transcends himself' and his moral cognitive perception becomes so acute and so keen that his consciousness becomes identical with the Moral Law itself. "Thus did We inspire you with a

Spirit of Our Command: You did not know what the Book was. But we made it a Light” (Qur'an XLII, 52). But the Moral Law and religious values are God’s Command, and although they are not identical with God entirely, they are part of Him. The Qur'an is, therefore, purely Divine...

When Muhammad’s moral perception rose to the highest point and became identical with the Moral Law itself (indeed, in these moments his own conduct at points came under Qur'anic criticism...) the Word was given with the inspiration itself. The Qur'an is thus pure Divine Word, but, of course, it is equally intimately related to the inmost personality of the Prophet Muhammad whose relationship to it cannot be mechanically conceived like that of a record. The Divine Word flowed through the Prophet’s heart. (pp. 32-33)

That the Qur'anic Revelation occurred in the heart and mind of the Prophet is asserted and confirmed by the Qur'an itself. In Sura XXVI, 194, the Qur'an says “the Trusted Spirit has *brought it down upon your heart* that you may be a warner” and again, in Sura II, 97, “Say: he who is enemy of Gabriel (let him be) for it is He who has brought it down *upon your heart*.”

My argument about the establishment of the revelatory character of the Qur'an is, therefore, in two parts. In the first part, I have agreed, and done no more, with the statements of Shah Waliullah and Iqbal who explained the *psychology* of the process of revelation. This account maintains that in all creative knowledge, and particularly in Revelation, the ideas and the words are born in the mind of the Prophet. Since they are new ideas and discoveries, their source cannot lie in the mind of the Prophet, but must be traced and referred to a source beyond. However, since the ideas and words are born in the mind of the Prophet as its integral process, the words are, in an ordinary sense, also referable to the agent’s mind as well. Shah Waliullah, as we have quoted him, has even gone so far as to say that the words, the idioms and the style were already existent in the Prophet’s mind. Iqbal has gone further by saying that the words are generated with the ideas without the conscious control of the Prophet, the recipient of Revelation. I have agreed with Iqbal.

Divine origin

Secondly, what Iqbal has not explicitly formulated, I have, at length, distinguished the unique character of the Divine Revelation from other forms of creative knowledge. This must be done because otherwise the Qur'anic revelation will fall in the same category as poetic and other creative forms of art. Psychologically, no doubt they are similar and form ascending degrees of the same phenomenon of creative inspiration. But in terms of religious and moral import and valuation, the Qur'an is something entirely *sui generis* and separate from any other form of creative thinking or creative art. In my opinion, this is the only way to explain in an acceptable manner for the thinking man of today the process of Revelation and at the same time not only to support but to demonstrate its pure Divine origin - not only in its inspiration but in its very verbal mode.

In the light of the foregoing, therefore, I reiterate that the Holy Qur'an is the Word of God revealed to the Holy Prophet. I believe in the proposition that the Holy Prophet was the recipient of the final, verbal Revelation of God. Without this belief no Muslim can be a Muslim even in name.

It is, indeed, shocking that this argument of mine which is based on Shah Waliullah and Iqbal should have provoked such an unthinking reaction amongst certain circles. It is clear to me that certain persons and groups are deliberately trying to mislead people. A dust-storm is being created to conceal and confuse the real issues from the eyes of the public to gain extraneous ends. In my judgement this bespeaks of an alarming state of affairs. The clouds of confusion which are being deliberately generated by obscurantist circles are a great challenge to our intellectual, integrate, and spiritual honesty. Iqbal tells us on the authority of Maulana Rumi that a nation, when it loses discernment and mis-judges the essentials, has gone far enough on the road to decay.

[Fazlur Rahman cites the original Persian couplet, which might be translated as follows:

Every nation that sunk in the past
Failed assaying logs from rocks]

As Muslims, it is our prime duty to cultivate mental and spiritual discernment. The Qur'an repeatedly and ceaselessly emphasises the need to understand and appreciate things with proper rational discernment.

It is sometimes said that 'subtle' intellectual issues should not be written about or spoken in public because the 'common man' lacks the intellectual capacity to understand and evaluate them and is thus confused. This is a dangerous argument and is directly conducive to the breeding of hypocrisy in society. In the bygone days when there was no Press some eminent Muslims (e.g. Ghazali) wrote books which were not meant for public circulation but for the elite circle of intellectuals. Whether this practice was good or not, in any case it is not practicable nowadays. Even on moral grounds I do not think that such an attitude is permissible. It is this very attitude which is adopted by certain highly intellectual Hindus. For example, when they are pressed on the point of *Tauhid*, they would say that *Tauhid* or unity of God is undoubtably the true doctrine. But, they insist since the common man cannot understand and appreciate the one absolute God, it is necessary for him to use idols as means. The Hellenist apologists used the self-same argument to defend their paganism against the onslaught of Christianity. Islam is a democratic religion. It did away with the special privileges and claims of the Brahmin and the intellectual class. Its teaching is not meant just for intellectuals but is intended for the entire human race. If one is convinced of a truth, it is his duty to say it openly.