

## **Fazlur Rahman: *Islam***

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### Chapter Two: The Qur'an, p. 30-33

#### *What is the Qur'an?*

The Qur'an is divided into Chapters or Suras, 114 in number and very unequal in length. The early Meccan Suras are amongst the shortest; as time goes on, they become longer. The verses in the early Suras are charged with an extraordinarily deep and powerful 'psychological moment'; they have the character of brief but violent volcanic eruptions. A voice is crying from the very depths of life and impinging forcefully on the Prophet's mind in order to make itself explicit at the level of consciousness. This tone gradually gives way, especially in the Medina period, to a more fluent and easy style as the legal content increases for the detailed organization and direction of the nascent community-state. This is certainly not to say that the voice had been stilled or even that its intensive quality had changed: a Medinese verse declares "If We had sent down this Qur'an on a mountain, you would have seen it humbly submit (to the Command) and split asunder out of fear of God" (LIX, 21). But the task itself had changed. From the thud and impulse of purely moral and religious exhortation, the Qur'an had passed to the construction of an actual social fabric.

For the Qur'an itself, and consequently for the Muslims, the Qur'an is the Word of God (*Kalam Allah*). Muhammad too, was unshakeably 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 that 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 (by 'Word', of course, we do not mean sound). The Qur'an says, "God speaks to no human (i.e. through sound-words) except through *wahy* (i.e. through idea-word inspiration) or from behind the veil, or He may send a messenger (an angel) who speaks through *wahy*... Even thus have We inspired you with a spirit of Our Command..." (XLII, 51-52).

When, however, during the second and third centuries of Islam, acute differences of opinion, controversies partly influenced by Christian doctrines, arose among the Muslims about the nature of Revelation, the emerging Muslim 'orthodoxy', which was at that time in the crucial stage of formulating its precise content, emphasised the *externality* of the Prophet's Revelation in order to safeguard its 'otherness', objectivity

and verbal character. The Qur'an itself certainly maintained the 'otherness', the 'objectivity' and the verbal character of the Revelation, but had equally certainly rejected its externality *vis-à-vis* the Prophet. It declares, "The Trusted Spirit has brought it down upon your heart that you may be a warner" (XXVI, 194), and again, "Say: He who is an enemy of Gabriel (let him be), for it is he who has brought it down upon your heart" (II, 97). But orthodoxy (indeed, all medieval thought) lacked the necessary intellectual tools to combine in its formulation of the dogma the otherness and verbal character of the Revelation on the one hand, and its intimate connection with the work and the religious personality of the Prophet on the other, i.e. it lacked the intellectual capacity to say both that the Qur'an is entirely the Word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also entirely the word of Muhammad. The Qur'an obviously holds both, for if it insists that it has come to the 'heart' of the Prophet, how can it be external to him? This, of course, does not necessarily imply that the Prophet did not perceive also a projected figure, as tradition has it, but it is remarkable that the Qur'an itself makes no mention of any figure in this connection: it is only in connection with certain special experiences (commonly connected with the Prophet's Ascension) that the Qur'an speaks of the Prophet having seen a figure or a spirit, or some other object 'at the farthest end' or 'on the horizon', although here also, as we pointed out in Section I of the last chapter, the experience is described as a spiritual one. But orthodoxy, through the Hadith or the 'tradition' from the Prophet, partly suitably interpreted and partly coined, and through the science of theology based largely on the Hadith, made the Revelation of the Prophet entirely through the ear and external to him and regarded the angel or the spirit 'that comes to the heart' an entirely external agent. The modern Western picture of the Prophetic Revelation rests largely on this orthodox formulation rather than on the Qur'an, as does, of course, the belief of the common Muslim.

The present work is not the place to elaborate a theory of the Qur'anic Revelation in detail. Yet, if we are to deal with facts of Islamic history, the factual statements of the Qur'an about itself call for some treatment. In the following brief outline an attempt is made to do justice both to historical and Islamic demands. 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 on 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 *ibada* 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, 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 individuals, but the inner life of a given individual varies at different times from this point of view. We are not here talking of an intrinsic moral and intellectual development and evolution, where

variation is most obvious. But even in a good, mature person whose average intellectual and moral character and calibre, are, in a sense, fixed, these variations occur.

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 ideals, and wishes to re-create history. Muslim orthodoxy, therefore, drew the logically correct conclusion that Prophets must be regarded as immune from serious errors (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 have made it a light" (XLII, 125.52). 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. 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. When Muhammad's moral intuitive perception rose to the highest point and became identified with the moral law itself (indeed, in these moments his own conduct at points came under Qur'anic criticism, as is shown by our account in the second section of the preceding chapter and as is evident from the pages of the Qur'an), 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.

But if Muhammad, in his Qur'anic moments, became one with the moral law, he may not be absolutely identified either with God or even with a part of Him. The Qur'an categorically forbids this, Muhammad insistently avoided this and all Muslims worthy of the name have condemned as the gravest error associating (*shirk*) a creature with God. The reason is that no man may say, 'I am the Moral Law'. Man's duty is carefully to formulate this Law and to submit to it with all his physical, mental and spiritual faculties. Besides this, Islam knows of no way of assigning any meaning to the sentence, 'So-and-so is Divine'.