

## **Towards a Theology of Revelation**

In every age the thinking, questioning person must ask how the Word of God in the Qur'an can be sent down to the Prophet Muhammad and appear from his lips whilst remaining beyond doubt the infallible Word of God. Fazlur Rahman, as a philosophically trained Muslim theologian of the twentieth century, felt the need to tackle this question in a way that would make sense to thinking people of his own age. As human knowledge expands and new philosophical insights are developed, he maintained that it is possible for an explanation to be given that is consistent with the timeless tradition of Islam and yet makes sense in a way that was not possible in earlier generations, which lacked the necessary concepts and understanding adequately to offer such an explanation. As with all attempts to explain the interaction between the transcendent world of God and human experience, an explanation thus offered could only be the best possible attempt to speak about such an interaction in our own times, subject, as always, to further clarification as human knowledge expands in future generations. What he offered, therefore, was the most satisfactory code of speech that he could formulate to speak of such things rather than an illusory 'description' of that which lies beyond our ability fully to know or express.

Certain biographical information and references to the Muslim philosophers who helped to shape Fazlur Rahman's theology are essential to the argument of this article and therefore are included below. However, for a more detailed consideration of these two areas, which will enable a better understanding of this topic, please read the relevant two articles on the Fazlur Rahman section of my website, under the heading Revelation of the Qur'an: *Biographical introduction* and *The psychology of prophecy*. The latter is not easy-going, but the struggle to follow its argumentation is highly recommended to grasp a deeper appreciation of Fazlur Rahman's thought.

Fazlur Rahman's attempts to speak about these matters caused great misunderstanding in the 1960s and led to his being forced into exile from his homeland. He had worked through the development of his own thought on this matter by his profound study of the Muslim philosophers. From this Fazlur Rahman took the philosophers' understanding of the development of the human intellect striving 'upwards' in quest of divine illumination. The prophets, being pure and sinless human beings endowed with the most heightened intellectual gifts, were privileged to develop their human intellects to the highest degree so that they were 'illuminated' by the lowest emanation of the divine, the Active Intelligence, to such a degree that it became the 'form' of the prophetic intellect. The concept of 'form', taken from the Neoplatonic system, understood the Active Intelligence so to permeate the prophetic intellect that, while the prophetic intellect was not the Active Intelligence, which being divine must always remain beyond human grasp in this life, it could not be understood or grasped without reference to the Active Intelligence as the 'form' that gave it shape and meaning. He made use of the image of a lump of wax that was so permeated by the form 'horse' that it took on the shape of a horse whilst remaining not a horse but a lump of wax. A wax horse is not a horse but it cannot be understood without reference to the 'form' horse. In the same way, the illuminated prophetic intellect was

not the Active Intelligence but it could not be understood without reference to it as the 'form' that gave it shape and meaning.

Drawing from the insight of Ibn Sina that a characteristic of this prophetic intellect was that it was capable of receiving divine illumination 'in wholes' or in a Gestalt intuitive manner, Fazlur Rahman was able to give meaning to the Qur'anic references to the Qur'an being sent down upon the heart of Muhammad.<sup>1</sup> Ibn Sina understood that this divine illumination could give an absolute assurance to the Prophet that he 'knew' the content of the revelation even though the details had not yet been conveyed from his lips in Arabic. Fazlur Rahman, in company with some earlier theologians, found the philosophers' explanation to be insufficient in that it did not adequately guarantee the literal, verbal nature of the revelation in such a way that the actual words of the Qur'an could be vouchsafed to be the 'Word of God' expressed in Arabic. The function of prophets is unique, they are to be distinguished from mystics, poets or philosophers, in that they are to give guidance to humanity on how to live a life in accordance with the Moral Law of God; they are activists and not contemplatives. Whilst the source of the Qur'an was outside Muhammad,<sup>2</sup> and the revelation wholly at the initiative of God,<sup>3</sup> the process of revelation, whereby the Qur'an was sent down upon the heart of Muhammad and not his ear or eye, for example, was internal, occurring within the prophetic intellect, shaped by the Active Intelligence, which is also referred to as the angel, the Agent of Revelation, the Holy Spirit,<sup>4</sup> and the Trusted Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

### **The book *Islam***

Fazlur Rahman attempted to express this in a somewhat truncated form in his book *Islam*, which was completed in 1958 but only published in 1966, when he was active as the Director of the Central Institute of Islamic Research in Pakistan. The book was written in English and aimed at a western audience of university students. As such, it could be read by the ruling elite of Pakistan but not by the *ulama* or the common people, who did not have access to that language. When the first two chapters of the book were translated into Urdu and published in the Institute's journal *Fikr-o Nazar*, they became accessible to a much wider audience and a controversy ensued. The second chapter contained his explanation of the Qur'anic revelation, the crucial section of which is contained in the 'Extract from *Islam*' available from this website. Those who wished to cause trouble to Fazlur Rahman and the political administration with which he was associated in Pakistan at that time took short excerpts from this and duplicated them for distribution amongst the masses to fuel popular anger and thus militate towards his eventual academic demise and the overthrow of the government. This galvanising of the masses in Pakistan against Fazlur Rahman led to him being branded *munkir-i-Qur'an* (disbeliever in the Qur'an) in a similar way to that in which

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<sup>1</sup> cf Q. 2:97 and 26:194, see also Q. 44:3-6

<sup>2</sup> cf. Q. 10:37-38

<sup>3</sup> cf. Q. 10:16

<sup>4</sup> cf. Q. 16:102

<sup>5</sup> cf. Q. 26:193

Ghulam Ahmad Parvez, the founder of the Ahl-e-Qur'an movement, earlier was branded *munkir-i-sunnat* (disbeliever in the Sunna). To prevent a repetition of this taking of excerpts out of context, readers are required to read the Extract (see the website) in full and, further to facilitate this, references to this extract are given here without page or line numbers.

The critical sentence that caused the controversy was: “The Qur'an is entirely the Word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also entirely the word of Muhammad”.<sup>6</sup> Writing retrospectively in 1976, Fazlur Rahman commented,

I had given a rational account of it [the Qur'an's revelatory status] *in accordance with what the Qur'an says about itself*, the public was given the impression by the campaigners that I had said that the Qur'an is the joint work of Allah and Muhammad - a position which no Muslim can hold.<sup>7</sup>

The controversy intensified in Pakistan until questions were raised in the National Assembly in May 1968. By this time, Fazlur Rahman, stricken with ‘heart trouble’, had withdrawn to Abbottabad to recuperate. Whilst he was there, the cabinet minister to whom he was ultimately responsible, asked him to write an article to clarify his position. This was published by the two English-language newspapers in Pakistan on 25 August 1968 as *Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet*. This did not quell the unease, which reached the stage of public demonstrations and strikes in various parts of Pakistan, both East and West.

The climax to this unrest was recalled by Fazlur Rahman in his 1976 account,

On September 5, there were complete strikes (including barbers and taxi-drivers) in five or six towns of the Punjab, but not in Lahore. The government was particularly apprehensive about the next day, the sixth, which was both a Friday and Pakistan Defence Day (celebrating the anniversary of the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War) and in the words of the president, ‘the governors of both provinces are very frightened’. I resigned with immediate effect.<sup>8</sup>

In his letter of resignation, Fazlur Rahman drew together these various strands,

I feel that my book *Islam* has become the subject matter of a serious controversy. As you know, this book was written by me in 1958, much before I assumed the office of Director, Islamic Research Institute, and the views expressed in the book are my personal, independent opinions, and interpretations. I am deeply pained to find that the book is being used by certain people as an excuse for criticising the Government as if the book had been written at the behest of the Government.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Extract from *Islam*

<sup>7</sup> *Some Islamic issues in the Ayyub Khan era*, 1976, p.300

<sup>8</sup> *Some Islamic issues in the Ayyub Khan era*, 1976, p. 301

<sup>9</sup> Published in *Dawn*, Karachi, 6 September 1968

### ***Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet***

This article, published in the Pakistani national English-language daily newspapers on 25 August 1968 and given in full in the text of the same name available on this website, can be regarded as the fullest statement by Fazlur Rahman of his position. Having surveyed the thought of some of the theological schools on the question, Fazlur Rahman went on to express his own understanding.

The question now crystallised into a discussion of how the mind of the Prophet could come into contact with a set of words which had a divine and eternal origin.<sup>10</sup> Fazlur Rahman then addressed the thought of Shah Waliullah, who taught that, “the Verbal Revelation occurs in the *mould of words, idioms and styles which are already existent in the mind of the Prophet*”.<sup>11</sup> Shah Waliullah understood this to refer to the contents of the Prophet’s mind before the revelation, and therefore the assumption of the rôle of prophethood, took place. The process of revelation, according to Shah Waliullah, consisted in the sending down of the Book of God ‘in a nebulous and undifferentiated manner’ on the pure heart of the Prophet, bypassing his subdued mind, so that it was imprinted there ‘as it existed in the *supernal realm*’, thus bringing about an absolute assurance in the being of the Prophet. “Subsequently, as the need arose, well-strung speech was brought out from the rational faculties of the Prophet through the agency of the angel”.<sup>12</sup>

This warrants careful scrutiny. The references to the ‘Book of God’ ‘as it existed in the *supernal realm*’ are taken to refer to the Preserved Tablet. Elements from this single Preserved Tablet were revealed in the various scriptures sent down by God to sundry prophets in various languages; therefore it cannot be associated directly with the Arabic language. In the case of the Qur’an and Muhammad, the ‘nebulous and undifferentiated’ contents of the Preserved Tablet were clothed in the ‘words, idioms and styles’ which already existed in the Prophet’s mind in Arabic; hence the repeated assertion by the Qur’an of its Arabic nature.<sup>13</sup> The Arabic ‘words, idioms and styles’ which clothed the revelation were not chosen by the mind of Muhammad but were ‘brought out from the rational faculties of the Prophet *through the agency of the angel* [italics added]’. Thus, the Agent of Revelation, in intimate collaboration with the intellect of the Prophet, brought forth from Muhammad’s tongue the Arabic words of the Qur’an, which revelation had been sent down upon his heart.

Fazlur Rahman then raised the next logical question for consideration, viz., “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

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<sup>10</sup> cf. *Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet*

<sup>11</sup> cf. *Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet*

<sup>12</sup> cf. *Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet* Also, cf. *Translating the Qur'an*, 1986, p. 24: “Clearly, the divine messages broke through the consciousness of the Prophet from an agency whose source is God”. And, *Muhammad and the Qur'an*, 1994, p. 10: “This shows us, clearly, that the Prophet’s consciousness was invaded from time to time, when the opportunity for it arose, by some force and that this force definitely came from his heart”. Also, cf. *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, p. 97.

<sup>13</sup> cf. Q. 12: 1-2; 13: 37 and 41: 2.

come to the Prophet not merely in inspirational form but the very words of the Qur'an are revealed divinely?"<sup>14</sup>

Fazlur Rahman approached this question initially through the writings of Muhammad Iqbal. Iqbal taught that all feeling has a cognitive element through which, by necessity, it seeks to express itself, so that any inner experience has a non-temporal (i.e. feeling) and a temporal (i.e. idea) dimension. Fazlur Rahman then followed Iqbal in referring to Hocking, the philosopher of religion, who said that all feeling has a basic instability which can only be stabilised through a force external to the recipient. With the feeling comes an inkling of the external object which will stabilise it, which is manifested concurrently in a cognitive idea.

In another place, Fazlur Rahman referred to Hocking's work in clearer terms.

I'm reminded of a sentence in the late Professor Hocking's book, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*, where, talking about religious experience, one has a powerful feeling which then propels itself automatically into an idea, and the idea expresses itself automatically in words. This is the revelation, or the revelatory experience par excellence.<sup>15</sup>

Returning to the principal article; Fazlur Rahman turned to Iqbal to explore the concept quoted above from Hocking. Iqbal too held that, "Inarticulate feeling seeks to fulfil its destiny in an idea which, in its turn, tends to develop out of itself its own visible garment." Thus, "idea and word both simultaneously emerge out of the womb of feeling", so that, "there is a sense in which the word is also revealed".<sup>16</sup>

Thus, in Fazlur Rahman's understanding, it has been demonstrated that psychologically speaking, a feeling-idea-word organic complex comes simultaneously to the mind of the Prophet, from an origin both outside himself and outside his control; as such it is a creative act and, in this case, constitutes revelation.<sup>17</sup> Fazlur Rahman drew the distinction between *ilham*, which might come to any human being, and *wahy*, which is reserved to prophets, precisely as the difference between 'an inspired feeling' that the recipient sought to express, and a verbal revelation in which the actual words were revealed.<sup>18</sup>

This, in turn, gives rise to a new question. As the same construct could be applied to any piece of creative knowledge in any field of human endeavour, we have to ask: wherein is the specificity of the Qur'anic revelation?

At this stage in *Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet*, Fazlur Rahman quoted three passages from *Islam*, to the effect that the Qur'an was clearly perceived by

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<sup>14</sup> cf. *Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet*

<sup>15</sup> *Muhammad and the Qur'an*, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> cf. *Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet*

<sup>17</sup> cf. *Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet*. In less technical language, Fazlur Rahman expressed this thought thus: "The Qur'an pushed so forcefully through his [Muhammad's] heart that immediately it got clothed in words" (cf. *Muhammad and the Qur'an*, p. 10).

<sup>18</sup> cf. Q. 42:51-52



Muhammad to be a message from God which gave him an absolute assurance of its authenticity. It was a verbal revelation, and not merely meanings and ideas; thus he supported Iqbal's organic complex construct of feeling-idea-word. He concluded,

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.<sup>19</sup>

However, this stage of the argument does not answer the question of the specificity of the Qur'anic revelation as it does not establish its purely divine character. Fazlur Rahman thus developed his argument by emphasising the essential moral nature of the Qur'an, which reflects the Preserved Tablet, which is, after all, the guidance given by God for the moral life of humanity, which must be followed in order for human beings to be judged righteous on the Day of Judgement; it can therefore also be referred to as God's Command or the Moral Law, which is immutable and cannot be made or unmade by human beings. Thus, the revelation which was sent down on the Prophet's heart was this Moral Law to which all must submit and which must be implemented as an act of service to God. This being the case, the unique and purely divine character of the Qur'an is established. At moments of the articulation of revelation, the consciousness of the Prophet becomes identical with the Moral Law itself, and thus the words which are brought forth through the Agent of Revelation are purely divine in source, expression and content.<sup>20</sup>

Prophets were, in terms of their overall characters, superior to the general run of humanity and, once illuminated by the divine command in revelation, can logically be said to be preserved from serious error, the doctrine of *'isma*. They were thus the first to have their lives transformed by the moral code which they proclaimed and could serve as exemplars for other people to follow.

The fact that the Qur'anic revelation was sent down on the heart of the Prophet,<sup>21</sup> in its feeling-idea-word organic complex, means that it appeared on his lips having flowed through his heart under the agency of the Agent of Revelation, and thus any mechanical notion of revelation is unsupportable.<sup>22</sup> Fazlur Rahman held that stressing the externality of the Qur'anic revelation, as though it came to Muhammad through his ear by the agency of Gabriel acting almost as a celestial postman, was the means that

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<sup>19</sup> cf. *Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet*

<sup>20</sup> cf. *Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet* and also Extract from *Islam*. An interesting reflection along similar lines is given in *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, p. 97: "Perhaps the Spirit is a power or a faculty or an agency which developed in the Prophet's heart and which comes into actual revelatory operation when needed, but it originally does 'descend' from 'above'. This is in perfect harmony with a well-known Islamic tradition according to which the entire Qur'an was first 'brought down' to the lowest heaven (i.e. the Prophet's heart, as thinkers like al-Ghazali and Shah Wali Allah al-Dihlawi would rightly say) and then relevant verbal passages produced when needed". Also, cf. *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, p. 102-103 for a discussion of the Night of Power in this regard

<sup>21</sup> cf. *Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet* citing Q. 26: 194; 2: 97

<sup>22</sup> cf. *Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet*

orthodox theologians took, in their time, to stress the divine origin. The fact that the Qur'an flows through Muhammad's heart means that the Qur'an, as clearly established, pure Divine Word appearing on the lips of the Prophet, is intimately related to his inmost personality, and thus, in an ordinary sense, is also entirely the word of Muhammad.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, in summary, Fazlur Rahman concluded that, *psychologically speaking*, the process of the generation of the Qur'an is similar to that of any other creative act of original knowledge; it differs only *by degree*. However, *religiously and morally speaking*, the Qur'an, because it is pure Divine Word, is *sui generis*; that is, it differs from all other such creative acts (except of course other Divine Revelations, i.e. those sent down to earlier prophets) not by degree but *by essence*.

To conclude with Fazlur Rahman's own words,

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.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> cf. *Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet* and Extract from *Islam*.

<sup>24</sup> *Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet*.