

Towards a Mutual Understanding of Christian and Islamic Concepts of Revelation

Ida Glaser

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The Christian looking at the Qur'an will naturally approach it with a pre-understanding shaped by his knowledge of the Bible; and the Muslim will approach the Bible with a pre-understanding shaped by his knowledge of the Qur'an. Because there exist similarities between the two religions, and in particular because of the Muslim contention that Islam is a continuation and completion of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, it is sometimes assumed that similar criteria can be validly used in considering the two revelations. It is my contention, however, that there is a wide gulf between understandings of revelation in these two faiths, so that such an assumption leads inevitably to misunderstandings.

The Muslim affirms that the message of Jesus was similar in content to that in the Qur'an. Yet when he comes to the New Testament he finds a violation of his idea of a revealed book, and finds it difficult to understand how the Christian can accept it as such. The Christian, on the other hand, finds the Qur'an something of a puzzle. It differs widely from the New Testament in structure and approach, and yet it bears some resemblance to other parts of what he recognizes as revealed writing: namely, parts of the law, psalms and prophetic writings in the Old Testament. Accustomed to analytical thinking, he is likely to concentrate on discussing and criticizing the content of the Qur'an, avoiding as far as possible consideration of its form.

It seems to me that an understanding of the form of a revelation—how it was revealed as well as its present written form—is prerequisite to an understanding of its content. More importantly, the form of the revelation will be consistent with its origin and content, and will be itself indicative of that origin and content. If we use such a proposal as the basis for study of any purported revelation, we shall have some hope of understanding the revelation in its own terms.

I am fully aware that many who adhere to one revelation prefer to judge another in their own terms—and in such terms it will inevitably fall short. However, I am concerned here with understanding rather than assessment or criticism, since it seems to me of enormous importance that we understand a thing before we assess it. We are otherwise likely to be guilty of assessing a figment of our own imagination, and not what we claim to be studying.

Here follows a brief explanation of forms of revelation in Islam and Christianity, and a discussion of their implications. A paper of this length inevitably includes oversimplifications, and many of the statements below would require some balancing comment for completeness. However, since my main aim is to compare the two systems, and to indicate the strangeness of each to adherents of the other, I consider the simplifications not only to be necessary for brevity, but also to be useful in comparison.

A. Forms of Revelation

1. Islam

In Islam, revelation is embodied in the Qur'an, which came as a direct message from God to man through the prophet Muhammed. The key here is that God's words came to man, the prophet being

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only the channel for communication. His title is 'the Messenger of God', which well describes him as one who takes the message and relays it to the recipients.

The mechanism of communication is simple: the Qur'an is considered to have been written in Heaven from eternity. Books have been given to many prophets in different languages and cultures from Adam onwards, but all have, it is said, been lost or distorted. The final revelation of the eternal Qur'an in the Arabic language was given to Muhammed, to be preserved in all its purity for the remainder of human history. The story of the beginning of the revelation is best told in the words of the Hadith, Sahih al-Bukhari 1, 3:

The first revelation that was granted to the Messenger of God (peace and blessings of God upon him) was the true vision of sleep, so that he never saw a vision but the truth of it shone forth like the bright gleam of dawn. Then solitude became dear to him and he used to seclude himself in the cave of Hira, where he would devote himself to Divine worship for several nights before coming back to his family. He would take provisions for this purpose, then he would return to Khadijah¹ and get some more provisions for a similar (period), until the Truth² came to him while he was in the cave of Hira. The Angel came to him and said, 'Read'. He said, 'I am not one of those who can read.'

And he continued 'Then he (the Angel) took hold of me and pressed me so hard that I could not bear it any more, after which he let me go and said, 'Read'. When I replied, 'I am not one of those who can read', he took hold of me and pressed me a second time so hard that I could not bear it any more, then he let me go again and said, 'Read'. I said, 'I am not one of those who can read'.

The Prophet continued: 'Then he took hold of me and pressed me a third time, then he let me go and said, "Read in the name of thy Lord who creates—creates man from a clot. Read, and thy Lord is most Generous"' (Surah 96: 1-3).

The Messenger of God (peace and blessings of God upon him) returned with this (message), his heart trembling, and he went to Khadijah, daughter of Khuwailid and said, 'Wrap me up, wrap me up'. So they wrapped him up until the awe had left him.

The mechanism of revelation is further clarified in al-Bukhari 1, 2:

Aishah, the mother of the faithful (God be pleased with her) reported that Harith ibn Hisham asked the Messenger of God (peace and blessings of God upon him), 'O Messenger of God, how does the revelation come to thee?' The Messenger of God (peace and blessings of God upon him) said, 'Sometimes it comes to me like the ringing of a bell, and that is the type which is the hardest on me; then he (the Angel) departs from me and I retain in memory from him what he said. At times the Angel comes to me in the likeness of a man and speaks to me and I retain in memory what he says.' Aishah (God

¹ Muhammed's first wife. Qur'anic quotations are from M. M. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (Mentor), unless otherwise stated.

² The Truth means the Spirit of Truth, or the Holy Spirit. This title refers to the Angel Gabriel.

be pleased with her) said: 'And I saw him when revelation descended on him on a severely cold day; when it departed from him his forehead dripped with sweat.'

There are various points of interest here. Firstly we see a direct mode of revelation, where the angel Gabriel was sent from God to give the exact words of the message. Muhammed then transmitted it to his disciples, who later committed it to writing.

Secondly, we notice Muhammed's insistence that he could not read. This is taken by many to symbolize and ensure the purity of the message—as the virginity of Mary can be seen as symbolizing and ensuring the divine purity of Christ. Some would even consider Muhammed's purported illiteracy necessary to the faithful transmission of the message: the message must be entirely of God, and not of Muhammed. In a sense, then, the nature of the messenger is unimportant: it is necessary only that his personality does not affect the message in any way. (Of course, Muslims consider Muhammed as much more than a passive messenger. His position as prophet gives his lifestyle and words a high, and even an authoritative, value. Many put the traditions about his speech and actions on a level second only to the Qur'an, and see his example as binding, and even inspired.)

Muhammed's illiteracy exemplifies a third emphasis in the record of revelation: that of the miraculous. The Qur'an is in the highest style of Arabic poetry so that its very language rejoices the heart of the reader. In fact, Qur'anic language is considered the highest form of Arabic, and so lofty is the style that it is seen in itself to be sufficient proof of the miraculous nature of the revelation. When asked what miracle he wrought to validate his prophethood, Muhammed pointed only to the Qur'an; and the stress on his own illiteracy implies the divine origin of the miracle.

Finally, we can notice a stylized form of language in the above quotations, and see this as an example of the centrality of language in the Islamic revelation. If the wording of the traditions is important, how much more is the wording of the Qur'an itself? It contains the exact words given by God through Gabriel, and represents the eternal Word written in heaven. There is therefore virtue in using its exact wording in prayer, and in reading it aloud or memorizing it: in Christian terms, the Quranic language is itself a means of grace, and takes on an almost sacramental significance. The role of the Arabic language has even been compared to that of

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the body of Jesus in revelation.³ The language, the words, and even the letters have importance in themselves, so that Arabic grammar and calligraphy have been extensively studied and developed by the faithful. It is hardly necessary to say that it is therefore impossible to translate the Qur'an. The best translation must be a human interpretation of the divine message, and there is no possible substitute for the sacred language.

2. Christianity

The origin of the biblical writings is much more complex than that of the Qur'an, and not so evidently divine. There are, of course, portions of the Bible that approximate to the Qur'anic picture of revelation, being presented as direct messages from God. Examples include much of the Mosaic law and parts of the prophets. However, such a manner of revelation is comparatively rare. Most of the Bible is clearly written by men, and bears the stamp of their

³ See S. H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities in Islam* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975), pp. 43

personalities and cultural contexts; and it is largely devoted to records of events in human history, together with human responses, feelings and reflections on those events.

It is hardly surprising that many people find it difficult to equate such a motley collection of human writings with divine revelation. The mode of production of the Qur'an seems much more appropriate! And yet Christians insist on the divine authority of their Scriptures. How are we to understand this?

Perhaps the key is that it is not the Bible itself that is the essential revelation. It might be clearer to consider it as a revelatory expression of something else that is the primary revelation. The nature of the primary revelation would then determine the mode of production of the Scriptures.

The primary revelation comes in various forms, but it is not perhaps too much of a simplification to say that it is essentially God acting in history: his interaction with his creation and particularly with man. The supreme point of this interaction is in the person of Jesus Christ—the ultimate interaction of God with man, and therefore the ultimate revelation of God and his relationship with man.

The biblical writings represent records of these interactions, together with reflections on their significance. They are produced through interaction between God and man, and are therefore necessarily thoroughly human as well as being thoroughly divine. It has been pointed out⁴ that, in the Christian faith, divine activity and human activity do not grow in inverse proportion, but in direct proportion. Thus the biblical writers were not merely channels whose will and intellect were overruled by God, but rather consciously used their human faculties to co-operate with God in the context of their relationship with him.

B. Implications

The above discussion indicates enormous differences in attitudes and expectations regarding revelation in the two systems. Perhaps the reader is already coming to realize why Muslims and Christians may find each other's sacred books unacceptable. We now need to seek reasons for their divergent views.

In each case, we are considering a process of communication by God to man through man. We have already explored something of the 'through man' aspect, as this is the part of the process most easily studied. But the mechanism of communication through man is likely to be dependent on other factors, namely, the nature of God, the nature of man, and what is communicated. The dependency here is hierarchical: what is to be communicated depends on the natures of man and of God, and the nature of man is determined by God himself.

It would be possible to start from the base of this hierarchy, discussing the nature of God in Islam and in Christianity and thence arguing to an understanding of revelation in the two systems. However, I prefer what the computer scientists call a 'top-down' approach: to begin with the situations which we can see and wish to analyse (*i.e.* the forms of the revelations), and work from them to an understanding of the fundamentals. We shall use the forms of revelation discussed above as our springboard, rather than seeking answers to our questions

⁴ K. Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible* (Freiburg and New York: Herder and Herder, 1961).

from the content of the texts—although it will also be necessary to look at the texts themselves.

There are several advantages to such an approach. Firstly, it is likely to give a deeper understanding and a broader picture than a more fragmented approach; and secondly, it allows questions and answers to arise in the context of the revelation under consideration. It is unlikely that one religion will give clear answers to the questions asked by another, since the two will consider different matters important. The questions seen as fundamental by one may be considered peripheral by the other, or may be understood differently.

Finally, I would suggest that the major common factor of Islam and Judaeo-Christianity (after their

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monotheism) is their claim to be revealed. Revelation would therefore seem a sensible starting-point for comparison.

1. What is communicated?

a. Islam

As we have seen, the communication in Islam is essentially a message. That is, it contains information relayed from God to man: information that God has chosen to give to man. The Qur'an is seen as God's greatest mercy towards man, so that the information in it is beneficial to him.

What kind of information is given? The Qur'an is characterized as a warning (18, 4), a reminder (81, 27), a guide and a witness (46, 12). It warns of the judgment to come, reminds of sacred history and present responsibility, gives guidance for conduct, and witnesses to God and his messengers.

Perhaps the essential description of the Qur'an is as a book of guidance for mankind: a guidance for all aspects of life. Together with the Traditions, it gives a basis for guidance not only in religious matters, but also in matters of personal and family lifestyle and in social, political and economic affairs. Every aspect of human life comes under this guidance from God.

The Qur'an then, informs man of all he needs to know about God, and reveals the way God wills man to live, together with witness and warning that urge obedience to that will.

b. Christianity

The biblical writings are seen as having been produced in the context of the writers' relationship with God, and are therefore an expression of that relationship. In few cases do they represent dictated messages from God: they rather express God's relationship with his creatures, and their response to him. This, we have suggested, is the essential revelation. It is not so much a revelation of what God wills man to do, as a revelation of God himself in what he has done, and of how man can relate to him.

This emphasis can be seen even in those portions of Scripture that are concerned largely with instruction or with historical records. Two examples will suffice.

The first is the Mosaic law, which certainly represents a guidance for living. It is given in the context of the covenant relationship between God and his people and his saving acts on their behalf, and is laced with appeals to the nature of God. In fact, the reason given for acting in a particular way is sometimes that God would also act in that way: it is expected that man should in some measure conform to the moral character of God.

Secondly, we consider the records of Jesus Christ. The gospels do record much of his teaching, but even this—although said to be derived from God—is taught by Jesus in his own way and words. It is of interest that the gospel writers do not even record Jesus' words in their original language, and, judging by the variations between the gospels, they are not particularly concerned with recording precise wording. Moreover, most of the gospel writings are concerned with Jesus' actions as well as his words; and this is not so much to give us an example to follow as to indicate his nature and the response of people to him. Finally, there is great stress on the crucifixion and resurrection.

All this suggests that it is not so much the message of Jesus that is being communicated as the person of Jesus, and his work which makes possible relationship between God and man. Jesus himself shows us the essential content of Christian revelation. He shows us God himself is the supreme relationship between God and man, and is also the way to relationship with God for other human beings.

We have suggested that Islamic revelation is essentially concerned with how man should live, whilst Christian revelation is centred in relationship between man and God. We should note that the Bible also gives instruction about living, and that the Qur'an also records God's dealings with man in history. However, the emphases are different and, as we shall see, the notions have different foundations.

2. What is man like?

a. Islam

Man is God's creature, to whom God condescends to communicate. However, the communication must occur in such a way that man does not alter it in any way. His action on the divine Word would invalidate it: so we see that man is completely other than God.

Further, we have seen that what is communicated is essentially information which shows man the will of God and encourages him to submit to him. This has two important implications. Firstly, it implies that what man needs is essentially to be informed.⁵ His major predicament is that he is ignorant of God and of his will and mercy. He has

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forgotten what he perhaps knew at first concerning God's unity and the coming judgment, and needs to be warned and reminded about these things. He then needs to be told how he should act in order to serve God and to avoid judgment.

⁵ Man is also seen as weak, and in need of strengthening, but this is not particularly obvious from the form of the revelation.

Secondly, it implies that man is able to obey God's commandments. God would never demand the impossible of man. Hence Islam's vehement rejection of any idea of original sin, however interpreted. In the Qur'anic accounts, Adam and Eve were forgiven as soon as they realized that they have wronged themselves (2, 35ff, 7, 10ff). Sin is seen as something that hurts the sinner, and not as hurting God; and God can forgive directly, without mediation or sacrifice.

Thus Islam gives man a very high position: by God's mercy he has the possibility of obeying God as far as he demands, and needs only to be given the right guidance to be able to please God and to be forgiven, if God so wills. On the other hand, God's demands on the individual are never greater than he is able, with God's help and by God's will, to fulfil.

b. Christianity

Here we see a lower view of man's abilities, but a higher view of God's demands on him. We have already noted that specific commands in the Bible are often based on the idea that man should reflect something of the moral character of God. This seems a strange demand: it implies either that God requires the impossible of man, or that man is in some way able to be like God. The former suggests injustice, but the latter might appear to border on blasphemy; and it is anyway obvious to most of us that man is not normally capable of reaching such sublime moral heights.

Let us return to our discussion of revelation, to seek clues to an understanding of this problematic view of man and his responsibility towards God. We remember that the Christian view of revelation is centred in the idea of relationship between man and God—which immediately eases the difficulty. If God and man can relate, then there must be some similarity between them. Man, although a creature, must reflect something of the nature of God; and God, although uncreated, must be in some sense a 'person'.

However, this removes only half the difficulty. It is still painfully obvious that man does not meet God's demands. In fact, it was necessary for God to reveal himself, and to reveal also a way for man's relationship with him to be established. In other words, man is only potentially related to God. Outside of the revelation, the relationship is broken, and man cannot satisfactorily respond to a message from God. The revelation leads to relationship between God and man, and gives guidance that can be followed only in the context of that relationship.

Man's predicament outside this relationship is not, then, essentially one of ignorance—or even of weakness. It is not knowledge but blood that makes relationships. Man's predicament is that he is out of relationship with God; but the Bible teaches that this was not man's original state. At the beginning, the relationship was there, but it has been broken by man's rebellion: a rebellion which not only harmed man, but also severed him from God. Therefore, man needs not information, but restoration; and that can be achieved only by God himself.

In Islam, then, man has no need of salvation: he has already the capability of obeying God, and needs only to be guided and strengthened in order to fulfil his responsibility towards his Creator. He is not potentially related to God, in the biblical understanding of relationship, since he is completely other than God.⁶ The Christian, on the other hand, sees man as greater

⁶ Although no equivalent to the biblical relationship between God and man is envisaged—the Qur'anic relationship is essentially that of slave and lord—God is nevertheless very close to man. A famous verse tells us, 'We

in potential, but—until he is restored—debased in actuality. Unless he is saved through Jesus Christ, he realizes only a glimmer of his potential, and can never by his own efforts please God.

3. What is God like?

a. Islam

There is much said about God in the Qur'an, and his creation is said to give an indication of him; but the essential nature of God is other than that of his creatures, and cannot be grasped by man. We know that God is one, that he has certain names and attributes, and that he is all-powerful to do whatever he wills. But we see only what he has chosen to reveal in his message through the prophets.

Say: Allah is One,
The eternal God.
He begot none, nor was He begotten.
None is equal to Him
(Surah 112, The Unity, Penguin translation).

God in himself is great, and infinitely other than what he has made. At the centre of his attributes appears to be his great power, and his will. These

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imply that he is also the Knower of all, the Wise, the Hearing, the Aware, the Judge, the Glorious, the Rich, the Independent, the Unique and the Supreme Lord.

Such a picture makes sense of our previous discussion. This God would not relate to man as a friend, a brother or a father, and could not be in any way affected by man's actions. The idea that he might be hurt by man's sin is ludicrous, if not blasphemous; the biblical idea of the fall in such a context is nonsensical, and that of salvation superfluous. Since the main effect of sin is to hurt man, and not to sever his relationship with God, no restoration of relationship is required. The God of all power can forgive as he chooses: no mediation is necessary, and indeed none is possible, since nothing and nobody can be associated with God.⁷

This, however, is not a complete picture of God. God has not remained totally aloof from his creation, but has chosen to speak to man through the prophets. Without this revelation, man would be in ignorance and under judgment; but God has shown mercy to him in his predicament. He has revealed not only the certainty of the judgment day, but also how man should act in order to live well on earth and hope to gain paradise after death.

So we see that God, in his power and wisdom, has chosen also to be the Speaker, the Guardian and True Guide of man, the Generous and Benevolent, the Loving and Provider, the Forgiving and the Merciful. In his beneficence and mercy, he has not only created man and provided for all his needs: he has also given him his revelation and guidance in the Qur'an. It

verily created a man and we know what his soul whispereth to him, and we are nearer to him than his jugular vein' (50, 16). Notice that the closeness here implies knowledge rather than relationship.

⁷ Among some Muslims, Muhammed or Ali or various people considered as saints, are given a mediatorial position. This is not, however, accepted by the more orthodox.

is this beneficence and mercy that the Muslim remembers repeatedly in his prayers, as he declares that God is Ruler of creation and Lord of judgment, and beseeches his guidance.

Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds.
The Beneficent, the Merciful.
Owner of the Day of Judgment,
Thee alone we worship; Thee alone we ask for help.
Show us the straight path,
The path of those whom Thou has favoured;
Not the path of those who earn Thine anger nor of
those who go astray (Surah 1; the opening).

b. Christianity

We have noted above the stupendous claim that the biblical writings record the revelation of God himself in relationship with man, and supremely in Christ. This implies that we should be able to say much about God, but it also implies great mystery concerning him. It is the mystery of an infinite God in relationship with finite man. Here follows an attempt to understand something of the mystery of our above discussion in terms of what God must be like if it is true.

Firstly, God must be in some sense like man if the two are to relate. In biblical language, man is made in the image of God. Of course, that image has been distorted by sin, but we should be able to understand something of God from our knowledge of man. The characteristics of man necessary for relationship include abilities to love and hate, moral consciousness, emotion and language, and all of these are seen as reflections of corresponding characteristics of God. The Christian God is a personal God.

Secondly, the essence of God includes relationship. How can this be, if God is one, and yet existed before he had created anyone to relate to? The answer is that from eternity God has related to himself, loved himself, communicated with himself. This is certainly a mystery, which the Christian describes in terms of the Trinity. The Bible speaks of Jesus Christ as one with God, as existing from eternity, and as active in creation; and it speaks of the Holy Spirit⁸ as existing with and being of one nature with the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. To say that the three are one accurately summarizes the biblical material, but brings problems in itself. Other writers have discussed these: here, we note only the insight it gives to the eternal love, communication and relationship in God.

Next, God is the one who is revealed in history. Thus we can see what God is like from what he has done. He is more often described as the God of Israel or the Father of Jesus Christ than in terms of his characteristics, so we can expect to understand him best through accounts of his actions and through personal experience of his actions towards us. Thus it will often be more appropriate to describe God as one who *does* something rather than one who is something. Supremely, God is a God who creates, who loves, and who saves. He is also a God who judges and destroys wickedness.

The supreme revelation of God in history is in Jesus Christ. 'No man has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known' (Jn. 1: 18). The question, 'What is God like?' is ultimately to be answered through a study of the person of Jesus Christ in the New Testament records, which is left to the reader.

⁸ The Holy Spirit here refers to the third person of the Trinity (*cf. n. 2*).

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This has been the most difficult section to write. A discussion of the nature of God in a few pages of human writing is no mean undertaking. I have sought only to bring out the main emphases and trust that the reader will proceed to a deeper understanding through his own study of the Qur'an and the Bible.

Conclusion

Doubtless, many criticisms can and will be levelled at what I have written. In particular, many statements require further elaboration and balancing comments, as has been noted already. This paper has been but an attempt to throw some light onto the question of why Christians and Muslims seem so often to misunderstand, and thus misrepresent, each other's Books.

To the Christian, the Qur'an has a monotonous and stylized form. He is not accustomed to the idea of a sacred language, and anyway does not usually have sufficient Arabic to be able to appreciate its poetry. More importantly, it fails completely to do what he expects a revelation to do: it does not relate to man's need for forgiveness, salvation and relationship with God as he understands it. And, of course, it also contains denials of some of his fundamental beliefs, including the death of Jesus Christ, his deity, and the doctrine of the Trinity.

To the Muslim, on the other hand, most of the biblical writings are of obviously human origin, and do not resemble what he recognizes as divine revelation. They look more like the Traditions, but even here they fall short of expectation by their failure to give clear guidelines on life-style. They do not record details of Jesus' manner of life that can be used to regulate everyday living, and do not even give the original language of his message. Moreover, the position given to Jesus in the New Testament amounts to blasphemy, and the emphasis on salvation through his death is at best superfluous.⁹

It is my contention that, if Christians and Muslims are to understand each other's Book, they cannot do it only by concentrating on points of similarity. Neither can they do it by applying their own criteria to the other's revelation. They must rather seek to recognize and understand fundamental differences in ways of thinking and then—and this is important—take the different way of thinking seriously.

I am not suggesting that this is likely to bring Christians and Muslims to agree with each other. The two religions are different, and disagreement is inevitable. But let it be a disagreement based on understanding and respect, and not on ignorance.

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⁹ For a critical Islamic approach to the gospels, see M. Bucaille, *The Bible the Qur'an and Science* (American Trust Publications, 1978), or Muhammed 'Ata ur-Rahim, *Jesus, a Prophet of Islam* (London: MWH, 1979).