

04. The nature of religious texts



God's revelation and religious texts (pages 22-25)

The point I wish to make here is fundamental to the study of any and every religious text. I believe that God reveals God's Self to everyone. A person becomes aware of this when he or she has an insight into the **Mystery**, the **Sacred Presence** we call **God**. Whoever we are, and this applies to Moses and Jesus and Muhammad, when we give expression to a religious insight, the expression comes from us. Whether or not we or others view this expression as inspired by God it is still a human expression of religious insight, and as such it carries with it the limitations inherent in any language. It must be understood within the context of the situation in which the revelation occurs.

This must be said and is said of the sacred texts of Judaism. The Deuteronomists and the Priestly School and the other Schools that produced the Torah show the insights, but also the points of view, even the prejudices, of the authors. The same must be said of the prophets and their disciples, and the authors of the poetry, Wisdom Literature and Stories that we find in the Hebrew Bible.

We must say the same of the Christian Scriptures. The Gospels and the Letters of the New Testament are the responses to Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James and the others. The written words of the Christian New Testament were treasured by the early Christians because they judged them to point in an authentic way to Jesus, the revelation of God. But nevertheless they were words written by people who belonged in the culture of their time.

Raymond Brown (Theological Studies 1981)

‘The Bible is the literary objectification of a faith that is a response to revelation’(page 9).

He goes on to define Scripture as: ‘divine revelation to which human beings have given expression in words’(page 13).

Schmaus, Dogma I, 188

‘What we encounter in the Sacred Scriptures is first of all the objectivization of the belief in and understanding of Christ which was possessed by the Church or the local congregation.

In other words it is the answer to the revelation of God. In this answer, however, the word of God itself is expressed, for this word has entered into the answer of the Church and is effective in it. On the other hand we must not forget that God’s word, which enters into our human answer of faith, nevertheless always transcends it.’

The history of religious thought reveals that there are people of every religious persuasion who, rather than take the trouble to examine religious texts in their context, prefer to take the texts as coming directly from God. This gives the text a divine and unalterable aura. It might appear to offer more security, 'knowing' what God is revealing without having to take the trouble to check our thinking. It is certainly easier not to have to work to discover what the human author intended to say, and how the text was understood by those to whom it was first addressed. Security, ease, and power can be very tempting. We would do well to listen to Jesus as he tells us: 'the truth will set you free' (John 8:43).

Islamic scholars accept the Qur'an as a gift directly from God. Muhammad is seen as a pure medium, who adds nothing of his own that could obscure the pure light of Divine revelation.

Jelal al-Din al-Rumi (1207-1273), a thirteenth century Sufi saint, speaks of how we should approach the Qur'an.

‘The Qur’an is like a shy bride. Although you pull aside her veil, she will not show you her face. The reason you have no pleasure or discovery in all your study of it is that it rejects your attempt to pull off its veil. It tricks you and shows itself to you as ugly, as if to say, “I am not that beauty.” It is capable of showing any face it wants. If, on the other hand, you do not tug at the veil, but you acquiesce, give water to its sown field, do it service from afar, and try to do what pleases it without pulling at its veil, it will show you its face. “Seek the people of God, enter among my servants; and enter my paradise” [Surah 89:29-30]. God does not speak to just anyone, as kings in this world do not speak to every weaver. They appoint viziers and deputies through whom people can reach them. So also has God selected a certain servant to the end that whoever seeks God can find Him through that servant. All the prophets have come for the sole reason that they are the way.’ (Fihi ma fihi, Discourse 8).

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (the General Editor of *The Study Qûran*), in his *Ideals and Realities of Islam* 1966, has this to say:

‘The Word of God in Islam is the Qur’an; in Christianity it is Christ. The vehicle of the Divine Message in Christianity is the Virgin Mary; in Islam it is the soul of the Prophet. The Prophet must be unlettered for the same reason that the Virgin Mary must be a virgin. The human vehicle of a Divine Message must be pure and untainted. The Divine Word can be written only on the pure and “untouched” tablet of human receptivity. If this Word is in the form of flesh the purity is symbolised by the virginity of the mother who gives birth to the Word, and if it is in the form of a book this purity is symbolised by the unlettered nature of the person who is chosen to announce the Word among men ... The unlettered nature of the Prophet demonstrates how the human recipient is completely passive before the Divine. Were this purity and virginity of the soul not to exist, the Divine Word would in a sense become tainted with purely human knowledge and not be presented to mankind in its pristine purity.’

Kabir Helminski, author of *“The Knowing Heart; a Sufi Path of Transformation”* (1999) reverences the Qur’an as divine revelation, a pure guide to the Truth, and sees Muhammad as a saint. His quotes from the Qur’an are mostly short phrases. He quotes also from the Hadith and the saints of the Muslim faith, especially Rumi.

However, he does not address the aspects of the Qur’an that I find understandable coming from Muhammad, but troublesome if judged to come directly from God.

According to Helminski one way of looking at the Qur'an is as an 'upflowing of meaning from the purest depths of the unconscious' (page 61). As we will see there are many very beautiful statements in the Qur'an. If this were not the case Islam would not be still nourishing people who are searching for truth and love; Islam would not still be producing saints. But I will be quoting from the Qur'an sentiments that do not appear to me to come 'from the purest depths.'

Helmski claims that 'abusive conduct was never the method of Muhammad' (page 138). Is this true? He claims that 'Qur'anic revelation is a pure inexhaustible spring of wisdom and guidance' (page 162). Of course, there is much wisdom and guidance, but is it all pure? Speaking of the amazing spread of Islam, Helmski states:

'The Qur'an and the prophet magnetized a backward and feuding people until their spiritual conviction and commitment to social justice spread throughout the known world in little more than a century' (page 163). This is putting an extraordinarily rosy view of the spread of Islam!

Helmski claims that ‘the Qur’an is a book without internal contradiction’ (page 164). Is this true? The Qur’an itself has no problem with contradictions in the text. God is free, and God can reveal one thing and then reveal something that contradicts it. God is not bound by our human logic.

‘No sign do We [that is ‘God’] abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but that We bring that which is better than it or like unto it. Do you not know that God is Powerful over all things?’(Sûrah 2:106, from Medina).

Muslim commentators explain that *naskh*, translated here as ‘abrogate’ (it can mean ‘postpone’ or ‘replace’), is a technical term used to explain contradictory commands and prohibitions that occur in the Qur’an and the Sunna.

The commentary in *The Study Quran* states (page 49 column 1):
'Other verses often mentioned in this connection are "*God effaces what He will and establishes, and with Him is the Mother of the Book*" (Sûrah 13:39 ? – period uncertain); "*When We replace one sign with another – and God knows best what He sends down*" (Sûrah 16:101, Mecca) and "*If We willed We could take away that which We revealed unto thee*" (Sûrah 17:86, Mecca).

The problem with the principle of abrogation (*al-nasikh wa-l-mansukh*) is finding criteria to establish which sūrahs have been abrogated. This means, for example, that some opt for the more peaceful sūrahs, revealed in the early years of Islam while Muhammad was still living in Mecca, but have to allow that the more aggressive sūrahs, which were revealed in Medina, in the last ten years of Muhammad's life, are not ruled out by the Qur'an. Others opt for the more aggressive sūrahs, but have to allow that the more tolerant sūrahs are not ruled out by the Qur'an. The problem is increased when we look at the hadith, which are littered with contradictory statements claiming to come from Muhammad.

If the understanding of revelation that I am proposing has value the explanation of the contradictions is to be sought, not by asserting God is above logic and is free to replace one revelation with a contradictory one, but by focusing on the changed circumstances within which Muhammad received the revelations. Any revelation is received by a human being, who grasps it and expresses it according to circumstances of time and place and situation.

A major problem in Christian-Muslim dialogue is that Christians hold that, while reason and logic cannot comprehend reality, they must be respected. Revelation goes beyond reason, but cannot contradict reason. Muslims see the Qur'an as an expression of God's will. Reason and logic must give way.

Helminski claims: 'The voice of the Qur'an is certainly not the voice of Muhammad' (page 198). In other words it is the voice of God. Muhammad is simply the messenger. Any religious group that claims that its holy texts come directly from God, bypassing the limitations of the person who conveys the words, is failing to appreciate the reality of inspiration. People live at a certain period of history, in a certain culture and with a certain language. When an inspired person gives expression to the inspiration in words, the words are human and need to be understood in context.

Muhammad and his followers see Muhammad as God's Messenger, who received the revelation from God through the Angel Gabriel (Sûrahs 26:192-194; 75:17-19; 96:1). Muslims see the Qur'an, the written text, as '*the revelation of the Book from God, the Mighty, the Wise*' (Sûrah 45:1).

It appears to me that this is understood as making God directly responsible for what is written in the Qur'an, without taking into consideration the limits of language, the limits of Muhammad's understanding, and the limits of the historical and cultural context of the time.

If we step away from this understanding, we might recognise Muhammad as, among other things, a mystic who had an experience of the Oneness of God. We could also appreciate the many values that are expressed in the Qur'an (for example, the importance of prayer, of almsgiving, of care for the poor, for orphans and widows and strangers), but we could also see the limited historical context that is expressed in some of the views expressed in the Qur'an. We will examine some of these shortly.

Different traditional schools of Islamic wisdom speak of reading the Qur'an in a non-literal sense, looking for a deeper meaning in the text. Muhyiddin ibn Arabi 'explained that just as water necessarily reflects the colour of its container, so theophanies are conditioned by the container that receives them and whose form they take on' (quoted by Husain page 243). However, such thinking appears powerless against those who, like the Salafi and Wahhabi Muslims, choose to read the Qur'an literally, and insist that other Muslims who do not follow them are infidels.



Hymn to the Holy Spirit

Words and Music Kevin Bates.

© 2007, Published by Willow Publishing Pty Ltd.

Reprinted with permission under One License A-642681.

All rights reserved.



Spirit come,
transform us,
open wide our eyes.
Seeing with
your wisdom
clearer truth can rise.

Spirit come,
remind us
of stories often told.
Living out
the mystery,
eternal truths unfold.



Spirit bring us
comfort in times
beset by fear,
refreshing hope
and meaning when
God's own breath
is near.

Spirit teach us
patience as our own
spirits yearn.
Nourish with
your passion
the life and love
we learn.



Spirit breathe
so gently
that broken lives
may heal,
sacred wounds
embracing
and through them
hope reveal.

Spirit come
propel us
your justice
to release.
Imprisoned hearts
keep crying
and longing for



Spirit come
unite us,
divisions days
be done.

Let our heart
and mind be a sign
of kingdom come.

Spirit find us
waiting
when our last breath
is done.

Your breath of life
keep singing
the song our lives
begun.



To Father
Son
and Spirit
be songs
of joyful praise.

We will breathe
your tenderness
and love,
for all our days.