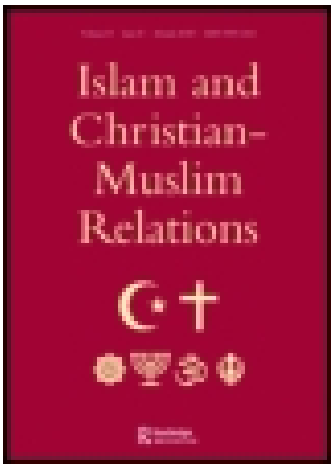

Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cicm20

An Islamic model of revelation

Shabbir Akhtar [a]
[a] Muslim Philosopher and Writer, 64 Nearcliffe Road, Bradford, West Yorkshire, BD9 5AU, UK
Published online: 18 Apr 2007.

I.C.M.R., Vol. 2, No. 1, 1991

AN ISLAMIC MODEL OF REVELATION

By SHABBIR AKHTAR

Many Arabists have believed that the traditional Islamic dogmas about the nature and status of divine inspiration and revelation are mistaken, unaccountably rigid and intellectually crude. I examine Kenneth Cragg's critique of the ancient Muslim confidence about the Qur'ān as the literal Word of God undiluted by human linguistic and mental variables external to its divine origin. I argue that Cragg's worries are idle and that his proposed model is based on a confusion between the *genesis* of scripture and the *interpretation* of its claims. His views about qur'ānic exegesis are shown to be erroneous and guided by considerations other than those professed. The paper concludes with an assessment of the strengths of the traditional dogmatic position.

The problems of the nature of inspiration (*waḥy*) and the status of revelation (*tanzīl*) have generated passionate controversy both within and outside the House of Islam. It was these controversial questions that generated a furore which eventually led to the exile of Professor Fazlur Rahman from Pakistan by an outraged orthodoxy. He took up a post in the School of Divinity, University of Chicago, and recently died in exile. It would be a fitting tribute to this devout and able man to raise afresh the concerns that exercised him. The Arabist Kenneth Cragg, partially concurring with Rahman, has argued in detail that the traditional Islamic view about the nature of inspiration and revelation is strange, misguided in motivation and, in any case, mistaken.

In this discussion I shall take *waḥy* to denote both the experience of divine inspiration and its revelatory product. The Arabic word *tanzīl* as applied to scripture will denote only the process of sending down the segments — the literal meaning of the term.

I should say at the outset that I regard both Rahman and Cragg as mistaken in their views. I shall concentrate solely on Cragg's critique and argue that his worries about *waḥy* are idle: they get us nowhere. But there are two important reasons for having a nuanced discussion of the points he raises. For one thing, whenever an author avoids a theme, critics suspect he is not able to justify his opinion, and this is particularly so in an ideologically charged atmosphere; secondly the *amour propre* of Muslim scholars is supposed to be easily touched on matters of revelation. The

second reason, different in status, is much more important. Though Cragg's own worries are idle, they eventually if indirectly lead to the posing of a question that is indeed central to a debate about scripture I have recently ventilated. The debate centres around the question of the authoritative integrity of partly fallible scriptures, itself part of a current Christian concern to secure an authentic enclave for revealed insight within an increasingly secluarized post-Enlightenment world. (I explore this concern in my *The Light in the Enlightenment*, London: Grey Seal Books, 1990, chapter 5.)

I

I begin with a few remarks on the received Islamic account of *waḥy* before considering and assessing Cragg's critique. 'The sending down (*tanzīl*) of the book is from God almighty and wise.' So reads the opening statement of several *sūra*s. 'From God' — and, in Muslim interpretation, strictly from God alone. There is no human or diabolic contribution. The content of the Qur'ān is wholly divine; it constitutes formulations of exclusively divine beliefs about man, the Creator, and the created order. The Qur'ān's Arabic segments 'descend' on one particular individual, an Arab called Muhammad ibn ʿAbdullah, but he has no role to play in the production of the Qur'ānic materials. The prophet of Islam passively receives the sacred text; he repeats it verbatim to his amanuensis for recording. The Qur'ān, then, is not in any way co-authored. The scripture simply passes through 'the Muhammadan mind' much as a grain of corn will pass undigested through the body of a bird. Muhammad is an instrument of the divine will, a medium through which God's literary endeavours in Arabic reach the human world.

The points are to be interpreted in the strictest possible sense. Islamic orthodoxy considers it blasphemous to attribute authorship to the Prophet even as a kind of literary convention. Thus, for example, unlike Milton and some of the classical writers who shared the privilege of joint authorship with the inspiring agency, the Muse, Muhammad felt obliged to give *all* the credit to God. The message, the Arabic sentences containing it, the arrangement of the sequences — all are alike the work of the divine author. The message is too consequential to be left to human designs of language and structure. God's message on Muhammad's lips in God's Arabic in God's own book: that is the Qur'ān in Muslim devotion and memory.

Is this extraordinary view indeed the Qur'ān's own account of its status? In the *sūra* that takes its title from a reference to 'the banishment' of the Jewish tribe of Banū Nadhīr from the Ḥijāz, there is a significant if oblique remark about the status of the sacred volume. It occurs in the context of a parable about human perversity and hard-hearted-ness: 'Had we "sent down" (*anzalnā*) this lecture (*qur'ān*) on a mountain, you would surely have seen it humbled, rent asunder out of the fear of God' (Q. 59:21). The verse comments that this is one of the many appeals to sentiment and reason, effected via analogy and metaphor, which God makes in order that mankind may reflect. It is striking that the verb *anzalnā*, typically used in the Qur'ān to denote the revelation to the Prophet, is here used to denote the descent of the work on a mountain (see Q. 12:2 and Q. 57 where iron is 'sent down'). No doubt, the meaning is metaphorical, yet it is significant that the same word can be used at all. In fact, it is quite naturally used. If so, it suggests what we have already made explicit, that the Prophet is to be taken to be no more than a passive recipient of the heavenly word.

Certainly, the Islamic tradition, taking its cue from the Qur'ān has seen Muhammad as no more than a mouthpiece, if a sentient and intelligent one. Cragg sees this model of revelation — 'mechanistic' in his terminology — as at once puzzling and unnecessary. He is struck by the fact that even a poet of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's imagination opts for this strangely 'pedestrian' model. Rūmī employs the image of a statue with water gushing from its mouth. The flow of water is controlled by clever engineers and craftsmen; the statue is merely a passage. So with the *tanzīl* of the Qur'ān — with God as the engineer and Muhammad, during periods of inspiration, as the statue (*Muhammad and the Christian*, London, 1984, p. 83).

Muhammad, then, is the mediating agency only in the most attenuated sense. If so, in what way, urges Cragg, does the message descend 'upon thy heart' as the Qur'ān has it? Surely, this must imply an active recruitment of the prophetic will and intelligence that sits ill with these orthodox suggestions of the abeyance and passivity of such faculties. Any model of revelation that works by by-passing all the prophetic 'yearnings of heart or processes of mind' (*ibid.*, p. 87) must be religiously suspect. Indeed, concludes Cragg, it is a strange and unnecessary view of revelation that makes Muhammad into a robot.

Before examining Cragg's claims, it is important to record a point concerning the status of his worries about the conscious components in

authorship. 'How do words and their revealing relate to personality speaking by receiving?' (*ibid.*, 81). Such a question, Cragg tells us, is vital to the understanding of Muhammad, the Qur'ān and Islam. For Cragg, a Christian assessment of Muhammad must centrally concern itself with his inner experience (*ibid.*, 6). I think Cragg is wholly mistaken here since the concern with the Qur'ān's religious doctrines is, in the final analysis, the only relevant one for Muslims, and indeed for others interested in or concerned with Islam. For if the doctrines be authentic, why should we care about the nature of the prophetic experience? If the doctrines be judged false or unconvincing, an exploration of the psychology of prophetic inspiration can at best be a matter of purely academic interest.

This is the more so if we accept Cragg's avowal that his intention is merely to understand, not discount or question, the authority of the Qur'ān (*ibid.*, 81–30). It is only because one sees the initiative in the revelation as genuinely divine that, he claims, one wishes to know whether or not the human recipient has a role. But isn't such a worry entirely unmotivated once one intends to accept the authority of the word as truly divine and its contents as fully authentic?

There remains, however, a further issue on whose behalf Cragg wishes to probe this matter: that is the question of God seeking partnerships, whether in literary or more broadly human enterprises with man and the created order. It is an evidently Christian theme with implicit links with the Incarnation; but not, of course, to be dismissed solely because it is partisan. The Islamic account, jejeune and barren as it seems to Cragg, of the human contribution to the divine project of revelation, raises large questions about the whole nature of the relationship between the human and the divine. Cragg puts it pointedly: behind the Islamic picture of *waḥy* is the dogma that 'the more an activity is divine the less it is human' (*ibid.*, 84). Again, the more a thing is God's the less it is man's. More specifically, in relation to revelation, any claim that 'proof of the divine stands in abeyance of the human' (*ibid.*, 86) is, contends Cragg, to be rejected as false.

Cragg wishes to assert, in opposition to Islamic orthodoxy on this score, that what is authentically divine can remain so even in partnership with the human. Indeed, he continues, the divine quality of a thing — text or action — can be secured by an appropriate change in the purely human faculty that is its medium. Surely, that should be natural for both Christians and Muslims, given the fact that God works in and through the

natural and human world: his signs, for example, in Nature are intimations of the transcendent. Why not in the human psyche too? God takes the human mind as his instrument and 'graces' it, in the strict sense, with knowledge from above. A human faculty is deepened, sanctified, made divine until it is perfectly and fully recruited for divine ends.

II

We are now in a position to examine the facets of Cragg's critique — several distinct issues and a number of entailments that flow from them. We begin with some remarks on a central distinction between the *genesis* of scripture, on the one hand and its *interpretation* on the other. These remarks lead us on naturally to a discussion of the implications of both the 'mechanistic' model of revelation, which Cragg rejects, and the 'dynamic' one he endorses. That discussion itself has immediate implications for the status of scripture as (allegedly) infallible and about the related issue of the arrangement in authorship which secures and ensures such an infallibility. This part of the debate concludes with a conjecture about the motives behind Cragg's critique and some final comments about the status of his worries.

During the period of trance, then, the prophetic intelligence and volition are completely suspended; there is no conscious participation in authorship, no active recipience of the revealed literary materials. This doctrine is about the genesis of scripture, not its interpretation. It is only the process of producing scripture that must exclude all human or diabolic contribution. (Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* [London: Viking-Penguin, 1988] is based on a disputed incident about an allegedly satanic contribution to Qur'ān 53.) Once revelation has actually been produced, the human mind, and *a fortiori* the prophetic intelligence, are both entitled to assess the authenticity of its claims and withhold or give assent. Once the Prophet is in a normal state, he is simply an Arab reader, an active interpreter who discerns the full significance of the inspired utterances. (Remember that Muhammad is the first interpreter of the Qur'ān, the first and most authoritative commentator, the initiator of the exegetical tradition.) His interpretation depends upon the fact that he is a particular human being, namely, an Arab with particular beliefs, motives, intentions, biases, and values.

It is only during the genesis of the text, then, that all human contribution, whether produced by direct authorship or creative interpretation, is

completely excluded. The effort of the human mind seeking to interpret the Qur'ānic significance, that Cragg so insistently looks for, comes *after* the production and final delivery of the text. Conscious prophetic activity — the human component — has a role to play only in the interpretation of the final message, not in its production or delivery. Cragg, it would appear, confuses the question of the undoubtedly indispensable role of the human faculties in the interpretation of revelation once it has appeared in the created world with the different issue of the role of the human faculties in the production and delivery of the revealed materials during the period of inspiration (*waḥy*).

The issue of human apprehension and interpretation is not to be conflated with the problem of divine production and divinely-aided delivery. It is only the former issue that presupposes the inevitable concern with certain prevalent assumptions about the locale, linguistic resources and general social context of the receiving agent or his community. Cragg's observations about the scripture's recruitment of existing linguistic facilities and the natural obligation upon any preacher, including Muhammad, to make sense of revelation (*ibid.*, 85ff), are all true but irrelevant, for these are observations about the presuppositions of interpretation, not about the process of producing revealed literature. The genesis of sacred writing is an entirely different, in fact unrelated, issue. To say that human faculties, pre-eminently reason, have a role in the determination or assessment of the intelligibility and validity of revealed claims is not to imply that such faculties have a role in the formation of those claims. This is the obverse of the equally true claim that even though human faculties, pre-eminently reason, have no role to play in the genesis of revealed claims, such faculties can still play the more modest role of assessing the intelligibility and authenticity of revealed claims once these have been presented in a recognizable human language.

To say, therefore, that the prophetic intelligence is virtually redundant during the production and delivery of the text is not to suggest that the language of the Qur'ān is wholly discontinuous with the existing Arabic vocabulary or that its message has no meaningful relation to the thoughts and ideals of the listeners. Only a confusion of genesis with interpretation could lead to any such absurd conclusion. The 'mechanistic' view of revelation as infallible dictation by no means implies, notwithstanding Cragg, that the Qur'ān is not properly subject to interpretation in relationship to different readers placed in varying eras and milieux. The

'mechanistic' view is intended to be a view about the supernatural genesis, not the human interpretation, of the scripture.

We can now see clearly why God's 'possession' of the Qur'ān does not make it less of a human possession, for divine possession is in the area of genesis, whereas human possession is *vis-à-vis* interpretation. The Islamic claim is that while men are at liberty to interpret the Qur'ān, the sacred volume is from God and from God alone. This claim is not an unmotivated one; the attempt to make God the sole author is undertaken in the interests of the larger attempt to render it infallible. The possibility of any fallible components creeping into the *production* of the text is removed by a radical decision to make its provenance entirely divine. The aim is to provide a bulwark against the erroneous contributions or distortions of a satanic or a purely human (and hence fallible) agency. The Qur'ān, with respect to the genesis of its claims, both begins and ends within the territory of the divine intelligence.

We may conclude, therefore, that Cragg's so-called 'dynamic' model is acceptable only as a model of interpretation, not as a model of genesis. As a view about the genesis of revelation, the dynamic model is false, unnecessary, and extremely pernicious; as a view about interpretation, it is truistic. To the Muslim reader, it is axiomatic that the Qur'ān is the word of God *alone*, no matter how human and fallible his own or others' interpretation of its meaning and religious significance.

I have argued, then, that the Qur'ān, as revelatory material accumulating over a period of time in the human world, is divine in origin and yet subject to human interpretation. Its sequences are relevant to human concerns, 'sent down' in relation to circumstance and need — as the whole idea of *sha'n al-nuzūl* or *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) implies — and constituting, when interpreted, a source of guidance (*hudā*) in various contexts. The quarrel is over the role of the prophetic mind in the production of the Qur'ānic segments. I have contended that the Muhammadan psyche is entirely passive in its reception of the sacred text, although this need not imply unconsciousness or total rupture of thought during the period of inspiration. This psyche, no matter how enlightened by grace, remains human and hence fallible. It is therefore important to deny it an active role in the production and delivery of a cargo as precious as the Word of God. The prophetic mind, however, retains a minimal capacity to receive the text and is, of course, fully active after revelation has appeared — discerning, sifting out and interpreting the religious significance of the finished text. In this way, a message that is, necessarily,

culture-laden, culture-relevant, and humanly received, remains nonetheless error-free. If human (or diabolic) contribution were present in the genesis of its contents, the possibility of error could not be ruled out absolutely.

The central question is whether or not the interference of a human agency during the reception of the revealed text jeopardizes its status as wholly true. Muslims argue that, at the moment of descent (*tanzīl*), all prophetic capacities are mysteriously suspended by divine decree. In this way, the received text is guaranteed to be infallible. There cannot be any possibility of fallible elements in a work that is entirely divine in conception, design and delivery. Should a human contribution be present, however, we are entitled to wonder whether that contribution is authentic. For once we say — as sophisticated Christians have done in recent years — that scripture is an amalgam of the divine and the human even in the *genesis* of its claims, we have opened up the possibility of asking 'are the human elements true?' (It is, of course, senseless to ask 'are the divine elements in the synthesis true?' since these are true by definition. Whatever God believes is an item of knowledge.) Such a concession makes conceptual room for posing a potentially dangerous question about the authority of scripture. The resulting situation is intolerable; re-writing the commandments every decade is merely a necessary corollary. Apart from the difficulty of deciding which elements are human and which divine, there is no reason *a priori* for the assumption that a book with false human elements — specific cultural and prevalent historical assumptions — is nonetheless infallible in its allegedly supernatural or supposedly inspired elements. If a work can be mistaken in its claims about man and the empirical universe, there is nothing, except the self-confidence of faith, to prevent it from being mistaken about God and the transcendent universe.

Someone could argue that the central concern is to have a scripture that is wholly true even if it has a human component in it. My suggestion is that a scripture with a human element may well be wholly true, but then the possibility of false components cannot be ruled out. We need to exclude such a possibility totally and absolutely in order to make the appeal to revealed authority fully secure.

Why does Cragg insist that the orthodox Islamic mechanism should be replaced by the dynamic model of revelation? The question in a polemical context could invite an answer in terms of motives, which is certainly one place where one finds it. If the Qur'ānic text is even in part the product of Muhammad's own mind — even if that mind be under the influence of

divine grace — the possibility of error cannot be eliminated, for Muhammad was a man and therefore fallible. Any such concession, any relaxation of the rigid but insightful orthodox view of *waḥy*, marks the beginning of the end of Qur'ānic authority, for one cannot reasonably accept the authoritative integrity of a partly fallible scripture. Could it be then, that Christians need partners in adversity, — want Muslims to start walking the same road to ruin?

Certainly, the suspicion has much to feed on. In Muslim interpretation, the Qur'ān is the unadulterated Word of God. Who cares about the exact mechanism whereby it was revealed — if our interest is merely to understand its message? To be sure, one can understand someone's interest in the mechanics of *waḥy*, but that interest would typically be motivated by some variety of scepticism or reserve about the authority. There can be no doubt that the question of the mechanics of the revelation of the Qur'ān is most likely to be interesting to those who reject its authority as divine. Unless the question of the genesis of the Qur'ān — whether in the divine mind or the Muhammadan psyche — is an open one, there is little motivation for being interested in the nature of the prophetic experience. Nor will it do to say that this concern is part of the larger concern with the exegesis of the sacred volume. That concern is both logically and psychologically unrelated to the manner of its initial appearance in the human world. To the Muslim interpreter, the question of the nature of the prophetic experience is of no interest at all.

The issue of the prophetic experience attracts our interest largely because of its conceptual relation to the question of the possibility of human — and hence fallible or potentially false — elements in scripture. In view of this, it is hard to avoid the suspicion that Cragg has some Christian manifesto behind the probing of Muslim confidence about scripture. His questions are in the long run, I suspect, designed to induce scepticism about the authority of the Qur'ān by introducing the possibility of the prophetic (human) element into the genesis of the text. From the human, it is a short step to the fallible, even the false and dispensable. We are already in the area of recent Christian concerns about the status of revealed scripture within post-Enlightenment consciousness.

How precisely does the *tanzīl* of the Qur'ān transpire? This is an idle worry that gets us nowhere. It is not easy — and fortunately not necessary — to answer such a question. What matters is that however *tanzīl* works, Muhammad has no active role in it that could compromise or attenuate the divine initiative, let alone seek to induce such an initiative whether

authentically or as a personal illusion. If the Qur'ān is adjudged false, it is clear that its provenance is not divine. 'Is the Qur'ān a genuine revelation?' is the only serious worry here. And the only correct attitude towards what one takes to be the word of God is that it is from God, from God alone, and therefore wholly true. Since the prophetic contribution could in principle endanger the possibility of a totally true text, that prophetic contribution must be excluded by fiat. The Muslim thinker, if he has his wits about him, will resist root and branch any suggestion that the Qur'ān is an amalgam of the divine and human.

Cragg is puzzled by the orthodox view of revelation with its drastic attenuation of Muhammad to a kind of puppet — a pair of lips during the hour of *waḥy*. It is absurd, thinks Cragg, that the Prophet, in a trance-like state, cannot make sense of the Arabic sequences. Indeed, Cragg sees the view as unnecessary and even plainly contradicting the Qur'ān's own claim that the message descends upon the prophetic heart — the seat of intellect and intelligence. As for the implications of such a view for exegesis, Cragg claims that these are desolating, restricting creative interpretation and leading to a style of interpretation that favours unduly narrow significances.

I have argued that some of these worries are idle, others do not have the implications Cragg claims they have, and that the mechanical model provides the best mechanism for ensuring infallibility of authorship and, consequently, the authority of scripture. Thus, for example, Cragg mistakenly believes that the descent of the Qur'ān on the Prophet's heart implies prophetic involvement in the *genesis* of the text; it actually only implies involvement in its *interpretation*. It seems to me that it does not greatly matter whether Muhammad retained a minimal degree of understanding during the period of inspiration; what matters greatly is that the message he brought has no human element in it added by conscious or creative effort. One might put it pointedly by comparing the Prophet to a frightened pupil in a strict school. The pupil understands, then repeats what the teacher dictates; there is, at most, only a minimal engagement of the pupil's faculties. Certainly, any creative variation or addition by the pupil is out of the question.

The divine quality of the text as God's word, Cragg protests, during an exposition of the Muslim dogma, 'is not by means of a human capacity deepened and tempered' (*ibid.*, 86). That is indeed precisely the Islamic view; and it is precisely correct. For a human capacity deepened is a human capacity nonetheless. And, as such, it remains fallible. Therefore, it

can only serve as a means to an end. Muhammad is a means — the ladder, in Witgenstein's famous metaphor, one kicks away after reaching the roof. What remains is the Qur'ān, — the miracle of Muhammad. This is revealed for the benefit of a wayward humanity in need of divine tuition. Men and women, believers and rejectors, are all free to interpret its claims. Elsewhere, Cragg asks rhetorically, 'Can any of us go wrong if we begin and end with God?' (*Muhammad and the Christian*, p. 147). The answer is, incidentally, a firm 'No'; and it is the Muslim verdict about the genesis of revelation.'