

Reflections on Revelation and Authority Among Shi'ites and Mennonites

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Say, 'We have faith in Allah, and in what has been sent down to us, and what was sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus were given, and the prophets, from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him do we submit.' (Qur'an 3:84)

Introduction

At first glance, our task seems rather outlandish: Mennonites and Shi'ites do not share a common history, and until very recently do not seem to have been aware of one another's existence. So, what could be the point of discussing theological topics like *revelation* and *authority* that are so peculiar to each tradition? One purpose is to help us to get acquainted. Since revelation and authority are such important topics to both groups, if we are to understand one another we had better try to get a picture of how they are viewed by both. If our first purpose is to discuss these topics in order to learn *about* one another, a second purpose might be to learn *from* one another.

Despite growing up in different neighborhoods, important common features are found in the stances Mennonites and Shi'ites have taken on both issues. The different directions that have been explored may enhance our own thinking. Finally, this exercise might even help to provide some theoretical support for our continuing cooperation and friendship.

With these aims in mind, I propose to examine first revelation, as understood by Shi'ites, and then to point out similarities and differences with the Mennonite view. Next I'll try the same with authority, and its relation to revelation. At the end of each part I'll offer some suggestions, and ultimately I'll attempt to tie some of these strands of thought together.

Revelation

In order to understand how divine revelation is related to authority from the perspective of Shi'ite Islam, we could start with questions about how the

Qur'ân and *hadîth* are interpreted, what interpretations are considered authoritative, and what sorts of arguments are used to invalidate unacceptable interpretations. From there, we could move on to issues pertaining to Islamic jurisprudence, and how rulings given by experts come to be seen as authoritative. Finally, we could review Shi'ite political theory, particularly claims that political authority must be grounded in revelation, and how this has led the Shi'ah to challenge competing claims to political authority. In what follows I'd like to touch on all these issues at least briefly, but it would be better to begin with a discussion of Shi'ite views of revelation and the claim to obedience that revelation makes. Naturally, there are differences between Christian and Muslim ideas about revelation, and these should be made clear.

The issues become more complex when we consider the notion of authority. Even though there are important differences between the concept of *revelation* in Christianity and *wahy* in Islam, the two are pretty straightforwardly comparable. But when it comes to the notion of *authority*, we find that the English word *authority* is itself discussed in several senses in relation to revelation; so it will be helpful to distinguish these and look for relevant discussions in Islamic theology of each of them.

Our faiths are grounded firmly in scriptural revelation. To begin to grasp the concept of revelation in Islam, we should start with the Qur'ân. The Arabic word translated as *revelation* is *wahy*. On the basis of pre-Islamic poetry, it is said to have the literal meaning of giving a message quickly and hiddenly, whether by gesture, in written form, or by inspiration. This term or one of its cognate forms occurs in the Qur'ân 78 times. In nearly every case it is God who does the revealing, but five exceptions help us grasp the concept. In one case, the meaning is to indicate or give a signal without words: when Zachariah asked God for a sign, which was that he would not speak to the people for three nights, he emerged from the temple and *signaled* or *revealed* to the people that they should glorify God morning and evening.

Notice the link here with authority, for what is signaled is a command, the order to glorify God. Devils also reveal deceptively to one another and to men, inspiring evil works; and liars make false claims to revelation or claim that they can reveal as only God can reveal. So, the first thing we learn from the Qur'ân about revelation is that the concept is used primarily for divine revelation, although there is also a more general sense of conveying a message.

Who are the recipients of divine revelation? The paradigmatic recipient as mentioned in the Qur'ân is the Prophet Muhammad, and roughly half the occurrences of *wahy* and its derivatives indicate him as such. Other recipients are the Jewish prophets, of whom Moses is the most frequently mentioned, the mother of Moses, the disciples of Jesus, angels, and even the bee. The earth and the heavens are also mentioned as recipients. People in general may be said to be indirect recipients, in that the message revealed to the prophets is to be delivered to them. Revelation is not an exclusive feature of prophecy. God reveals Himself to creatures that are not prophets, like the bee, angels, the mother of Moses, the disciples of Jesus, and the seven heavens. What distinguishes the revelations given to the prophets, peace be with them, from those given to others is the content of what is revealed, not the mere fact of revelation.

Nevertheless, Muslim theologians have sometimes given *wahy* a technical sense for the sort of revelation given exclusively to the prophets, to which we may refer as *prophetic revelation*. Prophetic revelation is not limited to the revelations given to Muhammad but includes those given by God to all the prophets who preceded him as well.

Often the Qur'ân, instead of using *wahy* to refer to revelation, makes mention of what has been “sent down,” using cognates with the root *nzl*. These cognates occur with the sense of revelation in more than 200 instances.

The prophets are given a divine commission through revelation, according to which they are to convey divine guidance to others. One cannot be a prophet without having been given revelation from God, as He addresses Muhammad in the Qur'ân: *We did not send any before you except as men to whom We revealed . . .* (Q 12:109). But the idea that revelation contains divine guidance in the form of directives is not limited to prophetic revelation. The revelation to the bee contains divine instructions about where to live, what to eat, and what sort of behavior to have (Q 16:68). This revelation is authoritative because it contains divine commands about how to live. Likewise, commentators say the revelation given to the seven heavens is the order given by God for the activities pertaining to them. God also granted revelation to the disciples of Jesus in which they are told to believe in Him and in His Apostle, Jesus; and the disciples respond with submission.

The content of the revelation to which derivatives of *wahy* refer may be divided into descriptive and prescriptive forms, although the border between them is often blurred, as when it is reported that one will surely be lost if one worships others besides God. The form of the revelation is descriptive—it just says what will happen to idolaters—but the prescriptive illocutionary force of the message is just as clear as it would be in a “Thou shalt not” form. If we count all such warnings as prescriptive, then in more than half the cases where derivatives of *wahy* are used, the associated revelation is prescriptive. Indeed, the most typical of all prophetic revelations is warning.

Warning in Arabic is derived from the root *ndhr*; from it come *nadhr*, vow, and *nudhr*, warning. The Prophet Muhammad is commanded by Allah to warn, and he is repeatedly referred to in the Qur’àn as a warner, *nadhîr*. Cognates of *nudhr* occur about 120 times. Warnings typically have both a descriptive and prescriptive element, although the latter is often implicit, as in a sign saying Wet Paint! The typical form of prophetic warning is given in this verse: *Certainly it has been revealed to you and to those before you: ‘If you ascribe a partner to Allah your works shall fail and you shall surely be among the losers’* (Q 39:65).

In addition to warnings, the content of revelation is often specific prescriptions, such as dietary laws or divine instructions given to Noah to build his ark. Sometimes what is revealed are tidings of the unseen, information about what has happened with regard to Mary the mother of Jesus, and the prophets Joseph and Noah. These sorts of revelation function as supports of prophetic authority because the information revealed could come only from God.

Sometimes what is revealed is a series of commands, to worship only Allah, to be kind to parents, to be charitable, not to kill or fornicate or usurp the property of orphans, to be fair and to shun pride, after which it is stated: *These are among what your Lord has revealed to you of wisdom* (Q 12:39). Here the content of the revelation is wisdom that consists of guidance in the form of rules of conduct.

As with explicit warnings, other instances of revelation often have the form of a combined descriptive and prescriptive element: *We did not send any apostle before you, but We revealed to him that ‘There is no god except Me; so worship Me’* (Q 21:25). This is an important verse because it states a common content to all prophetic revelation. All prophetic revelation

combines the descriptive and prescriptive. The descriptive part is ontological: only one existent has the status of divinity. The prescriptive part establishes religious practice.

Revelation can also be an assurance. When the faithless threatened the prophets, *Then their Lord revealed to them: 'We will surely destroy the unjust, and surely We will settle you in the land after them'* (Q 14:13-14). The assurances revealed for those who believe are referred to as “good news” (*bushrà*), and the Prophet is referred to as a warner (*nadhîr*) and a bringer of good news (*bashîr*): *Does it seem odd to these people that We have revealed to a man from among themselves: "Warn mankind, and give good news to the faithful that they are in good stead with their Lord"?* (10:2). Like warnings, good news contains both a descriptive and an explicit or implicit prescriptive element. For example, *Indeed this Qur'ân guides to what is most upright, and gives good news to the faithful who do righteous deeds that there is a reward for them* (Q 17:9).

There is no particular disagreement among Muslims about the meaning of revelation or *wahy* as described here. The main distinction to be found in Shi'ite writings on revelation is epistemological. According to some sources, the Prophet was doubtful about the revelations he had begun to receive, and was reassured by a Christian monk that he had all the signs of being a true prophet. The Shi'ah reject such stories as inconsistent with the doctrine of prophetic infallibility. According to them, the revelatory experience was such as to leave no room for doubt as to its authenticity.¹

The Mennonite concept of revelation, as with other Christian denominations, is broader than the Muslim concept of *wahy*. The primary revelation for Christians is Jesus Christ himself, but it is held that the disciples of Jesus plus Paul were recipients of divine revelation. Scripture is called the word of God by Christians, not because it was sent down as a “book” to Jesus but because those who wrote and compiled it are believed to have been *inspired* by the Holy Spirit to do so correctly. If Christian and Muslim scriptures are both considered revealed, the sense of revelation is certainly different.

Inspiration

Both Christians and Muslims distinguish revelation from inspiration. Christians sometimes distinguish *general* from *special* revelation, where *general*

revelation means whatever can be known about God through reason. Our concern here is with *special revelation*, by which is meant the extraordinary communication of a divine message to human beings. For Christians, special revelation culminates in the person of Jesus. The recording of scripture, through which the content of special revelation is conveyed, is considered reliable enough to be called the word of God because of the divine inspiration given to those who recorded, collected, and selected the canon.

The specific function of inspiration is to preserve revelation in a trustworthy and sufficient form to serve its divine purpose. Inspiration is the activity of the Holy Spirit in securing for the church the Scriptures in such a form that the church may trust its verbal form as an adequate, authentic, and sufficient vehicle of special revelation.²

While Muslims also distinguish between revelation and inspiration, there is nothing corresponding to the Christian notion of inspiration as divine protection of the canon, not because there is no belief in a supernatural protection of the text but because appeal to such protection is made without recourse to any sort of inspiration. The canonicity of the Qur'ân is usually defended on historical grounds and on the basis of its being subject to divine protection.³ When Muslims distinguish *wahy* from inspiration (*ilhâm*), it is usually on the basis of: (a) the recipient, restricting *wahy* in its technical sense of prophetic revelation to the prophets, while visions and orations given to the Imams or other saints are called *inspiration*; (b) the passivity of the recipient as adding nothing of his own personality in the process but serving purely as a clear channel; (c) the claim that accompanies the revelation, as providing public guidance; or (d) the unquestionable certainty that accompanies the revelation.

Muslims often distinguish among prophets those commissioned by God for guidance of the public through divine law. A prophet is a *nabî*, and one commissioned with a public message is an apostle or messenger, *rasêl*. Those who receive divine inspirations at a rank below the prophets are called *awliyâ*, usually translated as *saints*.

In short, the concept of *inspiration* among Muslims is similar to what some Christians would call *private revelation*. Although Muslims hold that Jesus' disciples may have been inspired, they did not receive prophetic revelations. Among the Shi'ah, Peter is especially honored as the trustee of Jesus, holding a position analogous to that of Imam 'Alî with respect to

Muhammad. Paul is not generally seen in a very favorable light and is often held responsible for what are considered excesses in Christian doctrine.

Inlibration and Incarnation

Harry Wolfson coined the term *inlibration*, as a parallel to *incarnation*, for the Muslim idea of how divinity is present in the text of the Qur'ân. Wolfson used the term in an attempt to respond to Muslim polemics against incarnation. The main logical difficulties in the doctrine of the incarnation, he argued, have counterparts in Muslim ideas about how the divine message takes on linguistic form.⁴ There are obvious limitations to the analogy, but it may still help us to sort out an old problem about the Muslim understanding of the Gospel (*injil*). In the Qur'ân, *injil* is used for the “book” revealed to Jesus. According to narrations from the Prophet and the Imams, it is used for the scripture possessed by Christians. The problem is that the gospels considered scripture by Christians are not a book revealed to Jesus. Some Muslim writers have sought to resolve this inconsistency by holding that the gospels in the Bible are a corruption of the book revealed to Jesus, but this is implausible because the gospels are not the sort of book that, by means of additions and omissions, could have evolved from a book given to Jesus.

Perhaps this puzzle can be solved by reversing the direction of Wolfson's explanation of *inlibration*. Instead of using this idea to find something analogous to the incarnation in Islam, we can use it to find something analogous to *wahy* in Christianity. Recall that the main form of the content of the revelation given to the Prophet Muhammad is warning and good news: *Indeed We have sent you with the truth, as a bearer of good news and as a warner; and you will not be questioned concerning the inmates of hell* (Q 2:119).⁵ Given that the Arabic *injil* is derived from the Greek *euangélion* (good news), we could take the “book” given to Jesus to be the good news revealed to him. What is essential for consistency with the Qur'ân is that the revelation given to Jesus should be one that brings with it the announcement of divine law for his age, a new covenant.⁶

Whether or not the divine message given to Jesus came in a verbal form, it became articulated in his life and teachings. If the presence of the divine message in the Qur'ân may be called *inlibration*, Muslims could allow that the presence of the divine message or *logos* in Christ may be called *incarnation*, not in the traditional Christian sense of God becoming a man

but in the sense that His Word is revealed in the life of a man in such a way that Jesus is himself called the Word of God in the Qur'ân: *When the angels said, 'O Mary! Allah gives you the good news of a Word from Him whose name is Christ Jesus son of Mary (3:45); That is Jesus, son of Mary, a Word of the Real (19:34);* And since his life and teachings expressing the good news revealed to him have been recorded in the four gospels, they too, by extension, may be called *injl*. On this reading, what becomes incarnate in Christ is not God, but His revelation, the good news.

This sort of solution has not been explicitly discussed by Shi'ite theologians as far as I am aware, although the Christology implied is recognizably Islamic. Issues pertaining to the doctrine of incarnation have been particularly divisive between Muslims and Christians and the cause of much sectarian dispute among Christians themselves, so I don't want to pursue this too much further—except to recall that the suggestion seeks not so much to solve a puzzle in Islamic theology as to illustrate how the concept of revelation differs between Muslims and Christians, although perhaps not irreconcilably so.

Both Christians and Muslims agree that revelation is a special communication from God to selected individuals through whom He provides guidance for the people. Scripture is considered by both groups to be the authentic record of the revealed word of God. Both consider revelation as recorded in scripture to be authoritative. Both Mennonites and Shi'ites hold that the correct interpretation of revelation is to be found, of course, within their own traditions.

Authority

A large number of issues are connected with authority in relation to divine revelation. First, different senses of authority need to be distinguished. For convenience, we may distinguish doctrinal authority from prescriptive authority, although the lines between them are often blurred. By doctrinal authority I mean the authority given texts, institutions, or individuals as sources of religious doctrine. Prescriptive authority is the authority given texts, institutions, or persons to command obedience. With regard to each, we can ask about the authority of revelation, and about how and to what extent others may derive their authority from revelation. There is also the question of whether revelation is the sole authority in any of these areas.

In order to understand the concepts related to authority in the Qur'ân, we need to examine a number of terms. One of the most crucial for the connection to revelation is the word used for "following," cognates with the root *tb'*. The idea of following is important because the one who follows accepts the leadership or authority of what is followed. The idea of following what is received through revelation is a recurrent theme. The Prophet follows what is revealed to him: *Say, 'I am not a novelty among the apostles, nor do I know what will be done with me, or with you, I just follow whatever is revealed to me, and I am just a manifest warner' (Q 46:9)*, and he is commanded to invite the people to follow him for the love of God: *Say, 'If you love Allah, then follow me; Allah will love you and forgive you your sins' (Q 3:31)*.

The idea of following is closely related to that of submission, *islâm*. It is not simply a matter of doing the right thing but involves accepting divine guidance as well. Following thus involves both belief and works, and here is a parallel to what Christians call justification. Justification is not by mere works, but neither is it "by faith alone." At the same time that Adam and Eve are expelled from paradise and exiled to earth, God turns to them clemently and says: *Should any guidance come to you from Me, those who follow My guidance shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve (Q 2:38)*.

Revelation is authoritative, both doctrinally and morally, for both Mennonites and Shi'ites. Both agree that the authority brought by revelation gives authority to specified individuals, and that religious authority may be delegated in some way. Both traditions have questioned claimants to this authority. The Anabaptists rejected popes and the Shi'ah rejected caliphs. How could they do this if the proper understanding of revelation is confined to the authorities? Criticism of authority is only possible if a standpoint can be taken that is itself not dependent on that authority and has the authority to pass judgment on it.

For Anabaptists and Protestants, the teachings of Scripture were so plainly in conflict with the teachings and practice of the Catholic Church that a direct appeal was made to Bible texts to refute claims to authority made by the Church. For the Shi'ah, the situation was a bit more complicated. Appealing to explicit teachings of the Qur'ân to refute the caliphs and their supporters

was only part of the strategy. They also claimed to find an authenticity, based on the explicit designation of their Imams in succession from the Prophet, that was lacking in other claimants to religious authority. Detractors have claimed that Shi'ites believe in inherited religious authority, but the principle is one of designation or appointment rather than mere geneology. Because of this designation, although the cycle of prophetic authority reaches completion with Muhammad, the cycle of the authority of the Imams continues.

Although the Shi'ah normally appeal to reason in order to support claims about the authority of the Imams, there are distinct parallels here with Mennonite ideas about the believers' church and the appeal to conscience. We recently celebrated the holiday of Eid al-Ghadir, which commemorates the designation of 'Alí by the Prophet near the pont of Ghadir Khumm with the words, "For whomever I am the *mawlà* (authority), this man 'Alí is his *mawlà*." The term *mawlà* is cognate with *wilayat*. He then invited the Muslims to acknowledge the status of 'Alí by congratulating him. Acknowledgement of authority was usually made in Arab society through a handshake in a ceremony called *bay'at* (literally, making a sale, but usually—somewhat misleadingly—translated as a pledge of allegiance). In making *bay'at*, one acknowledges the Imam's leadership and accepts his authority. One condition for a valid *bay'at* is that those entering into it must be sane adults. During the days of the Shi'ite Imams, one became a Shi'ite, literally a partisan of the Imam, through *bay'at*. There are obvious parallels with the Anabaptist notion of accepting the authority of the Church through adult baptism. Of course, there are significant differences as well; for example, the Christian concept of Church is not found in Islam. Nevertheless, common themes find different forms of expression in Mennonite and Shi'ite traditions.

The appeal to reason is itself a kind of appeal to conscience. Anabaptists generally took a dim view of the idea that reason has any special religious authority, because so much had been justified in Catholic tradition in the name of reason that seemed to the Anabaptists to fly in the face of the obvious testimony of scripture. While we do not find the same sort of scorn for "the learned" in the Shi'ite tradition as is common in early Anabaptist writings, numerous narrations attributed to the Imams castigate hypocritical scholars.

Doctrinal Authority and Revelation

Epistemological Issues

How does a prophet know that he is the recipient of divine revelation? Is there something about the nature of the experience that makes it self-warranting, or does it require some sort of outside confirmation? When someone makes a claim to have received divine revelation, how do we know that it is true?

Doctrinal Authority

Sources for doctrinal teachings according to the Shi'ah are to be found in the Qur'ân, *hadîth* (narrations attributed to the Prophet and Imams), and reason. It is the responsibility of every sane adult Muslim to figure out the basic principles of religious doctrine without imitation of a scholar. This does not mean that one cannot make use of scholars' expositions and explanations to understand the basic principles, but one must arrive at a judgment that these principles are true by one's own lights with the help of God, and not simply by parroting.

Prescriptive Authority and Revelation

Do right and wrong depend on the command of God as expressed through revelation? What gives revealed prescriptions and prohibitions their moral authority? According to the Shi'ites, reason is capable of grasping basic moral principles, but revelation is needed to perfect one's moral understanding as guided by the revealed law.

Communal Religious Authority and Revelation

The prophets are given positions of religious leadership because of revelation, but it is not merely the reception of revelation that conveys religious authority. God chose the prophets to be recipients because of their excellences, both innate and acquired. In Islam, other religious leaders gain authority through designation or through knowledge. With regard to practice, every sane adult Muslim must either learn to derive the rules from their sources or to imitate someone who can.

Political Authority and Revelation

There are a variety of views on this subject within both the Mennonite and Shi'ite communities. Here too are many common themes. Both groups have challenged political authorities on the basis of conflict with religious principles. For this reason, both have been accused of being rebellious, and at the fringes of the Anabaptist and Shi'ite traditions have been rebels taking extreme positions. For the most part, however, Mennonite and Shi'ite leaders have been content to respect just political authorities that did not interfere with their own practice of religion. Both communities have sought, insofar as feasible, autonomy.

Although many Mennonites today view these tendencies as endorsing secular government, I suggest this is a distortion. Anabaptists called for political and religious authorities to tolerate them, to cease oppression of their groups, and to let them live in peace. This did not require that there be no established religion, and certainly they would not have preferred avowedly agnostic magistrates to Christian ones. When secular governments demanded Anabaptists carry arms and go to war, they often disobeyed and suffered persecution and imprisonment for it. The criterion for obedience to government was that there should be no conflict with religious duties.

Shi'ite history has also seen a strong effort to attain autonomy, whether through respect for political authorities that did not interfere with the religious practice of the Shi'ah or through the establishment of government based on the authority of the jurispudent. The criterion for Shi'ite political thought has been to insure the ability to observe religious obligations.

I don't mean to suggest that there are no fundamental differences between Shi'ite and Mennonite theological teachings about politics. Mennonites separate the institutions of Church and State in such a way that the State must have functions that cannot be performed by the Church, because the authority of the sword in the hands of the magistrates is to be accepted "in so far as they are not contrary to the Word of God. Rom. 13:1-3."⁷ In Islam, at least in its origins, there was no separation of temporal and spiritual authority. However, the institutional separation of which Menno speaks is not the religious neutrality of the modern secular state. Menno calls on magistrates to be good Christians and to uphold the laws against sodomy, adultery, idolatry, and much else that is considered none of the business of the modern secular

state, but to avoid bloodshed while doing so. This implies that at least some important strands in Mennonite thought are less in line with contemporary liberal secularism than is often assumed. Menno seemed to advocate the state's tolerance of the peaceful coexistence of different Christian denominations. The state was to serve to ensure order and not to enforce any particular sectarian belief system, but at the same time toleration was not to be extended as far as the permission, say, of witchcraft.

Notes

¹ See Muhammad Baqir Saeedi Rowshan, "Revelation in the Qur'an," *The Message of Thaqalayn*, Vol. 3, Nos. 1 & 2, 1417/1996, 23-40.

² "A Christian Declaration on the Authority of the Scriptures (General Conference Mennonite Church, 1962): a CMEQ Source Document."

³ See Al-Sayyid Abu al-Qasim al-Musawí al-Khu'i and Abdulaziz Sachedrina, *The Prolegomena to the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁴ Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1976).

⁵ Cf. 34:28, 35:24, 41:4.

⁶ The idea that no corruptions need be attributed to the gospels and that the term *book* (*kitàb*) in the Qur'an need not refer literally to a book composed of chapters and sentences has been argued most famously by Ayatullah Ma'rifat.

⁷ Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), 200.

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