

A Brief Guide to the Study of Islam: Revelation

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I. Introduction

The scholarly study of Islam by Christians has been dominated by the question of identifying the “real” Islam. This in turn revolves around two methodological problems. The first problem relates to identifying the essence of any religion. Early students of religion tended to focus on religious texts. This was particularly the case with Islam. Muslims themselves claim the primacy of the Quran and the *hadith* (the traditions of Muhammed’s spoken words) in Islamic life. The continuous references to these works in every aspect of life from daily conversation, to worship, to legal rulings, seems to bear out the truth of this claim. Nonetheless an anthropological study of Islamic societies reveals the extent to which textual representation of Islam is an ideal rarely matched by Muslim societies. Particularly among common people we find, from the Maghrib to the Indonesian archipelago, pre-Islamic beliefs, rituals, and customs beneath and intermingled with those from the sacred texts. More recently there is also an overlay of modernity which likewise shapes the Islamic mind and Islamic practice.

As students of Islam we must perhaps be guided by our own intentions with regard to identifying the “real” Islam. If we wish to communicate effectively with Muslims about their faith we must realize that they will refer to it in its textual, and idealized, form. For them Islam is the teaching of the Book, and the books. We must understand and appreciate these first and foremost. We must also understand the variations in the Islamic ideal characterized by both ancient and modern Islamic sectarianism, and the conventional Islamic explanations for these divisions in the one true religion. For many practical purposes we will also need to examine Islam as a sociological or anthropological phenomena. While this yields many interesting insights, it must be kept in mind that for Muslims such approaches are new, and even among scholars are not always acceptable. Christians have lived now for two centuries with both the social sciences and with liberal theology’s re-definition of Christianity as a human faith rather than divine revelation. Muslims do not generally see their own religion in this way. Humans may be faithful or unfaithful, but to Muslims Islam is God’s revealed path, not a human effort to authentically respond to the divine. Many otherwise liberal Muslim scholars believe that the path of Christian theology in its liberal form is a proven path of failure which Muslims not only need not, but should not, imitate.

The relation of Muslims to “the West” is fraught with difficulty, and this is the occasion for the second area of methodological difficulty in studying Islam. Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* brought into focus a long standing conflict between Western students of Islam, whose comparative method used Western and even explicitly Christian categories to analyze Islam, and Muslims who demanded that Muslim societies should be understood within the framework of Muslim thinking, particularly when this was a reflection of a Divine perspective. Said’s accusation, no doubt overstated, was that “orientalists” had ultimately used Islam as a foil to better define their own societies, faiths, and aesthetics.

Today we find that in every field of human endeavor Muslims are working hard to define an “Islamic” methodology and to assert its ultimate superiority for understanding not only Islam, but everything from the physical universe to human society as well. Muslim are deeply engaged in epistemology, and are actively seeking to master Western approaches as well as more fully articulating their own tradition. If we intend to have any serious scholarly discussion with Muslims we cannot be limited to a naïve Kantian understanding of phenomena and noumena. Much less can we regard the new linguistic philosophers as having said the final word on either truth or method. Instead we should expect to be challenged to justify philosophically our methodology, and our moral right to use it. We can expect to hear, at some stage, that our science is not only wrong, but immoral. And we will hear it from those who have learned that science and the works of its critics within the West.

Given these methodological issues it is impossible to undertake a meaningful study of Islam which merely focuses on the basics of belief and practice, even if these are extended into the realm of folk beliefs and practices. We need to begin to grasp Islam from within, to see its coherence as a faith and to understand the logic of its development up to the present day. This includes the rise of modern Islamicist movements. The suggestions outlined below include a brief guide to approaching Revelation in a way similar to that of Muslims, and then a longer introduction to historical developments in Islamic understandings of Revelation and Authority, and the metaphysics of revelation.

II. God's Revelation

A. Introduction

The formal study of Islam by Muslims almost inevitably begins with the story of Muhammed received the first revelation of the Quran. It is this manifestation of God's revelation in the world which not only initiates the Islamic faith, but which provides the starting point for all reflection on the relation of God to the world.

"Recite: in the Name of your Lord who created,
Created man from a blood-clot.
Recite: and your Lord is most bountiful,
he who taught by the pen,
Taught Man what he knew not."
(Surah 96)

This was the first revelation to Muhammed and it sets the tone for all other reflection on Islam. God reveals. Humans recite. The Quran, according to Orthodox Islamic theology, is co-eternal, uncreated, yet subordinate to God as God's Word. While Muslims have at various times in their history pursued pure metaphysics, this pursuit has never succeeded in creating a Muslim understanding of God independent of the event of the Quran. The call to recite, which reaches its zenith in Muhammed, is integral to human nature. Adam, according to Islam, is the first prophet. So while Muslims have reflected deeply on issues of psychology and sociology they have never embraced an anthropology whose basic fact was anything other than the human imperative to live out the Quran.

Revelation is not, then, just another category of theological reflection for Muslims. It is the center of their human being, giving life both its integrity and its direction. When a child is first born, as he or she draws the first breath, the father whispers in the ear a verse of the Quran. With rare exceptions the Quran will be the constant sonoral background to their entire life. They will hear them from the mosque 5 times a day. Worship is little more than recitation of the Quran. Everyday speech is laced not only with Quranic expressions, but all sorts of proverbs and maxims drawn directly from it. Many, perhaps most, Muslims will memorize large portions, if not all of the Quran.

Revelation is not merely meaning or information passed from God to humanity. Both theologically and practically Muslims have a deep understanding of the resonance of the Word with the human soul. Christians have often been critical of the fact that many, perhaps a majority, of Muslims cannot actually understand the Arabic words which they memorize and hear. However, as Seyyid Hossein Nasr points out, the very sound of God's Word may resonate within the soul so powerfully that articulating its meaning is neither necessary nor possible.¹ This is the reason that chanting the Quran is the primary aural aesthetic experience for all Muslims, regardless of their mastery of the Arabic language. The best of the Quran reciters have the status of a Pavarotti or a Sutherland in the Muslim world, and cassettes and CD's of Quran recitation sell like pop music. Similarly the visual experience of the written Quran quickly became the primary ocular aesthetic for Muslims. The greatest of Muslim art and architecture is an elucidation of the written Quran, with the Arabic words woven into patterns of increasing complexity and symbolic meaning.

As Christians we must not only appreciate the centrality of the Quranic event in Islamic life, but the very different role demanded of revelation in the development of the Muslim community. The first centuries of Christianity were dominated by the need of a politically and economically marginal community to define itself and articulate the gospel with which it had been entrusted in Graeco-Roman cultural milieu. The struggles to define orthodoxy and defend it against heresy remain foundational to Christian theological reflection. The role of the church councils and the growing organizational solidarity of the orthodox churches remain fundamental to Christian reflection on authority within the faith community. For the Muslim community the first crisis of identity dealt not with metaphysics or theology, but politics. The Quran announced, and Muhammed established, a new way of life among the Arabs whose dominant feature was a body of positive law regulating personal and community life. The central questions of the early Muslim era dealt with how the authority of the original revelation and its prophet Muhammed would continue to provide legal guidance as the community expanded geographically, and in the breadth of its relationships and daily undertakings. Metaphysical reflection, so crucial to creating the groundwork for comprehensible and authoritative creeds, was of secondary concern to the first generations of Muslims. It came into importance only when they had

¹ Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *Islamic Spirituality, Vol. 1*, Crossroads, New York, 1987. Page 4.

begun to assimilate the Greek intellectual tradition. And its purpose was always closely linked to the goal of establishing, or disestablishing, the foundations of the political and legal structures which guided the community.

B. Authority and Revelation

1. The Quran

In the earliest part of Islamic history there was, not surprisingly, little reflection on the exact relationship between the Revelation to Muhammed in the Quran and the authority to guide the Muslim community. Muhammed himself made a clear distinction between his own words and those which were received as part of the Quran. The latter were immediately repeated and memorized by large numbers of his followers. Shortly after his death they were collected and written in almost precisely their current form. Not too long after this first recension a serious effort was made to insure uniformity in all written versions of the Quran. Islamic tradition readily acknowledges that there were one or two minor differences among the earliest reciters which were obliterated in this process. At the time, and long afterward, it was the spoken Quran which had primacy. Muslims were more interested in noting and categorizing dialect differences in pronunciation than in the study of manuscripts, since in fact all were identical. Later, as different versions of unpointed Arabic script arose, a science of comparing the different scripts in which the Quran was written developed. However, unpointed early Arabic merely served as an aid to memorization, and the oral tradition was the ultimate authority in reconciling differences that arose in the written manuscripts. There was, and is, virtually no need for a science of textual criticism in Islam.

2 The *Sunnah* of the Prophet

The Quran itself was not nearly sufficient to provide guidance to the emerging Muslim community. Nor did it pretend to be a set of axiomatic principals upon which further guidelines could be elucidated. Sometimes the Quran did provide immediate guidance in specific situations. As often, however, Muhammed was forced to render his own judgements. Early in the Islamic movement his position as the one receiving God's revelation, as well as his personal charisma, led his followers to accept his guidance and example as authoritative. In his absence they remembered both his words and his actions and used them to lend authority to their own words and actions. After his death Muhammed's immediate successors continued the tradition of referring to Muhammed's words to resolve disputes, but also made their own authoritative rulings. These too were (and are) remembered.

While the Quran was firmly defined within a few years of Muhammed's lifetime, and its contents never seriously disputed, the extra-Quranic authoritative tradition of the Muslim community was defined much more slowly, and never took as firm a shape as, for example, the Christian canon. One of the earliest disputes in Islam was over whether the words of Muhammed's successors, and indeed Muhammed himself, could bind Muslims to a course of action which they regarded as un-Quranic. The Kharizites withdrew from the larger Muslim community asserting the absolute right of the individual to determine his course of action according to the Quran. This withdrawal was the first crisis of authority in the community. As a consequence a distinction was made between the traditions of the Prophet (or the *sunnah of the Prophet*) and the decisions rendered by his companions. The former came to be the ultimate authority in interpreting the meaning of the Quran, in providing legal guidance in mundane affairs, and in articulating Muslim theology. The traditions of the early Caliphs continued to have authority, but more as legal precedents than as authoritative spiritual guidance.

3. The Laws of the Caliph

The expansion of Islam outside of the Arab cultural zone demanded a further refinement in the understanding of authority within the community. The first Muslims had lived according to their traditional laws, except where these were specifically superceded or rejected by the Quran. Within Muhammed's time a distinction was made between *ada'*, or traditional law, and the Quran. His decisions and actions (the *sunnah*) provided a third source of authoritative guidance for the community. However, these decisions, like Arab *ada'*, provided little guidance for the management of a far reaching empire which embraced peoples with many different customary laws. Beginning with the Umayyad Caliphs the laws and commands of the ruling Caliph became another source of authoritative guidance for the Muslim community. In theory, of course, the laws made by the Caliph (called *siyasa*) were in accordance with, or at least didn't contradict, the Quran and *sunnah*. In fact they were far ranging and often touched on the daily lives of Muslims in ways which were bound to affect their obedience to the Quran and *sunnah*.

4 From Revelation and Tradition to Law

In this situation the Muslim community, through its scholars, began a process of defining more closely the theoretical basis for authority in the community. This involved first the science of collecting and judging the accuracy of traditions about Muhammed. (The content of the Quran was never in doubt.) Secondly, it involved defining the process of authoritative interpretation and elucidation of the Quran and *sunnah*. Finally it involved defining the relation between different authorities (individual Muslims in their own household and work, religious scholars and judges, and the Caliph and his representatives.), and what principals would determine how each in his own sphere acted in accordance with the Quran and *sunnah*.

a) *Hadith Methodology*

The earliest guidance given Muslims by their local leaders seems to have consisted of an amalgam of Quranic teaching, local custom, traditions of the prophet, and a fair amount of personal judgement. In general it might be said that as disputes arose, not least between local leaders and the representatives of the Caliph, the former sought a firmer authority on which to base their decisions. The portion of the traditions of the prophet which recorded his spoken judgements (called the *hadith*) provided just such a universally acknowledged authoritative basis for decision making. However, within two or three generations after the prophet Muhammed the number of traditional sayings attributed to the prophet had increased to the point where many were contradictory, impossible, or otherwise clearly fabricated. This led a number of scholars to dedicate their lives to not only collecting the traditions of the prophet, but grading the probability that they were accurate. The result was a science of analyzing tradition.

This science rested first on establishing a chain of witnesses to the tradition which led back to the prophet. Then it analyzed the reliability of each of those witnesses through a study of both their personal integrity and circumstances in which the tradition was passed on. As a consequence a vast body of Islamic biography grew up and the mastery of this, along with the formal *isnad* or chains of witnesses, became a fundamental tool of an interpreter of Islamic tradition. While the reasoning over any particular tradition can be complex, the system as a whole is coherent and logical. A reliable tradition:

1. Had a complete *isnad*. (chain of transmitters)
2. Recurred in a variety of places and schools. (It had a complex *isnad*.)
3. Had transmitters of a high standard. (Men and women who were morally upright and intellectually honest.)
4. Was consistent in the source and order of transmission.
5. Was not associated with known efforts to fabricate traditions in order to deceive or gain personal fame.

A "weak" tradition might have only one chain of witnesses, and that broken. Or one or more of the witnesses might have heard it in less than ideal circumstances (such as when he or she was a young child).

Because of the complexities of grading the traditions there were disagreements about the relative strength of some *hadith*. More important was the fact that in complex situations several traditions of different degrees of reliability might be cited in reaching a decision. By no means did the science of analyzing tradition put an end to disagreements on legal and theological issues.

b) *The Process of Authoritative Interpretation*

The first Muslims read the Quran as contemporary literature in the presence of first the prophet and then his companions. Within a few generations, however, both cultural distance and inevitable disputes over interpretation demanded a science of interpretation which would compliment the science of analyzing *hadith*. The ground of this science was a mastery of Quranic Arabic, and its development spurred the systematizing of grammatical and lexical knowledge, as well as the preservation of such pre-Quranic Arabic traditions as still existed. Where this knowledge did not make perfectly clear the meaning of a text, appeal was made to the context in which the revelation originally appeared. Every verse came to be associated with a particular event or period in Muhammed's life, and mastery of this historical knowledge was a second basis for interpretation of the Quran. Where possible the interpreter could also refer to any *hadith* which shed light on the meaning of a particular verse. Finally, where two or more interpretations seemed equally valid appeal could be made to *istihsan*, or the priority of an interpretation which promoted the public good.

Interpretation never rested, however, on a pure application of agreed hermeneutic methods. In different regions insightful judgement by great teachers, regional customs, and distinctive collections of *hadith* resulted in differing schools of interpretation. The application of independent judgement, called *ra'y*, particularly in the appeal to what was for the benefit of the overall Islamic community, naturally led to different interpretations in different times and places. *Ada'*, or local custom, continued to have authority when it was not overruled by either the Quran or *hadith*. There was a profusion of sometimes varying legal rulings by religious leaders, as well as regional variations. These had the potential to create both disunity and uncertainty in the Muslim community. By the second century after Muhammed both political and religious leaders were finding it expedient to define the bounds of orthodoxy, and the different spheres of authoritative judgement occupied by the individual Muslim, local religious leaders, and the Caliph.

Despite differences in opinion about specific regulations almost all early Islamic scholars agreed that God's revelation and its compliment in the *hadith* should yield absolute certainty about how to live every aspect of human life. It should generate, in other words, a body of positive law. The process of interpretation was not a process of applying abstracted principles to changing situations. It was rather the process of discovering the absolute unchanging truth about theology and law which was explicit and implicit in the revelation. After some three centuries of development in the Islamic understanding of interpretation, Muhammed Ibn-Idris al-Ash'ari (circa 800 a.d.) was able to develop a theory which satisfactorily explained the acceptable diversity within Islamic interpretation, firmly excluded heretical teaching, and seemed to insure that the results of interpretive activity would consistently yield a clear articulation of God's will.

(1) Muhammad Ibn-Idris Ash'ari

The divisions which arose within Islam during its early years fall broadly into four categories. The first divisions were over who had a right to interpret the Quran, and to continue to speak for God. It became the orthodox (*Sunni*) understanding that there was no further revelation beyond the Quran. Interpretation could be carried out by anyone competent in the literary and historical sciences which it entailed. The Caliph had a special duty to enforce God's rule, but did not have any special right or ability to interpret the Quran. In the broad movement which became *Shi'ism* it was believed that a particular spiritual grace rested on the descendants of the prophet and others. This allowed them to continue to receive Divine revelation, and gave them insight into the esoteric truth of Quran teaching which could never be discovered by purely rational means.

The second division was over who should wield political control over the whole community. In part this was a division between the *Sunni* and the *Shi'*. In part it was between those who preferred a central autocracy, and those who maintained an older Arabic ideal of individual and tribal autonomy. In the end the older Arabic ideal was almost completely lost. The *Shi'* for their part were able to establish some centers of autocratic political power, the *Sunni* others. Both groups established theories which legitimated their political leaders as successors of Muhammed in his role of unifying Islam.

The third division was over the basis theological reasoning proper. In its most important form it was a disagreement over the relative status of human reason (represented by Greek metaphysics) and revelation and tradition. Ultimately the proponents of a dominant role for reason were politically suppressed and theologically isolated. As is often the case, however, this happened only after their opponents had adopted an equally rationalist methodology, albeit one in which revelation and tradition axioms upon which a rational structure could be built.

The final divisions were over matters of jurisprudence. In part these arose because Islamic law always incorporated some local customs, and these varied in the major centers of Islamic life in the century after Muhammed. In part they arose because these centers had access to differing *hadith*. Many differences, however, could be attributed to the initial freedom with which individual jurists used their own judgement in formulating decisions. It was this which Al-Ash'ari found problematic, and which he tried to eliminate in his theory of proper interpretation.

According to Al-Ash'ari there were four roots of Islamic law.

- (a) The Quran was both source and as guide to interpretation,

The Quran not only witnesses to its own authority, but it also substantiates the authority of the second source, the prophet Muhammed. In addition the Quran is in many respects self-explanatory, so that some verses clarify the meaning of others.

- (b) The *sunnah* (both the *hadith*, or spoken words, and actions) of Muhammed as a divinely inspired source of law.

By maintaining that the words and deeds of Muhammed were divinely inspired Al-Ash'ari resolved the problem of potential conflicts between the Quran and the *hadith* by declaring that this was impossible. Muhammed's decisions represent the correct interpretation of the Quran and cannot be in conflict with it. The *hadith* (words of Muhammed) thus cannot be rejected because of their *content*, but only because of their *authenticity*, and for all practical purposes the *sunnah* (totality of traditions from the Prophet) becomes an authority prior to the Quran, since it provides the authoritative interpretation of it.

Al-Ash'ari then developed rules to determine how varying traditions could be reconciled in case of a conflict.

1. They could be reconciled on the basis that one rule was a particular exception to a general principal which still had to be accepted.
2. A tradition would be preferred if it had a stronger *isnad*
3. A tradition could be abrogated (*naskh*) by a later tradition. In this case the Quran is abrogated only by the Quran because the *sunnah* can only explain, not contradict, the Quran. The *sunnah* can only be abrogated by the *sunnah* because otherwise the Quran would explain the *sunnah* and not visa-versa.

(c) *Ijma*, or the consensus of scholars as third root of Islamic law and theology.

Al-Ash'ari limited this to the time when they all lived in Medina, since at any later point in history no such consensus could be practically obtained. The limitation of authoritative consensus made the differences in the major schools acceptable as long as none of them contradicted the *ijma* which had developed in Medina.

(d) *Qiyas*, or analogical reasoning as the sole valid methodology for extending Islamic law

This was a type of *ijtihad*, or human reasoning, but strictly regulated by both the method of analogy and the controls of consistency with the *sunnah* and Quran.

(2) What Al-Ash'ari rejected.

Al-Ash'ari's system no longer included was any role for personal judgement in the formulation of law. Both independent reasoning based on the priority of the public good, and the application of customary law, were rejected. At least in theory Islamic law and theology had taken on an almost mathematical formalism. The limiting concept of *ijma* insured that both the axiomatic statements and interpretive methods were not open to further discussion. *Qiyas* as a formal system of reasoning suggested that in a world of finite situations all possible analogies to earlier situations could be found and articulated.

(3) From Independent Reasoning to Imitation

Al-Ash'ari did not just articulate a system of interpretation. In effect he re-defined the nature of Revelation. It is little wonder that his system of authoritative interpretation emerged in the midst of a broader controversy over the metaphysical nature of the Quran. *In Al Ash'ari's system there was a subtle change the concept of revelation. It was no longer God's word to humans who recited it in their daily lives. It had become primarily God's law for humans who must obey it explicitly.*

Such a view, taken to its logical conclusion, would have destroyed the very foundation of Islamic aesthetics and spirituality. This did not happen. The Quranic event continued its creative impulse in Muslim spirituality and art by moving outside both the scholarly and political establishment. In jurisprudence and theology, however, the widespread acceptance of al-Ash'ari's system led to a certain stagnancy. Within a few centuries Islamic scholars reached a consensus that, given the finite axioms and rules of the Islamic system of reasoning, all possible articulations of Muslim practice and faith had been reached. There was no further need for *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning. To be a faithful Muslim, one needed only *taqlid* or imitation of the pious forebears who had made the system complete.

C. The Quran and Hadith in Modern Islam.

There always existed within Islam approaches to applying the Quran and *sunnah* to daily life which were more flexible and creative than those of the orthodox schools of theology and jurisprudence. Among the *Shi'* the right of certain leaders to find and apply highly esoteric interpretations to the Quran made it possible to escape the straightjacket of the otherwise acceptable orthodox system. The Sufis, while bound to public acceptance of the orthodox system of interpretation, focused attention on both the esoteric and individual character of revelation. Beneath the orthodox interpretations they found a rich world of symbolic meanings. Exploring and teaching these was acceptable so long as they remained private.

By the 19th century it was becoming clear to many Muslim leaders that the rich, but rigid, system of classical Islamic law and theology was inadequate to answer the needs of a modern Muslim society. Some such leaders argued that this should indicate a need to turn away from modernity and to re-create the social and economic structures of Islam's golden age. A much broader movement criticized the methodological developments from the time of al-Ash'ari onwards. Followers of this group believed that conscientious, educated Muslims should be able to read at the Quran and *hadith* and exercise their own judgements about their meaning. The hermeneutic principles of al-Ash'ari and others of his age should be studied to help clarify the issues of interpretation and authority, but in it themselves were no longer regarded as normative. In other words they argued that the old principals of *ra'y*, *intihsan*, and *ijtihad* should still be in force. These ideas have remained controversial throughout much of this century, yet in some form or another it is now accepted by almost all Muslims. This has created an important shift in power in the Islamic community.

1. Changing centers of authoritative interpretation.

The traditional system of Islamic law accepted that the state authorities would act outside of the carefully articulated system of Islamic law, and even justified this exception from within the system of law. In this way Islamic law and theology could remain pristine even as changing social circumstances forced political leaders to act outside the law. Similarly, through complex legal reasoning called *hiyal*, Muslims could participate in economic systems which appeared to contradict Quranic teaching. This allowed the Muslim scholars to maintain their power and prestige (particularly in the realm of family and personal law) without having a confrontation with either political or economic powers. And it gave political and economic leaders some freedom from the rigidity of Islamic legal reasoning.

The new emphasis on independent reasoning which arose in the 19th century undercut the position of traditional scholars whose prestige came from mastery of these systems. At the same time it promoted the rise of a new class of commentators who understood modern economic and social systems, and who could cast new ideologies into an Islamic framework. The rise of journalistic enterprises helped shift the influence on public opinion from the traditional teachers based in the mosque to those who wrote for the newspapers. It also placed additional demands on politicians and economic leaders to demonstrate that their policies are actually Islamic. This task has been particularly difficult because these leaders did not wish to depend on the traditionalist *ulema* to give them legitimacy, but have understood well the dangers of seeking legitimacy from the new intellectual classes.

All these groups continue to use the popularity of traditional Islam to advance their causes. Increasingly, however, the Islamic public is giving its loyalty not to those who are orthodox, but to those who are effective in defending its interests. A case in point is the Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt. Often labeled "fundamentalist", its key interpreter of the Quran, the martyred Sayd Qutb, nonetheless frequently broke with traditional Islam in his interpretations. Moreover he clearly sought to re-establish Islam on a basis prior to the classical Islamic theology and jurisprudence. The popularity of the movement lies chiefly in the fact that it has provided jobs, health care, education, and community development in impoverished areas which Egypt's governments have ignored or oppressed. In Indonesia the supports of the Islamicist movements are frequently unemployed youth whose lifestyle is the antithesis of orthodox propriety. They are drawn not to orthodoxy, but the promise of employment and an end to corruption and poverty.

2. Contemporary Questions

Despite the rapid changes in Islamic society the revelation of the Quran continues to be the center of Islamic life. However, we live in an age where its unquestioned authority is no longer complimented by an unquestioned approach to interpretation and application. In some circles even its metaphysical status is being called into question. These developments are both too diverse and rapidly changing to document in this short paper. Yet in closing we can indicate some of the questions engaging Muslims scholars.

1. What qualifies one to render authoritative interpretation of the Quran and *hadith*? Is it acceptance in the community of Muslim scholars? Is it personal piety? Is it knowledge of the basic grammatical

and historical tools which allow one to read and understand the context of the revelation? Is it the ability to forge a consensus among other interpreters? Is it the ability to forge a coherent and relevant ideology from Islamic sources? In general we might say that traditional centers of Islamic teaching continue to argue that in-depth knowledge of the Quranic tradition and personal piety are the keys to authoritative interpretation. Politicians argue that the ability to facilitate a consensus around particular approaches and interpretations is critical to finding the meaning of the revelation. In other words the politician is necessary to the traditional scholar, even if the politician is not a scholar. Intellectuals tend to emphasize the need for a coherent ideology informed by contemporary as well as classical methodologies, and therefore to assert their right as interpreters.

2. What is the function of classical systems of interpretation beyond the Quran and *hadith* themselves? Some argue that these systems continue to provide guidelines for the application of Quranic teaching to contemporary events. Others go further and see these systems as normative, to be supplemented only when circumstances demand it. Others argue that these systems are no longer either relevant or intellectually compelling.
3. Is there any limit to the ability of Revelation to articulate the human condition and the nature of God? Muslims almost universally affirm that the application of reason to problems of science is legitimate, and cannot contradict Revelation. However, there is great controversy over the extent to which the social sciences should be allowed to compliment, extend, or force a re-evaluation of traditional interpretations. Central to these is the question of the nature of Revelation. In the classical system it was a fixed, and finite, source of all the necessary guidelines for human governance. In the modern era there are scholars who have begun to suggest that a more dynamic view of God's Word would be both truer to the event of the Quran itself, and more useful to the Muslim community. To understand these arguments it is necessary in closing to briefly review the early controversy over the nature of the Quran which ended with the political suppression during the early Abbasid dynasty of all ideas contrary to the classical view.

D. The Metaphysics of Revelation

From its first manifestation to Muhammed the Quran made itself known as something distinctly outside the realm of human experience or creation. Muhammed himself experienced it as an invasion of his consciousness from outside. Although the language of the Quran was Arabic, its beauty was beyond the possibility of human creation. The Quran itself says that God's revelation exists in perfect form as a heavenly book, the "mother of all scripture". The Quran as it came to Muhammed is the last and perfect imparting of this book to humanity. However, in part the original scripture was given to numerous prophets throughout human history. Moses and Jesus in particular are prophets whose followers possess enough of the divine revelation in written form to be, with Muslims, "people of the book". As Islam expanded and came into contact with non-Semitic wisdom the extensiveness of God's revealing activity came to be appreciated. Lists of "books" which were part of God's revealing activity lengthened, and eventually almost any human wisdom which did not contradict the Quran and *hadith* could be brought into the circle of revelation. This provided a powerful tool for proselytism, since Muslims could recognize the wisdom of the many people's whom they conquered or among whom they lived. It never, however, provided an authoritative supplement to the Quran. Being perfect, the revelation to Muhammed could not be enhanced by any previous revelation.

The relation of revelations given at different times and places to the single perfect original revelation presented Muhammed and later theologians with both metaphysical and methodological questions. The latter were resolved primarily through the concept of "abrogation", based on a verse in the Quran which suggests that God may replace one instruction with one which is better, or that God may actually correct a mistake by the Prophet with a later revelation. Along with the idea that the revelations delivered to earlier prophets had been corrupted, this allowed Muhammed and his followers to maintain the absolute purity of the Quran even when it contradicted other of the revealed books.

More difficult the metaphysical questions raised by the Quranic presentation of God's relation to the created world through revelation. The concept of revelation presented two particular problems to Muslim thinkers who were coming into contact with Greek philosophy. The first was the problem of identifying the qualities of a God who both "spoke", and yet whose essence utterly transcended and was other than the creation of which speaking and hearing were a part. Ultimately orthodox theology simply recognized this as a theological mystery and declared that the quality of speech, and other qualities spoken of in the Quran, were "not He, nor are they other than He." This means that God's speech, while it cannot be identified with God's essence, is nonetheless both eternal and uncreated. This raises the issue of how the Quran, as the pure, divine, source of all revelation, relates to God's speech. The answer of the orthodox, articulated by al-Ash'ari, was that the Quran, like the divine quality of speech which it manifested, is both uncreated and eternal. This was

accepted by all the orthodox theological schools. They were, however, stimulated by both contact with Arab speaking Christians and Greek philosophy, and continued to grapple with various explanations of the relationship between the quality of divine speech, the eternal uncreated Quran, and the Quran as that which is recited and written by Muslims.

Among Muslim theological schools one group, the Mutalizes, rejected entirely both the orthodox explanation of God's essence and qualities, and the concept of an uncreated and eternal Quran. The origins of this group are both fascinating and complex, for they were both a school of rationalist theology and a political ideology based on the concept that Muslims could live in an intermediate state between belief and unbelief. This latter idea provided a basis for uniting all Muslims under the new Abbasid dynasty at a time when the orthodox schools rejected any political or theological compromise with their enemies, or the enemies of the Umayyad dynasty. The rationalism of the Mutalizes led them to reject much of orthodox theology as being unreasonable, as well as being based on dubious *hadith*. The Mutalizes asserted that God's essence could not be identified with the metaphorical qualities suggested in the Quran. They also asserted that Quran was both created and temporal, otherwise it would be co-equal to God. For the Mutalizes the exalted position given the Quran by the orthodox amounted to the sin of *shirk* or placing something equal to God. On the basis of an overriding belief in God's justice they also rejected the orthodox idea of predestination to good and evil and insisted on human free will. To some extent the differences between the Mutalizes and the older orthodox schools resulted from differences over what constituted the main teaching of the Quran about God, as well as over the methods used to rationalize Quranic teaching overall.

At the beginning of the Abbasid dynasty Mutalize ideas were favored and all others were declared heretical. However, as the dynasty matured it found it politically expedient to court orthodox opinion, and eventually it was the Mutalizes who were declared heretics and their ideas suppressed. Nonetheless they continue to play a role in Islamic reflection. By insisting that reason, not post-Quranic tradition, was the only guide to articulating an Islamic theology based on the Quran, they created an approach to theology which engaged both intellectual and political issues ignored by the orthodox. In the 20th century Mutalize ideas are still considered heretical by most Muslims. However, as other long-standing orthodox theological opinions are called into question the debate around the metaphysical nature of the Quran is being revived. Some Muslim thinkers, discontented with the methodology and results of orthodox theology, are exploring the intellectual approaches of the Mutalizes in their search for an renewed Islamic intellectual tradition.

E. Spirituality and Revelation

While the problems of authority, and to a lesser extend metaphysics, dominated classical Islamic theology, the spirituality which was formed by contact with the revelation of the Quran had a strong place in the life of the community. Almost apart from the flowering of Islamic law, schools of meditation and esoteric knowledge began to develop throughout the Islamic world. Some of the impetus for these came from the Shi' community, which maintained that revelation and esoteric knowledge continued to be given to the family of Muhammed even after his death. But the search for an immediate, unmediated experience of God was also found in orthodox communities. In this search the Quran played a critical role. The powerful aesthetic experience of Quran recitation, already the ground of the Muslim worship experience, became the framework for seeking spiritual ecstasy. In the Sufi orders the repetition of Quran verses and phrases became the gateway to an experience of God in which even these were left behind.

The experience of spiritual ecstasy, the presence of teachers with extraordinary spiritual insight, the manifestations of unearthly power which they sometimes demonstrated, and the sense of a presence within the communal worship which transcended the mere human recitation of the Quran led the Sufi and Shi'ite communities to develop a theology of God's presence in the world which moved beyond the historical revelations and their development into law. Naturally there are varying understandings of exactly how God is active in human lives, and how humans can experience oneness with God. The Shi'ites believed that God would give divine insight to those in the prophetic line, and to those religious teachers particularly blessed by God. This had distinctly political implications, in as much as the Shi'ite could expect at some times to re-establish the original pure Islamic polity. After the disappearance of the last child in Muhammed's line the Shi'ites came to believe that he would re-appear at some point in the future and establish an eschatological reign of perfect Islam. In the meantime God gave guidance to the community of the faithful through this hidden leader, who in turn guided the highest and most pious of the *mujtahid* (or seekers after God's truth). This Shi'ite term, *mujtahid* is a contrast with what became the acceptable orthodox name for a religious teacher, a *muqallid*, or imitator of the pious teachers of the past.

Sufis developed a complex theology of God's continued activity in the world based in part on a Neoplatonist idea of spiritual states between the mundane and earthly realm and that of the God. Later Sufis developed this basic idea into systems of great complexity. The idea of all, however, was the same. They explained how

it was that God's revelation, originating in the purity of God's light and word, came to be continually manifested on earth. Indeed for some these systems were simply ways to make clear the essential interrelatedness of all Being. They also provided a kind of spiritual map which enabled the seeker of unity with God to free himself or herself from the bounds of the earthly and material world. Reading of the Quran and following normal Muslim practices in prayer were regarded by Sufis as only the most basic approaches to spiritual development. The attentive and dedicated seeker after God would move beyond even the chanting of Quranic verses in the quest for spiritual ecstasy. Yet the Quran also had esoteric significance. Some chapters of the Quran begin with individual arabic letters or numbers which cannot be assigned any rational meaning. These provided fertile ground for speculation, as did the application of numerology to Quranic verses. While meditation on the esoteric truth of the Quran provided one approach to God, its use in the formulation of charms and magic spells provided even common Muslims access to its potent spiritual power. Everywhere in the modern Islamic it is possible to find both books on Quranic magic, and the actual charms formed out of verses or words from the Quran.

III. Conclusion

In the historical development of the Islamic concept of revelation and authority Christians will undoubtedly find much that is similar to the development of their own theological ideas. Both Christians and Muslims have wrestled with the relation of revelation to codes of law and human structures of authority. And both have striven to place the event of revelation in a framework which is rational, coherent, and yet faithful to the human experience of that event. Because of these similarities Christians have sometimes tried over the centuries to correct Islamic theological systems. Christian theologians have, for example, sought to show that Muslims, both to understand the Quran and to develop a coherent theology, need a concept like that of the Holy Spirit. Christians have also sought to apply various critical methods to the study of the Quran and *hadith*. Though often well-intended, these efforts have not been warmly welcomed. Muslims are conscious that even with the end of political colonization there is still a strong movement by persons in the West to intellectually colonize Islamic societies. Beyond this is the fact that Christians often fail to grasp the difference between the Muslim and Christian religious experience, and thus cannot appreciate the way in which Islamic theology succeeds in giving coherent expression to that experience. It seems likely that we will be able to share our theological insights only when we can do so out of a thorough understanding of the Muslim experience, and perhaps only after the Christians and Muslims have shared more of life together in the world.

IV. References and Recommended Reading

Islamic Spirituality, Vol. 1., ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Crossroads, 1987.

Islamic Spirituality, Vol. 2., ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, SCM Press, 1991. (Nasr is one of the most eloquent and accepted spokespersons for the Sufi tradition in Islam. These volumes contain a variety of articles from both Muslims and non-Muslims.)

The Venture of Islam, (three volumes), Marshall G.S. Hodgson, University of Chicago Press, (A massive and brilliant overview of Islamic history, culture and religion. Hodgeson's approach revolutionized the study of Islam and Islamic society.)

A History of Islamic Law, N.J. Coulson, Edinburgh University Press, 1964. (Scholarly but readable, it is one of the the best first introductions to Islamic law.)

Muslim Devotions, Constance Padwick, Oxford U. Press. (A sometimes moving account of how Muslims worship from a gifted scholar in the Islamic languages who was also a devoted Christian deeply in touch with her own spiritual tradition.)

The Event of the Quran, Kenneth Cragg, Oneworld Press, 1991. (an excellent introduction to the Quran which makes clear Islamic approaches while giving a more critical framework as well. Cragg is an Anglican bishop who devoted his life to the study of the Quran and Islam.)

Milestones, Sayyid Qutb, American Trust Publications, 1990. (This manifesto of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has been translated into dozens of languages and inspired millions of Muslims around the world. If one reads it with an open mind, or a sense of frustration with injustice and poverty in the world, one can feel the power of Qutb's concepts and begin to understand the revolutionary fervor which they have inspired. Its clarity and force are almost frightening when compared with the muddle-mindedness of most contemporary Christian teaching. It bears a fascinating resemblance to Roman Catholic apologetics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as the work of many fundamentalists in the Protestant tradition. The reader should bear in mind that it is not a work of theology, but a series of sermons.)