The Institute of Ismaili Studies

# Philosophical remarks on Scripture

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## I. Introduction

Philosophy of religion is conspicuous in the modern Islamic world largely by its absence. Ibn Rushd was the last of the great philosophers in the classical Islamic world to consider the religious tradition of that world from a vantage-point external to that world - that is to say, from the point of view of the logical and metaphysical tradition of the Greek philosophers and their Hellenistic successors. I must admit at once that this judgement has been disputed. Henri Corbin was its most vigorous opponent. For him, this misguided (and misguiding) view, which sees in Ibn Rushd the close of a tradition, stemmed from an identification of philosophy with the Aristotelian tradition. Against this view, Corbin extolled the tradition of esoteric wisdom (hikma) contained in the substantial corpus of writing beginning with that of Yahya Suhrawardi (1154-1191) and his younger Andalusian contemporary, Muhyi l-Din Ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240), and continuing (principally in Iran) down to Mulla Sadra al-Shirazi (1571/2-1640) and beyond. Corbin's thesis must be taken seriously, for it rests on an important insight. But, I would argue, it is an insight which he develops in a direction, and from which he draws conclusions, which not only bode ill for a rational science or philosophy of religion, but are also potentially at odds with the very insight that lies buried in his writings[1].

*Philosophy of religion: historical approaches*

I must resist the temptation to digress into the issues arising from Corbin's thesis - it would take us too far afield. Suffice it to say that what we find in al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd is an outline of what is essentially an epistemological theory of prophecy (and of the religious tradition appealing to prophetic teaching). Such a theory presupposes two things. It implies a view of the religious tradition qua tradition (although we must remember that the idea of tradition is characteristic only of *post-traditional* societies). In turn, this view rests on a consideration of the religious tradition from a perspective belonging to something other than religion. This is what I meant above by the "external" vantage-point of classical Islamic philosophy. If in the first place the religious tradition were to appear as a problematique, inviting inquiry into what sort of a phenomenon it was, and what type of knowledge or contact with reality it offered, it was important that philosophy be understood qua philosophy - as a tradition of thought with its own style and integrity. The philosophers in classical Islam saw their discipline, just as Plato and Aristotle had done, as founded and relying on no other principle but that of logical reasoning, and leading to certain or conclusive knowledge (the key term in Arabic being *burhan*, customarily translated as "demonstration"). It was the consideration of the Islamic religio-legal tradition from this separate point of view

[1] The most accessible work of Corbin's (surprisingly so, given the turgidity of many of his other writings), in which his basic thesis may be sampled is *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, Paris 1964

that led al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, each in his own terms, to what we might today call a "philosophy of religion". Both proposed the existence of a single, ontological truth, grasped in the one case (philosophy) through rational means and in the other (prophecy) through visionary intuition; resulting in the one case in a rigorous philosophy accessible only to an intellectual elite, and in the other case, in the mythical and metaphorical idiom of revelation, meant for the society as a whole.

*A new approach*

For all its originality and interest, this Platonic-Aristotelian legacy, to which the Muslim philosophers added their own original adaptations to fit their contemporary concerns, was eventually to prove unequal to the intellectual challenges of a new world. The physics and cosmology on which it relied were overthrown by Galileo, Copernicus and Newton. Its biology and psychology were similarly overtaken by new discoveries and perspectives. Its notion of a body of knowledge from which the rank and file are to be excluded for their own well-being could hardly survive the political and social revolutions of modernity. The pace and depth of material and social change which came in the wake of these events, together with the transformations in technology, introduced a radically new notion, viz. the historicity of our world-views - an idea wholly alien to the medieval mind[2]. In consequence, the only legitimate way to regard the great Muslim philosophers is by placing them in their historical context. This need not entail the strong thesis of historicism, where all philosophical knowledge is but froth on the surface of time; a social "construction", as the fashionable jargon of the day might say of it, stamped indelibly, in this view, indeed formed entirely, by the currents of mind peculiar to the age and the society concerned, with no real claim to objectivity; hence neither true nor false in any but the loosest or most trivial sense of these terms. No, it is quite tenable to see in these philosophies their genuine errors and their shortcomings, gauged against subsequent knowledge, experience and new concepts and refined procedures of analysis. And it is equally tenable, indeed as a matter of intellectual principle, necessary, to salute the spirit of rational inquiry, and whatever among its ingredients are of permanent interest, which distinguished them.

*Islamic Philosophers*

In this light, it must be deemed nothing short of scandalous that down to this day, the philosophers in the classical Islamic world scarcely receive a mention in textbooks of philosophy. This is because these textbooks purport to be about "Western philosophy", to which the philosophers of Ancient Greece, or men like Augustine (who grew up in North Africa), are seen to be integral, whereas men like Ibn Sina or Ibn Rushd, who wrote essentially in Arabic or are taken (to my mind, misleadingly) to have written "Islamic philosophy" are assumed to fall outside this history. One of the dismal consequences of this approach is that the place where these men are discussed, men whose philosophical capacities and steadfast commitment to the subject were of the highest order, is in textbooks on Islam - where they are dealt with, that is, by authors untrained in philosophy.

There can be no doubt, to anyone familiar with the intellectual orientation of these philosophers, that they would have hardly recognised what they were seeking to do in many

[2] Of course, the pre-modern world was aware of history in the sense of past events. This is to be distinguished, however, from history as process, just as awareness of changes is not the same thing as the idea of change.

of these exclusively “Islamic” accounts.

This curious circumstance owes itself to a number of factors. It may plausibly be seen as symptomatic of a more general Western parochialism in matters to do with Islam. Among otherwise careful and objective scholars, however, it shows a wavering, at this point, in their adherence to the ideal of universal knowledge to which great philosophers and scientists in every age have unhesitatingly subscribed. It shows, in other words, a tendency for a “nationalist” or “ethnocentric” consciousness to cast its unwholesome shadow on scientific or philosophical objectivity. And in this trend such authors are not alone. Writers who are in the habit of seeing every significant intellectual achievement in the history of the Muslim world as somehow “Islamic” provide a neat counterpart, a mirror-image, to this ideological distortion.

Thus, many who write today on “Islamic philosophy” appear to be moved more by an ideological interpretation of “Islam” than by the spirit of philosophical inquiry. One manifestation of this outlook is in their habit of disregarding, or summarily rejecting the whole modern history of philosophy, from Descartes or Locke. This is not because the author concerned has examined the detailed arguments of one or more philosophers of this period and found them wanting. Rather, this whole body of thought is ignored, or rejected by some a priori criterion, e.g. as being “Western”; or else disdainfully found to be lacking in some “higher” wisdom, e.g. of “spiritual” or “mystical” traditions. But, if one were to ask what exact meaning is to be given to “higher”, and by what reasoned considerations it is to be regarded as such, what one finds instead of arguments (though they may have the appearance of arguments) are really exercises in a lofty rhetoric, full of atmospheric terms such as “exalted”, “sublime”, “celestial” and the like. Quite often the “argument” includes the old claim that “reason” itself is a pale shadow of “higher” modes of knowing - a feeble, stunted, pitiful creature which creeps and crawls in terrestrial mire while the other thing, called “love”, or intuition, or gnosis, soars to the skies. Of course, these assertions are meant to mean what they say; they are not (for instance) intended to mean the opposite; to this extent, logic (in the guise of the ancient law of contradiction) would seem to be indispensable to even the most determined anti-rationalists.

I have in all this begged the question of how “reason” may be best understood. Neat definitions are sterile, however, and I shall not attempt one here. It is hoped, though, that what rationality may mean in specific terms - in a philosophy of scripture - will become apparent in the course of this essay.

Our argument thus far leads to the following conclusion. If we consider human knowledge as a continuous enterprise - as something innate to the human mind, destined to disappear from the earth only when the last human being does - and if, further, we are to oppose any artificial limitation of this continuity through political categories (such as “Western” vs. “Islamic”), then we must also see the ideas of the philosophers who worked in the Islamic milieu, in a broadly human and historically ongoing context. We must take all subsequent developments in philosophy into account - developments such as Kant’s critique of metaphysics and the fundamental reconsideration, in its light, of the meaning of science, religion and the moral life; the alternatives proposed by Hegel and his successors, the more recent transformations and the altogether new modes and fields of inquiry opened up in their wake: by the enormous influence, for example, of Heidegger or Wittgenstein; or of leading figures in social thought or linguistics (men such as Weber, Levi-Strauss and their successors). We must take note of all these developments as part of an ongoing endeavour of thought: not, to be sure, as marking anything like a single line of progress; nor as adding up to any unitary or uniform doctrine or

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"world-view"; nor as possessing any common denominator except commitment to continual criticism and a resulting growth in knowledge. In this outlook there can be no historical terminations, only punctuating stops and the close of one chapter followed by the beginning of the next. Still less can there be any place for artificial fences or barriers, or arbitrary divisions of territory, no matter what adjectives are applied: "Islamic", "Christian" or "Western"; "sacred" or "profane"; "orthodox" or "heretical"; "traditional" or "decadent"; "pristine" and "authentic" *(ash)* or "modern" (in the sense of new-fangled and illegitimate).

*Philosopher and religion*

If in this spirit we were to ask what progress modern philosophy has made in explaining the phenomenon of religion, and in particular of the notion of scriptural revelation on which the theologies of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are based, we find a complicated picture, of which we can here give but a bare indication. One of the effects of the secularisation linked to the conflict of church and state in Europe was the emergence of "religion" as a distinct category of life. Whereas on one hand this circumstance inspired valiant attempts to explain the significance of religion in humanistic terms (as by Kant and Hegel, in their different ways) it also caused the concrete density of religious traditions to be ignored (outside the study of theology) in favour of would-be explanations of "religion" as such.

This assertion may appear to contradict my remark above about the classical Muslim philosophers' treatment of "religion" as a problematique - a remark which was made there in general terms, but which now needs to be qualified. There is a profound difference between the "objective" or "external" vantage-point on religion afforded by classical philosophy on one hand and its modern philosophical counterparts on the other. It is a difference between (in a word) two species of universalism. In the one instance, the particular entity on which philosophy was believed to give a universal perspective was the contemporary complex of the religious sciences and law in the Muslim world, or ecclesiastical doctrine in Latin Europe, or Jewish law and ritual in the same milieu. In the early modern world, such treatments begin to give way to religious life seen as itself representing a distinct, universal essence (a trend which will bear fruit later in philosophy as well as social anthropology). This binary polarity will in turn give rise to rationalist dismissals of religion (as in logical positivism) or to the advocacy of a rational commitment (as in Kierkegaard).

## II. The Tradition of Qur'anic Exegesis

An important aim in a consideration of the Qur'an from the point of view of philosophy of religion is to locate a point of convergence between modern philosophy and issues arising from the Qur'an itself. This may be facilitated by considering a third factor which might serve to bridge these two domains. That factor is the age-old tradition of exegesis of the Qur'an, seen in hermeneutic terms.

The term "hermeneutic" has a certain equivocality about it which causes it to shade into commentary or exegesis on one hand, and into something approaching the philosophical associations of the term on the other. Exegesis *(tafsir)* of the Qur'an has long played an important part in the history of Islamic doctrine and literature. But its designation as "commentary", and the distinct genre as well as corpus which it has come to signify, prevents the possibility of a fresh view - of asking about the sense in which such works may be said to be "commentaries", and whether they are only this, or something more. Clearly, as the root-

verb *fassara* indicates, the so-called commentaries of classical times were meant to explain or elucidate the corpus of the Qur'an (it was the book rather than its liturgical equivalent which occupied the attention of the *mufassir* qua *mufassir*). However, it is clear from these works that they were meant as much to enlist the Qur'an to suit the interests and ideology of the socio-political group to which the commentator belonged, as to understand the "original meaning" (itself an elusive notion) of the text. In and of itself, therefore, exegesis went beyond commentary to what in current jargon is referred to as "appropriation". In this respect what was later understood - controversially - as the practice of *ta'wil* or allegorical interpretation by Sufi's, Hellenistic philosophers and the Shi'is (for at first the term was a synonym of *tafsir)* is only a "limit case" of the same propensity to recruit the Qur'an to the ideology and outlook peculiar to the group in question in the time and place of the author concerned. All these productions were thus exercises in hermeneutics rather than commentary in the more restricted sense of the term. And although it is wrong to say that hermeneutic meaning is self-justifying - for factors such as philology and historical plausibility do constitute a criterion of objectivity, so that the familiar attacks on the more extravagant varieties of *ta'wil* would seem to be quite justified - it is also true that one of the insights that hermeneutics serves to drive home is that the meaning of "meaning" is not a simple, straightforward or univocal matter.

*Modern interpretations of the Qur'an*

The vast increase in interpretations of the Qur'an in the modern age (following contact with modern Europe), of which Muhammad 'Abduh's thought is a paramount example, and in which values of modern political or social liberalism and discoveries of modern science are presented as already foreshadowed in the Qur'an, merits the same observation as above. Interpretations which "find" allusions in the Qur'an to the discoveries of modern physics or biology (e.g., nuclear bombs or microbes) are only the more notorious examples. Less remarked, yet in the same category, are "discoveries" in the ancient text of such values as multicultural tolerance, religious ecumenism, equality of men and women, pluralism, etc. - values inconceivable (in their modern form) except in the economic, social and cultural conditions of late-capitalist, technologically organised, and democratically governed societies. Yet another example is the all too common belief that the numerous allusions to thought, intellection or reflection in the Qur'an (in terms derivable from '*aqala, fakara*, etc.), attach importance to a search for knowledge as we now understand it (as "science", whether natural or human). In all these instances it is right to say that they make the Qur'an mean what it could not have meant in its time and place. On the other hand, if we grant that "meaning" is not only found, nor retrieved, but also created or generated out of present-day motivations, such anachronistic interpretations may be appreciated better for their historical function. In short: such elucidations are less of the Qur'an than of a society eager to define itself as Muslim in a given age.

As long as social change is not so fast or great as to make a well-trodden path seem no longer useful or convenient, societies cling to tried and trusted traditions - just like a stream of water which runs along an existing track. In a similar way, commentaries on the Qur'an could take the easy option of adhering closely to the scheme of interpretation associated with the founder of a school of thought, a legal school or a mystical fraternity. This picture changed with the social upheavals and political transformations in the Muslim world which came with the modern age. Among the modernists there was still a nuclear cluster of values - science, modern education, the idea of consultative (if not representative) government, a growing criticism of polygamy and more generally of the subjugation of women. These values provided something of an intellectually, if not socially, and certainly not institutionally rallying point. But in the late modern period - the period of nationalist and ideological struggles in the new states - and with the rise of a new breed of preachers, such as Sayyid Qutb in Egypt and

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Mawdudi in Pakistani, a new ideological strain came to the fore (a subject which now receives so much attention as to make it unnecessary for us to dwell on it here).

*Traditional thinking about the Qur'an*

This ideological trend has become both intensified and diversified today. This, again, is a well-researched topic. Equally noteworthy, however, is a profound shift in the relation between exegesis and the conditions of social, political and intellectual modernity. In the early modern period readings of the Qur'an and of Islam more generally could safely assume the existence of essential (metaphysical) truth and meaning on one hand, and on the other hand, the values of modernity summed up in the idea of "progress". In interpreting or quoting from the Qur'an (e.g. in Muhammad Iqbal) the authors in question could safely take these twin principles for granted. They were, in fact, so basic as to remain unconscious. But in contemporary times these assumptions have been undermined. The result is a sense (to borrow the terminology of Thomas Kuhn, the philosopher of science) of a paradigm in disintegration. This sensibility is fed by awareness of new conditions and needs which are no longer capable of being accommodated under the umbrella of existing traditions of thought. This in turn triggers a search for a new paradigm.

*A change in the traditional thinking*

One of the signs which suggest that a paradigm-change may be in the offing in a given tradition of thought is when its more self-conscious adherents begin to look at the tradition as a whole - i.e.; in a sense, from the outside, as opposed to dealing with problems of a familiar type wholly from inside. We could re-phrase this in several other ways, as follows. We could say that such a process is under way when instead of adding to a body of knowledge, the question is raised as to what makes it a body of knowledge - in short, when epistemological questions become prominent. We could also draw the same conclusion when something which has so far served as a framework of consciousness becomes an object of consciousness. In other words, this is what one could say when a "meta" discourse replaces or arises alongside a given tradition of discourse.

There were instances in Islamic history of paradigm-shifts in the making. One was the Mu'tazilite theory of the Qur'an as a "created" thing. Another was the work (already discussed) of the Muslim philosophers in the Aristotelian tradition. In the contemporary period there has been another type of paradigm-shift in process. It may be observed in authors such as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd[3]. Interestingly enough, in authors such as these, as well as others in the Western academic tradition, the term "hermeneutic" (or at least the concept) is all too widely employed. It should be clear, however, from what has been said above that the meaning and significance of hermeneutics begs more fundamental questions. What is it? What are its assumptions about "realism" or "constructivism", i.e. on the question whether knowledge involves contact with an objective reality, or whether it is no more than a "construction"? (These questions are of the greatest importance in every intellectual field, including the natural sciences). What special assumptions of this kind are relevant to a hermeneutic of the Qur'an? Last but not least, what are the rational criteria by which one hermeneutic paradigm may be chosen over another? For, it is obvious that absence of such criteria makes preference of one scheme of thought over another more or less arbitrary.

[3] Useful synopses of the work of some of these authors for an English-reading audience can be found in a forthcoming publication: Suha Taji-Farouki (ed), *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an.*

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This arbitrariness is not an accident. It is built into much of modern philosophy, including hermeneutics. To a remarkable extent, and despite major differences between them, a number of traditions in modern philosophy seem to converge at one point. They have all served to undermine the confidence, previously seldom in question, in a contact between mind and the world - in other words, in the contract between word and world. Hermeneutic philosophy renounces this principle; in its rejection of a "Cartesian" starting point, it is content to stay within the so-called "hermeneutic circle". The same attitude marks all non-referential theories of language, whether inspired by the later Wittgenstein, or harking back to de Saussure's theory of language as a system of self-referential signs. Even in the philosophy of science, where we might expect the strongest stress on a realist ontology, the kind of relativism relished by social constructionists found powerful support in the work of Thomas Kuhn[4]. The same outlook informs the pragmatism of the American philosopher Richard Rorty, who sees the proper job of philosophy as having nothing to do with "objective truth", rather with keeping "the conversation going"[5].

We cannot say more here about the contemporary philosophical scene except to pose a question to those scholars of scripture, who have as a matter of course embraced hermeneutic, structuralist or post-structuralist methods (and their underlying assumptions). The question may be put quite simply. *What becomes, in this view, of the religious object?*

It is interesting that this question coincides with a prevailing chase, in religious studies - between the points of view of the believer and the scholar. There are different points at issue here, and it is important that they are not confused. One is the difference between critical scholarship - whether it takes the form of philology, history or social science - and the mythological or ideological structure of belief. In this controversy I have no doubt whatsoever where a rational choice lies. It lies with scholarship. This has nothing to do with "personal preference" or any other aesthetic or sociological criteria. It has to do with the ideals of reason, objectivity and truth. Ideological distortion is a lie; and it is for this reason that science, which is (or ought to be) committed to (to borrow a term from Kant) the "regulative" ideal of truth, has an objective claim over and against the claims of myth, no matter what defence, Platonic or otherwise, may be mounted in its behalf.

*Ontological vision and deontological scholarship*

There is, however, another distinction where something different is at stake. This is the difference between what might be called ontological vision and deontological scholarship. It is the distinction between the vision of a higher reality - "higher" in the sense that it subordinates to itself what was hitherto taken as important or real, showing it up as either a negation or a derivative of the latter - and on the other hand, an academic scholarship which ignores this aspect of the believer's experience, focusing solely on (say) semiotic or structuralist features. It is not only that such scholarship is bound to strike anyone who is sensitive to the enormously evocative power of the Qur'an, to its music and its rhetoric, as dry and sterile. It is rather that even within the principles of scholarship, which must necessarily objectify what it studies, the tradition of textual analysis nowadays on the rise does not methodically acknowledge the impact that scripture has on believers through the quality of its language - a quality of discourse which Paul Ricoeur has aptly called, in another context, its "ontological vehemence"[6].

[4] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago 1970

[5] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton 1979, p. 377 and *passim.*

[6] Paul Ricoeur, *La métaphore vine,* Paris 1975, p. 379.

It follows, then, that reflective, conceptual thought must possess a method for doing justice, intellectually, to the aspect of the Qur'an which is, precisely, religious; which in theology is called "revelation". It is surely very odd, to say the least, that the studies, nowadays on the increase, which focus on the grammatical or stylistic features of the Qur'an seldom address its religious, revelatory power and impact. One cannot but wonder whether there is not something profoundly missing in such work.

This is not to deny the importance of linguistic analysis. The sheer fact that what analytic philosophers call (in pedestrian terms) "God-talk" is the only mode in which God becomes an object of consciousness - for religious experience remains inchoate until it finds expression, however paradoxically, in discourse - suggests the relevance of linguistic science. But one cannot reiterate too often that science is worth its name only when it is adequate to its subject-matter. Besides, it is only science which can supply the systematic or methodical approach essential to all rational inquiry.

We are led back, then, to where we started in this section - to the search for a meeting-point between critical philosophy and a point of view intrinsic to the Qur'an itself. A detour through Qur'anic exegesis made us conscious of the philosophical issues buried in it. In particular, modern interest in hermeneutics and linguistic studies of the Qur'an makes us all the more conscious of an existing hiatus requiring to be bridged. The following section indicates the direction in which this may be done.

**III. The Qur'an: Book or Symbol?**

It is a truism to say that the revelation of the religious object occurs in discourse. It is less commonly recognised, thanks to the subsuming of discourse to language considered as a system of signs, that revelation is not confined to language, but involves the creation of a world - and through this, a transformation of the known world.

It is not hard to justify this postulate of the world-making (and world-remaking) function of the Qur'an. One does not have to rely on external facts about the Prophet's career in Mecca and Medina (a traditional narrative in Muslim as well as Orientalist literature which has recently been put into doubt, though with inconclusive results) for this purpose. All one has to do is to attend to the nature of the discourse within the Qur'an itself. A number of features attest to a live, fluid situation: the frequency of imperatives (including passages beginning with *qul*, "say"); the question-and-answer, or argumentative, challenging, provocative and rebutting modes of much of Qur'anic discourse. What do these traits signify, if not a historicity of the situation - a situation of which the Qur'anic discourse is part, albeit the most significant (and signifying) part, the very engine of change?

Yet it is important to look further than this relatively obvious evidence of the historicity of the revelation. What this evidence consists in is tie forms, or rather genres, of Qur'anic discourse. It is a lot more illuminating, however, to carry this analysis to the vocabulary of the discourse. For, beside; promising a deeper penetration into the ontology of Qur'anic discourse, analysis at this level also enables us to extend our conception of historicity. It enables us to see historicity not only as the changing, surrounding "context", but as an unfolding world in all the cardinal aspects of social and individual life - speech, perception, cognition, time (as reflected in tenses of verbs in all human languages) and not least, action in the world.

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*Madigan's arguments*

A good deal of the ground for this has been prepared by Daniel Madigan in his impressive monograph, *The Qur'an's Self-Image*[7]. Three factors make Madigan's study remarkable. It is thoroughly researched, both widely and in detail. It deals with a subject of great importance, namely, whether the Qur'an sees itself as a "book", or whether the terms which the Muslim community and Orientalist scholarship have alike interpreted as indicating a book, are better understood differently. And thirdly, Madigan's work suggests conclusions of yet greater import - namely, for a fundamentally alternative vision of Islam as such.

I shall refer only to those ingredients in Madigan's work which are directly relevant to our purposes here, although because of the coherence of his treatment, they also serve to reflect in a microcosm, the outlines of his thesis. Furthermore, I make no attempt here to evaluate his positive arguments, which I am not at any rate qualified to do. Fortunately, even if his detailed arguments were to be questioned, I believe that their general thrust is not only illuminating but valid. As such, it can safely be relied on for the philosophical observations made here.

In a nutshell, the thrust of Madigan's argument is as follows. Contrary to a widespread habit of equating the "Qur'an" with its known form of a book *(mushaf),* it does not see itself as such. Even the term *kitab*, which is habitually translated as "book", can be shown in the Qur'an to mean anything but the visible, tangible, bounded and finished entity indicated by this term. In the Qur'an it means "writing" in an intangible, ordaining, semantically verbal sense. It implies, in short, a process rather than a product[8].

Writing is often contrasted with speech, and like such scholars as William Graham[9] who have explored this contrast in connection with scripture, Madigan too dwells on it. He makes this distinction yield interesting implications of an existential nature. In giving effective precedence, in practice, to oral recitation, which in and of itself remains piecemeal or incomplete, Muslims have tacitly understood divine guidance as something in process, something continuous. Indeed, despite the Muslim community's reduction of divine activity to the tangible monument of a book, it retained an instinctive sense of the alternative (Qur'anic) conception. Not only the actual emphasis on orality, but also a variety of notions brought to bear on the text, such as the idea of abrogation (*nash*) and the complementarity of the prophetic *sunna* reflect this intuition[10]. Thus, the importance that al-Shafi'i gave to the *sunna* reflects the insight that "God has more to say than could be contained within the limited text of the ... *mushaf* [11] - an intuition expressed more sharply in al-Gazzali's contention that it is "permissible for the *sunna* to abrogate the Qur'an as much as vice versa"[12]. One cannot help feeling, however, that Madigan's argument here would have been stronger had he not confined himself to the orthodox Sunni tradition. Had he considered the Shi'i and Sufi traditions, he would have found much stronger support for his case - as for instance in the distinction between *al-Qur'an al-natiq* and *al-Qur'an al-samit* (the "speaking" and the "silent" Qur'an, respectively) to be found in esoteric Shi'ism; and in the Sufi notion of continuing revelation of divine mystery in the "heart" (*qalb*) of the gnostic - an idea conveyed through a variety of concepts, such as *wahi, ilham,* etc.

[7] Daniel Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image,* Princeton 2001
[8] *Ibid., p. 179.*
[9] William Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: oral aspects of scripture in the history of religion,* Cambridge *1987.*
[10] Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image, pp. 183-190.*
[11] *Ibid., p. 189.*
[12] *Ibid., p.190*

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If the Qur'an or the Kitab is not a book, what is it? At several points, Madigan declares that it is most suitably seen as a "symbol". What does it symbolise? It is a token of "God's sovereignty and knowledge"[13] or "the knowledge and authority of God"[14] Or, better still, it symbolises "a process of continuing divine engagement with human beings - an engagement that is rich and varied, yet so direct and specific in its address that it could: never be comprehended in a fixed canon or confined between two covers"[15].

The concept of the symbol invoked here returns us to philosophical questions.

*The Qur'an as a symbol*

Madigan's use of the term "symbol" in reference to the Qur'an raises the obvious question: how are we to understand this notion? Paul Ricoeur, who has studied the symbolic mode as part and parcel of his philosophy, took as his starting point a definition of the symbol as having a double meaning. This semantic duality is of a special kind: not the structural duality of sign and signification to be found in all signs; nor of the sign and the thing signified, to be found in the use, again, of every sign; but the special "relation du sens au sens" (of meaning to meaning)[16]. What is distinctive, moreover, of this duality of meaning is that it is only in and through the first that the second is apprehended[17]. This indivisible duality is what in Ricoeur's view clearly distinguishes symbol from allegory. A symbol is pre-hermeneutic; an allegory, post-hermeneutic ("déjà herméneutique")[18]. An allegory objectifies the relation of meaning P to Q; once P is decoded, i.e. shown to stand for Q, it becomes superfluous, having given way to Q. By contrast, a symbol represents a "mouvement du sens primaire qui nous fait participer au sens latent et ainsi nous assimile au symbolisé sans que nous puissions dominer intellectuellement la similitude"[19]. In other words: where allegory *translates*, a symbol *reveals.* The contrast in question is of "*la donation de sens en transparence* dans le symbole a l'interprétation par *traduction* de l'allégorie"[20].

Why thus limit plurality to duality, however? Only in passing does Ricoeur permit himself (once) in these definitions to speak alternatingly of "le sens second" to "les sens multiples"[21]. But, it might be asked, why harp on plurality? Why not duality? My answer to this would be: because duality very nearly undoes the distance Ricoeur strains to establish between symbol and allegory. Does not the identification of the "second" meaning court the risk of a "settled" meaning? Granted that in his enumeration of the symbols of spiritual "dis-ease"[22] (stain, sin, guilt), Ricoeur strives to demonstrate their quality of progression. Still, there is a schematism in this approach which detracts from the cardinal Ricoeurian insight into the "surplus" - what I prefer to call the open-endedness - of meaning which typically presents itself in symbolic (and mythical) discourse. Even if we consider the psychoanalytic concept of "over-determination" which Ricoeur applies to the symbol[23], it still harbours a

[13] *Ibid., p. 77*
[14] *Ibid., p. 182.*
[15] *Ibid., p. 165.*
[16] Paul Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation: Essai sur Freud,* Paris 1965, p. 22.
[17] Paul Ricoeur, Philosophie de la Volonté: Finitude et Culpabilité, 11, La Symbolique du Mal, Paris 1960, p. 23.
[18] Ricoeur, *La Symbolique du Mal, p. 22.*
[19] *Ibid., p. 23.*
[20] *Ibid., p. 23*
[21] Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation, p. 22*
[22] I use this expression because the rendering of "le mal" by "evil" in the English translation of Ricoeur's work is obviously unsatisfactory due to the different connotations of the two words in the two languages.
[23] Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation, pp.* 478-486.

suggestion of discrete units of meaning which I do not believe to be essential to Ricoeur's more fundamental insistence on an indeterminacy of meaning. The latter, I would say, must be preserved in the teeth of notions which, while intended to lead up to it, tend in fact to detract from it.

Besides this reifying potential in the duality, there are two other elements in Ricoeur's symbolology which deserve criticism, not so as to negate his basic insight, rather to add to it. First, there is the focus on symbols as opposed to symbolic discourse - in linguistic terms, on words as opposed to sentences (constituting a piece of discourse). Against this I can hardly insist too strongly on the irreducibility of such discourse to words. This is a point full of theoretical implications, but one which cannot be developed here. Suffice it to say that because the symbol involves a word which is inevitably a noun, it implies a thing (even if the "thing" is an abstraction), and so undermines the very quality of fluidity and indeterminacy which recourse to the idea of the symbolic is meant to emphasise[24].

The second question which may be asked in this connection is whether the virtual restriction of Ricoeur's treatment of symbolism to religious symbols, while it sheds valuable light on these, is not in the end a limitation. In this respect, it is interesting to note Cassirer's voluminous work, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which spans across language, myth and scientific knowledge. Ricoeur was critical of what he thought was "un cercle trop grand" in this treatment[25]. Yet this very circle, largely drawn, enabled Cassirer to highlight the character of language as other than "a finished product"[26]. Similarly, science too illustrates the principle of "unlimited evolution". It sacrifices finality, though not universality. This view, incidentally, is strikingly reminiscent of Karl Popper's, who abjured all finality in science, and saw the incessant task of "problem-solving" as its very essence. In this light, I would go so far as to say that Ricoeur's philosophy of religion suffers from his attendant neglect of science. It is reasonable to expect that were each of these fields to be unified in a simple philosophical framework, we might well obtain a higher, synthetic vision.

As for mytho-religious symbolism, Cassirer aptly observes how, while every vision of the divine is bound to "existing forms of religious expression", the "highest religious conceptions are able ... to enter into this bond and also to overcome it. They both destroy and create forms". (We might pause here to note that this, as anyone familiar with the Qur'an will instantly recognise, describes its very dynamic). "All truly religious and prophetic spirits appear", Cassirer goes on to say, to have a "Janus face. They break up the *forma formata*[27], but by their very readiness to destroy and by the act of destruction itself they open up again the way to *forma formans*"[28].

We are thus led to note a tension at the heart of all cognition, a tension between process and product, between a mode of being peculiar to an entity, or object, and a mode of being better expressed as "being". It is a tension which Ricoeur indicates succinctly in terms resonating

[24] This would also necessitate a revision of Ricoeur's interesting thesis of the relation between symbol and metaphor, which too, however, is impossible here; see P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Forth West (Texas) 1976, pp. 45-69

[25] Ricoeur, *La Symbolique du Mal, p. 22*

[26] Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, IV, The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, ed. J. M. Krois and D. P. Verene, New Haven 1996, p. 17.

[27] I.e., the "finished forms"; Cassirer, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms, p. 20.*

[28] I.e., the forms "in formation"; *Ibid., p. 20*

with scripture. “II faut que meure l’idole afin que vive le symbole”: an idol must die, so that a symbol may live[29].

Equipped with these theoretical resources, we may now resume our reflection on the Qur’an, We noted above Madigan's finding, from his examination of the Qur’an’s allusions to itself, that far from being the object or entity, the finished product that a book represents, the Qur’an is rather a speech symbolising the knowledge or sovereignty, indeed the “writing” action, of God. We may legitimately press this interesting interpretation further than Madigan does, and ask: why stop at divine sovereignty and knowledge? Can these concepts not be credited too with a symbolic function? To raise this question is to approach the very heart of the symbolism of the sacred in the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic traditions. It is to address the issue of the self-presentation of God in scripture.

*Self-presentation of God in scripture*

As has often been noted, the self-disclosure of God in scripture is radically different from the God of theology or metaphysics (in Heidegger’s terms, of “onto-theology”). God as revealed in the Qur’an (or better, God-as-revealing-Himself) is not God as presented by the *mutakallimun* nor by al-Farabi, nor in the Neoplatonic scheme of (say) Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani. In contrast to all these conceptions of God as the Supreme Being, including the indefinable One said to be “above being and non-being”, the self-disclosure of God in the Qur’an is essentially that of an active, relational power. No doubt, inasmuch as “Al-llah” is a noun, and insofar as it is linked innumerable times to adjectival epithets (the well-known *asma’ al-husna*), the conception of God as a Sovereign Being with superlative attributes is undeniably Qur’anic. But here too to focus on the word in isolation from the entire syntax as well as the semantic field is to miss something important. Even in the passages purporting to describe the “nature” of God this “description” is dynamic, in that it is set in relief against invocations of human existential limitations, or more specifically, of the ideologies of groups in contradistinction to whom Muhammad’s movement gains a distinct identity. Thus, in the *ayat al-kursi* (2: 255) divine nature is glorified by negative comparison to the human condition of fatigue and the need for sleep, together with the fact that human beings do not embrace His knowledge (*la yuhituna bi-say’in min ‘ilmihi*). The scheme of illumination presented in the verse on light (24: 35) is at first sight a picture of the divine in splendid self-containment. However, it too culminates in the self-referential mention of the guiding and simile-forming activity of God (*yadribu l-Llahu l-amtala lin-nasi*). And the purity of the divine nature declared in the short chapter entitled *Al-ihlas* (112) has a polemical force in its implied rebuttal of the doctrine of the Christians who remained recalcitrant (if not, like the Jews, hostile) to Muhammad’s movement.

*The Qur’an/ The role of the Qur’an*

The Qur’an is thus an ongoing, open-ended, evolving, self-revising commentary on, and a response to the situation and events in the Higaz. It reflects Muhammad’s reaction to these, the reactions of the various surrounding groups to him and his activity, the inner stresses and strains of his personality - the calculations, ambitions, policies, battles, hopes and disappointments of his career. Its conversational, argumentative, polemical, didactic features make this quite clear. In this respect, it is a historical discourse in the sense not only of a testimonial to but also a driving, evaluative, shaping force in an unfolding, turbulent history.

Were it only this, however, the Qur’an would not have the power that it has over the minds and hearts of Muslims, individually and collectively. It is the centrepiece of worship and liturgy; it provides a familiar, solemn atmosphere to public ceremonial; it has been used,

[29] Ricoeur, *De l’interprétation, p. 510.*

throughout history, in support of the ideologies of different groups within Islam; it is used to support or mobilise socio-political campaigns, ranging from the conservative to the revolutionary; through recitation at rites of passage, it shapes habits of thought and feeling linked to the life-cycle; while to the individual, its voice becomes audible, in moments of joy and sorrow, hope and despair, in the secret recesses of his soul. What is it about its discourse which has so many varying effects?

Max Weber spoke famously of the charismatic leadership of the Prophet. He neglected the charisma of scriptural or prophetic *discourse.* The genius of the Qur'an consists, among other things, in its ability to transform ordinary phenomena through such means as condensation and metaphor, into ingredients of a cosmic meaning. Otherwise discrete, random mundane events are generalised and elevated to transcendent maxims. When, for instance, God is said to bring life from death and death from life (*yuhrigu 1-hayya mina 1-mayyiti wa yuhrigu 1-mayyita mina l-hayyi*), very different spheres of existence are in one stroke made to coalesce. The seasonal fluctuations in the vegetative cycle become a "token", through the metaphor of "life" and "death", of the human condition, with all its vicissitudes and its mortality. The facts of biology serve as a template for recognising what was elsewhere known as the wheel of fortune. And all this is linked to a sense of a mysterious but positive power at work in human affairs, in a biological, social, historical and cosmic setting.

Notable too is the presence of primordial time - the time of creation and ancient history - and of a time "about" to come (it is significant that as in Arabic the imperfect tense indicates both present and future, the eschatological future appears as an imminent possibility in the Qur'anic scheme). Similarly, space is sketched at its limit-points (east and west; the heavens and the earth and what lies between). This symbolism reverberates with the experience of boundaries and constraints in human existence. A similar effect is achieved through repeated assertions that God knows what human beings do not and cannot fathom. It is significant that even as this notion marks the limits to the transparency of things to human minds, it also rescues existence from opacity, and makes it intelligible. For, to say that "God knows", even if "humanity doesn't", is to say that the cosmos has an order which can be known. If this is not clear, a glance at the narrative of Joseph should suffice (Sura 12). The whole story evokes the sense of a close-encompassing fog which leaves but a small pool of light attending the onward steps of a sojourner through life. Every protagonist in the drama is at one point or another up against darkness. Everyone, that is, but the all-aware Lord who decrees the outcomes, manipulates the fates and judges the behaviour of every protagonist; who, above all, assigns to each event and deed its meaning by fitting it in the total sequence of events and the grand design of human motives, follies and the chain of cause and effect which entangles every character in it. Further, thanks to the narration, the reader-reciter is abreast of the unfolding chain of outcomes, ahead of the blundering steps of the protagonists. Not, to be sure, in the manner of the great Author: for the human auditor processes knowledge in linear time. By contrast God's is Bergsonian time: it is space-time, "la durée", where all knowledge is simultaneous. Around the hidden causes, the unpredictable twists and turns of events, extends the enveloping "knowledge-in-simultaneity" of God.

Considered from one angle, this negative definition of God - in terms running counter to those which apply to humanity - results in a theocentric view in which (as Feuerbach might say) man is abased, drained of potency. But from another angle it is apparent that the very fact that man recites, hence envisages, a higher form of being, registers the entry of the ideal into human consciousness. To be sure, it does not abolish the conceptual distance between man and God; theism is not Protagorean humanism. The notion of God is neither of an object external to man nor reducible to him. It is a notion which has the function, strictly, of a horizon, of what

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Kant called the "regulative" principles of reason. Precisely at this point, however, there exists a perpetual tension. For the horizon is the point where the symbol is continually prey to transformation into object.

One of the forms that objectification takes is in a treatment of the Qur'an as a document of doctrinal or theological propositions, and of legal or moral imperatives. These are all interconnected: textual propositions and imperatives imply a document, whereas if the Qur'an is seen as a symbolic, open-ended discourse, it cannot be regarded as document; hence, neither propositions nor imperatives will lie regarded as primary to its discourse, and will themselves be seen as sharing in the symbolic function of the entire text.

As has been seen, the documentary use of the Qur'an came to be entrenched in Muslim history. Focusing on its propositional elements, theologians and jurists wove them into an Islamic creed (in its various schools, Sunni or Shi'i). Focusing on the quasi-legal injunctions in the text, jurists used them to build an Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and positive law (*shari'a*). But the character of both these discursive modes - "logocentric" in the one case, "nomocentric" in the other - is of a different order from the symbolic. In contrast to the latter, these discursive forms constitute a closed, definitive, canonical system.

*Traditional and modern themes of the Qur'an*

Nor have modern interpretations altered this fundamental trait. All that one needs to do to see this is to note a work on the Qur'an by Fazlur Rahman, who is admired by many liberal Muslims as a progressive scholar with a creative updating of Islamic tradition to his credit. The very title of the work, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, says it all. By definition, it treats the Qur'an as a compendium of "themes": topics which the holy book covers. This is already a false start. One needs to do no more than to open the Qur'an at random to appreciate that it is not, like a textbook of philosophy or science, a systematic treatment of discrete themes or topics. But consider, further, the actual list of topics. They are as follows: "God", "man as individual"; "man in society"; "nature"; "prophethood and revelation"; "eschatology"; "Satan and evil"; "emergence of the Muslim community"; "the religious situation of the Muslim community in Mecca"; "the People of the book and diversity of religions"[30]

It will be obvious that these headings are heterogeneous. Thus, "God" is a theological concept, and to this extent, "traditional" (though in the Qur'anic discourse, as we have seen, the self-disclosure of God is far from the theological concept of God). The next two ideas are obviously inspired by modern history and culture. The following concept of "nature" invokes the Hellenistic tradition as well as modern science. The two captions which follow are again theological. In noun-form, they represent conceptual sediments from an other-wise fluid and free-ranging discourse featuring prophets or messengers of God (as distinguished from "prophethood"), or the sense of an impending resolution where injustice is corrected, good rewarded and evil punished (as distinguished from the concept of "eschatology"). Moreover, why *these* subjects, and why in *these* terms?

It is only fair to add that any interpretation of the Qur'an whatsoever cannot but start from existing perplexities, existing needs of mind and society. Furthermore, when a living tradition grows in an altered climate of material circumstance and cultural presuppositions,

[30] Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the* Qur'an, Minneapolis 1980.

every creative spurt in such growth presents a double aspect: novelty on one hand, and a sense of continuity on the other (reflected, among other things, in a vocabulary rooted in tradition). In this respect, Rahman's endeavour is all too understandable, particularly when one notes the spirit of reform which characterises his actual treatment of the above subjects (a topic which deserves critical evaluation in its own right). It is not at this level, then, that I raise objection. What I mean to question, rather, is the use of the Qur'an as a document ostensibly for instigating, but in fact for legitimising present-day reform in a society which wishes, in one or another way, robust or fragile, to maintain a Muslim identity. The question which one could ask in this respect is: is this type of "return" to the Qur'an, seen as a textbook of concepts and ethico-legal principles, a complete enough return? Is it not, in the last analysis, a collapse into tradition? It is arguable, indeed, that one of the weaknesses of so-called Islamic modernism was that it was neither really "modern", nor really primordial; on the contrary, it was perhaps more traditional than it saw itself as being, though in the eyes of traditionalists it was hardly traditional. (I use the term "traditional" here in contrast not to "modern" but to "primordial")[31]

To push the inquiry to this level, however, requires work at the level of a philosophy of religion and culture. It requires stepping outside the confines of hermeneutics understood as exegesis.

We return, then, to the philosophical argument of this essay. I shall now adduce a conclusion to this argument in the form of a brief statement which may run the risk of appearing dogmatic. This will be offset partly, I hope, in the light of the entire foregoing discussion; and partly, perhaps, by its obviously prolegomenous character.

## IV. Conclusion: the Dialectic of Scripture and Philosophy

Earlier above we identified as a central aim of our inquiry, a convergence between philosophy and scripture - a hinge on which a dialectic between them may turn. We have, I believe, identified this meeting-point in a twin endeavour of mind: a faithful reading of the discourse of revelation; and a critical deconstruction of processes of sedimentation - into dogma, ideology, or text. There is, then, revelation and revelation. There is the revelation of a gift of power, and a grace of the spirit; a power to decipher being; to become a new being; and to make the world anew. There is revelation, on the other hand, as text, as scripture. And we have seen that first and foremost, it is revelation itself which provides the implications, the resources, the ammunition, against its own hardening, its own "idolisation". In this critical function, philosophy and revelation come together. At the same time, in an attentive reading of the symbolic discourse of revelation, philosophy fulfils the criterion we set for it above, requiring to be met if it is to be a philosophy of religion worth the name - the criterion, namely, of being equal, being adequate, to its subject.

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[31] Perhaps a more appropriate reference to Rahman for my purpose here would be to his proposal for devising new Islamic laws by deducing general principles of the Qur'an from their specific prescriptions by matching them against contemporary social conditions, and applying them in the creation of new regulations *(Islam and Modernity*, Chicago, p. 20). I plan to evaluate Rahman's work in a separate paper.

But we must go further. If what revelatory discourse signals is the revelation of a new being, is this not an ever-present possibility? Can it rightly be localised in time and place? If it is right to see it as an ever renewed, and ever new possibility, an ever new summons to a venture of mind and spirit, then the Qur'an to the Muslim (like the other scriptures to their respective followers) becomes not so much a source-text, nor a text for exegetical derivation of doctrine or law, but a call to new horizons, new enunciations of heart and mind. But in this case, is it not an undue limitation to see such renewal as "religious"? Is not the category of the "religious" an anachronistic projection from later centuries onto Biblical or Qur'anic revelation? If the sacred is that which gives life meaning by orienting it to an ideal ever so near and yet ever so far - always elusive, always beckoning - does not this ideal silently invite the scientist, the philosopher, the artist, the sage, the statesman, the seeker after truth, beauty and justice, in thought or in action as much as the prophet?

Some of our modern categories, such as the religious and the secular, or our modern versions of the ancient dualism of *logos* and *mythos*, might well be precluding a return of thought and action to the root of our being. Certainly, the modern specialisation of knowledge makes unitary horizons of mind an all the more beguiling ideal. In saying this, I do not refer solely to disciplinary compartments; "inter-disciplinary studies" are the other side of the same coin; they represent a mere juggling of the baleful kaleidoscope. What behoves us is to raise the question anew as to what is really meant by the life of the mind and by action in the world; and to raise the question too as to what relationship these things might have to the revealing word which summons us to transcend ourselves.

It is arguable that the prevailing norms of intellectual life in both the Western and the Muslim worlds are less than propitious for a true or full appreciation of the complex of phenomena associated with revelation, prophetic discourse, and scripture. In the Muslim world, an impassable barrier between education in the natural and human sciences and education in religion and theology makes a unitary, integrative vision along the lines just indicated something of a utopian dream. Meanwhile, the sphere of religious thought is increasingly dominated - among traditionalists, modernist apologists or fundamentalists alike - by an *ideological* interpretation of Islam. Indeed, the very idea of Islam - that is, its thematisation - is the product of an ideological mode of thought. By contrast, the data of prophetic revelation is human experience, as it is shaped by time and place, as well as in its existential universals, apprehended in a distinctive way, with potentially timeless resonances, to which (for various reasons which bear continued investigation) symbolic discourse appears to be best suited. Suffice it to say, however, that an ideological preoccupation is not only different from, but at odds with, revelatory discourse; as such, it is an inherent obstacle to a genuine appreciation of it[32].

But even the first step in this direction is a task of incalculable magnitude. In the meantime, all that this essay is meant to urge at bottom, even if its actual assertions are disputed, is that in the world as it is today, Muslim intellectual life can no more ignore issues at this level than it can ignore any other traditions of thought of substance and significance today. In this respect the ancient plea of al-Kindi to remain open to knowledge no matter where it comes from deserves as earnest a hearing today as it did in his time.

[32] These assertions cannot be justified here in detail. A number of modern analysts have pointed out the profound shift involved in what I have here termed the modern 'thematisation' of Islam. My own views on this issue are scheduled for a forthcoming publication.