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Epistemology of Prophethood in Islam

Dr. Jalal al-Haqq

Revelation as a medium of information about the content of reality has not been particularly a subject of scholarly interest in Western tradition of philosophy and philosophical theology. Medievalists talked of 'revelation' but they did not mean by it an epistemic activity in which God 'spoke' to a human person: it was rather for them a concrete event in which God 'entered' into a human body.

The 'Word' of God (Logos) which, supposedly, was hitherto a transcendent entity was given the form of flesh and blood. This Paulean innovation, as we know, not only made Christianity anomalistic to the long established tradition of prophetic epistemology, of which it otherwise claimed to be a climax, it also seriously restricted the understanding of revelation as a special source of knowledge.

When modernity made its headway in Europe, what it gave rise to were 'empiricism' and 'rationalism'; any philosophy which could be called 'revelationism' just did not figure in their scheme of things. The new philosophers, for the very nature of the subject, did not find it worthy of a philosophical scrutiny.

For them sense-organs and the intellects were doors to new vistas of possibilities to hitherto untracked regions of cosmic reality, and any fallback upon the question of revelation might have been considered by them to be an anachronism.

The results of logic and experimental sciences appeared to be concrete and credible, while the explanatory theories derived from the Bible were clearly irrational and incongruous with the observed facts. Thus revelation was to them a non-issue and nothing more. This attitude of cool reluctance later developed into utter contempt when in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century some anthropologists and psychoanalysts reduced it, for different reasons, to a product of human illusion and self deception.

This is however not the case with the Muslim tradition of philosophy and kalam. For the crucial fact that the revelation occupied a central place in the Islamic system of doctrines, and also for reasons of its being a distinguishing feature of Islam's religious methodology, Muslim scholars took very keen interest in disentangling the various issues connected with it. Thus we find that a discussion on it started as early as the beginning of Muslim thought itself.

This legacy passed through the contributions of philosophers like al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Bajjah, Ibn Khaldun, Ibn al-`Arabi, al-Ghazali and others, coming down to the writings of Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal in our own times.¹ The present undertaking is however not a chronological survey of their views on revelation, but an independent personal understanding of it in the perspective of contemporary knowledge with reference, of course, to the earlier understandings of it.

At the outset, it may be clarified that the term revelation in its import is not exactly identical with a somewhat vague but currently very widely used- rubric, namely, `religious experience'. This blanket rubric is applied by contemporary authors on philosophical theology to any cognitive activity which has as its referent some supernatural material.

Thus prophetic message of monotheism, Buddha's discovery of the Four Noble Truths, Ibn al-`Arabi's and Eckhart's Pantheism, etc. are all subsumed under a single category of knowledge through religious experience.² The Islamic notion of revelation, on the other hand, implies making a distinction between the prophetic mode of acquiring spiritual knowledge and all other modes and means which people of different cultural groups may employ to have access to that domain of reality. The distinction is absolute, and is in respects of nature, content, origins, as well as result and authenticity.

As just said, the Western encounter with the problem of revelation was from a distorted perspective. Although the culture-world of the West had in it the presence of a Judaic element which meant its being in a way familiar with the revelational epistemology, the effect of Paulean innovation was strong enough to almost neutralize that presence. As is known, historical Christianity originated not from what Jesus taught or was taught (by God) but from the `vision' that St. Paul is said to have had on his way to Damascus.

This means that Christianity as a religious creed was rooted in the subjective experience of a person who was admittedly not a prophet in a traditional Judaic sense. As a historical truth, this proposition has not forced itself into Western consciousness earlier than the early decades of nineteenth century when

critical research in Biblical exegesis started, although in a non–doctrinal sense it was a part of Christian theology. But once people took cognizance of it, they could not resist the temptation of developing what were its obvious implications.

For one thing, the discovery eviscerated the creed of its authoritative awe. Inasmuch as the dogmas were results of one's personal experience, they could not be infallible and could not be universalized. The more the subjective factor weighed in consideration, the lesser became the authenticity and authority of the dogma.

In later decades the situation took another turn when materialism took hold of the mind of the West. The tendency grew increasingly popular among men of letters to reduce the supernatural into the natural. Naturally the so–called religious experience was also subjected to this treatment and, as a result, the whole mystique of the phenomenon was dismantled. Especially, some psychologists went too far in their criticism and reduced in their view the whole phenomenon into what they called delirium of persons suffering from some psychic diseases.³

Muslims, on the other hand, had an entirely different viewpoint from which they approached this problem. Revelation, to them, was a voluntary and purposive Divine self–communication to humankind through the medium of some `chosen' individuals. God, who is believed to be the Sustainer of His creatures in the material sense of the term, is also believed so in regard to their spiritual needs.

The spiritual need of man is nothing but an indispensable urge to live a self–life, which is possible only by relating one's self to God in a productive and authentic way. But since in themselves the human cognitive faculties are not potent enough to enable him to have a sufficiently comprehensive contact with God, the need of God's Himself choosing some individual and conveying through him the knowledge about His reality is obvious.

A glance at the Old Testament shows how some persons were selected from among the `Children of Israel' with whom God `spoke'. God's act of self–revelation to humankind through the elect is what may be taken to be the crux of the epistemology of prophet hood in Islam.

As is obvious, by the very nature of it, the prophet's mode of obtaining Divine gnosis is such as to put a permanent cleavage between itself and other modes of human experience. Whether it is sensory experience or rational or intuitive experience, they are all basically human ways of apprehension of reality subject to enormous handicaps and limitations.

Revelation, on the other hand, is a process in which Divinity partakes very actively in its effort of self al–xpression. While in ordinary human experiences, the subject is the real actor in getting at things, in the latter's case, he is just a passive recipient (i.e. not an actor but one who is acted upon). This basic character of revelation as something given (not acquired) was affirmed in the speculative interpretation of it that unfolded itself through the history of kalam.

There were, however, important differences among thinkers in determining what was exactly the mode of its receiving by the recipient (S). Description of this mode, as inferred from the verses of the Qur'an and as given in detail in traditions, was such in nature that disagreement was natural to occur. One thing, for example, which created particular difficulty and caused controversy was the problem of understanding those situations in which what was ordinarily considered supernatural was given a naturalistic content.

For instance, apart from the mode of revelation to the prophets through dreams, etc., one mode (especially in the case of the Prophet Muhammad [S]) was the Gabriel's carrying of the message to the Prophet (S) while appearing in a human guise. In such cases, supernatural events meddled with natural events and consequently one person's understanding of the real nature of the situation differed from that of another. While many people, mainly theologians, thought it unnecessary and undesirable to problematize these situations, for many others a philosophical probe and 'a rational explanation' of them was most necessary.

While repeating that almost all sections of thinking Muslims down the centuries concurred upon the unacquired character of revelation, the interpretational difference among them can be made discernible by broadly dividing them into two groups. The first of these may be said to be the group of internalists, while the second group may be called externalists.

The former, mainly comprising philosophers and philosophically oriented mystics and theologians, understood revelation in terms of a habitué or a faculty which they said God especially created among those whom He pre decided to choose as the media for His communications. It was this special internal faculty in the body of a man which enabled him at times to have access to those domains of supernal reality which could not be trekked by the different noetic faculties possessed by the ordinary mortals.

Although a rational philosophical interpretation of revelation was started by al-Farabi, the man who decisively influenced the entire course of subsequent speculative discussion of the subject was the great Ibn Sina. As is now fairly known, these early Muslim philosophers possessed an eclectic acumen which they superbly utilized in making out a creative blend of the materials available to them from different sources and developing an intellectualistic super system that could do justice to both Islamic beliefs and the canons of philosophy.

Thus, Ibn Sina's interpretation of revelation, as of al-Farabi's, is intellectualistic. It is a part of and perfectly fits into their general intellectualistic system of cosmology and cosmogony for which they are so famous. Indeed the presence of the Hellenic factor, which blurred the distinction of epistemological events and the ontological ones, is most conspicuous here.

The Logos was for Greeks an act of God's self thinking and it became itself an entity to serve as an agency for the realization of God's creative activity. While Christians deified this Logos by identifying it with their idea of Christ, the Muslim philosophers, too, picked it out as a basic category to explain the problems of the creation of the universe on the one hand and the phenomenon of revelation on the

other.

The Logos, called by Muslim philosophers Active Intelligence, was according to them an intermediate reality between God and His creation both in ontological and epistemological sense. It was an agency through which God expressed both His Being and His Knowledge, i.e. Himself, as well as knowledge about Himself. The realm of intellect had two regions, one being the higher, transcendental and Divine and the other, mundane and human. The Active Intelligence lay in the middle, having contact with both the regions.

Now, since a prophet was by definition both human as well as recipient of Divine communications, his place in the scheme of philosophers was between the human intellect and the Active Intelligence. He was the bearer of `aql al-mustafad (Acquired Intellect) which was the perfected state of actual intellect possessed by ordinary human beings in varying degrees.

Ibn Sina points out that in all human beings there is a discernible creative potential, as some of the knowledge possessed by them is not a result of the working of their minds upon the data supplied by the sense perception but a direct endowment of Active Intelligence to the minds. The philosophers, the poets, the artists, and others exhibit this potential in a more explicit manner although at a lesser scale it is found in all men.

Now the person in whom this creativity finds its most perfect expression is called `prophet'. He is a human being, but his capacity to obtain knowledge is immense, indeed infinite; in other words, his access to Active Intelligence is quite direct and closest. And since all his knowledge is innately creative, he does not need any external instructor to teach him that knowledge.

The creative potential of a prophet is nothing but a power, extraordinary in his case but ordinary in the case of other people – to arrive at certain knowledge without the help of mental operations which would have been otherwise necessarily required to produce that knowledge. By its very nature, it occurs to the person concerned as something sudden and spontaneous. Explaining Ibn Sina's position here, Fadl al-Rahman writes: “We know, Avicenna tells us, that people differ in their power of intuition, i.e. hitting at a truth without consciously formulating a syllogism in their minds and therefore without time.

Since there are people who are almost devoid of this power, while there are others who possess it, some in greater and others in lesser degree, it follows that there may be a man naturally so gifted that he intuits all things `at a stroke' or `flares up' with an intuitive illumination as Avicenna puts it”⁴

The doctrine of prophetic revelation being essentially `a natural intuitive power of hitting at truths' has been echoed in the writings of as late an author as Sayyid Ahmad Khan who speaks of the presence in the constitution of all men of a habitus (malakah) of revelation, being in its most purified and perfected form in the constitution of prophets. He says:

... Prophethood, in reality, is a natural thing. It exists in the prophets by exigency of their nature, as do

the other human faculties Among the thousands of human habitus sometimes some special habitus is so strong in a certain man on account of this person's constitution and nature that he is called the imam or prophet of this very kind of habitus.

A blacksmith too can be the imam or prophet of his craft. A poet too can be the imam or prophet of his art. A doctor too can be the imam or prophet in his medical art. Yet a person who heals spiritual illnesses and upon whom has been bestowed by God the habitus of teaching and fostering (human) morals in accordance with his nature is called a prophet [5](#)

At another place he writes:

As there are other faculties in man, so, in the same way, there is in him the habitus of revelation. One of the human faculties may be completely wanting in one man whereas it may exist in another. We further see that one and the same faculty is found in different men to different degrees. In one to a very low degree, in another to a higher degree and in a third to a much higher degree. In exactly the same way the habitus of revelation in some people is wanting; some have little, some more, and some very much.[6](#)

It is clear that the doctrine outlined above is in a very plain sense an internalistic doctrine as it envisages the source of revelation within the constitution of man, not outside it. As such, it stands in open contrast with the literalistic view on a number of points. It goes against the latter position not only for its advocacy of an internal source of revelation but also for its denial of the prophet being in some way special as a bearer of revelation.

The internalization and universalization of the capacity to receive and reveal the Divine secrets seems prima facie to vacate from the whole prophetic institution what is essential to it, i.e. its infallibility, its exclusiveness, as well as its authoritative awe. There seems to be nothing left if revelation is a property which is shared by all human beings only with a difference of degree. In what sense, then, is a prophet a 'chosen' individual as insisted upon by the verses of the Qur'an.

Apart from this basic point, there are some other facts which have been traditionally connected with the event of revelation and which the philosophers needed to take into account in order to establish their doctrine. Prominent among these is what may be called the 'periodicity' of revelation. Clearly, if the power 'to reveal' has been an inbuilt characteristic of a prophet, he should have been permanently in the state of revealing things; i.e. whatever a prophet had uttered on any occasion and at any stage of his life should be taken to possess the status of revelation.

But, according to traditional belief, this is not the case. Revelations came to the prophets not generally but only occasionally and periodically. While some of the prophets received unexpectedly and without having any particular context, more often than not they were uttered on the impulse of some specific occasion. It often happened that a prophet was faced with a critical situation or a companion made before him a query for which he had no immediate solution and then the Divine guidance came to him relieving him from his puzzle.

There were also certain clear physical signs for the Companions and for the Prophet himself which preceded the advent of revelation and by virtue of which they came to recognize and distinguish the revealed words from the non-revelatory ones. One such sign for the Prophet was that he heard the chime of a bell (called in Arabic *silsilat al-jaras*) which alerted him to be ready to receive the Divine message. Besides, the Prophet invariably went into a state of trance and showed physical tension while receiving the revelation.

One proof that the revealed words were different from a prophet's usual utterances was the fundamental difference of diction and style between the two kinds of discourses. In the case of the Prophet Muhammad (S), his own discourses (preserved in the books of hadith) and the text of Qur'an (which contains the Divinely revealed words) are distinguishable even for a man who has only elementary familiarity with the Arabic language.

Each of these two has its own personal form and style which it consistently follows without anywhere admitting any overlapping. The distinction is indeed so glaring and so irreducible that some theologians have adduced it to prove the claim of Muhammad (S) for receiving Divine communication. For, as they argue, how an illiterate person could so consistently follow in his life two different kinds of style and diction while communicating with his people.

There are several traditions about the Prophet Muhammad (S) which suggest that the receiving of the revelation used to have been a very trying experience for him. Not only that he suffered physical and mental tension, the effects were also transmitted outside his body. It is, for example, related in the Sahih Muslim (one of the supposedly authentic collections of hadith) that once while the Prophet was travelling on a she-camel, revelation came to him.

The event was so full of pressure that the animal could not move further; it was even unable to keep standing on its feet and sat down. It was only when the communication stopped that it stood up and walked. Similarly, in another instance it is recorded that the revelation descended on the Prophet (S) while he was lying, his head being in the lap of 'Ali (A). 'Ali (A) felt as if his legs are going to break, the pain continued till the revelation was over.

Besides these specific instances, it was a common phenomenon that whenever the revelation came to the Prophet, his face turned red. His body began trembling and sweating even if it was extremely cold. Such instances of the physical effects on the Prophet while communicating with God suggest rather strongly that the revelation was an externally caused occurrence in which the Prophet participated only unwittingly and passively.

At the last may be considered the anthropomorphically described nature of the angelic agency which is said to bring the message of God to the Prophet. The Archangel Gabriel, who is said to be specially entrusted for this job, has been mentioned in several places in the Qur'an by different names. In one place God asks the Prophet to say to mankind

“... who is an enemy of Gabriel. For he it is who hath revealed (this Scripture) to thy heart by Allah's leave” (2:97).

In another place God again says to the Prophet to tell the people that

“The Holy Spirit hath revealed it from thy Lord with Truth, that it may confirm (the faiths of) those who believe” (16: 102).

In another verse he has been given the name ‘Spirit of Faith’.

“Verily this is a revelation., from the Lord of the worlds. With it came down the Spirit of Faith and Truth” (26: 192–3).

Similarly, in a yet other verse his position has been quite exalted:

“Verily this is the word of a most honorable Messenger, endued with power, with rank before The Lord of the Throne. With authority there (and) faithful to His trust”(81: 19–21).

These verses of the Qur’an are confirmed by those traditions in which the angel has even been said to often appear before the Prophet and his Companions in a human form. The point is that if the angelic agency is really taken in its traditional reified meaning the internalistic theory will be harder put to establish its truth.

Before we proceed any further in the discussion of where does the philosophical theory stand against the arguments posed by the externalists’ theory and whether there is any possibility of reconciling the two seemingly conflicting standpoints, it may be worthwhile to consider here a third approach to the problem which, at least in part, bridges the gulf that separates the orthodox position with the philosophers’.

This third doctrine, which explains revelation in evolutionary terms, had among its exponents people of no less stature than Rumi, Ibn Miskawayh, Ibn Khaldun, and latterly Shah Wall Allah of Delhi. Since it would not be desirable to go at length in the exposition of all these authors, we may concentrate here upon Ibn Khaldun– who was its most systematic exponent and was at once free from the simplism and literalism of orthodox scholars on the one hand and the speculations and the muddle– headedness of the philosophers on the other.

Ibn Khaldun’s theory takes into account certain simple truths about the constitution of our physical cosmos on the one hand and about the human psyche on the other. It says, in the first place, that the universe we inhabit displays in its constitution a certain order and harmony so that the various elements in it seem to be connected, concatenated and combined with each other in the relations of cause and effect and their amenability to be transformed from one to another.

There is a visible pattern of an ascending order wherein one element is higher than the other element

which itself is higher to a third element and so on. From the point of view of their ontic status we can proceed upwardly from earth to water, from water to air and from air to fire, The next upward stage from fire is the realm of spheres which, contrary to the preceding elements, is not visible, but whose existence we can nevertheless infer from the fact of motions and movements of the elements. For the elements, which are dead and motionless in themselves, can move only by some external force which, as Aristotle said, is applied by spiritual things.

Apart from the `world of elements' there is the `world of creation' wherein also we see the same order, same harmony and same tendency to move from lower stages to higher ones. The inorganic matter grows into plants which themselves progress to become animals, and animals in turn prepare the ground for the emergence of man.

Ibn Khaldun says that whether it is the world of elements or the world of created things, it is invariably the case that the higher stage in the order is finer and subtler than the preceding one; and the former has always the capacity to influence the latter. Also it helps the latter to evolve and transform itself into a higher form.[7](#)

This implies that while the human soul, being superior to the elements which make up man's body, can influence the latter, it is itself susceptible of being influenced by and be transformed into the still higher levels of existence. This higher level is the realm of angels. The soul, as Ibn Khaldun says, "consequently, must be prepared to exchange humanity for angelicity in order actually to become part of the angelic species at certain times in the flash of a moment. This happens after the spiritual essence of the soul has become perfect in actuality [8](#)

The soul, with its upward and downward connections, is able to acquire two diverse kinds of knowledge respective to two different kinds of ontological worlds. In the perspective of its relations with the body it performs perceptive and unperceptive kinds of cognitive functions, but when it approaches the realm of angels it is afforded with the `reflective', i.e. of the eternal truths about the hidden, unseen reality.

This cosmological framework to the problem of revelation in Ibn Khaldun is supplemented when his philosophy takes an about turn and moves to take a peep into the abysses of the human psyche. The soul sharpens its powers of perceiving and thinking progressively as it advances further and further into its own inward regions.

The external sense-perceptions lead to inward perceptions which in turn develop successively into the powers of estimation, imagination, and memory and then, lastly, into the power of thinking. It is this last power of thinking that `causes reflection to be set in motion and leads toward intellection. The soul is constantly moved by it as a result of its constitutional desire to (think. It wants to be free from the grip of power and the human kind of preparedness.

It wants to proceed to active intellection by assimilating itself to the highest spiritual group (that of angels) and to get into the first order of spiritual by perceiving them without the help of bodily organs.

Therefore the soul is constantly moving in that direction. It exchanges all humanity and human spirituality for angelicity of the highest stage” [9](#)

After describing in this manner the various levels of the cognitive potential of man, Ibn Khaldun proceeds to divide the souls into three kinds. One kind of soul, possessed by ordinary mortals, is by nature too weak to arrive at the spiritual perceptions, Consequently, it remains tied down with the bodily organs of experiencing, which enable it to acquire, at the best, the powers of imagination, memory and estimation.

The second kind of soul, the soul of the mystic, is able to rise above its physical connections to a limited extent and approach the spiritual realm, thanks to its innate preparedness for it. The third kind of soul, which is the privilege of individuals called prophets, is:

by nature suited to exchange humanity altogether, both corporeal and spiritual humanity, for angelicity of the highest stage, so that it may actually become an angel in the flash of a moment, glimpse the highest group within their own stage, and listen to essential speech and Divine address during that moment. (Individuals possessing this kind of soul) are prophets. God implanted and formed in them the natural ability to slough off humanity in that moment which is the state of revelation

(The prophets) move in that direction, slough off their humanity, and, once among the highest group (of angels), learn all that may there be learned. They then bring what they have learned back down to the level of the powers of human perception, as this is the way in which it can be transmitted to human beings. At times, this may happen in the form of a noise the prophet hears. It is like indistinct words from which he derives the idea conveyed to him.

As soon as the noise has stopped he retains and understands (the idea). At other times, the angel who conveys (the message) to the prophet appears to him in the form of a man who talks to him, and the prophet comprehends what he says. Learning the message from the angel, reverting to the level of human perception, and understanding the message conveyed to him—all this appears to take place in one moment, or rather, in a flash.

It does not take place in time, but everything happens simultaneously. Therefore it appears to happen very quickly. For this reason, it is called wahy (revelation), because the root w-h-y has the meaning `to hasten'. [10](#)

It may be seen that Ibn Khaldun's theory moves in close pace with the theological position on certain points. There is, in the first place, no reduction of the prophetic soul to the level of ordinary human souls as done by the philosophers. While the latter spoke of all human souls being the same in kind (though differing in their powers of hitting at truth), Ibn Khaldun envisages here a distinct kind of soul in the case of prophets which makes his position more commensurate to the idea of a prophet being `special' and `chosen'.

Secondly Ibn Khaldun's conception of angels (who bring the Divine message to the prophets) is quite the

same as has been the traditional idea. But this is not the case with philosophers who have not only depersonalized the angels but have also de-reified them. Sayyid Ahmad Khan, for example, is quite emphatic in saying that what in theology we call angel is only the capacity or habitus in the prophet which enables him to know the hidden higher truths and nothing else. And in this, he, clearly, has only followed the position of earlier philosophers like Ibn Sina and others.

But the difference between the two theories cannot be pressed any further. In fact Ibn Khaldun's theory is basically in the same philosophical tradition of which al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn al-`Arabi and others were earlier proponents. For, in regard to the fundamental question of the source of revelation, Ibn Khaldun, too, finds it to be in the internal constitution of the prophets.

The prophets, he clearly states, a “move towards the angelic stage, sloughing off humanity at will, by virtue of their natural constitution, and not with the help of any acquired faculty or craft.”¹¹

The prophet, of course, does not learn through ordinary means what he later communicates, but all the same he has to depend upon his own innate and inborn capacity for revelation. In the idea of transfiguration—wherein the prophet is said to exchange his humanity for angelicity—also the movement was from lower to higher, which implied that it was the prophet himself who by virtue of his extra cognitive powers made contacts with the angelic realm and not vice versa.

Thus, even though the evolutionistic theory accommodates certain elements of the externalist theory, it basically does not go beyond the internalistic framework of the philosophers. This means that the gulf between the two opposite standpoints survives. In the remaining part we shall attempt to see whether this gulf can be bridged or at least can be narrowed down to any substantial extent.

It would seem quite natural at this stage to take recourse to the verses of the Qur'an in order to solve this problem. But in spite of the fact that the word wahy and its equivalents find mention in a good number of places in the Book, it is nonetheless not possible to extract from them a clear-cut theory about the matter.

The Qur'an mentions the matter both in the human and nonhuman contexts. While in most of the verses God is the giver of the revelation, there are also places where the transpiration takes place exclusively between the humans or between angels and humans. Similarly, while humans are generally the recipients of it, at places angels, animals and even nonliving things are also said to be among those who enjoy this Divine gift.

Prophets, non prophetic but still morally superior human beings, ordinary mortals, bees and mountains are all said to be receiving this Divine communication occasionally or on a permanent basis. Look at the following verses wherein things other than God are found receiving the revelation.

“Then he (Zachariah, the prophet) came forth unto his people from the sanctuary, and signified (awha) to them: Glorify your Lord at break of day and fall of night” (19: 11).

“And it was not (vouchsafed) to any mortal that Allah should speak to him unless (it be) by revelation (wahyan) or from behind a veil, or (that) He sendeth a messenger to reveal (yuhī) what He will by His leave” (42:51)

“Thus have We appointed unto every prophet an adversary—devils of humankind and jinn who inspire (yuhī) in one another plausible discourse through guile” (6. 112)

And in the verses given below, God is the revealer but the recipient of the revelation varies from verse to verse:

“Say (O Muhammad, unto mankind): `I warn you only by wahy. But the deaf hear not the call when they are warned.” (21:45)

“Then when they led him (Joseph before his ministry) off, and were of one mind that they should place him in the depth of the well, We inspired (awhayna) in him”(12: 15)

“And We inspired (awhayna) the mother of Moses” (28:7).

“And when I inspired (awhaytu) the disciples (of Jesus)” (5: 111)

“And thy Lord inspired (awha) the bee, saying choose your habitations in the hills and in the trees and in that which they thatch”. (16:68)

“Then ordained them seven heavens in two days and inspired (awha) in each heaven its mandate” (41: 12)

“When Earth is shaken with her 60nal) earthquake. And Earth yieldeth up her burdens. And man saith: `What aileth her?’ That day she will relate her chronicles. Because thy Lord inspireth (awha) her.” (99: 1–5)

It is clear that—due to its use in such varied and diverse contexts, the word hardly carries any singular meaning in all these verses except what it literally connotes. We are in any case not able to describe exactly what is actually the nature and character of the revelation al-vent in the light of the Qur’an. In Arabic the word *wahy*, both literally and according to its usage, stands for a certain gesture by someone to someone else which is surreptitious and hidden.

It also signifies loosely the stimulation of heart in a sudden and unexpected manner. Revelation comes to the heart of the recipient very swiftly, like a flash of light, so that the subject comes to be aware of the object without the mediation of any formal or technical apparatus such as verbal or written language. It may be seen that except for this common factor the word *wahy* (in English, revelation or inspiration) carries very different meanings in different cases.

In fact, even if we leave aside those verses wherein other-than-God things communicate, and confine

ourselves only to those ones in which God is the cause– of revelation, we will arrive at two different conclusions as following .from two distinct kinds of verses, i.e. one in which the subject is human and the other in which it is non–human or nonliving thing.

For, if we think upon the verse relating to bees, it is clear that in this case the revelation or inspiration means nothing except a natural and inborn capacity in– the insect to live its life as it lives. Similarly, when God says that He inspires in each heaven its mandate or that the earth will relate its agony according to its inspiration from God, what is meant is their pursuing the course upon which they have been set by Divinity. This would mean that the revelation is nothing but some built–in capacity or power in the subjects which finds its sporadic or perpetual expression in the behavior of those subjects.

But a different conclusion will follow if we shift our attention to the cases in which the subjects are humans, whether prophets or non prophets. For, in such cases, we see that certain critical moments in the life of the subjects are selected for the particular experience. The subject's enlightenment in no case seems to emerge from any faculty which he or she is carrying from his or her birth.

The subject all of a sudden finds solution of the crisis in which he has been entangled and he feels that neither his senses nor his reason has helped him out of that difficulty. Besides, the extraordinary conviction and the sense of authenticity and infallibility which symbiotically emerge with the occurrence of the event also testify that some extra personal factor is responsible for its occurrence.

For example, when the idea dawned in the heart of Moses' mother that she should put the child in a basket to be carried away afloat on the river, it was not just her reason or common sense which led her to do it. Had it been so she would never have had the courage to take such a drastic step so unhesitatingly. Her confidence and the absence of any hesitation in her act must have had behind it an absolute trust in what she has been told. As for prophets, evidence supporting the externalist theory has already been cited in the preceding pages.

Very complex though the problem may be, but still certain issues can be sorted out and their complexity eased by making a closer analytical look at them. It seems that a linguistic scrutiny of the phrases and nuances which the two respective theorists employ may go a long way in bringing close to each other what appear to be poles apart.

It may be noticed in the first place that the internalists too, like the externalists, are quite emphatic in denying the prophetic revelation as something which the prophet acquires by his own effort. Whether Ibn Sina or Ibn Khaldun or Sayyid Ahmad Khan, they all take care to emphasize that whatever a prophet reveals, it has not been imparted to him through any human agency, neither does he learn it by employing his ordinary faculties, which he, like other men, possesses from birth and which develop in the course of the growth of his personality.

The capacity to reveal is absolutely independent of his other cognitive powers. While revealing a prophet is completely cut off from his mundane living and is in direct contact with some superior reality–with an

angel or the Active Intellect, as that reality is variously called. This is a very important point. For it, by implication, draws a line of cleavage between the experience of the mystic and that of the prophet. A mystic is such not due to some of his inborn faculties which he is privileged to possess and which are denied to other men.

The intuitive faculty is universal; only certain persons decide to cultivate it, and, through constant efforts, are able to galvanize it into action, while most of the people ignore it and consequently the capacity to acquire trans empirical knowledge remains dormant in them. Every man is a potential mystic; he can rise to these heights if he chooses to.

He has to make the decision and then indulge in meditations, concentration and other devout practices. Per contra, a prophet is a prophet by birth; he is a prophet not by his choice or by his effort. He is just made a prophet by destiny. There is a certain fatalism involved in his case which is in direct contrast with the facts of decision, deliberation and endeavor which characterize and are presumed in the mystical experience.

Although certain prophets have been reported to be favorably inclined towards meditation, abstinence, seclusion, etc. in their pre prophetic lives, at no place any philosopher has dared to suggest that these were in any way responsible for the emergence of the power of revelation in them.

It is true that according to the philosophers both revelation and mystical experience are rooted in man's intuitive faculty and have the heart as their seat, and it is also true that both convey the message about the transphenomenal world. But the similarity between the two ends there. On the rather more basic question of what really makes possible the occurrence of two kinds of experiences, the answer in two cases is radically different.

While a mystic's communication with the Divine is occasioned purely by his own efforts in which he possibly gets some help from the other side, in the case of prophets the converse is true. Because, in his case, it is Divinity itself which chooses a certain person to receive the message It wants to convey to mankind through him..

The literalist theory is in fact a rational impossibility inasmuch as it involves a bad metaphysics i.e. a kind of anthropomorphism which not even traditionalist theologians would otherwise find to be agreeable. When a common man makes such statements as 'God sent the message to prophets', 'the prophet received the message from God', 'Gabriel brought the message from God', he tends to think as if there is a Supreme Being, God, who sits in heavens and from among

His cohorts orders someone to carry a certain communication to the person al-lect, which the carrier in question faithfully obeys by uttering the words in the ears of the person communicated to. Now this is all patently absurd. God is obviously not a localized entity, nor the heavens a world situated in the sky. The angels, too, cannot be anthropomorphized to the extent it is done in the said theory.

God, to be sure, is a universal spiritual presence which is not isolated or apart from the physical world; He is rather the underlying substratum of which the latter is merely a contrived transfiguration. Similarly, the soul, the recipient of the Divine message, is also an elusive, evanescent and non-localized being whose mode of communicating with God must be entirely different from the way of our communication with the outside reality.

The spiritual and the material are, functionally, two entirely different realms and require two different modes of conceptualization for their proper comprehension. But since our ideational activity (of which the language is one basic manifestation) is contextually determined only with reference to mundane reality, we need to avoid its application to the spiritual realm as we more often than not unwittingly do.

Such words as 'giving', 'receiving', 'sending', 'carrying', etc. have social al-nvironmental origins and make sense only in that region of interaction. Their extension to cover the other region inevitably generates a distorted metaphysics, the example of which we see in the above theory of revelation.

It would then seem that even the externalist theory cannot be sustained in its literalist form; It must subject itself to a non-literal philosophical interpretation in order to survive. The first step in this direction would be to disinvest the doctrine of its anthropomorphic bias. Whatever be the exact mode of contact between God and the prophetic soul, it cannot be in the interlocutory pattern of human communication.

This negative, de-anthropomorphized, explanation of revelation would then pave the way for its positively philosophized understanding. God's revealing His words to prophets must in some sense imply the latter's ability to establish a communion with God whereby he succeeds in getting knowledge which otherwise would have been denied to him.

The event of revelation could be understood, as al-Ghazali has said, in terms of a certain capacity on the part of the prophet to make this kind of communion—a capacity which, of course, is peculiar to him in not being universally distributed. A prophet is a person who, thanks to his absolutely sinless life, is immune from any sort of corruption of his soul, and this fact puts him into the privileged position of sharing a part of God's knowledge.

The difference between the prophet and the mystic is that while the prophet has an absolutely uncorrupted soul, the mystic, not being completely free from his evil propensities, is able only to make fleeting contact with God. And this results in his knowledge being fragmentary and in being, more often than not, fallible. Such an understanding of the revelatory event will save the externalist doctrine on one hand from the difficulties of its literal interpretation.

On the other hand, it will also be able to keep itself away from the trap of internalism in which many people felt when they tried to rationalize the event. The prophet, in the light of this refined externalist doctrine will remain a possible recipient of Divine messages but no determinism will be involved in the whole act, as the ability to receive the revelation is due to his sin-free life.

The internalistic theory of Muslim philosophers explained revelation in terms of the prophetic soul making a communion with what they called the Active Intellect, which was a second-order being having spontaneously emanated from God.

Now this whole idea of the Active Intellect as the first emanation from God's Being is Neo-Platonic and which, as al-Ghazali has convincingly shown in his *Tahafut al-falasifah*, stands neither to reason, nor to experience and is, besides, theologically objectionable and abhorrent. Thus, the internalist theory is by no means a model towards which a rational understanding of the phenomenon of revelation should crave. A non-anthropomorphic, externalist interpretation would better serve the purpose for reasons of both being reasonable and theologically admissible.

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1. It is indeed unfortunate that even Iqbal could not save himself from falling victim to this confusion. Although at times he talks of 'the fundamental psychological differences between the mystic and the prophetic consciousness' (*Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Lahore, 1971, p. 17) and 'the psychological difference between the prophetic and the mystic type of consciousness' (*Ibid.*, p. 124), his general tendency is to identify religious experience with the experience of the mystic. It seems that in his eyes the real difference between the prophet's experience and the experience of mystics was not in point of origins, contents or results, but only in point of their respective collective and individualize meaningfulness.

Qualitatively the two types of experiences are the same; only that prophet's experience is meant for others too, that of mystic is only for his own self. As he says "A prophet may be defined as a type of mystic consciousness in which 'unitary experience' tends to overflow its boundaries and seeks opportunities of redirecting and refashioning the forces of collective life. In his personality the finite centre of life sinks into his own infinite depths only to spring up again, with fresh vigour, to destroy the old, and to disclose the new directions of life." (*Ibid.*, p. 125).

2. As an example of this assimilative approach, we may cite a passage from C. G. Jung, who writes: "Creeds are codified and dogmatized forms of religious experience. The contents of experience has become sanctified and usually concealed in a rigid, often elaborate structure This is a definite frame, with definite contents, which cannot be coupled with or amplified by Buddhistic or Islamic ideas and emotions.

Yet it is unquestionable that not only Buddha or Muhammad or Zarathustra represents religious phenomena, but that Mithras, Attis, Kybele, Mani, Hermes and many exotic cults do as well. The psychologist, inasmuch as he assumes a scientific attitude, has to disregard the claim of every creed to be the unique and eternal truth. He must keep his eye on the human side of the religious problem, in that he is concerned with the original religious experience quite apart from 'what the creeds have made of it.' (*Psychology and Religion*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1938, pp.6-7)

3. For a comment on such theories one cannot do better here than quote a passage from the classic work of William James on the subject. He writes: "Medical materialism seems indeed a good appellation for the too simple-minded system of thought which we are considering. Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic.

It snubs out Saint Teresa as any hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as an hereditary degenerate. George Fox's discontent with the shams of his age, and his pining for spiritual veracity, it treats as a symptom of disordered colon, Carlyle's organtones of misery it accounts for by a gastro-duodenal catarrh. All such mental overtensions, it says, are, when you come to the bottom of the matter, mere affairs of diathesis (auto-intoxications, most probably, due to the perverted action of various glands which physiology will yet discover)" (*The varieties of Religious Experience*, London, 1952, pp. 14-15).

4. *Prophecy in Islam*, Rahman F., George Allen & Unwin Ltd. London, 1958, p. 31.

[5.](#) Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Tafsir al-Qur'an, tr. C. W. Troll, "Sir Sayyid's credo" The text translated in Sayyid Ahmad Khan-Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology, Vikas, Delhi, 1978, p. 281.

[6.](#) Ibid., p. 290.

[7.](#) It may be remarked here by the way that while an ontology which speaks of the possibility of the one type of existence being transformed into another type has been a common characteristic of all great philosophical traditions-Indian, Greek, and latterly (a derivatively), Muslim-seeing this transformation in an evolutionistic frame of reference is, in all probability, an exclusive Muslim contribution to the history of thought and science. See, for instance, Ibn Khaldun, Muqaddimah, Eng. Tran. (Pantheon Books, New York, 1958), p. 195.

[8.](#) Ibid., pp. 195-6.

[9.](#) Ibid., p. 197.

[10.](#) Ibid., pp.199-200.

[11.](#) Ibid., p. 199.

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