

Two Accounts of Qur’anic Revelation

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This essay examines the notions of revelation and prophecy as offered by Fazlur Rahman and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. Their ideas regarding prophecy and revelation contribute to the clarification of some foundational issues in Islamic theology. For both Rahman and Abu Zayd, theology begins with the idea that divine revelation is intended for human beings. So, even though this revelation is divine in origin, it is also mostly intelligible. This rethinking of the idea of revelation is welcomed by some Muslim thinkers, but has not met with so positive a reception in more traditional Islamic circles. I argue that what makes these human-centric accounts of revelation controversial is the idea of Muhammad’s “contribution” to the revelation process and the article investigates this idea as it is formulated in the work of these two scholars.

Keywords: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd; Fazlur Rahman; revelation; angel; Jibreel; Qur’an exegesis; Islam; Qur’an interpretation; hermeneutics; humanism; contemporary Islam; Muhammad; emanation; *ijtihad*

Introduction

Muslims can hardly avoid engagement with the question of what Islam entails for contemporary believers. But Islam is a religion that is based on an assumed divine revelation. It follows that one can answer the question of what Islam entails only if one can offer an intelligible account of what is meant by prophecy and revelation. No serious Muslim religious thinker can avoid engagement with this difficult theological topic. Study of contemporary Islamic thought suggests that ideas regarding divine revelation reflect broader theological depictions of God’s relationship to creation. This is certainly the case in the works of Fazlur Rahman and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. A humanistic¹ approach to revelation will assume that God reveals himself in ways that are intelligible, that is to say, understandable by human beings. Both of the authors studied here emphasize this by noting that the revelation came through the work of a particular human being, that it was related to specific circumstances in the life of that individual, and came expressed in a language that was shaped by the ideas of its time. This article explores how Rahman and Abu Zayd describe the event of revelation, focusing on what they regard as the contribution Muhammad himself made to this process. It will also discuss what implications they believe their ideas have for a contemporary understanding of Islam.

The thinkers

Fazlur Rahman

Fazlur Rahman Malik (1919–1988) was an influential scholar from Pakistan, trained in *tafsīr*, Hadith, *fiqh*, theology, philosophy and Arabic at Punjab University (MA, 1942). At Oxford,

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Rahman gained his PhD in 1949 with a work on Avicenna's psychology under the supervision of Simon van den Bergh. He then taught Persian Studies and Islamic Philosophy at Durham University (UK), and Islamic Studies at McGill University (Canada). In 1962, under Pakistan's then president, Muhammad Ayub Khan, he became head of the Central Institute of Islamic Research, which was established to provide intellectual support for Khan's modernization programme for Pakistan. For this modernization, three crucial components of an Islamic state had, according to Rahman, to be rethought: the ulama, government administration and the populace. Defining their roles should be based on qur'anic principles, primarily that of *justice*. This could be achieved through intellectual jihad (*ijtihād*) and moral jihad, which Rahman (1982a, 7) cites as the core internal struggles of each individual. As long as these struggles are undertaken, Islamic law and theology remain dynamic, socially relevant and morally necessary. Obstacles to these struggles are a static *ijmā'* (consensus as found in orthodox Islam) and a closed door to *ijtihād*, and the lack of connection between law, theology and ethics (Armajani 2004, 87). Such impediments, he asserts, are responsible for the "suicide of the Islamic development" (Rahman 1982b, 270).

Staunch opposition to Rahman's reform ideas particularly emerged when he expressed in his book *Islam* (1966) the idea of the birth of God's word in Muhammad's mind. He now had to face anger and disapproval from Pakistani theological circles and consequently from Ayub Khan's political opponents, who realized that the ulama's opinions suited their interests in degrading Rahman, the intellectual power behind Ayub Khan's reforms and policies. After he was threatened,² resignation from his duties at the Central Institute of Islamic Research followed in September. Rahman left Pakistan and became a visiting Professor at the University of California – Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1969 and later the Harold H. Swift Distinguished Service Professor of Islamic Thought/Studies at the University of Chicago in 1969 (Saeed 2004, 39). He served temporarily as "an adviser to the Indonesian government in the establishment of Higher Education in Islam and as a consultant to the White House from 1979–1980" (Berry 2003, 50). In Chicago, he established the Near Eastern Studies programme and was devoted to the University of Chicago until his death.

Today his greatest influence can be found in intellectual circles in North America, Turkey and Indonesia. His best known scholarly followers are probably Nurcholish Madjid, Farid Esack and Amina Wadud. The last deploys Rahman's criteria for exegesis in *Qur'ān and Woman* (1999).

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943–2010) was an Egyptian scholar trained in literary studies, rhetoric and Islamic studies at Cairo University. He received his PhD in 1981 with a work on the Islamic mystic Ibn 'Arabī. In 1987, Abu Zayd became associate professor at Cairo University and followed a call to the University of Osaka (Japan), where he was guest professor until 1989. He published *Naqd al-kitāb al-dīnī* (Critique of Religious Discourse) in 1992 (Abu Zayd 1996), and his application for a tenured professorship at Cairo University was rejected in the same year. A court trial led to his conviction for apostasy, based on the allegation that Abu Zayd questioned the divine character of revelation and the Qur'an (Thielmann 2003). Defamation led to various death threats being made against Abu Zayd and his wife, so they escaped to the Netherlands. From 2000 to 2001, Abu Zayd held the Cleveringa Honorary Chair in Law, Responsibility, Freedom of Religion and Conscience and was guest professor at the University of Leiden. From 2002 to 2003, he was Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and then held the Ibn-Ruṣd (Averroes) Chair at the Utrecht University for Humanistic Studies until 2008. He remained professor emeritus until his death.

Rahman on revelation

Rahman asserts that the Qur'an has a dual character, which he believes incorporates both a divine and a human aspect. The twofold nature of revelation emerges from the way revelation proceeds. Central to Rahman's thought is that Muhammad was not merely a passive recipient and transmitter of the divine messages and that revelation must have involved some process internal to the heart and mind of the Prophet. This suggests that Muhammad, as a human being, made an active contribution to the process of revelation.³

Rahman (1976, 299) rejects what he sees as a purely "external" account of the process of revelation:

I defended the idea of the verbal revelation of the Quran, which is the universal belief. However, it seemed to me that the standard orthodox accounts of revelation give a mechanical and externalistic picture of the relationship between Muhammad and the Qur'an – Gabriel coming and delivering God's messages to him almost like a postman delivering letters.

Rahman does not deny the divine origin of the Qur'an, but takes into it the idea that the message "comes down to the heart" of Muhammad. He states that "the Qur'ān is entirely the Word of God insofar as it is infallible and absolutely free from falsehood, but, insofar as it comes to the Prophet's heart and then his tongue, it was entirely his word" (Rahman 1976, 299).

It should be noted in this context that Rahman (2009, 13) depicts Muhammad as a fallible being. He refers to Q 7.100 and 41.36, and concludes that Muhammad was not immune to the devil's temptations, any more than any other human being. However, although fallibility implies the potential for error, it does not mean that Muhammad actually fell into error. Rahman nowhere affirms that the Prophet was guilty of error, despite his human fallibility.

Given the nature of traditional Muslim beliefs regarding the Qur'an, any idea of Muhammad's active participation in or contribution to the process of divine revelation poses serious theological problems. To investigate the notion of revelation, Rahman returns to the qur'anic verses that state that there are three ways in which God communicates with humankind: through inspiration, "from behind a veil," or through a messenger (Q 42.51–52). The Qur'an does not clarify how its own revelation took place. This has allowed Islamic tradition to speculate about the process. In addition, Rahman reflects upon possible ways of revelation and develops a general opposition to the traditional view, which renders Muhammad an inactive recipient. On the one hand, Rahman insists that both the Prophet's human state of mind and the divine influence contributed to revelation; in other words, it was neither a process of pure divine dictation nor one of pure human imagination. On the other, Rahman rejects the idea that revelation took place by allowing Muhammad somehow to feel revelation and then express those feelings in his own words. Rahman (1966, 33) asserts:

[...] it is a mistaken notion that ideas and feelings float about in it [revelation] and can be mechanically "clothed" in words. There exists indeed, an organic relationship between feelings, ideas and words. In inspiration, even in poetic inspiration, this relationship is so complete that feeling-idea-word is a total complex with a life of its own.

So how must we understand this complex of feeling and words? It is clear that Rahman is not satisfied with the idea that Muhammad received words in the ordinary sense. He writes (2009, 100): "the words heard were mental and not acoustic, since the Spirit and the Voice were internal to him" and although "revelation emanated from God, on the other it was also intimately connected with his deeper personality. Thus the popular traditional accounts of the utter externality of the agency of Revelation cannot be accepted as correct." Rahman speaks here about the nature of the "words" the Prophet obtained. What were transmitted were non-acoustic, mental idea-word sounds (99). This poses the question of how these mental words were finally transformed into human utterances, specifically in the Arabic language.

In any case, there emerges a tension between Rahman's belief that Muhammad received words and his insistence that the Prophet's mind had a part in imagining them. I attribute this tension to the way Rahman understands the nature of these words. It seems that he offers a scheme of thought that presents numerous possibilities without embracing one of them in particular. It seems evident, however, that Rahman was inspired by Ibn Sīnā's (Avicenna's) understanding of imagination or intellectualization.⁴ By considering Ibn Sīnā's influence on Rahman, it will be possible to construct at least one of the possible models of revelation that Rahman's thinking allows for.

In order to comprehend how Ibn Sīnā understood the active intellect, we have to recognize that his theory of revelation is developed in the context of neo-Platonic speculation.⁵ Hence, he thinks of the imparting of revelation as a process of emanation. Not only Ibn Sīnā, but also other neo-Platonic Muslim thinkers incorporated the idea of *logos* (Greek for *ratio*, "reason" or "rationality") into their philosophy of knowledge. The Arabic term that best conveys the idea of *logos* is '*aql*'. According to a hadith, '*aql*' was believed to be the first creation by God (Rahman and de Boer 2012).⁶ Muslim philosophers and theologians developed different ideas about '*aql*' and its functions. The Greek thinker Alexander of Aphrodisias, who interpreted Aristotle's thought on *logos* ('*aql*'), had the most influence on Islamic thought on this topic. He believed that reason could be divided into the potential intellect and the active intellect. The active intellect can be divided into *intellectus in habitu* and *intellectus in actu*. Ibn Sīnā incorporates these terms in his theory of emanation and gives his own understanding of how such intellects are actually acquired. Rahman explains:

According to Ibn Sina (al-Shifa', De anima) the potential intellect ('*aql* bi '*l-quwwa*, or '*aql* hayulani = intellectus potentialis or materialis) reaches the first stage of its actualization when it acquires the axiomatic truths (this is called '*aql* bi '*l-malaka* = intellectus in habitu), the second stage (called '*aql* bi '*l-fi'l* = intellectus in actu) when it acquires the secondary intelligibles from the primary intelligibles or axioms, the final stage ('*aql* mustafad = intellectus acquisitus) when it actually contemplates these intelligibles and becomes similar to the active intellect. Ibn Sina, inspired by Neo-platonism, affirms that the universal cannot be acquired by abstraction from the particulars, but by direct intuition from the active intelligence. The final stage of human bliss comes when the human intellect becomes one with the active intellect, which happens, according to al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, only after death, although Ibn Rushd allows such a union during earthly life. (Rahman and de Boer 2012)⁷

The merging of the human soul (Greek: *psychē*; Arabic: *nafs*) with the divine intellect is an idea found within Sufism, Islamic mysticism. Some Muslim thinkers held that '*aql*' is God himself, while some said it was part of the human soul.

Rahman (1952, 116–117) reflects on Book two, Chapter 6, of Ibn Sīnā's *Kitāb al-najāt*:

Avicenna gives a detailed account of the nature of the action of the active intelligence on the potential intellect in order to render it actual. Before the intellection takes place the human soul has, on the one hand, the images of the particular material objects, and, on the other, the potential intellect. The potential intellect considers and compares these images, and this activity prepares it to receive the universal intelligible from the active intelligence by way of emanation. It is not the transportation of the image, denuded of its material attachments by the illumination of the active intelligence, into the intellect which constitutes the act of intellection, but an intellectual intuition coming directly from the active intelligence. Avicenna compares this with the intuitive perception on the part of the intellect of the necessary connexion between the premises and the conclusion. Nor does the universal element in the images produce its like in the intellect. The images are then not the cause of the intelligible at all. Their consideration by the soul is merely preparatory for the reception of the intelligible.

According to Ibn Sīnā, a human mind prepares its potential intellect for the emanation of the active intellect by comparing images, which comprise material objects. The comparison aims at finding the universal in all of them, not as cause of understanding, but as its necessary

condition. Understanding occurs through the “intellectual intuition coming directly from the active intelligence” (Rahman 1952, 116–117).

Returning to the initial question of how Ibn Sīnā understands revelation, it may be helpful to understand how past Muslim philosophers have thought of the active intelligence. Here, too, I follow Rahman, who writes in his article on *‘aql* that the philosophers believed in 10 spheres of intellects, which are “incorporeal beings, usually ten in number and endowed with life, intuitive thought and bliss in varying degrees, create and govern their respective spheres which themselves are regarded as being possessed of souls” (Rahman and de Boer 2012). The active intellect, then, is the lowest intellect and is identified by Muslim philosophers with the spirit or angel Jibrīl who is “the ruling *‘aql* of the sublunar sphere” (Rahman and de Boer 2012). The active intellect, in other words, is the 10th and lowest intellect, sometimes identified as an angel. Recall, too, that in some Islamic accounts of revelation Jibrīl was the spirit that transmitted the qur’anic message to Muhammad, an idea from which (as we shall see) Rahman distances himself.

Now, Ibn Sīnā gives a detailed account of the active intellect, which he identifies with the 10th intellect within his model that correlates spheres and intellects, a correlation that is integral to his cosmology (Strohmaier 2006, 65).⁸ He believes that the active intellect is the platform from which materials for reality and thought could be, as it were, “downloaded.” Whatever material, mental or physical, is transmitted, it is the active intellect that gives it its specific forms.

Translated into the context of Rahman’s thought on revelation, two aspects become clearer. We recall that, according to Ibn Sīnā, the ordinary human mind has to prepare for gaining knowledge. This preparation is the comparison of images in order to receive the categorical terms, which reveal the truth of things. This is what in Rahman’s account of revelation could be understood as the contribution of the human mind to the act of understanding. The understanding that results from the process of revelation is therefore divine, but is also conditioned by the human intellect’s preparation. That the divine is conditioned seems to risk contradiction, since the divine should be beyond all limits, but this view makes sense when a human is chosen by God to play an active part in this process.

Indeed, Rahman emphasizes that revelation is a semi-mutual process, meaning that Muhammad’s mind had to be in a receptive state in order to be illuminated through revelation. Illumination in Ibn Sīnā’s scheme means that the potential intellect becomes aware of the universal in all images and hence becomes actual. We need to keep in mind, however, that Ibn Sīnā is describing the process of gaining knowledge in general, which he does not limit to acts of revelation and prophecy.

Given that Rahman wrote extensively on Ibn Sīnā, it is not unreasonable to assume that he was influenced by his thought. The key fact here is that Ibn Sīnā believes that knowledge is brought about through a process of emanation from the active intellect to humankind (Strohmaier 2006, 65). Ibn Sīnā and Rahman hold in common the idea that the human mind actively participates in the process of gaining knowledge (in the case of Ibn Sīnā) or prophetic revelation (in the case of Rahman).

Rahman’s account of how the Prophet received emanation from the “ultimate source of all being” is not as detailed as that given by Ibn Sīnā, but it suggests a conception that is at least similar.

[...]: what the Qur’ān is essentially saying is that God’s Prophets or human Messengers are recipients of some special or extraordinary power which emanates from the ultimate source of all being and which fills the hearts of these Prophets with something which is light whereby they see and know things the way others are not able to. At the same time, this power determines them upon a course of action that changes the lives of whole peoples. This undying and ever renewed Spirit is nothing other than the Agency of all being and life. It is the guarantee that whenever the human race sinks

into the moral morass of its own follies, there is always hope for its rescue and renewal. (Rahman 2009, 98–99)

Rahman also reflects on the tradition that mentions a mediator of revelation, often identified as the angel Jibrīl. Belief in a mediator indicates that Muhammad did not receive messages directly through inspiration from the Divine, but that this inspiration was channelled through a medium or, as Rahman (2009, 93) formulates it, through an “agent of Revelation.” Recall that the 10th intellect was sometimes associated with the angel Jibrīl in medieval Islamic thought. Rahman, however, holds a different view, a fact highlighted by Webb (2010). In his *Major Themes* (2009, 95), he argues that the spirit of revelation is not identified in the Qur’an as the angel Jibrīl, which suggests that the spirit is probably of a nature higher than the angelic. “[T]he Qur’ān,” he writes, “describes the agent of Revelation, at least to Muḥammad, never as an angel, but always as Spirit or spiritual Messenger. [...] the Qur’ān does not mention them [the angels] as agents of Revelation [...]” He goes on to say that “[i]t is probable that the Spirit is the highest form of the angelic nature and the closest to God (cf. 81:19–21 [...])” (96). That Rahman recognizes the medium of a spirit between God and Muhammad does not diminish the internal character of revelation within Muhammad. Rahman cites passages from the Qur’an which state that revelation comes down to the heart of the Prophet (Rahman refers to Q 26.193, 42.24).⁹ He understands these passages to say that God sends this spirit to the heart of Muhammad. In support of this idea of an indirect revelation to Muhammad, he emphasizes that the Qur’an denies any direct conversation between God and humankind. Furthermore, he considers an alternative interpretation of what the spirit is:

There is also a suggestion that the Spirit is the actual content of Revelation: “Even so have We revealed to you a Spirit of Our Command” (42:52; cf. also 40:50: “He casts the Spirit of His Command upon whomsoever He wills”). Perhaps the Spirit is a power or a faculty or an agency which develops in the Prophet’s heart and which comes into actual revelatory operation when needed, but it originally does “descend” from “above.” This is in perfect harmony with a well-known Islamic tradition according to which the entire Qur’ān was first “brought down” to the lowest heaven (i.e., the Prophet’s heart, as thinkers like al-Ghazālī and Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī would rightly say) and then relevant verbal passages produced when needed. (Rahman 2009, 97)

This interpretation could support Rahman’s idea that the Qur’an has a certain spirit, which is geared towards the good and just. If we combine Rahman’s thoughts on revelation with the traces of Ibn Sīnā’s account, we find the following: The universal, which is to be recognized by the illuminated Muhammad, would in Rahman’s scenario be the divine law and main concept of God, namely Justice. The universal message Muhammad shared with his followers was that God is just and all creation is aimed at justice. Hence, all deeds should be righteous and represent this concept of justice or at least lead towards its establishment in society. This universal message (stored within Muhammad’s heart) was expressed in particular words concerning particular historical events during Muhammad’s lifetime (Rahman 1952, 119). Rahman’s understanding of revelation may thus be summarized as follows: Revelation is of divine origin. However, God did not communicate with Muhammad directly but through a medium, a spirit close to God. The Qur’an (unlike the secondary literature) does not identify this spirit as the angel Jibrīl. The spirit infused messages into the heart of the Prophet. This was an internal process in which Muhammad perceived these messages as non-acoustic idea-words (perhaps one could call them “verbal”). Muhammad was then inspired to use specific Arabic words to articulate the messages. Rahman does not exclude, and even suggests, that Muhammad’s heart was in possession of all the qur’anic messages before he released them on specific occasions, spread over 22 years of prophethood. The human contribution to the process of revelation was Muhammad’s mind, which was gifted by the Divine to receive and understand all knowledge of the revelations.

The result of this process was that all the words uttered by Muhammad that came to make up the Qur'an came from the divine spirit. For Rahman, there cannot be any falsehood in it, even though Muhammad himself remains a fallible human being. Muhammad's initial struggles with his task as Prophet show his fallibility and prove his humanity and individuality. Rahman believes that Muhammad initially struggled with his role as mediator. He describes the Prophet as shy and reluctant to get involved with other people's lives. On the other hand, through his growing experience with the divine revelation, Muhammad became increasingly determined to secure the fundamentals of the ethico-legal purpose of the Qur'an. The principles of social justice, as they emerged during the period of revelation, were consequently implemented in the form of concrete social policies. Rahman holds that Muhammad's policies were corrected over time and adapted to the current needs of society. The continuous processing of the qur'anic messages is an established notion within Rahman's thought and has great influence on carrying out Qur'an interpretation.

Although the practice of exegesis is not the subject of this article, it might be helpful to mention some of the consequences that result for Scripture interpretation from Rahman's views on revelation. The basis for exegetical efforts is that all human beings with a sufficient level of *taqwā* are able to engage in understanding the ethical code contained in the qur'anic messages.¹⁰ The intellectual effort of the individual to engage in interpreting the Qur'an is called *ijtihad*. According to Rahman (1982b, 269), there is no monopoly on *ijtihad*, which "is really an attempt at thinking and nobody ever either 'gave' any one the right to think or 'confiscated' this right from him." Rahman saw that within Islamic history the ulama (theologically trained clerics) were increasingly supportive of politicians, political agendas and state interests. They tended to consolidate Sharia opinions into an objectified body of knowledge. A consolidation therefore occurred of what was originally a personal understanding of God's will, allowing for further possible interpretations and opinions. The consolidated view and the collusion of clerics in maintaining the political power of statesmen led to a neglect of ethics and the qur'anic spirit of justice (Armajani 2004, 86–87). In opposition to this unfortunate development, Rahman pleads for the ongoing adaptation of the Qur'an's ethical guidelines, each according to the needs of the Islamic society. Only such a continuity of applied *ijtihad* will serve the development of just societies.¹¹

That *ijtihad* is indeed a personal endeavour, which comes along with inner development and growth, is reflected in the mental struggle of the Prophet Muhammad in accepting his prophethood. Growing into his role as a Prophet and "with this mixture of opposing mental traits and conscious of a 'heavy mission,' as the Qur'an says [Muhammad was] engaged in a constant inner dialectic – the ideal moral state for man to be in, according to the Qur'an" (Rahman 1982a, 16–17). This mental struggle is illustrated in Rahman's explanation of Q 53:

The verses in sura 53, where the Prophet had reportedly made concessions to the goddesses of the Meccan pagans that were subsequently "abrogated," are along with other Qur'anic evidence, direct proof of this phenomenon. The second side of the Prophet, his determination, finally won over his other side. (Rahman 1982a, 16–17)

Indeed, well-known works on the life of Muhammad such as that by Ibn Ishāq mention that the Prophet made concessions to worshipping the three goddesses, in what have been called the "satanic verses." However, the text of the Qur'an does not speak of making concessions, but rather criticizes the practices concerning the goddesses, practices that it insists were not instituted by (the true) God.

Nonetheless, it remains important to note Rahman's belief that Muhammad was not immune to the devil's temptations, any more than other fallible human beings. In all his fallibility Muhammad remains a "model for mankind" (Rahman 2009, 62), and Rahman never suggests

that Muhammad fell into error when performing his prophetic task. Indeed, Rahman's unshakeable belief in the holistic nature of the divine message of justice – that the whole Qur'an expresses this one underlying message – does not seem to allow for any suggestion of error.

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd on revelation

For Abu Zayd, there is no doubt about the divine source of the revelation found in the Qur'an. At the same time, he emphasizes that the sending of this revelation was context related, so that to understand it we need to study the social conditions in the Hijaz at the time of revelation. According to Abu Zayd, such historical and sociological knowledge enables us to identify those parts of the revelation that are purely contingent. He hopes that in this way an understanding can be achieved of how Muhammad might have perceived the messages (Abu Zayd 2003, 39). In general, Abu Zayd is not interested in speculating about the divine source of the message of the Qur'an; he is more concerned about the current application of the text. In fact, he removes the actual moments of revelation from the field of scientific investigation, asserting in an interview given to Kermani (1996, 63) that "every discourse about the Quran [itself] is a metaphysical discourse, not a scientific one." The only process open to scientific investigation is the way "God reveals himself in the world" (87). However, although Abu Zayd exempts the Qur'an's divine origin from scientific examination, he still assumes certain ideas about the revelation process. The coming paragraphs will consider how Abu Zayd views what he calls the "communication" between God and Muhammad.

Central to Abu Zayd's quest for understanding revelation is his analysis of the Arabic term *wahy*, which is broadly equivalent to the English word "revelation." He shows how it was understood in pre-Islamic times and during the time of the qur'anic revelations, and how it is used in the Qur'an itself.¹² By examining the pre-Islamic understanding, Abu Zayd hopes to shed light on how the qur'anic use of the term should be understood, especially against the background of the first audience's beliefs. His conclusion is that the term refers within the Qur'an to various communication processes, just as it did within pre-Islamic times. *Wahy* originally referred to poetry, prophecy and soothsaying, which possibly included communication between humans and jinn. In this last sense, *wahy* meant communication between humans and superhuman beings (Wild 1993, 258; Kermani 1996, 42; Sukidi 2009, 195). Abu Zayd claims that in the case of *wahy* only the person directly addressed can understand the "mysterious and hidden information" that is transmitted to the human receiver (Sukidi 2009, 193). To an observer (*al-murāqib*), this process remains incomprehensible and inexplicable (Wild 1993, 258).

Referring to *wahy* in the sense of communication between humans and supernatural beings, Abu Zayd concludes that *wahy* was generally understood as communication between the superhuman sender (*mursil*) and the human receivers (*mustaqbil*), who are those to whom the code (*shifra*) is known.¹³ The *shifra* is the medium (*wasila*) that enables communication of the message (*risāla*). Hildebrandt (2007, 400) suggests that Abu Zayd considers the *shifra* to be a matter of human convention and thus known to all who share the conventions in question, whereas Kermani and Wild give the impression that Abu Zayd believes this code to be known only to the sender and the receiver. Perhaps the two ideas can be reconciled by suggesting that, for Abu Zayd, while the code itself is not exclusive to sender and recipient, the message is. This notion can be supported by Abu Zayd's claim that the revelations to Muhammad were first of all non-verbal, a claim to which I shall return in a moment. It also explains why the message is initially incomprehensible to the third party (Abu Zayd 2008a, 89). However, it is important to note that, for Abu Zayd, *wahy* between the divine sphere and

Muhammad was first of all a non-verbal process, so that its messages must necessarily be decoded so as to be expressed in language.

As mentioned earlier, the Qur'an refers to three types of revelation: through inspiration, from behind a veil, or through a messenger (see Q 42.51–52). An example of *wahy* through inspiration is “*wahy* to Moses’ mother (al-Quran/28:7). The notion of *wahy* here is to signify ‘speech without word’, or ‘code-speech without sound’” (Sukidi 2009, 195). The second, “from behind a veil,” is illustrated in the story of God speaking to Moses from behind a mountain (as appears to be illustrated by Q 7.143). A different verse (Q 4.164) indicates direct speech of God to Moses. Sukidi shows how Abu Zayd tries to reconcile the idea of indirectly speaking from behind the mountain with the notion of direct communication. Abu Zayd, Sukidi (2009, 196) writes, “argues that God’s direct speech to Moses represents ‘speech with language’ so that Moses could easily comprehend His speech.” Nonetheless, in the context of this specific verse, which presents God’s communication with Moses, *wahy* still indicates “God’s speech.”

It is important to note, however, that, for Abu Zayd, the qur’anic term *wahy* and its related verbs do not always refer to divine speech. He refers, for instance, to Q 31, which indicates that God’s words are unlimited and that the term *wahy* is not synonymous with God’s speech (Abu Zayd 2008a, 129). It is true that when verbs from the root *w-h-y* appear in the Qur’an they generally relate to communication between superhuman and human, but they can also be used to refer to sign language between people. Abu Zayd is referring here to the non-verbal communication which, the Qur’an claims, took place between Zechariah and his people (Q 19.10–11; 3.41).

Abu Zayd claims, in fact, that *wahy* in all its appearances in the Qur’an refers to non-verbal communication (2009), even when this communication occurs between agents of two different ontological levels, namely Allah and Muhammad. Abu Zayd draws on Hadith literature (in this case al-Bukhārī) to argue that the *wahy* that was involved in the prophetic revelation was a non-verbal event (Abu Zayd 2008b, 73). In his (2009) interview, Abu Zayd explains:

Generally speaking, Muslims believe that *wahy* in case of Islam, in case of Qur’an, was through a mediator: Jibrīl. So God sent Jibrīl, the angel and Jibrīl transmitted the divine message to Muhammad. How, we don’t know. We have no clue. We have only the reports by Muhammad about this process, in the *sīra*. As the reports of Muhammad, if we study them, he would say at the beginning it was very, very hard. It was like ringing bell, or like the sound of so many [ants? (unclear)]. Whether it is a bell ring or the wind, it is not verbal. And we have his description of his wife Aisha, when he was under *wahy* they have to cover his face. Because he would feel very hot, even in a cold day. He was sweating and his face changed. When it is over, I mean this *wahy*, then he could come out with the verbal expression of *wahy*. So it is obvious from this description that *wahy* through the mediator according to the Islamic belief, was not verbal communication. We have qur’anic evidence. In qur’anic evidence, there is a passage in the Qur’an [...], God would never communicate with humans but only with three channels. By *wahy*, which means non-verbal communication, or from behind a veil, and this has been understood as the way of God communicating with Moses from behind the mountain,¹⁴ Sinai, or from behind the bush. From behind the fire bush or from the Sinai Moses just heard the voices, he did not see God [unclear: of course this is impossible]. There was a voice here. [unclear: the third mean that] God sent the messenger [...] reveal, which means, by *wahy*. So we have in the third case, which was taken by Muslim theologians as this is how Muhammad received the message. The word *wahy* is used, that God sent a messenger [by his message]. But the messenger, *yuhy*, which means inspired, Muhammad. Again, the Qur’an is using the word *wahy*, which means non verbal communication.

According to this view, Muhammad was inspired non-verbally and exited the revelation process in a state of verbalizing these inspirations.¹⁵ Abu Zayd seems to deviate here from Rahman, who denies that Muhammad clothed the received messages in words. Still, Abu Zayd expresses an understanding of the verbalization process that seems to resemble what Rahman called the complete feeling-word complex. This resemblance may be detected in what Abu

Zayd calls the synchronicity between the sending of the message and the comprehension of its meaning by the receiver. What does he mean by this? According to Kermani (1996, 40), Abu Zayd is referring to Ibn Khaldūn's comment on the character of *wahy*, in which Ibn Khaldūn understands *wahy* to take place outside of time. Abu Zayd claims that sending and decoding take place simultaneously.¹⁶ In our context, synchronicity excludes the idea that the qur'anic revelation somehow preceded the formulation of the message. This means the revelation has instant meaning for the Prophet and that the communicative character of the message entails the necessary comprehension of its meaning.

A further way of understanding the communication between God and creation is the idea of signs. Such signs should be witnesses to the divine origin of God's creation. Abu Zayd understands the inspirations to Muhammad as signs of God, too. With reference to Ibn 'Arabī and drawing on a number of qur'anic verses (e.g. Q 2.118, 187, 221, 230, 242, 266, 3.103, 5.89, 24.58f. and 57.17), Abu Zayd comprehends the Qur'an and the entire creation as signs (*āyāt*; sing. *āya*) of God. While natural signs are visible to all humans who wish to understand creation, revelation as oral text is in need of a messenger, who receives the signs and communicates them to an audience.

To summarize Abu Zayd's view so far: God chose a human as Prophet and hence human language to communicate a verbalized message to the people. This verbalized message is accessible to all humans through their rationality. If I understand Abu Zayd, correctly, the *shifra* mentioned above was known to Muhammad, who could instantly decode the inspiration and reveal its meaning. The *shifra* here is the meaning known only by God and Muhammad. At a later date, when the verbalized message is spread, hearers have to apply their rational abilities to understand the codes that remain in the text, especially in the ambiguous parts. Decoding and recoding then takes place in human terms where the *shifra* is known to every human. In the aftermath of the actual revelation to Muhammad, Abu Zayd wants to understand the Qur'an not only as the verbalized will of God, but also as God's speech, in order to emphasize the communicative character of the divine message. God speaks to the people and this speech is an *āya* to them, which can be understood in human terms and whose meanings can be explored and expressed in human language.

Let us turn our attention to Muhammad's role in revelation, as Abu Zayd understands it. My study of Fazlur Rahman's understanding of revelation, which I have interpreted in the light of Ibn Sīnā's ideas, has suggested that the only possible contribution by Muhammad to the revelation process would have been the preparation of his mind for receiving the universal messages. Abu Zayd's view, by way of comparison, is that Muhammad was in a state of transformation during the process of revelation.¹⁷

Rahman (2001, 37) expresses this aspect of Abu Zayd's thinking as follows:

The transformation of Muhammad to the level of angel, according to Abū Zayd, however, was not a literal physical transformation [...], but rather occurred through imagination [...]. This is where Abū Zayd introduces the philosophers' and Sufis' discussion of prophecy. According to them, a Prophet can grasp the revelation through his imaginative faculty [...]. This faculty is greater in the Prophet than in philosophers, mystics or ordinary people. Compared to philosophers and mystics, the Prophet does not need training to increase the power of his imaginative faculty but has this granted to him by God. In ordinary people, by contrast, this faculty can only be performed in a limited time, especially during sleep.¹⁸

This suggests that prophets have no need for a preparation of the mind; they are gifted in such a way that they can understand the divine message instantly. For my part, however, I cannot find evidence of this view in Abu Zayd's writings. He holds, rather, that Muhammad received the messages non-verbally and therefore had to use his fallible and limited human abilities to clothe the messages in words that could be understood by the first communal audience.

Here, I would like to offer two critical remarks. First, I see some similarities between Rahman's and Abu Zayd's understandings of Muhammad's experiences. Rahman, for example, refers to the Night Journey (*al-isrā'* and *mī'rāj*) of the Prophet, which Rahman (2009, 92–94) understands as a spiritual journey, not a physical one. Abu Zayd similarly rejects the idea that Muhammad was physically elevated to the spheres of angels in the moment of receiving revelations; he believes that this journey was a spiritual experience. Rahman and Abu Zayd also locate Muhammad's revelation experiences in the rational and imaginational faculties of the Prophet, who might have been granted a special gift of connecting to the divine sphere.

There remains the important question of whether, in the moment of revelation, meanings and words were transmitted simultaneously. This question is related to Abu Zayd's concepts of code and decoding and will have implications for how one thinks about the "humanity" of the Qur'an. It seems to me that Abu Zayd points towards an understanding of the revelation that is slightly different from that found in the studies of his thought by Kermani and Hildebrandt. Hildebrandt holds that Abu Zayd rejects the idea that only the transmission of the message's meaning (*ma'nā*) took place between God and Jibrīl, and that the transmission into language or word-sound (*lafẓ*) would have taken place subsequently. Abu Zayd (2003, 12) refers to the Mu'tazilī thought of (al-Nazzām's student) Abū 'Uthmān al-Jāhīz, who believed that the meaning (*ma'nā*) is delivered with the word (*lafẓ*). This means the signifier (*al-dalāla*) comes along with the signified (*al-madlūl 'alayhi*), but despite Abu Zayd's adherence to some Mu'tazilī ideas, he does not indicate that he is following al-Jāhīz in this regard. For Abu Zayd, Hildebrandt (2007, 417) remarks, the wording is entirely divine, without any human contribution. Kermani (1996, 63) seems to take the same line and concludes that Abu Zayd believes in the "inverbation of God in the Quran." My previous findings suggest, however, that this view is incorrect. Abu Zayd's strong emphasis on the nature of revelation as non-verbal inspiration, and his explanation of the concept of *wahy* as the transmission of codes known to sender and receiver and mute for others, suggest that he viewed inspiration as follows: Muhammad received non-verbal inspirations which he then uttered in Arabic, the only language he knew. That this language was not the language of the revelation is clear to Abu Zayd, who believes that neither God nor Jibrīl spoke Arabic. Hence, the code known between Jibrīl, God and Muhammad must have been one that is different from Arabic. Muhammad may have understood the revelation immediately, but this does not mean that it came already clothed in Arabic words.

The idea of verbal inspiration is of course problematic for any scriptural exegesis. If the wording is already determined by God, then the human contribution of the prophets in formulating the proclamations can only be that of a passive receiver. Hildebrandt and Kermani seem to argue that Abu Zayd believes Muhammad to have received words and meaning simultaneously. Believing that the Qur'an contains the infallible incarnation of God's words is to understand inverbation in the sense that Protestant believers hold to the infallibility of the words of the Gospels, because Jesus Himself is Word. One consequence of this would be that the text, which is believed to capture the wording, is entirely God's speech. It seems to me that this would lend support to the idea of the ultimate inscrutability of the text's meaning, which Abu Zayd argues to be a critical obstacle in the way of reforming Muslim societies. So I would be reluctant to hold that Abu Zayd believes in inverbation (as the Protestant Church teaches it). We have to be careful about saying that Abu Zayd holds to the notion of verbal inspiration, without looking more carefully at his position.¹⁹

If one assumes that Abu Zayd does not believe in verbal revelation, one question remains unanswered. We know (from my interview data) that Abu Zayd believed Muhammad to have received revelation by way of inspiration and most probably through a mediator, perhaps Jibrīl. If *tanzīl*, the revelation process between the mediator and Muhammad, was non-verbal,

than precisely how did inspiration occur? In other words, what role did the mediator have in the inspiration process? Abu Zayd (2009) is certainly aware of this problem: “So God sent Gabriel, the angel, and Gabriel transmitted the divine message to Muḥammad. How, we don’t know. We have no clue.” It does not seem a problem for Abu Zayd to simply take Jibrīl as a given in the process; he seems to have considered it more important to understand Muhammad as a fallible human in a process of revelation that was a form of non-verbal inspiration.

As we saw earlier, Abu Zayd rejects the possibility of researching the actual event of revelation. Nevertheless, we also saw evidence of his conviction that the Prophet received revelation non-verbally. On this view, the most significant contribution of Muhammad would be his formulation of the revealed messages into Arabic. To recognize the Prophet’s role in the formulation of the messages entails recognizing the cultural and historical conditioning of the resulting messages. This conditioning is reflected in Abu Zayd’s distinction between two different roles for Muhammad. According to this distinction, during the first half of the period of revelation the Prophet acted as alerter, while in the latter part he acted to a greater degree as messenger (Rahman 2001, 137).

While Muhammad and his biography do not play a significant role in Abu Zayd’s approach to the Qur’an as a literary text, a claim such as this relies on the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (“occasions of revelation”) literature. Abu Zayd is generally critical of the traditional material that is secondary to the Qur’an, which he notes (2006, 94) was “canonized as a revelation equal to the Quran in its legal authority,” but he himself cannot avoid referring to such secondary literature in the course of trying to understand the initial moments of Islam.

Closing remarks

This article has attempted to describe how both Rahman and Abu Zayd think of the revelation process. What it has termed “Muḥammad’s contribution” to the revelation process is apparent in both thinkers’ accounts. The role of Muhammad becomes the cornerstone of Rahman’s and Abu Zayd’s conviction that divine revelation centres on the human capacity for understanding. This conviction leads further to a theology that allows today’s believers to find similarities between Muhammad’s experiences of revelation and their own relationship with God. Since Rahman and Abu Zayd both emphasize the importance of considering the humanity of Muhammad, they deem the divine message to be intelligible by and accessible to human reason.

There are striking similarities between Rahman’s and Abu Zayd’s accounts of divine revelation. Both admit to the historically conditioned character of revelation and prophecy, regarding the Qur’an as both human and divine. Analysing Rahman’s and Abu Zayd’s accounts of revelation and prophecy shows that this twofold character of the Qur’an originates in the role of Muhammad in the process of receiving and mediating the revelations, but even while affirming this role, both authors continue to insist on the divinity of the revelation that Muhammad transmits. Their depiction of Muhammad’s experiences does not generally oppose the narratives found in traditional Islamic sources. However, they emphasize the Prophet’s unique involvement in the final product, namely the Qur’an. And this admission of the impact of the psychological state of an individual on the God-sent revelation is what has made Rahman’s and Abu Zayd’s accounts somewhat difficult to be accepted in theological circles.

In what way is Muhammad an active participant in the process of revelation? For both Rahman and Abu Zayd, the words and the message of revelation were conditioned by the specific time and place in which the revelation occurred, by the personality of Muhammad, and by the vocabulary available to him. But each thinker has his own way of developing these general claims.

Rahman believes that non-acoustic idea-words were revealed to Muhammad's heart and mind. He does not specify how Muhammad formulated these into clear Arabic, but he allows that the mental state of the Prophet had immediate influence on the qur'anic formulations. For example, it manifested in the "staccato-like abruptness" of the early verses (Rahman 2009, 59), which Muhammad received in a state of fear and uncertainty about the prophetic task. In fact, Rahman offers different possible scenarios for how revelation took place and some of his ideas are reminiscent of the neo-Platonic speculations put forward by Ibn Sīnā. From these accounts, one version of revelation has been extracted that seems most likely to reflect Rahman's thinking: the qur'anic messages were processed through Muhammad's heart and mind. The core of the messages, namely how to establish a just society on earth, Muhammad expressed in particular messages in concrete social circumstances. This prophetic task Muhammad carried out faultlessly. In order to receive messages, Muhammad must have been in the ideal mental state of *taqwā*. This mental state is also an ideal for all other humans, since it provides each person with an open heart, ready to receive God's instructions for leading a just life.

My reading of Rahman does not conclude that the Prophet's ability within the process of revelation "is beyond that of mere mortals." What I do find is that Rahman allows for the idea that the Prophet's "transfer" of the ethical code of the Qur'an was infallible. This means that, even though Rahman stresses that the Prophet himself was fallible, his action of transmission was infallible. Whether God "guided" this transmission and hence removed Muhammad's fallibility for the moments of prophecy, Rahman does not explain. The human trait that was the most essential criterion for God to choose Muhammad was his *taqwā*, and this can be acquired by all human beings. Developing this line of thought means that all human beings have in essence the potential to transfer the meaning of messages correctly. Whether they will be actually chosen by God to carry out the task of prophecy to a wider community is a different question. The essence of Rahman's thought in this respect is that all humans have the potential to understand the ethical message of the Qur'an as God intended humankind to understand it. Abu Zayd, too, emphasizes that the purpose of the Qur'an's revelation was the establishment of a more just social structure.²⁰ At the same time, Abu Zayd asserts that humankind still needs to actively take part in this process of creating justice, a process that requires the application of human reasoning to the signs of God. Regarding the nature of divine revelation, Abu Zayd tries to prove from the Qur'an's use of the term *wahy* that revelation took place non-verbally. In addition, he refers to some secondary narratives that portray Muhammad's experiences and also suggest that the revelations were non-verbal. Abu Zayd's discussion suggests that Muhammad had to translate the revelations he received into human language and concepts that were known to the first audience. In this sense, Abu Zayd makes Muhammad not only the first translator but also the first interpreter of the qur'anic revelation. It follows that, for Abu Zayd, the active exercise of human reason is essential if one is to understand the signs of God. As Muhammad did in the seventh century, so today's believers must apply all their intellectual capacities in order to decipher God's will. In Abu Zayd's theology, the role of Muhammad in the revelation process becomes a model for every believer who seeks understanding of the divine messages.

The two accounts of qur'anic revelation as formulated by Rahman and Abu Zayd could form the foundation of an Islamic theology that focuses on motivating people's creative capacities in order to deal with contemporary challenges. Their accounts assume that Islam is not merely a spiritual guide but also an inspirational force for creative and practical solutions of very real problems. But such motivation cannot come from scripture alone; it requires an emphasis on rational thinking and the incorporation of scientific knowledge. There is a sense in which the process of revelation lies beyond human understanding, but

this means that the questions regarding its interpretation must remain open questions, whose purpose must be to render the message of the Qur'an relevant to the challenges that face modern believers.

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Notes

1. By "humanistic" here is meant a theological approach to revelation based on the human potential for understanding (Verstand/Lat. Ratio) as well as the human conditioning of revelation.
2. In Lahore, wall posters were up announcing a price on my head. On September 5, there were complete strikes (including barbers and taxi drivers) in five or six towns of the Punjab, but not in Lahore. The government was particularly apprehensive about the next day, the sixth, which was both a Friday and Pakistan Defense Day (celebrating the anniversary of the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War) and in the words of the president, 'the governors of both provinces are very frightened'. I resigned with immediate effect. (Rahman cited in Berry 2003, 49; Berry refers to Rahman 1976, 299; see also Rahman 1966, 31)
3. Denny (1989, 3) holds that Rahman does not need to reflect on the process of revelation in detail, since "the literature of religious experience is full of testimonies about experience of the divine, the veridical quality of which is a given in Islam." However, I believe it is worthwhile investigating how Rahman viewed revelation in order to understand his stance on the messages revealed and the role of Muhammad. The fact that Islamic accounts of the experience of the divine are numerous and far from coherent, makes it even more interesting to grasp which view of revelation Rahman embraces. Nonetheless, Rahman's understanding of the actual revelation process is not as clear as is suggested by Sonn (1991, 213), who states that "Fazlur Rahman offered a comprehensive and systematic methodology for understanding revelation."
4. Rahman's early work was directed towards the analysis of Ibn Sīnā's writings on *psychē* and its acquiring of knowledge. In Oxford, Rahman gained his PhD with a study of this work in 1949. Two years later his thesis was published with an English translation of Book 2, Chapter 6, of Ibn Sīnā's *Kitāb al-najāt* [Book of Salvation or Book of Deliverance]. Parts of *Kitāb al-najāt* and other works by Ibn Sīnā were known in Latin scholarship as *De Anima* [About the Soul].
5. The theory of emanation was expressed in the *Enneads* by Plotinus (ca. 204/5–270), who is understood to be co-founder of Neo-Platonism.
6. De Boer refers to Goldziher (1909, 317–319).
7. See Avicenna's use of words (*ʿaql manā*, *ʿaql faʿāl*) according to Rahman (1952, 116).
8. He speaks of a *Sphären-Intellekt-Zuordnung*.
9. Q 26.193–194: "(...) brought down by the Faithful Spirit, upon thy heart, that though mayest be one of the warners, (...)"; Q 42.24
Or do they say, 'He has forged against God a lie?' But if God wills, He will set a seal on thy heart; and God blots out falsehood and verifies the truth by His words; He knows the thoughts within the breasts. (translation from Arberry 1996)
10. For human civilization, beyond Muslim societies, Rahman considered that there was universal equality: "The essence of all human rights is the equality of the entire human race, which the Qur'an assumed, affirmed, and confirmed. It obliterated all distinctions among men except goodness and virtue

- (*taqwā*): [...]” (2009, 30). In other words, the only difference between humans could be found in different values and ethical practices.
11. Rahman’s double-movement method of interpretation and the application of *ijtihad* in real politics is considered in Völker (2012, 92–100, 131–142).
 12. The Qur’an uses *wahy* (six times) and its related verb (70 times).
 13. This notion of the *shifra* or code as part of the communication process is inspired by the Russian semiotician Yuri M. Lotmann, who employed the mathematical theory of communication as developed by the American theoretician of information Claude Elwood Shannon. Shannon uses a model of encoded broadcasting that can be understood only when the sender uses a code that the addressee knows and is able to decode (Wielandt 1996, 260). The communication is at first mute for the third party, who might only be aware that communication is taking place (Kermani 1996, 39), without understanding its content.
 14. Q 7.143 seems to indicate (indirectly, not literally) that God was located somewhere behind the mountain while speaking to Moses.
 15. Furthermore, Abu Zayd embraces the traditional notion of the chain of transmission as put forward by Islamic theology. It distinguishes between the three steps of communication within the qur’anic revelation process. The first communication is that between God and Jibrīl (*tanzīl*), the second between Jibrīl and Muhammad (*wahy*, *risāla*), and the third between Muhammad and humans (*balāgh*, *indār*).
 16. Abu Zayd asserts that this simultaneity is reminiscent of what is understood as timelessness by modern linguistics.
 17. Reflecting on the ability to acquire truth, Denny (1989, 3) finds that:
the quality of such experience was central to Fazlur Rahman’s view. “A man who has a genuinely religious experience is automatically *transformed* by that experience” [emphasis mine]. The philosophers failed to appreciate this quality of religious cognition and thus invalidated their whole approach of parallelism between theology and philosophy.
 18. Yusuf Rahman refers to Abu Zayd (1990, 49).
 19. It may be that Abu Zayd does not follow up on the implication of his views regarding the Qur’an and revelation because of the scarcity of material available to reconstruct the actual act of revelation or because he holds that this is a matter of metaphysics, rather than scientific analysis.
 20. Like Rahman and Abu Zayd, the South African Muslim scholar Farid Esack bases his liberation theology on the qur’anic concept of justice. He refers to Rahman in his *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism* (1997).

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