

THE WORD OFF THE STREET: Divine Inspiration & Semantics in Christianity & Islam

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INTRODUCTION

Ideas have consequences. As tumultuous events of the new millennium churn that shaky relationship between western cultures and the Islamic world, we must remember that *ideas have consequences.* As we attempt to understand the impact of worldviews in conflict, we must remain clear that *ideas have consequences.* As theologians, politicians and mediocrats offer countless evaluations of Muslim beliefs, family values and social strategies, we must return to the concept that *ideas have consequences.*

That ideas have consequences was the implicit force behind a “new” book by Benjamin Barber – originally published in 1995, then re-issued last fall because of its prescience -- entitled *Jihad vs. McWorld.* Using the title words emblematically, Barber suggests that the modern world is seeing a collision of fundamentally antithetic ideas, both of which can entail destructive consequences. One, which he labels *Jihad*, involves a centripetal force of ethnic and religious identification coming into conflict with another idea, *McWorld*, his designation for a centrifugal force of secular, popular culture undergoing rampant, expansionist globalism. Barber proposes (1995:xi-xii) that “the clash between *Jihad* and *McWorld* is again poignantly relevant in understanding why the modern response to terror cannot be exclusively military or tactical, but rather must entail a commitment to democracy and justice....” Inherent in each idea are both productive and destructive potentials, says Barber. And either, if victorious, may undercut democracy.

My own longstanding curiosity about the religion of Islam and some of the cultures it has dominated, along with the tragedies of this past year, have prompted this inquiry into a topic which, I believe, will contribute to an appropriate response which is more than “tactical” *and* which extends beyond any commitment to democracy. I wanted to know whether Islamic beliefs concerning the Koran’s ostensible divine origins – the *idea* – might offer a bridge or create a barrier for those who hold to a Judaeo-Christian understanding of the origins of sacred scripture – the *consequence.* When I began this study last year, I was open to the *possibility* that the orthodox Islamic view of the inspiration of the Koran might provide a bridge of the kind missiologist Don Richardson has identified as “cultural compasses” or “redemptive analogies” – fixed points of a culture’s knowledge base that can be used to “facilitate human understanding of redemption” (1999:397 – though I note that Richardson himself does *not* apply this concept to the Islamic doctrine of inspiration).

As my inquiry progressed, however, I have become concerned that whatever bridge might have been created in this matter will be counter-balanced by a barrier that has less to do with divine action and more to do with societal authoritarianism and cultural imperialism. The *idea* of divine inspiration behind the Moslems' holy book appears to differ significantly from those of conservative Jewish and Christian scriptures. The *consequences* of these differences are disconcerting.

Though I am not a scholar of Islamic doctrine or history, I have sought to understand some of the essentials this religion offers its adherents. I have proceeded cautiously but confidently under the assumption that an inquirer about a religion should be able to apprehend its tenets. Moslems who have energetically, sometimes even winsomely, attempted to evangelize me during travels around the Middle East repeatedly assure me that theirs is a religion for the world. They suggest – as have their sacred scriptures – that a common spirit animates our respective traditions and that Christians (as “People of the Book”) are within reach of Islam.

So I ask in response: Do our religions really share a common ground on the origins of our respective scriptures? My conclusions will necessarily remain tentative, but it is my hope that this beginning investigation of the doctrine of inspiration may help us formulate an appropriate Christian response to Islam and its *jihad*, whether emblematically or literally construed.

1. CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF INSPIRATION

Given the constituency of this conference and the explicit statement of faith signed annually by all members of the Evangelical Theological Society, I shall assume the concept of the “inerrancy of the autographa” of scripture to be a given. Furthermore, for the sake of time and space, I shall limit myself in this portion of the paper to an evangelical understanding of why scripture has been regarded as it has.

This inquiry starts with divine authorship and how truth was conveyed *to* and *through* human minds, mouths and hands – what is the nature of divine *inspiration* ? The very word can be misleading when one moves between modern English meanings of the word to what traditionally has been intended by theologians who apply it to the Jewish or Christian scriptures. In order to move away from current nuances, such as “to excite” or “to move deeply,” evangelicals cite a variety of pertinent matters. These include: the Old Testament prophetic formula, “thus says the Lord”; the crucial Greek word animating II Tim.3:16-17, *theopneustos* ‘God-breathed’; the word *prophet* that identifies he is ‘speaking for’ God; the clarification of II Pet.1:20-21 that it is not the will of man but the movement of God that drives divine inspiration. With these and like passages, we aim to clarify that more important than any in-breathing done by men is the ex-halation first performed by God.

But what was it that God *breathed out*, and to what degree did that breath constrain the mind, tongue or stylus of the prophets and apostles who received and

conveyed it? How specific was its substance, how particular its contents? I shall survey selected writers in the hope that they may speak for most evangelicals today.

Charles Hodge, a respected and oft-cited theologian from my own ecclesiastical tradition, is helpful for what he says on the matter as he surveys ecclesiastical tradition. In his three-volume *Systematic Theology*, Hodge claimed (1986:151) that “All Protestants agree in teaching that ‘the word of God, as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only infallible rule of faith and practice’.” Historically and traditionally, at least, that had been the case when his work was first published in 1871-73, though the doctrinal hemorrhaging that was beginning to occur in Hodge’s own ecclesiastical and academic back yard would surely have led him to clarify the claim were he writing just a generation later. In his discussion of inspiration, which spanned nearly forty pages, Hodge showed the importance of starting with the personhood of God, noting (153-4) that God is “self-conscious, intelligent, [a] voluntary agent, possessing all the attributes of our spirits without limitation, and to an infinite degree.” He would go on (154) to note that inspiration is a “supernatural influence” which is not part of the general providence God exercises over the creation but is “produced by his immediate efficiency” rather than employing “second causes.” He distinguished this effect from “spiritual illumination,” calling acts of inspiration “extraordinary gifts...bestowed upon particular persons,” being designed (155) “to render certain men infallible as teachers.” He carefully distinguished between *revelation*, whose object is to communicate knowledge, and *inspiration*, which secured infallibility and “preserved him [the recipient] from error in teaching.”

Hodge continued by calling the writers of scripture “the organs of God” (156), a phrase that has often been used by Protestant theologians to indicate (as Hodge himself was doing) that “when God uses any of his creatures as his instruments, He uses them according to their nature...angels as angels, men as men, the elements as elements.” He clarifies: “The sacred writers were not made unconscious irrational.... They were not like calculating machines which grind out logarithms with infallible correctness.” He makes a particular point of clarifying what certain medieval and patristic theologians had intended when they likened inspired prophets and apostles to “pens in the hand of the Spirit” or “harps, from which He drew what sounds He pleased.” Hodge states his understanding firmly and repeatedly (157):

The Church has never held what has been stigmatized as the mechanical theory of inspiration. The sacred writers were not machines. Their self-consciousness was not suspended; nor were their intellectual powers superseded.... It was men, not machines; not unconscious instruments, but living, thinking, willing minds, whom the Spirit used as his organs. Moreover, as inspiration did not involve the suspension or suppression of the human faculties, so neither did it interfere with the free exercise of the distinctive mental characteristics of the individual. If a Hebrew [i.e. Jew] was inspired, he spake Hebrew; if a Greek [i.e. Hellenistic Gentile], he spake Greek; if an educated man, he spoke as a man of culture; if uneducated, he spoke as such a man is wont to speak. If his mind was

logical, he reasoned, as Paul did; if emotional and contemplative, he wrote as John wrote. All this is involved in the fact that God uses his instruments according to their nature.

Hodge demonstrated this approach practically, for example, in his treatment of I Cor.10:8 when dealing with a numerical discrepancy between Paul and the Old Testament passage being discussed at that point in the epistle. What does Hodge make of the difference? He states (1988:178):

The infallibility of the writers [Hodge has in mind both Old and New Testament figures] consists in their saying precisely what the Spirit of God designed they should say; and the Spirit designed that they should speak after the manner of men – and call the heavens solid and the earth flat, and use round numbers, without intending to be mathematically exact in common speech. The Bible, although perfectly divine, because [it is] the product of the Spirit of God, is perfectly human. The sacred writers spoke and wrote precisely as other men in their circumstances would have spoken or written, and yet under the influence as to make every thing they said correspond infallibly with the mind of the Spirit.

With such descriptions, Hodge aimed to summarize an historic Christian understanding of divine inspiration.

When B.B. Warfield wrote on the inspiration of scripture more than a generation later, he discussed some of the variations Hodge had not admitted, despairing at one point (1948:105) that “Wherever five ‘advanced thinkers’ assemble, at least six theories as to inspiration are likely to be ventilated.” Yet he, too, stated that the scriptures were simultaneously divine and human, i.e. they are truths originating with God and perfectly conveyed by him to mankind, all the while preserving the natural propensities and styles of the person. Warfield summarized the matter in this way (173):

The Church, then, has held from the beginning that the Bible is the Word of God in such a sense that its words, though written by men and bearing indelibly impressed upon them the marks of their human origin, were written, nevertheless, under such an influence of the Holy Ghost as to be also the words of God, the adequate expression of His mind and will. It has always recognized that this conception of co-authorship implies that the Spirit’s superintendence extends to the choice of words by the human authors (human inspiration) and preserves its product from everything inconsistent with a divine authorship – thus securing, among other things, that entire truthfulness which is everywhere presupposed in and asserted for Scripture by the Biblical writers (inerrancy).

How do these two theologians of the Reformed branch compare with more recent formulations in the larger evangelical survey? Attempting to speak for as many as possible, one may consider the “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” formulated in

1978 by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. In its first part, the summary statement, the Bible is described as “written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit” and “wholly and verbally God-given.” Its second part, containing articles of affirmation and denial, includes the following statement: “We affirm that the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration” (Article VI). At first, this might appear to be a mechanistic statement, but Article VII adds: “The mode of divine inspiration remains largely a mystery to us.” Furthermore, Article VIII continues that “...God in his work of inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared. We deny that God, in causing these writers to use the very words that He chose, overrode their personalities.” Article X clarifies that the Chicago Statement’s doctrine applies only the autographa, while Article XVI states in a general way the authors’ understanding that the doctrine of inerrancy is part of the historic Christian faith and has transcended even the chasms of ecclesiastical boundaries.

It is impossible in one paper to survey the plethora of writers that Hodge and Warfield and those who formulated the Chicago Statement had before them. And it is to be presumed that, at points, evangelicals will disagree. However, it is hoped that this brief survey will have shown generally how evangelicals view the inspiration of their scriptures, thereby permitting a tentative comparison – and contrast – with views of inspiration articulated by another small (but hopefully representative) sample of Moslem writers with regard to the Qur’an.

2. ISLAMIC VIEWS OF INSPIRATION

At first, the Islamic doctrine of inspiration – if indeed it can be characterized as a singular position – seems to share an affinity with Judaeo-Christian revelation. Early Islamic tradition, as shown in Mohammad’s biographer Ibn Ishaq, states that in 610, when Muhammad was about forty, the first deposit of revelation was given him by the angel Gabriel while he was meditating in a cave on Mt. Hira near Mecca. Though presumably illiterate, Mohammad was said to have been commanded to “read/recite” the 96th Sura (Newman 1996:39), a miraculous act in and of itself, thus rendering him a prophet possessed of some kind of spirit – a status he is said to have resisted at first.

Caner and Caner (2002:84-85) identify various mechanisms or circumstances under which revelations reportedly came to Mohammad from Allah, including: while he was having seizures, experiencing dreams, visions, appearances of an angel or angels, while himself traveling across the “seven heavens,” or with Allah speaking from behind a veil (Surah 42:51). From this part of the Qur’an (Surah 42:51-52), the Islamic doctrine of *wahy* ‘inspiration’ can be clarified:

And it is not for any mortal that Allah should speak to him except by revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger and revealing by His permission what He pleases; surely He is High, Wise. And thus did we reveal to you an inspired book by Our command. You did not know what the Book was, nor (what) the faith (was), but We made it a

light, guiding thereby whom We please of Our servants; and most surely you show the way to the right path....

W. Montgomery Watt (1968:18-19) paints a similar picture, though he includes other Arabic terms that also conveyed a doctrine of inspiration, noting as well that Islamic scholars over the centuries have enumerated between five and ten “manners” (*kayfiyyat*) by which revelation reportedly came to Mohammed. Watt interprets some of these mechanisms as meaning that Mohammed “simply found the words in his heart somehow, and eventually came to regard this as occurring by the operation of Gabriel” – though many would certainly disagree with this latter assessment. In general, there seems to be at least *some* affinity with accounts of revelation in both Old and New Testaments, and the late Hammudah Abdalati, a specialist in Islamic studies, even commented (1975:12): “The true Muslim believes...in all the scriptures and revelations of God.” In theory, he placed the inspiration of the Qur’an on the same footing as the Bible.

However, consistent with mainstream Islam, Abdalati then goes on to dismiss “the books of Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus” as having been lost or corrupted during transmission, leaving the Qur’an behind as “The only authentic and complete book of God in existence today...complete and authentic” (ibid). Putting aside the theoretical status granted the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, he then addresses why the Qur’an may be viewed with such confidence:

Nothing of it is missing and no more of it is expected. Its authenticity is behind doubt, and no serious scholar or thinker has ventured to question its genuineness. The Qur’an was made so by God Who revealed it made it incumbent upon Himself to protect it against interpolation and corruption of all kinds. He cites the following suras in support: 15:9; 2:75-79; 5:13-14,41,45,47; 6:91; 41:43).

Holy writ, then, is described as originating from God *and* as having perpetual protection by God – the divergence between our respective views starts to become clear.

Further insight into what Abdalati (and mainstream Orthodox Islam) believe regarding the divine origin of scripture is found in a footnote on pp.3-4, in which he intimates an additional facet of the Islamic doctrine of inspiration:

Good literary works cannot be fully translated into any other language. This is more so in the case of the Qur’an, the Book that challenged (and still does) the native masters of the Arabic language and literature and proved their inability to produce anything even remotely similar to the shortest chapter of the Book. It is impossible, therefore, to reproduce the meaning, beauty, and fascination of the Qur’an in any other form. What appears, then, is not the Qur’an proper or its perfect translation even if such were possible. Rather, it is a human interpretation in a different language that falls far short of the forcefulness of the original Book of God.

Does this imply that the Qur'an we now possess was always a single corpus? No, for it is claimed that collections of individual verses (ayas) might possibly have been gathered from the time of the Caliph Abu Bakr (c.633-34) and afterward (Newman 1996:311), since various acquaintances and even Mohammad's personal secretary were consulted as resources at different times. More reliably, it is said that under the third caliph, 'Uthman (c.652), another collection was made and standardized because recitations in different locales of supposedly identical passages were showing differences, some of dialect and others of substance (ibid:312) – a fact which is reflected in the Hadith (ibid:313). Hence, 'Uthman authorized the production of four copies of his collected text while he ordered earlier codices to be destroyed (though not all appeared to have suffered the intended fate), and one each of these four copies was placed in strategic cities, namely, Medina, Kufa, Basra and Damascus (Cooper 1985:55). The Arabic word itself, *qur'an*, means either “the reading/recitation” or “the collected things,” a collection generally regarded today as Uthmanic (Cooper 1985:55) and showing a preference for Quraysh tribal dialect whenever conflicting readings had earlier surfaced.

However, this paper shall not concern itself with the historical issues of compilation and textual divergence, nor with the related issue of the Islamic “doctrine of abrogation,” nor with the so-called “Satanic verses.” These bear upon the topic, but need to be left aside for the sake of time and space. Instead, we return to inquire about Moslem views on the *mechanism of conveyance* of holy writ from heaven to earth. In theory, do Moslems view the giving of the Qur'an in the same way that they (theoretically) view the giving of supposedly-lost autographa of the Judaeo-Christian faith? How specific was the divine work of inspiration in the Moslem tradition – did it apply to each word of the Qur'an, to the phrase or clause, or only to the ideas in general?

Islamic tradition claims that the Qur'an is eternal and uncreated, i.e. that its revelations given from that first occasion on Mt. Hira and beyond come much later than its actual existence as a text on a “guarded tablet” residing in the presence of Allah. This is taught in Sura 85:21-22 (“Nay! It is a glorious Qur'an, in a guarded tablet”) and 43:3-4 (“Surely We have made it an Arabic Quran that you may understand. And surely it is in the original of the Book with Us, truly elevated, full of wisdom.”).

It has been suggested that the most accurate grasp of the origination of the Qur'an comes not from analogy with the Judaeo-Christian scriptures but with the incarnation of Jesus: as Jesus is the Word of God incarnate, the Qur'an has been described as the Word of Allah *inlibriate*. Eugene Nida (1954:171), whose writings typically evidence great patience of understanding and a keen desire for flexibility, nevertheless put it curtly: “It is now heresy for a Mohammedan to say that Mohammed wrote the Koran; rather, one must believe that the Koran is a word-for-word copy of the pre-existent, eternal Koran which is in heaven.”

Orthodox Islam insists without wavering that this eternal Qur'an was given in Arabic because that is the language of heaven (Sura 43:2), a claim that also appears in Surah 41:2 (“A revelation from the Beneficent, the Merciful God: A book of which the

verses are made plain, an Arabic Quran for a people who know: A herald of good news and a warner, but most of them turn aside so they hear not.) and in Surah 41:44 –

And if We had made it a Quran [*sic*] in a foreign [i.e. non-Arabic] tongue, they would certainly have said: Why have not its communications been made clear? What! A foreign (tongue) and an Arabian! Say: It is to those who believe a guidance and a healing; and (as for) those who do not believe, there is a heaviness in their ears and it is obscure to them; these shall be called to from a far-off place.

Arabic is portrayed as the language of the revelation in heaven before the printed Qur'an came to earth. As a result, Muslims have traditionally claimed that it is essentially untranslatable; its recitation must be performed in Arabic, regardless of one's native tongue, if that recitation is truly to be of Allah's own words. The pseudonymous writer Ibn Warraq (1995:xiii) indicates he grew up in an Islamic republic (which he leaves unidentified), and: "Even before I could read or write the national language I learned to read the Koran in Arabic without understanding a word of it – a common experience for thousands of Muslim children." Such is the fastidious commitment of Moslems to holy writ in the language of heaven.

Movement from there toward the infallibility of the Qur'an is but a simple step. Says Anna Cooper (1985:50): "the language itself is an intrinsic part of the revelation...the doctrine [of its inspiration] applies both to its *form* and its *substance*." This is why Pickthall called his English translation *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* while A.J. Arberry (cited in *ibid*) would call it *The Koran Interpreted*. The reticence regarding translation also was made evident in Mohamed Raza M. Dungersi's "Preface" to the English translation (by M.H. Shakir) that I have used for this paper. Dungersi states:

A perfect translation of the Holy Qur'an in any language can be produced by only that scholar who is anchored in the 'Quranic culture', who is also an authority of that brand of the Arabic language that is used in the Qur'an, and who has a complete command of the language in which he is translating the Qur'an. Moreover, this rare scholar must also be in complete control of all the varied and disparate intellectual disciplines that transverse the substance and structure of the Holy Qur'an. In absence of such a rare polymath endowed with a competence in 'social sciences' and in 'pure sciences' simultaneously, a par excellent translation is, to say the least, very unlikely.

What Dungersi offers in principle he negates in reality, as shown further in his comments on the English translation he commends in that Preface:

The usefulness of M.H. Shakir's translation then lies not so much in its perfection, as in its 'correctness' in terms of the literal translation from the original Arabic text, and by the way of its adherence to the translation

standards which have been set by earlier scholars.... Shakir has succeeded, within reasonable limits, in presenting a standard English translation of the Holy Qur'an in quite a simple language, without distorting the 'surface' meaning of the Holy Qur'an. Shakir's work, with all the potential and real linguistic and stylistic shortcomings, is handy and honest, providing a starting point for those who are eager to learn the gist of the Divine Message contained in the Holy Qur'an.... In my endeavors to grasp the precise and 'outer' meanings of the Message of the Qur'an, I have found Shakir's translation adequate and satisfactory. Those in search for the 'inner' meaning of the Holy Qur'an may still find this translation helpful as a stepping stone to loftier studies in the form of commentaries. Otherwise, Allah is the best of the Guides.

Morton Speight's assessment (1989:24) coincides neatly:

The vehicle of this final revelation was the language, Arabic, not the man, Muhammad, nor the event of Muhammad's call to prophethood. The essential role of the language means that *what* God said is inseparable from the way (through a particular language) the thoughts are expressed. So the meaning of the Qur'an cannot be conveyed exactly in any words other than the original Arabic words of the Book... [although, as a matter of necessity] the use of translations of the Qur'an is accepted as necessary.... [Mohammed was] the passive receiver of the revelation.

The Moslem scholar Mohammad Hosayn Tabataba'i also agrees and places his views of Arabic language squarely at the forefront of the matter (1989:100-103):

It is established that Arabic is a powerful and versatile language that can express the subjective states of human beings in the clearest and most precise manner possible. No other language approaches Arabic in this respect.... God's words were so indescribably beautiful and moving that all hearts were drawn to them; with their sweet form, they sealed the lips of the orators.... [O]nce people had fallen in love with the eloquence of the Noble Qur'an, they would...listen to its recitation. Then they would murmur to each other, 'This speech cannot be a human creation'.

Caner and Caner (2002:84) put it most succinctly: "Only in the Arabic does the Qur'an contain fully the words and testimony of Allah."

Thus, coordinately it is the originator of the Qur'an (Allah) and the content of the Qur'an (the Word or words of Allah) – not to mention its conveyance via the angel Gabriel, to an apparently illiterate man – that render the book inspired. Moslems claim that its aesthetics attest to its inimitable inspiration – what Rippin and Knappert (1990:4) describe (citing Arabic *balagha*) as "the aesthetic effectiveness of the Qur'an on some verbal level."

This writer has heard many native Arabic-speaking Muslims acclaim the beauty of the Qur'an's language style. But most impressive have been similar, though independent, testimonies of a Scandinavian scholar and a West African graduate student who acquired competence in Arabic during their adult years and proceeded to memorize portions of the Qur'an. Despite holding neither religious nor ideological commitment to Islam at this time, both men spoke of the aesthetic appeal inherent in the spoken/recited Qur'an and the ease with which they could memorize texts – all in a second language which they never used outside of religious situations.

To the degree that the aforementioned sources represent mainstream, historic Orthodox Islam, then it will be evident that Christians must grapple with the way Moslems perceive the nature of their Qur'an if they are to appreciate how its inspiration, in particular, should be understood. According to George Braswell (1996:53, in part quoting Richard Martin):

[T]he Islamic tradition offers the most vivid and convincing example of the active, oral-aural function of sacred scripture in the life of a religious community and culture. Islam's own view is that there are many scriptures of which the Qur'an is the final and most complete. The character of the Qur'an as verbatim speech of God sets it apart. 'Whereas the divine person for the Jew is in the Law [I would contest this claim – *jmw*] and for the Christian is in the person of Christ, it is in the Qur'an for the Muslim as a direct encounter with God'.

Form and function appear to have consummated a perfect marriage in the Islamic doctrine of Qur'anic inspiration. Idea and consequence are virtual bedfellows.

3. ISLAMIC AND CHRISTIAN VIEWS CONTRASTED

Whereas the general concept of inspiration of holy writ seems, at first, to be a common ground between Christian and Moslem, the definitions of the concept – to the degree that my brief surveys of both religions are fairly representative and accurate – are strikingly different. In addition to what I articulate below, I observe a significant difference between various Moslems' expressions (in print and in person) of the impersonability and unknowability of Allah, in contrast to that long and loud proclamation of historic Christianity as to the Person, and person-like knowability, of God.

With such a distinctly different starting point (albeit within the strictures of the limits of human comprehension at the best of times!), it is perhaps not surprising that sharp points of contrast seem to emerge between Christian and Islamic doctrines of inspiration, including these four:

- a) Moslems believe the Qur'an was dictated *verbatim*, the substance of the dictation being the word-for-word contents of the "tablet of heaven." The Moslem doctrine of inspiration is mechanistic, involving dictation of a divine monologue – ironically, from a god who is, in the minds of most Moslems, unknowable.
- b) Moslems consequently believe that full, divine status applies only to the Arabic text, as that alone represented the eternal words of Allah.
- c) Moslems insist upon reading and recitation of the Qur'an in Arabic if one wishes to represent the actual words of heaven, and therefore all translations must be energetically nuanced and viewed with suspicion.
- d) The Islamic doctrine of inspiration is often understood as extending beyond the autographa to the early textual unification of the Qur'an and its preservation through history. Christians, on the other hand, usually limit themselves to expressing belief in a divine providence that oversees preservation of the scriptures in general.

Though having no desire to offend or alienate Moslems or Islamic communities, this writer nevertheless concludes that Moslem and Christian ideas about inspiration of holy writ differ significantly and may entail substantial consequences.

4. IMPLICATIONS OF THIS DOCTRINE FOR THE 21st CENTURY

Andrae Tor once proposed that Mohammad saw an integral connection between language and religion, the latter of necessity being in one's native tongue if it is to offer any compelling personal influence. He suggested (1955:95-96) that Mohammad

...knew that the words which they [Christian mystics] muttered in a foreign tongue came from their holy scriptures, and he believed that the essential thing about this devotional exercise, its religious efficacy, resided wholly in the reading of the holy text. So how could he, Mohammed, pray correctly if he had no holy scripture to read? He could not use the scriptures of Jews or Christians, because they were written in a foreign language. It clearly did not occur to Mohammed that they might be translated. Thus for him and his fellow-countrymen an Arabic Holy Scripture was necessary above all things.

Without endorsing Tor's psychology of the man altogether, I would suggest that this close connection he has identified between Arabic language and Islamic religion in Mohammed's mind is something typical of religious communities in general. It was surely a potent force behind the historic rise of Islam would underscore the uniqueness and strength of Islamic cultures today – thus distinguish much of their experience from most (though certainly not all) of historic Christianity. There certainly have been Jewish and Christian writers who have claimed that Hebrew or Greek will be the language of

heaven, though oddly they make such claims about a language *other than* their own native tongue.

However, for a significant portion of the world, the claim that Arabic is the language of heaven reflects not only upon their native language but also on any culture that uses it. In the field of language ideology, it is observed that, to many people, language and culture are inseparable. If one's language of culture is also deemed the eternal language of heaven, it is only one short step further to insist on ultimate cultural superiority. As Nida observed in *Customs and Cultures* (1954:171):

In the doctrine of the infallibility of the Koran, it can be said that 'the word became a book' in contrast with Christianity which declares that 'the Word became flesh'. It is now heresy for a Mohammedan to say that Mohammed wrote the Koran; rather, one must believe that the Koran is a word-for-word copy of the pre-existent, eternal Koran which is in heaven. An infallible Koran and an immutable social structure have frozen the socio-religious culture and given it incalculable strength and defense against penetration.

It may be that the particulars of what appears to be the Islamic doctrine of Qur'anic inspiration, rather than being an incidental of the faith, are part-and-parcel with its historic fortitude and resistance to other faiths and cultures. Some ideas have almost incalculable consequences.

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