

# The Qur'ān, Human or Divine Speech

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**ABSTRACT:** fundamental question about the Qur'ān is whether its source is divine or human and whether its wording and meaning are the Prophet's or God's. One of the questions currently is raised concerning the Qur'ān is that whether the Qur'ān is the words of God or it is just religious experiences of the Prophet Muhammad? Could one in common with Christian theologians and some Iranian intellectuals such as Dr. Abdul Karim Soroush, accept this theory about the Qur'ān like the existing version of the Bible, consider the Qur'ān a kind of Prophet's religious experience? To reply to this question, we firstly expound the meanings of 'revelation' its multiple applications in the Qur'ān and what is meant by its teachings being revelatory, and then we compare it with religious experience.

**KEYWORDS:** revelation, Qur'ān, religious experience, prophet.

## *Introduction*

The itinerary of Christian religious studies indicates two approaches regarding revelation: literal and experimental. The literal approach considers revelation to be a series of truthful teachings delivered by God. The experimental approach emphasizes the inner discovery of God by man. The literal approach declined due to such reasons as the opposition of many Christians, disbelief in the heavenliness of the Gospels, considering the Bible to be a creation of society and not holy revelation, criticism of the Bible, rationalism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the emergence of the romantic school, and contradiction between the Bible on the one hand and reason and science on the other. The experimental approach was brought about in the wake of that. This approach has attracted more

Christian supporters, especially over the recent centuries. Schleiermacher is the founder of the modern experimental approach which treats revelation and religious experience common to all men as equals. He transferred the foundation of the religion from the Bible to the depth of the believer's heart in order to, in the belief that this would safeguard Christianity from threats and free theologians from having to respond to serious challenges.<sup>1</sup>

Some Iranian intellectuals have also supported the experimental approach to the Qur'ān. Since the basis of this approach is unity of Qur'anic revelation and religious experience, we deal here with a general evaluation of that theory with reference to some statements made by Soroush – the eminent example of those who support it.

### *Revelation, a Kind of Religious Experience*

In Soroush's view, revelation is the same as religious experience achieved by mystics:

The constituent of personality and prophecy of prophets and their only property is revelation, or – as it is called today – religious experience.<sup>2</sup>

In this phrase, the author equates religious experience with revelatory experience. Elsewhere he states: "prophecy, was a kind of experience and discovery."<sup>3</sup>

After presenting revelation or the prophets' experience as religious experience, he refers to various kinds of religious experience and considers greater levels of it to be mystical visions: "The lowest level of religious experience is truthful dreams and the higher levels are mystical tastes, findings, and visions."<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere, he equates revelation with inspiration, adding poets' insight, as well as mystics, to the people who have this experience. He presents such analysis of revelation as a way to make revelation meaningful in the

contemporary world. In response to the question, “How can one see revelation meaningful in today’s modern desacralised world?” he asserts:

Revelation is inspiration. It is the same experience that mystics and poets have; although, a prophet experiences it on a higher level. In modern times, we understand revelation through the metaphor of poetry. As one of the Muslim philosophers stated, revelation is the highest level of poetry.<sup>5</sup>

Soroush considers the Qur’ān not to have been sent down by God, but rather created by the Prophet. Dividing that into two parts: thematic and lexical, he asserts regarding the content of the Qur’ān:

According to traditional narrations, the Prophet was only an instrument; he only delivered the messages revealed to him through Gabriel. In my opinion, however, the Prophet had an essential role in producing the Qur’ān. The metaphor of poetry helps explain this point. Just like a poet, the Prophet feels that he is controlled by an external force. But, in fact – or even more than that, at the very time – the individual of the Prophet is everything: the creator and the producer. Arguing whether this inspiration is internal or external is irrelevant here because in the realm of revelation, there are no differences or distinctions between internal and external.

This inspiration comes from the Prophet’s soul, and every individual’s soul is divine. But the Prophet is different from other people because he has become aware of divinity of this soul. He has brought that potentiality into actuality.<sup>6</sup>

On the Prophet’s role in producing Qur’anic words, Soroush says:

The Prophet is also the creator of the revelation in another way ... Revelation is formless and it is the Prophet’s individual duty to give this formless theme a form in order to make it available for everyone. Again, just like a poet, the Prophet conveys this

inspiration in his own language and fashion, with images and knowledge of his own.<sup>7</sup>

In some of his writings, Soroush considers revelation categorically to be a creation of the Prophet himself, without distinguishing between words and content, saying:

Revelation was subject to him as opposed to his being subject to revelation... He was not subject to Gabriel; rather, it was Gabriel who was subject to him, and he was the one who sent the angel down.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

1. Revelation is inspiration itself and these two are the very experiences of poets and mystics.
2. Revelation is created by the Prophet's personal experience and is not from God.
3. Everyone's soul, including the Prophet's, is divine and can be the source of revelation and inspiration. The only difference between the Prophet and other people is that he has become aware of divinity of his soul. Others can also achieve this ability. In such a case, they, too, will be like the Prophet.
4. The source of revelation being internal or external is not a matter of importance.
5. Both the words and meanings of the Qur'ān are produced by the Prophet himself and not by God.

The most important, and indeed the only, reason he presents the Qur'ān as human is treating Qur'anic revelation as equal to others' religious experiences; for, he considers religious experience to be the only constituent of prophecy, treating revelation as nothing more than that.<sup>9</sup> Such experience is not restricted to prophets. Its words and content not being divine is also a requisite of its being a religious experience. In his opinion, the Prophet, like poets and mystics, is the producer of his inner and religious feelings.<sup>10</sup> He considers both the words and

content of the Qur'ān to have been created by the Prophet (S); for, when revelation itself is nothing but inner feeling and experience created by prophet's soul, its expression and transformation into words will also be his own work.

Soroush in particular, but also other Iranian supporters of the experimental approach to revelation who agree with Soroush, have accepted with respect to the Qur'ān what the experimentalist western theologians and philosophers have accepted with regard to the Bible e.g., personalisation of the revelation, the impossibility of revelation without interpretation, and the fallibility of revelation).

After equating revelation with religious experience, Soroush writes in his article *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*:

This introduction explains the essence of prophecy, the methodology of knowing prophets, and some requisites and results of considering prophecy to be experimental.<sup>11</sup>

After explicitly stating revelation to be fallible due to its being human and the Qur'ān being mixed with the Prophet's personal interpretations, he says:

The Prophet is a human being, his experience is of human nature, and people around him are human beings. Encounter of these human elements gradually produces a human creed.<sup>12</sup>

In order to examine the relationship between revelation and religious experience, we deal firstly with the nature of revelation and religious experience; and secondly, compare them.

### *The Nature of Revelation (Wahy)*

The word *wahy* and its derivations have various applications such as signalling, inspiration, writing, message, and inner inculcation.<sup>13</sup> Referring to the etymology of *wahy*, Ibn Fāris holds in his *Maqāyīs al-Lughā* that it denotes secrete inculcation of knowledge to others. According to that, anything inculcated to others in any way is *wahy*, even pointing, writing, and so on.

### ***Revelation in the Qur'ān***

The word *wahy* and its derivations occur over seventy times in the Qur'ān. Also, various recipients of *wahy* are mentioned including prophets, other human beings, and other living beings such as honeybees.

In some Qur'anic verses, *wahy* is used to refer to the existential guidance of inanimate objects and plants, or instinctual guidance of animals (Sūrah 41: 12; 99: 4-5; 16: 68). In some verses, the term means divine inspiration, such as inspiring Moses' mother mentioned in Sūrah 28, verse 7. It is sometimes used to convey satanic inculcation or inspiration (Sūrah 6: 112 & 121). In some verses, it means inculcating the meaning through pointing (Sūrah 19: 11). Among other usages of this word is inculcating meanings to angels (Sūrah 8: 12).

The commonest usage of the word *wahy* in the Qur'ān – over sixty instances – is for prophetic revelation. In this sense, *wahy* is conveyance and inculcation of the message from God to His elected prophet (Sūrah 4: 163; 42: 3 & 51).

It seems that various applications of the term revelation in the Qur'ān, in spite of differences in details, have a common meaning, namely inculcation of a meaning to the recipient. This applies to all usages of the term revelation. All of these instances are, in a sense, inculcation of a meaning to the recipient. This inculcation is sometimes divine and sometimes satanic; the receiver is sometimes a prophet, sometimes an angel, and sometimes another being; inculcation is sometimes direct and sometimes indirect – existential guidance can also be probably considered a kind of inculcation of meaning. Since the cosmic system and phenomena are all subject to divine governance and act in accordance with divine laws, they have, in fact, received the divine message and act on its basis. It can be inferred from some Qur'anic verses that inanimate objects are also addressed by God and are obedient to His commands (Sūrah 99: 4-5). Revelation to the honeybee and instinctual guidance of animals and other living beings are also kinds of existential guidance.

It can be inferred from several usages of revelation in the Qur'ān that the intended meaning in theology and Qur'anic sciences is prophetic revelation,

which is equivalent to notification, explanation, and inculcation of God's message to His elected prophet. With regard to prophetic revelation, the Qur'an refers to three ways of divine speaking: through angels, direct reception, and the production of sound (Sūrah 42: 51).

In the first way, God's words are indirectly received by the Prophet through an angel, called Gabriel in the Qur'an (Sūrah 2: 97).

In the second and third ways, the speech is directly attributed to God; even though, it is of two kinds: in the second way, words and meanings are infused in prophet's heart and soul while in the third way the physical ear hears words – sometimes they are even heard from a specific thing such as a tree. In the third way, the Prophet hears God's speech, but that sound is heard from a specific object or place; like the creation of sound in space or a tree, like when God spoke to Moses through a tree (Sūrah 28: 30).

### ***The Nature of Religious Experience***

Various western scholars such as Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto, William Alston, William James, and Wayne Proudfoot all agree that religious experience is a kind of experience the object of which is not materialistic, mundane affairs, but rather mystical and intuitive affairs, namely inner sensations, metaphysical affairs, the ultimate truth and infinite existence such as experiencing God or Nirvana, or God's manifestation in something or someone like Jesus.

In Proudfoot's opinion, the experiencer considers a natural explanation to be an incorrect explanation of his experience, which is only explicable on the basis on religious teachings. Anyone can experience such sensations under specific circumstances in accordance with his capacity. As Brightman puts it, religious experience is any experience that anyone can have about God. Thus, the inner feeling of metaphysical affairs is the common element of such perspectives.

However, the question is whether such feeling also has a cognitive aspect. Western thinkers disagree on this. Schleiermacher and Otto consider it not to

have a cognitive aspect while William James and Alston treat it as having such aspect. Of course, those who acknowledge a cognitive aspect of religious experience do not mean definite knowledge which correlates to reality, but rather a summarily fashioned knowledge which may be nothing but an illusion.

In short, religious experience can be considered to be a feeling perceived by immediate knowledge, the object of such perception being the individual's inner feelings of metaphysical affairs such as the infinite existence or God, and a kind of relation, connection, passion, and attachment to God or the ultimate truth.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Revelation and Religious Experience; Similar or Different***

Is what is known as religious experience among Christian researchers the same as what we, in Islamic culture, call revelation? It seems that the supreme effort of people like Soroush is to consider Qur'anic revelation to be the same as religious experience common to all human beings and then attribute all requisites of other religious experiences to the revelation. For example, it seems that Dr. Soroush has presupposed the equality of the Prophet's experience of revelation to other religious experiences and made judgments, when in fact proving such claim should have been his first burden. Emphasising common facets of revelatory experience and other religious experiences, he attributes all requisites and effects of the latter to the former, but this reasoning is fallacious. Focusing on common points should not lead to ignoring particulars. Such reasoning is the same as asserting that "God and we are the same in the essence of existence. We both exist; therefore, we are also eternal." Emphasis upon the human aspect of the Prophet, something presented by Soroush so many times, in order to prove that revelation is a human, and not divine, affair is incorrect. The Prophet has some characteristics in common with ordinary people, but what makes him unique in comparison to others is that he receives revelation. Historical study of the Prophet's personality and features of the Qur'ān clearly reveal this fact. The Qur'ān also refers to this point where it says:

Say: I am only a mortal like you; it is revealed to me... (Sūrah 18: 110).



## ***Comparison of Revelation and Religious Experience***

### *Internal or External Approach to Religion*

Internal religious reasoning means an argument the acceptance of which is subject to prior acceptance of the truthfulness of that religion while external religious reasoning is an argument without such a presupposition. Before dealing with the differences between revelation and religious experience, it is necessary to answer this question whether reference to Qur'anic verses or prophetic words to assess the relationship between revelation and common religious experiences necessitates internal religious reasoning and a circular argument.

To answer this question, we can say that in comparing revelation to other religious experiences, we refer to differences which are mostly external religious ones and are not dependent upon acceptance of the truthfulness of Islām and the Qur'ān. Reference is then made to Qur'anic verses to confirm external religious reasoning, but it is not the principal argument. Furthermore, arguing on the basis of prophetic sayings and Qur'anic verses can also be considered to be external religious; a historical look at lifestyle and words of Prophet makes the argument external religious, for the following reasons:

Firstly, historical study of mystics' lives and sayings is the usual method employed by researchers to discover the truth and aspects of the mystics' religious experiences. We have no access to the spiritual aspects and characteristics of historical figures and cannot judge them unless we investigate their lives, sayings, and works. The same applies to the Prophet of Islām.

Secondly, biographical narrators all agree about the Prophet's unquestionable honesty, as his people used to call him Muhammad, the honest. Even if some historical figures' honesty could be called into question, the Prophet's never could. Therefore, one way of proving the divinity of revelation in an external religious way is his own clear words.

Further, there are two ways in which reference in our discussion to Qur'anic verses could be considered to be "external religious":

### ***1. Prior Confirmation of the Truthfulness of the Qur'ān Intellectually and in an External Religious Way***

Relying on two external religious reasons, reference to all Qur'anic verses can be verified:

- a) The inadequacy of emotional and cognitive instruments for guidance and achieving happiness, which is a primary necessity of prophecy.<sup>15</sup>
- b) Miraculous aspects of the Qur'ān which prove it is sent down from heaven. On the other hand, intellectual proof of divine revelation sent down to guide human beings necessitates its deliverance through a reliable intermediary, precisely, unchanged, and safeguarded from any error. Otherwise, the purpose of guidance would be defeated – which is contrary to divine wisdom. After validity of the Qur'ān has been proved through external religious reasoning, we can rely on the Qur'ān, itself, to prove other questions such as the nature and other features of revelation.

### ***2. Approaching the Qur'ān via the Text***

This kind of analysis is a phenomenological approach to the Qur'ān. As some of the external and internal experiences, characteristics, and feelings of mystics, poets, and writers can be understood through scrutinising their books to uncover characteristics of their religious and mystical experience, the Qur'ān can be studied in a phenomenological way to uncover the characteristics of the revelation. As one way to discover different kinds of mystics' religious experiences is to study their lives and books, one can discover ways of receiving revelation through the Qur'ān without the argument becoming internal religious or becoming circular. It means that some of external religious reasons are evidence based on the text or points manifested by knowledge of the text. No evidence from the text is necessarily considered internal religious evidence, as Soroush refers to some verses to expound his perspective on the unity of revelation and other religious experiences.<sup>16</sup> The argument only becomes circular if we intend to prove the

truthfulness of the Prophet's claims through the Qur'an, asserting that as the Qur'an declares honesty of the Prophet, then his words are truthful. Of course, if the validity of the Qur'an and the truthfulness of God or the Prophet are proven rationally, the argument will not become circular.

***Religious Experience; an Implicative of Revelation and not the Same as It***

It is not that easy to make a definitive judgment on the nature of revelation. However, through a glance at the Prophet's lifestyle and words as well as text-based consideration of the content of revelation, we can ascertain its effects and requisites and know some of its features. Such consideration indicates that Qur'anic revelation may be different from religious experience. Prophetic revelation means a kind of inculcation of meaning and conveyance of information, religious propositions, and doctrines whether historical, juristic, moral, or other such teachings to the Prophet. However, since this inculcation is accompanied by a kind of encounter with God, Gabriel, or divine intermediaries as well as deliberation upon God and His majesty, it is accompanied by special feelings, specific religious and inner experiences, and the immediate conceptualisation of God. This feeling, itself, is not revelation. Revelation is its specific aspect which is related to cognition, knowledge, and the receipt of information, not the emotional facet or what is considered to be a kind of religious experience.

In other words, a phrase can be delivered to an individual through different means and depending on who delivers it (whether an ordinary individual in the street, or brother, mother, friend, teacher, a beloved relative etc.) it can generate different emotions within the recipient. The kind of emotions is an inner experience which differs depending on the encounter with whoever delivers it. If this encounter and experience are with God, it is considered to be a religious experience. The important point, however, is that the meaning received is different from the inner feelings concomitant to it. For example, suppose that an individual, who is very close to a mystic and loves him dearly,

hears his master's words and becomes so excited that he experiences an emotional state of spirituality. If, in such case, the master advises him, the content of the advice will naturally be distinct from his emotional state while hearing it. Similarly, the Qur'ān and revelation are the contents of the divine speech and points conveyed by God to His prophet, but receiving revelation is usually also accompanied by religious experiences and special spiritual states.

Historical study of the Prophet's life and phenomenological as well as text-based study of the Qur'ān establish this claim:

1. Religious experience is to be created and not delivered: historical study of the Prophet's life indicates that he claimed to receive revelation from God and to be charged with conveying it to others. Qur'anic verses are also evidence of that, for they speak of revelation being sent and coming down to the Prophet and his responsibility to deliver it to others (Sūrah 7: 62 & 68; 5: 67).

These verses indicate that revelation is not the same as the Prophet's religious experience, for God's role in this connection is to create or initiate religious experience in the Prophet's heart and the Prophet's is to feel it; it is not a matter of God sending the revelation and Prophet simply receiving and conveying it. Investigation of the Prophet's life reveals the fact that in the process of receiving revelation, the Prophet (S) was a learner of divine doctrines in order to convey them to people. That is why such qualities as exposition, making clear, clear sign, and clear signs are attributed to the Qur'ān in the words of Imams and the Qur'ān itself (Sūrah 3: 138; 16: 89; 6: 157; 2: 185).

These indicate that revelation expounds divine teachings. Its cognitive aspect – as well as aspects of conveying propositions, concepts, meanings, and particular teachings – is taken into consideration and not the emotional and experimental aspects attached to it.

2. Many verses (Sūrah 6: 106; 6: 145; 7: 117) indicate that revelation is related to the cognitive and not the emotional aspect. Such verses reveal that revelation is to be followed; the Prophet is commanded both to obey it himself and

encourage others to obey whereas religious experience cannot be followed – it is a wholly personal, inner affair and a matter of feeling. What can be followed in the latter is its theme and the meaning conveyed by it. Its theme is an attachment and implicative of the inner religious feelings or experience but not the experience itself.

3. Similarly, Qur'anic and historical evidence presented by Soroush to indicate the experimental nature of revelation fail to support what he is seeking to prove, and show that religious experience deals with the emotion concomitant to revelation and not its cognitive aspect. In order to reveal the experimental nature of revelation, he refers to the Prophet's feelings of fear when he began receiving revelation receiving and the gradual decline of such feelings. In his opinion, since revelation has an experimental nature, it can be reinforced like any other experimental affair. That is why the Prophet gradually becomes familiar with receiving verses and revelatory encounters and his fears declines:

In the beginning, and after the revelation of the first verses of Sūrah 96, as stated by al-Tabarī, even the Prophet (S) was terrified and unaware of what precisely happened to him, but he quickly became accustomed to it.<sup>17</sup>

In order to demonstrate the experimental nature of revelation and prophecy, Dr. Soroush relies on Moses' primal fear of the rod turning into a serpent, Qur'anic reference to this fear (Sūrah 27: 10), and his gradual familiarity with revelation and miracles.<sup>18</sup>

In reply to such historical and Qur'anic references, it can, as stated above, be said that the reality of prophecy and receiving revelation is not emotions like these. The Prophet's primary fear when the signs were sent down and gradual decline of his fear are not the revelation itself, but rather an emotion concomitant to it. Further, Moses' fear when the rod turned into a serpent is not the nature of prophecy and revelation sent, but rather concomitant to it.

### ***Differences between Revelation and Religious Experience***

Even if we assume that revelation is a kind of religious experience by the Prophet accompanied by a meaning conveyed – in other words, that it consists of two aspects, cognitive and emotional, and neither necessitates the other – it still does not mean that revelation is the same as other people's religious experiences; for, despite the similarity between the Prophet's and other people's religious experiences, there are too many differences between them for them to be equated with each other. The overall similarity between the Prophet and other people does not mean all differences should be overlooked.

If we draw a distinction between the Prophet's kind of religious experience and other religious experiences, we do not have the right to judge them in the same way. In other words, taking differences into account makes it impossible to apply the same rules and characteristics to common religious experiences and to revelation and assess them in the same way.

Some of the differences between the revelation and human religious experience are mentioned below:

### ***The Impossibility of a Definite Judgment on the Nature of Revelation***

As mentioned earlier, a definite judgment on the nature of revelation is not that easy, especially if we consider it to be one of the Prophet's inner, esoteric and not physical, exoteric affairs. Generally speaking, we have access to our inner states, but we do not have immediate access to other people's. We can only judge others' inner states through observing their external signs and effects. If such signs are similar to the external effects of our own inner experiences, we can guess that the individual has had the same inner experience as we have. The same applies to judging any inner affair of another. The more similar the visible signs of others' experiences are to our own experiences, the more possible it becomes to make a similar judgment. The proper method of investigating inner and spiritual affairs necessitates consideration of the differences between them and physical affairs on the one

hand and of the differences between individual inner experiences on the other. Otherwise, the study will be logically unsound.

Accordingly, it can be said that we have no way to ascertain the nature of the Prophet's inner feelings while receiving revelation other than to refer to narrations recounting some of his feelings at the time. Firstly, it has to be proven that the Prophet's revelatory experience shares the same concomitants and signs as others' religious experiences; only then can the same rule be applied to revelation as to other religious experiences. Thus, the greater the number of external signs common to both revelation and others' religious experiences observed, the greater the possibility is of applying the same rule. On the other hand, the more differences there are, the lower the possibility is of applying the same rule. Hence, even if we call revelation a religious experience, we should compare what is concomitant to it based on our own experimental evidence and reports of the Prophet's life before speaking about the nature of revelation.

It seems that the results of such comparative study, supported by intellectual and experimental evidence, indicate several differences between revelation and other religious experiences some of which are as follows:

### ***1. Religious Experience is not Exclusive to the Time of Revelation***

The Prophet's religious experience was not exclusive to the when he received revelation. On the contrary, he experienced spiritual states and religious experiences while praying, due to his high position with and closeness to the Almighty as well as his purity of heart. Furthermore, he had constant devotion to God and was always experiencing religious intuition due to the greatness of his soul, all the time when he was not receiving revelation. If we consider revelation to be the same as the Prophet's religious experience, there is no need to call revelation a specific part of his religious experiences. The Prophet had two kinds of religious experiences, but he only called the one which was exclusive to the prophets' revelation. The other is the experience he

had when, like other people, he experienced spiritual closeness to God. Like other people, the Prophet had spiritual connections and non-revelatory intuitive cognitions, but he did not call them revelation.

## ***2. The Prophet's Distinction between Revelation and Other Categories***

The Prophet's revelatory words differ from his other sayings. Investigation of prophet's life clearly indicates that not everything he said was Qur'anic revelation. So many *hadiths* are narrated from the Prophet on various fields such as ethics, worship, culture, social relations, and fundamental doctrines. The Prophet distinguished his own sayings from revelatory phrases. If revelation was the Prophet's own work, there would be no reason to distinguish so emphatically. Furthermore, comparison between prophetic *hadith* and Qur'anic verses indicates a major difference in the style of depiction, rhythm of words, and sentences as well as their structure. If revelation really was the Prophet's own work, how can such differences be explained? God's words expressed through the Qur'ān have a particular eloquence while the Prophet's non-Qur'anic words definitely do not have such a level of beauty and appeal. This level of difference in the level of eloquence reveals a difference in their sources; one is from the Prophet himself and the other from an outward source.<sup>19</sup>

## ***3. Different Ways of Receiving Revelation***

Some of the ways in which the Prophet (S) received revelation, such as God's speaking to him (Sūrah 2: 253; 4: 164), his hearing the voice of revelation from behind curtain (through the intermediary of an object such as a tree or a mountain) and Gabriel's frequently coming and going in the form of ordinary man while the Prophet was awake<sup>20</sup> (Sūrah 42: 51) – which is the way most Qur'anic verses were received – have not been reported to have happened in the lives of mystics and people of intuition. Further, there is no other book ninety percent of the words and contents of which the author claims were dictated by Gabriel. The ways in which prophetic revelation was



received have to have been experienced by others people for us to say their religious experience was similar.

It may be possible to say that the main difference between revelation (and inspiration) and other religious experiences is the former's having inner as well as outward sources. What happens in other experiences is a kind of feeling of intuition, but revelation is mostly receiving words and messages directly through Gabriel, or hearing a voice through another object such as mountain or tree. Soroush emphasises that it is not important whether the source of revelation is internal or external. However, to ignore the external source of revelation is to ignore an important difference between revelation and other religious experiences. According to *hadiths* and historical reports, most of the revelation was sent down to the Prophet (S) through Gabriel.

#### ***4. Revelation not Being Communal***

According to the definition of religious experience, this experience is relatively communal and not exclusive to prophets whereas revelation sent to prophets does not happen to others. Since we do not have access to original sources of the Bible, we cannot demonstrate this point on the basis of them. However, this is not the case with the Qur'ān and so it can be experienced. What is exclusive to the Prophet's revelatory experience is unparalleled in history. We cannot even find an experience close to it. Even though many significant books on mysticism and poetry have been written, they do not come even close to the Qur'ān. If revelatory experience was communal, many other works similar to Qur'ān (covering its various aspects) should have been created.

The Qur'ān also confirms the fact that revelation is exclusive to prophets. It is said in the Qur'ān that

Their Messengers said to them, 'We are nothing but mortals, like you; but God is gracious unto whomsoever He will of His servants'.  
(Sūrah 14: 11)

Further, another verse says:

Say: I am only a mortal the like of you, [but] it is revealed to me.  
(Sūrah 18: 110)

It is understood from these verses that the only point which distinguishes divine prophets from other people is that they have been selected by God and have received heavenly revelation – something unavailable to others. Not even infallible Imams receive revelation at its particular level, let alone ordinary people.

### ***5. Revelation Being Conditional upon Belief in God***

To enjoy a religious experience is not dependent upon believing in God the One; it is even possible for religions denying the existence of God. Religious experience is something that all human beings can enjoy while revelation has been sent down exclusively to believers in God. Prophets, who received revelation, were all believers in God. According to the Qur'ān, not only is revelation not sent down to those who deny existence of God, but it is only sent down to a few believers (i.e. prophets) and not all of them.

### ***6. Individual and General Validity of Revelation***

The validity (if any) of common religious experience is individual and it is of no validity for others because this experience is an inner sensation felt by an individual and there is no reason why others should validate personal, inner feelings which they have not experienced for themselves. In contrast, the rational proof of the necessity of prophecy and revelation guide human beings means that the content of revelation has to be binding and valid for all human beings.

The common religious experience does not even have much validity for the one who experiences it because it firstly may originate from various sources. Each individual can have different sacred or even profane experiences based on his psychological, physical, mental, and environmental status. Therefore, it is quite possible that spiritual states, fancies, and opinions of the individual may affect the religious experience or its interpretation. Furthermore, religious experiences can be different, or sometimes contradictory, depending upon the number of

people who experience them. Thus, those different, and sometimes contradictory, claims cannot all be considered valid. That is why Muslim mystics do not accept intuition unconditionally, and instead divide them into two kinds – *rahmānī* and *ilāhī* – giving signs for both in order to prevent those who experience them from being deceived by satanic kinds. Hence, those who experience such things are recommended not to base their actions, cognitions, and factual judgments on them. The reason dictates that revelation should issue from a reliable, infallible source. This is based not only on external argument, but on text-based evidence; as God says:

This Qur'ān could not have been forged apart from God; but it is a confirmation of what is before it, and a distinguishing of the Book, wherein is no doubt, from the Lord of all Beings. (Sūrah 10: 37)

### **7. Revelation Assures**

The above also indicates another difference between revelation and religious experience. Contrary to other religious experiences, revelation is accompanied by a sense of certainty of its truthfulness. A survey of the prophets' biographies when receiving revelation confirms this claim. Any time a prophet received revelation he would become overwhelmed with a feeling of confidence of its truthfulness, but this is not true of mystics. Mystics – at least Muslim mystics' life stories, reveal the fact that their experiences were mostly accompanied by a kind of doubt as to truthfulness of the content. Division of intuition into two kinds – *rahmānī* and *ilāhī* – is evidence of this claim.<sup>21</sup>

### **8. Revelation is Detailed**

If common religious experiences can be put into words, they are mostly ambiguous and presentable in a few propositions such as: "I love God.", "I am dependent on Him.", "God is great.", etc. whereas Qur'anic revelation consists of hundreds of clear propositions on different individual, social, political, juristic, moral, historical, and other subjects. In explaining the nature of religious experience, western scholars, who are well aware of this point, have

asserted that religious experience prepares little and vague information.<sup>22</sup> It would have been better if Soroush, who borrowed this concept from them, had paid more attention to their analysis of religious experience. One of the differences between sensual and religious experiences according to western academics is that the former gives us a wide range of detailed information whereas the latter prepares little and vague information.<sup>23</sup>

### ***9. Revelation is non-Volitional***

Soroush says, "Revelation was subject to the Prophet and not vice versa," whereas a study of the Prophet's biography reveals something quite different. Religious experience is a feeling that any individual can prepare for by fulfilling certain spiritual conditions. If an individual delves into his soul and only pays attention to his God, he will have a religious experience. The various types of intuition are also volitional to some extent, i.e. an individual can make preparations to experience intuition through wayfaring and exercising mystical stations in the presence of masters of intuition whereas receiving revelation was never volitional – the Prophet never had any choice in the matter. It was not the case that whenever he wished or concentrated on divinity, revelation was sent down to him. Revelation was dependent upon God's will and certain circumstances necessitating fresh divine teachings and it happened only in particular moments and under certain circumstances. Therefore, divine revelation was not dependent upon the Prophet's spiritual states and religious experience, but was subject to the Muslims' need for particular guidance from God. If receiving revelation was related to the Prophet's spiritual feelings, he would have received revelation every night during his mystical night-prayers when he was at the highest level of spirituality but there were so many nights when he did not receive any revelation. Furthermore, revelation did not always happen at night after his mystical night-prayers.

Thus, there is no concomitance between receiving revelation and the Prophet's spiritual feelings, in the sense that the better the Prophet's spiritual feelings were, the more revelation he received. Therefore, it can be said that the

Prophet had two kinds of religious experiences: revelation, which was non-volitional, and an experience he felt, like other people, while concentrating spiritually on divinity. Thus, Dr. Soroush's remark that "Revelation was subject to him and not vice versa," is unacceptable; firstly, because revelatory experience was beyond his control and choice; and secondly, after receiving revelation, the Prophet not only followed it himself but also commanded others to follow it. Basically, all the Prophet's efforts were aimed at putting divine revelations into effect both at the individual and societal level and convincing everyone to follow it. A study of the Prophet's biography clearly indicates his absolute submission to the revelation.

It is obvious from the Prophet's life story that receiving revelation was non-volitional. There were so many situations in which he was unaware of what he was supposed to do and no matter how long he waited; he did not receive any revelation. No matter how many times his followers asked him to ask God for guidance – which he did – no revelation was sent down. There were other times when revelation was sent down without his asking God.

### ***10. Revelation is Full of Information on Past and Future Generations***

The Qur'ān is full of information on the past generations and world events yet to come. It teaches us so much about earlier prophets and their lives. This much hidden information cannot be found in the religious experience of any ordinary individual. Ordinary people's religious experiences lack detailed, clear information, and those of mystics and people of intuition are not of this level.

### ***11. Revelation is Coherent and Free of Contradiction and Inconsistency***

Despite presenting hundreds of propositions on various individual, social, worldly, eschatological, moral, religious, cultural, and legal subjects, the Qur'ān presents a coherent and consistent intellectual, educational, and instructive system. Such contextual coherence is not found in other religious experiences. The Qur'ān deems this to be proof of its divinity, as it asserts:

What do they not ponder the Qur'ān? If it had been from other

than God, surely they would have found in it much inconsistency.  
(Sūrah 4: 82)

If it is claimed that some verses appear to be inconsistent; the reply to this is that they only appear to be inconsistencies, i.e. they are resolved by referring to other verses through a holistic view and interpreting the Qur'ān through the Qur'ān. In order to understand any speaker or writer's words, one should necessarily consider them altogether. Ambiguities are resolved when all the verses of the Qur'ān are considered together in the round.

### ***12. Divine Interpretation of Revelation***

Common religious experiences have human interpretations. Each individual attempts to give his personal understanding of his religious experience in his own words. People of intuition have usually confirmed this. At least among Muslim mystics, or mystics devoted to other divine religions (with the exception of prophets of God), one rarely finds someone who claims that his quotations from God are His exact words. In contrast, the Holy Prophet does claim so. Qur'anic verses also confirm this and emphasise the divine origin both of word and content:

Do not move your tongue with it (Qur'ān) to hasten it. Ours it is to gather it, and to recite it. So, when We recite it, follow its recitation.  
(Sūrah 75: 16-18)

### ***13. The Receiver of Revelation Challenging Deniers***

In spite of the number of mystical schools and people of intuition who have made their own claims, nobody else throughout history can be found who claimed to be a prophet and to receive revelation from God, clearly challenged deniers, and was not defeated in spite of strong oppositions.

### ***14. The Illiteracy of the Recipient of Revelation***

If we consider the literal and thematic magnificence of the Qur'ān on the one hand and the Prophet's illiteracy on the other, we will clearly understand the difference between revelation and other religious experiences. A study of the

lives of mystics and people of intuition shows that they were in contact with eminent masters for years, learning so much from them and benefiting from their works in order to become capable of wayfaring and thereafter leaving books for generations to come. However, the level of their works is considerably lower than the Qur'ān whereas the holy Prophet brought a book which is much greater than any other book in spite of his being illiterate and not having any master or participating in any scholarly circle of his time. He was not even able to read or write, let alone learn anything from his contemporary masters. On the other hand, the Qur'ān is literarily and thematically incomparable to any other work. Accordingly, how can one ignore all differences between the Qur'ān and other books as well as the differences between the Prophet and other people and equate them?

Suppose that you encounter two writers of books on mathematics:

1. A child at primary school who has written a book at the highest level full of innovatory, complicated formulae; and
2. A celebrated mathematician highly educated by great masters who has written a book of a much lower level than the previous one.

Can one judge these two to be the same?

### ***15. Eloquence and Articulateness***

The inimitability of the Qur'ān in terms of eloquence and articulateness has been confirmed by great Arab linguists. Celebrated experts believe that human beings are not able to produce anything similar. Arab linguists even see a huge difference even between the Qur'ān and prophetic *hadiths* in this regard. Qur'anic special rhythm has been remarked upon by scholars since its revelation. There are shocking reports of non-Muslims converting to Islām after hearing the rhythmic sound of the Qur'ān alone.<sup>24</sup>

### ***16. Unique Impact***

The Qur'ān is the most influential book in guiding and educating human beings throughout history. This work has drawn the attention of billions of

people throughout history, engaging their hearts and regulating their behaviour and personalities. No other mystical or poetic work can be compared to the Qur'ān in terms of influence on people (teaching humanity, building society, guiding, and educating). Other mystical and educational masterpieces have never had such a power in theoretical and practical fields of morality and education and becoming the source of various fields of human knowledge. Many an unbeliever became a believer just by reading the Qur'ān. Even some enemies of Islām felt humble when they heard its divine verses.

### ***17. Unique Comprehensiveness***

Contrary to other religious experiences, the Qur'ān is endowed with a unique comprehensiveness which is not to be seen in any other mystical, literary, political, or moral masterpiece. The inclusion of the individual and social, worldly and eschatological, internal and external, microcosmic and macrocosmic, political and cultural, historical and doctrinal, and cognitive and emotional aspects in the Qur'ān makes it, undoubtedly, superior to all other works.

### ***18. Permanence***

The characteristics mentioned above have made this work, of a level superior in terms of permanence to all other similar works. A piece of work has a high status for some time, but it is finally defeated by a new masterpiece after decades or centuries whereas the Qur'ān is not so. The passage of time could not lead to the creation of any other work at that level.

Considering the above differences between revelation and religious experience on the one hand and the clear uniqueness of the characteristics of revelation on the other, we cannot equate the two. The only explanation for all these differences is that the Prophet is connected to an outward source; in other words, the Qur'ān is of divine origin.

### ***Conclusion***

It is not an easy task to carry out a definitive assessment of the nature of



revelation, but one can uncover its effects, concomitants, signs, and some of its features through studying the biography of the Prophet's and conducting text-based survey of the content of revelation. Such a survey shows that Qur'anic revelation clearly differs from religious experience. Prophetic revelation means a kind of inculcation of meaning as well as transfer of information, propositions, and religious teachings to the Prophet, accompanied by a kind of inner feeling and experience.

Even if we consider revelation to be a kind of religious experience by a prophet along with a meaning conveyed, i.e. treat it as having emotional and cognitive aspects without either of them necessitating the other, this still does not mean that revelation is the same as human religious experience because in spite of similarities between the Prophet's religious experiences and other men's, there are many differences, namely: religious experience was not exclusive to when there was revelation, the Prophet distinguished between revelation and his other sayings, and the different ways in which it was received. Some distinguishing features of revelation are: it is not communal, revelation is conditional upon belief in God, the individual and general validity of revelation, revelation is assuring, revelation is detailed, revelation is non-volitional, revelation is full of information on past and future generations, revelation is coherent and free of contradiction and inconsistency, the divine interpretation of revelation, the recipient of revelation challenges deniers, the recipient of revelation was illiterate, it is eloquent and articulate, has unique impact, special comprehensiveness, and permanence.

### *Notes*

1. For more information and references to such opinions in western and Christian sources, see: Sājedi, *Dīn wa Dunyā-ye Modern*, 'Asr Niyāz, (Qum: Mu'assase-ye Amuzeshi wa Pazhuheshi-ye Imam Khomeini, 1387 S.A.H.), 121-146.
2. Abdolkarim Soroush, *Baste Tajrebe-ye Nabawī*, (Tehran: Mu'assase-ye Farhangi-ye Sirat, 1379 S.A.H.).
3. Ibid, 10.
4. Ibid, 7.

5. Abdolkarim Soroush, <http://aftabnews.ir/vdccoqxqm.2bq1o8laa2.html>
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Abdolkarim Soroush, (*Baste Tajrebe-ye Nabawī*), 13-14.
9. Ibid, 7.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid, 9.
12. Ibid, 21.
13. Al-Farāhidī, al-Khalil b. *Aḥmad, Tartib Kitāb al-ʿAyn*, (Tehran: Uswah, 1414 A.H.), 1932.
14. Michael Peterson, et al., *Reason and Religious belief, (ʿAql wa Iʿtiqad Dīnī)* trans. Ibrahim Sultani & Aḥmad Narāqī (Tehran: Tarh-e Nou, 1376 S.A.H.), 41 & 50; Vin Proudfoot, *Tajrebe-ye Dīnī*, trans. ʿAbbas Yazdānī (Qum: Muʿassase-ye Farhangi-ye Tāhā, 1377 S.A.H.), 218-219; Mohsen Qumi, *Burhān-e Tajrebe-ye Dīnī*, (M.A. Thesis, 1376 S.A.H.), 163; Hādi Sādiqī, *Darāmadi bar Kalām-e Jadīd*, (Qum: Maʿaref & Taha, 1382 S.A.H.), 243. For more information on different approaches to the nature of religious experience and evaluation of them, see: Abolfazl Sājedi, *Vaḥy Shenāsi-ye Masiḥi ba Gozari bar Vaḥy-e Qurʾāni*, in *Qabsāt*, (Spring 1387 S.A.H.).
15. Abolfazl Sājedi, (*Dīn va Dunyā-ye Modern*), 49-60.
16. Abdolkarim Soroush, (*Baste Tajrebe-ye Nabawī*), 10-12.
17. Ibid, 12.
18. Ibid, 12.
19. Hādi Sādeqī, (*Darāmadi bar Kalām-e Jadīd*), 24.
20. Faḍl ibn Ḥasan Tabrisī, *Majmaʿ al-Bayān fi Tafsiṛ al-Qurʾān*, (n, 1304 A.H.), V. 1, 31.
21. Hādi Sādeqī, (*Darāmadi bar Kalām-e Jadīd*), 247.
22. Michael Peterson, et al., (*Reason and Religious belief*), 18-19.
23. Ibid.
24. Maḥmud Rajabī, *Qurʾān-Shinasi*, (Qum: Muʿassase-ye Amuzeshi va Pazhuheshi-ye Imam Khomeini, 1380 S.A.H.), 161-162; Muḥammad Baqir Saʿīdi Roushan, *ʿUlum-e Qurʾān*, (Qum: Muʿassase-ye Amuzeshi va Pazhuheshi-ye Imam Khomeini, 1379 S.A.H.), 153.