Monks and Muslims
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Monastic and Shi‘a Spirituality in Dialogue

Edited by Mohammad Ali Shomali and William Skudlarek
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Introduction

The first formal meeting for dialogue between Catholic monks and nuns and Iranian Shi‘a Muslims took place in England in 2003. Chapter 7 of this book describes how a chance encounter in 2001 was the beginning of a decade of ever-deepening knowledge, friendship, and trust between followers of these two ancient and illustrious spiritual traditions that until then had been virtually unknown to one another.

That first formal meeting of Benedictine monks and nuns with Iranian Shi‘a Muslims was devoted to the topic of spirituality and theology and was referred to by the Catholic periodical The Tablet as “the first major British encounter of Catholic theologians with Iranian Shi‘a thinkers and theologians.”¹ Two more conferences followed: the second on faith and reason and the third on ethics.² While these meetings were a Benedictine-Muslim initiative and hosted in the Benedictine abbeys of Ampleforth and Worth, they were conducted in collaboration with Heythrop College of the University of London and included participants from beyond the Benedictine world.

¹ The Tablet, 19 July 2003, 13.
In addition to the three formal meetings that took place in England, monks and theologians from England visited Iran in 2002, 2004, and 2006, made presentations in various institutes in Qum, engaged in informal but penetrating dialogue with faculty and students, and were warmly received wherever they went.

The focus of this most recent dialogue has now been directed toward the spiritual practices and religious experience of Christian monasticism and Shi’a Islam. The meeting was held in September 2011 at the Primatial Abbey of Sant’Anselmo in Rome, the center of the Benedictine world, and was sponsored by Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, an international organization that promotes and supports dialogue, especially dialogue at the level of religious experience and practice, between Christian monastic men and women and followers of other religions. The Christian participants were monastic and came from nine different countries in Africa, Europe, and North America. The Muslim participants were Iranian and British Shi’a, most of whom live in Iran, all of whom are professors, postgraduate students, and graduates of universities and seminaries in Qum.

Those who read monastic periodicals like The American Benedictine Review, Erbe und Auftrag, or Studia Monastica will find little on the relationship between Muslim and monastic spirituality. The silence of the monastic world vis-à-vis Islam has become less deafening in recent years, thanks to the witness of Christian de Chergé and the Cistercian community of Tibhirine, Algeria. The uniqueness of Christian de Chergé was that he had a degree from the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI) in Rome, which enabled him to weave into his monastic conferences appropriate references from the Qur’an. His death, along with six of his brethren, brought an untimely end to the community at Tibhirine and to his initiatives, but it did awaken recognition that Christian monks—and Christians in general—need to become aware and appreciative of the rich spiritual resources of Islam.

A remark of Frithjof Schuon will help to understand why it is important for Christian monks and Muslims to become friends
who are willing to speak of their own religious practice and experience and who are eager to listen to and learn from one another. In his article “The Universality of Monasticism and Its Relevance in the Modern World” he first poses the question “Why is monasticism excluded from a religion which nevertheless possesses mysticism, ascetic discipline, and a cult of saints?” He offers this answer:

One of the *raisons d’être* of Islam is precisely the possibility of a “monastery-society,” if the expression is allowable: that is to say that Islam aims to carry the contemplative life into the very framework of society as a whole; it succeeds in realizing within that framework conditions of structure and of behavior that permit of contemplative isolation in the very midst of the activities of the world. . . . The famous “no monasticism in Islam” (*lā rahbāniyah fī-islâm*) really means, not that contemplatives must not withdraw from the world, but on the contrary that the world must not be withdrawn from contemplatives; the intrinsic ideal of monasticism or of eremitism, namely asceticism and the mystical life, is in no way affected.³

The 2011 conference was a response to Schuon’s implicit invitation to monastics and Muslims to learn from and encourage one another, and the papers given there and presented here certainly lay a foundation. But there is still much work to be done. The ongoing challenge is that monastic and Muslim communities become ever more deeply involved in this uncharted area, to which they both bring centuries of wisdom and expertise.

Mohammad Ali Shomali
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Chapter 1

Revelation

A Monastic Perspective on Divine Revelation

Benoît Standaert, OSB

A monk in the tradition of Saint Benedict, the founder of our monastic family, is supposed to read from the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New, for an hour or more every day.

*Lectio Divina*

This practice is called *lectio divina*, “divine reading.” Translated literally, the term means “reading God,” the word “divine” standing here for the object of our reading. The expression *lectio divina* is usually not translated. A translation did exist in Greek—θεία ἀναγνώρισις (*theia anagnôrisis*)—at the time of the church fathers (from the fourth to the fifth centuries), but in modern languages there is no apt equivalent, and so we prefer to keep to the Latin expression.
What is shocking about this formula is that we should “read God”! The root meaning of lectio/leg(g)ere—lire in French, lesen in German, lezen in Dutch—is “binding” or “collecting,” like λόγος (logos) and λέγειν (legein) in Greek. But how can we collect or bind God? The reality, on the level of experience, is that we are read by God, brought together and recollected by God in our act of reading.

So, within the traditional expression for the prayerful reading of Scripture we may already find an opening to the deep mystery of our effective relationship to the living God.

**Revelation**

How do we experience the revelation of God in and through this practice? An old saying makes it clear: “When you read, he speaks to you; when you pray, you speak to him.” We find this saying in the writings of Saint Cyprian, Saint Jerome, and Saint Augustine, three major Latin church fathers who lived between 300 and 430.

*Lectio* and *oratio*—reading and prayer—are joined together in this exercise like the act of breathing. Just as there is no inhalation without exhalation, so there is no prayer without reading and no reading without praying.

The purpose of our reading is not just to comprehend (to “grasp”) the text by intelligence, analysis, comparison, synthesis. We read to listen to Someone and to enter into a kind of conversation with him. From the practice of reading we receive light, meaning, impulse, direction, sense. Our first attitude is one of receptivity rather than grasping.

**The Vigan Method**

Today there is a method of *lectio divina* for small groups (six people maximum) that originated in the Philippines and has spread throughout the world. We call it the “Vigan Method,”
Vigan being the city from which the method was circulated by the catechetical center of John Paul I. Sister Henrietta Sebastian, a Benedictine nun who later became abbess of her community, and Father Ludger Feldkämper, a German priest of the Divine Word Missionary Society, proposed the method at the end of the 1970s. I have found it very helpful and have used it with groups of lay people for more than twenty years.

The method comprises three steps—Text, Word, Response—and each step has three moments: Reading, Silence, Sharing. For each step, however, there is a different question to be answered:

1. **Text:** What are the expressions that strike me?
   a. Read the text aloud.
   b. Reflect in silence.
   c. Respond with a simple statement without comment.

2. **Word:** What is the Lord saying to me through this text, here and now?
   a. Read the text aloud.
   b. Reflect in silence.
   c. Respond.

3. **Response:** What is my response to what the Lord says to me?
   a. Read the text aloud.
   b. Reflect in silence.
   c. Respond in the form of a prayer that eventually leads to a personal engagement.

The second step is the difficult one: How do we allow the text to become the Word of God? It is a question not of grasping with the mind but of pure listening with the heart. To avoid personal considerations about the text, we always introduce the sharing of that second step with, “The Lord says to me: ‘Benoît, [we each say our own name] . . .’”

This method of reading the Scriptures, proposed for groups of five or six people, can also be used when one is reading the Bible alone or even when one is preparing a homily.
The basic theological insight behind the Vigan Method is that of the church fathers and of the Bible itself: our God is speaking continuously. But do we hear him? Is there a connection? Or is our line always busy, making it impossible for him to get through? So we try to be more receptive to God’s speaking to us when we come together to hear his Word or when we read in silence the text of the Divine Word, as we call it.

As you may have noticed, the inner rhythm of the Vigan Method parallels the sequence of our three days together: Word, Prayer, and Action by Witness.

Saint Benedict, the founder of our monastic tradition, used the image of light to describe his approach to God’s Word: reading and listening is much like looking attentively to the divine light. In the Prologue to his Rule he writes, “attentis oculis ad deificum lumen” (“our eyes open to the light that comes from God,” or “to the light that makes us like God”). In fact, the very first word of God in Holy Scripture, spoken on the first day of creation, is “Let there be light!” (אָרְאָה יְחִי, Yehi ’or; Gen 1:3). But is it not true that every one of God’s words is lumen de lumine (“light out of Light”)?

The Revelatory Dimension throughout Our Entire Life

The practice of lectio divina is essentially revelatory, and this revelation affects our whole being and shapes the attitude we bring to every possible situation.

Let it be clear, when we as monks approach the Gospel, the Psalms, the Torah of Moses, or the Prophets, we do not become involved in discussions about the degree to which these words, these sayings and stories, are precisely inspired by the Holy Spirit. There are academies where scholars can formally debate those questions. But a monk, generally speaking, is not at all concerned with them.

One of the reasons for the monk’s lack of interest in these historical/critical questions is that the church recommends that all
the books of the Bible be read as the Word of God. Believers of the past have experienced the value of this literature, and for this reason certain writings of the first followers of Christ were selected as authoritative for Christian believers. Over the centuries all twenty-seven books of the New Testament and the many books of the First Testament in Hebrew and in Greek were copied and circulated. As monks, we basically trust that ancient decision.

However, monks do not want to limit the revelatory dimension of human experience to sacred and authoritative texts. For them God speaks everywhere and all the time. Their human consciousness is open to the divine consciousness and attentive to the possibility of revelation in any event of life. Here we may perceive an essential element of spiritual consciousness: once we realize plainly the light of our own consciousness, we perceive a direct door to the divine consciousness as a light that supports our interiority and self-consciousness but that has in itself no beginning and no end. The act of reading is—at least for some monks—rooted in this perception of their participation in the divine Act of Being.

Giving a privileged position to some texts as revelatory in the name of God does not mean that we are suspicious about other literature or even about other ways of approaching reality with an open mind. In a certain way, our experience is just the opposite. The sacred text itself gives us keys and tools to deal with all reality as an open book in which the face of God is revealed. In the Rule of Saint Benedict we find that the guest, the sick person, the poor at the door, the elder, and the child are all possible revelations of Christ. There is divine revelation in daily life, as Jesus makes clear when he says, “I was sick and you took care of me. . . . Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:36, 40).

We can also recall the occasion when Jesus was sitting at the entrance of the temple and saw a poor widow making an offering of just two small coins of no value at all. “Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has
put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on’’ (Mark 12:43-44).

The strength of this remark is that the widow was not a follower of Jesus. She remained in her own tradition, faithful to the rites going on in the temple, which Jesus had earlier rejected. Can we look on other believers with the eyes of Jesus? For example, when we see a Hindu entering a shrine with some fruit and flowers to offer, can we, like Jesus, appreciate the full gift of life that is expressed in that gesture of offering? So we see how Scripture teaches us to receive revelation even from outside our own tradition.

**Revelation in Reciprocity**

Moreover, in the Rule of Saint Benedict the sick person is regarded as Christ, but so is the visitor. Around the sickbed there is an opportunity for Christ to meet Christ in pure reciprocity, the highest and most beautiful form of revelation in life. If we consider the entire model of life in the Rule, we could say that monks are in fact trained to this way of perceiving divine reciprocity by seeing Christ in the sick, the guest, the child, and the abbot. We obey the abbot, in whom we hear Christ. But Christ is also present in the response of the obedient monk, who is to have in his heart the words of Christ who said, “I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38).

For monks, the practice of praying the psalms offers a privileged way of receiving divine revelation. The psalms are the Word of God in the words of men. We pray them “in Christ” and we pray them “to Christ.” Saint Augustine has made clear that this original reciprocity is rooted in our faith that we are the Body of Christ. Christ assumes all the suffering of humanity, suffering that is so poignantly expressed in the words of the psalms, but Christ, as head of the body, is also the one to whom we may confidently address all our desires and supplications.
During these past few days I stayed in a Benedictine community here in Rome where a brother had just died. When, after his death, we prayed the psalms, we also prayed them in his name: the “I” of the psalm became, in Christ, the “I” of that brother who expects to be received into the eternal dwelling place that God has prepared for him.

We could even refer here to the liturgical practice of the celebration of the Eucharist. When the community gathers together to celebrate the Eucharist and the Word of God is publicly proclaimed and then related to the life the community through the homily (preaching), we may hear a revelatory message for this very moment. In addition, our gestures and our repetition of what Jesus said and did when he took the bread and broke it on the night before he died—“While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body’” (Matt 26:26)—allow us to perceive again a strange and unique reciprocity: he in us and we in him act out and fulfill the form as well as the content of what was said then and is now repeated in the present celebration.

We meet the revelatory dimension of life everywhere—in the humblest tasks of serving at the table, as well as in the most solemn gestures of a liturgical celebration. In a certain way, it makes no difference. Saint Benedict counsels the cellarer (bursar or steward) of the monastery to “regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar” (RB 31.10). The holy books of the Bible, it is true, do offer us a privileged access to divine revelation, but the God who is revealed there is a God who calls us to open our eyes to the divine light, wherever and whenever it shines.

**Hospitality or Humble Openness to Any Otherness**

This understanding of revelation provides a theological opening for us as monks to appreciate other holy books and other religious traditions. We may make mistakes, but we learn from them and remain open. Our openness is rooted in the Gospel
and in texts of our monastic tradition. That may be not enough for some academic theologians, but we would like to invite them to join us on the level of life shared with the poor, the stranger, the anawim, the humble, the fakirs of all other religious traditions. A strong spiritual intuition makes us sure about one thing: the humble monk, the poor rabbi, the unassuming Buddhist bhikkhuni, the transparent Hindu sannyasi, and the authentic Muslim fakir will never fight. They can only enlarge peace on earth.

We may need to remind scholars that, without any pretention, the humble are always in advance of most schools or academies. They are prophets. Not everybody may like to hear this kind of “prophecy.” But as Jean Vanier, the founder of communities for and with handicapped people (L’Arche), has often insisted, the humblest and poorest person in a community is the most prophetic. Can we be open to one another and accept that the other is also, in his or her own person and as a bearer of a religious tradition, an authentic revelation of the Invisible?

This is the understanding to which the practice of lectio divina has brought us. I think here of something Christian de Chergé, the prior of Tibhirine (Algeria), wrote about one of his Muslim friends:

Since the day he asked me, quite unexpectedly, to teach him how to pray, M. has gotten into the habit of coming to see me. Thus we have built a longstanding spiritual exchange. . . . One day he discovered that he could get my attention by saying, “It’s been a long time since we have dug our wells!” We use this expression when we feel the need for a deeper level of conversation. Once, in a joking way, I asked him, “And what will we find at the bottom of our well? Muslim water or Christian water?” He looked at me with an expression that was both pained and amused: “You are still asking that question? Do you still not understand that what you find at the bottom of this well is the water of God?”

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In both of our traditions we have the example of Abraham to show us how to receive, in a spirit of true hospitality, the otherness of the other as we would receive the Lord himself. Abraham’s guests at the oak of Mamre were just passers-by, but he received them as the Lord and was blessed by a divine promise that is still a blessing for all the descendants of the one who was born out of that hospitality, including you and us, Muslims and Christians.2

**Pilgrims Walking under One Shoulder**

The prophet Zephaniah was convinced that only a remnant of poor, humble people will be left on God’s mountain. They will come from all nations and will join together as pilgrims, no one dominating anyone else. They will “walk under one shoulder,” or “shoulder to shoulder”3 (Zeph 3:9, 12). May this prophetic vision that is about twenty-seven centuries old inspire us for today and tomorrow!4


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3 This passage is cited in *Nostra Aetate* (4). “Shoulder to shoulder” is a literal translation of the phrase in Zephaniah 3:9 that is translated “and serve him with one accord” in the NRSV.

All adherents of the Abrahamic faiths believe that God has communicated with certain people, known as the prophets, so that they may guide humankind toward happiness. In what follows, I will refer briefly to the main elements of the Muslim understanding of this communication in general and of the divine communication to Prophet Muhammad as embodied in the Qur’ an in particular.

**Definition of Wahy**

For a more precise understanding of the Islamic perspective on divine revelation or word of God, it is necessary to become acquainted with the term *wahy*. In Arabic this term literally means giving a message quickly and secretly, whether by gesture, in a written form, or by inspiration. The term has been

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1. An early edition of this paper was initially presented to an interfaith conference in Krakow, Poland, in November 2004 on “Sacred Books and the Word of God.” An expanded version of that presentation was published in *Islamochristiana* in 2007 (no. 33, pp. 121–136), entitled “Divine Revelation: A Shī‘a Perspective on Divine Guidance and Human Understanding.” This is an updated and selected version of that paper.

2. E.g., see *Mufradaat Al-faz al-Qur’ an*, p. 858; *Al-Sihaah*, vol. 6, p. 2519; *Al-Qaamus al-Muhit*, vol. 4, p. 399.
used in this sense both before the advent of Islam (e.g., in pre-Islamic poetry) and after it. There is also a technical sense in which the term *wahy* is used to denote “communication of God to the prophets.”

In the Qur’an, the term *wahy* or one of its cognates occurs seventy-eight times and is used in a broad sense. Except for five, all of these cases pertain to God as giver of the message. Therefore, the first thing that comes to mind is that the concept is used primarily for divine revelation in the Qur’an, though there is also a more general sense of conveying any message. With regard to the verses in which the term or one of its cognates is used to refer to the divine act of giving messages, the recipients of this communication are

1. Prophet Muhammad: he is the paradigmatic recipient of *wahy* as mentioned in the Qur’an, and nearly half the cases in which the term *wahy* or its cognates are used in the Qur’an relate to him;

2. the Prophets, of whom Moses is most frequently mentioned;

3. the disciples of Jesus or the mother of Moses;

4. angels;

5. the bee; and

6. the heavens.

As we see, *wahy* is not restricted to the prophets. Rather, it is used in a more general sense to refer to different sorts of guidance given by God to His creatures, and since divine guidance is all-inclusive, His *wahy* reaches out to all forms of creation. The

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3 One of those exceptions is related to Zechariah. When he received the good news of having a child, he asked God for a sign. The sign was not being able to talk for three nights. So when he went out of the temple, instead of talking to the people, he *awha*—i.e., he *signaled* to the people to glorify God morning and evening (19:11).
Qur’an teaches that God, the Wise, has provided His creatures with guidance so that they may achieve their proportionate perfection. The first form of divine guidance is an inner and instinctive instruction, which is innate in all beings. It is from Him that each created thing derived its form and nature, including the free will and power that was given to human beings. God has granted to everything all the means and opportunities for development. The Qur’an says:

He said, “Who is your Lord, Moses?” He said, “Our Lord is He who gave everything its creation and then guided it.” (20:49-50)

Celebrate the Name of your Lord, the Most Exalted, who created and proportioned, who determined and guided. (87:1-3)

The second form of divine guidance is through the prophets and divine books that teach men and women why they were created and how they can realize their true potential. The prophets inform people of what is outside the realms of their knowledge and experience, explain to them the consequences of their actions, confirm and support what they can understand through reason, and serve as a role model for them to follow. Thus, human beings enjoy two sorts of guidance: the general guidance (al-hidâyat al-‘âmmah), which is shared by all creatures, and the special guidance (al-hidâyat al-khâssah), which is exclusive to those beings that have reason and free will. This form of divine communication to human beings through the prophets is called wahy by Muslim theologians.

The occurrences of divine wahy in the Qur’an can also be classified according to the nature of the messages into the following categories.

**Natural instinct.** We always admire the wonderful achievements of small insects, such as bees, ants, spiders, and so forth.⁴

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⁴ The Qur’an says: “And thy Lord taught the Bee to build its cells in hills on trees and in [human] habitations; Then to eat of all the produce [of the earth] and find with skill the spacious paths of its Lord: there issues from within their bodies a drink of varying colors wherein is healing for men:
The same is true about the laws of nature, such as gravity or the movement of atoms, planets, and so on. This is all due to a general guidance provided by God.

**Inspiration.** Sometimes God suggests certain ideas or courses of action to some people who are not necessarily prophets.⁵ For example, we read in the Qur’an that in order to protect Moses, God inspired (awhaynā) his mother to put the baby in the river.⁶ This inspiration was not conveyed through an angel, and the mother of Moses was not a prophet. Therefore, there is also a kind of general inspiration for all people. For example, the Qur’an tells us that God has inspired humans to be able to discern between virtues and vices (91:8).

**Prophetic revelation.** This is exclusive to the prophets and is referred to in the Qur’an more than seventy times.⁷ For example:

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Thus have We revealed to you an Arabic Qur’an that you may warn [the people of] the Mother of the Towns and those around it, and warn [them] of the Day of Gathering, in which there is no doubt, [whereupon] a part [of mankind] will be in paradise and a part will be in the Blaze. (42:7)
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Verily in this is a Sign for those who give thought” (16:68-69). Wahy here consists in divine instructions about where to live, what to eat, and what sort of behavior to have.

⁵ The Qur’an tells us that Satan and his followers also engage in counter-inspiration. E.g., verse 6:121 reads as follows: “But the evil ones inspire their friends to contend with you; if you were to obey them you would indeed be pagans.”

⁶ E.g., the Qur’an says, “So we sent this inspiration to the mother of Musa: ‘Suckle the child, but when you have fears about him, cast him into the river, but fear not, nor grieve; for We shall restore him to you, and We shall make him one of the messengers’” (28:7; see 20:37-40).

⁷ In addition to using the term wahy to refer to prophetic revelation, the Qur’an frequently (more than two hundred times) uses cognates with the root (nuzul) meaning: “descending.” In its transitive form, the term means “to send down.”
We will recount to you the best of narratives in what We have revealed to you of this Qur’an, and indeed prior to it you were among those who are unaware [of it]. (12:3)

This is the highest and the most sophisticated form of divine communication, and Muslims have always considered the Qur’an as an instance of this phenomenon. According to Islamic beliefs, other divine books, such as the Torah, the Gospel, and the Psalms of Prophet David, are also examples of this connection between the Divinity and humankind.8

Some Aspects of Prophetic Revelation

To be able to be addressed directly by God and to receive His message and revelation requires a very high capacity. God is the most pure, and it is only the pure hearts that can fully grasp His message. It is said of Prophet Muhammad that “God has not sent any prophet [nabīy] or apostle [rasūl] unless he has completed his intellect and his intellect is superior to the intellects of his entire nation.”9

Imam Hasan Askari, the eleventh Imam of the Shi’a, is quoted as saying, “Verily, God found the heart of Muhammad the best and with the greatest capacity so He chose him for prophethood.”10

The prophets are fully aware of the divine communication given them. Prophets who are recipients of wahy never doubt the veracity of what has been revealed to them. This is a very

8 Commenting on the phrase “We revealed to them [the prophets] the performance of good deeds” in verse 21:73, ‘Allamah Tabataba’i asserts that one type of wahy is what he calls tasdidiy, i.e., the protective revelation that is identical with infallibility. This involves practical divine support for the person in order to perform good deeds. See Al-Mizan, vol. 1, pp. 274 and 284; vol. 5, p. 80; vol. 6, p. 261; vol. 10, p. 223; vol. 14, p. 305; and vol. 15, p. 286.
important aspect of the Shi‘a doctrine of revelation. There is no particular disagreement among Muslims about the meaning of the revelation. The main distinction to be found in the writings of the Shi‘a scholars is ontological and epistemological. For example, basing themselves on rational and scriptural arguments, the Shi‘a reject any story suggesting that Prophet Muhammad or any other prophet had ever been in doubt about his mission. For prophets to doubt whether they are true prophets and then to be reassured by someone else is totally inconsistent with their being divinely appointed guides for the people. If a prophet himself is in doubt about his mission and message, how can people be expected to believe in him, to follow him wholeheartedly, and to sacrifice their lives and possessions in the way that he asks them?

The Qur’an speaks of revelation as a kind of vision that accepts no illusion or error and cannot be disputed. For example, after talking about the incident of the ascension (mi‘raj), the Qur’an goes on to say,

> The heart did not deny what it saw. Will you then dispute with him about what he saw? Certainly he saw it yet another time, by the Lote Tree of the Ultimate Boundary, near which is the Garden of the Abode, when there covered the Lote Tree what covered it. The gaze did not swerve, nor did it overstep the bounds. Certainly he saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord. (53:11-18)

Zurarah, a well-known and trusted companion of Imam Sadiq, the sixth Imam, asked him how the Prophet became certain that it was a genuine revelation that he received and not a satanic temptation. Imam replied, “Verily when God chooses a servant of His to become an apostle [rasūl] He bestows upon that person confidence and tranquillity so what comes to him from God is like what he sees with his eyes.”

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Once Imam Sadiq was asked how the Apostles (rusul, pl. of rasūl) knew that they were Apostles. Imam replied, “The veil [ghità] was removed from them.”\(^{12}\) Muhammad b. Muslim, another reliable narrator, says that he had a conversation with Imam Sadiq about muhaddath (literally, “the one to whom speech is made”). Imam said, “He hears the voice and does not see.” Muhammad b. Muslim asked Imam, “[In that case,] how does he know that this was the speech of the angel?” Imam replied, “He will be bestowed with confidence and tranquillity so that he knows that it was the angel [that spoke to him].”\(^{13}\)

Thus, one should not compare the knowledge that the prophets receive through revelation to the ordinary type of knowledge that human beings have, which is subject to change and doubt.

Though receiving divine revelation is an extraordinary gift, it should by no means be taken as a strange, dubious, or suspicious phenomenon. The Qur’an says,

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\text{Does it seem odd to these people that We have revealed to a man from among themselves, [declaring], “Warn mankind, and give good news to the faithful that they are in good standing with their Lord?” The faithless say, “This is indeed a plain magician.” (10:2)}
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In the course of human history there have been many prophets to whom God sent His wahy. The first prophet was Adam and the last was Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets (33:40). The Qur’an says,

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\text{We have revealed to you as We revealed to Noah and the Prophets after him; and We revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, the Tribes, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron and Solomon and to David We gave the Psalms. Of some Apostles, We have already told you their story; of others We have not; and to Moses God spoke direct. [These are] Apostles who gave good news as well as warning that mankind after (the coming) of the Apostles}
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\(^{13}\) Ibid., vol. 26, p. 68.
should have no plea against God: for God is exalted in power and wise. (4:163-65)\textsuperscript{14}

Altogether, the Qur’an mentions twenty-five of the prophets and states that there were many more (40:78). Through the indications of hadiths, Muslims believe that there have been 124,000 prophets. Among them, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad are the most outstanding. These are called \textit{Ulu al-`Azm}, meaning “those of great determination.”

All the prophets were recipients of divine revelation. The Qur’an says, “We did not send [any apostles] before you except as men to whom We revealed” (12:109). However, this does not mean that all the prophets were given books. In addition to itself, the Qur’an speaks of four heavenly books: the Book of Abraham (87:19), the Psalms of David (4:163; 17:55), the Torah of Moses (2:87; 3:3, 4; 6:91, 154), and the Gospel of Jesus (5:46). This does not necessarily mean that there were no other books, but certainly there were many prophets who were not given books but were preaching the book of a previous prophet.

There is a consistency and homogeneity in the message given to the prophets. Muslims believe that the harmony and consistency present in the divine creation extends to God’s revelations. Divine messages communicated to the people through His messengers are to be harmonious too. If they are revealed by the same God to the same recipients (human beings), who have the same nature and genuine needs, in order to show them the path toward the maximum possible happiness and salvation, they

\textsuperscript{14} Commenting on these verses, A Yusuf Ali says, “The list here given is in three groups. (1) The first group, Abraham’s family, is the same as in ii. 136, (where see the note) and in iii. 84. (2) Then we have the prophets Jesus, Job and Jonah, who symbolise patience and perseverance. (3) Then we have Aaron the priest and Solomon the King, both great figures, but each subordinate to another primary figure, viz., Moses (mentioned in the next verse) and David (mentioned at the end of this verse). David’s distinction was the Psalms, some of which are still extant.” Abdullah Yusuf Ali, \textit{The Holy Qur’an: Text, Translation and Commentary} (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, Inc., 2001 [1934]), p. 232. For an online version, see http://www.quran4u.com/Tafsiraya/Index.htm.
must be similar in nature. Of course, depending on varying conditions and factors, some details may be changed.

Thus, Muslims confirm and believe in all the prophets and consider all believers in God to be members of the same community of faith:

The Apostle has faith in what has been sent down to him from his Lord, and all the faithful. Each [of them] has faith in Allah, His angels, His scriptures and His apostles. [They declare,] “We make no distinction between any of His apostles.” And they say, “We hear and obey. Our Lord, forgive us, and toward You is the return.” (2:285)

The various ways in which the prophets received divine communication can be understood from the following passage of the Qur’an:

It is not [possible] for any human that Allah should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a curtain, or send a messenger who reveals by His permission whatever He wishes. Indeed He is all-exalted, all-wise. Thus have We revealed to you the Spirit of Our dispensation. You did not know what the Book is, nor what is faith; but We made it a light that We may guide by its means whomever We wish of Our servants. (42:51-52)

Based on these verses and Islamic narrations, Muslim scholars have distinguished between three different methods of divine communication to the prophets:

1. Direct and immediate communication. This is interpreted to be of two kinds:

   a. A suggestion thrown by God into the heart or mind of a prophet, by which he understands the substance of the message, whether it is a command or prohibition or an explanation of a great truth.

   b. Verbal or literal communication, by which the actual words of God are conveyed in human language.
2. *From behind a veil.* This is not, of course, a material veil but the veil of Light.\(^{15}\) In this sort of communication, the prophet hears a voice but does not see the one to whom the voice belongs. This has been likened to hearing the voice of a person from behind a curtain. Prophet Moses received the revelation from God on Mount Sinai in this way. So did Prophet Muhammad in the Night of Mi’raj.\(^{16}\)

3. *By sending a messenger (rasûl).* This messenger was the angel Gabriel, through whom the revelations were given to the Holy Prophet. Prophet Muhammad usually received the revelations in this way. The Qur’an says:

> This is indeed [a Book] sent down by the Lord of all the worlds, brought down by the Trustworthy Spirit upon your heart . . . in a clear Arabic language. (26:192-95)

> Say [O Muhammad, to mankind], “Whoever is an enemy of Gabriel [should know that] it is he who has brought it down on your heart with the will of Allah, confirming what has been [revealed] before it, and as a guidance and good news to the faithful. (2:97)

It has been suggested that revelation by sending a messenger takes one of the following forms:

1. The angel deposits the revelation in the spirit of the prophets without appearing to them.

2. The angel appears as a human being and speaks to the prophets. For example, there are historical reports that on occasion Gabriel appeared to Prophet Muhammad in the

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\(^{15}\) There is a tradition that the Prophet said, “His veil is Light: were He to withdraw it, then would the august splendours of His countenance surely consume everything that comes within His Sight.” *Sahih* of Muslim, section on Imaam; *Musnad* of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, vol. 4, pp. 401 and 405; introduction to *Sunan* of Ibn Majah, p. 13.

\(^{16}\) Ayatollah M H Ma’rifat, *Ullum-e Qur’ani*, p. 25.
form of Dehyah al-Kalbi, who was the foster brother of the Prophet.

3. The angel speaks in the ears of the prophets like a bell. This was the most difficult type of the revelation.

4. Gabriel appears for the Prophet in the same form that God has created him.

The above relate to the ways and styles of revelation to the prophets. What was actually revealed to the prophets (i.e., the content of the revelations) will be studied below.

Muslims believe in the immunity of the Qur’an on historical grounds and on the basis of its being protected by God:

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\text{Indeed We have sent down the Reminder [the Qur’an], and indeed We will preserve it. (15:9)}
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\[
\text{Indeed it [the Qur’an] is an august Book: falsehood cannot approach it, from before it nor from behind it, a [gradually] sent down [revelation] from One all-wise, all-laudable. (41:41-42)}
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The message originates from divine knowledge, so it must be true and completely pure: “But Allah bears witness to what He has sent down to you—He sent it down with His knowledge—and the angels bear witness [too], and Allah quite suffices as a witness” (4:166).

The messenger who brings down the message, Gabriel, is trusted, and so is the recipient who acts as a messenger to human beings. Prophet Muhammad has a passive role in this regard; that is, he does not add anything of his personality to what has been revealed. He only acts as a pure and clean channel. The

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18 This idea is also clearly mentioned in the hadiths of the Prophet and of his household. E.g., arguing for the need for the prophethood and revelation from God, Imam Rida argues that there was a need to appoint infallible (ma’sum) apostles to convey divine commands and prohibitions and etiquettes to the people and to inform them about what benefits them or harms them, since they could not understand these by themselves (Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 11, p. 40).
Qur’an clearly rejects any possibility of something being added to the Qur’an by the Prophet:

Had he faked any sayings in Our name, We would have surely seized him by the right hand and then cut off his aorta, and none of you could have held Us off from him. Indeed it is a reminder for the Godwary. Indeed We know that there are some among you who deny [it]. And indeed it will be a [matter of] regret for the faithless. It is indeed certain truth. So celebrate the Name of your Lord, the All-supreme. (69:44-52)

In the case of the Qur’an, the revelation certainly included actual wording. In this regard, ‘Allamah Tabataba’i writes:

The general belief of Muslims concerning the revelation, based on the Qur’an, is that the text of the Qur’an is the actual speech of God transmitted to the Prophet by one of His chosen angels.

The name of this angel, or heavenly being, is Gabriel or the Faithful Spirit. He transmitted the word of God over a period of twenty-three years to the Prophet. He would bring the divine instructions to the Prophet, who would relate them faithfully to the people using the same words in the form of a verse.¹⁹

As indicated above, the main reason for such belief is the Qur’an itself. What follows are different types of evidence for this idea from the Qur’an and from various hadiths to further support it.

With respect to the Qur’anic verses, reference should predominantly be made to those verses in which the Qur’an is described or to the verbs that indicate the way in which the Qur’an is or should be treated. Regarding the former, the following are titles to which the Qur’an may be referred:

1. Qur’an. The term Qur’an literally means “something that is readable.” Thus, it must consist of words. In the first instance of divine revelation to the Prophet, he was told, “Read in the Name of your Lord who created... Read, and your Lord is the most generous, who taught by the pen”

¹⁹ The Qur’an in Islam, part III.
This shows that what was revealed was a scripture that could be read. Though in Arabic qa-ra-‘a includes reading or reciting by heart, it is only applicable when a text or script is involved.

2. *Kitāb* (book) or its cognates. For example, “Alif, Lam, Ra. [This is] a Book, whose signs have been made definitive and then elaborated, from One [who is] all-wise, all-aware” (11:1).


4. *Kalāmullāh* (Word or Speech of God). For example, “If any of the polytheists seeks asylum from you, grant him asylum until he hears the Word of Allah. Then convey him to his place of safety. That is because they are a people who do not know” (9:6).

5. *Qawl* (speech). The Qur’an says, “Indeed soon We shall cast on you a weighty word” (73:5).

Regarding the latter—that is, the verbs that indicate the way in which the Qur’an is or should be treated—the following verses can be referred to:

1. *Qiraa‘ah* and its cognates. For example, God says, “And when We have recited it, follow its recitation” (75:18).

2. *Tilāwah* and its cognates. For example, God says in the Qur’an, “These are the signs of God which We recite for you in truth, and you are indeed one of the apostles” (2:252; emphasis added).

3. *Tartil* and its cognates. The Prophet was told, “Recite the Qur’an in a measured tone” (73:4). Not only was Prophet Muhammad supposed to recite the Qur’an in a measured

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20 See also the verses 32:2-3 and 40:2. “The revelation of this Book is from God Exalted in Power Full of Knowledge” (40:2).
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tone, but also God the Almighty says that in the first place He Himself has recited the Qur’an to the Prophet in a measured tone: “The faithless say, ‘Why has not the Qur’an been sent down to him all at once?’ So it is, that We may strengthen your heart with it, and We have recited it [to you] in a measured tone” (25:32).

Furthermore, it is a recognized fact that the Qur’an was revealed in Arabic. If the revelation did not include the actual wordings of the Qur’an, there would be no place for discussions about its language. For example, the Qur’an says,

This is indeed [a Book] sent down by the Lord of all the worlds, brought down by the Trustworthy Spirit upon your heart . . . in a clear Arabic language. (26:192-95)

Yet before it the Book of Moses was a guide and a mercy, and this is a Book which confirms it, in the Arabic language, to warn those who do wrong, and is a [bearer of] good news for the virtuous. (46:12)

In addition to Qur’anic evidence, one may also refer to the numerous hadiths in which the same titles or verbs are used for the Qur’an. For example, Imam Ali says, “Verily, God . . . sent down to him [Prophet Muhammad] the book with truth.”21 This is why Muslims believe that translations of the Qur’an, however accurate and perfect they may be, are just translations and can by no means be considered to be the Qur’an itself. It should also be noted that the hadiths of Prophet Muhammad, despite their eloquence and profound meanings, are completely different and distinct from the Qur’anic verses; anyone familiar with the Arabic language can verify this. This, by itself, is another piece of evidence for the idea that the wording of the Qur’an is not from the Prophet.

21 Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 92, p. 81.
Therefore, the Muslim understanding of the Qur’an is that it was revealed by God to the Prophet with the exact wording that has always been there and that is still there today.22

The Qur’an has been revealed in clear and plain language so that the people can understand it and take benefit from it. In addition to the above verses, we read in the Qur’an, “Certainly We have made the Qur’an simple for the sake of admonishment.” This verse is repeated four times in the same chapter (54:17, 22, 32, 40). The Qur’an also says:

Indeed We have made it simple in your language, so that they may take admonition. (44:58)

Certainly we have drawn for mankind in this Qur’an every [kind of] example, so that they may take admonition—an Arabic Qur’an, without any deviousness, so that they may be Godwary. (39:27, 28)

There are deeper layers of the meaning of the Qur’an for which extra guidance from the Qur’an or the Sunnah is required. This is where the process of tafsir is involved. Tafsir is a profound Arabic term. Literally, it means to “uncover” or to “unveil.” Technically, it means to clarify and explain the hidden or concealed aspects of a text. Sometimes a text may convey different possibilities or alternative meanings. Therefore, it would need an act of interpretation, or tafsir, to define what is really meant by the speaker or the writer. Sometimes a text has a clear and apparent meaning, but there might be some more fundamental or underlying levels of meaning. Here tafsir would involve an act of unveiling and exposing those inner meanings.23

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22 For the statements of the Shi‘a scholars in this regard, see Shi‘i Islam: Origins, Faith and Practices, pp. 32–35.

23 Therefore, the real task of tafsir starts just after defining the following: the lexical meaning (this is deduced from the root of the word), the morphological meaning (this is deduced from the structure of the word), and the grammatical meaning (this is deduced from the function and position of the word with respect to the whole speech).
A sound *tafsir* can never be in conflict with the outer meaning.\(^{24}\) Moreover, a sound *tafsir* has to be able to show the relationship between the apparent or outer meaning and the underlying or inner meaning. In other words, an acceptable *tafsir* is the one that is able to show how the outer meaning refers to the inner meaning and how the inner meaning, in turn, refers back to the outer meaning. This is why another title for *tafsir* among the early exegetes of the Qur’an—like Abu Ja’far al-Tabari in *Jaami’ al-Bayaan*—was *ta’wil*, which literally means “to refer.”\(^{25}\)

The first person to interpret the Qur’an was Prophet Muhammad. According to the Qur’an itself, the task of the Prophet was to recite the Qur’an for the people, to teach and explain it to them, and to put it into practice so that he could be taken as an example for those who want to follow the Qur’an and to implement its teaching and value system in society.\(^{26}\) Therefore, to teach and to explain the Qur’an involved more than just reciting the Qur’an to the Arabs who were themselves able to understand the literal meaning of it.

According to the well-known hadith of *thaqalayn* and other hadiths, the Prophet has given the responsibility of interpreting the Qur’an to his household.\(^{27}\) Among the household of the

\(^{24}\) In his preface to *Al-Mizan*, ‘Allamah Tabataba’i writes, “As a direct result of this method, we have never felt any need to interpret a verse against its apparent meaning. As we have said earlier, this type of interpretation is in fact misinterpretation.”

\(^{25}\) It has to be noted that *ta’wil* is used in different ways. For a comprehensive discussion on this issue, see *Al-Tafsir wa al-Mufassirun*, vol. 1. ‘Allamah Tabataba’i has a special idea about *ta’wil*, in which he basically takes *ta’wil* to mean the reality to which the text refers. For his view on *ta’wil*, see, e.g., *Al-Mizan*, vol. 2, p. 14; vol. 3, pp. 49–53; and vol. 13, p. 376.

\(^{26}\) E.g., refer to the beginning of chapter Friday and verse 44 of chapter The Bee.

\(^{27}\) The hadith of *Thaqalayn* has been narrated in major sources of all schools of Islam. This tradition was uttered by the Prophet on different occasions, including the day of ‘Arafah in his last pilgrimage and the eighteenth of *Dhu’l-Hijjah* in Ghadir Khum. Despite minor differences in the wording, the essence remains the same in all versions of the tradition. e.g., in one
Prophet the first to interpret the Qur’an and introduce the Qur’anic teachings to Muslims was Ali b. Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet who was brought up in the house of the Prophet.

Version of the hadith the Prophet is quoted as saying, “Oh people! I leave among you two precious things: the Book of God and my household. As long as you hold on to them you will not go astray.”