The Alteration of the Sacred Books According to the Islamic Theologians

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ABSTRACT: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity preach the worship of God of Abraham. Jewish and Christian faiths were intertwined with the Islamic faith in its initial days. The Qur'an calls Jews and Christians as believers of God (*Ahl al-Kitab*). Islamic faith is not complete unless believing in Moses and Christ as the messengers/prophets of God. It also affirms Torah, Prophetical literature, and Gospels as the sacred books. At the beginning of the Islamic faith, Christians and Muslims lived in the same country. This closeness in both location and theology undoubtedly led to the extensive theological discussions. As a result of such studies, many subjects emerged as controversial issues. One such theme is the question of alteration/*tahrif* of the Bible. This paper attempts to delineate how this question is dealt with by the famous Muslim theologians. Muslim theologians have many discussions with Christian theologians on some theological problems, including the issue of *tahrif* in the Bible. They deal with this question with a reconciliatory approach. According to them, the meaning of *tahrif* is not clear both in the Old and in the New Testament. It means Muslim theologians have not been in unity on Sacred Books corruption. However, according to significant part of them, corruption (*tahrif*) is a change of meaning.

KEYWORDS: Alteration, The Bible, Gospels, Qur'an, Islamic Theologians

Introduction

According to Islamic theology, Christianity and Islam have many similarities. It also believes that Christianity is an early revelation, whereas Islam is later. Muslims believe that Christianity is a Divine message from God, and Christ is a Prophet of God/Allah, having been born of Immaculate Conception (Gardet 1948, 37-38, 201-202).

Islam is not built on the rejection of other religions. Indeed Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are strictly interactive relations. Islamic faith is not complete unless believing Moses and Christ as Prophets of God. It also considers that Torah and *Injil* (Gospels) are sacred books along with the Biblical prophets and all the revealed books (Al-Razi 1990, 1:30, 3:43)

Some people claim that Islam is a false religion (Bell 1968, 190; Torrey 1933, 127-154). The Qur'an gives an obvious answer to such claims. It states that Islam is not a new religion, but rather a continuation of the primordial religion. It has many similarities with prior revelations in several key areas. However, Islam differs significantly in its understanding of God and the human relationship to God. It also differs in the way that the Qur'an describes many prior historical incidents such as the creation of Adam, the role of Satan, the flood, the Abrahamic sacrifice, the crucifixion of Christ, etc. (Madigan 2001, 13-14).

Another aspect of understanding the Divine Wisdom behind allowing multiple religions is related to the divine understanding of human nature and the competitive instinct therein, which is alluded in several passages of the Qur'an like V: 48, II: 148. There are two verses in the Qur'an:

"To you be your Way, and to me mine" (Qur'an CIX: 6)

"There shall be no pressure in religion" (II: 256)

These examples make it clear that there is no place for religious intolerance in Islam, and indeed, coexistence with Christianity is a part of Islam (Al-Razi 1990, 5:16).

Qur'an gives a special status to Jews and Christians, naming them "the people of the book". The main Qur'anic perception is that Jews and Christians are the people of the book because they have received scriptures proclaiming essentially the same doctrines as that of the Qur'an. However, it claims that they have deviated from the purity of scriptural truth, at least to the extent of not recognizing and acknowledging Muhammad (Goldziher 1978, 208).

There are some verses in the Qur'an which talk about the secure exclusivity of Jewish and Christian faith. Sayings of the Prophet and Qur'anic verses related to *Ahl al-Kitab* demonstrate a wish to accurate this independent thinking and to call them to alter their methods and accept the Qur'an as a divine inspiration in line with earlier revelations (Al-Razi 1990: 3:70-73).

The Encounter between a Christian and a Muslim

The vital difference that separates Christianity and Islam is the theory of revelation and prophet. The concept of revelation and prophethood in Islam and Judaism is in one similar layer. One aspect in the Qur'an that challenged the Jewish authorities is the accusation of altered or changed authenticity of revelations (*tahrif*). The medieval Christian writers challenged the Islamic revelation at its foundation, with no apodictic doubt or hesitation. They continually insisted, in arguments that were based in general reason and Scripture, that it was demonstrably impossible that the Qur'an is true or that Muhammad is a prophet. Many of their arguments were founded on premises that were non-acceptable to Muslims (Daniel 1993, 67).

In *Madina,* Muhammad had to deal with the Jews and the Christians who were *the Ahl al-Kitab*/*People of the Book*. They are mentioned in the Qur'an as the holders of the earlier revelation, the believers who are preferred by God in the same way as the Muslims, who have accepted the new divine inspiration.

The Qur'an had stated that it was confirming the previous revelations, and the word that is translated in this context as "*musaddiq*" (II: 41) means approximately "claiming the truth" (Al-Razi 1990, 12:9-10). Since Muhammad based his claim of prophethood on his prophetic experience in similarity with that of Moses and Jesus, he could not deny that Jews and Christians were people of the book (Al-Razi 1990, 3:42-43). The Qur'an produces many arguments against the Jews and also against the Christians. Most Muslims claim that the corruption of the Jewish and Christian holy scriptures is confessedly alleged in the Qur'an (Fazlurrahman 1992, 35-39). The major Qur'anic perception of Jews and Christians is that they are the people of the book, who had received scriptures proclaiming doctrines virtually the same as those of the Qur'an. But it affirms that they have deviated from the purity of scriptural truth, at least to the extent of not recognizing and acknowledging Muhammad (Watt 1991, 26).

There is no verse in the Qur'an, which gives a condescending signal to the holy book of the Jews and the Christians. As a substitute, there is respect. There are minimally condemning remarks about the People of the Book on some of their actions. But many verses respect the "Book of God" (Torah or Gospel) as given to Jews and Christians (Al-Razi 1990, 3:111-113).

God says, "And in their footsteps We sent Jesus the son of Mary, confirming the Torah that had come before him: We sent him the Gospel: therein was guidance and light, and confirmation of the Torah that had come before him: a guidance and an admonition to those who fear Allah" (V: 46).

According to Islamic theology, the Torah is a similar book to Qur'an in contrast with the Gospel. We understand quickly that the Gospel is a different book by Qur'an. In this context, there is a possibility to claim that some Jews and Christians have changed the words in the Bible. And this is misused by Muslims very often, giving the impression that once there was a true bible and then somebody hid that and published a false one. The Qur'an does not say that. Instead, it means that the people, who have the proper words with them, do not deliver it to others. They mistranslate it or misrepresent it, or they add to the meaning of it. They put a different slant on it (Scott 2007, 19).

To these, Christian reactions to Islam are documented from an early date. Christianity used a formula of rejection of Islamic beliefs from the beginning. This is related to the work of St. John of Damascus, who was born about fifty years after the emigration/*Hejira*. The formula takes an unusually severe attitude in condemning the Muslim beliefs, including its faith in God and about Christ (Platti 2000, 356-358).

The religious polemics among the Jew, Christian, and Muslim theologians have begun at the early times of Islam. Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem (d. 639), John Damascus (d. 777), Theodore Abu Qurra (750-825), Jahiz (777-869), Juwayni (d. 1085), Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) and Fakhr al-din al-Razi (d. 1209) are very famous theologians among them.

Some Muslim theologians started to write books to Christian reactions. The first one to be considered among the Muslim polemists is Abdallah b. Ismael al-Hashimi (d. 820). His work *Risala ila Abd al-Masih Ibn Ishaq al-Kindi* was published in London in 1880. Another important person is the Zaydite imam al-Qasim b. Ibrahim (d. 860). In his *al-Rad ala al-Nasara* he declares some verses from the Gospel and upholds that the Christians have fallen into a fault in claiming the divinity of Christ for they have not correctly understood their books (Di Matteo 1921, 301).

One of the leading scholars interested in falsification Fakhr al-din al-Razi is an Islamic theologian and commentator. He is the author of the *al-Tafsir al-kabir (The Great Commentary)* or *Mafatih al-ghayb* (The Keys to the Unknown) and *Munazarah fi al-radd ala'l-Nasraniyya* (The Book of Discussion on the denial of a Christian). In the *Munazarah* he discussed with a Christian theologian some Christian and Islamic theological problem like Jesus, Muhammad, Qur'an, Islamic social life, etc. Razi tackles the same issues in the *Tafsir*.

Alteration/*Tahrif*

One of the most significant achievements of the early Muslim scholars, in general, is the development of a doctrine that at some unspecified point in the past, the Jews and Christians had corrupted or altered (*tahrif*) Gospels. This doctrine implies that their scriptures are no longer the real Torah and Gospel received from God by Moses and Jesus, respectively (Saeed 2002, 419-428).

Islamic scholars have approached the issue of falsification (*tahrif*) in two ways. The first approach is that the Bible's text was interfered with. The second approach is that while the text is untouched, Jews and Christians changed the meanings of the scriptures, they said things that were not in the main text. In early Islam, *tahrif* was bounded by the understanding that the holy books were misinterpreted for an ulterior motive. There was no belief that the texts of the Torah themselves, or the Gospel were rearranged. This early belief also conflicts the new, widespread acceptance that these books were misinterpreted through centuries of bona fides and accidental mistranslation and copy errors.

The Qur'an accused some *Ahl al-Kitab* (mainly Jewish masters) to the charge of *tahrif* or changing the authenticity of revelations (II: 75; IV: 46; V: 13, 41). This deformation is not limited to the interpretation but also the replacement (*tabdil*) of words (II:59, 211; VII:162), or the exchanging of revealed words with words that did not appear originally in the scripture, or the secrecy-hide (*kitman-ihfa*) (II:42; III:71, 187; V:15; VI:91), the suppression of the truth with falsehood, or overlap (*labs*), to cover (II:42; III:71). These Qur'anic revelations came towards the mid-end of the Muhammad's life. It was at that point that Muhammad was invited by both Christian and Jewish communities arbitrate peace in the city of *Medina* (Bicer 2010, 87).

This made it easy for Muslim theologians to adduce some arguments posed by Jews and Christians on the Bible. It was claimed that this doctrine of *Tahrif* ("corruption" or "alteration") was founded in the Qur'an. There are, four verses (II: 75, IV: 46, V: 13, V:41) where the word "*yuharrifuna*" appears, which is a form of a verb which has *tahrif* as its verbal noun. It appears that the Muslim considerate of the term *yuharrifuna* is founded on the idea of scripture in Islam as "literal words of God", which are just as they were revealed and are in the same language in which they were revealed. It looks to be somewhat different from that of Christianity (Arnaldez 1956, 311-312).

For Muslim theologians, like Al-Razi, for instance, the Qur'an is not Allah's word in a metaphorical sense, but it is so. It is the authentic statement of God, which came through the angel to the Prophet in the system of direct divine explanations and advised the human on how to

live in this world. The angel, the medium through which revelation eventuated, as most Muslims trust, is said to have transported God's revelations realistically, in the language of the Prophet. The Prophet, in turn, taken those messages and transmitted them as exactly as they came to him. His followers then took the messages and compiled them into a form of a book without any adjudication and augment (Fazlurrahman 1989, 81-85).

It was claimed that this doctrine of *tahrif* (corruption or alteration) was found in the Qur'an. *Tahrif* is defined as "alteration of a transcript, by favor of the original sense is corrupted" (Isfahani 1986, 638). It may happen in diverse methods: by direct corruption of the inscribed text; by voluntary alterations in reading aloud a text which is itself accurate; by mistake or add in; or by a wrong statement of the true sense." The definition of *tahrif* (corruption), according to Razi is as follows: *Tahrif* is variance and corruption. This word is derived from *inhiraf*, which is deviating or leaving something (Al-Razi 1990, 10:120-121).

Some of the Muslim theologians accepted the falsification as either distortion of the meaning of the text (*tahrif al-ma'na*) or falsification of the text itself (*tahrif al-nass*) or falsification of the word (*tahrif al-lafzi*). Thus, it is preferable to interpret the *tahrif*, usually, as alteration (*taghyir*) of the word (*lafz*) than to understand it as a changing of the meaning. For God's word (*kalam*) must remain as it was. And when the interpretation (*ta'wil*) is changed, the meaning is also changed (Al-Razi 1990, 11:191).

Al-Razi says that, according to Qaffal, who is a scholar from the Shafi`i school, *tahrif* means to bend something from its natural condition. Razi notes briefly four kinds of Jewish *tahrif*:

Substitution and replacing a word or phrase in the Torah with another word or phrase.

It is attributing a false interpretation to the context, *al-tawilat al-batila* (according to Razi this is the best explanation of *tahrif*). It is *tahrif al-ma'ani*.

Replacing the words in which Muhammad's name and features are specified, with another similarly meaningful word.

Inverting the precepts of the Pentateuch, for example, applying "beating" for "stoning."

The question, whether *tahrif* of scripture was in the meaning or the wording, is not decided by Islamic scholars.

According to them, the Qur'an states (IV: 46) three ways in which *tahrif* could arise.

Firstly, corruption could arise by placing a word for another. For example, usage of the term '*Adam tawil*' instead of "*rab'ah*" in Torah. For example, Razi raises the challenge to this by saying: how is this change possible for a Book whose letters and words are known to many such people in the East and West? It could be said that it was possible in the beginning, because initially, people who adopted religion were few, and they had very few scholars. These very few scholars may have come together to change part of the original of the book. Because at that time, only scholars had the holy book.

Secondly, *tahrif* (corruption) is to use doubtful statements for false interpretations. It is to change the true meaning of a word into a false meaning using various linguistic tricks. This kind of incorrect interpretation could be seen in the contemporary world. People use the Qur'anic verses that are not in line with their sect schools (Al-Razi 1990, 10:119-120).

Thirdly, the Jews used to meet the Prophet and ask him about different things and receive the information from him. But as they left him, they changed his words (Rashid al-Rida 2007, 3:343-345). To explain this clearer, Razi, in his interpretation of "*an mawadi'ihi*", goes further: If we interpret *tahrif* as false interpretations (*al-ta'wilat al-batilah*), the verse "*yuharrifuna al-kalima an mawadi'ihi*" (Q. 4:46) means that they attribute false interpretations to those texts. There is no statement to indicate that they take a particular word, *tilka al-lafzah*, out of the Book (Maturidi 2010, 4:181, 229).

According to Maturidi the alteration of the word is possible. He uses an example of a verse, V: 41, where the term "*min ba'di mawadi'ihi*" is used. Maturidi does not give a definite and clear view on this. There is a possibility of both types of *tahrif*, but he seems to be leaning towards the

tahrif of meaning (Maturidi 2010, 4:229). In his interpretation Maturidi also gives preference to the view that *tahrif* is a false interpretation.

Many Christian theologians do not accept the claim of Islamic theologians and other some modern Islamic theologians. Against the proposal of *tahrif*, they have alleged the "inspiration." In this context, since pontificated by the sacred writers, who were inspired by the Holy Spirit, these Bible must be acknowledged firmly and faithfully as the truth which God wanted to put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation (MacKenzie 1966, 119; Rahner 1975, 1461; GRIC 1987, 127-135). Therefore "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy, 3:16-17).

The problem of the Alteration Time of the Bible

Muslim theologians, who speak about the alteration of the Bible, do not have a unanimous opinion regarding the time of the alteration. Islamic theologians like Razi makes a distinction between *tahrif lafzi* (changing the text) and *tahrif manawi* (changing the meaning, the interpretation). He is not definite on the nature of *tahrif*, but he raises the possibility of both. However, it appears that he prefers the *tahrif manawi*. It seems that Razi believes that such changing of the text is possible only before a scripture becomes well known to many followers (Al-Razi 1990, 3:143-144).

Razi believes that the possibility of this *tahrif* was either at the time of Moses or at the time of Prophet Muhammad. This is related to the object of *tahrif*, the distortion of what was received by Moses during his lifetime or the texts in To-rah, which most probably referred to the prophethood of Muhammad. In most cases, disputes on *tahrif* were intertwined with the connotation that the Jews and Christians simply distorted the references to the Prophet Muhammad in their scriptures (Al-Razi 1990, 4:93).

Razi argues further that if this *tahrif* had occurred at the time of Moses that probably is related to the texts concerning Prophet Muhammad. And he presumes that if the *tahrif* occurred at the time of Prophet Muhammad, it would be referring to the interpretation of the texts related to the coming of Prophet Muhammad and his prophethood or specific laws, such as the law of adultery. He then says, "The apparent meaning (*zahir*) of the Qur'an does not indicate the nature of what they distorted (*harrafu*)."

On the question of who was engaged in *tahrif* the terms used in verse (Q. 75) do not give a clear answer. According to Razi, some of those who were engaged in *tahrif* were of the time of Moses, and of the time of Muhammad. The Prophet received the words from God. It is improbable that any "change" or "distortion" by some renegades from among Moses' followers would have been given any kind of authority. The text of the word of God would have remained intact and well-known to both Moses and Muhammad.

Razi's arguments are disputable. However, Razi cannot support his views with historical data. At the same time, religious people would, in no case, purposely change their sacred book. There is no reference to the time of Moses in Razi's arguments. Similarly, the *tahrif* would not have been possible at the time of Muhammad. He recommended Jewish people to refer to the decisions of the Torah. If any Jew who does not accept the Torah, he would not apply to the decisions of the Torah (Al-Razi 1990, 4:94-95).

On the other hand, Maturidi did not mention the time of the falsification and the way it took place. Many Islamic theologians, such as Maturidi, did not give information about the time and form of the distortion.

Conclusion

The *tahrif* is a challenge before Jewish and Muslim theology. But it is not a question of primary interest for the Christian and Muslim theologians. However, for Christian theology, the understanding

of revelation is of prime importance, and this is where Christian theology has differed from the Jewish and Muslim theologies. According to the Jewish and Muslim theologians, the words of Jesus are not written in a literal way. The expression of Jesus, who spoke Aramaic, is translated into other languages.

The majority of Islamic theologians, like Razi, suggest the *tahrif*. Their thesis derived from an understanding of the Islamic revelation. Their claim is agreeable from the point of the Islamic perspective. However, the Christian concept of revelation differs from the Islamic understanding of the revelation. After all, the Biblical Criticism movements are embedded in the West. As it is pointed out by Hava Lazarus Yafeh, the evolution of Biblical Criticism favors the claim of Muslim theologians about *tahrif* (Yafeh 2000, 10:112).

We do not find any apodictic God's words to *tahrif* in the Qur'an. And consequently, Muslim theologians do not have any consensus on this problem. According to many Muslim theologians like Razi, *tahrif* (corruption/ altered) can be interpreted as an alteration of the meaning. It is resulted by translation and interpretation. In the views of Razi, *tahrif* (as meaning) is possible for the Torah. Many of the Qur'anic texts which are connected with *tahrif* are pertinent to some Jewish notables. By Qur'an some Christians were accused of not being dependent on the way of Jesus and of being wrong in their exposition of the words of Jesus.

It is a known fact that many people believe first and asks for evidence later. Thus the above discussion makes it clear that each faith-group is satisfied with what it feels. Any matter for disputes comes then and finds secondary importance. In conclusion, one can say that all religions must find internal manifestation rather than external resources concerning their claims.

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