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Toward an Islamic Model of Revelation

In Islamic tradition, *waḥy* (literally “communication”) and *tanzīl* (literally “sending down”) refer to revelation as the transmission of God’s message, rather than the “unveiling” of God Himself implied by the English term with its Christian connotations. Reflection on revelation across the Abrahamic traditions typically distinguishes between general revelation—knowledge of God derived from nature or human experience—and special revelation, which involves specific events, experiences, or teachings conveyed through prophets or other exceptional religious figures. From a monotheistic perspective, the natural order or natural law may be interpreted as part of general revelation.

This paper focuses on special revelation as understood within the Islamic framework, where faith in God is closely tied to the human response to God’s special revelation. While these revelations were initially transmitted orally, all Abrahamic traditions have canonized them in sacred scriptures. Traditionally, special revelation has been viewed propositionally—as the communication of divinely revealed truths that humans are invited to believe. This understanding is commonly referred to as the Doctrine Model or Revelation as Doctrine.

Since the rise of historical-critical approaches to the Bible in the nineteenth century, non-propositional models of revelation have gained prominence. These models emphasize not the transmission of propositions but a relational encounter with the divine: “What God reveals is not information, but God Himself.” Such perspectives often blur the line between general and special revelation and challenge the authority of propositional claims. While this paper critically engages with the non-propositional view within an Islamic context, its primary focus remains the propositional model.

Christian theologians have identified four major non-propositional models: the History Model or revelation through divine acts in history (e.g., G. von Rad, W. Pannenberg); the Inner Experience Model or revelation as personal religious experience (e.g., F. Schleiermacher, J. Wesley); the Dialectical Presence Model or revelation as existential encounter (e.g., K. Barth, E. Brunner); and the New Awareness Model or revelation as transformative consciousness (e.g., P. Teilhard de Chardin, P. Tillich). Jewish theologians have added two more: Revelation Without Content or the Interpretive Model (e.g., M. Buber), and Hermeneutical Revelation or the Postliberal Model (e.g., E. Levinas).

This paper advances two main claims. First, none of these six non-propositional Judeo-Christian models adequately captures the Islamic understanding of revelation. Second, while the Islamic model aligns more closely with the propositional Doctrine Model, it significantly diverges from both its Christian (e.g., T. Aquinas, C. Hodge) and Jewish (e.g., S. Gaon, J. Soloveitchik) formulations. An Islamic model of revelation, as proposed here, is one grounded in the principles of the Quran and the Prophetic Tradition.



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Mohsen Kadivar is a research professor of Islamic Studies at the Department of Religious Studies, Duke University (US). His work is at the intersections of “Islamic Studies”, the contemporary “Intellectual History” in the Middle East, and the “Philosophy of Religion”. His primary interests span both classical and modern Islamic thought. Kadivar is known for his work in advocating for the compatibility of modernity with reformist Islam. His books, *Blasphemy and Apostasy in Islam: Debates in Shīʿa Jurisprudence* as well as *Human Rights and Reformist Islam*, (both Edinburgh, 2021), reflect his arguments in this regard. He has authored numerous books and scholarly articles in Persian, some of his works translated into other languages. Kadivar’s forthcoming books are titled *Governance by Guardianship*, (Cambridge), and *The Illusion of Islamic Theocracy*, (UNC).