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The Quran as Divine Speech: Shī'ī *Uṣūlī* Thought and Speech Act Theory

Muslims believe that the Quran is the revealed speech of God (*kalām Allāh*), a “divine speech act” whose illocutionary force, it might be said, is to “guide those who are pious” (*hudā li-l-muttaqīn*). This guidance operates through a complex array of speech acts: commands, prohibitions, promises, threats, reassurances, and more. In this paper, I examine divine speech acts in which God addresses specific audiences and ask the question: do *addresses* to specific audiences extend to others not directly addressed? To achieve this, I engage Shī'ī *uṣūlī* legal theory with contemporary philosophy of language, particularly focussing on the problem of *al-khiṭābāt al-shafāhiyya*. Do the commands and prohibitions that were initially addressed to a specific audience extend beyond their immediate contexts? How can divine speech maintain normative force for audiences who were not directly addressed at the time of revelation? These questions, central to Shī'ī *uṣūlī* thought, have engaged Imāmī legal theorists such as Mīrẓā Qummī (d. 1231/1816), Ākhund Khurāsānī (d. 1329/1911), and Muḥammad Ḥusayn Nā'inī (d. 1355/1937), to name but a few. Their explorations touch upon the universality of divine law, the contextuality of meaning, and the mechanisms by which legal norms transcend temporal and spatial boundaries. Drawing on modern philosophy of language, particularly John Searle's theory of speech acts and debates on the context-dependence of meaning, this study investigates how *uṣūlī* insights resonate with or challenge these contemporary frameworks. Ākhund Khurāsānī's emphasis on the rational intelligibility of divine discourse, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Nā'inī's exploration of collective address and the forms these take in different propositional contexts, and Mīrẓā Qummī's views on interpretive boundaries provide fertile ground for rethinking the hermeneutics of divine commands. By analyzing their approaches through the lens of modern linguistic philosophy, this paper argues that *uṣūlī* hermeneutics offers valuable perspectives on enduring debates about context-dependence in meaning and the universalizability of speech acts, thus illuminating the sophisticated mechanisms by which religious traditions navigate the tension between contextual specificity and universal application.



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