

# Muhammad Hamidullah on the Islamic theology of revelation: topics for a discussion on comparative theology

## Muhammed Hamidullah e a teologia islâmica da revelação: elementos em vista de uma teologia comparativa

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### Abstract

The dialogue of theological exchange, which can be carried out as comparative theology, is one of the four forms of interreligious dialogue encouraged by the magisterium. A subject of great interest to this form of dialogue is divine revelation, within the field of fundamental theology. Regarding this subject, a discussion partner in the dialogue with Islam is Muhammad Hamidullah, one of the most distinguished Muslim scholars of the 20th century, whose work is the object of growing attention. This article has two objectives: (1) to highlight the importance of Hamidullah for a future work within comparative theology; (2) to categorize issues, derived from his analysis of revelation, that will be relevant to a later theological exchange with a Christian theology of revelation of an ecumenical nature in the light of the Second Vatican Council.

### Keywords

Fundamental theology. Interreligious dialogue. Theological method. Islam. Muslim theology.

### Resumo

O diálogo de intercâmbio teológico, que pode se desenvolver como teologia comparativa, é uma das quatro modalidades de diálogo inter-religioso fomentadas pelo magistério. Um tema de interesse para tal modalidade é a revelação divina, assunto por excelência da teologia fundamental. No diálogo com o islã acerca desse tema um interlocutor é Muhammad Hamidullah, um dos mais destacados acadêmicos muçulmanos do século XX e cuja obra é objeto de crescente interesse no meio acadêmico islâmico contemporâneo. Em vista de um posterior estudo de teologia comparativa, e após ressaltar o valor de Hamidullah, este artigo sistematiza os elementos de sua reflexão sobre revelação que serão oportunos em tal intercâmbio teológico com a teologia da revelação cristã de cunho ecumênico à luz do Concílio Vaticano II.

### Palavras-chave

Teologia fundamental. Diálogo inter-religioso. Método teológico. Islã. Teologia muçulmana.

## INTRODUCTION

Christian revelation and Christianity<sup>2</sup> were formed and flourished initially for about three centuries as a minority religion based in a religiously diverse and often contentious context. By the year 380 the Roman emperor Theodosius, through the Edict of Thessalonica,

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<sup>2</sup> We define Christian revelation as the divine disclosure that happened in Ancient Israel and in the Church of the time of the apostles (the *Urkirche*). We mean by Christianity the religion of the faith in Christ, in his principles of behavior, and in his action of redemption.

declared Christianity to be the state religion of his empire. This represented a remarkable turning point in the history of the religion because, as a consequence, for more than a millennium Christian revelation and Christianity came to exist in a context in which religious diversity was expressly reduced or absent, namely Christendom. The present times have induced a new turning point and have brought Christendom to a close. *Mutatis mutandis*, this context is somewhat analogous to that of the first three centuries. Christian revelation and Christianity again exist in a religiously diverse and, therefore, challenging environment. Although the difficulties brought about by this religiously diverse context may seem great, they should not be paralyzing; they were analogously not paralyzing for the Christians of the first three centuries.

From the methodological point of view, a valuable contemporary response to this diverse context is comparative theology.<sup>3</sup> It is a fruitful method for working theologically on religious diversity:

[Religious] diversity makes it necessary to focus our thinking, to choose a particular path of learning, commitment, and participation. [...] We need no longer find diversity and tradition incompatible [...]. In our religiously diverse context, a vital theology has to resist too tight a binding by tradition, but also the idea that religious diversity renders strong claims about truth and value impossible. Comparative theology is a manner of learning that takes seriously diversity and tradition, openness and truth, allowing neither to decide the meaning of our religious situation without recourse to the other. [...] Indeed, the theological confidence that we can respect diversity and tradition, that we can study traditions in their particularity and receive truth in this way, in order to know God better, is at the core of comparative theology (CLOONEY, 2010, p. 8-9).

From a methodological point of view, those who undertake comparative theology are rooted in one of the religious beliefs being compared; they have no compunction about their confessional adherence, nor do they want to be ambivalent. In doing so, theologians set to work according to venerable methodological tenets of their activity: “I believe in order to understand” (*credo, ut intelligam*) and “faith that seeks intelligence” (*fides quaerens intellectum*). Those who engage in comparative theology aim to deepen their understanding of the identity in which they are rooted. Since human identity is relational, such an understanding is aided by a gentle consideration of the other confessional identity with which it converses. These theologians are confident that their religious belief will acquire a deeper meaning by following the path indicated in the First Letter of Peter: “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence, and keeping a good conscience” (1Pt 3,15-16).

This way of developing theology has been encouraged and guided by the magisterium since the Second Vatican Council and, above all, since the 1980s, when some documents provided basic guidelines for interreligious dialogue. The text *Dialogue and mission*, which

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<sup>3</sup> We presuppose the method of comparative theology presented by Clooney (2010).

refers to four forms of dialogue, was released in those years (DM 28-35). Later on, the encyclical *Redemptoris missio* was published, with further reflections in tune with the four forms of dialog indicated in the previous text (RM 57). The document *Dialogue and proclamation*, which revisits the subject, came out the following year (DP 42-45). The first form of interreligious dialogue presented by these documents is called “dialogue of life”, in which people belonging to different beliefs share their neighborhood in a spirit of conviviality and sharing. The second one is called “dialogue of action”, when people of different beliefs work together at an institution, with the aim of promoting people’s lives. Another form is called “dialogue of religious experience”: persons of different beliefs talk about elements of each one’s spiritual life, for example about prayer and the search for God. Finally, in the form of “dialogue of theological exchange”, experts belonging to different beliefs present something from the perspective of their own religious belief, and then listen to the views of the other belief in the same theological area. This “dialogue of theological exchange” may be conducted in the manner of comparative theology.

As far as fundamental theology is concerned, this latter form of dialogue can take place on the issue of revelation. The objectives of this paper are: (1) to indicate the importance of the Muslim theologian Muhammad Hamidullah as preparation for a forthcoming study of comparative theology; (2) to systematize elements of Hamidullah’s reflections on revelation that will be relevant to such a future dialogue of theological exchange on this issue.

## **1 WHO WAS MUHAMMAD HAMIDULLAH**

Muhammad Hamidullah (February 9, 1908–December 17, 2002) was one of the most prominent Muslim scholars of the 20th century, having published hundreds of titles. He is ranked as a “giant of Islamic scholarship” (MUJAHID, 2003) and a “towering scholar” (BHAT, 2018, p. 58). He was also an accomplished linguist, and was proficient in nearly twenty languages. He was characterized by closely integrating academic and religious life in a way that served his religion while maintaining sincere friendship and coexistence with other religious faiths. Hamidullah “left great impact on the Muslim world through his significant contributions to the fundamental sciences of Islam” (BHAT, 2018, p. 58). His work is currently subject to renewed in-depth study in the contemporary Islamic academic milieu (ALI, 2009; ISLAHI, 2015; BHAT, 2018).

Hamidullah was born and grew up in Hyderabad, India – then under British rule – in a learned Urdu-speaking Muslim family. He gained bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Islamic law from Osmania University in his hometown; unlike modern law, Islamic law is intrinsically theological. Hamidullah’s first doctorate was earned in 1933 at the University of Bonn, Germany, with a thesis entitled *Die Neutralität im islamischen Völkerrecht (Neutrality in international Islamic law)*. His second doctorate was obtained two years later at the Sorbonne University in Paris with a work entitled *La diplomatie musulmane a l’époque du prophète et des*

*khalifes orthodoxes (Muslim diplomacy at the time of the prophet and of the orthodox caliphs)* (BHAT, 2018, p. 58-60). After his studies in Europe, he returned to his university of origin in India as a professor of Islamic law.

In the late 1940s he settled in France, where he stayed for at least 20 years. While dedicating himself to the Islamic Cultural Center of France and to the dissemination of Islam, Hamidullah conversed with French experts and took part in Islamic-Christian dialogue circles even before the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. He carried out a renowned translation of the Qur'ān into French (BORRMANS, 2009, p.31-49) and published several theological and historical works (LARZUL, 2012; BHAT, 2018, p. 65-66).

## **2 DIVINE REVELATION ACCORDING TO HAMIDULLAH**

The main work in which Muhammad Hamidullah developed his exposition of Islamic revelation is entitled *Introduction to Islam*, a book that was originally released in 1957. It was originally written in English, but was published by the Islamic Cultural Center in Paris. The book was translated into many languages from this first edition. In the ensuing decades, however, the text received a series of improvements and additions from the author. We use the third (revised and enlarged) edition, which was published in London in 1979. The elements concerning divine revelation that appear in this work are presented systematically below under six sub-themes. With reference to a “dialogue of theological exchange” (DP 42), in this limited space the intention is to reveal what Hamidullah has asserted, to let him express himself on the following subjects, to listen to his voice.

### **2.1 Nature, object and author of revelation**

In Islam, the nature of divine revelation is verbal, that is, it is composed of words. Hamidullah points out that the very first tiny part of what was revealed to Muhammad made this clear by referring to the roles of the writing pen and reading. In the Qur'ān the first words transmitted to the prophet were: “Read in the name of your Lord who created, created man from a clot. Read that your Lord is the most generous, who taught through the pen, taught man what he did not know” (QUR'ĀN 96:1-5).<sup>4</sup> In this very first fragment of Islamic revelation, the author stresses the importance of understanding divine revelation, from the beginning, as having a word-based nature: “it is inspiring to note that the very first revelation that came to the prophet, who was born among illiterate people, was a command to read and write, and the praise of pen which is the only means or custodian of human knowledge” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 158).

The revealed words made up in total a vast collection that was assembled into a book: “It is the collection and compilation of these revelations which constitute the revealed books”

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<sup>4</sup> The quotations from the Qur'ān are based on Muhammad Hamidullah's translation (LE SAINT CORAN, 1959).

(HAMIDULLAH, 1959, p. 50). The object of revelation – that is, that which is revealed – is thus a literary work, a collection of pages that forms a volume. This object of revelation, the book, has a unique character, to it all special deference is reserved: “The Qur’ān is not a book in the ordinary sense; it is a collection of the words of God, revealed from time to time, during twenty-three years” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 22).

The ultimate origin of these revealed words that form a book lies exclusively in God: “God is the source of all [...] prescriptions which [...]. He communicates to us through his chosen messenger” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 43). God is therefore the author of revelation, that is, the one who originates it, the one responsible for its existence and institution. In this way, author and object of revelation are distinct from each other. The author of revelation is God; the object of revelation is a huge collection of words in Arabic that make up a book.

## **2.2 Phases of the revelatory process**

Hamidullah stresses that the communication between God and human beings resulted in a process or sequence of events that produced the revealed book or Qur’ān: “This communication [...] simply resolved itself into a medium of reception of divine messages” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 2). The first phase of the process was the passage from the divine to the human realm of what God had to reveal. This first and most important stage was verified again and again over the span of twenty-three years. It consisted of the revelation itself, in Arabic *wahy*:

The highest degree of contact, the surest and the most infallible means of communication between man and his creator is called *wahy* by the prophet Muhammad. It is [...] a veritable revelation made to man on the part of the Lord, a celestial communication (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 48).

In the first phase of the process of sending down revelation, an intermediary was necessary. It was “a *malak*, literally a messenger, i.e. a celestial message-bearer, commonly translated as *angel*, who serves as intermediary, or the channel of the transmission of the message of God to his human agent or messenger, i.e., the prophet” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 48). In the Qur’ān, the *malak* or heavenly messenger who brought revelation – *wahy* – from God to Muhammad is called Jibril (Gabriel): “None except a prophet receives such a revelation through the intermediary of a celestial messenger” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p.48). In the *Ḥadith* or sayings of prophet Muhammad, which are distinct from the Qur’ān, we read that “this celestial messenger, Jibril, did not appear to the prophet always in the same form. The prophet saw him sometimes like a being suspended in the air, sometimes in the shape of a man, sometimes like a being having wings” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 49).

Hamidullah notes that, with the exception of the first revealed passage (Qur’ān 96:1-5), all other revelations given to Muhammad took place when he was awake: “According to Ibn Ishaq, the first revelation had come to the prophet during his sleep, evidently to reduce the

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shock. Later revelations came in full wakefulness” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 9). The author gives a synthesis, gathered from several *Ḥadith*, of accounts concerning what happened to the prophet during revelation (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 49-50). He reproduces the following narrative from the most important of these, the *Ḥadith al-Bukhari*:

Sometimes it came to me like the beating sound of the bell – and this is the hardest experience for me –, and when that ceases, I retain well engraved in my memory all that it has said; but sometimes the angel appears to me in the shape of a human being and speaks to me and I retain what he says (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 49).

But a second phase was necessary, a complementary phase to the first one in which the revealed words crossed over from the divine to the human realm. In the first phase the words remained oral. In the second phase they were put in writing. Hamidullah states that Muhammad “took necessary steps to preserve through writing the revelations he was receiving” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 8). To begin with, he had no disciples, so “it is reasonable to believe that the earliest revelations received by the prophet were not committed to writing immediately” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 17). As he started announcing the first revelations, which were still only expressed orally, he managed to gain companions in religion. The prophet himself then began to dictate to his scribes the texts that we call the Qur’ān: “While dictating this to his disciples, the prophet assured them that it was the divine revelation that had come to him. [But we] do not know precisely the time since when the practice of writing down the Qur’ān began” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 16-17). He made sure that the revealed words, hitherto merely oral, were also memorized by his peers, and dictated them to people who mastered the technique of writing: “This continued all through his life, since the Qur’ān was not revealed all at once, but in fragments as occasions arose” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 8).

The conveyance of words from the divine to the human realm until they reached the prophet “continued during the whole missionary life of Muhammad [...]. A revelation consisted sometimes of a whole chapter, short or long, and sometimes of only a few verses” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 17). Because revelation had this verbal character, such a “nature of the revelations necessitated that the prophet should repeat them constantly to his companions and revise continually the form which the collections of fragments had to take” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 17).

Hamidullah asserts that Muhammad’s activities in receiving and systematizing the Qur’ān were inerrant. Such actions were those of “an infallible person who should be protected by God against error, as is the case of a prophet” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 210). Yet the complete task of putting in writing all the revealed words was not an easy one due to the large number of sentences conveyed:



The prophet used to revise in the fasting month verses and chapters [already committed to writing] and to put them in their proper sequence. This was necessary, because of the continuity of new revelations. Sometimes a whole chapter was revealed at a stretch, at others fragments of the same chapter came continually, and this posed no problems. The same was not the case if several chapters began simultaneously to be revealed in fragments. In this last case one had to perforce to note them provisionally and separately on handy materials [...]. As soon as a chapter was entirely revealed, the secretaries classified these notes under the personal supervision of the prophet and made a fair copy (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 17-18).

Hamidullah emphasizes that all the words originally put in writing by the prophet were in Arabic and that “the same text is still in use” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 20). After the death of Muhammad, Caliph Abu-Bakr realized the urgency of codifying the Qur’ān. The author stresses that this task did not take long to be completed and that “the Qur’ān was ‘published’ only a few months after the death of the prophet” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 118).

### 2.3 Manifold revelatory processes

Muhammad Hamidullah explains that throughout the previous centuries, there have been a number of revelatory processes: “Islam has proclaimed that God has always sent his messengers, at different epochs among different peoples” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 141). In such manifold revelatory processes, an angel would bring God’s message to a chosen man, who was also charged with subsequently communicating to his people what was revealed: “In Qur’ānic terminology, this human agent of the message is differently called: *nabīy* (prophet), *rasūl* (messenger), *murfal* (envoy), *bashir* (announcer), *nadhīr* (warner)” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 51). They all received divine revelation of a verbal nature. Therefore, such titles represent the high dignity accorded to that individual: “The Qur’ān has made express mention of certain prophets, such as Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, David, Moses, Salih, Hud, Jesus, John the Baptist, and Muhammad” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 52).

According to Hamidullah, the teachings of the various prophets differed in details, but not in the essentials: “The divine messages do not disagree on fundamental truths, such as the oneness of God [and] the demand for doing good and abstaining from evil, yet they may differ as to the rules of social conduct in accordance with the social evolution attained by a people” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 52).

A divine revelation can be abrogated only by a later revelation: “The Qur’ān is explicit that there have been others [prophets] before Muhammad, he being the seal and the last of the messengers of God” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 52). Therefore “it is part of the obedience of man to God’s orders to abide by the latest disposition of his will” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 80). The author stresses by this the emphasis laid by the Qur’ān that Muhammad closed the sequence of the manifold revelatory processes and that after him the divine revelations came to an end.

## 2.4 Preservation and distortion of the manifold revelations

Muhammad Hamidullah asserts that some of those human agents put in writing the revelation they received: “The Qur’ān names and recognizes the scrolls of Abraham, the Torah of Moses, the Psalter of David, and the Gospel of Jesus as the books revealed by God” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 51). The author notes that all of these writings were originally God’s word: “A Muslim venerates the Torah, the Psalter and the Gospel as the Word of God” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 81). However, he notes that “we do not possess originals of the ancient messages, which have suffered damages in the unhappy fratricidal wars of the human society. The Qur’ān is not only an exception to the rule, but also constitutes the latest divine message” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 43). The author remarks that the scrolls of Abraham have disappeared, the Torah and the Psalms have been repeatedly destroyed by pagans, and that “as for Jesus, he had not had the time to compile or dictate what he preached; it is his disciples and their successors who gleaned his utterances and transmitted them to posterity in a number of recensions” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 51). He stresses that today those books are accessible only as distorted versions and do not reflect the original divine message: “It will be pathetic if, by some misfortune, one were to lose the original text of the revelation; the substitute could never be in entire conformity with what is lost” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 15).

Hamidullah underlines that of all the messages that were put in writing by the prophets, the only one that has been fully preserved and has reached the present day in its entirety is that revealed to Muhammad. All the rest have been corrupted and distorted:

practically no religion, excepting Islam, possesses today integrally the original of the revelation on which it is based [...]. It is the translation, or at best fragments, of which dispose the Christian, Jewish, Parsi and other communities. How fortunate the Muslims are that they form an exception, and possess integrally the original text of the revelation, the Holy Qur’ān! (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 209).

## 2.5 Content and purpose of revelation

Muhammad Hamidullah comments on the content of the divine revelation that is put in writing in the Qur’ān: “It is a collection of revelations sent occasion by occasion [...]. It has directions for everybody, every place and for all time” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 22). Such divine imperatives communicated through the prophet must be observed in every behavior of the individual: “Divine revelation alone should be the source of law for our conduct in all walks of life” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 67). All rules of conduct, whether spiritual or temporal, stem from the book that is the verbatim word of God, the Qur’ān (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 56).

Hamidullah expounds that what is determined in the written word of God must have universal scope because “the Qur’ān is addressed to all humanity” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 22). He stresses that these revealed sentences underlie all Islamic life, legislation, and morality: “Islam



is based on the belief of a divine revelation sent to men by the prophet as intermediary. Its law and morality, even as its faith, are therefore based on divine commandments” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 84). A characteristic of a Muslim is that he not only follows divine law in his actions and in those of his community, but “he is also to contribute according to his capacities and possibilities, to the propagation of this ideology, which is based on divine revelation and intended for the well-being of all” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 43). Islam “seeks that the Word of God alone should prevail in this world” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 99) and therefore Islamic countries, according to the particularities of each case, “are trying to reintroduce the *Sharī’a* in all walks of life” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 120). In this connection the author notes that a general caliphate as in the early days after Muhammad, in which *Sharī’a* was in force, no longer exists:

nevertheless, the masses continue to aspire for it. The very independent existence of Muslims is also subject to fragmentary reconquest. Before restoring the institution of a universal caliphate, it may be that they could have recourse [...], in order to avoid regional rivalries and susceptibilities, [to] a “Council of Caliphate” composed of the heads of all the Muslim states (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 98-99).

Hamidullah notes that, ultimately, all these efforts have a soteriological purpose with an eschatological stamp, for “one lives in this world in the preparation for the hereafter” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 43). He asserts that the destiny of a person after death will depend on the acceptance or rejection of the Islamic revelation in this life: “The believers and the unbelievers cannot be equals; the former will go to paradise, and the latter to hell” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 147).

## **2.6 The relationship between God and human nature**

Claiming that divine revelation exists presupposes some conception of the relationship between God the revealer and the human realm to which the revelation is sent. Hamidullah expounds that in Islam, God is “transcendent and non-material, beyond any physical perception (‘Sights comprehend him not’, Qur’ān 6:103)” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 39). He adds that, however, God “is also immanent, omnipresent and omnipotent (‘We are nearer [to man] than his jugular artery’, Qur’ān 50:16)” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 39).

Among the theoretically possible modes for the relationship between God and humans, Hamidullah notes that Islam rejects one in particular: “There are several ways of establishing contact or communication between man and God. The best would have been incarnation; but Islam has rejected it” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 47). In order to explain such a rejection, the author introduces concepts such as the vileness and abhorrence of the relationship. This rejection of incarnation is because “it would be too degrading for a transcendent God to become man, to eat, drink, be tortured by his own creatures, and even be put to death” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 47).

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He notes, however, that there are some possible modes for that relationship. For the sending of revelation – in Arabic *wahy* – such as the Qur’ān, composed of a precise series of sentences with exact words, Hamidullah stresses that an intermediary heavenly bearer, an angel, was necessary. However, the relationship between God and human nature is not limited to this. Divine revelation, in fact, is closed and no longer takes place because “the death of the prophet marks the cessation of the divine revelations” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 116). Conversely, and not to be understood as revelation, in general “the relations between man and his creator are direct and personal, without requiring any intermediary” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 39). The author comments that the term *communion* should not be accepted in this sense.<sup>5</sup> “The Christian term communion implies participation in the divinity. Finding it pretentious, Muslims use the term ‘ascension’ [of man] towards God [...] and no confusion between the twain” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 9). He points out that the distinction between God and human nature will always remain:

However close a man may approach God in his journeying towards him, even in his highest ascension man remains man and very much remote from God. [...] let us repeat that: man remains man and subject to all his weaknesses, and God is above all these insufficiencies (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 47).

One mode of such a direct relationship is called *ilham*, meaning divine assistance or illumination; this is not revelation, *wahy*, for revelatory processes were concluded. In divine assistance “one understands without effort [...], the human spirit – or his heart as the ancients said – is thus enlightened [...]. It is God who guides him and controls him and his thoughts as well as his actions” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 48).

Hamidullah further indicates that in the relationship between God and human nature, the text of the Qur’ān in Arabic as it descended from the divine realm is of indispensable help: “It is noteworthy that according to the Islamic belief the Qur’ān is the Word of God, the recitation of which is considered by the Qur’ān as something meritorious” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 207). He expounds that it is a matter of reciting the Arabic words that came from God himself. Man ascends to God along the path composed of the exact words that have descended from the divine realm in the very same Arabic language, “the language God himself has chosen for revealing his latest word for us” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 208). Translations are not suited for this, one must make use of the original words: “The original word has been revealed in Arabic: any translation would be a human work and human word, and this can scarcely serve the purpose of this mystical journey” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 208). He adds that “this is done both by the Arabs and the non-Arabs, even by those who do not know a word of Arabic” (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 206).

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<sup>5</sup> Hamidullah perhaps wrongly assumed that “communion” had as its etymology “common + union”, when in fact this term derives from the Latin *con-munus*: simultaneous duties or responsibilities in a relationship.

## 2.7 The interpretation of the Qur'ān

The various branches of theology (systematics, moral, pastoral theology etc.) use the data of revelation to reflect on particular themes. The theology of revelation (or fundamental theology), conversely, deals with revelation as such: its nature, its object and author, its intrinsic characteristics, and its interpretation. The study of Muhammad Hamidullah's analysis of revelation provides relevant criteria concerning the interpretation of the Qur'ān. It indicates that there are connections between a given theology of Islamic revelation and a line of Qur'ānic interpretation.

The verbal nature of divine revelation plays a pivotal role in the interpretation of the Qur'ān according to Muhammad Hamidullah. This criterion is implicit in his verbal view of revelation. He treats revelation as identical with the communication of huge set of divinely originated words in the Arabic language making up in total a vast collection that was assembled into a book. This verbal view primarily presents revelation as the divine disclosure of a huge collection of words in Arabic that made up the Qur'ān. These words were already in Arabic in the divine realm, even before descending from there to the human realm. Their origin in Arabic in the divine realm is the leading context<sup>6</sup> to be considered. First and foremost, the interpreter of the Qur'ān needs to get to the bottom of this and to have such a criterion as its main priority.

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<sup>6</sup> After Hamidullah's work, the literature on the issue of the "context (or circumstances) of the revelation" (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) has expanded considerably in recent years. According to the *Dictionnaire du Coran* (AMIR-MOEZZI, 2007, p. 168), the *asbāb al-nuzūl* ("contexts of the revelation") are a branch of the literature of Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*) that dates back to the pioneer work of Ali al-Wāhidī (AL-WĀHIDĪ, 2008) in the 11th century. The *Dictionnaire du Coran* indicates at least three lines of hermeneutical research in the reading of the Qur'ān. (1) Mohyiddin Yahia (2007a, p. 168-171) asserts that the "context of the revelation" is recognized as an indispensable tool for the understanding of Qur'ānic verses by most exegetes: it refers to the circumstances of a verse as a situation, a particular event or a question posed to the prophet Muhammad as a result of which a revelation was manifested to him as a divine answer. The context that provides the historical background of a Qur'ānic verse contributes to exegesis in that it provides a means of understanding the whole verse, and of preventing misinterpretations. Yahia highlights that knowing the *asbāb al-nuzūl* – the "context of the revelation" – raises a huge theological problem: if revelation appears to be contingent or 'restricted' to certain particular events, what might be the justification for deriving from it a rule which are valid for all, in all places and at all times? Mohyiddin Yahia affirms that taking the context into consideration in exegesis seems to attenuate the universal scope that the law attributes to the Qur'ānic verses. He stresses that the majority of Islamic theologians argue that the connection between a revelation and its context is not causal: one cannot speak of the "triggering" of revelation to the prophet except by the free initiative of God. Revelation is a one-way process from the divine to the human realm. The revealed words existed in Arabic in the divine realm even before their passage to the human world. The revelation of a Qur'ānic verse would have happened, regardless of any context, because it had as its sole cause the divine will. (2) Conversely, the point of view of some Orientalists is based on premises that are hardly compatible with the traditional theological exegesis. The view of these Orientalists sets aside a great concern over the verbatim preexistence in Arabic of the revealed words. It has more to do with the science of language and social sciences than with the divine origin of revelation. Some significant studies of this type are Rippin (1985, 1988, 2002) and Warraq (1998). Mohyiddin Yahia affirms that such an Orientalist hypercritical approach is however far from being unanimously accepted by scholars, and that its validity for all the exegetical traditions has yet to be proven. (3) A third line of hermeneutical research is the reading of the Qur'ān by some Muslims who show a desire to emancipate themselves from the traditional commentaries (YAHIA, 2007b, p. 295-298). Mohyiddin Yahia asserts that these authors do not intend to question the divine authenticity of the Qur'ān, but only to develop a new exegesis with some common features which

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According to Hamidullah, the *Ḥadith* (documents on the life and sayings of the prophet Muhammad), which are distinct from the Qur'ān, are also relevant to interpret revelation:

The narrations on Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, are called *Ḥadith*, whether they concern what he said or did or even simply tolerated among his disciples if they said or did something in his presence. This tacit approval implies the permissibility of the conduct in question of the public. [...] The Qur'ān is often succinct; it is in the practice of the prophet that one must look for the method of application, the details and necessary explanations. [...] The importance of the *Ḥadith* is increased for the Muslims by the fact that the prophet Muhammad not only taught, but also took the opportunity of putting his teachings into practice in all the important affairs of life. [...] His practice was therefore not mere private conduct, but a detailed interpretation and application of his teachings (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 23-24).

Hamidullah asserts that diligent study and a pious practice as a believer, together with the preceding criteria, are important for the interpretation of the Qur'ān. Interpreting revelation is vital for Islam:

It is a phenomenon observed in all countries that certain chauvinists and those lacking in independent thought wish to sacrifice the spirit to the letter of the teaching of an old master, while others adventure into non-conformism. But it is the golden means that should always prevail! A spirit without an inferiority complex, but equipped with the necessary preparation in data, and endowed at the same time with the piety of a practising believer, will never encounter difficulty in finding interpretation practical, as well as reasonable, such as would even modify the opinion held by the ancients. With what confidence and assurance does the great jurist Pazdawi tell us that not only individual opinions, but even the consensus of former times can be replaced by a later consensus! (HAMIDULLAH, 1979, p. 119-120).

## CONCLUSION

For some decades now, interreligious dialogue has been encouraged and guided by the magisterium. John Paul II and Vatican institutions under direct papal authority instruct that one of the forms for this is the “dialogue of theological exchange”. This can be carried out in the format of comparative theology, assuming the method presented by Clooney (2010). One of the issues that can be worked out in such a dialogue is that of revelation, the subject par excellence of fundamental theology. This is an important issue because divine revelation is generally the foundation on which all other conceptions of a religion stand.

The discussion provided in this paper introduces the Muslim thinker Muhammad Hamidullah as a participant in a dialogue of theological exchange in the field of revelation.

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testifies to the influence of Western culture: it endeavors to integrate into the interpretation of the Qur'ān the achievements of modern sciences; it criticizes other contemporary exegesis for having become a hermetic specialty for the most part, and above all, for ignoring the contributions of other disciplines. Yahia stresses that it is still too early to judge whether the results of such a hermeneutics are up to take up victoriously the challenges and denials of modernity with regard to the divine revelation of a huge collection of sentences in Arabic that make up the Qur'ān. Some recent studies of this type are Akbar (2019) and Andani (2019).

Hamidullah is a highly regarded specialist in the Muslim theological milieu, and a prominent scholar whose work is the subject of renewed in-depth study in contemporary Islamic academia.

The idea of divine revelation indicated by Hamidullah's work presents a framework that distinguishes between a revelatory nature, a revelatory principle, a revelatory process and a revelatory product. This framework is highly advantageous to a serious analysis of revelation in the form of a "dialogue of theological exchange" that is conducted in the manner of comparative theology.

Focusing on the elements of Hamidullah's reflections in that theological area, this paper has systematically and succinctly analyzed the theology of revelation of this author. In the limited span of the article and in view of a study planned for the future on comparative theology, our purpose was to take note of what that prominent author had to say in that field, namely:

(1) Divine revelation has a verbal nature that was objectified as a literary work whose author is God alone.

(2) The author and the object of revelation are distinct from each other.

(3) The revelatory process consists methodologically of a first phase in which the Arabic words descended from the divine realm to the human realm through an angel who delivered them to the prophet, followed by another phase in which the prophet made his disciples memorize and/or write down what he dictated literally.

(4) The prophet himself, with the aid of his scribes, codified and reorganized the revealed material that was already written and produced the physical Qur'ān.

(5) This idea of revelation endows the Qur'ānic phrases in Arabic with a quality that distinguishes them from any other sentence in that language. According to Hamidullah's theology of revelation, the Qur'ānic phrases in Arabic have an absolute character, in the sense that they preceded any human interpretation since they already existed in Arabic in the divine realm, independently of man.

(6) Over the previous centuries there were a number of similar revelatory processes involving other prophets – some of which also resulted in the production of books – but Muhammad's was the last of all.

(7) With the exception of the writing originating from this ultimate revelatory process, all previous ones have been corrupted and distorted, and their authentic versions are lost.

(8) All rules of social and individual conduct must emanate from the words divinely revealed to the prophet, which were faithfully reproduced in the Qur'ān.

(9) The words in Arabic were revealed for the purpose of saving people, and the afterlife destiny of each person – heaven or hell – will depend on the acceptance or rejection of that which was revealed to the prophet.

(10) Communication between God and human nature does not take place through incarnation, which is repulsive and would be demeaning to God.

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(11) Apart from revelation – which with the prophet's death has been brought to an end – communication between God and human nature can take place as divine illumination without intermediaries.

(12) Of great help in the actual communication between God and human nature is the oral and/or mental repetition of the words that were revealed in the original Arabic, even if the person does not understand that language.

These twelve elements are relevant in structuring an Islamic theology of revelation and are part of its identity. In view of a study planned for the future on comparative theology, their collation with the characteristic elements of the ecumenical Christian theology of revelation in the light of the Second Vatican Council will provide a relevant enactment of interreligious dialogue. ✨

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