

## **Islam – Between Human Inspiration and Divine Revelation: A Counter Argument to the Notion of Cultural Vacuum by Albert Hourani**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Albert Hourani, the British-Lebanese historian of Islamic history, bases his theorisation of Islam, which he claims is not of divine revelation, largely on three factors that revolve around the questions of prophecy, scripture and culture. This article seeks to refute the said claim, arguing that Hourani's contentions are indefensible. With reference to prophecy, Hourani contends that it was impossible for God to communicate with a human being; rather He manifested himself in a human person, like He did with Jesus (peace be upon him). In the absence of a mediator, such an argument has as its proof of validity only the claim of the person so divinely-manifested. In the case of Muhammad (S.A.W), God sent Gabriel, His archangel, to convey His revelations, thereby making the Qur'an, God's words, concrete proof of Muhammad's prophethood. With reference to the question of scripture, this article argues that the fundamental characteristics of the Qur'an, its language and consistency of messages in the face of tumultuous surroundings belie the contention that it was an adaptation from other religions mainly Christianity and Judaism. As for the absence of a viable Arab culture which therefore made borrowings and adoptions inevitable, the article points out that there was an established culture characterised by diversity, differences, economic activities such as trade and the like, all of which render invalid the notion of a cultural vacuum. This article thus argues that Hourani's contentions

are untenable. This article further asserts that any analysis of Islam should be based on its main and essential source, the Qur'an.

*Keywords:* The Qur'an, divine revelation, prophecy, scripture, culture, prophethood

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## INTRODUCTION

*Islam in European Thought* (Albert Hourani, 1991) by Albert Hourani is a collection of nine essays penned over several years and covered various aspects of Islam. However, of importance and interest to this article is Chapter 1 whose title gives the book its name. The longest chapter in the collection, it puts together views on Islam of several European scholars who preceded Hourani (1915 - 1993), ranging from among the earliest such as Edward Pococke (1604 – 1691), Simon Ockley (1678 – 1720), George Sale (1697 – 1736), up to Ignaz Goldziher (1850 – 1921), H A R Gibb (1895 – 1971) and concluding with Hourani's (1915 – 1993) own. Indeed, it is not pushing the point too far to suggest that Hourani's ideas constitute the culmination of the main thesis of what may be said as Western scholars' theorization of Islam. It is largely to this "theorization of Islam" and the questions it raises that this article seeks to address itself. Put simply, the thesis that underpins this theorisation of Islam is that, unlike Christianity and Judaism that are said to be related to divine scriptures and prophets, Islam is a humanly-inspired religion.

It is imperative at this juncture to stress that European scholars initiated the study of Islam, driven, as it were, by the fact that Islam had long settled on European soil and shaped its civilisation, as seen in Muslim Spain. This initiative served as counter-intellectualism or counter-influence to assert European self-identity that was felt to have undergone serious dilution after eight centuries of Muslim

rule in Spain. It thus saw as appropriate exploration of the Muslim world in various fields such as religion, culture, history and other areas that would yield the secrets of the Muslim world. Thus, Huart, Nicholson and Goldziher, who were among the early European scholars interested in Islam, became prominent scholars on Islam and were duly acknowledged by the West as experts in the field. Their works, regarded as classics, became reference sources and their worldview on Islam was institutionalized as a respectable academic field, as Ismail Ali Muhammad (2000) and Edward Said (1995) pointed out. Indeed, Said, sure and clear in his view of the institutionalization of Islamic scholarship, asserted that the study of Islam went beyond scholarly interest in that it was adopted by European Church institutions, and was later financed by European and American universities until Islam became the subject of interest throughout the West. Indeed, it could be said that interests in Islam developed into two grand ideas namely the establishing of a school of thought called orientalism on the one hand, and the setting up of learning institutions devoted to reinforcing the enterprise of theorising Islam, on the other.

It is against the background of a long-standing interest in the study of Islam that Hourani's ideas must be viewed and understood. As stated earlier, *Islam in European Thought* is an edited compilation of the author's previously published articles on the most conspicuous and dominant viewpoints of prominent European scholars, with Chapter One devoted to solidifying the

main thesis of Islam as a humanly-inspired religion, a thesis, it seems to suggest, that Hourani's own argument take to its logical conclusion. Concomitant with this, it is interesting to note that the last three chapters appear to somewhat soften the charge of Islam as an adaptation from Christianity and Judaism. This observation notwithstanding, it must be noted that the thrust of the three chapters can hardly be said to be antithetical to the traditional Western views on Islam. Rather, the chapters come across as an attempt to portray a more lenient stance towards Islam, a fact accomplished by focusing on the establishment of Islam itself, rather than its origin. Hourani, nonetheless, leaves unsolved the question of Western hostility towards Islam in that there is hardly any evidence of any attempt to go beyond the oft-repeated Western stance or to consider the Islamic perspective or references.

Hourani's survey of Western scholars' views on Islam such as those of Nicholson (1930), Huart (1966), Norris (1983) seem to lend credence to the argument of the presence of what may be termed as a cultural vacuum, a notion that in turn makes possible the preoccupation with the three crucial questions of prophecy, scripture and culture. Put in another way, Hourani's analysis emphasizes a strong underlying message of the existence of a cultural vacuum that paved the way for the coming of Islam, Muslim society and Islamic Scripture.

## THE NOTION OF A CULTURAL VACUUM

Posited as the three principles that underlie Islam, Hourani elaborates on the ideas of the prophecy of Muhammed (S.A.W) as an inspired person, the religion of Islam as an adaptation, and the identification of the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula as barbarians or primitive people. Referring to scholars of the pre-colonial period, Hourani evokes the views of Edward Peacock, Gorge Sale and Simon Ockley that Islam is either an adaptation of Christianity and Judaism, or the product of a genius who is inspired by the two religions that preceded it. These scholars opined that Muhammad was not "immediately inspired by God" (Hourani, 1991, p. 13)<sup>1</sup> nor "an inspired prophet" (13) but was "a man of remarkable achievements" (13) in the "knowledge and wisdom of earlier times" apart from being "a man who brought about a moral reform" (13).

As for the post-colonial scholars, Hourani suggests that because they had more direct experiences with Islam, their attitude became more confrontational due to "the idea of opposition between Christianity and Islam by the new religious spirit of Evangelicalism" (17). Also, it became more critical, and deliberation of Islam became even more stringently located within the traditional analytical framework that perceived Islam as the enemy or threat to Christianity. To discredit Islam, the notion of Islam being developed by a genius

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<sup>1</sup>All subsequent references to Hourani are from this edition.

named Muhammad after being inspired by Christianity and Judaism was reinforced further. It was thus with much certainty that Hourani is able to summarise Maurice's view of Islam as follows, "It cannot be said that the whole content of Islam was taken from the Old and New Testaments: Muhammad must at least have been inspired by them" (21).

It must be stressed that Hourani's arguments are in large measure an extension of opinions inherited from European scholars who preceded him, rather than the result of a cross-cultural analysis and critical approach to the subject of Islam, a point borne out by the fact that his arguments and sources are confined to the inherited opinions only. These opinions are not tenable because firstly, they introduce as a valid assumption an untested frame of thinking in advance of an argument, and are therefore, at best, mere presumptions. Secondly, they are not representative because they do not consider nor examine the direct sources related to Islam. Whilst these Islamic sources are admittedly referred to, their *inner layer* or crux, which refers to Islam's fundamental conviction and teachings such as belief in the oneness of God, His miracles, the Islamic concept of faith, and the like, is put aside. It must be stressed that historically, the Islamic texts, namely the Qur'an, Hadith and the works of prominent Muslim scholars, were available in the West. This assertion is based on the fact that Muslim Spain became a centre of learning not only for Muslims but also non-Muslims of various European nationals. Also, the

Islamic texts were translated into various European languages. It can therefore be conclusively said that the texts were readily available to European scholars well before they became concerned with the *outer layers* of the texts, to which they confined their references.

Further, as suggested by Edward Said (1995), the opinions of European scholars interested in Islam largely revolved around tales of voyages that were one-sided and subject to limited individual experiences. Or, these were personal "experiences" of western scholars who had spent time in the Muslim world and were said to be interested in Islamic studies. These "experiences", as Said's studies imply, served as reinforcements or justifications for pre-conceived ideas about Islam set in place well in advance of any argument. Additionally, the "experiences" were restricted to "interesting" places such as concocted brothels which, historically, could hardly be openly accessible to the public. The same goes for the experiences of erotic sexual pleasures made possible by the expertise of the local people steeped in the so-called exotic art of love-making.

As mentioned earlier, in mapping European thoughts on Islam, Hourani sees his own arguments as final and conclusive. The notion of a cultural vacuum that makes possible the three critical interests in prophecy, scripture and culture, is advanced as defensible and sound, the result of serious reflection and deep thought by orientalist over a long period of time, with Hourani's own ideas being the logical conclusion to

this theorisation of Islam. The workability of this notion, it would appear, lies in what may be called the three ideas of the space of culture, the mobility of the people, and the span of time. It is to these three ideas that the article now turns its attention, in particular to call into doubt their soundness as well as the viability of the theorisation of Islam as an intellectual discourse as a whole.

### **THE NOTION OF A CULTURAL VACUUM: A REFUTATION**

The three ideas of the space of culture, the mobility of the people, and the span of time are, in truth, an expansion of the three critical interests in the prophecy of Muhammad (S.A.W), the adaptation of the religion of Islam and the marginality or nothingness of the culture of the Arabs, all of which serve to cement the idea of Islam as a humanly-inspired religion.

With reference to the workability of the idea of the *space of culture*, it must be stressed that West Asia was characterised by diversity, factions, aggressions, counter-aggressions and battles that came about because of competition, marginalization and oppression, a fact mentioned in both the Bible and the Qur'an. Further, Hourani makes no mention of archaeological proofs of the existence of various cultures as proven by the Pyramids and the Sphinx in Egypt, and Petra ("Rock"), the famous stone structures carved into the rock, which lie on the slope of Mount Hor (Jordan). It is surprising that Hourani plays down Rome and its undeniable influence in West Asia, preferring instead to focus on

Egypt and Persia. Indeed, Hourani seems deliberately to (79-83) steer his argument away from the above characteristics and facts, and in so doing successfully denies the vitality and vibrancy that mark West Asia. Instead, Hourani chooses to focus on a theory of cultural development proposed by Marshall Hodgson, whose use of the terms *Oikoumene*, *cited agrarianate societies*, *Oxus* and *Axial Age*, serve to iron out cultural differences thereby making the need for cultural identity and sense of belonging superfluous or irrelevant. In availing himself of Hodgson's said theory, Hourani was thus able to similarly ignore the diversity, factions, battles and the like established by the Qur'an and the Bible, thereby denying the Arabs a viable culture.

Further, on referring to things related to Islam, Hourani tends to mention names only such as the Axial Age and the Mazdean tradition (82), but shies away from analysing them deeply especially in terms of their significance vis-a-vis his theorization of Islam. In addition, his analysis can be said to focus on the development of material culture, rather than spiritual or *religious culture*, as explicated in both the Bible and the Qur'an. This is truly surprising given the fact that Hourani's writings are concerted attempts to theorize Islam, which logically would call for giving due weight and attention to aspects of the religion proper and the religious culture that it spawns. These rebuttals throw into doubt the feasibility of the cultural angle of Hourani's argument.

With reference to the idea of the mobility of the people, its plausibility rests upon the portrayal of a time in pre-history where the world was dominated by ancient cultures while the rest of humanity, in particular the peninsular Arabs, existed sparingly on the margins of a culture. This portrayal is made possible by making mobility available to people with access to established cultures, at the same time as those without access to these established cultures were denied this mobility. The author suggests that through the course of time, the people with the benefit of mobility occupied the barren desert of Arabia, and later contributed to the formation of Islam. This picture is in stark contradiction to the account given by the Qur'an (106: 1- 4) of the existence, besides the established cultures of Babylon, the pharaohs and so on, of a vibrant Arab culture that developed as a result of trade and barter. Indeed, it was this culture that succeeded in bridging the gap between the east and the west. This fact could not be denied, and was instrumental in making possible the development of a culture that was truly unique in that it partook and availed itself of the various strengths and richness of the many cultures with which it came into contact.

The plausibility of the idea of the span of time, which makes credible the notion of Islam as coming out of nothing but mere inspiration and the work of adaptation, hinges upon establishing the concept of prehistory as discussed above, where humanity's progress was monotonous. It must be pointed out that such an account

of history ironically denies the possibility of the existence of various cultural and religious backgrounds. At the same time, putting aside artefacts as evidence of ancient people occupying the area, the said history serves to erase differences or diversity evident, as recorded in the Qur'an and the Bible. In other words, Hourani's arguments deny the existence of the periods of time characterized by the differences of people in terms of colour, language and tradition, the existence of certain ways of communication, and perhaps more importantly, the existence of self-establishment, identity, nationhood, and so on. The fact that there were trades and battles shows that there *were* diversities, whose diversities were called culture because they served to establish self-assertion or self-identity. Thus, ironing out diversities, as Hourani's argument seems to suggest, calls into question his own notion of a cultural vacuum.

The workability of the three ideas is crucial for the purposes of bolstering Hourani's discussion of Islam. It serves to deny *the existence of an entity* related to Islam that is located outside the selectively defined culture. It is thus possible to argue that the Islamic prophecy is derived from human inspiration, competition, rehabilitation and the spirit of morality found in the unrecognised and far from the established culture of the Arabs. Apart from that, it makes it highly possible to say that Islam has benefitted from the previous religions of Christianity and Judaism as well as the pagans' idolatry. Specifically on Islamic culture, Hourani (83) seems to suggest that

before the formation of the Islamic state, the institution of the caliphate, indeed, the establishment of Islamic civilization itself, Islam was characterized by the marginality of the identity, religion and culture of the people who occupied the barren sands of Arabia. Their existence was hardly known and they depended mostly on the strength of established people and cultures that were contemporaneous with them. Alternatively, they could be considered as a splinter or a fraction of the established people and cultures occupying Egypt, Syria and Persia then. These assertions, baseless at best, complete the theory that purports Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) to be “inspired” by other religions or cultures. However, as shown above, the notion of a cultural vacuum leaves much to be desired and is far from tenable.

### **THE “HUMAN INSPIRATION” FACTOR**

In addressing the question of Muhammad’s prophecy, Hourani opines that no word of God was revealed to a person. Or, to put it differently, divine revelation in the sense of putting God’s words into a human mouth, did not take place.

In understanding this argument, it bears repeating that Hourani reiterates the commonly-held Orientalists’ position that the last Prophet was Jesus (peace be upon him) and not Muhammad (S.A.W). Hourani further emphasises that the divinity of religion is measured at the level of divine manifestation, and not at the level of divine revelation. In this regard, and as

far as Christianity is concerned, God only manifests or incarnates Himself in a human body, as happened to Jesus; there was no direct interaction between a human being such as Muhammad (S.A.W) and God. In other words, the meeting of God and a human being happened at the spiritual level or the level of the soul, and not at the level of communication. By implication, the certainty of prophecy is proven at the level of feeling. This is so because there was no medium of appointment as a prophet other than the feeling of the divine incarnation which the prophet himself felt. Thus, all prophecies including that which was related to Jesus (peace be upon him) are subject to qualm or doubt, and a prophet was not sure whether he was an appointed prophet from God or he just felt so.

As an extension to the above argument, prophecy itself is a human feeling or an interpretation of the supposed-prophet’s inner feelings or his outward worldview. It has nothing to do with a scripture or scriptures that were supposed to be a divine revelation, or at least, an interpretation of God’s commandments upon mankind. Thus, a religious scripture is a prophet’s human experience, who feels that God has manifested Himself in his human body. The scripture is thus human writing, not God’s exact words or the interpretation of His words. Set against this explanation, prophecy is thus nothing more than human words because there is no indication that divine commandment on a would-be prophet has taken place. Mere divine manifestation without any divine revelation cannot support

a prophecy; thus, a prophet cannot proclaim that he is a messenger from God, and the messages in the religious scripture that he bears should not be propagated for fear that they do not represent the real messages from God.

By implication, too, there is no sure way of worshipping God in whatever form because the prophet is not divinely guided as to how to worship according to His pleasure. Thus, the concept of God to be worshiped or glorified is doubtful because the prophecy happens at the level of sense and falls short of the level of belief. In this regard, prophecy is an individual's guess or prediction and there is no absolute way of worshipping God. Thus, there is no divine scripture, and this puts the Bible, which is said to be of divine inspiration, in the same situation.

Contrary to the dubious concept of prophecy as explained above, Islam, on the other hand, categorically believes that Muhammad's (S.A.W) prophethood is the result of divine revelation, a personal communication from God to Muhammad (S.A.W) through the archangel Gabriel. The prophecy means a blessed gift, that is to say the Muslim prophet receives the divine words from God through His revelation; it is not affected through the manifestation of God or His incarnation, whose incarnation, as experienced by the individual prophet, is then translated into words that are later attributed to God. Therefore, the question of Islamic prophecy should be looked at from the vantage of divine revelation, that is, the Qur'an, not the allegation of the

divinity of the prophet as commonly held in Christianity.

The above counter-argument to the Western notion of Muhammad's (S.A.W.) prophecy places Islam as a part of the family of *spiritual* or *religious cultures*. It categorically states that Islam does not spring from human inspiration or ambition, and that Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) was not a man inspired by the notions of divinity. Like Jesus (peace be upon him) and other prophets before him, Muhammad (S.A.W) was also a prophet. He did not learn prophecy or divination, nor did he produce the Qur'an out of his ambition. Had he done so, his work would have been subjected to revisions or omissions due to mistakes or inexperience, all of which would have demeaned the Qur'an (4:82). On the contrary, the Qur'an stands as a proof of Muhammad's (S.A.W) prophethood, an appointed messenger of God.

### **THE DIVINE REVELATION FACTOR**

Divine revelation is a factor that distinguishes Islam from Christianity, which is said to be based on divine manifestation or incarnation. This point needs to be understood as it is fundamental to the understanding of Islam's position, which is different from that of Christianity.

In regard to the above, divine revelation contrasts with human inspiration, as the two are in different domains. Human inspiration is related to human senses or capabilities such as experience and knowledge as well as with human society. These capabilities are identified with the

boundaries of time and place in that they are subject to change as dictated by time and place. They are also subject to trial and error due to circumstances that are beyond control and to inexperience in knowledge. Thus, any idea proposed by a religious reformist, for example, is not exempted from revamp or revision; it is not unlikely that a radical element within the reformist's society would revolt against part or the whole of his reformation agenda. Likewise, ideas written in scriptures are subject to constant review to suit the requirements of the community. Historically, this did not happen to the Qur'an as a divine revelation.

The Qur'an's distinctiveness is characterised by its integrity which remained intact, unaffected by its surroundings which at times were tumultuous. It must be remembered that during the time of Muhammad's (S.A.W) prophethood, there were cultural and social instabilities in the form of battles between the two super powers then, Rome in the North and Persia in the East. Logically, the instabilities should have undermined the Qur'an's integrity and the consistency of its message. However, there is no historical record or evidence that suggests the Muslim Prophet had to revise the Qur'an to suit angered or disgruntled elements of society. That it remained intact throughout the span of twenty years, unaffected by its sometimes fractious surroundings, is testimony to its divine provenance.

Also related to the question of the Qur'an's divine provenance, a common view among the orientalist is that superstitions,

myths and biblical stories were randomly adapted in the Qur'an. Muslim scholars such as Ismail Ali Muhammad (2000), however, convincingly quashed this view based on the fundamental characteristics of the Qur'an such as its content, language style and the consistency of its messages, all of which, the author reiterates, are absent in the Bible. Of no less significance is the issue raised by Orientalists such as Gibb, R.A. Nicholson and others that Islam was shaped by other contemporary cultures and religions that surrounded the Arabs, subsequently shaping their minds. It is not to deny that there existed inter-racial exchanges between Arabs and non-Arabs before Islam. However, these exchanges were confined to trades rather than religious interactions on account of hostility between the Jews, Christians and the Arabs then. Inter-racial contacts were largely prompted by social needs or living necessities, rather than a desire to spread a religious belief or faith across ethnic boundaries.

In the same vein, it must be noted that in the Arab society then, lines were drawn between religions and cultures. The Jews stayed in the Jewish community in Medina, while the Christians were considered as a minority group among the Meccan Arab idolaters. It could hardly be said that cultural integration existed, allowing for the flow of ideas or philosophy to help inspire the Qur'an. Further, there were no stable religious scriptures on Christianity conspicuously present and within reach of the Arabs. This is supported by the fact that the Arabs then did not have their own

alphabets to facilitate translation works or the study of other religious texts for the purposes of adopting and adapting them for Islam. Thus, the claim that Islam was a hotchpotch job of various religious beliefs, customs, cultural practices, stories and myths is completely without basis.

### **TRANSCENDENCE AND UNIVERSALITY OF THE QUR'AN**

Although geographically Muhammad (S.A.W) was very much limited to the Arab peninsular, the Qur'an nonetheless *transcended* the worldview of the Arabs then, and its messages were universal in nature. The transcendence of the Qur'an was proven, especially in the Quranic *Meccan* Chapters, when regional boundaries, associated with religious and cultural identities as well as norms, were surpassed. Likewise, its messages on social, economic, educational and political aspects are horizontally encompassing in that they are aimed at mankind in general, surpassing tribal and ethnic boundaries. For example, the message of the importance of reading for acquiring knowledge in the Chapter entitled *al-Alaq* is culturally and religiously all-embracing.

Also exemplified in the said Meccan Chapters is *unlimited supernatural knowledge* where the Qur'an transcends extant human knowledge and understanding of the universe, nature and the human body. Indeed, when human knowledge then was replete with unfounded, contradicting and ambiguous superstitions and myths common in various traditions and religions then,

the Qur'an traced deeply the origins of the universe, nature and the human body. Beyond human expectation, the Qur'an foretold the ending stages of the earth and universe. It also foretold the existence of various universes besides the universe to which this world belongs. It asserted that the human body was its own universe, characterized by complexity, systems, parallelism, sequence and coordination, which were not known to humans before. It preceded the era of science and technology and penetrated into worlds beyond the grasp of human senses and thinking. It explored unseen space and described it in a systematic way; it (55:33) foretold the penetrability of the space with great authority. It also penetrated into delicate spots of atoms (99:7-8), germs and organism (36: 36), oceanography (25:53) and other creatures. It described the origin, significance, as well as the process of recycling and preservation of water. Beyond that, and in great detail, it described life after this worldly existence, a subject other previous religions and traditions only briefly touched upon.

In contrast to the unlimited supernatural knowledge that the Qur'an displayed, human achievements in knowledge was confined to materials seen by the naked eye and human experiences that were limited. For example, the experiences of individual mobility or tribal migration in the desert, hardships and uncertainties in battles, recorded in traditional poetry, were regarded as a source of knowledge for the Arabs then. In the same vein, human knowledge was largely associated with

collective tradition, and was passed down from one generation to another without impetus or momentum for advancement. Examples of such traditional knowledge are *qiafah*, a traditional knowledge of tracking signs and traces in the desert of Arabia, Arab traditional medicine and Hellenistic logics. Such being the nature of human knowledge then, it was thus subject to frequent improvement, making present day achievement, for example, totally unthinkable to societies such as that in which Muhammad (S.A.W) received the Qur'anic revelation.

The universality of the Qur'an is upheld by the fact that the Qur'an's reach not only went beyond the boundary of normal Arab experiences of life, enterprise, worldview, communication, interaction and so on, but also various environments beyond the barren Arabian desert where the revelation took place. Examples would include addressing the question of transportation, in particular ships in the ocean which was totally unfamiliar to the desert Arabs, references to living things such as bees and their honey and cows, both of which did not exist in the Arab desert.

## CONCLUSION

The main thesis that underpins Hourani's *Islam in European Thought* is one that is often repeated in the Western discourse on Islam. It revolves around the main allegation of Muhammad (S.A.W) as an inspired man whose ingenuity resulted in the Qur'an, an adaptation of the Christian and Jewish scriptures, a claim backed by

the so-called fact that the Arab society of Muhammad's (S.A.W) days was bereft of culture. Contrary to the allegation, which the article has shown to be baseless, Islam is of divine inspiration and is not an adaptation, reformation or revision. The varieties evident in the Qur'an are of its own interpretation in dealing with humankind, universe and other creatures. They do not represent the perspectives of other religions, beliefs or traditions. Hourani's thesis, like his orientalist predecessors before him, is based on perception, impression and pre-conceived notions about Islam. It ignores the fundamental crux of Islam itself, namely the depth, density and complexity of the Qur'an as its main source and the exclusiveness of the prophecy of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W).

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