Taḥrīf in the Digital Age

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1 Introduction

The present subject occurred to me during my research about the role of the Internet in the discipline of New Testament textual criticism. If one is interested in New Testament textual criticism and conducts research on the Internet wanting to know more about manuscripts, ancient versions, editions, etc., one will quickly find Islamic websites presenting topics on New Testament textual criticism. This fact, though it might be surprising to some, is actually related to a classical topic in Islamic debates against Christianity, the taḥrīf. To understand this unexpected meeting between a specialized field and a notion, which over time involved into polemics, it is first necessary to establish the definition of the notion and then its interesting historical development. Thereafter, we will analyze how taḥrīf is used in the digital age and interacts with New Testament textual criticism.

2 Definition

According to Lazarus-Yafeh, tahrīf means:

[C]hange, alteration, forgery; used with regard to words, and more specifically with regard to what Jews and Christians are supposed to have done to their respective Scriptures, in the sense of perverting the language through altering words from their proper meaning, changing words in form or substituting words or letters for others. (Lazarus-Yafeh 2012)

Caspar and Gaudeul underline the importance of the tahrīf in interreligious relations: “Since the beginning, the Tahrīf (alteration or falsification) of their

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2 On this topic see e.g. Clivaz 2013 and Schulthess 2013.
Scriptures by Jews or Christians has been one of the main topics in the Islamic-Christian polemic” (Caspar and Gadeul 1990, 61). Does “since the beginning” mean that we already find taḥrīf in the Qur’ān? In the Qur’ān, we have the same root as in the word taḥrīf (تَحْرِيق h-r-f) in four places as a verb, concerning Jews or Christians:

- **Al-Baqara (2) 75**: “Do you covet [the hope, O believers], that they would believe for you while a party of them used to hear the words of Allah and then distort the Torah after they had understood (yuḥarrifūnahu) it while they were knowing?”
- **An-Nisā’ (4) 46**: “Among the Jews are those who distort words (yuḥarrifūnahu) from their [proper] usages and say, ‘We hear and dis-obey’(...)
- **See also**: Al-Mā’īda (5) 13 and 41.

Here in the *Sahih International Translation*, which is a modern translation probably influenced by the today acceptation of taḥrīf, the verb is translated as “to distort”. In an article about these verses, Nickel renders the verb by ‘to tamper’ (Nickel 2007). Accad underlines the differences between two kinds of taḥrīf: (1) taḥrīf al-ma’na: falsification of the meaning, that is a misinterpretation of the text. Accad considers this to be the meaning of the verbs found in the Qur’ān; (2) taḥrīf al-lafẓ (or taḥrīf an-naṣṣ): falsification of the text that is an intentional textual corruption (Accad 2003).³

This distinction is not new and already existed among early Islamic scholars, for example by Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 1210), the Persian Sunni theologian, exegetist and philosopher, who knows both meanings but prefers the meaning of a textual alteration, as he explains:

> The taḥrīf is either about the text, or about its meaning. But the word taḥrīf applies better to the alteration of the letter than to the alteration of meaning. Indeed, if the Word of God still is how it was and only its interpretation has been altered, then only its meaning and not the Word of God as we hear it has been changed. So, if this significance (alteration of the text) is possible [...], it should be preferred. If it is not possible, we should apply the word to the alteration of the interpretation [...]. (in *al-tafsīr al-kabīr*, cited in Caspar and Gadeul 1990, 65–66).⁴

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³ The idea of scriptural falsification was present in late antiquity (by the Samaritans or the Marcionites, for example). Reynolds rejects a direct influence (Reynolds 2010, 197).

⁴ All citations from French articles have been translated into English.