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Progressive Interpretation of Quran as an Opportunity to Live Peacefully together in a Global and Plural World

Introduction

The main topic in this article is the latest interpretation of Quran which is called progressive interpretation.

The discipline which is commonly used among progressive Muslims is hermeneutics. Hermeneutics could be defined as science of interpretation which deals with the relationship between the author, reader and text, and the conditions under which one understands a text. The progressive approach to Quran is almost strictly contextual. This means that the reader must take into the consideration the historical background of some quranic verses. Beside that, progressive Muslims have during interpreting focused on linguistic analysis, on semantic and thematic analysis (i.e. words have meaning only by being enmeshed in a relationship to other words; Quran's narrative comes as reminders in short sequences, directives or ethical exhortations) and on interpretations of various authors, such as early Islamic philosophers and exegetes, mystical and mutazalite thinkers.

My objectives in the present work are threefold. First, to show that it is possible to live in faithfulness to both the Quran and to one's present context alongside people of other faiths, working with them to establish a more humane society. Second, to reconsider the way the Quran behaves to religious Other in order to make space for the righteous and just Other in a theology of pluralism for liberation. Third, to demonstrate that Quran's most important and universal message lies in the notion of justice to which we must strive for.

Article (because of its shortness) does not go into details when explaining the way of constructing the meaning of some quranic terms and despite mentioning the South African context it does not demonstrate how different sides took part in the struggle against apartheid. Anyway, it still highlights a challenge for all religions: that human liberation and interreligious dialogue can not be realized without each other.

Progressive Muslims

A progressive Muslim agenda is concerned with the ramifications of the premise that all members of the human race have the same intrinsic worth because each of us has the breath of God breathed into our being (Quran 15: 29). "Progressive" refers to a relentless striving towards a universal notion of justice in which no single community's prosperity, righteousness, and dignity come at the expense of another.

The method of progressive understanding of Quran

Progressive Muslims state that certain pre-existing interpretations of Quran fail to offer them a sufficient guidance today. For that reason they take into the consideration the sources which exist

outside Islamic tradition and can serve as useful tools in the global pursuit of justice. These external sources include for example the liberation theology. Progressive Muslims follow squarely in the footsteps of liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff, who deemed a purely conceptual criticism of theology, devoid of any real commitment to the oppressed, as radically irrelevant. Boff recognized that *liberacao* (liberation) links the concepts *liber* (free) and *acao* (action).

Progressive Muslims say that justice lies at the heart of Islamic social ethics. Time and again the Quran talks about providing for the marginalized members of society: the poor, the orphaned and the downtrodden. It is time to translate those social ideals in a way that Muslims and non-Muslims can understand.

Anyway, how did progressive Muslims “translate” these so called social ideals in Quran? God’s word is revealed to the searcher, but which comes first, the word or the searcher? At first glance this is a seemingly innocuous question. Not so when dealing with a text such as the Quran which most Muslims believe to be co-eternal with God. So, where does one commence a work on quranic hermeneutics, the text or the context? Given that every literary production is inescapably autobiographical, progressive Muslims locate the birth of their ideas in their own personal, social and ideological history. Contemporary hermeneutics alerts us to the false pretensions of objectivity or neutrality.

Farid Esack, the author of the book “Quran, Liberation and Pluralism” has while growing up in South Africa noticed that the battle over interpretations of religion was being waged in the discourse of solidarity with the religious Other in the struggle against apartheid. South African quranic hermeneutics of pluralism for liberation has influenced on rethinking approaches on Quran, especially to the theological categories of exclusion and inclusion rooted in a struggle for freedom from economic exploitation and racial discrimination.

Belief in the eternal relevance of the Quran is not the same as belief in a text which is timeless and spaceless. In order to relate quranic meaning to the South African crucible, the progressive Muslims were compelled to relate it from some historical moment. The Quran could not have been revelatory had it not been also “eventful”. This approach has enabled many progressive Muslims in South Africa to engage the apartheid regime meaningfully and in solidarity with the religious Other. More than fourteen centuries after the revelation of the Quran, in a far southern corner of Africa, believers in the Quran have asked the text to enter their context of oppression and struggle for freedom.

The socio-historical and linguistic milieu of the quranic revelation is reflected in the contents, style, objectives and language of the Quran. This contextually is also evident from the distinction made between the Meccan and Medinan verses. In the relationship between the revelatory process, language and contents, on the one hand, and the community which received it, on the other, the Quran is not unique; revelation is always a commentary on a particular society. Furthermore, the picture which the Quran portrays of the Transcendent is one of God actively engaged in the affairs of this world and of humankind. One of the ways in which this constant concern for all of creation is shown is in the sending of prophets as instruments of His progressive revelation. Moral and legal injunctions have been revealed gradually. The Quran itself is explicit about the reasons for the progressive nature of its revelation. The fact that it came as day-to-day guidance necessitated this manner of revelation because “only that it can strengthen our hearts” (25: 32). This principle, which

characterized the entire revelatory process, is best manifested in the disciplines of *asbab al-nuzul* ("events occasioning revelation") and that of *naskh* (abrogation).

Asbab al-nuzul deals with the transmission of the *sabab* (cause) of the revelation of a chapter or verse and time, place and circumstances of its revelation. Despite the neglect that it has suffered as a discipline, its significance is evident from the frequency of the claim that no assistance is greater in understanding the Quran than knowledge of when and in what circumstances its verses were revealed.

Naskh means the removal of something by something else and annulment. In traditional quranic studies and Islamic jurisprudence it means the verification and elaboration of different modes of abrogation. The proof text is verse in Quran 2: 106: "Any message we abrogate or consign to oblivion We replace with a better for similar one." Whatever the various opinions surrounding *naskh* and *asbab al-nuzul* there is unanimity about the situational character of the Quran. As Muslim society was taking shape, the quranic revelation kept up with the changing conditions and environment. But our goal is not to search for accounts of isolated historical incidents. A Quran is not merely a collection of individual and disjointed injunctions. It is also an integrated whole with a definite ethos, where verses and sentences clarifying and amplifying one another. An understanding of that interaction and context is a condition for reapplying it. To understand the Quran in its historical context means that the reader has to understand its revealed meaning in a specific past context and then to be able to contextualize it in terms of contemporary reality.

The hermeneutical keys

The location of the interpreter itself became a consciously chosen hermeneutical key. The first two keys, *taqwa* (an awareness of the presence of God) and *tawhid* (the unity of God), are aimed at developing the "moral" and "doctrinal" criteria with which to examine the other keys and the "theological" glasses with which to read the Quran in general, and more specifically, the texts dealing with the religious Other. The second two keys, *al-nas* (the people) and the marginalized (*al-mustad`afun fi`l-ard*) define the location of their interpretative activity. The last two, justice (*adl and qist*) and struggle (*jihad*) reflect the method and the ethos that produce and shape contextual understanding of the word of God in an unjust society.

Taqwa may be defined in the quranic sense as "heeding the voice of one's conscience in the awareness that one is accountable to God." Its comprehensive sense of embracing both responsibilities to God and to humankind is evident from Quran 92: 4-10: "Thus as for him who gives to others and is conscious of God." A *Muslim* is, in the first instance, someone who has submitted to God in both a social and personal sense.

Tawhid means "to be alone", "one", "an integrated unity". Although this form of the word does not appear in the Quran, *tawhid* has come to be synonymous with the unity of God. Islam's comprehensiveness or holism is rooted in the principle of *tawhid*. *Tawhid* at the socio-political level is opposed to a society which divides people along the lines of religion, ethnicity, race and gender. *Tawhid* at personal level means that people should not live in a "dualistic" way of life (for example, being a believer known for bad deeds).

Al-nas refers to “the people” as a social collective (72: 6). The divine trust was placed exclusively in humankind’s hands (33: 72), thereby lifting humankind beyond matter to the status of guardians of earthly life. We are “His vicegerent on Earth and carrier of His responsibilities.”

Al-mustad`afun fi`l-ard are people of “inferior” social status who are vulnerable, marginalized or oppressed in the socio-economic sense. The Quran also uses other terms to describe the lower and impoverished classes of society, such as the *fuqara`* (poor) (2: 271) and the *masakin* (indigent) (2: 83). Quran mentions also those *mustad`afun* who are not Muslims, but Israelites who suffered under unjust Pharaoh (7: 137). All examples reflect God’s preferential option for the oppressed despite the nature of their religion.

Qist means “justice” and “equity”. *Adl* is defined as “to act equitably, justly, or rightly”. These two terms are used interchangeably in the Quran (49: 9) and, according to it, justice forms the basis of the natural order (45: 22), and it is based on *tawhid* (55: 1-10). These verses place humankind and the task of doing justice within the context of their responsibility to the Creator, on the one hand, and the order which runs through the cosmos, on the other. The enforcement of justice is given as one of objectives of revelation (56: 25) and it is seen as a stepping stone to *taqwa* (5: 6). Justice could be the *raison d`être* for the establishment of religion. The Quran is often specific about those areas of social affairs wherein lapses are most likely to occur (matrimonial and interfaith relations, contracts). Injustice is therefore the deviation from natural order and is regarded as a disturbance in “the balance”.

Jihad literally means “the struggle”, to “exert oneself”. In the Quran, it is frequently followed by the expressions “in the path of God” and “with your wealth and your selves.” *Jihad* could be defined also as “contemplative spiritual struggle” (22: 78) and even “exhortation” (29: 8). Despite its popular meaning as a sacred armed struggle or war, the term *jihad* was always understood by Muslims to embrace a broader struggle to transform both oneself and society. The Quran establishes *jihad* as the path to establishing justice and praxis as the way of experiencing and comprehending truth. *Jihad* as praxis serving as a hermeneutical key assumes that human life is essentially practical; theology follows: “And those who strive in us (our path) to them we shall show our ways (29: 69). Theory can be based on praxis as a source of knowledge.

Progressive “theological glasses” of responsibility to God and to humankind, their empathy to marginalized and oppressed people, their devotedness to justice and struggle for positive transformation of society had important influence on their understanding of quranic terms, such as *iman*, *islam* and *kufr*.

Iman (“being secure”, “good faith”, “loyalty”, “to believe”) is in the Quran often linked with God itself and Last Day, with righteous deeds, with the followers of Muhammad, Moses and his followers and other prophets. *Iman* has a dynamic nature; it can increase (*iman* as an act of the heart, inner satisfaction, certainty, awareness of God, being just, having faith) or decrease (because of increase of *kufr*) (3: 173). Looking at the verses in Quran shows that it is almost impossible to separate faith (deeply personal response to God) from (just, rightly) actions (8: 2-4).

Islam is in Quran often identified as “the only din acceptable by God” (3: 19) what could be central to an understanding of Islam as reified entity, one religion among others. Many exegetes recognize that, at one level, the *din* of *islam* was among several reified religious systems, but this was not the

primary reference for understanding *islam* as *din*. We must know that entire third Chapter of the Quran is Medinan. Both terms, *islam* and *din* must be understood within the quranic context of a process of reification. In the first and second Meccan periods, the term appears as a verbal noun and mostly with the word *yawim al-din* (the day of Requital). In the third Meccan period *din* seems to emphasize a personal commitment of individual to God (6: 125). In the earliest chapters of the Quran the emphasis is on humankind's response to God, of either denial or agreement to a specific lifestyle. In the last part of the Meccan period, there is an identification of the *din* with the "community of Abraham" and "the straight path". From then onwards, especially in the Medinan period, the emphasis seems to be on community of believers. The Quran speaks and uses expressions in terms of the understanding of a community or individuals at a particular stage of their development. Word *islam* does not mean only reified Islam. The Quran portrays a *Muslim* as someone who submits to a Divinity beyond, and more abiding, than that *Muslim* and beyond reified religion. God is *akbar* (greater than) any conception of Him or any form of institutionalized or non-institutionalized service to Him.

When Progressives look at the termin *kufir* they recognize that this word is strongly connected to those people who are "ungrateful" (26: 19), "reject the signs of God", "slay Prophets and mock them" (4: 155) and "oppress the weak" (4: 168). While this word itself contains also the important element of disbelief, it must be remembered that this is not the only basic semantic constituent of the word, nor is it the original one. Its earliest meaning should not be abandoned. *Kufir* was first applied to some Meccans who insulted Muhammad and later, in Medina, to various elements among People of the Book and Bedouins as well. From the short survey of the Quran in the light of hermeneutical keys and also from the examination its linguistic roots one is led to agree that *kufir* means "person who denies the truth in the widest, spiritual sense". The Quran portrays *kufir* as an actively and dynamic attitude of ingratitude leading to willful rejection of known truths, God's gifts and, flowing from this as well as intrinsically connected to it, a pattern of actively arrogant, oppressive and aggressive behavior (16: 104-9). As we can see, according to Quran, it is not labels that are counted by God, but actions that are weighted (2: 177). Furthermore, the Quran is explicit in its acceptance of religious pluralism; verses stating the compassionate God and His Prophets who are responsible to act in solidarity with the oppressed (28: 5-6) take part in quranic inclusivity or pluralism which is connected to its willingness to free humankind from several forms of injustice.

Conclusion

The progressive attempt to develop contextual theology of pluralism for liberation illustrate that the objective towards which Quran moves is more significant than the premise from which it starts. Taking into account the method of *asbab al-nuzul* and *naskh* (the Quran's historical background), on the one hand, direct our understanding in the way that some words and verses have specific or pragmatic meaning; the semantic and thematic analysis of cited quranic words and sentences, on the other hand, direct us to its universal and eternal meaning. For progressive Muslims Quran's ethics lies in its humanism: our ultimate accountability in front of God is related to our just and responsible deeds, to our empathy and solidarity with religious Other who live in a painful reality of all times. Devotedness to this kind of interpretation could lead to a greater awareness of our similarities and consequently to peaceful and dialogic coexistence of our differences in a global and plural world.

Bibliography

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