

Scriptural Interpretation: The Importance of Contextual-Historical Hermeneutics in a Process of Peace Building (Northern Nigeria)

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Abstract

Religion as a powerful impulse in human existence has contributed significantly in shaping the socio-political, economic and spiritual life of the people in northern Nigeria. At the same time, religion which is closely intertwined with culture and is central in the understanding and establishment of peace in society, continues to play a paradoxical role in the locality. Radical religious strife, quest for more converts, ethnicity, perceived political domination and poor or extremist interpretations of scripture have strengthened stereotypical views of the self and the other; such that religion is used to fuel intolerance and conflict in northern Nigeria. The experience of religious diversity in the region present an opportunity for growth and strength in developing a formidable culture of peace hinged on the values of respect and tolerance. However, northern Nigeria has not been able to lend itself to the project of peace with the capacity to build a viable mechanism to respond to the complex nature of religious diversity, peace and security. Faith communities that once lived together in mutual harmony are being torn apart in conflict, doubt and mutual suspicion. How has poor interpretation of scripture facilitated such hideous actions? Where is the value of peace which for instance Christianity and Islam claim to profess? How can dynamic scriptural hermeneutics promote peaceful coexistence in the recognition of the otherness of the religious other?

1. Introduction

Scriptural Interpretation or hermeneutics is the science of explanation also known as *exegesis* (Greek-explanation), i.e., the investigation of the meaning of the sacred text (McKenzie, 1968:393). The aim of *exegesis* is to study and carefully understand the significance of a text

from the perspective of the Divine Will in revelation or inspiration and the immediate circumstance of the human agent (Prophet or community), the direct recipient of such revelation. God, through the human agent, makes His message known, and in most cases within the historical and lived experience of the one who receives such communication. Hence the meaning or the intention of God in the text can be investigated and understood only by discovering what the human author means, since God does not make His intention known except through the knowledge and experience of the human writer (McKenzie, 1968). To aid a balanced understanding of the sacred text and to ensure against mistakes, misinterpretation and extremist or literal reading of the text, it is important that the art of hermeneutics be applied through critical analysis of text, language and a study of the historical circumstance in which a verse is given and its contemporary application (Lehmann, 1975: 611).

The interpretation of scripture and its relevant application in a religiously diverse society remains a challenge and a project for Muslim and Christian clerics, interpreters and preachers especially in northern Nigeria where relations between adherents of the two religions (Christianity and Islam) have been marred by violent conflicts. Religious sentiments as expressed in ethnicity, politics and socio-cultural encounter which promotes rivalries, stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination, intensified by poor scriptural interpretation, underpin a deep-rooted historical divide. This seems to be the trigger for violence in the region. However, religion understood as emotions, gestures, belief systems and attitudes which express our most fundamental relationship and the worship of the one God remains a valuable institution for peace in society (McBrien, 1984: 520). Moreover, the sacred books (Bible and Qur'an) remain the most vital resource for peace and harmony with the other. Therefore, a lucid interpretation of these sacred texts is fundamental to achieving mutual peace and harmony in the locality. Exegetes, interpreters and commentators of scripture must critically strive to expound and unravel the spiritual significance, intended and ordained by the divine author, with that care which the dignity of the sacred word demands (*Divino Affalante Spiritu*, 1943, no 27).

This paper focuses on the need for balanced interpretation of scripture in a religiously plural environment, with specific reference to the Qur'an, highlighting the importance of understanding the historical

context of a particular scriptural revelation and how such may apply in a contemporary religious milieu.

2. Qur'anic Interpretation

The Qur'an is the Islamic Holy Scripture, a vital spiritual source. It is believed to be the word of God and a guide for Muslims. The Qur'an is the most Holy book in Islam, the *Umm Al-Kitab* (mother of all books). In the Islamic tradition, the Qur'an is considered a declaration of the eternal word of God transmitted by an angel to the Prophet Muhammad. It is a direct auditory dictation from an eternal origin which is not influenced by the Prophet (Kenny, 2000:47-49). For Muslims, the Qur'an is God's final supreme word which is not dependent on any previous revelation. It is normative, unique and immutable. The written word set down once and for all by God; that transcends all consideration of space and time. It is the main criterion of Islamic faith and action, and the basic foundation of all Islamic laws (Kenny, 2000). It communicates ethical obligations, external dynamics, religious depth and specific convictions about faith. It presents human responsibility, social justice and Muslim solidarity with God and the Islamic *Ummah* (Yaran, 2007: 29).

Since the Holy Qur'an emerged in the seventh century, attempts have been made by various Islamic scholars, schools of thought and commentators to study, understand and give meaning to the message contained in the classical text. The Qur'an by its nature does not provide detailed prescriptive theological guidelines for its interpretation. But the fact that recognising and critically analysing the times and historical circumstances in which Mohammed appeared with his message as the Prophet of God and launched his mission goes a long way in helping scholars and exegetes to articulate the message in the Holy Book (Sachedina, 2001:16). The historical method of interpretation which requires that the text be examined and interpreted in accordance with the rules of grammar and the meaning of words has had a long significant history in the development of Qur'anic exegesis (Sachedina, 2001). Moreover, since every text speaks in the language of its times, it is pertinent that the interpreter of such a text deploy knowledge of language, its speakers and context in explaining the relationship of the message, while recognising the dynamic nature of history and society (Sachedina, 2001). Although various Islamic scholars and schools of thought have tried to assess

historical forces connected with the text which have given rise to divergent interpretation to God's revelation, such however are not unrelated to the distinct views held by individual exegetes engaged in the formulation of specific lines of inquiry into the meaning of the text.

According to scholar of religion Abdulaziz Sachedina (2001:4), in the last few years, religion has re-emerged across different communities as an important source of moral imperative needed to maintain social cohesion in society. Religion as a form of identity has not only helped to mobilise people's sense of outrage in resisting for instance an autocratic government, but plays a significant constructive role in national reconciliation and nation building. At the same time, religiously inspired nationalism and their related ethnic rivalries and conflicts have raised serious questions about the impact of religious ideology, intolerant interpretation of scripture and extremism in a pluralistic world (Sachedina, 2001). Meanwhile, it can be argued that Islamic revelation presents a theology that resonates with contemporary pluralistic belief that other faiths are not merely inferior manifestations of religious belief, but variant forms of individual and communal responses to the presence of the divine in human life (Q3:198). This means that Qur'anic interpretation has to acknowledge the plural nature of modern society and the equality of all humans as created by God.

The Qur'an presents a universal perspective of divine revelation, a Being who responds to the commitment and sincerity of humans created by God (Esack, 1997:146). The world view of the Qur'an is overwhelmingly anchored and set within the human experience which tries to make sense of the divine revelation for a positive response (faith) and to create ethical order within human society. The challenge however remains of the need to clarify the Qur'anic motivation with the aim of leading the community of faith to its ultimate destiny. For instance, when a verse is revealed in a particular situation and later another verse is revealed that seems to contradict the previous verse as revealed. What happens in such a circumstance? How are such verse(s) interpreted and how can an exegete deal with such an impasse?

3. The Theory of Abrogation or *Naskh*

Islamic scholars, jurists and commentators have advanced the theory

of abrogation. Abrogation is a prominent concept in the field of Qur'anic commentary and Islamic law which allows the harmonisation of apparent contradictions in legal ruling. However, understanding and analysing the principle of abrogation and applying such to the Qur'an demands a critical distinction between Qur'an as a source and Qur'an as a text. The difference being the verse removed from the text is the substance of which remains a probative source of doctrine (Burton, 2001:11). Classical Islamic jurisprudence recognises two primary sources of legal ruling, the Qur'an and the Sunna, and two secondary post prophetic sources are acknowledged: the analogy derived from one or other of the primary sources and the consensus of qualified legal experts (Burton, 2001). Nonetheless, abrogation is applicable to neither of the subsidiary sources but only to the document on which they are based. And since abrogation is surely the right of the law giver, it is argued that it must have been initiated before the demise of the prophet who mediated the Qur'an and the Sunna.

Abrogation may be external or internal in Islam. For instance, some Muslim scholars argue that Islam abrogation of Judaism and Christianity is obvious since Islam is the last in the series of God's revelation of the divine Will. This is defended by applying the theory of external abrogation. Internal abrogation applies when, for example, a Qur'anic verse which was previously revealed is repealed by another verse or revelation to the prophet. Thus abrogation is claimed when one regulation is withdrawn and replaced with another or a later one even though the replaced verse remains in the Qur'anic text.

Scholars like Al-Shafii (AD. 820) argues that, since the mission of the prophet lasted over two decades, it is not surprising that the community with signs of dynamism would assent to the notion that one of the prophets' practices or instructions could abrogate another. On the other hand, for scholars who undertook the derivation of the law from its primary source (Qur'an and Sunna), the simplest means of disputing on an opponent view was the blunt assertion that even though the verse was correct at the time of its revelation, it has since been abrogated by a further revelation. Al-Shafii was nonetheless convinced that God had singled out the prophet as the sole person qualified to pronounce on the law. Thus he insisted on unquestionable obedience to the prophet and affirmed that no ruling in the text is abrogated without a replacement being promulgated; hence

abrogation really means substitution (Burton, 2001:13).

Furthermore, to some Qur'anic commentators, the idea that a verse in the text abrogates another suggests that divine will is dynamic and mutable, which contravenes the basic theological tenet of revelation. Others have argued that no Muslim ever objected to the notion of abrogation, since if God adapts His regulations to the different circumstances prevailing in the different ages as is apparent in the alteration, God may equally adapt regulations appropriate to the initial stages of one revelation to address a present need. Meanwhile scholars like Al-Ghazali (AD. 1058) and Al-Qurtubi (AD. 1273) maintain that God can command and forbid whatever He wants. Divine knowledge is infinite and instantaneous, and for all eternity. God knows what to command, the precise duration intended for the command and the exact moment He proposes to give a further command. For when abrogation occurs people may perceive it as change but this is only a variation from the human perspective. Moreover, there is perfect harmony between divine will and knowledge which humans may not totally comprehend (Burton, 2001: 14). Some scholars, such as Al-Tabari (AD. 838), have difficulty in accepting the theory of abrogation as worthy of the revelation of God. However, by providing variant readings for references to abrogation in the holy text, proponent of the abrogation theory claim that God was not referring to the text of the Qur'an but the ruling conveyed by the text because in terms of beauty, no verse can be superior to another and no Sunna or Hadith is more beautiful than a verse from the holy Qur'an (Burton, 2001:15-16).

The Islamic theology of revelation as contained in the Qur'anic text and the hermeneutics of the text is challenged today by religious, cultural and social diversity. For example, the Qur'an makes reference in *Sura Al-'Imran* (chapter 3) to the People of the Book. It is obvious then that the Islamic *Ummah* dwell along people of other faith traditions and thus lucid Qur'anic interpretation has to be sensitive to the multiplicity of the modern world. Islamic scholars like Farid Esack (1997), arguing from his South African background, maintain that dynamic Qur'anic interpretation should stem from a Qur'anic theology of liberation. He believes that such a theology should focus on a deeper awareness of the socio-political religious experience of the people and work towards liberating religion from all forms of socio-political, ethnic and religious ideas based on structures of uncritical

obedience, and freedom from all forms of injustice and exploitation: race, class or religious (1997:83). This form of Qur'anic hermeneutics derives its inspiration from the Qur'an and the instance of the prophets in a process of shared analytical reflection that is critical and self-critical to engender a positive praxis (a conscious action undertaken by a community that has responsibility for its own socio-political, ethnic and religious determination) in a contemporary multi-religious and social environment. To achieve such rational scriptural interpretation involves a continuous critical assessment of text, context and historical circumstance in a reflective search on the implications of such interpretation for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Esack proposes some criteria necessary for understanding and interpreting scripture in a contemporary multi-religious diverse setting: *taqwa*, meaning an awareness of the presence of God; *tawhid*, the unity of God; *al-nas* the people; *al-mustad'afun fi'l-ard*, the location of interpretive activity; and *jihad* struggle. These, he argues, are aimed at developing the standards essential for reading and theological examination of the Qur'an in general and specifically the way the text relates to the religious other. These however have to be understood within the specific historical context wherein the interpreter is located and bear upon the outcome of his or her interpretation. However, interpreters have the freedom to position themselves differently in relation to the situation in order to arrive at a specific interpretation.

The challenge with scriptural hermeneutics remains speculation and personal whim of the interpreter. According to Esack (1997: 86), the art of Qur'anic hermeneutic of liberation, bearing in mind the presence of God, ensures that such interpretation remains free from dogmatic assertions, political reaction as well as pure subjective speculation of the interpreter. *Taqwa*, he further argues, facilitates the creative and spiritual balance in the life of the engaged interpreter even when such activity is approached from a socio-political perspective as the outcome of such endeavour has inference even for the (wider society) religious other. Although *taqwa* is a vital source of support for the engaged interpreter in trying to understand the text of the holy Qur'an, there is no absolute guarantee of meaning. Therefore, the interpreter has to push towards ever increasing authentic search, a continuous critical investigation of the text, in order to arrive at a viable explanation to minimise the extent to which the text can be manipulated for narrow selfish or ideological advantage (1997:90,

111).

The theology of textual hermeneutics poses further questions on how the Qur'an relates to the religious other and how the Qur'anic interpreter should relate the message of the text to the other. The Qur'an, it can be said, presents a positive inclusivist perspective of the religious other when it makes reference to the 'People of the Book,' and goes further to invite them to come to dialogue on a "Common Word". However, there are verses in the Qur'an that are potent, for example, *Surah Al-Anfal* 8:59-60 and *Surah At-Tawbah* 9:5. How does the interpreter relate such exhortation to wage an armed struggle against the other in a multi-religious and multi-cultural circumstance? In such a situation, critical exploration of the text cannot be over emphasised. This allows the interpreter to discover the value of divine message through (exegesis) contextual-historical analysis to engender a balanced approach and not isolate particular texts and understanding from the rest of scripture, but to be attentive to the content and unity of the divine will in the whole scripture (CBC: England and Wales and Scotland, 2005:20-25). While the context of individual verses dealing with the religious other is often recorded in the Qur'an, the Muslim interpreter has the duty to understand such historical setting in order to shed light on such revelation within a contemporary pluralistic milieu (Esack, 1997:146).

Furthermore, the Qur'anic interpreter must guide against the dangers of perceiving such isolated revelation to generalise denunciation of the other irrespective of the socio-historical circumstance of a particular verse, to support rejection or damnation of the other, as such will foster extremism and conflict. Moreover, the phenomenon of religious extremism is becoming prevalent alongside obstinate and uncompromising attitudes of intolerance which rule out the need to listen to other views and the willingness to dialogue. There are significant dangers involved in fundamentalist approach to the scriptures which often focus on a particular text or texts, by making absolute what is a partial and incomplete understanding of scripture. Such interpretation of scripture disregards the diversity of views and the development of variety of understanding which may be found for instance in the Qur'an, and does not allow for the presence of imperfect and time-conditioned elements within scripture (CBC, 2005:20). For a clearer understanding of a scriptural text, the exegete must fully acknowledge that they are the word of God revealed within the

human historical experience and seek to discern the meaning of such in every age and in every society as it affects the self and the other.

4. Islamic Shari'a in a Religiously Diverse Society

Religious pluralism and scriptural interpretation also posit a unique challenge in places like Northern Nigeria with a large Islamic *Ummah*; where historical records attest to the fact that shari'a law was in place in the locality until the advent of colonisation. This is the fundamental reason for constant agitation for the adoption and implementation of shari'a law in the region by some Muslims. Shari'a is the sacred or holy Law of Islam (Okike, 2000:14). It is regarded in the Islamic tradition as Divine law binding on all Muslims. According to scholar of religion John L. Esposito (2011:14), the purpose of Islamic shari'a law is to provide the guidelines and requirement for the worship of God and social interaction within the Muslim *Ummah*. Shari'a as both divine and positive law is a straight path leading to God. Muslims are therefore obliged to strive and be steadfast in keeping the law. Moreover, the believer has the responsibility to turn to the one God in faith and prayer, following the part laid down by God through the prophet as revealed in the Qur'an 9:20, 22:78, 25:52, 29:69, 69: 10-13 (Siddiqui, 2007: 88-89).

For many centuries in traditional Islamic communities, shari'a law has functioned as a positive source of guidance whose principles and values provided the moral compass for individuals and society (Esposito, 2011:161). Shari'a law was developed to serve as the blueprint for an ideal Muslim community based on Qur'anic values and in an attempt to answer the question how should a good Muslim live? Furthermore, shari'a regulates the religious life of a Muslim in terms of prayer, fasting, almsgiving as well as his or her social obligation for instance in marriage, divorce, inheritance, business and political activities (p. 161-162). However, the application of shari'a in a religiously diverse and democratic setting can have dire consequences on the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. Meanwhile, the challenge of modernity lies in keeping a meaningful interface between what is strictly religious and the secular in a plural world.

Scholars like Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im have argued that the historical context within which shari'a was developed and applied by the early Muslims in the seventh century could be justified because of

prevailing circumstances, which cannot not be coherent in a contemporary world of universal human rights, in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society (An-Na'im, 1998:227). It is a fact that during the formative phase of shari'a the conception of human rights was not in existence anywhere in the world, such that institutions like slavery and antagonism towards non-Muslims were sanctioned. However, shari'a as a practical Islamic legal system in a contemporary pluralistic world cannot disregard the concept of human rights as it applies in today's context. It follows that Qur'anic interpretation in the modern setting has to be sensitive to the religiously plural nature of society on one hand, and on the other, evolve an alternative form of Islamic public law that is contextual and based on mutual equality which seeks to eliminate limitations on human rights. To achieve the above demands courage on the part of Muslim jurists and exegetes to explore the possibility of replacing outdated and archaic aspects of shari'a with more modern humane principles of Islamic law compactable with human rights (p. 229).

The Muslim *Ummah* and scholarship is therefore challenged to embrace and welcome such an evolutionary approach to Qur'anic hermeneutics, irrespective of the difficulty and resistance that may be encountered. This for me involves as Sachedina (2009:18) has suggested: analysis of literary tradition and linguistic aspect of revelation, determination of the historical context of such revelation, clarification of meaning through intra-textual reference and explanation of passages by the use of Hadith material attributed to the Prophet as the first commentator and teacher of the Qur'an.

Islam as a religion in this century has to be insightful of the religiously plural nature of society. The essence of shari'a endures, but its interpretation and application has to be contextual if conflict and tension with the religious other are to be weakened. Islamic scholars, jurists and exegetes might wish to consider and promote those aspects of Islamic shari'a compatible with human rights in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society, such that features that do not take cognisance of the dignity and equality of all could be abolished. Moreover, religious pluralism presents an opportunity and a fundamental resource that could be tapped by different faith communities to establish justice and peaceful relations in any contemporary society.

5. Conclusion

Religion is going to continue to significantly shape and affect relations between peoples and communities. One of the most challenging tasks for religious leaders, for instance, in contemporary northern Nigeria is to find workable ways for Christians and Muslims to be true to their faith convictions and the interpretation of such experience in a faith community, while living together in peace and harmony in the same political and social scenario (Volf, 2011:13-14). The Roman Catholic Church in *Nostra Aetate* has tried to advance this model by creating the prospect for encounter (dialogue) between different religious traditions. Scriptural interpretation is a religious exercise vital for the spiritual growth of a faith community. However, balanced explanation of the text in a contemporary setting is fundamental to peaceful coexistence.

The responsibility of religious leaders and clerics as interpreters of scripture and religious tradition demands scholarship and training. Academic scholarship and proper learning in theological hermeneutics, critical and contextual analysis cannot be over emphasised if religious leaders are effectively to guide their communities to be open minded, kind and welcoming to fellow seekers of the truth in other religions with equal rights and opportunities. Regrettably, those who perceive the sacred books as immutable; only to be read, recited and obeyed, see any form of critical engagement with scriptures as a critique of Divine Will and tantamount to blasphemy (Siddiqui, 2007:103). These have to come to terms with the fact that faith and intellectual exercise are mutually complementary and crucial in the understanding of the ancient texts. Hence, Muslims and Christians in Northern Nigeria can bring about growth in better understanding and harmony to which a contextual interpretation of the sacred books remains vital and dynamic for peace to be sustained.

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