

THE INTERPRETATION AND MISINTERPRETATION OF ISLAM

This is a huge topic to cover, so today I will talk about the ultimate authority in Islam – the Quran, and how it can be misinterpreted and used to falsely justify politically motivated acts of terror.

The Quran is the foundation of the religion of Islam. It was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) in Classical Arabic, the language of the Arabian Peninsula 1426 years ago. The Quran is a book of guidance from God to us directly. It contains clear verses and ambiguous verses. The Quran has been translated into many different languages. All translations are interpretations and therefore open to misinterpretation.

Some of the clear Quranic verses command us to:

- believe in God
- do good deeds
- follow the example of all the Prophets from Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon them all)
- care for our neighbour
- care for orphans, the needy and the poor
- pray regularly
- give in charity
- honour the sanctity of life

In short, to be good honest people in peace with all God's creation.

The Quran was revealed in Arabic but most of the world's Muslims are non Arab and must rely on translations of the Quran. Immediately then, there is the risk of mistranslation. The slightest change in one or two words can change the meaning of the message. For example, the widely distributed Penguin Classic edition translated by N.J.Dawood writes: "Men have authority over women because Allah has made one superior to the other". This is a gross mistranslation, whereas a correct translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali writes: "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women" (4:34), while Muhammad Asad translates this as: "Men shall take full care of women". Wrongly, Dawood is stressing authority and superiority over women whereas Ali and Asad stress protection and care. (1) Unfortunately, the Dawood translation was re-released after Sept. 11, 2001 and sold by non Muslim bookstalls.

For Arabic speaking Muslims, there is the risk of misunderstanding the Arabic in which the Quran was written. The Quran was revealed in Classical Arabic. Most Arabs today speak colloquial Arabic and do not understand the Arabic of the Quran. Traditionally, Muslims throughout the world used to learn Classical Arabic in order to understand the Quran. One of the consequences of colonization was the loss of the teaching of Classical Arabic. (2)

This presents a problem. How do we understand the Quran correctly? Firstly, we need to read a worthy translation by a trusted scholar. Both Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall and Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translations have stood the test of time. A more recent translation published in 1980 by Muhammad Asad is a popular translation as well. For a serious student of the Quran it is desirable to consult three or four translations to come close to an understanding of the Arabic.

Secondly, as well as a worthy and trusted translation of the Quran, we should also read the tafseer which explains the verses of the Quran. Some verses could be misunderstood without tafseer or explanation. For instance, some verses comment directly on the battles Muhammad and his followers had with the Quraysh disbelievers or idol worshippers. After 12 years of persecution, Muhammad and his followers were given approval from God to defend themselves against the arrogant oppression of the disbelievers, the Quraysh. The encouragement to battle the unbelievers and the promise of gardens for the righteous are written in the Quran but to know and understand that the unbelievers are the pagan and idol worshipping Meccan Quraysh is written in tafseer or explanation, setting the scene in its historical context. These verses should not be taken out of context. When the Quran is read, we should have full knowledge of the historical setting, the reason of revelation, the period it was revealed, the meaning of the words and whether such verses are abrogated or not. (3)

I think, therein lies the problem we have today – misinterpretation of the Quran.

I read in the Sunday Mail newspaper (July 17,2005,p.58,59) a two page article, first published in Time magazine, which claimed to look inside the mind of a suicide bomber. I am a Muslim and it frightened the living daylights out of me! The very disturbing part was that this young man claimed to excel in "Koranic" studies and said that Jihadis can instantly quote a relevant section from the "Koran". He did admit to undergoing a programme to discipline his mind which is what we would call brainwashing. He also said that the "Koran" says it is the duty of Muslims to bring terror to the enemy, so he said being a terrorist makes him a good Muslim. This is really scary! This is a gross misinterpretation of the Quran and a misunderstanding of the entire religion of Islam. May God have mercy on us all.

Relating to his comments, I want to tell you a story about the Battle of Uhud. Muhammad received a letter from his uncle 'Abbas warning him that the Meccan army consisting of 3,000 men, 200 horses and 3,000 camels, was setting off to attack Medinah in order to annihilate the entire Muslim community. Allah assured Muhammad that the Meccan army would be terrified, that Allah "would put terror into the hearts of the unbelievers" (Quran 3:151). Remember, unbelievers are the idol worshipping Meccans.

Muhammad gathered an army of 700 to defend their religion of Islam, submission to God. Before the battle, Muhammad consulted his companions, sent a group of young boys back home to their mothers and prayed the dawn prayer. Against all odds the Muslim community survived. The Meccan Quraysh counted 22 dead out of 3,000. The Muslims lost 72. Muhammad himself was injured. Among the dead was Hamzah. The Quraysh mutilated his body. The Prophet was angered but a revelation came to him to remain patient so the Muslims were forbidden to ever mutilate. The Prophet also

forbade any injury to the enemy's face. There lay injured was a man not known to be Muslim. Before he died on the plain, he told the Prophet he fought for the sake of Islam. For years later he became known as the man who entered Paradise without ever praying one of the five daily prayers. Another dead, was a learned Rabbi, Mukhayriq, of the Jewish clan of Tha'laban, who had summoned his people to keep their pact with the Prophet and to join him in fighting the idolaters. Muhammad prayed a funeral prayer for each of the 72 dead. (4)

I hope this makes it clear to you how important it is to put verses from the Quran in their context.

We are now hearing on our news, the words "ideology of hatred" and "haters of Western civilization", attributed to the motives of terrorists. How can a religion grounded in compassion be interpreted as one of hate?

Notwithstanding the fact that Associate Professor Robert Pape from the University of Chicago, who has studied all 462 suicide terrorist attacks around the world since 1980 and found that over 95% of suicide attacks are not about religion but a specific strategic purpose – to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from the territory which they view as their homeland:(5) our politicians still tell us there is an ideology of hatred of western civilization.

Indeed, Muslims and non-Muslims should be concerned about Wahhabi and Salafi jihadi interpretations of Islam. These were conceived in the late 18th and the late 19th centuries respectively.

The Wahhabi movement was founded by Abd al-Wahhab who died in 1792. When the Saudi government came to power after WW1 they established the Wahhabi doctrine and sort to rid the country of Sufi, Shia, Ottoman and Western influence. Any thought outside the Wahhabi interpretation is considered incorrect even heresy. This included other Muslim interpretations of Islam. The Wahhabi idea rejected the four traditional juristic schools of thought and originally attempted reformation using ijtiḥād or intellectual reasoning but they became reactionary rather than progressive. (6)

The Salafi reform movement, based on the writings of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d.1897) and Muhammad Abduh (d.1905) again used ijtiḥād, and the Quran and the Sunnah (way of the Prophet Muhammad) to promote the common good. (7)

Wahhabi and Salafi jihadi movements merged and rose to prominence in Afghanistan. They claim jihad as a pillar of Islam and are strict concerning women. They also oppose the arts and music. Much of their interpretations are gathered from the writings of Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328) having been influenced by the crusade slaughter. He was known to be a brilliant man with a photographic memory but spent much of his life in and out of jail on blasphemy, heresy and anthropomorphism charges. (8)

Both al-Afghani and Abduh would have experienced British imperialism. The Briton, Lord Cromer, ruled over Egypt for two decades until 1907 as a Governor, who enforced a spirit of Western civilization. (9)

In my view, the Muslim world is going through a painful metamorphosis. After years of enduring oppressive rulers, Muslims, led by Muslim academics, are guiding the community to a more open, just and pluralistic society, based on the Quran, sunnah and Islamic tradition.

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Endnotes

1. Jamila Hussain, *Islam Its Law and Society*, Federation Press, 2004, p.29,30
2. Dr. Mohamad Abdalla pointed out that of the approximately 280 million Arab Muslims, it would be safe to say that about 90% of these would not understand the Classical Arabic in the Quran. [Proof of this] are the dots and vowels now used in the Quran, which are an innovation, which came later, to help understand the Arabic. As a comparison, I looked in the Philip's Concise Encyclopedia to see how the English language has changed over time. During more than 1,500 years it has been transformed from Anglo-Saxon Old English, to 7th century written down, replaced by Norman French in 1066, native tradition re-emerged in the 14th century, William Shakespeare in the 16th and early 17th centuries and so on. All languages change.
3. Dr. Mohamad Abdalla indicating the necessary conditions when the Quran is read.
4. Martin Lings, *Muhammad, his life based on the earliest sources*, Foundation for Traditional Studies and A.S. Noordeen, 1983, p.172-192.
5. Interview with Kerry O'Brien, 7-30 Report, ABC TV, 20/07/2005
www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2005/s1418817.htm
6. There is now a mountain of literature on Wahhabi and Salafi thought. An interesting article in the Sydney Morning Herald newspaper, July, 2005, written by Karen Armstrong, titled *Mind your language or risk turning friends into foes*, says "Bin Laden was not inspired by Wahhabism but by the writings of the Egyptian ideologue Sayyid Qutb, who was executed by president Gamal Abdul Nasser in 1966. Almost every fundamentalist movement in Sunni Islam has been strongly influenced by Qutb, so there is a good case for calling the violence that some of his followers commit 'Qutbian terrorism'".
7. Khaled Abou El Fadl writes "it was Rashid Rida (d. 1935) who best exemplified the ideas, and contradictions, of Salafism, and its elusive relationship with Wahhabism ... Rida welcomed the Wahhabi rebellion against the Ottomans, as an Arab revolution being waged against their Turkish masters" (Progressive Muslims, Ed. Omid Safi, One World, 2003, p. 56,57).
8. Ibn Taymiyya by Dr. G. F. Haddad,
<http://www.fair.org.au/modules.php?name=news&file=article&sid=66>
9. Queensland Muslim Times newspaper, *Turkey experience with Westernization*, July, 2005.

