

[Back to Article](#)

On Multiple Understandings Of The Qur'an by Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer

Generally it is believed by many, if not all Muslims and in particular by non-Muslims, that there is one authentic interpretation of the Qur'an. This is far from true. Even the closest companions of the Prophet (PBUH) differed from each other in understanding various verses. Also, in Islam, since there is no concept of official church, no one interpretation can command following of the majority of Muslims, let alone all Muslims. There is hardly any major issue on which Muslim 'ulama do not differ. These differences, more often than not, are due to different interpretations of the Qur'anic text.

It is because of this that every sect or school of thought has its own orthodox and liberal followers. There is Shi'ah orthodoxy or Sunni orthodoxy, Isma'ili orthodoxy or Bohra orthodoxy, Hanafi orthodoxy or Shafi'i orthodoxy and so on. It is not only this, but now there are scholars with modern and liberal thinking who are looking at the Qur'anic text from modern and liberal perspectives. Also, some feminists and those working for empowerment of women read the Qur'an from a feminist point of view.

There are various reasons for this. Firstly, the Qur'anic text is very rich and can be understood in ways more than one. Secondly, its language often tends to be symbolic or allegorical, and hence these symbols and allegories carry rich social and cultural meanings; also, the shades of meaning can change with different socio-cultural backgrounds. Thus, social and cultural factors can often play an important role in understanding of the Qur'anic text. Therefore those scholars who have been brought up in modern societies with their own intellectual traditions tend to understand the text differently from those who studied the text under medieval ethos and its own intellectual traditions.

Now the orthodox 'ulama of course insist on medieval understanding of the text as final and irrevocable, whereas modern scholars, of no less intellectual integrity and knowledge, insist that there can be a

multiple understanding of the holy text. Today this debate between the orthodox and modern scholars has been going on practically in every Islamic country. Also, new issues and questions are emerging which cannot be answered with medieval understanding of the text. Breath-taking discoveries and changes have taken place in last two centuries, and these revolutionary changes cannot be ignored if the Qur'an has to play any role for Muslims in modern society.

The fear of the orthodox 'ulama that any change in understanding of the text will in any way change the importance of the divine text is totally misplaced. In fact, it shows greater richness and several levels of meaning hidden in the text. If anything, it enhances the significance of the divine word. However, it is possible that their fear is that if new interpretations are accepted than they (i.e. the 'ulama) would loose their importance; this may be justified because they are not intellectually equipped to accept the change. To grasp modern changes requires an altogether new intellectual orientation.

However, in my opinion, even this fear should not be stretched too far, at least for several years. The Islamic world as a whole is not well-equipped for understanding the Qur'anic text de novo. The vast masses of Muslims in most of the countries are still illiterate and intellectually quite backward. They will continue to need the orthodox interpretations for quite some time to come. The Islamic countries still live intellectually in medieval ages though physically they are now in 21st century. It is quite a task to usher them into 21st century in intellectual sense. Thus the orthodox 'ulama continue to have their own relevance, perhaps for many coming decades.

Thus the two traditions, i.e. the orthodox and the modern, will have to co-exist in the Islamic world for many coming years, maybe for many decades, and there is urgent need for dialogue between the two traditions. Such a dialogue can remove many misunderstandings on both the sides. Today there is an air of hostility. What is worse is that the 'ulama are getting politicised and religious orthodoxy translates into political power due to more and more involvement of masses into politics.

Due to widespread illiteracy and intellectual backwardness in the Muslim world, democratisation would mean increased influence of the traditional 'ulama. And greater influence of traditional 'ulama means greater resistance to change and longer persistence of religious orthodoxy. The middle and upper middle classes in Algeria who were modernised and westernised preferred authoritarian military rule to democratic rule by the Islamist forces.

Most of the Islamic countries are undergoing complex changes, and democratisation, though highly desirable, poses difficult challenges. The authoritarian rulers are more westernised and elite in terms of class origin and often support the modernisation project. There is a long history of this in Islamic world. King Amallah of Afghanistan in the thirties of last century tried to impose modernisation and got deposed as the masses of people were not ready for it.

In Algeria too, the military rulers were Francophile and quite westernised, and the elite Muslims supported them. When in an election, the radical Islamists won. The fear was that they would impose orthodox Shari'ah law, and all those who stood for modernisation supported the ruling military establishment rather than democratic forces. They feared that radical Islamists will do away with modernisation project of the military rulers.

It was not much different in Iran. The Shah of Iran was imposing modernisation from above. There was mass agitation against him and he was overthrown (though I am not trying to simplify the reasons for revolutionary change in Iran as the situation was very complex). The masses supported Islamic revolution, which was not to the liking of the modernised elite. Thus this dilemma has to be faced in the Islamic world today. You cannot have democratisation and modernisation together. Democratisation, more often than not, might bring forces of Islamic orthodoxy to the fore.

In the Islamic world there is hardly full and uncontrolled democracy in any country. It is either authoritarian rule or controlled democracy as in Egypt, Pakistan or Malaysia. There is authoritarian rule in most of the Arab countries and greater democracy in Bangla Desh and

Indonesia. Also, in Bangla Desh forces of Islamic orthodoxy are emerging stronger and stronger, although Mujibur Rahman's Awami League was in the forefront of the struggle and Awami League was quite secular in orientation. Today Jamat-e-Islami, which had collaborated with Pakistani rulers in crushing the Bangla Desh movement, has become part of ruling alliance and is trying to impose Islamic orthodoxy.

Even in highly advanced countries like the USA, the religious right has emerged as strong factor in American politics. Bush is their representative and he is doing everything to appease the Christian right. Thus religion is a serious force in world politics today. India also saw emergence of the Hindu right, which ruled over India for six years and still is a strong force in Indian politics. India is comparatively quite an advanced country technologically compared to the Islamic world.

Religion is far from being written off in the modern world, though some may not agree with this assessment. It is a serious force and has to be creatively used as an option for modernisation, change and liberation of the poor masses in the third world. This is, again, easier said than done. The challenge is extremely complex. It is one thing to contend with rigid orthodoxy and quite some thing else to take on the powerful vested interests.

The problem is not orthodoxy. Dialoguing with it, as pointed out above, can serve useful purpose if it is so. But real problem is politicisation of religion. The religious authorities taste power, and for them power becomes end and religion only a means to that end. In such a situation neither multiple reading of the text nor creative use of religious teachings can help. This has to be fought only politically. And in such a situation, democracy can greatly help. The forces of Hindu right could be fought in India only democratically, and the Christian right in USA can be defeated only through elections.

However, in Islamic countries, the situation is more complicated. In India or USA there is basic secular and democratic orientation of

politics, and this has been so for quite some time. In Muslim countries there is not only absence of secularism but also of democracy. Islamic influence on political culture is very strong, and one cannot imagine, as of now, emergence of secular polity. However, one can think of alternative political culture, though based on religion, but liberative and change-oriented.

And here one has to understand the multiple readings of the Qur'an from new perspectives. And, as pointed out, such perspectives are emerging in different Muslim countries, though for reasons well known they are yet not influential perspectives. In some countries such multiple readings of the Qur'anic text is rejected and even punished. There are several examples of this.

Prof. Fazlur Rahman, a profound scholar of Islam, had to leave Pakistan as the orthodox 'ulama vehemently opposed his understanding of the Qur'an. Abu Nasr Zaid of Egypt was declared by the lower court as heretic, and even his marriage was declared dissolved. He had to migrate from Egypt to the Netherlands. Such examples can be multiplied from other countries also. But what is important is that such voices are being heard from these Muslim countries. They are even respected, though not accepted. The forces of orthodoxy are yet too strong to make these alternate voices viable.

It is important to note that in 19th century, which was beginning of colonial period in most of the Islamic countries, there seemed to be greater space for modern understanding of the Qur'an than in later part of 20th and in 21st century. There was no such fierce opposition, though it was not altogether absent, as one finds today. Jamal al-Din Afghani and Muhammad Abduh of Egypt propounded modern ideas, and Muhammad Abduh reached the position of grand Mufti of Egypt despite his modern approach.

In Indian sub-continent, a crop of modernists led by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan advocated modernity, and despite some opposition from orthodox 'ulama, this was accepted by Muslims by and large. There was no fierce opposition. Maulavi Mumtaz Ali Khan, Maulavi Chiragh Ali, Justice Ameer Ali, Nawab Mohsinul Mulk and several

others supported modern reforms. Maulavi Mumtaz Ali Khan wrote a book *Huququn Niswan* (Rights of women) and published it. His interpretation of Qur'anic verses was refreshingly modern. He advocated equal rights for women and men by suitably interpreting the relevant verses of the Qur'an. He challenged old interpretations with his scholarship of the Qur'an. Thus we see that multiple readings of the Qur'an were much more acceptable in 19th century than in twenty first century.

The reasons are not difficult to understand. In 19th century the Muslim intellectuals were trying to show that Islamic teachings were quite in keeping with modernity and modern science. It helped them in overcoming the sense of inferiority, which they had developed due to superior technology of the colonial power. It gave them great intellectual satisfaction.

However, today in 21st century, the situation is very different. During colonial period, one not only had to feel intellectual parity with colonial powers, but also had to struggle against them for political freedom. In several Muslim countries the 'ulama were engaged in liberation movement and religion as a great mobilisation force for liberation. Thus religion, under that situation, was liberative rather than conservative force. The Deobandi 'ulama in India and Nahdatul 'Ulama in Indonesia, for example, played such a liberative role in political sense.

Today's situation after more than half a century of de-colonisation is very different. Now not only the 'ulama but also the intellectuals and the educated youth have developed aspirations for political power and no longer use religion as a liberative, but instead a conservative force to capture political power. Of course there are host of other factors which must be taken into account, without which our understanding of the complex situation will remain incomplete.

Now colonialism is no longer a factor, but neo-colonialism is. The American and Israeli policies in the Middle East are greatly influencing resurgence of Islamic orthodoxy. The Shah in Iran acted as American gendarme and his policies enhanced American influence

in the area. He also tried to enforce modernisation on Iranian people. This coupled with economic policies which generated a lot of misery and unemployment. Also, Khomeini's political persecution by the Shah completed the scenario for Islamic resurgence under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini.

The US media then started condemning the Islamic resurgence as it went against the interests of its ruling classes. The word 'fundamentalism' was also coined by the US media in the late seventies. It began to be used then throughout the world in a pejorative sense. Though the Christian right was quite active in American politics, it was conveniently ignored, and only Islamic intervention was considered harmful.

It is important to note that religion can or can be made to play different roles in a society, and its role should not be stereotyped. Firstly, religion is understood differently by different sections of society. At its lowest level it becomes mere superstition and at its highest level it assumes the role of spiritual and philosophical sublimation. It plays the role of political mobilisation at one level and that of spiritual liberation on the other level. It might become opium at one level and an active agent of change on the other. It should be understood in its entirety rather than in a monolithic sense.

With increasing democratisation, the religious leaders are also wanting to play an active role, and in view of the popularity of orthodoxy among the masses of people, the 'ulama see a clear advantage in using religious orthodoxy for fulfilling their aspirations. It is also important to note that something which the human mind accepts as 'sacred' would like to see it as unchanged. Sanctity and change cannot go together. Process of change can rob it of sanctity. Either it is sacred and unchangeable, or changeable and does not have an aura of sanctity. And unlike science, religion, for common people, falls within the halo of sanctity. And the 'ulama are seen as upholders of this sanctity.

Either they play a direct role in politics, or they toe the line of certain politicians or political parties, and those politicians or political parties

exploit their so called 'halo' in the eyes of the people. Thus religion in the hands of these 'ulama as collaborators with certain political parties (or they may form their own party as in Pakistan and in many other Muslim countries) plays exploitative rather than liberative role. However, that does not mean that religion can never play a liberative role.

With certain reading of the Qur'an, it is certainly possible to render Islam as a powerful liberative force. To begin with, in Iran it did play very positive and liberative role. It became possible to liberate Iran from the exploitative clutches of the Shah and American imperialism through Islam. However, subsequently --as it often happens with other revolutions-- Islamic revolution of Iran also fell into the hands of conservative clergy and lost its earlier revolutionary spirit and dynamism. In other words, it was hijacked by conservative 'ulama and revolutionary 'ulama were eliminated.

It is also necessary to emphasise that it is impossible to eliminate religion from the socio-cultural arena, though it is possible to circumscribe its political role. And as long as it remains a socio-cultural force, its potential for political exploitation will always remain. Thus it is necessary to promote liberative scriptural interpretation as far as possible. Since religion plays multiple role in ones life - social, cultural, exploitative, liberative as well as that of provider of inner solace and peace, one has to choose, if one can, the most beneficial role.

But one should not ignore the challenges to be faced in choosing most beneficial role. The powers that be and the status-quo forces would resist any such attempt. Even secular liberative or pro-poor politics is sought to be challenged by these powerful vested interests. In Latin America those Christian priests who upheld liberation theology were murdered by these vested interests.

In fact, it is not only orthodox 'ulama who resist change and uphold medieval interpretations of the Qur'anic text, but these vested interests too, otherwise quite indifferent to religion, strongly resist, through such orthodox 'ulama, any multiple interpretations of the

Qur'an. The 'ulama might collaborate with these forces for their own reasons or for their own benefits. A section of 'ulama have always collaborated with the rulers throughout the history of Islam and continue to do so today.

Though the majority of 'ulama might go that way, one will always find those who rise above vested interests and take liberative position and are even ready to make great sacrifices. The role of Ayatollah Khomeini should not be stereotyped and is, in fact, quite complex. It was quite liberative in one context and also conservative in another context. It is well known that his interpretation of the Qur'an in terms of struggle between mustad'ifin and mustakbirin, i.e. between weaker sections of society and ruling classes, was quite liberative in its main thrust.

His interpretation of the Qur'an was, in a way, quite liberative until sometime after the revolution. It was not for nothing that the Palestinian Leader Yasser Arafat at the time fully supported Iranian revolution and even said that all the roads to liberation meet in Tehran. However, with the changed context and emerging struggle for power in post-revolutionary Iran, Khomeini's position tended to be more conservative.

Religion has great psychological role to play in modern social life, too. Human beings face very complex challenges at various levels in their life, and often religion (in a spiritual sense) provides inner solace and enables them to enjoy mental peace. In Islamic countries a vast majority of people find the very meaning and direction of life through Islam. One cannot rob them of this meaning and direction of life. For them nothing else can provide a better alternative. One must understand this psychological need of the vast majority of people. Thus for many Sufi Islam, it is far more efficacious in this sense than formal doctrinal Islam advocated by the 'ulama.

Thus the interpretation of Islam by Ibn Arabi or Rumi can play very creative and accommodative role in their life. Among multiple interpretations, Rumi's understanding of Islam is far more relevant to the modern complex world. It gives not only message of love and

peace, but also rejects doctrinaire rigidity. One needs such interpretation in the fast-changing and challenging world. Inner stability with change is highly necessary. Globalisation and fusing of totally different cultures has created much mental confusion leading to turmoil.

One can neither avoid change nor can one live without moorings.
Can religion in a positive spiritual sense not fill the bill?

About The Author

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