

THE SEARCH FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE -  
A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE THEOLOGY OF ABDULLAH SAEED

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ABSTRACT

Abdullah Saeed, a Muslim theologian who teaches in Australia, seeks to ground universal human rights in the Islamic tradition. He does this by rethinking the traditional Islamic understanding of revelation and by addressing questions about the nature and interpretation of the Qur'an. His contextual approach to Qur'an interpretation can offer resources for peace building because it encourages Muslims to affirm the dignity of every human being without distinction of any kind through a process of inter-religious dialogue. His practical orientation leads to a search that is on-going and encourages Muslims and Christians to collaborate in the search for peace by remaining committed to a process of dialogue.

Keywords: Dialogue, contextual hermeneutics, values, human rights, diversity, religious freedom

INTRODUCTION

If the role of religion is considered against the historical background of global wars and conflicts, it becomes clear that religions can either be sources of conflict or agents of peace. On the one hand, a lot of violence happens worldwide in the name of religion. Extremist interpretations of religious traditions easily violate human dignity. On the other hand, many religions are explicitly based on promoting a message of peace. Both Christian and Islamic traditions speak of the equal dignity of all human beings, thereby laying the foundation for sincere dialogue, peaceful coexistence and respect for universal human rights. The positive potential of religions must be recognised and used for the benefit of humankind.

The Muslim thinker Abdullah Saeed, whose approach to major Islamic sources is presented in this article, pursues this path of dialogue. Based on resources that exist within the Islamic tradition, he establishes the concept of universal human rights from an Islamic point of view by adopting a contextual approach to Qur'anic hermeneutics

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and by advocating a dynamic understanding of revelation. For him, the recognition of the equal dignity of all people and the practice of genuine dialogue between the religions are prerequisites for peaceful coexistence. He develops his approach against the background of a search for a peaceful, just world. From a Christian theological perspective, such an approach provides a special opportunity for Christian-Muslim dialogue and a joint commitment to human rights based on human dignity (Zurich, 2021).

#### ABDULLAH SAEED

Abdullah Saeed was born into a traditional Muslim family in the Maldives in 1960. At the age of 16, he began his studies in a religious school in Faisalabad, Pakistan, which belonged to the Islamic movement *Ahl-i-Hadīth* that began in northern India. Having received a scholarship, he completed a bachelor's degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia. In 1986, after having been in Saudi-Arabia for nine years, Saeed continued his studies in Melbourne, Australia because it was possible for him to combine an academic career with earning a living. He obtained degrees in Middle Eastern Studies and Applied Linguistics and became a Doctor of Philosophy in Islamic Studies. Saeed became a lecturer and held senior positions in various university institutions. Since 2004, he has held an endowed professorship at the Sultan of Oman Chair in Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Melbourne.

Saeed is particularly concerned with the relationship between Islam and human rights, religious pluralism and inter-religious dialogue. His research focuses on Islamic law and Qur'anic studies, taking into account the situation of Muslim minorities in Western countries. His guiding principle is the search for justice and peace but his concern is to remain faithful to the Qur'anic revelation and at the same time to take into account the needs and living conditions of today's Muslims. According to Saeed, if Muslims want to derive human rights from their own faith, the ethical-legal contents of the Qur'anic revelation must be made accessible to a contextual interpretation (Saeed A., 2005). Saeed counts himself among those he calls "new *ijtihadis*" or "progressive *ijtihadis*", who emphasise the need for *ijtihād*, which is the effort to interpret the foundational texts of Islam by use of reason alone.

Abdullah Saeed publishes mainly in English and rarely in Arabic. He admits that he receives feedback from Arabic-speaking scholars, most of whom are based in Western countries. Abdullah Saeed also describes the situation of those who want to discover new paths in Islamic thought similar to his own. Such authors often live and publish outside the Islamic world where they can enjoy intellectual freedom. Since they do

not enter into direct exchanges with scholars of the Arab world but write for an international audience, the “the impact of their work on the Islamic world remains limited” (ibid, 147).

### CONTEXTUAL HERMENEUTICS

In the view of Abdullah Saeed, only a contextual approach is able to do justice to the message of the Qur’an, which refers repeatedly to the realities and circumstances of tribal populations in the Arabian Peninsula during the first half of the 7th century. If the Qur’anic message is understood as closely related to its context and as an act of communication addressed to people at a very specific time, then a recognition of the context must continue throughout history in order to point out the relevance of the message in changing circumstances and in different social, political and cultural conditions. Saeed says that a contextual reading of the Qur’an is firmly rooted in the Islamic tradition. For example, the *maqāṣid al-ṣharī‘a* (aims/purposes of the Sharia), a basic principle of Islamic legal methodology (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), provide the theoretical basis for a contextual approach to interpretation. This principle is based on the conviction that God-given norms change because the meaning and purpose of the legislation is paramount and that the applicability of these norms guides interpretation. For this reason, modern Muslim authors distinguish between the foundations of the Sharia, which are eternally valid, and context-bound individual regulations (Rohe, 2011).

Abdullah Saeed’s contextual interpretation of the Qur’an is based on this approach to the legal methodology of Islam. He recognizes a hierarchy of values in the Qur’an and argues for a high flexibility with respect to the interpretation of ethico-legal texts (Qur’an, 128-143). However, according to Saeed, the conclusions of jurists from the first centuries of Islam have often remained the standard of interpretation even though they do not correspond to the contemporary significance of the Qur’anic texts and to its emphasis on fairness, justice and equity. This hierarchy of values allows for continuity and stability in the Islamic tradition while at the same time adapting religiously based regulations and instructions for action to the changing social conditions.

### HIERARCHY OF VALUES

A Muslim theologian can recognise fundamental values in the Qur’an such as the protection of life, property and the family. According to Saeed, there is textual evidence for these values and they form the basis of universal human rights. The so-called protectional values are among the unchanging foundations of Islam. But they are also inevitably linked to efforts of interpretation. The focus here is on the need to

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protect fundamental human values through the formulation of prohibitions, which provide general indications and specific instructions on the legal implementation of these prohibitions. Saeed gives the example that theft is prohibited to guarantee the protection of property. In this context, theologians who work contextually are not very interested in questions of definition, for example, regarding the nature of new forms of theft. The Qur'an only offers individual examples of these instructions for the protection of fundamental values (Saeed A. , 2013).

“This does not reduce the importance given to it in the Qur'an, since the strength of the protectional value is largely derived from the fundamental value and the specific command relating to the protectional value itself. Since protectional values are essential to the maintenance of the fundamental values, universality can also be extended to the protectional value” (ibid, 67).

According to Saeed, other values are also highly contextual, such as the implementational values. These refer to concrete measures to enforce the prohibitions of protectional values in society and to protect such fundamental values in the best possible way. For example, the primary objective is not punishment itself but the prevention of a certain act that is harmful to human beings. For this reason, punishments that do not respect human rights can be replaced by other measures that meet the requirements of the integrity of the person or the protection of life.

Other values mentioned and analysed in detail by Saeed are obligatory values, which are fundamental beliefs that are similar to the six pillars of faith (*imān*) and the essential practices of faith (*ibādāt*) emphasised by the Qur'an. However, obligatory values must be based on the Qur'an and the unambiguous practice of the Prophet. Statements about such values should not to be confused with prohibitions that have no Qur'anic basis - such as detailed lists from Islamic legal texts which are expressions of human interpretation. Furthermore, Saeed lists instructional values that can be found throughout the Qur'an. These are instructions, suggestions, advice and exhortations that relate to very specific situations. In order to define whether such values depend on place, time and circumstances, or whether they are universally applicable, some additional research is needed. Abdullah Saeed initiates such research.

The hierarchy of values outlined above allows not only for the introduction of new freedoms but also for the modification and adaptation of already existing rights and duties in accordance with their underlying principles. Moreover, the contextual approach to the hermeneutics of the Qur'an encourages Muslims to affirm the dignity of every human being – regardless of their religious affiliation. Contextual

hermeneutics is significant in the struggle for peace because, in the view of the political scientist Mahmoud Bassiouni, a society should have both religious and secular structures for a commitment to human rights, peace and justice. In Islamic countries, in particular, where religion is a resource of legitimacy and plays a central role in forming identity, a religious justification for peace and justice is important to ensure that social change meets with acceptance by the faithful (Bassiouni, 2014).

#### DYNAMIC UNDERSTANDING OF REVELATION

In line with his contextual approach, Abdullah Saeed's understanding of revelation is dynamic and historical but he does not question the traditional doctrine regarding the Qur'an as the direct word of God transmitted in Arabic. Saeed takes a different approach to reform thinkers who emphasise the prophetic office and the active role of the Prophet in the process of revelation. For Saeed, the process of revelation remains a mystery in the realm of the Unseen (*al-ghayb*) for it is beyond human understanding or comprehension. Saeed prefers to focus on the period after the Qur'an was uttered by the Prophet in a human context:

“At the time of the Prophet's utterance of revelation in Arabic it begins to function in history. It was spoken by the Prophet to a community who were subject to various social and historical conditions. God's Word was thus revealed to the heart of the Prophet and then made directly relevant to what was happening in the immediate context. Thus, it addressed initially the concerns, norms, values, customs, and institutions of a specific society. More importantly, it was also communicated using a human language, namely, Arabic” (Saeed A. , 2013).

On the one hand, it is important for Abdullah Saeed to know how Muhammad and the first generation of Muslims understood the revelation and continued to interpret it. He speaks of a text 'expanded' by the practice and interpretations of the Prophet and the first companions. On the other hand, he is also concerned about the time after the Prophet's death when the time for additions and changes to the Qur'anic text had ended. Subsequently, various new Muslim communities emerged that did not understand the Qur'an as an abstract message but interpreted it according to their own circumstances.

They incorporated what they understood to be the meaning of revelation in their own lives and in their specific environment. For Saeed, this indicates that the Qur'anic message must continue to be understood and incorporated into each new context so that its relevance will be guaranteed. Moreover, certain aspects of revelation continue to function because those who seek to understand and to implement God's Word in

their own lives are guided and inspired by God in their interaction with the text of the Qur'an. Saeed says that "this amounts to a form of 'inspiration' that continues; it is non-prophetic and non-linguistic" (Saeed A. , 2005). In particular, if the Qur'an is understood as a meaningful act of communication between God and human beings then the principles and objectives underlying such communication must be analysed in detail in order to produce the actualisation of the message (Saeed, Reading the Qur'an in the twenty-first century, 53–63, 2007). Thus, Saeed's dynamic understanding of revelation provides the basis for his contextual Qur'anic hermeneutics in which revelation is interpreted anew and in terms of human-friendly and peace-promoting values.

#### RELATIONSHIP WITH NON-MUSLIMS

Abdullah Saeed gives special attention to the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in his theological reflections. He refers to the theological interpretation of diversity in the Qur'an and argues in terms of a positive recognition of diversity and human freedom. Thus he underlines the importance of a common humanity and a common path to God.

In all their diversity, human beings share the same origin and the same search for God: "O people, observe your Lord; the One who created you from one being" (Surah 4:1) (Saeed A. , The Qur'anic quotations follow the translations). The general and the specific are part of God's plan: "If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made humankind one people" (Surah 11:118). Other verses emphasise the dignity of every human being and the divine spirit that animates everything. Biblically described in the idea of the image of God, the Qur'an justifies the special relationship of humanity to God differently by telling the angels with regard to Adam: "I have to place a vicegerent [*khalifa*] on earth" (Surah 2:30).

Saeed not only highlights the need for the appropriate interpretation of religious traditions in order to preserve and defend human dignity as an absolute value but also believes that the fundamental values of the Qur'an apply equally to all people (Saeed A. , 2006). For Saeed, freedom in religious matters is rooted in respect for the human search for religious truth and promotes the protection of human dignity and just coexistence in a society.

Saeed thus argues for an inclusive view of members of other faith communities - even if he does not justify this point theologically in detail. Rather, he refers to the necessity of dialogue in order to enable peaceful coexistence in a globalised world and in plural societies. He understands inclusivism as an attitude of openness that recognises the equality of all people, regardless of their beliefs, and that rejects any claim to

superiority. Moreover, in this perspective every human being is a creature of God and has access to God and to his truth (Saeed A. , 2013). In contrast, he is critical of exclusivist tendencies.

“I argue that such exclusivist views are highly problematic from a Qur’anic and prophetic perspective. They are equally problematic when looked at from the perspective of contemporary concerns and needs.”

He recognizes that contrasting positions emerged during the historical period in which competition and polemics dominated society and threats to the political-religious community were common. Today, religious freedom must be available for all because nation states are no longer based on religious identity and citizens enjoy equality of rights regardless of their religious affiliation (Saeed A. , 2011).

For this reason, Saeed also rejects traditional Islamic views regarding the corruption of previous Scriptures and their “abrogation” by the advent of Islam. He insists that the integrity and authenticity of the faith of others be accepted so that dialogue can take place without needing to be on the defensive (Saeed A. , 2011). Crucial for this inclusive attitude, according to Saeed, is the changed environment of multi-cultural and multi-religious society in the contemporary world, which allows for greater intellectual and religious freedom and which also offers opportunities to get to know the other through inter-religious dialogue. Another factor that favours an inclusive attitude is the trend towards acceptance of individual methods of interpretation (Nasir & Nirmala, 2015).

In some statements, Saeed explicitly refrains from a theological interpretation of the terms inclusivist and exclusivist but simply mentions distinctions between attitudes and theological positions. He argues that we need not try to clarify the meaning of salvation or explain the truth-value of other religious traditions. For him, an inclusivist attitude means recognising the dignity of every human being and acting accordingly (ibid., 42).

The work of “progressive *ijtihadis*” is contributing to such an orientation of dialogue. Such scholars are guided by the fundamental values of Islam and also by that which modern society considers to be fair, good and reasonable according to contemporary standards and circumstances (Saeed A. , 2013). “Towards the aims of pluralism and living in peace in a pluralist world, the progressive *ijtihadis* believe that Muslims deserve an interpretation of Islam that enables them to restore and in some areas maintain their compassionate, humane, selfless and generous selves in interpersonal relations and exchanges with others” (Saeed A. , 1999).

## A COMMON SEARCH

From a Christian point of view, those who reflect on Saeed's hermeneutics of the Qur'an, his understanding of revelation and his remarks on the significance of religious diversity will find diverse starting points for a collaborative search for that which strengthens human dignity and freedom. The focus on a process of inquiry is implied by Saeed's theological reflections, which are the result of a dynamic of search. Such a process of inquiry also confirms the Christian understanding of dialogue and could foster better relationships with other religious communities.

The Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, issued by the Second Vatican Council, for example, links the individual right to freedom to the human duty to seek the truth (DH 1-3). The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, states that existential questions and search movements unite the entire human community (NA 1). Those who go one step further and regard the faith of the other as authentic and are convinced that the Holy Spirit is active in their own as well as in other religions will feel the need to enter into dialogue with the other and to make their own search for truth a common concern, without relativizing their own beliefs.

From a Christian perspective, revelation is not exhausted by the transmission of truths of faith but represents a process of communication. This suggests that the search for truth is not exhausted by an explanation of the contents of faith but that the search for truth takes place by listening to one's conscience and through collaborative action. This understanding of truth is based on an understanding of revelation that is participatory and communicative because it is based on a dialogical relationship between God and human beings. At the same time, the search for truth is linked to the need for action. One aspect of the search for truth, which occurs within all religious traditions, is to strive for the central importance of human dignity. Truth is discovered in the dialogue about ethical values shared by all religions in which both dialogue partners listen to their conscience – and thereby, from a Christian perspective, to God (LG 16) & (Voges K. , 251-261).

Saeed's hermeneutics of the Qur'an and his understanding of revelation reflect these common search processes in a number of ways. His approach is based on the claim that the will of God can be found in various contexts. Moreover, Saeed advocates a dynamic and communicative understanding of revelation that makes it possible for the message of God to be interpreted in light of current needs and circumstances. The fact that a Muslim theologian such as Saeed makes the call for justice a central criterion for the interpretation of religious texts provides a special incentive for the



inter-religious commitment to peace, justice and freedom. His theological and anthropological reflections on the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims provide the foundation for a collaborative search for justice and peace.

The unconditional search for God's will that shapes Saeed's thinking is an inspiration for Christians. Saeed's theology encourages Christians to discover God and His promise for us through prayer and faith. This search can become a spiritual attitude in which our everyday lives are permeated by the desire to live as followers of Jesus and can be a source of encouragement for inter-religious dialogue and for a deeper commitment to peaceful coexistence (Voges K. , 2022).

#### A COMMON COMMITMENT

From a Christian perspective, a person's search for truth, which is guided by God, must always be characterised as incomplete and provisional and also sometimes in need of revision. Theological recognition of the legitimacy of search processes can encourage efforts of inquiry and various dialogue processes in society (Katja, 2021). The issue is not only to name and to struggle against violations of human dignity but also to find ways in which people struggle to defend human dignity. Ultimately, the collaborative engagement for human rights is an ongoing search process that involves different actors within society. Of course, the Christian contribution aims to safeguard human rights. At the same time, however, Christians are aware of human incompleteness and endeavour to take people seriously even in the event of failure.

Hence, the situation of those who have been harassed and hurt should not be disregarded. This means that we should analyse the factors that prevent people from learning and embracing values of peace and freedom. In this context, the need for education plays an important role and raises the issue of the injustice done to children when they are introduced to views hostile to peace and freedom during their education at school and in religious institutions. Another issues concerns the opportunities that the education system offers children for reflection on views that differ from their own and for finding ways to deal with such difference. Finding solutions for these issues and taking initiatives that broaden children's views that will enable them to listen to other views and to act in a way that leads to peace, justice through dialogue is the responsibility of members of all religious traditions (ibid., 318).

In order to deepen commitment to human rights, we could conclude that different developments to respect human rights should be taken into account. Processes and transitional phases should be appreciated - even if they have not yet resulted in a comprehensive protection of human rights. Religious views that seek small - perhaps only pragmatic - changes should also be appreciated for such points of view can

contribute to dignified living conditions that are suitable for everyday life. An inter-religious human rights discourse that has not achieved complete agreement in all respects can still lead to important insights and stimulate developments in religious traditions.

“This dialogue has different dimensions. It refers to philosophical justifications, to theological formulations as well as to the practical level of realisations and violations of human rights. Such a dialogue looks at different learning opportunities, contexts and efforts to promote human rights in a culturally sensitive way and without the display of arrogance” (Schmid, 2013).

For this reason, it is important to become involved regularly in inter-religious cooperation and to appreciate it - despite all its shortcomings - as a collaborative search process. At the *10<sup>th</sup> World Assembly of Religions for Peace* in August 2019, around 900 religious representatives from all over the world came together in Lindau on Lake Constance in Germany to strengthen interreligious cooperation and to discuss the resolution of current conflicts. In past decades, members of this multi-religious network have mediated in violent conflicts worldwide and initiated peace processes. Many participants felt enriched by their exposure to the different religious backgrounds of those taking part in the Lindau congress and felt empowered to see issues from various angles and to encourage one another in a common commitment to peace and understanding in their respective countries.

However, this World Assembly was limited in its ability to convince Muslim religious leaders, for example, to commit themselves directly to far-reaching reform processes in favour of human rights. The Assembly's working paper emphasised the importance of universal human rights based on a recognition of the human dignity of all and suggested ways in which religious communities could contribute to developing the modern doctrine of human rights (Religions For Peace: Workbook, 2019). During the congress, Muslim women in particular expressed their impatience and disappointment with the way Muslim authorities - and to some extent even those who were present in Lindau - were showing reluctance to engage in theological reform. Even if all the relevant issues could not be solved at the World Assembly, however, the participants were able to learn from each other by means of inter-religious discussion about the reasons for their sense of frustration. The participants were also inspired by certain initiatives taken by members of other religions to hasten the implementation of their own inter-religious projects. To honour processes, however, does not mean to refrain from all criticism but it means looking for and making use of all the positive potential

that can be found in a situation of imperfection. The report of the World Assembly concluded in the following words.

“Religions for Peace cannot achieve everything at once. But the goal is to make peace between believers, to take advantage of values shared by all the religions and to encourage the internal modernisation processes within faith communities. It would be more appropriate to approach religious leaders, to formulate the values they share and to find ways to work together. This will lead naturally to greater tolerance of one another’s faith traditions” (zeit.de, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

The *Religions for Peace* meeting in Lindau was significant because it alerted different faith communities to the importance of inter-religious dialogue as a path towards justice and peace based on human rights. The views expressed and the steps taken at this meeting were milestones on this path of dialogue. In this article, I have explored the contribution of Abdullah Saeed to the dialogue process. His approach to a contextual reading of the Qur’an has opened up new perspectives for a collaborative search for justice and peace. His approach encourages Muslims and Christians to engage in the process of recognizing significant developments in the contemporary social context that could open up new opportunities for collaboration between the two faith communities. ■

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