Checks and Balances on Interpretations of Sacred Texts that Justify Violence

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Abstract

Religious teachings are understood to be against violence. But could a scholar doing a religious interpretation justify violence? One way to address this issue could be to say that religious principles place limits even on religious scholars. Hence, religious scholars cannot ignore certain generally accepted standards. Some of these standards originate in religious texts themselves. But it is not against any religious teaching, nor it is secularism, to say that standards for interpreting religious texts should be coherent with logic and shared human experience. A religion may use rational ways of thinking to make its message more intelligible to everyone and the interpretation of religious texts should also be based on such rational ways of thinking. In Islam, Imam Fakhr-ud-din Razi advocated the "use of reason all through" as qanun-i-kulli. A contemporary (empirical, rational and universal) exposition of reason is also finding its way into religious literature. For example, Mustafa Akyol (in Re-opening of Muslim minds) and Alija Izetbegović (in Islam between east and west) advocate that moral evaluations presented by religion should be combined with experiential or shared justifications for ethical practices. This combination of reason and religion could help reduce communal biases and promote peacebuilding by promoting the possibility of inter-communal understanding.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Interpretations, Religion, Islam, objectivity, Violence

Introduction

Reinterpretation of texts in the holy books of any religion often judge applications of old texts to new situations. It is essential to assess whether such interpretations fit well with the whole body of the text in the relevant holy book. And, generally, interpretations that justify violence do not fit nicely into the whole body of perhaps any sacred text. Moreover, if a text in some holy book is conveyed to us through a chain of narrators, the validity of the transmission should be

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discussed. In general, applications, interpretations or transmitted texts are accepted if they conform to a justified standard, and rejected otherwise. As was just mentioned, consistency with the whole body of the text in a holy book or with a more reliable holy book is a widely recognized standard. For example, in Islam, a standard for checking the validity of a *hadith* (a narration attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him) is logical inferences from the relevant text of the Qur'an. The *Hanfi* school of jurisprudence within Sunni Islam is known particularly for making an extensive use of this standard. This approach is elaborated in Section 2 below, followed by Section 3, where this standard is used to argue that interpretations justifying violence are misinterpretations.

However, other standards are also mentioned in the religious literature. These include not only logic required to implement the above-mentioned consistency, but also human experiences in form of testimonies, reports and narrations, etc. These universal standards, as used by the religions and used *in* the religions, are introduced and discussed in Section 4. After elaborating the concept of "standards or rules for religious interpretations," the question eventually addressed in this article is if we can include "avoiding violence" in rules for interpretations of sacred texts, while allowing for a discussion about well-understood exceptions to it. If so, should this be considered a new standard, or can it be derived from already established interpretative principles? This inquiry forms part of a broader discussion, addressed in Section 5, about how to include some universal moral values in rules for interpreting sacred texts. Section 6 concludes this article.

The Context and Harmony Rule

Perhaps the most quoted rule for interpretation of sacred texts is that an interpretation of a passage should agree with other, more clear portions in the same holy book. For example, (QuranHouse, 2023) notes that the general criteria used by Islamic scholars to understand and interpret a Qur'anic verse are its context and harmony with other Qur'anic verses. (Rippin, 2013) writes that Ibn Kathír, the pre-eminent *mufassir* (commentator or interpreter) of the Qur'an, regarded interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an as the best procedure for a commentator of the Qur'an. This method assumes and uses the harmony and coherence of the Qur'an in the form that *a verse is clarified by other verse(s)* "noting that, in the Qur'an, 'what is said succinctly in one place is treated in detail in another place'."

For the Bible, (Duty, 1967) includes the same standard of (conformity with) the other parts of the religious text in rules for interpretation. He recommends adopting the interpretation for a Scripture that agrees and harmony "with all the facts of the case".

Rodriguez (2016) states: "A biblical hermeneutics has to be built out of the Scripture itself…., the unity of the Bible is an expression of its inner order and

rationality". Rodriguez also emphasizes an analysis that allows using one passage to clarify the meaning of another passage until the message in it is well recognized.

Religious Reasons for Declaring Violent Interpretations of Sacred Texts as Misinterpretations

It is difficult to deny that some texts in the holy books of all the religions have been interpreted by various persons or groups to justify violence. Rowley & Wild-Wood (2017) observe that even in the same tradition, response to the same text may differ. They remind us that religious interpretations supporting violence are not recent only, and suggest comparing "the situations under which sacred texts have been used to facilitate violence" in different ages and regions. In their view, it is unclear to what extent the sacred texts themselves promote violence; they are curious about "the ways in which a neutral or even pacific text has been used to facilitate killing."

If we say that these interpretations justifying violence are misinterpretations, we have to first explain our rule for calling an interpretation a misinterpretation? That is, what *standard* does a pro-violence interpretation clash with? A possible answer is given by (Akyol, 2021). First to be noted is that Akyol admits that the problem is not absent from Islamic history. He writes:

> Today, the Qur'an has more than a hundred verses that address these conflicts that took place in the latter phase of Prophet Muhammad's mission——the Medinan phase. They include commandments like, 'Slay the pagans wherever you find them,' or 'Strike above their necks and strike all their fingertips.'

This is followed by two sentences which can be taken as his answer to why the violent religious interpretations are misinterpretations. (Akyol, 2021) continues:

> To read them out of context is a big mistake, done intentionally or unintentionally, either by militant Muslims who seek justification for violence or [by] anti-Islam polemicists who seek ammunition for propaganda. These verses must be rather understood as temporary commandments given in a specific context of war—similar to the militant passages one can also read in the Hebrew Bible.

Akyol seems to use the same rule for spotting a misinterpretation as mentioned in Section 2 above. That is, an interpretation is declared a misinterpretation if it conflicts with other clear portions of the same holy book. This is included in the very title of this article as a check on interpretations of sacred texts justifying violence, which is a religious check. Now, we turn to the other checks:

Universal Standards for Interpreting Sacred Texts

Checks on interpretations of religious texts need not be limited to purely religious standards, *even if we steer clear of secularism*. To begin with, often logic has to be used to reach an agreement or not when implementing the above-mentioned religious checks. And logic itself is not a purely religious standard because the rules of logic are not explicitly depicted in any religious text. However, as has just been said, religious traditions frequently use logic. In Islam, the Qur'an emphasizes the role of intellect and reason (*a'ql*) in recognizing the divine message and in evaluating [the source of] guidance as, for example, (Khan, 2012) indicates. (Imam Ghazali, 1962) has written in his *Incoherence of the philosophers* that: "the [logically] impossible cannot be done by God, and the impossible consists in the simultaneous affirmation and negation of a thing [and other examples of logic].

In Christianity, a recognition of logic is the following statement (Wikipedia, "Omnipotence paradox") of the great middle-ages theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas, in *Summa contra gentiles*, Book 2, Section 25. (trans. Edward Buckner):

> Since the principles of certain sciences, such as logic, geometry and arithmetic are taken only from the formal principles of things on which the essence of the thing depends, it follows that God could not make things contrary to these principles.

Duty (1967) explicitly names his 5th rule of biblical interpretation as "rule of logic," and mentions reason, logic and evidence under this heading. His last rule is the "rule of inference," and he says that inference is a logical consequence. In the Islamic tradition and practice as well, reason often refers to (logical) deduction of one proposition from another. This includes checking the validity of a *hadith* through comparisons with logical inferences from the relevant text of the Qur'an, as noted in the introduction above.

A check on religious interpretation that is not of purely religious origin remains clearly available if a relied-upon religious scholar makes a religious interpretation to justify violence. A religious standard, for example the one mentioned in the quotation from (Akyol, 2021) quoted in the previous section, may seem inaccessible without relying on a religious scholar. However, Akyol's book is not limited to purely religious standards and explicitly discusses many universal checks for interpreting sacred texts. He demands a respect for "- reason, freedom, and tolerance within the Islamic tradition itself." These are moral values addressed in the next section. But in the remaining part of this section, we focus on the universal *epistemological* standard called shared human observations, whose status is similar to that of the above-mentioned logic.

The combination of logic, shared observations and explanations of human experiences, along with universal moral values often collectively referred to as universal or human reason plays a role in every religious argument if not in every religious persuasion as well. When a prophet invited people to accept the divine message, obviously not all of those invited belonged to the prophet's religion. This becomes clear from the invitation mentioned in Qur'an 3.64: "Say, 'O People of the Book! Let us come to common terms: that we will worship none but God, associate none with Him, nor take one another as lords instead of God."

In a different situation, the common understanding or common ground between people can be quite different. For example, in the contemporary world, we often engage in dialogue with people who do not believe in God, let alone in one God. Yet, the lesson of beginning from common ground can still be learnt from the Qur'an as well. Muhammad bin Malik writes, in his Urdu article (Malik, 2019) entitled "اسلام، عقل اور سائنس" (Islam, reason and science), that

> (translation from Urdu): It is well-known that the preaching style of the Qur'an begins by making a common point of reference in order to get the attention of those being addressed and to appeal to their use of reason. According to the Qur'anic way of conveying its message, this point of reference could be either natural phenomena that anyone could observe or any common beliefs that are common to Islam and to those being addressed. (Emphasis added.)

This quotation also addresses the possibility that no common religious beliefs exist between the preacher and the addressee. If one does not search for common ground for the sake of effective communication, the result could be mutual disregard, mistrust, hatred, or even violence (if the resulting mistrust is combined with, say, a clash of interests). Apparently, a strong candidate for common ground between any two parties would be modern science. But a careful consideration points out some limitations:
1. Controversies are common in science as well.
2. Errors in science in the past can lead to modified science.
3. There are many complaints about controversial arguments in the name of science, particularly in opposition to culture, religion(s) or religiosity.

In this context, it is interesting to note that a possible alternative to common religious belief mentioned by (Malik, 2019) is not science but *observation*. It is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on the detailed philosophical distinctions between science, observations and broader human experiences——including mental and spiritual experiences (Wilber, 1998). These discussions would have much to say about the many problems that arise by taking science as the ultimate standard and that these problems can be avoided if we use properly-defined immediate past self-observation (Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy,

"Acquaintance") and shared human experiences as the standard for accepting or rejecting claims in both science and *non*-science.[2] The reputed Austrian-English philosopher of science Popper (2005) favorably cites the opinion that: "What is immediately experienced is *subjective and absolute* . . . ; the objective world, on the other hand, which natural science seeks to precipitate in pure crystalline form... is relative" (p.94, footnote 4).

It is to be noted that every religion permits the use of properly tested science, and such science is universal. (Properly tested science is science that has been validated through the standards of logic and observation.) Thus, any religious allowance for science gives us permission to use a universal standard. A permission for science typically emerges when a religion equally allows for multiple options, such as two permissible food items or two acceptable styles of dress. In such a situation, the choice between *religiously equivalent options* has to be through means other than the religion, as the religion has already been told to have no preference between them and is indifferent. Any difference or distinction between them, then, must be due to something other than the religion under discussion. This 'other than the religion under discussion' means universal or apart from any specific religion.

As universal standards are accepted, these should be and are accepted for interpreting sacred texts as well. Religious scholars themselves recognize reason to be a check on any religious understanding. In Islam, Imam Ghazali criticized blind following of Greek philosophers, but he did not reject logic or human reason. He even wrote (Ghazali, 2013) that: "He who rejects reason rejects *sharia* (Islamic guidance)". This was expressed a few years later by Imam Fakhar ud Din Razi as *qanoon kulli* (a general principle) arguing that when revelation and reason appear to contradict, reason must be preferred. This principal is mentioned, for example, in (Akyol, 2021), chapter 3, note 47. Similarly, the well-known Pakistani Islamic scholar Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani (2023) praises in his book *Uloom-ul-Qur'an* another writer for stating:

> (translation from Urdu): …we have to wait for the time when the truth value of statements that are said to be problematic as far as Islam is concerned are expressed in a form that *avoids a clash with observation and logic* (p. 416).

As mentioned in Section 1 (introduction) above, if a text in a holy book is conveyed to us through a chain of narrators, the validity of the transmitted text should be discussed. In Islam, a standard for checking the validity of a *hadith* (a narration attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is to compare this hadith with logical implications of the relevant text of the Qur'an. However, there are also

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[2] (Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy, "Science and pseudo-science") section 3.1, has "non-science is different to but not contradictory to science." It includes everyday knowledge such as claims in a court, and religion, etc.

other standards mentioned in the books written by mainstream Islamic scholars. Khan (2012) states: "If intellectual reasoning is a means to understand the Qur'an, it should also be an apparatus to understand the substance of Hadith literature" (p.11).

Thus, these other standards include avoiding a clash with logic or observation. Many Islamic scholars have stated that that a hadith should not be accepted if it *contradicts clear logic or observations*. For example, as reported by (Mufti, 2020), an expert in hadith *Ibne-Hajr* writes in his book titled as شرح نخبة الفكر (Interpretation of *Nakhbata Alfikar*) that: (translation from Urdu): "If a hadith is against clear reason, it is an indication that the claim is forged." Mufti (2020) also quotes the well-known Syrian author *Allama Mustafa Hassan Sabae'i*, who in his book السنہ ومکانتها فی التشریع الاسلامی (*Al-Sunnah* and its place in the Islamic interpretation), writes that: (translation from Urdu): "Among the indications that a hadith is forged is that it contradicts obvious reason, observations or human experience." Isfahani (2001) reports some principles of فتح المغيث لابن جوزی (*Fath al-Mughīth* by *Ibin Jozi*) and الموضوعات الکبری لملا علی قاری (The Great Collection of Fabricated traditions by *Mulla Ali Qari*), which, in turn, are a summary of principles used by hadith compilers, as: (translation from Urdu): "A hadith is unreliable, regardless of its narrators if…. it contradicts accepted principles. . .. goes against observation and experience, or. . . .is against reason" (pp. 11-12).

When applying these checks, there may be occasions when one prefers reliably tested (*through logic and shared observations*) science over previous religious interpretations. The above-mentioned Pakistani Islamic scholar Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani writes in his Urdu book (Usmani, 2023) *Uloom-ul-Qur'an* that (translation from Urdu): "If the demand of reason is certain and the report of the Islamic tradition is guessed or probable, we should prefer the reason" (p. 409). His examples of reason include logically proved statements as well as *known observation-statements.* For instance, he says that, "the sun does not set in a pond because sun and earth do not meet at one point." This example is used to judge that the *literal meaning* "until he reached the setting ˹point˺ of the sun, which appeared to him to be setting in a spring of murky water" of Qur'an 18: 86 should *not be preferred*. This Qur'anic verse from *Surah Kahf* is a description of the story of Zulqurnain. As another quotation, historically earlier than the one above by Usmani, the view of the great medieval Islamic scholar, Imam Ibne-Taymiyya, is available in English (Idris[3], 1987): "In case of two probable statements (the *zan-ni*) give priority to whichever has the stronger evidence behind it, again irrespective of whether it is the religious or the rational or empirical" (p. 206).

Mention of the universal standard of not contradicting evidence, which includes not clashing with shared human observations, can be found in the Christian

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[3] The English author (Idris, 1987) claims to describe the position of Ibn Taymiya in the book tilted as "On a clash between the received knowledge and the reason درتعارض عقل و نقل".

tradition as well. (Rodriguez, 2016) proposes wisdom as the use of our ability to infer knowledge from observations. He writes:

> The formulation of the proverbial sayings found in the Bible always involved 'this fundamental process of observation to a greater or lesser degree.'…. Concerning Solomon, we are informed that 'he described plant life from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish' (1 Kings 4:33).

Universal Values for Interpreting Sacred Texts

This section argues that universal standards extend beyond logic and shared human observations and include universal moral values as well. This extension is needed because to avoid violence is a moral value and not an example of logic or shared human observation, which have been our focus so far. The role of shared human values for interpreting religious texts must be defended against two challenges:

1) Interpretations of science suggesting that moral values cannot have the shared (universal) and objective status reserved for logic, shared observations and science, and

2) The pure divine command theory, which asserts that moral values can only originate from religious teachings and cannot have a shared origin.

A reply to the first challenge above is that some universal moral values are related to human experience, shared observations, and science. In addition to highlighting the experiential support of some moral values, it could be argued that some moral values are conditions of the possibility of science. For instance, is scientific communication possible without a general respect for speaking the truth? If a published reference is needed, it can be provided as, for example, the following quotation in the book (Cartwright & Montuschi, 2014) by the philosopher of science Nancy Cartwright and her co-author: "The value of knowledge itself must be respected, such that scientists pursue methods that are aimed at genuine discovery rather than a predetermined result" (p.181).

Moreover, without relying on the relationship between science and morality, we can directly address the experiential support for universal moral values. Many years before becoming the first president of Bosnia, the Muslim intellectual Ali Izetbegović (1994) wrote:

> People have acted and behaved differently but they have always spoken in the same way about justice, truth, equality, and freedom: the wise men and heroes out of sincerity because of truth, and the politicians and demagogues hypocritically out of interest (pp.110-11).

So Izetbegović understands hypocrisy as evidence for the objectivity of morality values. Hypocrisy, he argues, demonstrates that a *universal demand exists for moral goodness* and thus everyone, even a hypocrite, is forced to claim this demand (of good moral values). This indicates that this demand is not arbitrary or merely personal and provides objective evidence for this demand.

Now, we address the second challenge mentioned in the first paragraph of this section (above), which is the divine command theory. This theory amounts to saying that religious and experiential supports for universal moral values cannot co-exist. Mustafa Akyol indicates that this was the position maintained by the Ash'ari tradition, which asserted that the *only* support for moral values could be religious (and, in this case, Islamic). (Akyol, 2021) reports that Al-Kiya, an Ash'arite from the twelfth century, simply denied that an act can be intrinsically good or bad and stated that *only* God's choice indicates what is good and what is not. (Akyol, 2021) also cites on the same page a statement of al-Ash'ari, the founder of the School, that there would have been nothing objectionable if God had ordered us to lie (make false claims)!

Compare this example with the above-mentioned experiential argument offered by (Izetbegović, 1994), which defends values such as truth, justice, equality, and freedom independently of any religious command. This approach, without embracing secularism, has the merit of potentially convincing all people, regardless of their religion. The justification and source of morality becomes available to every person without necessarily relying on any religious scholar.

Advocating for moral values, as Izetbegović does, can foster common ground between conflicting parties, even if these parties are in conflict or at war with each other. As I wrote in the abstract of this article, such shared justifications for some ethical practices should reduce communal biases and promote peacebuilding. In contrast, the divine command theory grounds moral values solely in God's commands. This could sound convincing as a theory of God's direct speech but, *in practice*, such direct speech could reach a person only through a particular religion or even only by means of a particular religious scholar. Thus, the divine command theory may hinder dialogue with those outside a particular religion and, therefore, should be combined with the shared, universal or common approach.

It is incorrect to assume that the original Islamic teaching is in accordance with Ash'ari (divine command theory). After discussing the Ash'arite position, Akyol refers to verses from the Qur'an in support of his thesis that the Qur'an itself often presents divine commandments based on reason. He writes

> In many verses, the Qur'an commands Muslims to do *adl* (justice) or *khayr* (goodness), or to refrain from *zulm* (transgression) or *sharr* (evil), without further explaining what such ethical concepts entail. In the words of contemporary Islamic scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl, this means 'the

Qur'an presumes that its reader has a degree of moral sense.' The Qur'an also describes itself as a 'reminder,' reminding people 'of the truth and values that should be innately known to them.'

Another key concept in the Qur'an which seems to support ethical objectivity is *ma'ruf*. In dozens of verses, Muslims are called upon to 'do *ma'ruf*,' which is often translated as 'doing good.' Yet the exact meaning of the term is not 'good' but [empirically] 'known.'

The Maturidi tradition in Islamic theology (*Kalam*) is also known to support the view that the knowledge of good or bad is not dependent solely on religion. A related human or universal principle is mentioned by (Khan, 2012), who describes the Islamic injunction to lead a balanced way of life free from materialistic or spiritualistic extremism as follows: "For this reason, any extreme behavior or saying attributed to the Prophet should be rejected as false or fabricated."

Furthermore, we may now ask whether "avoiding violence" is only a received religious command or, in words of Akyol, is a necessary and eternal truth about the nature of things. It seems that to avoid violence is a requirement of the above-mentioned *adl* (justice), *khayr* (goodness), and to refrain from *zulm* (transgression) or *sharr* (evil) - values that should be innately known to people (Akyol, 2021). Moreover, to avoid violence seems to be included in the above-mentioned concept of *ma'ruf*, which is 'known' universally and experientially (Izetbegović, 1994). Likewise, it seems that to avoid violence is a requirement of a balanced way of life. Hence, violence is viewed as extreme behavior (Khan, 2012)

Similar ideas are expressed in the Christian tradition. For instance, (Akyol, 2021) writes:

Saint Thomas Aquinas, ... accepted that behind God's commandments there are objective moral values, 'to which all men are forced to give their assent.' This view…became known as *intellectualism,* implying that God's commandments are intelligible. Intellectualism led to the concept of 'natural law,' which presumes that there are inherent ethical qualities, and also 'rights,' in nature that are knowable by human reason.

In (Hentsch & Premawardhana, 2011), Reinhold Bernhardt argues from a Christian point of view that compassion involves understanding others and caring for their needs - even to the extent of embodying the teaching: "to suffer with the sufferer (*com-passio*)."

(Izetbegović, 1993) integrates both universal knowledge and shared moral values into what he defines as *civilization* in a chapter entitled "culture and civilization" (chapter 2, p.43). According to his definition, civilization is a state of human development that we can all share because it includes universal science and

institutions developed through human progress. Izetbegović argues that all cultures, including all religions, share the same civilization.

Conclusions

Religious checks on the interpretation of sacred texts are available - for example, by ensuring that such interpretations do not contradict the clear and foundational teachings of religious texts. Interpretations that justify violence do not fit neatly into the original expression of any religion. While maintaining affiliation to a particular religious tradition and without resorting to secularism, believers can also recognize universal standards of logic and shared experience. Moreover, moral values can be justified with recourse to human experience (in addition to their religious endorsement). Besides, the universal standard of logic is generally used in any process of checking whether a given statement conflicts with religious literature. The combination of logic with the explanation of human experiences and universal moral values - a process known as *reason* - is generally accepted by religious communities. In other words, universal reason is a valid tool for the interpretation of religious texts. In short, the use of universal reason is not against religious teaching, just as the use of universal science is not against religious teaching. One example of a universal moral value is to avoid violence, and it is a religious value as well. In conclusion, universal values can act as a standard to provide additional checks on religious interpretations by religious scholars and universal values or standards can form a basis for mutual communication between different communities, thereby preventing biases and communal hatred leading to violence.

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