

Islam For Our Times

Islam, exactly as it was revealed to Prophet Muhammad sallallahu alayhi wasallam, and without any changes or alterations, is the religion that Allah chose for all people from the time he sent His Messenger till the end of time.

Islam is thus for recent times just as it was for earlier times. But while the texts of this religion are immutable, people's conditions are not. What can we do? In answering this question, people these days have been, basically, divided into two main camps: the faithful and the revisionist.

THE REVISIONIST SAYS: *Keep the religious texts as they are but give them meanings that suit contemporary culture just as those before you gave them meanings that suited their particular cultures. The texts are divine revelation, but their understanding is a human endeavor. Divine words are absolute, but their human understanding is relative.*

THE FAITHFUL ANSWERS: But the Qur'an was revealed in clear Arabic words whose meanings are well known to Arabic speaking people, "we send it down as an Arabic Qur'an in order that you may understand." [12:2] The Prophet, sallallahu alayhi wasallam, explained the Qur'an verbally and by example. All the Prophet's words and deeds are considered to be a living commentary on the Qur'an. The companions of the Prophet were better placed to do so than later generations because Arabic was their mother tongue, and because they had knowledge of the occasions on which the verses were revealed, and the situations in which the Prophet's words were uttered. Then came generations after generations of great leading scholars whose extant works are a living witness to the fact that they understood the basic meanings of the verses of the Qur'an in generally the same way as they were understood by the first generations. Your claim that each generation gave the words of the Qur'an and those of the Prophet meanings that suited their contemporary cultures is one that history belies.

REVISIONIST: *Are you saying that they never differed?*

FAITHFUL: They differed only slightly as far as the basic meanings of the verses and the Ahadith are concerned. But they naturally differed sometimes on matters like what was to be deduced logically from the text or the way rules were to be applied to a new situation. What is important here, is that the differences, whatever they were, did not come as a result of differences in culture. They were individual differences that occurred even among contemporaries living in the same cultural milieu. True, there were drastic differences, but they were among those who adhered to the correct method as well as those who adopted irrational methods.

REVISIONIST: *Are you claiming that there is a scientific method for the interpretation of Islamic text?*

FAITHFUL: I am saying rather that there is a scientific method for the basic understanding of every text, Islamic or otherwise.

REVISIONIST: *How?*

FAITHFUL: If you want to understand a poem by say, Shakespeare, what do you do?

REVISIONIST: *I consult the books that explain what Shakespeare meant by it.*

FAITHFUL: Do you mean that you do not understand it in the light of your contemporary culture?

REVISIONIST: *No, because my aim is to understand what Shakespeare meant by his poem.*

FAITHFUL: Do you mean that you give his words and phrases the meaning that he meant by them at the time that he wrote his poem, even if they differed from what current English usage might suggest?

REVISIONIST: *Of course; because my aim, as I said, is to understand what Shakespeare actually meant. If I give his words meanings that he did not intend by them, I would be attributing to him something that he did not say.*

FAITHFUL: Do you follow this same method if you want to be, say, an Aristotle's expert? Do you try, for example, to learn ancient Greek in which he wrote his philosophy?

REVISIONIST: *I certainly would, and would try not to confuse it with Modern Greek, because my aim again is to understand what Aristotle said.*

FAITHFUL: Are there any ways, besides his language that you think would help you in understanding his philosophy?

REVISIONIST: *Yes, I would for example, try to see how his contemporaries understood it because they were better placed to do so than I am. I would also consult the works of the experts who preceded me, and so on.*

FAITHFUL: Well, that is the method that we called scientific, and it is the method we advocate for understanding Islamic texts.

REVISIONIST: *But you are now ignoring the great differences between ordinary texts and Islamic texts.*

FAITHFUL: Would you please elucidate those differences for me?

REVISIONIST: *One of them is that I can understand what humans like myself really mean because I am human being, and because they address me in words that are human; therefore limited. But God is absolute and what He means is absolute, and cannot therefore be couched in limited human words. But if every reader of Islamic text is given the right to interpret them the way the reader understands them, there will be a multiplicity of meanings which approaches the absolute.*

FAITHFUL: Leaving aside your vague talk about the limited and the absolute, the gist of what you are saying is that while human beings have the ability to successfully communicate their meanings through a medium like Arabic, God fails to do so. This is despite the fact that He himself says that he used this human language so that those who speak it may understand his message.

REVISIONIST: *This looks like a good argument. But related to the difference we just mentioned is another important one. Islam, we say, is good for all times and places. If we*

give the words of its texts the same meanings that an earlier generation like the Prophet's companions gave, we would be limiting Islam to a particular age.

FAITHFUL: So, what is the alternative?

REVISIONIST: *The alternative is what I propounded at the beginning Of our dialogue. Every generation of Muslims should give them the meanings that suit their culture.*

FAITHFUL: Is this the understanding of the principle of the suitability of Islam for all times and places?

REVISIONIST: *It is, and I don't see how it can otherwise be.*

FAITHFUL: if the characteristic of the suitability of a message for all times and places is what you take it to be, then any message, even one that is advocated by the most stupid human beings can fit it.

REVISIONIST: *I think you're exaggerating.*

FAITHFUL: I am not, suppose that some one called Mr. Donkey formulated what he thought was a comprehensive ideology that consisted of many doctrines on different aspects of life. Suppose that, to make it suitable for all times and places Mr. Donkey concluded his ideology with this statement; I hereby give all believers in this world ideology the right to make any changes in it they deem necessary to make it suit their different times and circumstance.

REVISIONIST: *Change will start to be made in donkeyanism soon after it is issued so much so that after a short lapse of time nothing remains of it except that concluding statement. But the Donkeyans will continue to boast of the suitability of their ideology to all times and places.*

FAITHFUL: Is this how you conceive Islam to be?

REVISIONIST: *Of course not. But then, what is your conception of this characteristic of the Islamic religion?*

FAITHFUL: I conceive it to mean that Islam, as it was revealed to Muhammad, and without the slightest alterations, is good for all times and places. What makes this miracle possible is that Islam is not a manmade religion. It is a message of guidance from the Creator of mankind who knows who they essentially are, and who thus addresses them as human beings, and irrespective of their different cultures, colors, times, places, standards of living and so on.

REVISIONIST: *What do you then mean by the phrase 'Islam for our times'?*

FAITHFUL: I am saying that though the religion does not change, people's circumstances and problems do change. And so, to make the immutable religion relevant to their special circumstances, we need to present it in a language that our contemporaries understand, evaluate, in the light of it, any new ideas or ideologies that have a bearing on it, refute any claims that throw doubt on it, find in it solutions for new intellectual problems.

Finally it is important to make use of scientific discoveries to strengthen the faith of its adherents, and to use them as means of invitation to Islam. And many other things, all of which are made possible because though the texts are limited, what can be deduced and learnt from them is not.