

Understanding the Relationship Between the Quran and Extremism

by

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To effectively counter the ideologies of strident puritanical groups who lay claim to Islam, we must appreciate the depth and breadth of the classical Islamic tradition. Quranic interpretation is of fundamental importance in this endeavor. It is the key to distinguishing between Islam as practiced by the majority of its adherents and the strident puritanical strands of Islam, such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram.

The latter rely upon truncated interpretations of the Quranic text and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. In contrast, Sunnis, Shiites and Muslims of all stripes have historically recognized that the diversity of interpretations among scholars is a mercy. The Quran is thus subject to a vast plurality of interpretations. Diverse approaches to the text share core principles, yet allow for different applications under different circumstances. It is an interpretative tradition of “divergent congruence” that allows for many avenues of exploration and application.

Failure to understand the dynamism of classical Islamic scholarship has led to the common refrain that Muslims cannot “reform” until they cease to regard the Quran as the word of God. Iterations of this claim have echoed through the halls of the Vatican, western academia, and numerous media outlets.

These trite and sententious assertions betray a deep misunderstanding of Islam and the place of the Quran within it. They also prevent many people from understanding just how far from the Islamic tradition the strident puritanical interpretations of Islam that dominate media representations have strayed.

From the first century of Islam until today, Muslim scholars have recognized that no understanding of the text is without a human intermediary. As Ali ibn Abi Ṭalib, one of the most revered figures in both Sunni and Shiite Islam, said, “This Quran is only writing, lines between two covers, that cannot speak without the intervention of an interpreter. Only human beings can speak on its behalf.”

Muslim scholars have always been aware that texts have historical contexts and must be understood in accordance with them. One of the central tools for Quranic interpretation is the “occasions of revelation.” These reports outline the particular historical circumstances in which passages of the Quran were first articulated. They are essential for interpretation and are employed in all major Quran commentaries. In one instance, Ali ibn Abi Talib told a man that if he did not know the “occasions of revelation,” or historical contexts, he should not comment on the Quran.

The “occasions of revelation” guide interpreters in determining which verses have broad application and which are more limited in scope. They restrict the application of several Quranic verses to particular historical circumstances. The most famous instance of such contextual limitation is perhaps Quran 9:5, known as “The Sword Verse”:

Then, when the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wheresoever you find them, capture them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush. But if they repent, and perform the prayer and give the alms, then let them go their way.

The majority of Muslim scholars maintain that the phrase “slay the idolaters wheresoever you find them” refers to particular tribes that had declared open warfare on the Muslims during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. Awareness of this historical circumstance contains and restrains the interpretation of the verse, thus preventing the wanton and unwarranted applications that those with political ambitions and apocalyptic visions seek today. As Qadi Abu Bakr, one of the most influential commentators in Islamic history writes, “It is clear that the intended meaning of the verse is to slay those idolaters who are waging war against you.” Heeding the call to fight issued in Quran 9:5 is thus conditional upon there being an existing state of aggression. If, however, one casts aside historical context and interpretive tradition, passages such as 9:5 are employed by strident ideologues to advocate a state of perpetual warfare.

Regarding the Quran as the Word of God does not lead Muslims to follow it unquestioningly, as is too often asserted. Rather it leads Muslims to appreciate that no single human interpretation of the text can suffice, since the finite human mind cannot encompass the infinitude of the Divine. Insight into these multiple modes of interpretation provides a panoramic vision of the history and interpretation of the Quranic text. It will help readers understand why all classically trained Muslim scholars reject the claims of ISIS or any other fundamentalist group and why many Muslim scholars have given their lives to oppose them.

So long as Muslims are viewed as subjects to be educated and lectured, the West will continue to misunderstand the dynamics of the Muslim world and of Muslims themselves. If, however, Muslims are embraced as partners in a battle against those who seek to pit us all against one another, we can work together to beat the swords of disputation into the plowshares of reconciliation, advancing the good of all rather than the interests and ideologies of a few.