

The Islamic Doctrine of "Abrogation"

Ever since September 11, 2001, when radical Islamists flew their hijacked planes into the Twin Towers in New York to seek martyrdom and an entry into paradise, we began to live in a different, more dangerous world. Fearful of backlash, most leaders of Muslim communities in the US, Canada, and Europe responded in predictable ways to the Twin Towers atrocity. They proclaimed first that Islam is a religion of peace; and second, that Islam was hijacked by fanatics on that September morning. But the suicide attacks didn't end in 2001. The London bombings of 7/7 by Islamists, which killed and wounded so many people, shocked England. What was the reaction of Muslims? In London, marchers carried signs calling for the beheading of the infidels – other Muslims demonstrated to claim that Islam really meant peace and honour.

Are Muslims in the West right in their efforts to present Islam as a religion of peace? But if Islam is a religion of peace, why is there is no declaredly Muslim state which offers full civil rights to Christians? In the spread of fanatic radical Islam we are facing a problem that will not go away anytime soon. Now is the time to ask why the continuous growth of radical Islam, "Islamism", is still a threat. Therefore, we must deal with some basic questions, such as: What is Islam? Although Islam is presented as a simple religion, in reality it is complex. In this article, I will attempt to answer the following questions: Are the moderate Muslims right in their claim that Islam is a religion of peace or are the radical Muslims correct in their interpretation of the Koran? How can Muslims reconcile sayings which contradict each other? On the one hand, the Koran says, "There is no compulsion in religion" (Surah ii:256). On the other hand, the Koran contains five commands to kill and twelve to fight (literally, "try to kill"). In classical Muslim discussions of these verses, two verses attracted more attention than any others. They came to be known as "the sword verse" (ix:5), and "the verse of tribute" (ix:29). These verses address a number of different situations, from "fighting those who fight you" to "fighting totally." The objects of fighting and killing include the unbelievers, the polytheists, and "the friends of Satan." Moderate Muslims appeal to the peace texts to back their claim that Islam is a religion of peace. The radical Islamists appeal to the "sword verse." And they also point to the deep rooted belief in the history of Islam that the world is divided into Dar al-Islam (the Abode of Islam, where Muslims and Islam prevail) and Dar al-Harb (the Abode of War), in which jihad is legitimate and standard.

The Koran

For the Muslims, the true scripture is the Koran; the Christian Bible is viewed as corrupt, a falsification, and all the Biblical figures are Muslim prophets who preached Islam. The Koran, which means "reading", is said to have been given to Muhammad piece by piece over the span of 23 years. It was dictated by the angel Gabriel. The sanctity of the Koran, therefore, lies in the Muslim belief that the text is the official word of Allah and of Muhammad as Allah's appointed mouthpiece. In *What Everyone Should Know about Islam*, published by the Islamic Foundation, it says, "The Holy Koran differs from any other religious text in that it was not written or edited by any human author; no word has

been added to it or subtracted from it." The fact that the Koran is seen by Muslims as a divine revelation, the word of God "incarnate" with the original copy still in heaven, means it is above criticism and imitation. To question the status of the Koran is, therefore, the same as insulting Allah. It is quoted in every context, sometimes – to Western eyes – quite inappropriately. It is the ultimate unchallengeable recourse of all religious knowledge. For the Muslim jurist the Koran contains the basic laws governing Islamic society. Orthodox Muslim theologians insist that the duty of the faithful is to accept it literally and not to question the tenor or the meaning of the revelations. But if the Koran is the divine word, *eternal* and *uncreated*, a literal "recitation of the original revelation", why then does it contain a collection of diverse materials that include polemic, praise, eschatology, law, narrative, battle calls, and details of the domestic life of the prophet?

No Chronological Order

As I will show in this article, the very nature of the Koran makes it difficult to dialogue with orthodox Muslims. For example, the latter refer to the Koran in response to questions about violence, but they often discuss the subject in such a way as to shut down a meaningful exploration of the Koranic text. One or two mild passages are usually cited, as if these fully represent the context of a scripture that contains some 6,000 verses.

The Biblical story line of creation, fall, redemption, and the restoration of creation when Christ returns in glory is totally different from the Koran. Those unfamiliar with its historical development find the arrangement of the 114 surahs (chapters) difficult to understand. They follow no particular chronological or contextual patterns. The longer surahs come first and the shorter at the end. And what is still more confusing is that Muslim theologians allow that in some of the surahs there are verses which belong to a different date from that of other portions of the chapter. The absence of the historical element from the Koran in regards to the details of Muhammad's daily life, may be judged by the fact that only two of his contemporaries are mentioned in the entire volume, and that Muhammad's name occurs only five times, although he is addressed by Angel Gabriel all the way through as the recipient of the divine revelations, with the word SAY. Muslim scholars assigned each of the Koran's 114 surahs to initial recitation by Muhammad in either Mecca or Medina; and within those main divisions, they gave each surah a place in a definite chronology. The establishment of such a chronology permitted the concept of abrogation – by which recitations originating in later in time took precedence over apparently contradictory passages recited earlier. Therefore, to interpret Koranic passages, it is important to look at their historical context. In this light we need to recognize that some can say, "Islam is a religion of peace"; while others can maintain that the Koran approves of violence. Many of the peaceful references do indeed come from Muhammad's earlier period. His later period, however, involved a message that was combined with political and military power. Why is there a difference between these two periods?

The Meccan Period

The Meccan surahs in the Koran date from the time Muhammad was seeking to win Meccans for his faith and cause. They are shorter but more numerous than the Medina surahs. They are concerned chiefly with questions of doctrine and ethics. In this period of the development of the Koran, Muhammad preoccupies himself with persuading his sceptical listeners to turn away from their idol gods and worship Allah. And the doctrine of the Trinity is among some of his teaching he condemns (v:72-73). Ceasar E. Farah notes that in this Meccan period Muhammad "resorted to reason, logical proof, and fair exhortation in his attempts at persuasion just as often as he resorted to threats of impending doom."

The non-chronological arrangements of the surah leads easily to confusion and misinterpretation. The changes the reader notices in the Koran mark the gradual development of Muhammad's mind from that of a moral teacher and reformer to that of a prophet, legislator and warrior-chief in Medina. In the Medina period, his sermonizing effect had been largely achieved. To follow the reasons given for the difference of attitude in the Koran, we must keep in mind the two main periods in which they were given. The longest surahs, which come first, relate to Muhammad's role as head of the community in Medina; the shorter ones, embodying mostly his ethical teachings came earlier, during his prophethood in Mecca, yet in the order followed by the Koran, they are found mostly in the latter part.

The Medinan Period

It is in the revelations in Medina that the historical message of Islam as embodied in the Koran becomes easier to perceive. They allude to accomplished facts and events. They also abound in legislative injunctions. Since these surahs reflect the triumphant establishment of Islam and of the Muslim community, they are more assured in tone, more aggressive and conquering. It is now the voice of the chief – head of the community – that speaks, the voice of the lawgiver and statesman who is detailing rules of conduct for the followers of Allah. The differences between the two periods are most notable in Muhammad's change of attitude toward Jews and Christians. The earlier revelations spoke of Allah protecting the Jews. In Medina Muhammad failed to convert Jews to Islam. The great majority rejected him completely. The Koran comments, "Allah has cursed them for their disbelief, so they believe not except a few." (iv:46; cf.xxvi:196-200). The Koran even states that Allah can punish them by turning them into animals. "And indeed you knew those amongst you [children of Israel] who transgressed in the matter of the Sabbath. We said to them: 'Be you monkeys, despised and rejected'" (ii:65). Previously, Muhammad instructed his followers to face Jerusalem to pray. In January 624 he changed direction to face Mecca. The Koran comments: "And from wheresoever you start forth [for prayers], turn your face in the direction of Mecca, "that is indeed the truth from your Lord. And Allah is not unaware of what you do" (ii:149). The earlier revelation said Jews and Christians were only required to believe in God and do good works. They did not have to convert to Islam. A later revelation, "And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him, and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers" (iii:85). The Medina period began the expansion of Islam by persuasion and by arms. In the year 630, Mecca itself was conquered and brought into

the Muslim fold. Shortly after this victory, on 8 June 632, Muhammad died after a short illness.

Abrogation

Why does the “eternal” and “uncreated” Koran contain changes that only apply to its manifestation on earth? And if the Koran has no chronological order and the Medinan surahs differ from the Meccan ones, how can these changes be explained? These questions are not just for theologians to squabble about; it is highly relevant in view of the spread of radical Islamism. And the issue becomes even more complicated when the doctrine of "abrogation" is taken into account. This is part of the Muslim belief that certain passages of the Koran are abrogated (repealed or abolished) by verses revealed afterward.

The problem of abrogation lies in two areas. Firstly, the Koran specifically says on the one hand there can be no change in the "Words of Allah" (Surah xx:65), and on the other hand "We substitute one revelation for another" (xvi:101). Secondly, in *Kissing Cousins: Christians and Muslims Face to Face*, Bill Musk observes: "Potentially contradictory passages of the Koran are often reconciled by means of abrogation or cancellation – the later verse (usually) replacing the former." He notes that while the process of "revelations" by Gabriel to Muhammad was still going on, it was made clear which verses were being replaced by new revelations. And this process was applied with Koranic approval:

"None of Our revelations
Do We abrogate
Or cause to be forgotten
But we substitute
Something better or similar:
Knowest thou not that God
Hath power of all things?" (ii:106)

The commands to fight and to kill in the Koran are considered by Muslims to be among the recitations made very late in the Prophet's life, at the time when his conquest of Arabia was almost complete. Muslim scholars have inclined to read the peaceful texts as subordinate to the later ones. In other words, Muslims seeking to find a peaceful message in the Koran must fight not only the plain meaning of the Koran's text, but also the course of its history. From the first, Islam was a religion of pillage, violence, and compulsion, which it justified and glorified. The expulsion of Jewish tribes from Medina, the raids against the Meccan caravans, the siege of Vienna later in 1529, and Hamas and Hizbollah today are part of the Islam historical record. There is, therefore, a link between Islamic tradition and the current acts of violence committed by radical Islamics around the world. How does the concept of abrogation work in practice? Peaceful passages in the Koran were considered to be superseded by materials with a warlike tone, especially Surah ix. David S. Powers, professor of near eastern studies at Cornell University, has noted that Muslim scholars such as Ibn Salama (d.1020) claimed the

"sword verse" (ix:5), "Slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them (captive), and besiege them, and prepare for them each ambush. But if they repent and establish worship and pay the poor-due, then leave their way free" had abrogating power over 124 other verses, including "every other verse in the Koran which commands or implies anything less than a total offensive against the non-believers." These warlike passages in the Koran encourage Islamists to continue on with their terrorist activities, disavowing the peace passages. Bill Musk rightly argues: "The Islamists make detailed appeal to verses (about killing non-believers for example) that are said to abrogate other verses (about respecting non-Muslims). Why does an eternally existing word need recourse to a doctrine of abrogation? Could it not make up its eternal mind?"

Conclusion

Independently of the actual conduct of many Muslims, Islam itself is inherently an unsettling and threatening factor in world politics. But the real threat to Western democracies is their refusal to face reality of radical Islamism. Consequently, interpreting the words of the Koran so that we can get a better understanding of the complexity of Islam is a large challenge. In view of the high stakes in the world today, however, it is a challenge we should take up.

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