THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF SCRIPTURE - HISTORIANS AND BELIEVERS, ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: Since the Enlightenment, scriptural discourse in the West has been generally limited to the historicity of texts. Although this is a valid and necessary method to study the history of scripture, more is needed. Following Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000), this paper argues that human involvement with scriptural text is more important than the study of the text's evolution. Smith believed that human involvement with scripture is not theological but historical as it often focuses on the historicity of the text. Further, following Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), the paper argues that philosophy does not have jurisdiction to judge religion except to disclose the hidden dimensions of human thought. With these two insights in mind, the paper calls on believers to make their scripture(s) central to their religious life and not be overly concerned with the historical evolution of their texts. This requires critiquing the secular discourse of religion and defining new conditions of religious discourse, such that religion enacts the "transformation and guidance of man's inner and outer life."

Keywords: Scripture, Discourse, Historical-Critical Method, Religious Life, Believers, Secular.

Introduction

This paper addresses some issues and their implications for believers when they read their scripture. It points out some short comings of the historical-critical method in its current form. The short comings are identified by Wilfred Cantwell Smith (d. 2000) in his book, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*.¹ The paper also points out one philosophical problem related to the domains of philosophy and religion that impedes scriptural understanding. The issue is identified by Sir Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938). Based on an analysis of the two scholars, the paper advises believers of all colours to develop new conditions of religious discourse based on humankind's involvement with scripture instead of just scripture's textual historicity. The identification of both problems is an effort to highlight the real purpose of reading scripture – to guide human life.

At the outset it is pointed out that this paper is about the historical study of scripture and not about how it should be read or understood by believers for religious purposes. In general, any historical study, including its methods and approaches, remains the concern of historians. However, in the case of religion, history and religion are essentially bound together. Therefore, religious history is an important interest of the believers. However, in their encounter with religious history while reading scripture, their interest in history pertains to better understanding their scripture, not to becoming historians of religion.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith is a giant in the academic study of religion and does not require introduction. It may suffice to mention John Hick's opinion about Smith: "Smith in his work on the concept of religion and of religions has been responsible, more than any other single individual, for the change which has taken place within a single generation in the way in which many of us perceive the religious life of mankind."² Our following discussion is entirely based on his seminal work, *What is Scripture: A Comparative Approach*.

Scripture as Text and Human Involvement with It

For Smith, the study of the history of scripture has two components: the evolution of the text and human involvement with it. Since the Enlightenment, historical-critical methodology has been an important instrument for understanding the history of scripture and its text. The historical-critical method includes a number of sub-methodologies. However, we can divide them into two major groups: the historical value of the text and the history of the meaning of its content. The historic value of the text uses methodologies like source criticism, redaction criticism, textual criticism, etc. The meaning of its content in history is studied by reconstructing the historical milieu in which the text was originally understood in order to determine its meaning as understood by the author(s) and later generations. The paper appreciates the latter over the former for the historical study of scripture by believers.

Smith believes "[s]cripture lies not in the text itself but in a human involvement in it; discernment of it."³ This involvement is extensive and relates to the "social organisation and in individual piety, in the preservation of community patterns and in revolutionary change, and of course in art, literature and intellectual outlook."⁴ Smith correctly understands that both the history of the text and human involvement with it are historical and worthy of study by historians of religion. However, his concern is that though the text as a historical artifact has received serious attention from historians of religion in the West since the Enlightenment, the history of human involvement with it has not received comparable attention, even though the latter is more important to Smith for the study of scripture. The

paper agrees with Smith's assessment. In the following we will look at the short comings of the historical-critical method as it is currently employed in scriptural history.

When Smith looks at the history of the evolution of scriptural texts, he notes two points. First, the texts were not yet scriptures at the point of their origins. It is only at some later point that many "cultures, civilisations, and communities" treated the texts as scripture and defined the canon. As such, reading the texts as their author(s) understood them means reading them when they did not exist as scripture. Second, in relatively recent scholarship on scripture, ideas/methods of literary criticism are applied, treating the texts as any other piece of literature.⁵ Smith does not object to using literary critical methods when studying scriptures; the problem is when they are studied during their pre-scriptural phase as scripture when the scripture did not exist. For Smith, the real role of any scripture is in between these two phases, when its role in human life is "rich, complex, and powerful" and "*not yet over* (my emphasis)." Smith's analysis is correct and applies to all scriptures except the Qur'an. The Qur'an does not fit this pre-scriptural and post-scriptural structure, as we will discuss later in the paper.

In light of the above shortcomings in current Western scholarship when trying to determine the historic value or the evolution of a scriptural text, Smith wonders why historians of religion have not paid attention to humankind's involvement with scripture, especially when this involvement is as historical as the study of the evolution of the text. The reason for its being historical, according to Smith, is that its quality changes over time and place; it is ever "enmeshed in the particular contexts of those whose lives and societies the role has been played;" and it is not "an accidental modifying of some higher or more stable reality" but an integral part of the ongoing historical process. Since Smith correctly believes scripture's "essential character" is its involvement with humankind, for him it can no longer be "set aside or get beyond or behind in order to understand scripture itself."⁶

The above discussion can be concretised with the help of a particular example. Smith asks us to consider a person away from home who receives a telegram that reads: "Dear Jane. Come home at once; Mother critically ill. Dad."⁷ In this example, textual historicism is similar to the attitude of a telegram recipient who "give[s] attention to the text ... is it a hoax, or a forgery; if genuine as text was it nonetheless composed some years ago by someone else's father and sent to *his* daughter Jane,"⁸ etc. as opposed to another recipient's attitude who considers it crucial to pay attention to his/her "emotional response" to the telegram and takes practical steps. The point is that paying attention to the first attitude is not unimportant but if all attention is paid to it and the other attitude is neglected then it nulls the real purpose of the telegram. This paper believes Smith's assessment is correct and requires attention from both historians of religion and believers.

Two Historical Facts Related to Scripture

When Smith looks at the second aspect of scriptural study relating to the evolution of its meaning, he discovers two historical facts: i) a great variety of interpretations exist when a text is understood by different religious or secular communities at the same point in time; and ii) a great variety of interpretations exist within a scriptural community over time. Interestingly, the two phenomena continue to the present and will probably continue into the future. According to Smith, this characteristic makes scripture not a thing of the past but of the present and future, too. Further, he observes that the two phenomena are so widespread that they even apply to scriptures that have very stable texts (e.g. the Qur'an), regarded as "God-given, or as transcendentally absolute." In other words, "without a human response to it [i.e. scripture], without a community of reception and preservation of it, it is otiose."⁹ In the following we will take one example of each phenomenon to further clarify Smith's observations.

For the first case, Smith takes the example of a Biblical book, "The Song of Songs", such that the choice of the song is "somewhat random" but not "quite arbitrary." Smith compares its interpretation in the Jewish, Christian, and philosophical communities at the same point in time. Smith chooses French Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes (d. 1105) as a representative of the Jewish community that understood the song as: "the love of God for the Jewish community, or nation; and as delineating that community's national history over centuries." Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1146) of the Christian community, on the other hand, understood the song as "Christ's love for the Church, or for the soul of individual Church member." Finally, for philosophers of the neo-Platonic school, the song was "the love of the active for the passive intellect – a salient issue in philosophic thought at the time."¹⁰ From this Smith concludes that the three communities understood the song differently, but for all of them it was read or preached "explicitly for moral and spiritual edification," not as "an object to be understood," or with a view to what "the meaning of the text" was. For all three it was "the meaning of the universe, of world history, of human life; of the readers' own lives as they read, or as they set forth about their affairs after reading."¹¹ It is also interesting to note that each community has its own narrative and its own symbols to express the same truth in their own language. As far as the original meaning of the song is concerned, it is historically indisputable that it was sung in early taverns as a "run-of-the mill love-song." One may therefore ask what the correct interpretation of the song is other than humankind's involvement with it.

For the second persistent phenomenon in the history of human involvement with scripture, Smith takes the example of the Qur'an. To him the Qur'anic text is stable but nevertheless has a large variety of interpretations in the form

of Qur'anic commentaries (*tafasir*). This process continues so as “[t]o write a commentary in any age is to suggest that extant interpretations are to some degree inadequate.”¹² This means God did not speak with the Prophet only in the seventh century, but continues to do so in every century through the Qur'an. At the *ummah* (global Muslim community) level “[e]very theologian, jurist, mystic, heresiarch, nationalist, agitator, philosopher” and others have over the centuries “incorporate[d] an interpretation ... into his system: sometimes in a distinctive way, slightly or markedly.”¹³ Smith's argument is strong and cannot be rejected. It is not God who has problems communicating with humans; it is humankind's finitude that requires new interpretations as humankind's knowledge, experience and needs change. Humankind's interpretations should be accompanied by humility instead of an attitude of “no interpretation needed” or the hubristic “we have *the* interpretation.”

Smith believes a number of reasons exist for variety of interpretation in scriptural communities: i) followers accept the particular authority of different exegetes, resulting in various interpretations; ii) an original thinker based on his or her reflection develops a new interpretation; iii) a believer who considers God not as a transcendent reality but as a unifying concept or idea may “discern or imagine...truth, goodness, worth, within this universe and within social or personal life”; iv) a historian for whom the idea of God is a “figment of imagination” must make it his or her task “to ascertain and to make evident what it meant to many millions of people at various times and places” resulting in a new reading of scripture; or v) a humanist, naturalist, or non-theist who “encapsulates in this symbolic form at the very least their capacity for, and their sensibility to, beauty, truth, and justice” again interprets the text differently.¹⁴ This does not mean that the history of interpretation within the Muslim or any other community is “chaotic.” The variety only means a foundational fact of the text being or treated as scripture.

Implications for Believers

When we study scriptural history in the context of human involvement we gain many insights. Believers may pay attention to the following implications as the fruits of their historical study. The first and most important implication is that the modern secular university, in its search for historical truth, continues to pay attention to the text alone, neglecting human involvement with it as a historical project. The believers as historians of religion and as communities of faith must overcome this and pay attention to human involvement with the text. If they do not, they must pay heed to Smith's warning: “Any religion will die out that does not have a positive function to fulfill, that is not something dynamic, summoning

to action and leading men to some solution of their problems.”¹⁵ Further, he advises, “religion must be not only modern, to fit a situation which is different today from what it was in the twelfth, or the seventh century. Religion must be also dynamic, to fit a situation which is different one minute from what it will be the next....religion today must apply not to a situation at all, but to a process”¹⁶ – an ongoing historical process of interpretation in human life.

Believers must understand that variety of interpretation is a historical fact that applies to all scriptures. Therefore, believers must accept and be satisfied that this is what it means to be human when reading scripture. It is not the Ultimate Reality but human finitude that is responsible for variation of interpretation. Due to its finitude, humanity’s understanding of “The Truth” will always remain “the truth.” In the process of human life, truth is a disclosure. It requires the believers to be humble, to accept that they may be mistaken in their interpretation and not become egotistic, thinking that *only* they have The Truth. Within a community of believers, believers should be allowed to have different voices. This diversity of voices enhances our understanding of scripture as all believers in the community continue to strive for the most relevant meaning, respectfully and with mutual authentication and negotiation in changing human situations.

Smith’s effort, based on historical data, to find common ground among scriptures in order to reach a general conception of scripture is important, appreciable, and relevant to our time. However, the case of the Qur’an does not fit his general theory in two important ways. First, the Muslim community did not call certain books or texts scripture. Rather, it was the scripture that created the community and continues to do so with new and varied ethnicities incorporating themselves into its fold as Muslims. Second, the Qur’an existed verbally and then, soon after the death of the Prophet, textually as a complete book (*mushaf*).¹⁷ Therefore, the Qur’an does not have the pre-scripture and post-scripture dilemma which is the case for all other known scriptures. The implication is that from the beginning there continues to be human involvement with the Qur’an. Therefore, for Muslim scholars, the search for common ground in the conception of a genre called “scripture” must start from the Qur’anic concept of The Book¹⁸ and the history of the prophets. Such a concept of scripture should also integrate Asian religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.¹⁹ In a globalised world, a religion that can define common ground between all religions and incorporate them into the same “Truth” may succeed in reviving religion once more as a source for the “transformation and guidance of man’s inner and outer life.”

Another issue believers need to be aware of is the Western propensity to consciously or unconsciously consider Western historical experience as humankind’s experience. An example of this attitude can be seen in Smith’s analysis of the concept of scripture in the West. According to him, before 1850

“scripture” in the West meant only the Bible, in the sense of “the straightforward, even literal word of God.” This meant that no other religious book could claim to be the word of God. Then, in the “aftermath” of revelations about the historicity of the Bible through the historical-critical method, liberal interpreters concluded that there cannot be any “metaphysical or other-worldly status” for the Bible; by implication, this came to mean no other scripture could have other-worldly status, either. Since the Bible emerged as a product of a historical decision as to which books could be called scripture, Western scholars thought other religious texts must have gone through this same process and hence must be treated and studied in the same way. The positive outcome, according to Smith, was that the idea of scriptures (plural) instead of scripture (singular) could emerge in the West. Later, modern Biblical scholarship came to the conclusion that the Bible was in reality simply a historical document. Hence, all religious books of the world must be considered and studied as historical documents.²⁰ It is for these reasons that believing scholars and lay persons should disclose their subjectivity, declare their belief about the scripture, and follow their scripture to live and enrich their lives.

Smith’s project in his book, *What is Scripture*, was to bring back the notion of transcendence to scripture, especially in the understanding of the Bible. He is quite blunt about the need for this in Western civilisation: “A civilisation in process of losing its spiritual moorings is in trouble – unless it can retrieve them, or find alternatives to them, in a new vision.”²¹ Does this mean the idea of transcendence may come back and be allowed to become the concept of scripture in the West? It may or may not. However, believers must progress towards a notion of scripture as having transcendental qualities. This is particularly necessary for believers in the Qur’an, as the Qur’an has a lot to say about scripture, its historic continuity and transcendence.

Philosophical Issues in Scriptural Discourse

Let us turn our attention to a discussion of the philosophy-religion rivalry, as reflected in the work of Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), for a new religious discourse with scripture at its centre. Iqbal acknowledges philosophy’s “jurisdiction to judge religion.”²² However, he believes that the nature of faith is such that “it will not submit to the jurisdiction of philosophy except on its own terms.”²³ This is so because “[r]eligion is not a departmental affair [whereas philosophy is a departmental affair].” Religion to him is “neither thought,²⁴ nor mere feeling²⁵ nor mere action;²⁶ it is an expression of the whole man.”²⁷ According to him, religion’s method is the “*process of reflective synthesis*.” Hence, philosophy must understand its limitations in front of religion.

Philosophy's noble and appropriate "function is to trace the uncritical assumptions of human thought to their hiding places, and in this pursuit it may finally end in denial or frank admission of the incapacity of pure reason to reach the Ultimate Reality."²⁸ From this Iqbal concludes that while philosophy, by its own admission, as shown by Kant, cannot reach Ultimate Reality through its method of pure reason, it still has a role in one aspect of religion: as a check on human thought and its hidden uncritical assumptions. From this we may also conclude that philosophy is a subset of religion.

This then allows us to understand that the conditions of discourse as set by secular universities and philosophy may not be sufficient for religious discourse, as religious discourse involves more than just thought and analysis. Believers need to be conscious of this fact. They must also realise that believers come in many shades and colours – Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc. Though the colours and shades of believers may be different due to differences in language, particular symbols, and historical experiences, they share a common ground for their discourse: the "transformation and guidance of man's inner and outer life."

From the above discussion, it is concluded that the secular discourse of religion in the Western tradition is a great gift to humankind that allows a critique of humankind's religions. However, the days of a Protestant worldview are long gone. The longing of "[b]ack to the original" or the "original is the true" does not exist anymore. According to Smith, we are in a phase of history where true meaning of scripture "is the history of its meanings." It is a process of understanding, a process that is "a dynamic, rich, creative, continuing complex..." The meaning is in "the minds and hearts of Muslims [and other believers]" that is "deeply intertwined" in their lives. This meaning is not a "fancy" but "a statement of observable fact", and hence historically worthy of study for historians of religion in search of truth. Believers shall no longer remain shy to develop a new paradigm of religious discourse based on their own terms. This paper has hinted towards some of those terms. Others need to be identified so that in the next generation of religious discourse, believers may insist and negotiate the conditions of religious discourse before engaging in it or accepting uncritically the terms of secular discourse.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Believers, particularly Muslims, should not pay as much attention to the history of the evolution of scriptural texts. Their resources should not be engaged in this research as the West is already undertaking it.

2. When Muslim scholars (or scholars of other religions) want to engage in religious history, they may prefer to research the meaning of past human involvement in scripture. Such research helps to determine what changes should be considered for current circumstances.
3. Believers of all colours should adopt the policy that if they find guidance in their scripture that helps them lead a meaningful life, they may choose to overlook the historicity of their scripture. The reason for this attitude is that scriptural reading is done for practical purposes, i.e. to live a purposeful life ethically. If scripture helps realise that practical purpose, then that is all that should matter.
4. Believers should accept that a variety of interpretations go hand in hand with their scripture(s). Smith has almost conclusively proven this through his historical analysis. For Muslims, it is their tradition that, when they interpret the Qur'an, they write at the end that God knows the best meaning. No Muslim has ever claimed that s/he has *the* meaning. Therefore, different voices of interpretation should be seen as revealing a richness of meaning, not a division of the Muslim community.
5. In a global world it is imperative that Muslims work with other religious traditions to develop conditions of scriptural discourse.
6. Scholars should also be conscious that the Western experience of life is only one of many. For example, there are Eastern, Middle Eastern, or Chinese ways of experiencing life. We should never take the Western experience as representative of all humanity's experience.

Notes

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1. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).
 2. John Hick, 'Religious Pluralism,' in *The World's Religious Traditions, Current Perspectives in Religious Studies: Essays in Honour of Wilfred Cantwell Smith*, ed. Frank Whaling (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1984), 174.
 3. Smith, *What is Scripture*, 1-4.
 4. *Ibid.*, 5-10.
 5. *Ibid.*, 4.
 6. *Ibid.*

7. Ibid., 35.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 21.
10. Ibid., 24-5.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 71.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 73.
15. Ibid., 23.
16. Ibid.
17. The Qur'an itself claims that it was brought down as a whole book. Please see Q 97:1: "We indeed brought down the whole Qur'an in the Night of Power" (author's translation).
18. The Qur'an calls all scriptures The Book, for example *Taurat*, *Injeel*, etc.
19. Smith believes that each religion is a different way of being human. I go further: for me each way of being human is based on the three sources of human knowledge: reason/philosophical reflection, inner reflection, and revelation (as in Semitic religions).
20. Smith, *What is Scripture*, 4.
21. Ibid., 12.
22. Muhammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989), 2.
23. Ibid.
24. Iqbal shows that faith has elements of thought, meaning and idea in it. Idea is philosophy's data point and legitimate domain of inquiry. Also, he believes that thought and intuition do not oppose each other. Rather, they spring up from the same root and complement each other.
25. According to Iqbal, religion has cognitive content; it is not just feeling and, therefore, can be empirically measured. Hence, religious experience for him is not mere subjective emotion.
26. For Iqbal, religious action (or any other human action) requires a strong rational foundation. For him, religion stands in greater need of a rational foundation than even the dogma of science. It requires a reconciliation of the oppositions of experience and a justification of the environment in which humanity finds itself.
27. Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 2.
28. Ibid., 1.