

Hermeneutics from Islamic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. The source material of Hermeneutics is texts and other utterances, and the goal is to achieve understanding of their meanings. In religious studies the study of texts and utterances is not an end in itself, but a means to say something about religion and religious processes in a society. Because this field of science was initiated by Western scholars in the name of Biblical interpretation and unlike very few Muslim theologians who used it in the interpretation of their divine book the Quran, many opposed it and thought it a conspiracy against Islam to deviate Muslims from true teachings of divine book the Quran. This article first of all gives a brief account of definition, types and history of Hermeneutics, how and what kind of role Hermeneutics plays in the interpretation and exegesis of divine texts; shares views of Muslim scholars about this field of science secondly; and finally give concluding remarks.

Keywords: Hermeneutic, Interpretation, Exegesis, Divinity & Theology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Hermeneutics Defined

Webster's dictionary defines Hermeneutics as: The science of interpretation and explanation; exegesis; esp., that branch of theology which defines the laws whereby the meaning of the Scriptures is to be ascertained.

Conner and Malmin (1983: 1) explain it: "It is (1) a *science* because it is concerned with principles within an ordered system. It is meant to derive and classify the principles which are necessary for the proper interpretation of scripture. It is also (2) an *art* because it is concerned with the application of derived principles. The application of these principles cannot be mechanical, but must involve the skill of the interpreter".

MILTON S. TERRY (Undated: 17) defines the Hermeneutics as: "the science of interpretation. The word is usually applied to the explanation of written documents and may therefore be more specifically

defined as the science of interpreting an author's language".

He also considers Hermeneutics as both the Science and Arts.

F. P. A., Demeterio III (Undated: 1) however introduces Hermeneutics as: Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek word (hermeneuein), which means *to interpret*, and its derivative (hermeneia) means *interpretation*. He further writes: "In its barest sense, Hermeneutics can be understood as a theory, methodology and praxis of interpretation that is geared towards the recapturing of meaning of a text, or a text-analogue, that is temporally or culturally distant, or obscured by ideology and false consciousness".

II. METHODS AND MATERIAL

A. Hermeneutics Classified

Conner and Malmin (1983: 2-4) have classified Hermeneutics into:

1. General Hermeneutics

It refers to the various sets of rules, which are used in the interpretation of the materials presented through the many forms of communication. General Hermeneutics is the science of interpreting the communication of man to man". Some scholars have referred this type as Secular Hermeneutics.

2. Biblical Hermeneutics

It is the science of interpreting the communication of God to human. This Divine communication has come to human in the form of sacred literature - the Bible.

MILTON S. TERRY (Undated: 17-18) classifies Hermeneutics as:

1. General Special Hermeneutics:

This is philosophical & methodical, and searches for methods & principles.

2. Special Hermeneutics:

This is a practical and almost empirical science and searches after rules and solutions.

3. Biblical or Sacred Hermeneutics:

This is the science of interpreting the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

F. P. A., Demeterio III (Undated: 3-8) has classified Hermeneutics as:

1. Romanticist Hermeneutics:

It conceptualises textuality as some kind of a floating signifier which without its temporal and cultural contexts is incomplete.

2. Phenomenological Hermeneutics:

Like the Romanticist Hermeneutics, Phenomenological Hermeneutics also assumes that a proper context or a mental frame is needed for any object in order to be fully interpreted. But instead of considering the irrelevant historical and cultural contexts,

phenomenological Hermeneutics argues that the text reflects its own mental frame. Therefore interpreting a text means to isolate it methodically from all non-pertinent things including the subject's biases and allow it to communicate its meaning to the subject. The goal of phenomenological Hermeneutics is to acquire the truth of the text as it is.

3. Dialectical Hermeneutics:

It argues that an object or text can contain a number of meanings. Therefore, unlike the romanticist and the phenomenological Hermeneutics, dialectical Hermeneutics is not interested in capturing a single and unified meaning, but rather in an existential one, the meaning of the here and now.

4. Critical Hermeneutics:

It mentions that textuality can be infiltrated with forces and powers that were formerly considered irrelevant to it and practically harmless. These irrelevant forces and powers are capable of penetrating deep into the text by weaving into its linguistic fabric. The goal of this hermeneutic system is to diagnose the hidden pathology of texts and to free them from their ideological distortions.

5. Post-structural Hermeneutics:

It expresses that the subject has lost its primacy that had been taken for granted by the previous philosophical systems, it is now decentred, and is presently considered a mere intersection of point of the various cultural and socio-economic forces that shape the human individual.

B. Role of Hermeneutics in the Interpretation of Divine Texts:

The Role played by Hermeneutics in the Biblical/Quranic exegesis can be understood from the following statement:

"The word "exegesis" comes from the Greek word 'exhegesisthai' which means "to guide or lead out". It refers to bringing out the meaning of any writing that might otherwise be difficult to be understood. This branch of science involves the *application* of the rules of Hermeneutics. While Hermeneutics provides us with the tools, exegesis refers to the actual *use* of these tools.

Hermeneutics supplies the *principles* of interpretation, while exegesis is the *process* of interpretation. Exegesis then can be thought of as 'applied Hermeneutics'." (Conner & Malmin: 1983: 6)

C. History

Hermeneutics was developed in antiquity in a period when a distinction was made between literal and allegorical meanings, for instance in the reading of Homer and Greek mythology and in Philo of Alexandria's interpretations of the Septuagint. Christian authors distinguished between different layers of meaning in the Bible. Origen (185–254) drew a distinction between the spiritual sense, the literal sense and the moral sense of Scripture. In practice such distinctions often boiled down to a division between the allegorical and the literal meaning. In the Renaissance Hermeneutics was combined with source criticism, connected closely to philology, and seen as the primary method of the humanities. With the Reformation, individual Christians started to read and interpret the Bible on their own, which led to a new focus on interpretation. The Lutheran theologian Johann Conrad Dannhauer (1603–66) coined the word 'Hermeneutics' and used it in the title of a book, *Hermeneutica sacra*, in 1654.

Hermeneutics was later extended to include not only Classic texts and the Bible, but texts from other cultures as well. Today Hermeneutics is also applied to text-like objects such as art, drama, photography and film, and to text-analogues such as speech and non-verbal communication—in fact to any system of codes and sense-making processes (Yanow 2006:15–16). Culture and religion can be seen as 'textual' and as webs of signs which can be analyzed by means of hermeneutical methods. (Ingvild S. G. 2011: 275-276)

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Approach of Muslim Theologians Towards Hermeneutics:

What we have mentioned up to now, was the viewpoint of Western scholars. Now we will analyse the position of this branch of science in the eyes of Muslim scholars, which is the actual purpose of this article to reach to

some point where we can be able to determine the actual advantages and disadvantages of applying Hermeneutics for the interpretation and exegesis of divine books specially the Quran.

By looking thoroughly into this matter we find that on one hand this science gets warm welcome by some Muslim scholars like Amin Al-Khuli of Egypt, Harun Nasution of Indonesia, Fazlur Rahman & Riffat Hasan of Pakistan, Fatima Al-Mernisi of Morocco, Ameena Wadood of South Africa (the author of "Islam & Women" who got fame and publicity by leading Friday Prayer in New York USA) and Ali Mirmoosavi of Iran. Hermeneutic was even considered necessary and demand of time by some of them like Ali Mirmoosavi (2009: 125) who while addressing the issue of freedom of religion posed some questions and wrote: "These questions lead us to Hermeneutics and the possibility of new interpretations. In light of dominant and current interpretations, religious freedom is not consistent with Islam."

On the other hand there are some Muslim scholars who not only oppose Hermeneutics but consider it a threat to pure Arabic and Islamic heritage like Abdul Wahab Al-Maseeri (al-Maseeri Undated: 5: 656) who terms Heretical Hermeneutics as "Jewish Deconstruction" or "Jewish Disruption" (اليهودية التقويضية/اليهودية التفكيكية) and Dr Hasan Al-Shafai who (al-Shafii: Undated) wrote a detailed article on this issue naming "The Required Response to Feminist Reinterpretations of the Qur'an" which reflects the viewpoint of opposing group, the abstract of which is as under :

-He defines Hermeneutics as an old Christian theological term used to understand the religious scripts. And going through historical transformations, this term has been meant for different purposes like:

- As an ideological principle aiming at explanation of theological scripts.
- Used as basis for exegesis of Bible
- Or used as an ideological science and practical art related to explanation of old scripts
- Or as an ideology for understanding of religious, philosophical and literal scripts
- Or as an ideology for understanding of literal scripts only
- Or it is an understanding of the different forms of human existence.

According to Hasan al-Shafaii (al-Shafii: Undated): The theory of Hermeneutics enters into Muslim academic world by the name of Feminist reinterpretation of Islamic divine texts. This movement is an attempt to exegete Quran ignoring the principles of *Tefsir* (exegesis) and Laws of *Taweel* (interpretation).

He calls this movement as Christian and western created on the basis of a hypothesis that Islamic Laws are Male dominant and it is the requirement of modern time to review them from feminist perspective to create equality among man and woman.

This movement was initiated (among the Muslims) in the second half of last century by people specially women who got education in western countries and were impressed by them and they had little opportunity to live in some Muslim country.

And they can be divided into two categories:

a) Moderate:

Those who exegete Quran on their own and refuse those Ahadith of Prophet which they suppose are against the rights of women.

b) Liberal:

Those who refuse the whole of Ahadith of Prophet Peace be upon him and even challenge the Quranic text (some verses) as being divine and their use as an argument/evidence.

Some examples:

-Haroon Nasution (1919) who grew up in Indonesia, did his Bachelors from Egypt and United States of America and finally travelled to Canada and got Doctorate and returned to his country to participate in Pancasila Movement for modernizing the Islamic ideology and Islamic way of life in his country. He got the idea of Hermeneutics from his teacher Toshihiko Izutsu at McGill University.

-Fazlur Rahman (1919-1989) a Pakistani scholar who studied in Canada, the colleague of Haroon Nasution. He also got the theory of Hermeneutics from his teacher Toshihiko Izutsu. He was of the view that there is some part of revelation, which was specific to Prophet SAW. He was perhaps the first one who applied Hermeneutics on Quran.

-Dr. Riffat Hassan, a Pakistani Shia scholar who did her Doctorate from U.K. Her thoughts are based on

Feminist Theology. She applied Hermeneutics to Quran considering that the orthodox way of Quranic exegesis is the reason of giving disrespect to woman in Islamic Sharia. She refused Ahadith of Prophet peace be upon him for the same reason.

-Ameena Wadood born and brought up in South Africa, embraced Islam in 1972, did Masters and Doctorate from USA, taught in International Islamic University Malaysia. She had thoughts same like Riffat Hassan. She does not believe in polygamy and divorce system of Islam and says that the presence of these two in Islamic principles is the result of misunderstanding the Islam and Quran.

-Fatima Al-Mernisi of Morocco: Did Bachelors in political science from Rabat and PhD from USA. Wrote many books about Hijab, Islam & democracy, certain aspects of Islamic history, Islam & woman etc. Won International Award in 2003 for her work in Feminist Movement. She was impressed by the works of Professor Arkoun, 'Abd al-Hadi 'Abd al-Rahman who doubted the originality and the authenticity of current Quran claiming that the context of real Quran became mixed with the myths and urged upon the recompilation of Quran.

He (Hasan Shafai) considers this movement as threat to Islamic heritage and Arabic Languages as it is based on linguistic studies and urges to avoid the traditional Islamic sciences.

IV. CONCLUSION

To understand the position of Hermeneutics in Islam we have to remember a general principle of Islam that it does not denounce any new invention, idea etc unless it goes against the set rules & regulations of Islam. Similarly if we apply Hermeneutic to any Islamic text keeping the basic principles of Islam intact and derive out some result, which is not against those principles, then there is no harm to benefit from this important branch of science.

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