238616 - He is asking about reinterpreting the Qur’an and Sunnah to suit the age

the question

These days a lot of people say:
"We dont ride horses and camels anymore, we have trains and cars now. We watch TV, have cellphones and high tech health care. So why cant we interpret Quran and Ahadith to fit in todays society?"
How does a Muslim reply to this

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

The call to interpret the Holy Qur’an and the Prophet’s Sunnah in a manner that is appropriate for our modern era may be right or it may be wrong. In other words, it may be understood in a proper way or in a wrong way, depending on what the questioner intends thereby, and depending on whether its aims and goals are genuine (Islamic) or are alien ideas.

If the aim is to reinterpret what is proven and clear (of Islamic beliefs and principles) in such a way as to make them drift from the original, definitive meaning, and twist the meanings and objectives of these principles in such a way as to suit the people’s changing whims and desires, thoughts and ideas, then in that case the purpose behind it (reinterpreting basic Islamic beliefs and principles) is undoubtedly wrong. That approach will never stop at cancelling the Qur’anic text and concealing its light only; rather it will go beyond that to cancelling the reason through which we think and understand what we read and hear.

That is because language, which is something common to all people and which may vary from one region to another, is a trustworthy transmitter of goals and meanings, and is the basic means of communication between people. This is something clear in people’s minds and hearts. So whoever

hears praise from some person, or lampooning, or criticism, or a command or prohibition, in a clear statement, with a clear meaning, then it makes no sense to understand it as the opposite of the meaning indicated by the language and to change its meaning in a manner that is appropriate to his environment, as he claims. So he understands praise as criticism, a command as a prohibition, a true report as something imaginary, and so on, for that interpretation will lead to real confusion and loss.

Why do such people want to interpret the Qur'an and Sunnah in such a manner, when they know that the basic objectives of the Qur'an are stated in clear texts, and cannot be undermined by interpretations that are based on illusions, and cannot be changed by the interpretations of those who have ulterior motives?

Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

"And thus have We sent it (the Qur'an) down to be a judgement of authority in Arabic. Were you (O Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)) to follow their (vain) desires after the knowledge which has come to you, then you will not have any Walee (protector) or defender against Allah"

[ar-Ra'd 13:37]

"And indeed We have put forth for men, in this Qur'an every kind of similitude in order that they may remember.

An Arabic Qur'an, without any crookedness (therein) in order that they may avoid all evil which Allah has ordered them to avoid, fear Him and keep their duty to Him"

[az-Zumar 37:27, 28].

The knowledge and guidance with which the Qur'an and Sunnah were sent down is guidance that is based on fundamental principles and sublime goals, that enable man to learn about the reason for his existence and the purpose of his creation, and the nature of his relationship with his Creator, may He be glorified and exalted, and what will happen after death of the resurrection and

reckoning; it explains to people the path of virtue, good manners and noble values. Moreover it is based on the objectives of sharee'ah, which aim at protecting people's essential and fundamental needs. In the Qur'an and Sunnah we also find stories of the Messengers and Prophets who carried the torch of light throughout human history, and examples of the sacrifices that they made, and what they had to endure of suffering and persecution at the hands of their nations and peoples, so that these stories might offer lessons for all subsequent generations, in order that humanity will not forget the purpose of their existence, which may be summed up in the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

"Who has created death and life, that He may test you which of you is best in deed. And He is the All-Mighty, the Oft-Forgiving"

[al-Mulk 67:2].

It is the right of all people to question in this regard what would be changed of these great basic principles with the change of time and place.

How can it be possible to turn around these holistic objectives to suit our time and present, when they are – in their content and wording, and in their nature – fixed and original values that are not subject to change with changes in time, place and circumstances. Rather these objectives are well-established in the messages of all the Messengers and Prophets, and will remain so until Allah inherits the earth and all who are on it.

What this (the call to reinterpret the religious texts) implies is that the Islamic texts, and the commands and prohibitions they contain, were only addressed to the people who lived at the time when the revelation was sent down, or whose situation is similar to that of those among whom the Qur'an was revealed. As for those who came after them and lived in a world different from theirs, these Islamic texts are not applicable to them.

When people's circumstances and way of life in general change – as is the case with people nowadays – then (as this call implies) these rulings that are included in the Islamic texts are not applicable to them, whether in terms of commands or prohibitions, and (it implies that) they may

interpret the texts in a manner other than the original meaning, and live their lives accordingly, and regard this new interpretation as the correct understanding of the religion in their case, just as the original interpretation represented the correct understanding of the religion in the case of those who were addressed at the time of revelation.

One of those who have this mentality said: The Qur'anic attitude towards women was an attitude that was connected to a particular era, and these rules and regulations were appropriate for a particular era. It is very possible that such rulings and regulations may not be suitable to be applied in the era in which we live. [Hiwaar hawla Qadaayaa Islamiyyah, by Iqbaal Barakah, p. 102].

Another one said: We know that the ancient religious texts were not disconnected from the ancient societies, and that the system of rule, the status of women, man's rights and duties, and the relationship between religion and political authority in these texts is an expression of the reality of ancient societies, that no longer exists and there is no longer any need for it.

Some of them think that the rules and regulations that have to do with worship and business dealings were dictated by the simple environment of the Hijaz at the time of the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), and they are not connected to any other environment. [Islam Bayna ar-Risaalah wa't-Taareekh by 'Abd al-Majeed ash-Sharafi, p. 61]. So man today is not obliged to adhere to these rules and regulations, as a result of the new circumstances he is living in, and when the Qur'an addresses people ("O people…"), what is meant by the people here is the first community that surrounded the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and that heard the Qur'an from his lips for the first time. [al-Fikr al-Usooli by Arkoon, p. 30].

One of them said: Similarly, it is appropriate here to re-examine some Islamic rules and regulations that were appropriate at that time, but we cannot imagine implementing them nowadays, after the development of international political thought, foremost among which is what is known as fiqh ahl adh-dhimmah (jurisprudence regarding non-Muslims living under Muslim rule)…. There is no way to implement this chapter of fiqh which was produced in particular circumstances in the past.

He also demands re-examination of some economic shar'i rules and regulations that were introduced in response to a social reality that is completely different from our contemporary reality, foremost among which is that which has to do with bank dealings that form the basis of contemporary economics, such as returns on capital that is loaned, where the aim of prohibiting such returns at that time was to protect the weak and needy, lest the need for money to buy their daily food be exploited, and thus debts would accumulate and the lender would end up seizing their houses and fields.

Something similar may be said about the hadd punishments which were dictated by the circumstances of society at that time, as society at that time was primitive and there was no state or government to ensure safety and security; rather people at that time would pounce on one another for revenge. Therefore establishing the hadd punishments was the least evil and the least harmful of options, because even though they were barbaric, they offered protection to the society of that era from that which was worse, more violent and more barbaric. [Al-Islam wa'l-Hurriyyah al-Iltibaas at-Taareekhi, by Muhammad ash-Sharafi, p. 89].

The hijab is no longer appropriate in the modern era, according to their claim, and it is not befitting to the status and freedom that women have attained, as they are now involved in all fields of public life, such as schools, universities, factories, management and business. Indeed, even acts of worship are subject to change in the modern era, because the way in which the Muslims used to worship at the time when the Qur'an was revealed is not binding upon those who come after them, if their life circumstances change. Rather they can select of these acts of worship those that are appropriate to their circumstances.

if – for example – the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) used to perform his prayers in a certain way, that should not mean that the Muslims in all places, times and circumstances are obliged to adhere to this method. [al-Islam bayna ar-Risaalah wa't-Taareekh by Muhammad ash-Sharafi, p. 62-63].

Based on this understanding, the conclusion will be that there is no fixed meaning to the Islamic texts, so what the people of a particular era understand as being required of them may become

something that is not required for others, and what they understand to be not required of them may be understood by others as being required, as a result of changes in cultures from one time to another. [an-Nass, as-Sultah, al-Haqeeqah, by Nasr Haamid Abu Zayd, p. 139].

The reason for this misguided approach is because they view the texts of the Qur'an and Sunnah as texts written by humans that are to be dealt with like any other texts; therefore they may be subjected to what other texts are subjected to, and may be examined in the light of history and the changes and developments that affect societies!?

Therefore Nasr Haamid Abu Zayd said: The Qur'anic text – even though it is a divine text – does not go beyond being a text; therefore it should be subject to the rules of literary criticism, like any other literary text. [Mafhoom an-Nass: Diraasah fi 'Uloom al-Qur'an, by Nasr Abu Zayd, p. 24].

Arkoon said: The Qur'an is no more than one text among others, and is the same in terms of complexity and the rich and powerful meanings that it contains, like the Torah, Gospel, and Buddhist and Hindu scriptures. Each of these fundamental texts was subject to various interpretations at different times of history, and may be subject to further interpretation in the future. [al-Fikr al-Usooli by Muhammad Arkoon, p. 36].

This is clearly a specious argument. How could you equate the Book of Allah with these distorted books or those that were written by humans? How can you compare the words of the Lord of the Worlds, Who has knowledge of what was and what shall be, with the words of humans who have but little knowledge? The words of Allah cannot be limited and restricted to a particular time, because Allah revealed it to be a constitution and guidance for all people in every time and place, and He knows what is best for His slaves and what is appropriate for them in all times and circumstances; nothing is hidden from Him, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing. We say to these people (interpretation of the meaning): "Do you know better or does Allah?" [al-Baqarah 2:140]. End quote from Bid'at I'aadah Fahm an-Nass, by Shaykh al-Munajjid (p. 51-56).

But if what is meant by his question is understanding new developments in the light of Islamic teachings by applying the texts of revelation to these developments in our own time, and trying to

examine these new developments, whether minor or major, in the light of the Islamic texts and in a manner that serves the objectives and fundamentals of the Qur'an and Sunnah, and in a manner that respects the basic principles of Islam in general, and emphasises the importance of adhering to the commands and prohibitions of sharee'ah, whilst taking into account the changes in time, place and circumstances in issues that are subject to ijtihad and the weighing up of pros and cons, where there is no specific text concerning these issues, then that should be done in a manner that is based on proper understanding of the spirit of Islam and its core message, in such a way as to deal with the concerns of modern man and enable him to adhere to the rules and regulations prescribed by Allah for His slaves. This is a sound aim that we should all strive for, and it is approved by all scholars, who have all striven to achieve it in all times and eras.

The scholars discussed – for example – the value of truthfulness and sincerity, and how that may be achieved and applied within the variables of their societies, and how belief in the unseen and in the resurrection and life after death may present an integrated framework for dealing with the concerns of our time and the troubles that people are facing, and the impact that this belief may have in achieving justice in the rules and regulations that govern people's lives, if their constitutions and systems of law were based on the principles of justice and mercy and the objectives of the last message to humanity, namely the message of Islam. There are many similar examples and details that we could discuss, with no end. All of these are noble aims and a sound approach, and we call for and support all of it, as the teachings of Islam themselves call for it and support it, because the teachings of Islam include factors that make it suitable for every time and place, and qualify it to give answers for new developments throughout the ages, helping the scholars to understand the changing social dynamics and to avoid being frozen in some traditional mould. This is a matter the reality of which cannot be understood except by one who understands the sciences of usool al-fiqh (basic principles of Islamic jurisprudence), qawaa'id at-tafseer (foundations of Qur'anic exegesis) and the philosophy of 'aqeedat al-Islam (Islamic doctrine).

This type of reinterpretation should be subject to many guidelines, as the scholars, mufassireen and fuqaha' are well aware, among the most important of which are the following:

1. Adhering to scholarly consensus, for whatever the scholars agree upon is constant and cannot be changed or altered; whatever the scholars differed about may be subject to re-examination and review, which gives us space for renewal.

2. Adhering to the rules of the Arabic language with regard to the meaning of individual words and understanding the context of those words as they were understood by the first generation, in whose language the Qur'an was revealed, and avoiding any interpretation that is contrary to the guidelines on the language and sound understanding of the Arabic language.

3. Examining all the shar'i evidence that helps us to understand a particular text and interpreting the Qur'an in the light of the Qur'an itself and in the light of the Prophet's Sunnah and the views of the Sahaabah and Taabi'een, for the sources of sharee'ah – as explained by the scholars of usool – are several; the mufassir must examine them and understand them so that he may develop a sound understanding and so that his conclusion will be based on sound methodology, otherwise his conclusion may not be sound and correct.

4. One of the most important guidelines in this type of reinterpretation is that those who take on this task must be qualified people who combine knowledge with fear of Allah, and people whom the people of knowledge testify are well-versed in knowledge and are specialists who are well-versed in the religious texts and the objectives of sharee'ah, in addition to having a sound religious commitment, piety and fear of Allah, may He be glorified. Thus the way will be blocked to those who want to violate the sanctity of the Holy Qur'an (by misinterpreting it), those who claim to have knowledge but are ignorant, and pretend to possess what they do not have of knowledge of religious texts and wisdom.

And Allah knows best.