

Session 40: Religious Knowledge: Fiction or True Reflection?

The status of realistic and unrealistic languages

During the last session, we discussed the notion of non-absoluteness of opinions and views of individuals and the existence of various interpretations in religion. In stating the origin of the notion of relativity of views, opinions and interpretations, we said that there are three perspectives and theories on the relativity of knowledge. In this session, we shall deal with two other sources of the notion, viz. “the language of religion” and “hermeneutics” or the science of textual interpretation, which is nowadays considered as one of the important fields of knowledge with which specific departments in prestigious universities in the world are engaged. In this session, we shall tackle these two subjects.

The language of religion and its connection with the theory of non-absoluteness of individuals’ opinions and understanding of religion stemmed from discussions held during the recent centuries in Europe, in the philosophy of religion and new theology on language, asking—*Is the language of religion real, or is it symbolic, coded and fictional?*

Let us elaborate: In understanding each other—whether in verbal, casual and simple conversations or academic and philosophical conversations—human beings sometimes use expressions with the aim of drawing attention towards an objective reality, and at other times, to subjective realities.

For instance, when a person says, “The conference room is bright,” his intention in making this predicative statement and specific literary compound is to draw the attention of the listener to the fact that there is no need for the lights to be switched on. It is realistic language and speaks about objective realities. Similar language is used in mathematics, logic and philosophy. Of course, in exact sciences and empirical sciences this language is utilized with some modifications. For this reason, it is said that the language of science and philosophy is realistic and speaks about objective or subjective realities.

Yet, there are also times when the use of linguistic expressions and compositions is not meant to

present objective or subjective realities. The expressions and compositions are the same, but the speaker or writer does not want to show reality through them. An example is the language of legend and fiction which never intends to present reality. Thus, it is said that such language is not realistic. Once we read story books like *Kalilah wa Dimnah*¹ we can see that sentences and expressions are organized in such a way that they never speak of objective reality.

If ever stories of animals in the jungle—the relationship between the lion and the wolf, and the leopard and the fox—are related, the aim of the writer is not to make us understand that there are really such events and animal conversations. His aim instead is to indirectly impart to us certain messages and subjects through the stories and languages of animals. Therefore, the language of fiction and legend is an example of unrealistic language.

Another example of the unrealistic languages is the symbolic or coded language which is used in many fields of science. It is also used in some branches of social sciences and humanities to express certain realities. Geometrical and mathematical models and formulas as well as algebraic symbols like x and y are vivid examples.

Obviously, these symbols, formulas and models do not speak of object realities out there and they are only codes for a set of scientific realities. The language of poetry is also an example of unrealistic language. When a poet talks about wine, minstrel and cupbearer, he does not want to talk about real wine, minstrel and cupbearer. Instead, the purpose of the poet or mystic in using the language of poetry which is a metaphorical language is to express certain subjects existing in his mind.

The motive of introducing the language of religion as symbolic and unrealistic

Some have said that religion has its own distinctive language and is among unrealistic languages. Initially, the discussion on religion took place in Europe among the followers of Judeo-Christian religious narratives. As such, the scholars of religion and thinkers presented their views on the accounts mentioned in the Judeo-Christian scripture. They said that the Bible with its various accounts does not want to acquaint us with objective realities. Its language is fictional and symbolic, therefore, unrealistic.

They generally divide the languages into two, viz. realistic and unrealistic languages. They include the language of religion in the group of unrealistic languages that do not speak about objective truths and realities. The reason behind the promotion of this notion was that after the Industrial Revolution in Europe, the increasing scientific discoveries, and the advancement of new hypotheses on the planet and the state of motion of the sun, earth and other planets by Kepler, Copernicus and Galileo, Western scientists found that scientific narratives were inconsistent with the narratives recorded in Judeo-Christian scripture, i.e. the Old and New Testaments.

They realized that the acceptance of scientific or astronomical views and theories would render some

religious narratives false and far from reality, thus striking a blow to the edifice of Judeo-Christian faith. Once the subjects of the Old and New Testaments were found to be incorrect, baseless and groundless, the foundations of the two faiths would be weakened, especially Christianity which was one of the religions in the world with the largest following.

After the Renaissance, they tried hard to maintain the credibility of the Bible and keep the foundation of the Judeo-Christian faith. The product of their efforts was as follows: Religious narratives and subjects mentioned in the Bible would become incompatible with scientific achievements and new scientific theories if the language of religion was regarded as realistic language expressing actual or objective realities and truths.

But if the language of religion was placed among unrealistic languages—like that of poetry, mysticism and fiction—which never intended to speak about objective realities out there, and the narratives in the Bible—like fiction and legend—were compiled for specific purposes and not supposed to identify objective scientific realities, no incompatibility and conflict of any sort between religious narratives and scientific narratives or objective realities would ever emerge. The implication of this view was that subjects about God, revelation, Resurrection, paradise, hell, and other narratives of the Bible were merely for the guidance of people, to discern the good and identify bad traits and beliefs.

Consequently, through discernment and awareness the believers had to perform good deeds and shun evil deeds. They were not supposed to tell lies, backbite, and oppress others. If it was said that anyone who oppressed others would be chastised and tortured in the hereafter, it actually embodied only the evil and wickedness of oppression and did not indicate that heaven and hell really existed in the hereafter. Therefore, there was no objective reality present in religious narratives.

In the common interpretation of the Bible, religious narratives indicate and represent actual and objective realities, but in scholarly and academic interpretations, they are meant to instruct people, encourage them to do good and pleasant deeds and shun evil deeds, and do not have any message beyond this. Even in their mythological interpretation of religion, God does not actually exist, and if ever it is mentioned in the Bible that God created the universe and revealed the truth to the apostles (‘a), it only portrays a fictitious and mythological image of God; for, in fact, according to them—God forbid—there is no god; neither is there any heaven, hell or revelation.

They have shrewdly compiled these fictitious images in their fictitious and mythological writings so as to encourage the people to do good and pleasant deeds and keep human values; strive to live honorably in this world and not annoy and disturb others. Yet, *the Bible, like the Kalilah wa Dimnah, is nothing but fiction*. For example, in ancient Greece and other old civilizations the people had gods and mythologies. It is even mentioned in some mythologies and fictitious stories that gods and goddesses married each other; sometimes they would befriend each other and at times quarrel. The scriptures and religious narratives of other religions, such as the Old and New Testaments, only portray to us fictitious images without any objective reality.

As we have said, this theory was advanced in order to justify the unrealistic narratives in the Old and New Testaments and salvage Judaism and Christianity from the brink of definite collapse and extinction. It gradually earned wide acceptance among the believers and religious people in the West and became the best way of justifying the Bible. In contrast, the Jews and Christians before the Renaissance used to recognize all religious narratives as true and real.

When they found these narratives incompatible with new scientific discoveries and theories during the Middle Ages, they threatened, terrified and convicted scientists whose views were incompatible with their religious tenets. In fact, they executed and burned alive some of them. They forced other scientists like Galileo to repent and recant their scientific views.

Westernized intellectuals, the promoters of the theory of relativity of religion

In this manner, the theory which holds that the language of religion never endeavors to state actual and objective truths and realities and has only a symbolic and fictitious structure was initially advanced in the West. However, with the expansion of relations between Europe and the Eastern countries, scientific interactions and sending of students to the West, this theory gradually found its way into the East. The xenomaniacs who were infatuated with Western culture, and some students who were sent to Europe for higher studies were infatuated and enamored by Western culture, and considered the study of and familiarity with European culture and language as one of their greatest achievements and took pride in learning their atheistic theories and transferring them to the Muslim world as the best, scientific and most compatible theories.

They said: *“Just as in the West the followers of the Old and New Testaments have placed the language of religion in the group of unrealistic, fictitious and symbolic languages which never indicate objective realities and truths, the language of the Qur’an is also a fictitious language which never intends to state any objective reality.”*

In the Muslim world, some Arab countries which are unfamiliar with the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) embraced this theory. Some Arab writers wrote books about it and cited bases and so-called evidence from the Qur’an in order to support their claims. Whenever they came across metaphorical [mutashabih] verses of the Qur’an whose real meanings were beyond their comprehension and whose outward purport, they thought, was incompatible with science, they embarked on a fictitious and symbolic interpretation of the Qur’an and its metaphorical verses as did the followers of the Old and New Testaments.

By doing so, they thought that they could eliminate the incompatibility of those religious narratives with scientific findings. For the past three decades particularly during recent years, some Western educated scholars have made extensive efforts to promote this Western theory in our society and present the language of the Qur’an as fictitious and mythological. To this end, they have presented a symbolic

interpretation of some verses of the Qur'an.

Eclectic understanding of the story of Habil and Qabil

Around 30 years ago, one of those Marxist-leaning and eclectic individuals presented in his lecture a symbolic interpretation of the story of Habil and Qabil mentioned in the Qur'an. The story as narrated in the Qur'an is as follows:

وَاتْلُ عَلَيْهِمْ نَبَأَ ابْنَيْ آدَمَ بِالْحَقِّ إِذْ قَرَّبَا قُرْبَانًا فَتُقْبِلَ مِنْ أَحَدِهِمَا وَلَمْ يُتَقَبَلْ مِنَ الْآخَرِ قَالَ لَأَقْتُلَنَّكَ قَالَ إِنَّمَا يَتَقَبَّلُ اللَّهُ ﴿١﴾
﴿٢﴾ مِنَ الْمُتَّقِينَ

“Relate to them truly the account of Adam’s two sons. When the two of them offered an offering, it was accepted from one of them and not accepted from the other. [One of them] said, ‘Surely I will kill you.’ [The other one] said, ‘Allah accepts only from the God-wary.’”²

As can be deduced from traditions, the sons of Hadhrat Adam (‘a), Qabil (Cain) and Habil (Abel), were supposed to make an offering to God. Habil offered a sheep for sacrifice while Qabil offered some grain. The offering of the former was accepted by God but that of the latter was not accepted. As such, Qabil became jealous and envious of his brother Habil to the extent that he murdered him. But he regretted what he had done. As he did not know what to do with the corpse of his brother, God sent a crow to teach him how to bury the dead body:

فَبَعَثَ اللَّهُ غُرَابًا يَبْحَثُ فِي الْأَرْضِ لِيُرِيَهُ كَيْفَ يُوَارِي سَوْءَةَ أَخِيهِ قَالَ يَا وَيْلَتَا أَعَجَزْتُ أَنْ أَكُونَ مِثْلَ هَذَا الْغُرَابِ ﴿١﴾
﴿٢﴾ فَأُوَارِي سَوْءَةَ أَخِي فَأَصْبَحَ مِنَ النَّادِمِينَ

“Then Allah sent a crow, exploring in the ground, to show him how to bury the corpse of his brother. He said, ‘Woe to me! Am I unable to be [even] like this crow and bury my brother’s corpse?’ Thus he became regretful.”³

When a crow, sent by God, started digging the ground in search of food in front of Qabil, the eldest son of Hadhrat Adam (‘a) who did not realize till then how he could dig the soil and bury a corpse, learned it from a crow and buried his brother’s corpse.

In his symbolic interpretation of this story, the said writer and speaker said that Habil is the symbol of the hardworking class of workers and peasants, the product of whose unrelenting sweat and toil is insignificant. Since God supports and inclines toward this class, He accepted his humble pasture product offering. Meanwhile, Qabil is the symbol of capitalists and when he offered his produce, God rejected his offering because God is against capitalists.

The speaker concluded that Habil and Qabil and their respective offerings did not exist in reality as they only represent and symbolize the classes of proletariats and capitalists and the struggle between the two classes. (During the time of Hadhrat Adam (‘a) when there was no other person other than him, his wife and two sons, how could the classes of the proletariats and the capitalists have existed and what was the meaning of class-based interpretation at that time? In any case, due to the prevalence of Marxist thought 30 years ago and the multitude of supporters of atheistic schools of thought, these symbolic interpretations earned wide acceptance.)

The said speaker presented a symbolic interpretation of Habil and Qabil but he did not tell what the raven symbolized. One of his students discovered this secret and in his article, he introduced the black raven as the symbol of *akhunds* who are preoccupied with *rawdhaikhani*⁴ and lamentation, propagators of wickedness and misfortune from pulpits, busy supporting feudal lords and capitalists. By discovering this secret, he allegedly completed the so-called third side of the triad of gold [zar], force [zur] and deceit [tazwir]. Interestingly, in narrating this story, God says: “*Relate to them truly the account of Adam’s two sons.*” That is, “Relate to the people the truth of this real event.” It is as if God predicts that one day there will be an unrealistic and erroneous interpretation of this event in history, and emphasizes that no distortion be made and the truth related to the people.

Yes, during recent decades, especially nowadays, symbolic, allegorical and fictitious interpretations of the Qur’an have increased and been propagated to such an extent that some of those who have studied Islam and are even wearing clerical garbs are hymning such melodies and claim that the language of the Qur’an is not realistic and it is not true that the Qur’anic verses show us objective and immutable realities.

Accordingly, in interpreting Qur’anic verses, we do not have decisive and convincing bases, fixed frameworks, and scientifically accurate criteria with which we can claim that so-and-so verse can have only one interpretation and explanation and all other interpretations are wrong. Rather, everyone can have a symbolic and allegorical interpretation of Qur’anic verses according to his ideas, presumptions and thoughts even if his interpretation is totally incompatible with other interpretations!

The presentation of an ambiguous image of religion

In order to be familiar with the theory of symbolism of religious narratives including the Qur’anic narratives and to enhance our minds, let me tell you that displayed in modern arts museums are tabloids with ambiguous geometrical forms that do not clearly show images of certain things, and everyone has his own interpretation and perception of them according to his literary talent, and introduces them as symbols of certain things.

Perhaps, the drawers of those tabloids might be unaware of others’ interpretations and perceptions of those drawings. Similarly, in some psychological tests some ink are spread on a sheet of paper and every patient is asked what object he can see on the paper. After a bit of thinking and conceiving the

specific shapes on the paper which he thinks is the form of a certain object, each of the patients offers his own interpretation, saying, for example, that a certain portion of the formed shape shows the hair of a woman and another portion shows her hands, and finally, he introduces the ambiguous form and image as a woman's portrait.

This is in spite of the fact that the one who scattered the small pieces of paper in different shapes on a sheet of paper has not intended to make a specific form or image at all and he did not want to do so consciously and logically. He just spread some ink on a sheet of paper, and as a result, an ambiguous image which is subject to various interpretations is formed.

They claim that the language of the Qur'an is not realistic and its narratives are related so that anyone can understand and comprehend something from it according to his own discernment. One should not treat as absolute his understanding and perception of the Qur'an and say that his interpretation of the Qur'an is definitely correct and that of others is wrong.

Likewise, if a person happens to deal with modern arts and has an interpretation of them, he can not say that his interpretation is definitely correct and that of another is wrong because he has a specific interpretation and understanding of them according to his ideas and specific conditions. Others also have their distinct interpretation and understanding according to their respective ideas and specific social conditions. Some interpretations cannot be regarded as correct and others as wrong. In essence, correctness or incorrectness in such cases is not something real and fixed and it cannot be said that one person's understanding is correct and another's wrong!

Is the Qur'an—God forbid—like modern arts which anyone can interpret according to his understanding?

Most of those who have such understanding of the heavenly scriptures do not believe in God and divine revelation, and if ever they talk about religion, it is only meant to deceive others. Then, the advocates of the theory of various interpretations and readings of heavenly scriptures say: Assuming that there is God who has sent divine revelation and His Apostle has heard it correctly—which is of course, debatable—yet, the Apostle is human and his understanding is not error free. So, he might not have understood the words of God correctly.

Besides, if we accept that the Apostle has not erred in receiving and understanding the verses of the Qur'an, one cannot present a definite way of interpreting Qur'anic verses on the basis of which an interpretation can be treated as correct and definite and other interpretations as wrong. Instead, anyone can have an interpretation and understanding of the Qur'an and this interpretation and understanding is credible and authentic for him and no one can reject it. In dealing with the Holy Scripture, we are exactly like those who have undergone psychological tests, shown an ambiguous image and asked to state their interpretation of it. Then, everyone can have his own interpretation according to his mental setup!

Comparing the Qur'an with the language of poetry as a justification of pluralist interpretations

Another example that can be cited to explain the concept of religious language to those who believe in the relativity of knowledge is the difference in the interpretation of mystical and gnostical poetry, particularly the *ghazals*⁵ of Hafiz.⁶ One of the books that can be found in most Iranian homes is the *Diwan* (collection of poetry) of Hafiz.

According to an ancient tradition, people consult the book to tell their fortunes. When a person's loved one travels and is missed and he wants to know his or her condition, he takes a copy of the *Diwan* and consults it. He interprets the first *ghazal* of the page he opens in such a manner that it tells him that his loved one, who is traveling, is in good condition and will be back soon. Another person who has a patient also consults the book interprets the same *ghazal* and finds that his patient will get well.

However, a third person might have an unpleasant interpretation of the same according to his mental setup. This is because the mystical and gnostical *ghazal* poems of Hafiz were never meant for unveiling fortunes and satisfying such needs of the people. None of his *ghazals* is intended to foretell that a patient will get well, or a traveler return, or a wish granted. In his mystical environment, Hafiz recited poetry, and since then, everyone is interpreting it according to his mental setup—an interpretation which usually differs from the interpretations of others as well as the intention of the poet. In the words of Mawlana,⁷

هر کس از ظنّ خود شد یار من از درون من نجست اسرار من

Anyone who becomes my friend in his mind

Will not find the secrets within me.

They say that the Qur'an has such a structure. Like the ghazals of Hafiz, it is subject to different and even contradictory interpretations and understandings. According to his presumptions and mindset, anyone can have his own interpretation and understanding of its verses and no one has the right to treat his own understanding and interpretation as absolute.

Most probably the root and basis of the notion that one must not treat his own understanding, view and opinion of religion as absolute is the theory that since the language of religion belongs to the group of symbolic and unrealistic languages it is fictitious and mythical, so, everyone has the right to have his own interpretation of religious narratives according to his mindset but no one has the right to consider his interpretation as the only correct and authentic one and reject other interpretations!

In case this atheistic view is widely promoted and propagated and people really believe that the Qur'an

is like the Diwan of Hafiz which is subject to various interpretations, will the Qur'an remain the book of guidance? Will it remain the same book for the propagation of whose message the Apostle (s), the pure Imams (may Allah's blessings be upon them all) risked their lives, and all the martyrs offered their lives? If everyone is supposed to have his own interpretation of the Qur'an which is a proof for himself, why is there great emphasis on the correct interpretation of Qur'anic verses and individuals warned of speculative interpretation [tafsir bi 'r-ra'y], and the reproach and rebuke against innovation [bid'ah] in religion? If the interpretation and understanding of the Qur'an is flexible and everyone can have his own understanding of the Qur'an, why did we stage a revolution and topple the Shah's regime?

The Shah also used to regard his actions and ideas as consistent with his understanding and knowledge of religion and the Qur'an, even claiming that "What I say is more compatible with the spirit of religion than what the akhunds say!" He used to claim, "I know and understand the Qur'an better than the akhunds do. They talk against me for no reason, and urge the people to chant a slogan against me!" Hence, the Shah also had his own interpretation of religion and no one was supposed to consider it as wrong!

According to this theory, if a person claims that his interpretation of religion is that God has no objective and actual existence and the edifice of religion is not essentially a belief in God, no one is supposed to protest against him because he has expressed his interpretation and religion can accommodate it just as the poems of Hafiz can accommodate diverse interpretations and understanding. Hafiz says, for example:

اگر غم لشکر انگیزد که خون عاشقان ریزد
من و ساقی به هم تازیم و بنیادش بر اندازیم

If sorrow's soldiers incite to shed lovers' blood tonight

With beloved I will unite and his foundations malign

According to his mindset, what a person understands from this poem is that his patient will get well or his wish will be fulfilled. For example, he says: "The 'wine and cupbearer' means the doctor and patient and 'we shall topple its foundation' means that we shall uproot the cause of sickness. It is possible that another person who consults the *Diwan* for his wish and desire has a totally different interpretation.

If Islam can tolerate the interpretation that God does not exist at all and there is no proof to prove His existence, nothing in Islam will be left. If everyone is permitted to have an independent interpretation of Islam and all interpretations are considered respectable, defending religion, and sensitivity to religious values and beliefs will become baseless and meaningless. All people must show tolerance for the ideas and actions of others, and not criticize their views and opinions.

Everyone is bound to act upon his understanding of religion. Now, if his interpretation is that God is the

One and Only, he has obligations, and if his interpretation is that there are thousands of gods, he has different obligations. Since the understanding of every person is basically a proof for himself, there must be no discord and all must live together in total peace, harmony and sincerity and not react negatively to each other's ideas and views!

For this reason, it is said that understanding of religion is subjective and indefinite, and one must not treat his opinion and view as absolute. The pristine Islamic or Qur'anic belief cannot tolerate this corrupt theory and such a view is essentially repugnant to religion. We can prove rationally that God's wisdom and grace demands that He guides His servants along a single objective and absolute truth. In line with this, God has revealed the Qur'an as a message, and guide for all humanity and a cure for spiritual diseases. Based on what we have learned from the school of the Apostle (s) and the Imams ('a), this Qur'an has only one interpretation or reading and that is the interpretation or reading of the Apostle (s) and the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) and only the authentic and correct view is that which emanates from the limpid fountain of their knowledge.

This interpretation is incompatible with other interpretations of religion and regards them as false. It is true that a Martin Luther will possibly emerge in the Muslim world to bring a new religion in which diverse and conflicting interpretations will be justifiable, and all readings portrayed as correct, based on the relativity of knowledge. However, innumerable traditions transmitted from the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) emphasize accuracy and meticulousness in correctly understanding and interpreting the Qur'an and strongly prohibit people from engaging in speculative interpretation.

Scholars of religion insist that people should not attribute to religion their own interpretations. If in certain cases they encounter ambiguous and allegorical passages which cannot be explained through common sense, they must pause and inquire from the *Ahl al-Bayt's* ('a) boundless ocean of knowledge and words of guidance. They can attribute to Islam and God a subject or statement which is only derived from the sayings of God, the text of the Qur'an, and the sayings of the Apostle (s) and pure Imams ('a).

The plurality of interpretations and trends of knowledge in hermeneutics

The other source of the notion of multiplicity of interpretations and the non-absoluteness of views and opinions is *hermeneutics or the theory of textual interpretation*. Today, this field of study is recognized as one of the disciplines in which different scientific groups in the world are busy conducting research. In the West, hermeneutics was initially a branch of exegeses related to Christian scholasticism and metaphysics whose concern was to discover, investigate and interpret the spiritual meaning and truth of the Bible.

Then, it gained a broader meaning and began to refer to the skill of interpreting and understanding the importance of human ideas, statements, actions, and institutions. Under the latter definition,

hermeneutics was drawn from the realm of theology to the realm of philosophy, and it refers to a branch of study whose concerns are the distinct methods of studying human sciences and humanities.

The theories advanced in this science say that words are essentially inadequate and insufficient in conveying the essence of the speaker's message and in transferring it to others, and can never bring the reader to the environment where the writer is located and be influenced by the presented ideas. So, when a person uses certain words to impart a concept to another person, the listener cannot comprehend the essence of the speaker's message.

For example, every person has many feelings like love, affection, anger, aversion, astonishment, and surprise. If he sees a surprising scene and he wants to express his feeling of surprise to another person, his addressee will only be informed that he has been surprised, but will never comprehend the essential quality of surprise and astonishment experienced by the speaker through the words used by the speaker. In reality, words only tell about the existence of a feeling but are incapable of imparting the nature and quality of the said feeling. If you tell somebody that you love something, your addressee will understand based on his interpretation of what you expressed that you have a feeling which you called "love". However, he will not get the complete information about your feeling.

Words and the possibility of their arriving at different truths

As stated, one of their claims is that words fall short of expressing the essence of the message. The insufficiency and inadequacy of words in conveying and imparting the intention of the writer is one of the main subjects of the hermeneutics of texts including religious texts. The reply to the abovementioned claim is as follows: If we try to study the historical accounts of various communities for the past millennia and take a glance at the literature of the followers of each religion, sect or faith, we will find that the main factor that contributed to the flourishing of the literature of all communities and religions is "love".

This point shows that love is a common and universal emotional state and feeling which can be understood and felt by all. Now, if a Japanese, Chinese, Arab, or Iranian expressed his love and was understood, how can it be claimed that we do not understand his feeling? How can it be said that we cannot comprehend the love stories of Leyli and Majnun, or Shirin and Farhad, and that we cannot have a correct knowledge and awareness of their love which is the axis of those stories on the pretext that words cannot impart feelings? If the emotional state or feeling like love cannot be comprehended by the speaker or listener, why has it earned prominence in the literature of various communities?

We also acknowledge that man cannot impart to others what he exactly feels, but by means of signs, gestures and instruments, one can understand and comprehend the feelings of others. I cannot impart to another person the exact feeling of fear I experienced, but since fear is a common or universal feeling and the same thing also exists in others, by means of its effects on me and my body, others can understand the fear I experienced.

Of course, if a person does not have a feeling similar to what I felt, he can understand and comprehend my feeling by means of signs, gestures and oral communication. For instance, a person who does not feel any spark of love in himself will not understand and appreciate love stories, but it must be acknowledged that such a person can hardly be called human. At least, there is a certain level of love in every person. Now, once he is aware of this feeling within him and also knows that this emotion can intensify or decrease, he will realize that once this emotional state reaches its peak, it is called “love”. So, it is not true that we can not impart our inner feelings to others, and thus, words are incapable and insufficient in expressing our inner intention and hidden feelings.

The possibility of acquiring absolute and real knowledge of the Qur'an

We equally acknowledge that through conventional and empirical means and common knowledge, one can neither become aware of the essence of metaphysical truths like the nature of angels nor acquire comprehensive and complete knowledge of them. Whatever is said about them is metaphorical and multifaceted. As such, some Qur'anic verses that mention such creatures are metaphorical. There are special means to know these truths which are inaccessible to common people. Individuals can grasp the truth of some of these creatures only by means of self-purification, moral refinement and spiritual elevation.

But the lack of comprehension of some truths mentioned in the Qur'an is not a proof that whatever is mentioned in the Qur'an is like that and beyond our comprehension, and that words and verbal expressions cannot show us the truth and reality and everyone has to interpret and explain those words according to his own mindset. Besides, it is true that we cannot acquire complete knowledge of metaphysical truths like the nature of angels, but their attributes, characteristics and descriptions mentioned in the Qur'an provide us with knowledge about them to some extent.

One of the alleged proofs they cite in substantiating their notion that the language of the Qur'an or the language of religion is fictitious is that metaphors, allusions, similes, and allegories are used in religious scriptures, in general, and in the Qur'an, in particular; for example, this passage in the Qur'an:

﴿...وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّتِي نَقَضَتْ غَزْلَهَا مِنْ بَعْدِ قُوَّةٍ أَنْكَاثًا﴾

“Do not be like her who would undo her yarn, breaking it up after [spinning it to] strength...”⁸

This is one example mentioned in the Qur'an and perhaps that woman did not really exist at all. The same is true in the case of the similitude of donkey mentioned in the Qur'an:

﴿...مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ حُمِّلُوا التَّوْرَةَ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَحْمِلُوهَا كَمَثَلِ الْحِمَارِ يَحْمِلُ أَسْفَارًا﴾

“The example of those who were charged with the Torah, then failed to carry it, is that of an ass carrying books...”⁹

They have said: “As these similes mentioned in the Qur’an seem mythological, how can we know that other subjects of the Qur’an such as God, Resurrection, revelation, heaven, and hell are not fictitious and mythological as well?!”

They place these absurd, baseless and atheistic statements in the form of articles at the disposal of university students throughout the country to inform them that the entire Qur’an is fictitious and mythological! This impudence has even gone to the extent that a student presents in his article a novel understanding of the story of Hadhrat Yusuf (Joseph) (‘a) narrated in the Qur’an. He discusses the story in the form of a fictitious novel and subjects it to literary criticism, expressing some objections to it.

Thereafter, he presents his “literary criticism” of the story of Prophet Joseph (‘a) in a class session in the presence of a professor who also gives his criticism of the story. They finally conclude that the Writer of the “novel” on Prophet Joseph (‘a) is not a literary genius and the novel is not skillfully written!

The relativists’ unfounded claim of Qur’anic language being unreal

Unfortunately, due to the freedom of expression and the press, the open atmosphere in universities and other educational centers, the cultural weakness of our official and unofficial learning institutions, the shortcomings and heedlessness of our educational system policymakers, especially at the higher level of education, there has been extensive sinister propaganda against religious teachings and Islamic values since the victory of the Islamic Revolution.

It has reached a point that the fundamental question of some students is this: Since parables, stories, metaphors, and allusions are mentioned or used in the Qur’an, how can we differentiate them from other Qur’anic subjects? Perhaps, the words such as “Allah,” “revelation” and “Resurrection” are also meant metaphorically. Yes, the outcome of theories like the relativity of knowledge, the symbolic language of religion and the hermeneutic interpretation of religious texts is a torrent-like attack against deep-rooted lofty values and beliefs which have enriched and made magnificent our culture and society in the course of history. The past and present honor of our nation has come into being because of the same pristine Islamic values and beliefs, and this nation has shouldered the responsibility of safeguarding this trust of all the prophets and saints of God.

Our point is that on the pretext that there are parables, metaphors and stories in the Qur’an they claim that the Qur’an does not intend to express truths and realities. It only attempts to present a series of fiction, allusions and metaphors. If there are poems and parables in a book, must this book be recognized as a book of poetry and parable? If a speaker makes a witty remark or cracks a joke in the course of his speech, must his entire speech be treated as full of witticism and jokes?

If a person makes use of a parable, metaphor, simile, allusion, or allegory somewhere in his speech, this does not mean that his speech is entirely an aggregate of figures of speech like simile, metaphor, parable, allusion and allegory. In this case, no writer has any right to make use of a parable, poem, or literary witticism in his scientific book, or else, his book shall be introduced as a book of poetry or witticism. *If God makes use of a parable in the Qur'an—as He does—does it mean that other passages of the Qur'an are poems and fables?*

﴿...وَاتْلُ عَلَيْهِمْ نَبَأَ ابْنَيْ آدَمَ بِالْحَقِّ﴾

“Relate to them truly the account of Adam’s two sons...”¹⁰

And

﴿...وَبِالْحَقِّ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ وَبِالْحَقِّ نَزَلَ﴾

“With the truth did We send it down, and with the truth did it descend...”¹¹?

To prove the credibility of the theory of hermeneutics or the interpretation of texts, they say that throughout history Muslims have embarked on speculative interpretations, and mystics have written books on speculative interpretations. So, it is clear that the Qur'an also has various interpretations. Just as mystics have made speculative interpretations, they also have a right to interpret and speculate even though the outcome of their process is totally different and contradictory to the interpretations of mystics.

Moreover, traditions also mention the existence of interpretations and inner meanings of Qur'anic passages which are in conflict with their outward meanings, and the existence of various interpretations and inner meanings of the Qur'an is a reasonable basis for one to present diverse interpretations and speculations of Qur'anic verses. All can engage in this activity and since it cannot be identified which interpretation is correct and which is wrong, all will have to be considered as credible!

In reply, let me say: “Yes, the Qur'an also points to the existence of allegorical verses [mutashabihat] and the need to interpret them based on definitive verses [muhkamat]. It is also mentioned in traditions that the Qur'an has various inner parts and layers but it does not state that the outward meanings of verses, words and expressions have no validity and do not reveal truths to us.

To say that in addition to the outward meanings of verses and their credibility there are more profound subjects in the Qur'an called inner parts or interpretations of verses is different from claiming that the outward meanings of verses are not credible, and the only interpretations which are credible are based on the mindset of the speculator and a product of his mind. In this manner, multiple, diverse and contradictory interpretations are presented as various interpretations of religion and we are asked to acknowledge them!

Imam ‘Ali’s (‘a) expression of concern over cultural confusion and the distortion of religion

At the end of my discussion, I deem it necessary to refer to the luminous words of the Commander of the Faithful ‘Ali (‘a) about the distortions that took place in religion after the Messenger of Allah (s) and ended in misery and gloom. As we all know, the government of the Commander of the Faithful (‘a) was established 25 years after the passing away of the Holy Prophet (s) and there were still those who had heard the interpretation and the circumstances surrounding the revelation of Qur’anic verses from the Messenger of Allah (s) himself and personally seen the scenes of the revelation of those verses.

Yet, the hypocrites, the enemies, egoists and opportunists introduced distortions in religion that consequently led to deviation from Islam, fratricide and bloodshed among Muslims. Imam ‘Ali (‘a) says:

وَلَكِنَّا إِنَّمَا أَصْبَحْنَا نُقَاتِلُ إِخْوَانَنَا فِي الْإِسْلَامِ عَلَى مَا دَخَلَ فِيهِ مِنَ الزَّيْغِ وَالْأَعْوِجَاجِ، وَالشُّبُهَةِ وَالْتَأْوِيلِ...

“We now had to fight our brethren in Islam because of entry into Islam of misguidance, crookedness, doubts and (wrong) interpretation...”¹²

Similarly, skepticism and deviation, which today has been organized and expressed in scientific ways, had reached such a state that Muslims fought each other during the time of Hadhrat ‘Ali (‘a). During the Battles of Jamal and Nahrawan, due to these deviant interpretations, some people stood against ‘Ali (‘a), the rightful interpreter of the Qur’an at that time, as a result of which many of them were killed.

In Sermon 17 of *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) complained to God of the misguidance and ignorance of the people, thus:

إِلَى اللَّهِ أَشْكُوا مِنْ مَعْشَرٍ يَعِيشُونَ جَهْلًا، وَيَمُوتُونَ ضَلَالًا، لَيْسَ فِيهِمْ سِلْعَةٌ أَبْوَرُ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ إِذَا تُلِيَ حَقَّ تِلَاوَتِهِ، وَلَا سِلْعَةٌ أَنْفَقُ بَيْعًا وَلَا أَغْلَى ثَمَنًا مِنَ الْكِتَابِ إِذَا حُرِّفَ عَنْ مَوَاضِعِهِ، وَلَا عِنْدَهُمْ أَنْكَرُ مِنَ الْمَعْرُوفِ، وَلَا أَعَرَفُ مِنَ الْمُنْكَرِ.

I complain to Allah about persons who live ignorant and die misguided. For them nothing is more worthless than the Qur’an if it is recited as it should be recited, nor anything more valuable than the Qur’an if its verses are removed from their places, nor anything more vicious than virtue, nor more virtuous than vice. ¹³

This complaint of Imam ‘Ali (‘a) came only 25 years after the passing away of the Prophet (s), but deviations and innovations had struck such a blow to religion that at the peak of his isolation the Imam (‘a) raised his hands toward the sky and expressed to God his pain and agony at the heedlessness of people to his words of guidance.

Similar to the above statement, in Sermon 147 Imam 'Ali ('a) says:

وَأِنَّهُ سَيَأْتِي عَلَيْكُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِي زَمَانٌ لَيْسَ فِيهِ شَيْءٌ أَخْفَى مِنَ الْحَقِّ، وَلَا أَظْهَرَ مِنَ الْبَاطِلِ، وَلَا أَكْثَرَ مِنَ الْكَذِبِ عَلَى اللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ، وَلَيْسَ عِنْدَ أَهْلِ ذَلِكَ الزَّمَانِ سِلْعَةٌ أَبْوَرُ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ إِذَا تُلِيَ حَقُّ تِلَاوَتِهِ، وَلَا أَنْفَقَ مِنْهُ إِذَا حُرِفَ عَنْ...مَوَاضِعِهِ، وَلَا فِي الْبِلَادِ شَيْءٌ أَنْكَرَ مِنَ الْمَعْرُوفِ، وَلَا أَعْرَفَ مِنَ الْمُنْكَرِ

Certainly, a time will come upon you after me when nothing will be more concealed than rightfulness, nothing more apparent than wrongfulness and nothing more current than untruth against Allah and His Prophet. For the people of this period nothing will be more valueless than the Qur'an being recited as it ought to be recited, nor anything more valuable than the Qur'an being misplaced from its position. And in the towns nothing will be more hated than virtue, nor anything more acceptable than vice. [14](#)

In continuation, he ('a) says:

فَقَدْ نَبَذَ الْكِتَابَ حَمَلْتُهُ، وَتَنَاسَاهُ حَفَظْتُهُ؛ فَالْكِتَابُ يَوْمَئِذٍ مَنفِيَّانِ طَرِيدَانِ، وَصَاحِبَانِ مُصْطَحِبَانِ فِي طَرِيقٍ وَاحِدٍ لَا يُؤْوِيهِمَا مُوْءٍ؛ فَالْكِتَابُ وَأَهْلُهُ فِي ذَلِكَ الزَّمَانِ فِي النَّاسِ وَلَيْسَا فِيهِمْ، وَمَعَهُمْ وَلَيْسَا مَعَهُمْ! لَأَنَّ الضَّلَالََةَ لَا تُوَافِقُ الْهُدَى، وَإِنْ اجْتَمَعَا، فَاجْتَمَعَ الْقَوْمُ عَلَى الْفُرْقَةِ، وَافْتَرَقُوا عَنِ الْجَمَاعَةِ، كَأَنَّهُمْ أَيْمَةُ الْكِتَابِ وَلَيْسَ الْكِتَابُ إِمَامَهُمْ، فَلَمْ يَبْقَ عِنْدَهُمْ مِنْهُ إِلَّا اسْمُهُ، وَلَا يَعْرِفُونَ إِلَّا خَطَّهُ وَزَبْرَهُ، وَمِنْ قَبْلُ مَا مَثَّلُوا بِالصَّالِحِينَ كُلِّ مَثَلَةٍ، وَسَمَوْا صِدْقَهُمْ عَلَى اللَّهِ فَرِيَةً، وَجَعَلُوا فِي الْحَسَنَةِ الْعُقُوبَةَ السَّيِّئَةِ

The holders of the Book will throw it away and its memorizers will forget it. In those days the Qur'an and its people will be exiled and expelled. They will be companions keeping together on one path, but no one will offer them asylum. Consequently at this time the Qur'an and its people will be among the people but not among them, will be with them but not with them, because misguidance cannot accord with guidance even though they may be together. The people will have united on division and will therefore be cut away from the community, as though they were the leaders of the Qur'an and not the Qur'an their leader. Nothing of it will be left with them except its name, and they will know nothing save its writing and its words. Before that, they will inflict hardships upon the virtuous naming the latter's truthful views about Allah false allegations, and enforcing on virtues the punishments for vice. [15](#)

Then, the Imam ('a) says:

وَأَعْلَمُوا أَنَّكُمْ لَنْ تَعْرِفُوا الرُّشْدَ حَتَّى تَعْرِفُوا الَّذِي تَرَكَهُ، وَلَنْ تَأْخُذُوا بِمِيثَاقِ الْكِتَابِ حَتَّى تَعْرِفُوا الَّذِي نَقَضَهُ، وَلَنْ تَمَسَّكُوا بِهِ حَتَّى تَعْرِفُوا الَّذِي نَبَذَهُ

You should know that you will never know guidance unless you know who has abandoned it; you will never abide by the pledges of the Qur'an unless you know who has broken them, and will never cling to it unless you know who has forsaken it. [16](#)

At the end of the sermon, he (‘a) says:

فَالْتَمِسُوا ذَلِكَ مِنْ عِنْدِ أَهْلِهِ، فَإِنَّهُمْ عَيْشُ الْعِلْمِ، وَمَوْتُ الْجَهْلِ، هُمُ الَّذِينَ يُخْبِرُكُمْ حُكْمَهُمْ عَنْ عِلْمِهِمْ، وَصَمْتُهُمْ عَنْ مَنْطِقِهِمْ، وَظَاهِرُهُمْ عَنْ بَاطِنِهِمْ، لَا يُخَالِفُونَ الدِّينَ وَلَا يَخْتَلِفُونَ فِيهِ، فَهُوَ بَيْنَهُمْ شَاهِدٌ صَادِقٌ، وَصَامِتٌ نَاطِقٌ.

Seek these things from those who own them because they are the life spring of knowledge and death of ignorance. They are the people whose commands will disclose to you their (extent of) knowledge, their silence will disclose their (capacity of) speaking and their outer appearance will disclose their inner self. They do not go against religion, and do not differ from one another about it, while it is among them a truthful witness and a silent speaker. [17](#)

It can be noticed that after giving warnings, in the end the Commander of the Faithful (‘a) asked us to recognize religion only through the way of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) because only their understanding and interpretation of the Qur’an and religion is correct. Other interpretations are false, alien to religion and the Qur’an, brigands along the way of the seekers of truth and the path of Allah, and whose end is nothing but misguidance and misery. Therefore, according to the Imam (‘a) it is not correct for anyone to have his own interpretation and understanding of religion, and for all these interpretations to be correct and rightful on the pretext that they are compatible with individual preferences. We have to seek the correct interpretation of religion from the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) and not follow our preferences that will lead to deviation in religion and misguidance.

The necessity of removing personal preferences from the domain of religion

Some people tell us: “Do not impose your preference on others.” In essence, is religion a matter of personal preference, and can its scope and interpretation be identified with personal preference? Preference is related to the approaches and ways of people in their daily lives; for example, the preference of individuals in choosing the quality and color of their attire.

In this case, one should not impose his preference on others. But beliefs are not a matter of preference such that one can say that his preference is that God is the One and Only, and the other say—God forbid—that we have many deities! Similarly, the shari‘ah or divine decrees do not follow the preferences and desires of people. So, the subjects pertaining to the ideology, essentials of Islam, Islamic laws, and divine beliefs and values are not a matter of preference. Concerning them, all preferences must be set aside.

To conclude, the notion of not treating views and opinions as absolute is correct only in relation to the secondary and hypothetical issues of religion. Even in this case, only acceptable is the view of those who express their religious edicts and views based on extensive research and knowledge of religion and

ijtihad in religious and juristic issues and by adopting correct and acceptable method of ijtihad.

Technically, one who has such qualities is called faqih [jurist]. It is in this context that it can be said, “A faqih should not impose his view and opinion on another faqih.”

Obviously, two jurists may differ in their religious edicts and none of them is supposed to attempt to impose his edict on the other. In matters of beliefs, principles and essentials of Islam, however, one must not act upon his own preference and opinion.

In this case, the only correct version is what the Apostle and then the pure Imams (may Allah’s blessings be upon them all) have said 14 centuries ago and about which all the ‘ulama’ and fuqaha have a consensus of opinion. As far as the essentials of Islam are concerned, only the interpretations of the Apostle and the pure Imams (may Allah’s blessings be upon them all) are correct. All other interpretations are wrong.

In reality, such expressions are among the vivid manifestations of innovation in religion [bid‘ah] which must be seriously faced by true scholars of Islam so that they do not incur the curse and damnation of God, the angels and His righteous servants.

[1.](#) The Panchatantra [Five Chapters] or Kelileh va Dimneh or Anvar-e Suhayli or The Lights of Canopus in Persian or Kalilag and Damnag in Syriac or Kalilah wa Dimnah in Arabic or The Fables of Bidpai/Pilpai in various European languages was originally a canonical collection of Sanskrit (Hindu) as well as Pali (Buddhist) animal fables in verse and prose. [Trans.]

[2.](#) Surah al-Ma'idah 5:27. [Trans.]

[3.](#) Surah al-Ma'idah 5:31.

[4.](#) Rawdhahkhani refers to the systematic commemoration of the martyrs of Karbala' through the professional narrators of the event in 'Ashura' so as to excite weeping and lamentation. [Trans.]

[5.](#) Ghazal is a lyric form of Persian poetry, with rhyme in the first two and in even numbered lines, and allowing various metric forms. With respect to content, it usually does not express the linear development of an idea, but rather its couplets express variations on an idea or mood. [Trans.]

[6.](#) Khwajah Shams ad-Din Muhammad Hafiz Shirazi (ca. 1325–1391) was the fourteenth century Persian lyric bard and panegyrist, and commonly considered as the preeminent master of the ghazal form. [Trans.]

[7.](#) Mawlavi Jalal ad-Din ar-Rumi (1207–1273) was the greatest mystic poet in the Persian language and founder of the Mawlawiyyah order of dervishes (“The Whirling Dervishes”). He is famous for his lyrics and for his didactic epic, Mathnawi-ye Mn'nawi [Spiritual Couplets]. [Trans.]

[8.](#) Surah an-Nahl 16:92.

[9.](#) Surah al-Jum'ah 62:5.

[10.](#) Surah al-Ma'idah 5:27.

[11.](#) Surah al-Isra' (or Bani Isra'il) 17:105.

[12.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 122.

[13.](#) Ibid., Sermon 17.

[14.](#) Ibid. Sermon 147.

[15.](#) Ibid.

[16.](#) Ibid.

[17.](#) Ibid.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/islamic-political-theory-legislation-volume-2-muhammad-taqi-misbah-yazdi/session-40-religious#comment-0>