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5. Applied Islamic Hermeneutics

For Bultmann and van Fraassen, there is no ultimate contradiction between science and religion because science is objectifying inquiry while religion speaks to the attitude one takes toward one's existence in all its subjectivity. On this view, it would be a mistake to try to apply a religious hermeneutics to the social sciences, for the social sciences, as sciences, are a part of objectifying inquiry while religious hermeneutics requires us to take a stance toward social phenomena that falls outside the realm of science. In dealing with historical phenomena, however, Bultmann insists that we cannot limit ourselves to objectifying inquiry. Hence, there will be a specifically religious understanding of social phenomena, but no specifically religious social sciences, although there is a specifically religious hermeneutics of social phenomena.

For Plantinga, on the other hand,

It would be excessively naïve to think that contemporary science is religiously and theologically neutral.. Perhaps parts of science are like that: the size and shape of the earth and its distance from the sun, the periodic table of elements, the proof of the Pythagorean Theorem– these are all in a sensible sense religiously neutral. But many other areas of science are very different; they are obviously and deeply involved in this clash between opposed worldviews. There is no neat recipe for telling which parts of science are neutral with respect to this contest and which are not, and of course what we have here is a continuum rather than a simple distinction. But here is a rough rule of thumb: the relevance of a bit of science to this contest depends upon how closely that bit is involved in the attempt to come to understand ourselves as human beings. [1]

For Nasr, there will certainly be a sacred form of hermeneutics that is informed by the principles of perennial philosophy. Everything is to be understood in terms of a grand perennial system of principles. Our understanding of all phenomena and texts is to be governed by and integrated into the Traditionalist worldview.

For Bultmann, Plantinga, and Nasr, the application of a religious hermeneutics will require considerable work. It is not a matter of simply taking note of religious assumptions and cosmic principles and carrying on from there.

The work that these thinkers require for a religious hermeneutics may be compared with what Paul Ricoeur called "the hermeneutics of suspicion". Ricoeur used this term for the ways in which Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche understood (or misunderstood) religion.[2] While hermeneutics in the tradition from Schleiermacher through Gadamer has sought to understand the other in a sympathetic way, trying to understand, to the extant possible, how the other looks at issues, gives reasons, and offers justifications, Freud, Marx and Nietzsche sought to find reasons for religious views and behavior of which those who display them are unaware. If we ask the religious person why he or she believes in God, answers may be given in terms of religious experience, intuitions, or proofs for the existence of God. To the contrary, Freud, Marx and Nietzsche argue that what lies behind religious belief is a projection of the idea of the father, or propaganda to keep the working classes from revolting, or a tendency for the weak and sheepish to deny to themselves the power of their own wills. This sort of attempt to rely on a psychological, sociological or economic analysis to ferret out underlying causes of thought and behavior of which agents are not consciously aware is also called genealogy.[3]

Thomas Nagel has suggested that the genealogical method might be applied not only to find the underlying reasons for religious phenomena, but also to discover the underlying factors behind atheism.[4] This would provide for a hermeneutics of suspicion in reverse, as it were. Indeed, the suspicion that the effects of sin are behind what on the surface seem to be reasons for heretical beliefs may be found in various religious traditions. In Calvinism, reason itself becomes an object of suspicion.[5]

Ricoeur proposes a hermeneutics of recollection to enable the researcher who has passed through the gauntlet of the hermeneutics of suspicion to emerge with a more profound understanding of the original intent of the religious texts to be examined. This approach has been criticized as being apologetic. D. Z. Phillips has proposed a hermeneutics of contemplation in order to avoid interpretive programs with fixed ends–either the undermining or defense of religion.[6]

The hermeneutics of contemplation shares some affinity with the ideal of the philosophical life championed by Leo Strauss, a life of free intellectual inquiry into the truth of things. Phillips, like Strauss, is also more concerned with the task of understanding religious texts, texts that offer theological or philosophical discussions of religious beliefs, and other religious phenomena, rather than with the task of understanding from a religious point of view.

The religious point of view is explored in Westphal's study of the hermeneutics of suspicion.[7] Westphal's aim is to show how religious thinkers might benefit from the insights of atheists without accepting the atheism on which their thought is based. He uses religious language to reinterpret Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, not as they intended to be understood, but as exposing how religion can be falsified when used to satisfy projections of our own needs, or to placate those who are exploited, or to allow the weak willed to feel self–righteous.

In calling Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche the great secular theologians of original sin I have suggested that the hermeneutics of suspicion belongs to our understanding of human sinfulness. The self– deceptions

they seek to expose, like those exposed by Jesus and the prophets, are sins and signs of our fallenness.[8]

Westphal's work suggests how a hermeneutic of suspicion may be transformed into a religious hermeneutics. The hermeneutics of suspicion operates by observing that the reasons that inform the self-understanding of religious agents may be rationalizations that serve to hide baser motives. Westphal transforms this into a religious hermeneutics through the observation that the reasons that appear to support religious behavior may hide a perversion of religion. The recognition of this phenomenon is also suggested in the following surah of the Qur'an (n. 107):

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

{أَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي يُكَذِّبُ بِالدِّينِ 1}

1. Did you seen him who denies the Retribution?

{فَذَٰلِكَ الَّذِي يَدُعُّ الْيَتِيمَ 2}

2. that is the one who drives away the orphan,

{وَلَا يَحُضُّ عَلَىٰ طَعَامِ الْمِسْكِينِ 3}

3. and does not urge the feeding of the needy,

{فَوَيْلٌ لِلْمُصَلِّينَ 4}

4. so, woe to those who pray,

{الَّذِينَ هُمْ عَنْ صَلَاتِهِمْ سَاهُونَ 5}

5. -those who are heedless of their prayers,

{الَّذِينَ هُمْ يُرَاءُونَ 6}

6. those who show off

{وَيَمْنَعُونَ الْمَاعُونَ 7}

7. but deny aid.

Here we find a clear example of an apparently religious phenomenon, prayer, that hides a non-religious motive, showing off. The criterion that shows that the prayer is not genuine is the denial of aid. This hardly constitutes a hermeneutics of suspicion, however, since it does not presume that apparently religious phenomena are always caused by hidden factors, but only that under circumstances of sinfulness, they can be.

The application of an Islamic hermeneutics cannot take the route of suspicion, recovery, or contemplation as a general rule for all cases, if these are taken to mean suspicion with respect to apparent motives, recovery of the original message given in a text or phenomenon, or a philosophical neutrality with regard to these issues. Instead, good judgment needs to be applied to each case, keeping in mind that it may be necessary to posit multiple levels of meaning in order to provide the best religious interpretation of the object of inquiry.

1. Plantinga (1996), 178.
2. See Ricoeur (1970).
3. From Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals. For a critical analysis, see MacIntyre (1990); also see Westphal (1998), and Leiter (2004).
4. See Nagel (1998) and the review: Legenhausen (2003).
5. See Wainwright (1995).
6. Phillips (2004).
7. Westphal (1998).
8. Westphal (1998), 288.

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