

“Integrity in Interpretation of the Qur’an (and other authoritative Islamic sources)”

Some Comments by Mark Durie
for the *Bridging the Divide* Network
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Over the years I have often pondered the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s comment that: “One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing’s nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.”

Wittgenstein was reflecting on the nature of propositional language, but his warning applies to just about any act of ‘tracing’, which is to say, to descriptions in general. We easily believe we are describing a thing, when we in fact just describing our presuppositions about it.

Love and Truth

I would to make a few initial comments about truth and love, particularly when dealing with sensitive material, and Islam **IS** sensitive material.

In order to achieve integrity in dealing with a sensitive subject, one must be committed to both truth and love. Let me explain.

A commitment to truth means we pay equal attention to wanted and unwanted evidence, even when it goes against the argument one would like to put forward. A commitment to truth requires an even-handed willingness to describe things as they really are, not how we would like them to be.

A commitment to love is also important.

It means loving the evidence, not fudging or forcing it: loving the truth.

It also means loving people, which means being aware of the complexity of human testimony, and the many reasons why it is not always reliable, and why people can have blindspots in one area, while seeing with crystal clarity in another. It means understanding that bias does not necessarily require bad intentions or ill-will on the part of others, or of oneself.

Love also requires us not to misrepresent others, whether to vilify or whitewash them: it respects the reality of who they are and what they have said.

Besides love and truth, there is also due diligence. When dealing with religious differences the need for due diligence is great because of the reality of bias and the difficulties of cross-cultural understanding.

Bias in Religious Statements

In the area of theology and religion, bias is the normal state of affairs. People have a great deal invested in their own religious world views, and in defending them, both against internal inconsistencies and external challenges, so one must always be willing to check and double check statements people make about their religion. People are highly invested in their religious outlook, so they will in general tend to display bias when reporting the beliefs and the essentials of their religion, and of conflicting beliefs.

I don't see this as unique to Islam or Christianity: it is a reflection on human nature.

Cross-cultural Observer Bias

Also wherever significant cross-cultural transmission is involved, there is observer bias at play.

The possibility of observer bias calls for special care. To interpret claims made by others about their religion from within their worldview requires taking painstaking efforts to ensure that the categories they are using are understood accurately.

Let me give an example of the difficulty of cross-cultural interpretation. There is an important body of experts in Islamic law known as the International Fiqh Academy which was set up by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (formerly known as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) to advise Muslims around the world on Islamic issues. In April 2009 the International Fiqh Academy issued important fatwas on freedom of speech, religious freedom and domestic violence.

To accurately interpret these statements, which were carefully prepared by a peak body of Islamic jurists, requires an awareness that just about every term the jurists use has its own specific meaning which is constructed within their religious world view.

For example the Fiqh Academy defines 'domestic violence' in such a way that a man beating his wife in accordance with sharia principles is not violence. Hence it speaks approvingly of 'non-violent beating' of a wife by her husband. It would lack integrity to simply report this fatwa, without qualification, as saying that 'Islam prohibits domestic violence'.

These two factors – the tendency to bias in anyone's statements about religions, and unavoidable bias in cross-cultural communication – means that one must be very careful and diligent when making claims about another religion.

Issues with Islam

To interpret a complex and controversial religion such as Islam with integrity means taking appropriate care to get the facts right. When one is aware of the possibility of bias on the part of another, or in oneself, one has a duty to take the steps to address this, to correct for bias. Due diligence includes a duty of care. This is no less true of Islam than of any religion.

For example, in order to comment on Muhammad and his life and influence, one ought at least to read the primary sources on Muhammad. This means reading the Sira and the Hadith for oneself. It would show a lack of integrity to come to a point of view about Muhammad's life and influence based on secondary sources alone. You have to read the sources for yourself.

In order to interpret Islamic sources, one must read them for oneself, with great care and attentiveness. One should also make reasonable efforts to gain familiarity with how Muslims have interpreted these sources.

Let me give you an example. Years ago I was in discussion with a man I respected greatly, a long-term missionary to the Muslim world. After more than 20 years in the mission field, he was back in Australia leading and training people to reach out to Muslims. The topic of female circumcision came up in our discussion. He said 'of course female circumcision is not an Islamic practice'. I said 'That is very interesting. How did you come to that view?' He said 'I have been informed of this by Muslims'. So I replied 'Did they draw your attention to the hadiths in which Muhammad refers to the practice, and to the rulings in sharia textbooks which uphold it, and did they explain that this practice is compulsory in at least one of the Sunni schools, and it is a recommended practice in the other schools?' He had never heard of these things.

As it happens the support for the Islamic basis of the practice of female circumcision is crystal clear, yet after decades in the field, this learned, intelligent and capable man was ignorant of it. He had never read the hadiths for himself. He had never read a sharia textbook on the subject. His interpretation was second hand and it was without a basis in fact. What was disappointing was not that he was mistaken, but that he had not been alert to the possibility of bias on behalf of those who informed him about the matter. Yet this is clearly a very sensitive topic, and one on which it is not easy to be entirely objective.

Another example is Colin Chapman's statement about the dhimma system in Cross and Crescent:

All non-Muslims living under Islamic rule paid a land tax (kharaj). Jews and Christians were treated as dhimmis, members of a protected community, and paid in addition a poll tax (jizyah). They were not allowed to do military service or pay the Muslims' alms tax [zakat].

This described appears to be derived from modern revisionist accounts of the state of non-Muslims living under the sharia, which date from the late 19th century. I would venture to say that no medieval Islamic jurists or commentators ever described the *dhimma* in such terms as 'they were not allowed to do military service.' The suggestion that *dhimmis* paid *jizya* to compensate for their protection or for non-payment of *zakat* is a modern interpretation not attested in original Islamic sources, which instead taught that the *jizyah* was a compensation paid by dhimmis in return for keeping their heads (i.e. to compensate Muslims for not killing, looting and enslaving them).

So my advice is, to quote Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 5 "test everything".

Integrity in using Islamic sources means actually using sources, and not relying on what others have told you about them.¹

Let me give another example a lapse by a capable scholar who apparently did not ‘test everything.’ Miroslav Volf, in his book “*Allāh*” declared that ‘aggressive jihad’ is ‘rejected by all leading Muslim scholars today’. Yet this statement was not adequately checked, because it is not difficult to find counter-examples to this claim.

M. Taqi Usmani was one of the signatories of the Amman letter to Pope Benedict, and also of the the Common Word letter, which rebuked Benedict for implying that Islam had been spread through force. He is a leading Pakistani jurist and deputy president of the International Fiqh Academy. He has gone into print to state: “Aggressive Jihad is lawful even today... Its justification cannot be veiled ... we should venerate ... this expansionism with complete self-confidence”. This statement was completely at odds with what he signed up to in the Amman letter and the Common Word Letter.

Another eminent signatory of Amman and Common Word letters was Sheikh Al-Buti of Syria, now deceased, killed last year a jihadi bomber. Sheikh Al-Buti argued powerfully in his magnificent book *The Jurisprudence of the prophetic biography* that it is ‘meaningless’ - his word – to distinguish between offensive and defensive jihad. What matters, he said, is the aim of achieving an Islamic society, not the means by which it is established. It is the end which justifies the means, whether defensive or aggressive.

What Volf said was not true. Could it be that he was affected by observer bias? It supported his argument to state that no leading Muslim scholar supported aggressive jihad, but he apparently did not exercise due diligence to test this. It seems likely that he heard this from some source, but such a high-stakes claim needs to be tested against the primary sources. He needed to go to writings of leading Muslim scholars.

When the stakes are high, and the potential for bias is also high, one must slow down one’s processes of observation even more, and take that much greater care to get one’s facts right. The more passionate one is about your opinions, the more one needs to check oneself, and exercise self-examination, expending great effort to seek out the primary facts. The higher the stakes, the slower a reader one must become.

I certainly acknowledge that there are times when I have failed to take the care needed where the stakes were high, and the potential for bias high as well. The observations offered here reflect what I have learned through my own mistakes and my own disappointments at myself, including an awareness of my own limitations as a human observer.

1. Ironically I committed exactly this error in my rejoinder to Joseph Cumming after the Bridging the Divide conference at which I first presented these remarks. I wrongly assumed that a critical report I had read about his paper *Did Jesus die on the cross?* was correct, and did not check the facts. My embarrassment for the conclusions I reached based on this false information and my sloppy fact-checking has spurred me on to provide this paper in written form.

Similarities or Differences?

Now here is a question.

Is it better to focus on differences or on similarities between Islam and Christianity?

I submit that we must do both. It is not enough to just focus on similarities.

Understanding differences can sometimes require the greater effort. The reason has to do with cognitive bias. We have perhaps all had the experience of listening to an unknown language, and thinking from time to time that we hear a phrase or word we recognise, when in fact we are hearing nothing of the sort. Our mind imposes familiarity on what is unfamiliar. Observer bias imposes patterns on sensory experiences where none exist. We observe what our mind expects. The differences, being unexpected, can sometimes be harder to discern.

This means that to observe accurately means one must take special efforts to overcome the potential for observer bias by attending carefully to differences. It is often the differences which provide the keys to interpreting and understand the totality of another's worldview. On the other hand, apparent similarities tend to seduce a interested observer into overstating the similarities at the expense of differences.

Joseph Cumming's interesting essay on the treatment of the crucifixion in the Qur'an – *Did Jesus die on the cross?* – seems to me to be a case in point. He cites Muslim commentators who referred to the theory that Jesus died on the cross and asserts that they considered this to be a 'legitimate' interpretation. If true, this could be important common ground between Christians and Muslims. On the other hand, I suggest that Islamic commentators may canvas a variety of interpretations without necessarily implying they are to be considered correct. As a case in point, Al-Tabari concludes his exploration of ten different interpretations of the crucifixion verse Sura 4:157 by concluding that only one of the theories is 'correct' (بالصواب — for the Arabic see [here](#)). Al-Tabari does not merely state that he prefers one interpretation, or that one is more plausible: rather he states that the one interpretation is 'correct'. The implication was that the other nine interpretations are 'incorrect'.

There is a challenge for bridge builders, by which term I mean those of irenic disposition who are deeply committed to establishing common ground. The risk is that they may over-estimate what is held in common. One of the most remarkable examples of such over-estimation that I have encountered was an interview on the ABC with David Khalili, the owner of the world's largest private collection of Islamic art, and a Jew from an Iranian background. Khalili has used his remarkable art collection to help build bridges between faiths all around the world. When asked in an interview whether he thought that his work might help Muslims understand that Jews are not inferior, Khalili responded that he thought this idea – that Jews are inferior – had never crossed any Muslims' mind.² He then went on to state that a third of the Quran (Sura 2) was in praise of Judaism and Christianity. In fact Sura 2 is only 7% of the Qur'an, but much more problematic is the undeniable fact that far from

2. <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/spiritofthings/stories/2007/1962358.htm>

being written in praise of Jews or Judaism, this Sura is replete with the most repugnant anti-Jewish themes and stereotypes.

Emotions and Self-Preservation

The potential for bias is greater when self-preservation is a factor.

Engaging with Islamic sources can mean engaging with threats of different kinds. I do not just mean fear for one's safety. There can also be the much lower-level but nevertheless significant fear of loss of relationship through causing offence to Muslims. Loss of access to communities, research institutions and libraries can be an important consideration for academics.

This can be the case for political scientists, for example. There are regimes which routinely block visas to academics who criticise them and this can have a chilling effect on academic freedom of speech because lack of access to a community can damage an academic's career. There have been periods in the recent history of Indonesia when a social scientist who published work critical of the Indonesian government or army would be denied research access to the country.

Today in the United States, the official government policy on Islam is such that any academic working in counter-terrorism studies who considers religious ideology a major driver of terrorism cannot expect to gain government-funded research grants. This does have a chilling effect on academic impartiality in areas connected with Islamic studies. Then there is the fact that a good many Islamic studies and projects are funded by regimes with Islam-positive policies, particularly the oil-rich Gulf states. Of course such financial largess comes with a degree of ideological control.

It is important not to discount the influence of physical fear even when it works at a very deep level. There is fear of Islamic terrorism; fear of persecution of Christians in Islamic jurisdictions; fear of the apostasy law; fear of sharia prohibitions on preaching the gospel to Muslims and fear of falling foul of blasphemy provisions of the sharia.

Every reading the primary Islamic sources can generate fear. There is a great deal of violence and threats of violence in the Qur'an and the Sunna. Such things are psychologically impacting. I must confess that I was deeply shocked and in considerable emotional distress for several months when I first read through the primary source materials documenting the life of Muhammad (the *Sahih Muslim*, the *Sahih Bukhari*, and the *Sirat Rasul Allah*). Great diligence, restraint, self-awareness and respect for the truth is required to give accurate interpretations of such materials.

Let me offer a relatively 'mild' example, a verse from the Qur'an.

Sura 4:65-66 states: *"If We had prescribed for them: 'Kill one another' or 'Go forth from your home,' they would not have done it, except for a few of them. Yet if they had done what they were admonished (to do) it would indeed have been better for them, and*

a firmer foundation (for them) ... Whoever obeys Allāh and the Messenger are with those whom Allāh has blessed..."

Here the Qur'an is stating that if Muhammad had told his followers to kill each other, they should have done it: indeed they would have been blessed by doing it.

What kind of emotional response might such a passage like this evoke? The mind might well ask questions like: "What kind of leader would say such a thing to his followers?" and "Could Muhammad have been a violent cult leader?" It is entirely reasonable to ask such questions, and to do so consciously, because being aware of one's own and one's readers' emotional responses to texts is a key part of achieving integrity in interpretation.

Psychological Responses to Cognitive Pressures

What are some of the cognitive pressures when threat is involved? Psychologists have had a lot to say about this.

- There is blaming the victim. Abuser blame their victims. A victim blames him/herself for what they have endured.
- There is the parallel tendency to justify aggressors: a vulnerable, threatened person can tend to see the one who is threatening them as vulnerable and suffering.
- There is projection, for example seeing others as vulnerable or at risk when it is one's very self that is in danger.
- There is displacement - replacing an unacceptable motive by another. For example fear of terrorism drives some people to express positive regard for Islam or Muslims as a protective strategy, while attributing such statements to their own love for Muslims (love is an acceptable motivation; fear is not).

Exploring these themes in relation to the literature on Islam could take many hours. But my point is simple, that scholars, missionaries, pastors and evangelists are all susceptible to psychological pressures when dealing with Islam. And I emphasise that this is not just about personal fear for one's own safety.

Nevertheless I believe that psychological distortions are apparent, for example, in the tendency of biographies of Muhammad to censor his actions. The Muhammad of the secondary description is always always a much nicer human being than the Muhammad of the primary sources – of the hadiths and the sira. For example there is a tendency in secondary accounts of the genocide of the Quraiza Jews in Medina to emphasise their treachery toward the Muslims. However in the primary sources the attack is triggered by a command from the Angel Gabriel, after the Quraiza had in fact refused to fight against Muhammad: later writers emphasised treachery, I suggest, in order to make Muhammad's actions more morally acceptable.

It might be objected that one should never pre-judge another's motives, but instead let others speak for their own motives. If only the whole world was healed and redeemed, this would be a safe and reasonable policy. However this side of heaven, a measure of well-informed

skepticism can be a much wiser strategy, and often a more loving one too. Particularly when people are under threat, it can be immoral not to read between the lines.

I am not commending a jaundiced attitude to others' intentions, and not to Islam either, but a precautionary approach that makes sure of the evidence and is aware of the possibility of bias, not only in others, but in oneself as well.

The Risk of Islamophobia – and its opposite

I have emphasised above that risk of bias in those who are reaching out and bridging bridges to Islam and Muslims. However of course there is a real danger of bias in those whose attitude to Islam is shaped by a fear that leads to critical, rejecting attitudes. I have encountered plenty of people who have accepted that stereotype that 'all Muslims lie', just because there is some justification in Islam for lawful deception. There is a real possibility of an escalation of anti-Muslim sentiment in societies around the world as Islamic violence continues unrelenting. At the same time there is also a possibility that fear of raising anti-Islamic views can cause someone to over-compensate in the opposite direction, for example by tarring all critics of Islam with an 'Islamophobia' brush.

Some can also be so conscious of the potential for negative bias against Islam that they bend over backwards to adopt a positive bias: a kind of affirmative action policy in the domain of one's emotional world view. Bridge building can seem very loving, but the results can be bad for both truth and love if they are not truth-based.

One way this works with Islam is that some non-Muslims write off certain Muslim ideas as 'extremism' just so they do not have to take their ideas seriously or give them any respect. However I would argue that if someone is promoting repugnant ideas, it is the height of respectfulness to take these ideas seriously and report them for what they are, including analysing how the ideas are derived.

In such troubled waters, one should cultivate have a healthy scepticism about one's own motivations. Self-awareness is an essential part of integrity in using Islamic sources in our highly conflicted world. To understand and interpret Islam requires one to become self-aware in understanding how psychological distortions can affect individuals, and whole communities. One must also understand the pressures upon oneself, and the possibility of one's own bias and mistaken assumptions!

The Need for a Systematic Reasoned Evidence-Based Approach

I was recently in correspondence with a missionary to the Muslim world who, before he had met me, had moved away from an insider perspective he had formerly enthusiastically embraced.

A core issue for him had become the understanding of the Qur'an. He wrote: "People with a calling such as mine [to Muslims] have been working with an assumption that there is no

theological conflict between [the Qur'an and the Bible], or at least they have been endeavouring to reinterpret [the Qur'an] in order to remove or minimise conflict.” However he had concluded that “This has in turn led to heresy and distorted translations of the Bible.”

The core problem, in his view, was an unfounded assumption, that the Qur'an and the Bible had more in common than they do. It was an attractive assumption. A useful assumption. A bridge-building assumption. But an assumption none the less. The primary evidence needed to be considered.

In such a context due diligence requires one to at least give the Qur'an a careful reading – the whole of it – for oneself, and to consult authoritative Islamic interpreters of the text before making us of it for ministry purposes, lest one merely be cherry picking.

For example if one encounters a verse in the Qur'an which commends the people of the Book, one should take special care to understand how this is understood both by the Qur'an, by Islamic tradition, and by Muslims in general. A **systematic** approach is needed.

I do understand that it is possible to be an effective missionary among Muslims without ever having studied Islam, the Qur'an or the life of Muhammad. I respect that one can just engage at the level of folk Islam, but in that case you can't have it both ways. If one does not seek to engage with and understand the Qur'an and the Sunna, it is wise not to try to appeal or use Islamic sources in one's ministry. On the other hand, if your ministry approaches interfaith relations, including mission, in a way which crucially relies on assumptions about Islam's primary sources, for example a belief that the message of the Qur'an is somehow similar to the Bible's or even that we worship the same God, you can't afford to rely on assumptions. More is needed.

The Issue of Deception in Islam

I have mentioned bias, which involves a kind of self-deception, but there can also be intentional deception. In connection with this there is the issue of Islam's own teachings concerning legitimate deception. There are contexts where it is permissible in Islam to mislead, if the interests of the Muslim community demand it. The legal permissions to use deception can particularly apply when Muslims are in a minority position and are vulnerable, which is the situation in many countries today. Not all Muslims follow the practice of lawful deception, but for those who are aware of it and do practice it, the potential for them to make misleading statements is real and sometimes this needs to be taken into account.

This also affects the general level of knowledge about Islam in a community. This issue is covered in the pre-reading from my book *The Third Choice*, sent out last week, and I won't go over it again. It is something to be aware of.

Another issue is the psychological pressure upon Muslims to publicly disown certain Islamic perspectives. Sheikh Al-Buti wrote extensively about this in the *Jurisprudence of the*

Prophetic Biography. First he blames the ‘Orientalists’ - i.e. Western scholars’, who, driven by fear, claim that:

Islam is a religion of peace and love in which armed struggle would never be given legitimacy except for the repulsion of unannounced aggression, and whose followers would never go to war unless they were forced to do so because some other party had initiated hostilities.

They do this, Al-Buti said - because Western commentators are afraid of jihad and its potential to unite Muslims against them, so they seek to promote the belief among Muslims that jihad - traditionally understood - no longer applies. It seems very striking that Al-Buti identified non-Muslim fear as the primary driver for Muslims disavowing aggressive jihad.

And How to Refer to Muhammad?

Finally I want to mention one more thing, namely the way we refer to Islam’s founder.

Integrity means also being true to oneself. While the task of stepping inside someone else’s skin to see the world through their eyes requires a high degree of self-discipline, and even (at least temporary) suppression or one’s own worldview, this should not be at the cost of one’s own convictions, or stating agreeing to things that in fact you reject as untrue.

I am a Christian. I follow Jesus. I am not a Muslim. I do not believe in many of the spiritual claims of Islam. For example I do not believe that Muhammad was a prophet sent from God. So I do not ever call him ‘the (capital-P) Prophet’, not even out of politeness. I am even-handed, in that I would not expect a convinced Muslim to call Jesus the ‘Son of God’ out of politeness either. If I did call Muhammad “the Prophet” or even “a prophet” I would consider myself to have been untrue to myself. Other Christians may see this differently, and I can understand there is a context in academic discourse where a title such as this might be useful – although in such a context I would prefer to call Muhammad “the Messenger” – but to habitually entitle Muhammad as ‘the Prophet’, particularly in contexts where I am speaking to Christians, is something I could not do.

Finally

In conclusion I note that these remarks merely scratch the surface of what is a very large, complex and sensitive topic. Nevertheless it is a vitally important topic, and I offer these reflections, not as someone who is a master of a disciplined approach to Islam, but someone who endeavours to approach it. I would also be most grateful to hear from others who may be able to add value to these thoughts, whether by way of correction or improvement.

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