

Introduction

Rahman (d.1988) (1982, p.2) believed that the earlier Muslims generally failed to recognise the unity of the Quran, leading to a decontextualised reading of the Quran. They took an atomistic approach, extracting laws from non-legal verses (ibid, p.2-3). The tools for deriving law and other social institutions, namely analogical reasoning, were not developed to the required level (ibid, p.2). This shortfall was the result of an insufficient method of understanding the Quran (ibid). Hence, Rahman formulated the double movement theory, a contextual approach to explain the ethico-legal verses of the Quran in light of modernity (ibid, p.5).

In this academic reaction paper, I will be evaluating Rahman's contextual hermeneutical approach.

Analysis

The double movement theory is, as described by Rahman himself, "from the present situation to Qur'anic times, then back to the present" (ibid). The Quran was responding to specific problems through the mind of the Prophet (ibid). These responses contained transhistorical "moral, religious, and social pronouncements" (ibid) with essential underlying reasons for such pronouncements. In other words, their meaning and practical impact do not dissipate at any point in history making it relevant in the present context (ibid). It is, hence, possible to investigate their context and deduce general laws from them to be applied in modern situations (ibid, p.6). Saeed (2006, p.5) believes that a contextual-based approach is needed to make the ethico-legal content of the Quran relevant in the modern context. Many Muslims

deem the literal reading of such ethico-legal verses to be “ancient and archaic” (ibid). To overcome such a situation, a contextual hermeneutical approach may provide a solution.

The double movement comprises modifying the rulings found in the text/precedence by making an intellectual endeavour, *ijtihad* (Rahman, 1982, p.8). This endeavour will then allow for a historically objective understanding of the text, uninfluenced by the present and the factors it was responding to (ibid, p.8). Consequently, Rahman’s contextualist approach is very much rooted in the concept of hermeneutic objectivity (ibid).

Rahman subscribed to the objectivity school of hermeneutics as advocated by Betti (d.1968) (ibid). According to Betti, there will always remain an intimate connection between any text and its author (Akbar, 2021, p.591). The interpreter should investigate the text for its stable meaning and the intended meaning by the author (ibid). Additionally, every text holds a definitive meaning which can be recovered using suitable principles, and meanings which exist outside of the interpreter’s worldview (ibid). Acknowledging that the interpreter will view things in relation to his/her own experiences, Betti urges that one hold back their preconceptions and experiences to attain the meaning the interpreted text is attempting to communicate (ibid).

Conversely, the double movement theory has been criticised for excessive subjectivity (Saeed, 2004, p.59). For Gadamer (d.2002), a member of the subjectivity school, past experiences are inseparable from any new understanding (Harrison, 2010, p.210). It is this preunderstanding which allows one to understand something new (ibid). The different understandings that become available to a person, which he has defined as a person’s ‘horizon,’ are relative to their

preunderstanding (ibid, p.211). Likewise, a text is written at a specific time and context, with its own set of preunderstandings, which can also be considered a type of 'horizon' (ibid). Consequently, for one to understand a text, there would need to be a fusion of the horizons of both the interpreter and the text, resulting in an understanding that the author could not have expected (ibid). Such a hermeneutical approach would imply that the interpretation of the text will continue to evolve with the evolving of one's preunderstanding (ibid). Therefore, due to the interpreter's subjectivity, he/she will be unable to objectively identify the author's intended meaning (Akbar, 2020, p.146).

However, Rahman does not acknowledge the impact the interpreter's subjectivity may have in Quranic hermeneutics (ibid, p.146-147). Minimal attention is given to the fact that preunderstanding is unpreventable in the interpretation of a text, influenced by "class, gender, religious orientation and ethnicity," (ibid, p.147) etc. To some extent, subjectivity can also be observed in Rahman's approach, privileging the moralistic dimension over the law. Yet, it may be argued that the moralistic dimension has always been favoured since the time of revelation.

Nonetheless, Rahman (1982, p.10) believes that in principle it is possible to objectively determine the past provided that "requisite evidence is available." However, Rahman (1982, p.9) contends that if Gadamer's subjective hermeneutics is found to be correct, then his double movement theory has no meaning. This may, possibly, be the greatest limitation of his theory.

Saeed (2004, p.59), has noted two responses that Rahman had prepared to the criticism of excessive subjectivity in his theory. Firstly, he argues, that the Quran is clear about its goals and purposes, be it indirectly or directly (ibid). As for those that are not clear, they can be distinguished by considering “the background and the context of the rules” (ibid). By implementing this process, Rahman was certain that it would reduce subjectivity if not completely eradicate it (ibid). Secondly, he argues that there have always been differing interpretations among jurists which hold significant value provided that they are sincerely advanced for the right reasons (ibid).

These two responses do not appear to adequately solve the issue of subjectivity. As for the first response, it merely highlights the possibility of eradicating subjectivity with no guarantee. The second response appears to be only an acknowledgement of his hermeneutical method to be one of many, providing no solution for the issue of subjectivity. Perhaps, it is for this reason that scholars who have been influenced by Rahman have reconsidered this aspect of his hermeneutics (Akbar, 2020, p.147). For example, very much like Gadamer, Saeed acknowledges the impact of the inseparable subjectivity of the interpreter in their process of interpretation. Similarly, Soroush states that all textual interpretations reflect the person’s “epistemic understanding of the world” (ibid) and preunderstandings. Subsequently, “the task of interpretation does not take place with an empty mind” (ibid).

Example of the contextual hermeneutical approach

Q4:3 has traditionally been understood to legitimise polygamy in Islam. However, Rahman’s contextual approach can provide an alternative interpretation. Looking at the Quran holistically, Rahman (1985, p.6) states that Q4:2 was responding to the guardians of orphans

whose properties were being abused by the former, a common practice in the Meccan period. Q4:127 further states that the guardians would prefer to marry the orphan girls, instead of returning their wealth when they are of age (ibid). Rahman (ibid), then concludes by stating that the permission for polygamy in Q4:3 is for the guardians of the orphan girls when they are unable to do justice regarding the latter's property (ibid).

This interpretation suggests, based on the context of the time of revelation, that the permission of polygamy is not an absolute permission for every man. Rather, it is restricted to the guardians of the orphan girls. This interpretation, although can contextualise polygamy in the Quran, may not be accurate. Firstly, it appears that the verses speak of orphans in general and not specifically orphan girls. Secondly, Q4:3 uses the word *nisaa*, translated as women, when speaking of polygamy and not necessarily orphan girls. A more plausible contextualist interpretation may be the marrying of the mothers of the orphans.

Furthermore, the holistic approach in this case may have been effective, however, may not be in all cases. When viewing the Quran holistically, it would also be necessary to consider verses which appear to be androcentric, such as those that speak of inheritance or the damsels of paradise.

Conclusion

Rahman's contextual hermeneutical approach, as Saeed (2004, p.62) puts it, is "among the most original, daring and systematic of the mid to late century." His double movement theory stresses the socio-historic context in which the Quran was revealed and has been able to make a significant impact on modern-day challenges and questions among Muslims (ibid). This

would include discussions of social justice, rights of women, social justice, etc. (ibid). It has become a tool for many Muslims to make the ethico-legal content of the Quran relevant in the modern world (ibid). Although the double movement theory is not without limitations and challenges, it does not take away from its merit and relevance in modernity.

References

- Akbar, A. (2020). 'Fazlur Rahman's Influence on Contemporary Islamic Thought.' *The Muslim World*, 110(2)
- Akbar, A. (2021). 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and Contemporary Muslim Scholars' Approaches to Interpreting Scripture.' *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 47(5)
- Harrison, V. S. (2010). 'Hermeneutics, Religious Language and the Qur'an.' *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 21(3)
- Rahman, F. (1982). *Islam and modernity: Transformation of an intellectual tradition*. University of Chicago Press.
- Rahman, F. (1985). 'Law and ethics in Islam' (Hovanissian, Ed.) *Ethics in Islam Ninth Georgia Levi Della Vida Biennial Conference*. Undena Publications.
- Saeed, A. (2004). 'Fazlur Rahman: A Framework for Interpreting the Ethico-Legal Content of the Qur'an.' In S. Taji-Farouki (Ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Saeed, A. (2006). *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach*. Taylor & Francis.