

they read out of context, and ignoring others that do not chime with their own predilections. Religious militants who read their scriptures in this way often distort the tradition they are trying to defend. Christian fundamentalists concentrate on the aggressive Book of Revelation & pay no attention to the Sermon on the Mount, while Muslim extremists rely on the more belligerent passages of the Quran & overlook its oft-repeated instructions to leave vengeance to God & make peace with the enemy.

We cannot turn the clock back. Most of us are accustomed to acquiring information instantly at the click of a mouse, and have neither the talent nor the patience for the disciplines that characterised pre-modern interpretation. But we can counter the dangerous tendency to selective reading of sacred texts. The Quran insists that its teaching must be understood “in full” (20:114), an important principle that religious teachers must impart to the disaffected young. Extremists have given the jihad (which they interpret reductively as “holy war”) a centrality that it never had before & have thus redefined the meaning of Islam for many non-Muslims. But in this they are often unwittingly aided by the media, who also concentrate obsessively on the more aggressive verses of the Quran, without fully appreciating how these are qualified by the text as a whole. **We must all – the religious & the sceptics alike – become aware that there is more to scripture than meets the cursory eye.**

The Quran, or any text, **speaks through its reader**. This ability of human beings to interpret texts is both a blessing & a burden. It is a blessing because it provides us with the flexibility to adapt texts to changing circumstances. It is a burden because the reader must take responsibility for the normative values he or she brings to the text. Any text, including those that are Islamic, provides **possibilities** for meaning, **not inevitabilities**. And those possibilities are exploited, developed & ultimately determined by the reader’s efforts – good faith efforts – at making sense of the text’s complexities. Consequently, the meaning of the text is often only as moral as its reader. If the reader is intolerant & hateful, so will be the interpretation of the text. If Quranic verses are read **literally & ahistorically**, then highly exclusionary conclusions will be reached.

Through the Narrow Gate is a stunning book by Karen Armstrong to truly understand **unholy strictures** that are set up by men (priests) in the name of God. And then changes are made by men to satisfy the changing times. “It’s all **very different now**. The Order was **transformed** by the decrees of the Second Vatican

Council. The nuns have discarded the habit completely, the rule of silence has been relaxed, the **old rituals & customs have gone**. The novices are **no longer** secluded from the world, **nor** are those trials & disciplines **manufactured** for them. They live...in a lively community and are always going out & about. There’s **no more** chapter of faults, public penance, processions down drafty cloisters, medieval underwear, austere dormitories. Nuns (now) live in cheerful bedrooms that they decorate & can invite visitors to see them & drink coffee.” The initial harsh restrictions were not revealed by an All-Knowing God but made up by man’s finitude.

Many of us do not have the time, skill or intellect to step back from the boundaries of a very traditional religious upbringing and take a much larger, in-depth view of God’s Scriptures. Hence many suffer the **unraveling of faith** due to the **incoherence of religious dogma**. Others are provoked to a crisis of faith because of “religious” people: the yawning gulf between the ideals of a religion and the corrupt lives of those who practice and – especially – lead it. The cover up of religious leaders’ sins, refutes the claims of religion in many different ways. In particular, it challenges believers to justify theodicy (the “problem of God’s goodness in the face of evil”), as well as the Dostoevskian idea of religion as a bastion against the chaos of amorality.

When we insist that our way is the only way (even within the same faith), we have injected our ego into our search for God which only makes it more difficult if not impossible. If we slavishly follow man’s unholy strictures, we will be spiritually impoverished/impaired. We would do well to march to the drumbeat of courage & determination in the face of “religious inhumanity.” When all is said and done, what religions teach is compassion, for ourselves and for each other, and that all life has meaning & value.

God’s Scriptures gives us new, transformative insights that help us to live more meaningful, caring lives. Lives that go deeper than just touching the edges of body-mind-soul. We must have the capacity & drive to feel & think deeply about the fundamental nature of life. We must be able to distill the complex into simplicity with analogy & metaphor. This strength will help us come face to face with the essence of God. Then, and only then, can our being be lit with **spiritual radiance**.

Reminders benefit: “**For He has not placed on you any undue strain in your religion.**” (22:78) Use this verse to reject harsh teachers. We have seen how man’s mis-shapen errors & absurd paradoxes do destroy the existence, the simplicity, the ubiquity, the eternity, and infiniteness of God.

LET THERE BE NO COMPULSION IN RELIGION.

GOD’S HOLY SCRIPTURES

LET THERE BE NO COMPULSION IN RELIGION.

MAN’S UNHOLY STRICTURES

PEOPLE CAN BE BLUDGEONED INTO SUBMISSION,
BUT NOT INTO FAITH.

Some persons interpretations & commentaries of God’s Word are hopelessly **unintelligible**. Even more than their “sacred” writers whom they take it upon themselves to explain; their exposition being more difficult than God’s Pure & Simple Text. Stifling &

Restricting. **Beware** of their made-up stories. If we want fairy tales, we can turn to Grimm or H.C.

Anderson, for they were at least **honest** & never claimed that their stories were anything but fiction. The **objective of religion** is **not** to bog people down under a **groaning burden of encumbering statutes & impending ordinances**. God is **not** the one who has freighted the human way of life with the inscrutable dogmas & intolerable practices that press down inexorably upon us, breaking our backs with indignities & separating us from our own nature.

God’s clear Word is an enemy of all philosophic indefiniteness & obscurity. Obedient to the word, fundamentalism loses sight of the spirit. It becomes, in a way, **anti-religious**. Faith – that magnificent conscious leap beyond logic – gives way to **blind belief**. The sacred is reduced to a simplistic set of binary strictures: **all or nothing, believe or be damned**.

This is religion made **harsh**, and at the same time, made **bland**. It leaves **no** room for wonder or for a personal sense of the divine. By claiming a hold on truth, it **destroys** the sense of divine mystery – of a truth that may perhaps be glimpsed, but never fully grasped. And in so doing, it **betrays** not just a lack of imagination, but a **lack** of real faith.

“The believer is of an easygoing & gentle disposition.” The meaning of

al-hanafiyya as-samha is

“the religion without any constriction in it.” The essence of *samha* is an easygoing attitude toward life & others that does not allow for harshness, intolerance, or fanaticism.

The **Stricture**: Fundamentalism divides the world into “us” & “them.” It is concerned with how to belong to an “in” group separated from other groups by certain commonly held beliefs and rituals. The Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity & Islam – are to a significant extent currently gripped by the divisiveness & sectarianism inherent in their fundamentalist traditions. There are, of course, myriad differentiations /permutations between them, but what they share in common is a dogmatism that precludes meaningful debate with contrary voices. The three fundamentalist traditions are absolutely sure of their theological correctness, are inserting themselves aggressively in the political process, and are convinced of their ultimate earthly as well as cosmic triumph.

The Scripture (2:62): “Surely, those who believe, those who are Jewish, the Christians & the converts; anyone who believes in GOD, & believes in the Last Day & leads a righteous life, will receive their recompense from their Lord. They have nothing to fear, nor will they grieve.” Inclusive of all humanity as any divine statement can get. A critical reminder that the spiritual highway has many lanes. To quibble with this, from the perspective of any one religion, is to be sanctimonious rather than spiritual. Let all Muslims around the world pause & reflect on this!

The concept of scripture has become problematic in the modern period. Before this period, Jews/ Christians/ Muslims all relished highly **allegorical interpretations** of scripture. **What is crucial to keep in mind is that humans have limited conceptual & expressive capacities.** This should introduce a cautionary principle into any claim to know what God knows, and ultimately deter us from engaging in spiritual or physical battle in God’s name.

The word of God is infinite & cannot be tied down to a single interpretation. Islam is **not** a religion of empty laws & strictures but one which points towards a higher ethical order. Unfortunately what we practice is JUST empty laws & strictures. **EMPTY.**

Preoccupation with literal truth is a product of the scientific revolution, when reason achieved such spectacular results that belief in the unseen was no longer regarded as a valid path to knowledge. **Belief in the unseen, however, is the only path to wisdom** (2:3).

We tend now to read our scriptures for accurate information, so that the Bible, for example, becomes a holy encyclopaedia, in which the faithful look up facts about God. Many assume that if the scriptures are not historically & scientifically correct, they cannot be true at all. But this was not how scripture was originally conceived. All the verses of the Quran are called “parables” (ayat); its images of paradise, hell & the last judgment are also ayat, pointers to transcendent realities that we can only glimpse through signs/symbols. **We distort our scriptures if we read them in an exclusively literal sense.**

There has recently been much discussion about the way terrorists interpret the Quran. Does the Quran really instruct Muslims to slay unbelievers wherever they find them? Does it promise the suicide bomber instant paradise and 70 virgins? If so, Islam is clearly chronically prone to terrorism. These debates have often been confused by an **inadequate understanding** of the way scripture works. “Why do they not study the Quran? Or are their locks on their hearts?” (47:24) We have refused to ‘study’ the Quran & insist on merely reciting its words like the parrot.

People do not robotically obey every single edict of their sacred texts. If they did, the world would be full of Christians who love their enemies and turn the other cheek when attacked. There are political reasons why a tiny minority of Muslims are turning to terrorism, which have nothing to do with Islam. But because of the way people read their scriptures these days, once a terrorist or govts have decided to kill people, they can probably find scriptural texts that seem to endorse their action.

Part of the problem is that we are now **reading** our scriptures instead of **listening** to them. When, for example, Christian fundamentalists argue about the Bible, they hurl texts back and forth competitively, citing chapter and verse in a kind of spiritual tennis match. But this detailed familiarity with the Bible was impossible before the modern

invention of printing made it feasible for everybody to own a copy and before widespread literacy – an essentially modern phenomenon – enabled them to read it for themselves.

Hitherto the scriptures had always been transmitted orally, in a ritual context that, like a great theatrical production, put them in a special frame of mind. Christians heard extracts of the Bible chanted during the mass; they could not pick & choose their favourite texts. Young Hindus studied the Veda for years with their guru, adopting a self-effacing & nonviolent lifestyle that was meant to influence their understanding of the texts. In Judaism, the process of studying Torah & Talmud with a rabbi was itself a transformative experience that was just as important as the content.

“For He has not placed on you any undue strain in your religion.” (22:78). It is humanity that has incessantly weighed itself down with its unremitting generation of convention after canon that has no foundation in divine prescription. It is humanity that has willingly doffed its native mantle of liberty for the straight jacket of synthetic traditions that are without basis in prophetic wisdom.

The last thing anyone should attempt is to read the Quran straight through from cover to cover, because it was designed to be recited aloud. Indeed, the word Quran means “recitation.”

Much of the meaning is derived from sound patterns that link one passage with another. Muslims who hear extracts chanted aloud thousands of times in their lifetime acquire a tacit understanding that one teaching is always qualified & supplemented by other texts & cannot be seen in isolation. The words that they hear again & again are **not “holy war,”** but “kindness,” “peace,” “justice,” & “compassion.”

Historians have noted that the shift from oral to written scripture often results in strident, misplaced certainty. Reading gives people the impression that they have an immediate grasp of their scripture; they are not compelled by a teacher to appreciate its complexity. Without the aesthetic & ethical disciplines of ritual, they can approach a text in a purely cerebral fashion, **missing the emotive & therapeutic aspects of its stories & instructions.**

Solitary reading also enables people to read their scriptures too selectively, focusing on isolated texts that

FOR GOD HAS **NOT** PLACED ON YOU

(QURAN 22:78)

ANY UNDUE STRAIN IN YOUR RELIGION

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