

Against the Mainstream: Muhammad 'Abduh's Reading of Q1: 7 and its Implications for Current Muslim-Jewish Relations

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'Abduh and Tafsir al-Manar

Egyptian scholar Muhammad 'Abduh (1849- 1905) is of course a well known figure in Muslim circles and beyond. It is suffice to mention that he is considered the founding father of Islamic Modernism, the school of thought that preached a deep reform of the dominant attitudes of Muslims, in order to narrow significantly the gap between Islamic values and Western thought. That led to his readiness to borrow ideas and practices from the West, like democracy, rule of law, educational reform, free thought and research, improving the status of women, and relations with believers from other faiths.

He was an al-Azhar graduate and then a senior teacher in that institute, and in his last years also the Mufti of Egypt. An important pillar of his project was to prove that all these changes are authorized and even compulsory by Islamic sources - the Quran, Hadith and the models of behavior exemplified by the Salaf- the ancient fathers of Islam, roughly, the first three generations after the Prophet. Those sources are to go through a process of Ijtihad, a re-interpretation; Thus, they will be totally competent to deal with the challenges confronting Muslims in the modern era.

The main tool of 'Abduh to spread his views, was the periodical al-Manar (The Lighthouse), established by his disciple Rashid Rida in 1898. After 'Abduh's death, al-Manar continued its regular publication until Rida's death, that came to be a very important scholar on his own merit, in 1935.

From time to time al-Manar also contained 'Abduh's lectures on the first four Suras of the Quran. He presented them orally to a group of his students almost every week, and they were adopted to a written version by Rida, that in some cases added his remarks, clearly distinguishable from 'Abduh's words. After 'Abduh's death, Rida

continued the Tafsir (exegesis), now well known as Tafsir al-Manar in 12 tomes, through Sura 12.

In line with his life- long project, described shortly above, the preface to the Tafsir states: "This is the only Tafsir that combines between tradition and rational thought...that clarifies that the Quran is the guide for Humanity at all times, and evaluates the situation of the Muslims in current times, including their deviation from the rightful guidance (of the Quran)".

'Abduh's ideas were not fully accepted even by those who saw him as their mentor, or wished to portray him as such. Actually, two trends can be traced among them; One that adopted a very pro- Western, even secular approach, and another (most prominent among its supporters are Rida himself , and the "Muslim Brothers") that preached a very suspicious attitude towards Western values, rejected what they perceived as the "Western cultural invasion" and prioritized the Jihad against Colonialism and Zionism, over internal reforms and changes. In recent years, on the background of the tremendous ideological and political turmoil in the Arab and Muslim world, and more than 100 years after his passing away, we witness a certain measure of revival regarding 'Abduh's acceptance. There is now a growing readiness to reconsider his moderate ideas, as will be demonstrated later.

Surat al-Fatiha - Main Features

The Opening¹

- 1 In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate
- 2 Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being
- 3 The All-merciful, the All-compassionate
- 4 The Master of Day of Doom
- 5 Thee only we serve, to thee only alone we pray for succor
- 6 Guide us in the straight path
- 7 The path of those whom Thou art blessed, not of those against whom Thou art wrathful, nor of those who are astray

All Quranic verses are from Arbery's translation ¹

Centuries of analysis, both Islamic and Non- Islamic pointed to the unique characteristics of this Sura. The Suras are largely organized from longest to shortest, save some minor exceptions, but al-Fatiha, though very short, is the first one. It is actually a prayer to God, while the belief that the whole Quran is God's word, is a basic pillar in Islamic doctrine. Hence, the obligatory Muslim explanation that it reflects God's command to Muslims how to pray to Him in the proper way. As Muslims don't have a prayer book (Sidur or Mahzor in Hebrew) al-Fatiha is the main part of the Muslim daily prayer and is also recited on many other occasions in individual and community life, from cradle to grave.

Regarding its content, the first six verses are quite clear. It's a direct speech to God, praising him and asking for His help and guidance to the straight path. As already noted by many, the Sura contains some expressions that are similar to Biblical ones, has no mention of the Prophet, and can be easily integrated to the traditional Jewish Sidur, an idea already raised by Jews who are active in Jewish-Muslim dialogue.

The main exegetical task is concerned with verse 7 – who are the three groups that are mentioned there? The majority of Muslim exegetics, beginning from Tafsir al-Tabari in the 10th century, the most esteemed in Muslim tradition, going through the short and most popular Tafsir al-Jalalayn in the 15th century, adopt the following categorization: the "blessed ones" are the Muslims; Those who suffered God's wrath are the Jews, and the Christians are those who are astray. Accordingly, every Muslim begs God to enjoy His grace that is allocated specifically to Muslims, and to differentiate him sharply from the past and future of Jewish and Christian history and destiny. As noted recently by the Israeli scholar Avi Elqayam, in his comprehensive essay on al-Fatiha, this line of explanation is popular among modern scholars as well, especially those who belong to the fundamentalist-radical circles,

most prominent among them is Sayyid Qutb (1906- 1966), widely considered the "Spiritual Father" of all Jihadist movements, including al-Qaida and IS.

More than that, it is obvious that if we ask the ordinary Muslim for the meaning of the verse, it is likely that he will cite the meaning just presented. Admittedly, this understanding of the verse is in line with the spirit and content of most (though not all) Quranic attitudes to the Jews, as will be presented in the appendix to this article. No doubt, this common, intuitive understanding contributed its share to Muslim Anti-Semitism, old and new.

On the other hand, Elqayam also proves that in classical Islam, the non-exclusive and non-self-praising explanation of the verse was in clear minority, but not absent altogether. Especially in Sufi circles, well exemplified in the writings of Abu-Hamed al-Ghazali (d. 1111), and Ibn al-Arabi (d. 1260) a more universal, ecumenical approach is adopted. It is probable that these scholars and their likes had significant influence on 'Abduh's attitude.

'Abduh's Commentary of 1: 7

'Abduh begins by presenting the popular explanation of the verse and then asserts that this Sura was the first of God's revelations to the Prophet Muhammad. He bases it on a tradition attributed to 'Ali, cousin of Muhammad, and later his son-in-law. 'Abduh knew of course that it is not the mainstream view that usually considers Sura 96 as the first one, but this assertion is critical to the core of his argument; Namely, that it was revealed in the very early stage in the development of Islam, so it is impossible that the prayer is ordered to ask God to lead him to the Muslim path. At that time the Muslim path was doing its first and hesitant steps, and of course very far from being coherent, as it would be crystallized only later, after many revelations yet to happen.

So it is clear, says 'Abduh, that the "blessed ones" are not the Muslims; Indeed the verse refers to the "prophets, righteous men, and the martyrs from previous nations, that preceded Islam". He mentions that three quarters of the Quran are dedicated to stories that relate to these

nations, so studying carefully their beliefs and heresies would lead to the straight path. Therefore, those who suffered God's wrath and those who went astray are to be identified with individuals from "previous nations", but not with large collective groups. Or in other words- they might be Jews and Christians, but not the Jews and the Christians as unified, collective entities.

In this point 'Abduh pauses his main thesis by inserting a "modernist" passage regarding an educational issue that was very dear to him- the importance of learning history. Mentioning it in his commentary of the of first Sura reflects his long fight for including history in the curriculum all levels of education and especially in al-Azhar. "embarrassment and bewilderment will be the share of those who hear that many of the clergies of a nation that this is her Book, use religious claims to block the study of history and assert falsely that there is no need to do that. They raise these claims while the Quran states that knowledge of the situation of the nations is among the most important issues that this religion (Islam) calls for".

Then he goes back to the core of his commentary and poses the following crucial question:" How could it be that God commands us to follow the way of those who preceded us, while we have now legal commands and guidelines that they did not have, and therefore our laws should be considered more perfect and more suitable to our times than theirs?"

And his answer is very clear:" the Quran himself relates to that question by explicitly stating that the religion of God is one in all nations, and that the legal commands change [from one religion to another] only in detail, according to the change of times, but there is no change in the foundations, in the basic principles (usul) - belief in God and in the Prophets, in rejecting Evil, and[striving towards] the best of virtues is similar in all religions".

And the resulting conclusion is clear: "God ordered us to look carefully at the history of these people [the" blessed ones"and to imitate them upon

the principles of the Good. The details of their general commands are to be learnt from our law and from our prophet".

It is worth noting which Quranic verses 'Abduh presents to corroborate his arguments; The first one is a divine command to speak directly to the Jews and to the Christians:" Say, People of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you, that we serve none but God, and that we associate not with Him, and do not some of us take others as Lords apart from God" (3: 56). The second one contains the most detailed list , in one verse, of Biblical figures, considered by the Quran as prophets and messengers:" We have revealed to Thee as We have revealed to Noah, and the Prophets after him, and We revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, Jesus and Job, Jonah and Aaron and Solomon and we gave David the Psalms, and Messengers we have already told Thee of before, and Messengers we have not told Thee of; (4: 162). The choice of both verses speaks for itself: it combines a very positive attitude towards previous prophets, as they are probably according to the author the "Blessed ones" mentioned in Sura 1; And a plea for a common denominator with the other monotheistic faiths, a notion considered by 'Abduh to be relevant also to his own times.

The measure of the innovation in Abduh's commentary is clear when we notice that Rida added a correction (istidrak) Some 30 pages after Abduh's words .He claims that there are several credible Hadiths that confirms the traditional categorization.

More examples of 'Abduh's Attitude

A full analysis of 'Abduh's "Jewish" attitudes in the Tafsir and in his other writings, is a task yet to be fulfilled. But still, checking even a portion of his written corpus traces a clear similarity to his ideas presented above.

A good example is, 'Abduh's commentary to the following verse:" You are the best nation ever brought forth to men, bidding to honor and forbidding dishonor, and believing in God" (3: 106). He strives to confine the prestigious title of "best nation" to the prophet and his followers that were active with him in his presence. Actually, he stresses the nuance that those who converted to Islam in an early stage, but did not

meet the Prophet in person, are not included in that group. This explanation contradicts of course a much more comprehensive definition adopted by Tafsir al-Jalalayn, that says that "the Nation of Muhammad", apparently in general, merits this epithet. Even Rida asserts that the Muslims in general were worthy of that definition, until the Umayyad Chaliphate took over and sow dissent and civil war within the Umma.

Another characteristic of 'Abduh's commentary, is to understand the term Islam not as the established concrete religion, but to stick to its literal meaning – "submission of the soul and the practical adherence"[to the orders of God]. This is clear from his understanding of 3:17 that says: "The true religion with God is Islam".

In one of his famous essays, 'Abduh mentions "Friendship with those who Differ in Faith" as one of the novel principles of Islam that he preaches their adoption by his co-Muslims. He mentions there the legal permission for a Muslim to marry a Jewish or Christian woman, even if she didn't convert. In his popular Fatwa (known as the Transwaal Fatwa) he allowed South-African Muslims to wear a Western styled hat, as long as it does not lead to heresy, and also to eat meat slaughtered by Jews or Christians, even when the traditional Basmalla, usually considered obligatory, was not recited during the act of slaughtering.

'Abduh's presence in the current religious debate in Egypt

The 100th anniversary of 'Abduh's death in 2005, had gone almost entirely un-noticed, even in his homeland Egypt. But he and his ideas came back to the public sphere, after the Arab Spring of 2011, and specifically in Egypt, after Abd-al-Fattah al-Sisi took over in 2013. One of al-Sisi's slogans and activities after consolidating his power was "The Renewal of Religious Discourse" (Tajdid al-Hitab al-Dini). In the framework of a very intensive campaign to uproot the Muslim Brothers and their ideology that is conceived very pejoratively by the regime, al-Sisi and his aides recruited 'Abduh's moderate approach on a variety of issues as an alternative model. It is premature and indeed out of the

scope of this paper, to evaluate the success of these relentless efforts. Seemingly the jury are still out.

Curiously enough, the very issue of 'Abduh's commentary to Sura 1 surfaced in the Egyptian popular media during 2017. Some prominent journalists noted that booklets distributed regularly in funerals and in mourning gatherings, contain the al-Fatiha with the traditional interpretation of the verses discussed here. More than that, it is stipulated in the preface that al-Azhar authorized these booklets. These journalists did not hide their harsh opinions against these booklets, and also criticized al-Azhar for its authorization, and mentioned that even past Shaikhs (deans) of the Institute voiced their reservations as to the traditional, exclusivist frame of mind, regarding those verses. They also urged the adoption of 'Abduh's interpretation as the correct one, and as the most suitable for the modern era; Namely, that people will be judged according to the quality of their deeds, and not according to their religious affiliation. One of the writers asked for example, whether it is not more appropriate to understand the verse as promising that God's wrath would be directed against Muslims who burn churches, or indulge in drinking and gambling. "Why do we dismiss ideas of light and openness in favor of extreme and dark ones", asked another article. The following saying sums up the spirit of the debate: "All religions should lead to the purpose for which they were revealed: to foster peace, compassion, co-existence and acceptance of the other".

Another example of 'Abduh's re-emergence in Egyptian discourse, is his recurring mentioning, combined usually with his photo, in the pages of the monthly al-Hilal, one the most important Egyptian intellectual organs, for the last 125 years. In several articles in 2017 he is portrayed as a symbol of a scholar and clergy that should be imitated in our times, in stark contradiction with the Muslim Brothers and other "extremists", that are severely denounced (including the accusation that Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Brothers, was of Jewish origins, God Forbid!). In one issue he is on the cover, together with a few others, all of them entitled the "Knights of thought"(or consciousness).

Appendix

Some Verses Regarding the Jews and Short Remarks on these verses

When the Quran relates explicitly to the Jews, the reference to them is divided to three terms: Children of Israel (Banu Israil); The Jews (al-Yahud) and "the People of the Book", a term that relates to Jews and Christians alike. The first category deals with the Biblical Israelites and almost always echoes the Biblical story, in many cases adding materials from the Jewish vast literature of interpretations and legends that do not appear in the Bible (mostly from the Midrash).

The vast majority of the verses are utterly pejorative and it is easy to understand why and how they were used to justify Anti-Semitic Muslim attitudes, past and present. In the first category, the stories stress the severe sins of the Israelites, mainly their disobedience of God and their prophets, and the harsh punishments that were their share throughout their long history of suffering. Some of the punishments are about to haunt them forever, according to some verses. The tales are shaped, so that a similarity is maintained between the fate of the Biblical Prophets and the situation of Muhammad vis-a vis the heathen Arabs and the Jews that rejected him. This setting puts Muhammad on equal footing with Moses and Jesus for example, and also provides him with a divine promise that in spite of all obstacles, his way and message would finally prevail.

In the second and third category the harsh allegations are directed against the Jews that confronted Muhammad and refused to join his new religion. These are basically verses of bitter polemic regarding the beliefs and actions of those Jews. We have scant information about the nature of the Jews in Arabia at the time, but the most accepted assumption is that they were mainstream Rabbinical Jews, who refused to admit that Muhammad could be a true prophet, because the Jewish firm tradition is that Prophecy stopped completely in the era of the Second Temple. More than that, even if Muhammad were to be a prophet for the Arabs, why should it oblige the Jews to convert and join

his community. So the most frequent guilt of the Jews of that time, is the intentional falsification of their own Scriptures, thus denying the mission of Muhammad that is allegedly mentioned there.

As a rule, the Quran lacks any mention of the specific context of the revelation. Nevertheless, the "Jewish" verses usually conform to the basic historical sequence, created by Muslim tradition and widely accepted today by Western scholarship. So, roughly speaking, we find few tolerant verses, dating probably to the period when Muhammad still hoped to gain the support of the Jews, and/or lacked the power to act directly against them, using violent means. They are relevant also to the period when he wished to convince his own Meccan tribe that he is God's Messenger. Even then (and also in further stages) negative verses regarding the Israelites are included. The polemical verses date mainly to the years after the Hijra to al-Medina in 622, and he encountered in the city and its surrounding a tangible Jewish, Arabicized communities or tribes. Gradually Muhammad lost hope to gain Jewish support, and paved the way to the expulsion of many Jewish communities, to the looting of their land and properties and to the slaughter committed against the males of the tribe of Quraiza. The main pretext for these measures was the claim that the Jews didn't live up to the obligations they took upon themselves in the treaties they had signed with the Arab tribes, that now became loyal allies of Muhammad. Hence, some verses easily fit with the actual siege and fight by the Muslims against the Jews, and stress the divine encouragement to their Anti-Jewish military campaigns.

In what follows there is small selection of relevant verses.

Anti-Jewish Verses

...The people of Moses took to them, after him, of their ornaments a Calf – a mere body that lowed. Did they not see it spoke not to them, neither guided them upon any way? Yet they took it to them, and were evildoers . (7: 145-6)

So, for their breaking the compact, and disbelieving in the signs of God, and slaying the Prophets without right, and for their saying, 'Our hearts are uncircumcised' – nay, but God sealed them for their unbelief, so they believe not, except a few...(4:154-5)

And We decreed for the Children of Israel in the Book: 'You shall do corruption in the earth twice'...

So, when the promise of the first of these came to pass, We sent against you servants of Ours, men of great might, and they went through the habitations, and it was a promise performed.

Then We gave back to you the turn to prevail over them ...

Then, when the promise of the second came to pass, We sent against you Our servants to discountenance you, and to enter the Temple, as they entered it the first time (17: 4-7)

People of the Book, now there has come to you Our Messenger, making clear to you many things you have been concealing of the Book, and effacing many things... (5: 19)

The Jews say, 'Ezra is the Son of God'; the Christians say, 'The Messiah is the Son of God'.

...God assail them! How they are perverted!

They have taken their rabbis and their monks as Lords apart from God (9:30-1)

Thou wilt surely find the most hostile of men to the believers are the Jews and the idolaters (5:85)

Say: 'People of the Book, do you blame us for any other cause than that we believe in God, and what has been sent down to us, and what was sent down before, and that most of you are ungodly?'

Whomsoever God has cursed, and with whom He is wroth, and made some of them apes and swine, and worshippers of idols – they are worse situated, and have gone further astray from the right way. (5: 64-5)

And He brought down those of the People of the Book who supported them from their fortresses and cast terror in their hearts; some you slew, some you made captive. And He bequeathed upon you their lands, their habitations, and their possessions, and a land you never trod. God is powerful over everything. (33:26)

Tolerant Verses

If God had willed, He would have made you one nation; but that He may try you in what has come to you. So be you forward in good works; unto God shall you return... (5: 54)

No compulsion is there in religion. Rectitude has become clear from error. So whosoever disbelieves in idols and believes in God, has laid hold of the most firm handle, unbreaking; (2: 257)

1 Say: 'O unbelievers, I serve not what you serve
And you are not serving what I serve,
Nor am I serving what you have served,
Neither are you serving what I serve
To you your religion, and to me my religion!' (109:
1-5)

All in the Hands of Interpretation

Given that there is contradiction between the content and message of these two groups of verses, the question rises which group is to be adopted nowadays by the Muslim scholars and masses. The more dominant view adheres to the first group. This is based on the fact that tradition has it, though not unanimously, that the more tolerant verses (also those regarding the details of Jihad, some of them contain limits on its implementation), were abrogated by the more militant verses. According to this view the following two verses, both from Sura 9, considered to be one of the last Suras, abrogated many others:

Then, when the sacred months are drawn away, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush. (9:5, 'verse of the sword')

and:

Fight those who believe not in God and the Last Day and do not forbid what God and His Messenger have s

forbidden- such men as practice not the religion of truth, being of those who have been given the Book – until they pay the tribute out of hand and have been humbled. (9: 29, 'verse of jizya')

This latter verse, though it can not be understood as a tolerant one, became from an early stage of the Arab huge conquests, the main pillar and justification to the legal and practical status of Jews and Christians that lived for many centuries under Muslim rule; Namely, they could enjoy life, work and religion, with some restrictions, in return for paying the collective poll tax.

The other view, still in minority, believes that the more tolerant verses are to be adopted, and that they are most suitable for the current reality. In that reality, they claim, a status of 'second rank citizen' is no longer applicable. They anchor their views in the diversity of opinions on exactly which verses abrogated others, and in their assertion that new interpretations are needed, and can be produced by going back to the text, re-reading it with a rationalist attitude, and an independent understanding of the actual needs of the Muslim nation.

'Abduh's reading, as presented in this article, is an integral part of that second attitude, that this author, like many others, Muslims and Non-Muslims, hopes that it would become the dominant Muslim approach toward the Non-Muslim 'other'.