

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Dealing with difficult texts in various faith traditions

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Why do religions sometimes go wrong? Or is it people who do evil, often in the name of religion by misuse of its teaching?

Former chief rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan Sacks, acknowledges that religion "has shed the blood of human sacrifice in the name of high ideals. People have hated in the name of the God of love, practiced cruelty in the name of the God of compassion, waged war in the name of the God of peace, and killed in the name of the God of Life."

In his book, "The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning," Sacks acknowledges that religion and science, both with the capacity to do good, can, in fact, contribute to great evil.

One of the things contributing to when religion goes wrong is the misuse of scripture, especially in dealing with what he calls the "hard texts."

These are passages that, when taken in isolation, can be used to go against the core teaching of the scripture as well as against the interpretive tradition of the religion.

The early passages of the Hebrew Bible were written in a time of conflict

and include many passages that support war and the elimination of enemy groups.

In general, however, the Hebrew Scriptures call for peace and look forward to a time when "they shall



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beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2:4)

Christians take as core teaching that Jesus brings love, forgiveness and peace, but even some of his sayings can become the "hard texts" that can be misused.

Consider his statement to his disciples: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Matthew 10:34)

Or again in one of his parables he says, "But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them — bring them here and slaughter them in my presence." (Luke 19:27)

Taken out of context and without interpretation, these can be texts that can be misused to justify

violent acts. Christians today and throughout history have consistently interpreted such texts in context of Jesus' core teachings of love and forgiveness.

The Quran also has such difficult texts that reflect the conflict and battles of the time when they were given. The passage most quoted by terrorists to justify their killing is known as the "sword verse" which states: "slay the idolaters wherever ye find them, and take them (captive), and besiege them." (Sura 9:5)

Taken by itself without context, this might indeed justify terrible acts. But Muslim scholars point out the context of this passage was a particular battle and is apparent from the surrounding verses.

The tradition also points to other verses which recognize the importance of the Hebrew prophets, the revelation of the Torah, and the teachings of Jesus.

One passage says, "If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about." (Sura 5:48)

One scholar has identified over 200 verses from the Quran which promote good deeds, peace, mercy

and compassion. In fact, the beginning of every chapter or Sura of the Quran, except one, reads, "In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful."

Krister Stendahl, the former bishop of Sweden, proposed rules for interfaith dialogue which included:

■ When you are trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies;

■ and don't compare your best to their worst.

In dealing with these hard texts it is important to follow both of these admo-

nitions. Let us learn from those who practice other faith traditions and refrain from selective reading of their scriptures as well as ignoring the "hard texts" of our own. Most importantly, get to know persons of other traditions and learn from them.

The daughter's story from *Not Without My Daughter*

MAHTOB MAHMOODY
SPEAKING AND BOOK SIGNING
THURSDAY, JANUARY 14TH AT 7PM

My Name is Mahtob
tells not only the
story of Mahtob's
escape from Iran,
but also her escape
from a life of fear.

