

## **General Guidelines for Interpreting Other Religions' Scripture Through the Bible**

Frank Hwang Choe<sup>1</sup>  
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### **INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE**

This paper provides general guidelines for interpreting other religions' scriptures through the Bible. Without objective guidelines, interpretations could become hopelessly subjective. We recognize that all interpretation is done through the pre-understandings and worldviews of the interpreter. We further recognize that subjectivity cannot be totally eliminated, but an objective set of guidelines can substantially reign in the subjectivity of the interpreter. We set forth these objective guidelines to help the interpreter to adopt a more "scientific" stance when he or she reads the sacred texts of any religion, including his or her own. For example, if a Christian does interpretations without any guidelines, he might become partial to a Christian worldview and could include erroneous information on other religions. Similarly, if a Hindu does interpretations without any guidelines, he might become partial to a Hindu worldview, and could include erroneous information on other religions. On the other hand, if the interpretations were done following a set of objective guidelines, such misinterpretations would be minimized.

In addition, when scriptures of other religions are interpreted through the Bible by establishing and using guidelines, other religions may gain fresh new perspectives and enrich their "spiritual wellbeing." This also applies to the Christian side as well. Through such interpretations of scriptures of other religions, Christianity would also gain fresh new perspectives and enrich its own "spiritual wellbeing." Therefore, such interpretations are for the mutual benefits of Christianity and other religions. The term, "spiritual wellbeing," is used here, because any religion in this world becomes corrupted after many years of "human interpretations" of the applicable religion's scriptures. Many things contribute to various erroneous interpretations of the same scripture including the different context of the interpreter as well as the interpreter's understanding of the function of the

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<sup>1</sup> President, Christian Outreach Training And Research Institute (COTARI), a nonprofit religious research organization. An ordained minister. PhD, 1975, Stanford University.

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authority of the text. We examine here only the examples of wrong interpretations due to people's selfish and egotistical nature. People's interpretations of scriptures tend to change the original meaning of scriptures in the direction of helping their own affairs at hand instead of following the original intended meaning. Historically, this is well demonstrated by the following facts. (1) The interpretations and applications of the Old Testament provided by Moses and other prophets became corrupted by the time of Jesus Christ. It took about 1400 years. An example is 'corban' in Mark 7:11. If children did not want to give certain things to their parents, they claimed that it was corban (meaning 'given to God'). Then they did not have to give it to their parents. This was a cunning way to avoid following the fifth commandment, "Honor your parents," in order to satisfy their own desire of keeping certain items. (2) The practices of the Roman Catholic Church became completely corrupted by the time of Martin Luther, which also took about 1400 years. The Roman Catholic priests were selling 'indulgences' as if people's sin can be forgiven by paying money. The Roman Catholic Church was putting mammon above God with this practice. (3) In Iran, it is illegal to execute a virgin. This is derived from the following basis. The Qur'an mentions virgins in Paradise several times. Though the Qur'an does not prohibit the execution of virgins, it does teach that virgins go to Paradise after death unlike married women (that is the reason for frequent mention of "virgins in Paradise"). After the Iranian revolution, Islamic clerics wanted to execute foreign educated women, mostly virgins. They were not satisfied with merely cutting short the lives of young girls, but also wanted to ensure that the girls would suffer an eternity in hell. It is illegal to execute virgins in Iran, but at the same time they created a legal loophole by ordering guards (Basiji guards) to "marry" and rape their prisoners and executed those women on the charge of fornication. Authorities in many other Islamic countries also order their guards to rape female prisoners systematically before the execution of female prisoners. In Iran, the crimes of homosexuality, fornication, armed robbery, kidnapping, drug trafficking are among those deemed capital offenses. Often fornication charges are leveled even when the accused is raped. The victim is rarely able to "prove" her innocence due to a lack of due process and the fact that the testimony of a female is worth one half that of man's. See the website in the footnote for further details<sup>2</sup>. It has also been about 1400 years since the prophet Muhammad. (4) Besides the above three examples, there are numerous examples of corruptions of religious practices due to egotistical human interpretations in

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<sup>2</sup> <http://archive.frontpagemag.com/readArticle.aspx?ARTID=35874>

history. Even the mainline evangelical or Pentecostal Christianity may experience internal corruptions when faith is practiced for a long time with self-glorification and complacency, which is the desire of human flesh.

Another important outcome of these interpretations is that similarities and differences between religions are identified. The identification of similarities might help to narrow the gap between two religions. The identification of differences surely will provide ample sources for further studies to either narrow the gap between two religions or develop definitive bases to support one or the other.

The general guidelines presented in this paper are initial and provisional. For a particular scripture of a religion, specific guidelines are planned to be prepared as the study progresses. These general guidelines should be continually updated as a new need arises instead of using the same initial guidelines all the time.

In order to keep these guidelines objective, the guidelines should be established before starting an interpretation of a scripture. However, in the process of interpretation, some additional guidelines could be developed. In all these efforts, it is important that people involved in the interpretation should agree on the guidelines. They could be Christians and Muslims, or Christians and Hindus, or Christians and Buddhists, or Christians and Confucian ethicists. It is important that all the people involved in the interpretation agree on the guidelines to be used, even though they may have different views on the scripture itself.

## **GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING SCRIPTURES OF OTHER RELIGIONS**

1. The argument is made for monotheistic religions, but also applies to non-monotheistic religions. God has never written any scripture directly with His hands. God is a spiritual being and hands of men were used to record the messages, even when the Spirit of God inspires it.

This is true for all religious texts of monotheistic religions including the Bible and Qur'an, but also true for non-monotheistic religions such as Vedas, Buddhist Sutras, Confucian writings, etc. There is no scripture that was written by the hand of God directly. For this reason, there is room for errors and misinterpretations in the human handling of a revelation.

2. The argument is made for monotheistic religions, but also applies to non-monotheistic

religions. The physical laws are descriptions on how the physical world works that God created and the interpretation of scriptures should not contradict the physical laws. They include physical, chemical, and biological principles.

New physical laws are continually discovered even today. Compared to the times when most of the world's religious scriptures were written, many new laws and discoveries have been made, and we have today much better understanding of the physical world that God created. Interpretation of scriptures should be consistent with these laws. Otherwise, God would break His own "laws," which He would not do, because physical laws are the descriptions of how the physical world God created works. This does not exclude miracles. Miracles happen because we still do not know and understand everything, but God does and He controls everything in the universe.

3. The argument is made for monotheistic religions, but also applies to non-monotheistic religions. The laws developed in psychology and social sciences are derived from human behaviors that are the attributes that God created. These attributes are inherent in God's creation of human beings, even though they became corrupted in the subsequent fall which God did not prevent. In this sense, the interpretation of scriptures should not contradict the laws developed in psychology and social sciences within statistical accuracy.

The laws in psychology and social sciences are not absolute in the sense that there are many exceptions unlike the laws in physical sciences, and are derived by statistical means. On the other hand, in physical sciences, laws are always obeyed with the exception of miracles. Therefore, interpretation of scriptures should be consistent with these laws of psychology and social sciences within statistical accuracy.

4. All human beings should be allowed to follow the righteous paths dictated by their own conscience.

Coercion or compulsion in religion should not be used in the interpretation of scriptures. Coercion or compulsion used in religion brings only superficial belief, and does not bring faith that wells up from the heart. When faith is coerced, only formalities of religion are practiced without true submission of the heart. This is a religion in form but not in substance!

5. The message should be understood within the original context as far as possible: the situation when a particular passage was written, and the role of the writer when a particular passage was written.

The correct understanding of the context and situation can only bring out the correct interpretation of a passage. For this purpose, the life story, or biography of the writer or writers of the scripture as well as the culture and the social situations of the society where and when the scripture was written should be understood.

6. What is claimed in or from scripture should be supported in real life.

People's lives are the testing ground where a certain claim or principle is tested to work or not. A simple claim without real life support should remain as a hypothesis until it is proven in the real life. For example, scriptures of many different religions teach the principle that we should forgive the one who has wronged us. In real life, many people report that forgiving their offenders free them and their relationship gets better. Therefore this principle works and we should follow it.

7. What is recorded in any scripture should be respected as "inspired" words. No scripture should be put down as false or non-truth by simply proclaiming opposing views without solid proofs.

8. When the same story or contents (not interpretations) are used for two or more different religions or scriptures, the earliest one should be considered as original, and later ones should be considered as trying to use the same story for later application. Therefore, if there are any differences, those differences should be interpreted as adaptation for later application for different purposes. This applies to the narratives or contents of the scripture, but not to the interpretations.

9. If certain things are practiced in a particular religion or scripture and they appear to have a merit compared to a Christian practice, they should be recognized as compatible with Christian belief and practice as long as they are not contrary to the gospel or basic teachings of Jesus Christ. In certain cases when they are proven to better Christianity, they should be considered for adoption in Christianity.

10. If there are genuine differences between two religions that could not be resolved by the

above principles, a special investigation should be performed as follows:

- a. If application of natural science could resolve the differences, the principles of natural science should be used for the resolution. Natural science includes physics, chemistry, and biology.
- b. If natural science does not help to resolve the differences, then the principles of psychology and social science should be used for the resolution. The sociological study or a laboratory experiment as in social psychology should be performed to see how different views or beliefs affect the lives of people differently. This study should become the basis for deciding the right path.
- c. If neither natural science nor psychology nor social science could help to resolve the differences, both religions are requested to allow open discussions of the opposing views of the other religion as a moral mandate for truth seeking. There is neither an authority common to both religions nor representing any one religion that could control such a discussion. There is no legal way to control the discussions between peoples of two different religions. This is more of a moral mandate for people seeking truth. If one religion bans open discussions of the opposing view, the view held by that religion is considered weak, because truth always wins out at the end. Any religion that stops open discussions of the opposing views is not following the path to truth. In addition, both religions should allow people to accept either view according to their own conscience instead of mandating only one view to the people.

11. When any religion claims the “one ultimate supreme being” as the final one that reigns over the material and spiritual worlds, it is considered to be the same as the God in Christianity, or other names in monotheistic religions. How it is called is immaterial.

The only difference is the names of God, and the people’s understanding of that God. Therefore, Allah, Yahweh, Brahman, Shanti, Shin, Hananim, the Heaven or Tien, Gott, Dieu, Dios, Gud, Mungu, Thien Chua etc are all different names of one God with different human understanding. In other words, there is one true God, and people named Him differently and ascribed different attributes/characteristics/traits/personalities to Him or different level of

accessibility or knowability. This makes each religion appear to have different Gods. All the cultures, customs, philosophies, and sociological human behaviors have formed these different understanding of Gods, and raise difficulties in understanding different religions.

One simple argument in support of this view between two monotheistic religions is as follows. If person A claims that there is only one God and names the God as GA, and if person B claims that there is only one God and names the God as GB, then GA is the same as GB. If either person A or B claims that the other God is a different God from his or her own God, several different cases may be considered: (1) that person no longer believes in one God and therefore claims that the other person's God is a different God, resulting in two Gods instead of one God, or (2) that person believes that God is created by people and therefore denies the "one ultimate supreme being" because God is simply created by people, or (3) that person does not want to apply logical reasoning to his or her claim. In all of these three cases, a person's claim that there is only one God contradicts the claim that the other person's God is a different God from his or her own God. In all three cases, the only logical option is that GA is the same as GB in essence, but people ascribed different attributes. Any other claims result in a logical dilemma.

12. The ultimate target for nurturing and teaching should be towards the majority population in a particular religious group.

This is similar to what Jesus Christ and Apostle Paul did. Pharisees and Sadducees were opposing the teachings of Jesus Christ during His time; however, the target of His teaching was towards the majority of population and was never towards Pharisees or Sadducees. While Apostle Paul's teaching always began from a Jewish synagogue in an area, he was opposed by Judaizers, and as a result his proclamations were focused on the gentile population in general instead.

13. In order to understand the scripture accurately, translations of the scripture should be provided for the majority of a population instead of forcing them to read in the original language.

The original language should be studied for further understanding of the scripture. The original language has changed significantly over millennia, and it is impossible to understand the scripture better by reading the original texts in the original language only in the modern language setting. The original language becomes almost like a foreign language after several millennia of

changes in it, and should be studied like one of foreign languages. The majority of population would be in the dark without a translated scripture. When a certain religion claims that the scripture has to be read in its original language, it reveals the intention of the religious leaders to keep the mass of people in the dark.

### **ALTERNATIVE PROPOSALS**

#### **1. Do as they do now without any guidelines**

This alternative has produced a great deal of mutual criticism without producing any constructive discussions or good fruits of such activities. Therefore, this alternative is not simply acceptable any more.

#### **2. Develop an alternative set of guidelines instead of the proposed guidelines**

Anyone is welcome to produce an alternative set of guidelines. If such guidelines are developed, some could be synthesized into the present guidelines to produce a better one, or vice versa.

### **RELEVANCE TO OTHER DISCIPLINES AND MINISTRIES**

#### **Apologetics**

Even though an argument is made below for Christianity, a similar argument could be made in the apologetics of other religions.

It appears at first glance that the guidelines described in this paper may weaken Christian apologetics, because this paper tries to put the Bible at the same trust level as the scriptures of other religions at the starting point. This part or process is intentional. If sincere desire exists to settle any disputes against Christianity, the best strategy is let the Bible be treated like any other books, and yet the truth contained in the Bible makes the book undeniably superior to others. Many Muslims who had started to study the Bible to attack Christianity became Christians. Contrary to this, alternative approaches that put the Bible above the scriptures of other religions in the beginning tend to be criticized for the very reasons the Bible is put superior to other scriptures in the beginning. We cannot force people to accept what we believe. We should let people's conscience choose to believe what we believe. This is supported by John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws



him.” Some Christians tried to convince a Hindu of the Christianity validity in an airport in spite of the Hindu’s objection. The Hindu man told the Christians that he was a Hindu and did not believe what he had heard. However, the Christians told him that they would pray for him on the spot. The Hindu refused, but they insisted and prayed for the Hindu loudly. Ever since that experience, that Hindu avoided anything related to Christianity. The result of such compulsion was permanent separation of such a person from God, which is the opposite of the original intention.

### **Comparative Religion**

Extensive search has been made to find out if there exists any a criterion or guideline in comparative religion when comparisons are made between two different religions. To my disappointment, I could not find any such guidelines or criteria. Lack of such guidelines drove peoples of different religions into meaningless criticisms of other religions and perpetual condemnations against other religions without understanding the entirety of other religions. A website search would produce numerous websites that claim why one religion is right but all others are wrong. Present academic practice in comparative religion appears to be, to avoid any contentious arguments, just listing the practices and philosophies/theologies in various areas for each religion, or just describing the religions without getting into any sticky points instead of actually comparing two different religions or various religions. If any studies are done in comparative religion with appropriate guidelines as presented in this paper, more objective studies would result and it would be easier to communicate between two different groups with opposing views. Studies of comparative religion with similar guidelines would result in more weight and relevance to religions involved and contribute to the advancement of the religions involved.

The specific guidelines for comparative religion could be different from the ones outlined in this paper.

### **Evangelism and Missions**

Even though an argument is made below for Christianity, a similar argument could be made in evangelism and missions of other religions.

Evangelism and mission for Christianity towards peoples of other religions did not have much

credibility so far because these peoples have entirely different concept of God as well as entirely different ways of salvation than Christians believe and practice. They have lived with such belief system and seen the benefit of certain practices. In the face of having their lives governed by certain virtues they believe and have practiced, they would not listen to Christian theology or counter-argument against their own religions unless we Christians go to the fundamental level where even these peoples think it is fair in their conscience. Developing these types of guidelines and following them in interpreting scriptures of other religions through the Bible would provide a basis for these peoples to start seriously thinking about the Bible and Christianity. Such serious studies of the Bible and Christianity by peoples of other religions then would lead them into accepting the Christian gospel message, because truth wins in the end because it belongs to God.

### **Purification of Religions**

Even though an argument is made below for purification of Christianity, the same argument could be made for purification of other religions.

By comparing the Christian doctrines and practices to those of other religions using the guidelines outlined above, we are opening them up for self-examination. Sometimes Christians just follow the traditions without thinking too much about what and how they practice their faith. Without objective self-examination, they could fall into self-gratification and complacency. This leads to rituals practiced but with no spiritual substance. This also leads them to keep ineffectual ways out of our spiritual disciplines.

Christianity can be enhanced and advanced to a higher plane by comparing their doctrines and practices to those of other religions. In addition, they can make their doctrines more complete and perfect and refresh their spiritual strength. They have many things to gain by such comparisons based on objective guidelines.

### **CONCLUSION**

The general guidelines established in this paper would make interpretations of scriptures of other religions more objective, leading peoples of other religions to follow the similar practices and eventually leading them to understand Christianity better. As a result, Christianity and other religions

would mature by learning about the practices and theologies of other religions. In addition, this approach would be useful for apologetics, comparative religion, evangelism and missions, and purification of religions in general. These general guidelines should be continually updated as the need arises. As the study of a particular religion's scripture progresses, specific guidelines should be prepared for interpreting that scripture through the Bible.