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Religious "Knowledge" as a Post-Truth Concept?

The word "post-truth" first surfaced when Donald Trump became president of the United States back in 2016. Since then, it has gone on to have many definitions and meanings, such as "where some feel emboldened to try to bend reality to fit their opinions", "a deliberately complicated relationship with the truth", or the simple Oxford Dictionary one: "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."

Though many people have taken on many angles on the post-truth subject, I have decided to focus on its relation to religion, or more specifically, religious "knowledge", which is defined in the following way: "religion *per se* is created by God but religious knowledge is human-made. The sacred law is divinely created but its understanding is a human enterprise." It seems that, almost by definition, religious "knowledge" falls under the category of post-truth, which is why I use the term loosely; "knowledge" implies "truth", and, in fact, it might be quite the opposite.

Leaning heavily on Morteza Hashemi and Amir R. Bagherpour's *A Theory of Evolution of Religious Knowledge in a Post-Revolutionary Iran: And a New Frontier for Sociology of Knowledge*, I examine how various definitions of the term post-truth can play into our understanding of religious "knowledge", focusing mainly on Islam, since it is the religion that Hashemi and Bagherpour focus on – that is not to say, of course, that these findings could not be applied to any of the other religions.

Keywords: religion, religious knowledge, post-truth, Islam, post-revolutionary Iran

1   Introduction

Morteza Hashemi's and Amir R. Bagherpour's *A Theory of Evolution of Religious Knowledge in a Post-Revolutionary Iran: And a New Frontier for Sociology of Knowledge* focused on dealing with the concept of post-truth as an answer to Abdolkarim Soroush's riddle about post-revolutionary Iran. In this paper, I will start by examining post-truth as a concept and summarizing what Hashemi and Bagherpour wrote about in their work. Leaning on their work, I will go on to argue how divergent readings of religious texts can pose a problem, especially in a religiously-governed country; I will predominantly be using examples from Islam, since Hashemi and Bagherpour's work focuses on this specific religion. In the end, I will argue how there could be a possibility that we can start viewing religious knowledge as a post-truth concept – if it is, indeed, possible.

2   A Short Look at Post-Truth

In order to have a clear understanding of what Hashemi and Bagherpour are discussing, it is best to start by looking at what post-truth truly means. In their case, Hashemi and Bagherpour define their understanding of post-truth as:

> By post-truth, we do not mean the irrelevance of truth, or post-factual politics, which are the popular understandings of the term after the rise of Trump to power in the United States /…/ The way we see it, post-truth is about a deliberately complicated relationship with the truth, which neither takes it for granted for one side of the debate nor considers it inaccessible. (Hashemi and Bagherpour, 2018: 72).

Indeed, the term post-truth first cropped up when Donald Trump became president of the United States back in 2016. The word was even chosen as the word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries. They defined is as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."

Lee McIntyre builds upon that definition even further by saying: "many see post-truth as part of a growing international trend where some feel emboldened to try to bend reality to fit their opinions, rather than the other way around." (McIntryre, 2018: 5–6). McIntyre goes on to further argue that it is a simple process of falsification, when the person knows that what they are saying is wrong, yet they try to present it as truthful anyway. They also argue that post-truth can sometimes appear as someone believing in something, despite it being untruthful: "This is when self-deception and delusion are involved and someone actually believes an untruth that virtually all credible sources would dispute." (McIntyre, 2018: 9).

The more modern problem the "post-true" world is currently facing is also the one accurately described by Hannah Arendt:

> To the citizens' everchanging opinions about human affairs, which themselves were in a state of constant flux, the philosopher opposed the truth about those things which in their very nature were everlasting and from which, therefore, principles could be derived to stabilize human affairs. Hence the opposite to truth was mere opinion, which was equated with illusion, and it was this degrading of opinion that gave the conflict its political poignancy; for opinion, and not truth, belongs among the indispensable prerequisites of all power. (Arendt, 1977: 233)

Hashemi and Bagherpour do not understand post-truth in the same way when it comes to their arguments. Their main focus lies in "*deliberate problematic relationships with truth*" (Hashemi and Bagherpour, 2018: 72). However, it is still relevant to understand these classical approaches to post-truth when discussing their work, to understand the main definition of post-truth along with the problem of truth and opinion, as described by Arendt, and the expansion of the definition by McIntyre.

Of course, this is not a complete overview of the complex problem of post-truth (that would require a separate essay on its own), but just a few definitions, used in a broader sense, which can help us begin understanding the phenomenon.

3   Post-Truth Society in a Post-Revolutionary Iran

> On 16 January 1979, the last king of Iran (a.k.a. the Shah) fled the country for the last time. The new leader, Imam Khomeini, triumphed, and his revolutionary followers established a new political system in Iran which has transformed the Middle East in the ensuing decades. (Hashemi and Bagherpour, 2018: 73)

Khomeini's goal was to "transform Iran into a theocratically ruled Islamic state" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021b). He seemed to have succeeded in his vision by banning Western music and alcohol, women were required to wear a hijab; this also saw the return of punishments according to Islamic law.

Hashemi and Bagherpour decided to study an overlooked aspect of this revolution, which they best describe as "an epistemological sea change that has shaped post-revolutionary Iran. The discussions around relativism, religion and what we call *post-truth society* are at the centre of this upheaval." (Hashemi and Bagherpour, 2018: 73)

The main problems that can be seen arising from a state governed predominantly through religion are those to do with non-religious questions. Hashemi and Bagherpour list some of those, such as how would this new regime support science and technology, or its approach to freedom (Hashemi and Bagherpour, 2018: 75). It always seems to boil down to questions of science and freedom.

Hashemi and Bagherpour pose some interesting questions, though the most interesting by far is the following: "What should be the government's policy in approaching divergent readings of religious doctrines?" (Hashemi and Bagherpour, 2018: 75). "Divergent readings of religious doctrines" are a problem which many religions, not just Islam, have faced throughout history. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (*Holy Bible, The New International Version,* 1979, 1984, 2011: Exodus 22:18) is probably the most notable example of how a wrong interpretation of religious text can have disastrous consequences (read: Salem Witch Trials). How can that relate to post-truth then?

If we consider post-truth to be acting in accordance with personal beliefs rather than facts, then Witch Trials are a perfect example of divergent readings of religious doctrines mixing with a post-truth society (even though they were unaware of being in a such society, of course), more specifically of Arendt's post-truth society where opinion and personal beliefs were used as prerequisites of power. Most people (though we could imagine there were some among them who were zealous believers) likely knew there is no such thing as witches, they were merely presented with the opportunity to take revenge on a neighbor that refused to sell a piece of their land, or a lover who did not return their affections.

The question is, could something like this have happened in post-revolutionary Iran? It is true that Khomeini brought back the more conservative traditions; for example, the Shah's rule saw women attending universities, not being required to wear a hijab, slowly gaining more and more equality – Khomeini's rule cancelled out all of it. The answers, as Hashemi and Bagherpour suggest, could be found in the works of Ali Shari'ati, a man who "laid the foundation for the Iranian revolution of 1979" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021a).

3.1   Ali Shari'ati on Knowledge and Religion

It is first prudent to understand the view Shariati held about epistemology: "Consequently, Shari'ati argues that man's knowledge is co-ordinate with what he feels to be the interaction among God, man and nature" (Akhavi, 1988: 408). Therefore, we can assume that Shariati was one who believed that our knowledge only operates in a religious framework.

Another striking thing about Shari'ati, which can be observed in Akhavi's helpful summary of Shariati's views, is the following:

> The common man plays a critical role in selecting the leaders of the community. /…/ Not only that, but Shariati even declares outright that the people are charged with the mission of the Prophet and the imams until the return of the Mahdi (Hidden Imam)! The people will maintain close links with their leaders and in so doing will 'secure the government of knowledge ... just as Plato had urged.' (Akhavi, 1988: 416)

By believing the people hold the power to shape their own destiny, it is easy to see how this type of thinking could have influenced the people of Iran to rebel against a government whose process of Westernization was endangering their religion and culture; an opinion that Shari'ati also shared (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021a).

The most problematic view he held, however, was one that is closely related to our post-truth problem: "But at the same time, he has warned impatient parliamentary deputies - especially over the questions of property ownership, land and trade - that 'if the Guardian Council says something is against the Islam, then it is against Islam'" (Akhavi, 1988: 421). That was precisely the problem I had pointed out with the example of the Salem Witch Trials (where we can consider priests and judges, who ultimately passed the sentence if the woman should be burned as a with or not, as the Guardian Council): how can we be sure that what, in this case, the Guardian Council says something that is against Islam is truly against Islam, or whether it is something closer to what Arendt had been saying about politics and opinion?

4   Religious Knowledge

Hashemi and Bagherpour continue by taking the theory of Abdolkarim Soroush as a basis for their arguments: "/…/ [w]hat fascinated me most was the details and intricacies of the differences in interpretation" (Hashemi and Bagherpour, 2018: 76). Soroush discussed how different people interpret religious texts differently and how we should distinguish between religion and religious knowledge. The main distinction that he makes here is "that religion per se is created by God but religious knowledge is human-made. The sacred law is divinely created but its understanding is a human enterprise." (Hashemi and Bagherpour, 2018: 77). The question I pose here deals with the problems dealt before: how can we, despite differences in interpretation, provide accurate knowledge? It is not completely impossible, especially if the interpretation is based on something like a guide, which can help us find the best way of interpreting a text. The problem arises when interpretation and post-truth become intertwined in a sense that post-truth is understood as interpretation – later, I will expand upon that further.

4.1   Post-Islamism

Post-Islamism is "a recognition that politics rather than religion provides for welfare in this life" (Eteraz, 2007: para. 1). This is a simple solution to the problem of incorrect interpretations of religious texts, something that has come into practice in most first-world countries. Post-Islamism has spread throughout Iran as well: "Post-Islamists in Iran, regardless of their internal differences, have been pursuing political reform. For them, religious reform is a path to political reform" (Mojahedi, 2016: 54).

Something that is interesting to note in Mojahedi's article on post-Islamism is one of the goals they list as part of the post-Islamite movement in Iran:

> Although they want to bring about political reforms, they seek political goals through religious reforms. Their focus, therefore, has been on giving alternative readings of the hadith and the Quran in line with modern values of democracy and human rights. (Mojahedi, 2016: 55)

This notion further supports the idea that religion *can* be interpreted in a way that fits today's modern society, it just seems that *it is not*, perhaps because it goes in line with Arendt's notion that opinion is a prerequisite of all power: one's interpretation of a religious text (in this case the Quran) can be done so that it supports one's personal interest, keeping them in power. If it can go one way, however, it can go the other: a more modern reading of the hadith and the Quran would fit better in today's society, because this society, regardless of how simplistic this sounds, has much considerably relative to the society in which the Quran "came to be".

4.2   Problems With Religious Knowledge

The problem that religious knowledge faces is rooted in Soroush's definition of religion and religious knowledge: religion is created by God, religious knowledge by people. If we put aside the flaw that I have described earlier (interpretation can be manipulated) and to which we will return later, we encounter another problem: the existence of God. If there is no proof of God's existence, this renders religion meaningless, therefore rendering religious knowledge meaningless because it stems from something that is already meaningless.

The problem with this statement is simple: religion is not intrinsically bad. For the people who believe in any God, it only matters that God exists for them, but it does not matter if God exists for us. Hashemi and Bagherpour summarize one of the theories Plantinga defended: "The belief in God is properly basic, and does not require any attempt to discover other propositions and statements as more fundamental bases for it" (Hashemi and Bagherpour, 2018: 78). As Plantinga himself said:

> The fact is, the vast majority of the world's people do believe in God, or something like that, so it's not that God is hidden in the sense that nobody knows about Him, all kinds of people do I suppose, as I say, the vast majority of the world's people. God isn't as plain to us as other people, let's say, or as, I don't know, trees and houses and material objects, but why think that he would have to be? (Plantinga, 2013: 1:02)

The basis of religion is faith, faith in God's existence and God's teaching (it does not matter if it is a Muslim, Christian or any other kind of God or Gods) and that is not intrinsically bad. So, when does it become "bad"?

The problem is the subjectivity of interpretation. The example of how bad interpretation can go wrong is the one I have given before of the Salem Witch Trials, where dozens of people were killed because someone interpreted the religious text as witches (witches being people who have allied themselves with the devil and can therefore perform magical acts) actually existing among us. It becomes an even larger problem when religion and state become intertwined, meaning religious views are turned into law. Even if the majority of the country shares the same religious beliefs, religious knowledge cannot be a basis for state laws, because:

a)   It is based on a deity whose existence has not yet be proven.

b)   Subjective interpretation does not equal to objective truth.

c)   Subjective interpretation can stem from opinion, which also cannot be mistaken for truth.

As Peter Carmichael suggests, we could instead substitute religious knowledge with philosophy, or rather educating our minds to come up with the answers we seek:

> The proof here of God's existence being (if it is a proof) a great *coup*, a stroke of genius, the means to it must be eminently recommended to us; but as these are strictly philosophic means, it will therefore be philosophy, not religious usage, that will be recommended to us as a vehicle, so far, of 'salvation': not action but understanding, not following a pastor like sheep but educating our minds. (Carmichael, 1949: 55).

4.3   Secularization as a Possible Solution

As I have mentioned before, religious knowledge cannot be considered as a basis for law, especially when it is, almost as a post-truth concept, subject to subjective interpretation, which can often lead to disastrous consequences. However, this is hard to imagine for us (Europeans), because Europe had, on several fronts, already managed to separate itself from the church, which is not the case in many countries today. As Hashemi and Bagherpour write:

The problem was that, by the 1980s, empirical data was increasingly proving that, although the theory [the state is separate from the church] is still applicable to Western Europe, it is not valid in many other parts of the world /…/ Moreover, the Iranian revolution was indeed a real-world counterexample to the theory. (Hashemi and Bagherpour, 2018: 80)

Hashemi and Bagherpour then continue by saying: "In its simplest form, the notion of the secular suggests that there is a place for making decisions over public policy which is not affected by diverging value judgments and religious motivations" (Hashemi and Bagherpour, 2018: 80). That would be in accordance with the point I was trying to make earlier.

5   Religious Knowledge as a Post-Truth Concept?

The last point that is still left up for discussion is whether we could actually consider religious knowledge as a post-truth concept. It is an interesting question, since concepts such as religion and religious knowledge are something that are, in fact, so old, yet the concept of post-truth is still relatively new. The question is whether it is actually possible to combine these two concepts?

In this case, of course, we use the term "knowledge" loosely, since it does not pertain to our general idea of what knowledge is (justified true belief). As Hashemi and Bagherpour defined it, "religious knowledge is human-made. The sacred law is divinely created but its understanding is a human enterprise" (Hashemi and Bagherpour,2018: 77), meaning that in this case, when we speak of "knowledge", we speak of the understanding of supposedly divine texts through human understanding and interpretation (which is not necessarily always accurate). Therefore, I use the term "knowledge" when it comes to religious knowledge somewhat loosely.

As mentioned before, religious knowledge has its basis in "the word of God" – religion, that this or that God had created. We may leave aside the fact that God has not yet been proven to exist, as belief in God is not intrinsically bad (as mentioned before). In this paper, I have mainly been discussing religious knowledge in connection to the "word of Gof" that is the Quran (though, in principle, these arguments could also work in connection to the Bible), as Hashemi and Bagherpour's focus was on Iran, a predominantly Islamic country.

The question they posed at the beginning, the one that I have already cited, is: "What should be the government's policy in approaching divergent readings of religious doctrines?" (Hashemi and Bagherpour, 2018: 75). I have been discussing these "divergent readings" in bits throughout the paper, but I would like to focus more on them in the next section.

5.1   Divergent Readings of Religious Doctrines in Islamic Countries

As someone who has had the opportunity to travel to an Islamic country (Tunisia), I have had the privilege of experiencing how one country can be so divided within the same religion (it should also be worth noting that Tunisia is considered the most progressive country in Africa): in the North, where the capital city of Tunis is located, women dress however they wish and do not need to cover themselves, and everything is modernized; in the South (especially on the island of Djerba, where I have stayed), women still cover themselves and a more traditional lifestyle is lead. This is not to say that the country is not considerably more conservative than any European country, it is just interesting to see how, within one country, such different lifestyles are led. Why, then, is it okay for half the country's people to live a more modernized lifestyle, while the rest still live very traditionally, if their one religion has the same "rules"? And, going even further, how is it possible that different countries with the same religion have different religion-based laws, if the "rules" are the same?

Samina Ali, in their Ted Talk for University of Nevada, gives a helpful explanation about how women should dress according to the Quran, which is a good example to further support my argument that religious knowledge could be considered a post-truth concept. They start by explaining that the prophet Muhammad had originally instructed women to dress similarly so they would not get assaulted – women of status were usually left alone, but slaves were often assaulted. This, of course, sparked outrage, as slave women could not possibly dress the same as women of status, so the solution they came up with about how women should dress were the following two points: "A woman's function in society, her role – what we might consider her job – and the society's specific customs." (Ali, 2017: 3:11). They later go on to explain that the Quran never specifies which body parts a woman should cover, and their intentional vagueness is so that a woman could choose how to dress according to the two points mentioned above. As for the term *hijab*, it is meant as a literal veil, separating the earthly from the divine, and not the veil we associate with women's covering.

So, we can safely pose the question here: at which point did a reading of the Quran start to shift in order to impose such laws on women? We could even go so far as to ask who was the first to read those verses of the Quran and say: "Yes, women must now wear a hijab to veil themselves from the world?" I am by no means attempting to attack Islam; I am by no means attempting to attack any religion. As I have said, religion is not intrinsically bad. However, I have also said when religion does become "bad".

5.2   Post-Truth and Religious Knowledge

This is the turning point where I could argue that we could start considering religious knowledge as a post-truth concept. If I abide by the Oxford Dictionary definition, the law which states that (referring to the previous example) women must wear a hijab falls into the category of personal feelings and beliefs, rather than facts. The facts that Ali presented were that women can choose how they want to dress (according to the two rules presented), and that the hijab is a veil separating the earthly from the divine, not a face covering.

Ali perfectly captures this once more:

> I hope it's not any surprise to you that this isn't by accident. For the past few decades, the very people who have been given the important task of reading and interpreting the Quran in a variety of different Muslim communities, certain clerics have been inserting a certain meaning into those three verses concerning women. For instance, that verse I told you about earlier: 'O prophet, tell your wives, your daughters and the women of the believers to draw upon themselves their garments. This is better, so that they not be known and molested.' Some clerics, not all, some clerics have added a few words to that, so that in certain translations of the Quran, that verse reads like this: 'O prophet, tell your wives, your daughters and the women of the believers to draw upon themselves their garments; parenthesis – a garment is a veil, that covers the entire head, the face, the neck, the breasts, all the way down to the ankles and all the way to the wrists. Everything on a woman's body is exposed except for one eye, because she must see where she is headed. And the hands must be covered in gloves. /…/ Ext. ext. ext. ext. on and on and on and on, end of parenthesis – so that she not be known and molested.' (Ali, 2017: 12:34)

This is not just concerning Islam, of course, these are merely examples provided because Hashemi and Bagherpour's focus is on an Islamic country. The example of the Salem Witch Trials is another case similar to this. So, to what does all of this lead us? Ali's TED Talk is in accordance with the Oxford Dictionary's definition of post truth; it goes in accordance with Arendt describing opinion, and not truth, as a basis for power; it even goes in accordance with Hashemi and Bagherpour's deliberate problematic relationship with the truth. It can even be thought of, as McIntyre puts it, deliberately ignoring facts, and/or manipulating them to fit a person's own agenda (in this case, the manipulation of the Quran to fit the notion that women should be veiled, or choosing to believe that witches exist).

> Deniers and other ideologues routinely embrace an obscenely high standard of doubt toward facts that they don't want to believe, alongside complete credulity toward any facts that fit with their agenda. /…/ This is not the abandonment of facts, but a corruption of the

process by which facts are credibly gathered and reliably used to shape one's beliefs about reality. (McIntyre, 2018: 11).

Simply put, it allows us to start thinking of an old concept, such as religious knowledge, in the terms of a newer concept, such as post-truth.

6   Conclusion

It seems that Hashemi and Bagherpour were on the right track when responding to Soroush's work as a post-truth problem, even if they did not continue to expand upon it even further. They have successfully laid grounds, however, to what I have attempted to argue throughout this paper: that we could view religious knowledge as a post-truth concept. If it is indeed the way Souroush describes religious knowledge as being the product of human interpretation, then I have given several arguments (especially backed up by Ali's profound TED Talk) on how interpretation cannot always be considered truth, because it can easily be manipulated to fit with one's own agenda (of course, that is not to say that interpretation cannot be done correctly, it is just to say that we must pay attention to how it is done). With the help of Oxford Dictionary's definition of post-truth, McIntyre's expansion upon that definition, Arendt's case on opinion and power, and Hashemi and Bagherpour pointing out the deliberate, problematic relationship with the truth, I have argued how these coincide with religious knowledge and how that can sometimes be harmful, especially in a religiously-governed state (even if religion is not intrinsically bad). Indeed, the concept of religious knowledge may be very old, and the concept of post-truth relatively new, but the latter gives us the opportunity to observe the former from a different angle.

Religijsko »védenje« kot post-resnični koncept?

Beseda »post-resnica« se je prvič pojavila, ko je leta 2016 Donald Trump postal predsednik Združenih držav Amerike. Od takrat je beseda prevzela veliko definicij in pomenov, med drugimi »kjer se nekateri čutijo tako pogumne, da poskusijo izkriviti stvarnost, da se ta prilagodi njihovemu mnenju«, »namenoma kompliciran odnos z resnico« in preprosta definicija slovarja Oxford Dictionary: »ki se nanaša ali označuje okoliščine, kjer so objektivna dejstva manj vplivna pri oblikovanju javnega mnenja kot sklicevanje na čustva in osebna mnenja«.

Čeprav je veliko ljudi obravnavalo post-resnico z različnih vidikov, sem se sama osredotočila na povezavo te z religijo, oz. bolj specifično z religijskim »védenjem«, ki je definirano na naslednji način: »religijo *per se* ustvari Bog, religijsko védenje pa ustvari človek. Sveti zakon je ustvarjen s strani Boga, razumevanje tega pa je človeška domena«. Zdi se, da religijsko »védenje« skoraj po definiciji spada v kategorijo post-resnice – prav zato uporabljam ta izraz zelo ohlapno; »védenje« implicira »resnico«, pravzaprav pa je morda situacija prav nasprotna.

Preučujem, kako različne definicije izraza post-resnica vplivajo na naše razumevanje religijskega »védenja«, pri čemer se sklicujem na delo *A Theory of Evolution of Religious Knowledge in a Post-Revolutionary Iran: And a New Frontier for Sociology of Knowledge* (Hashemi in Bagherpour, 2018). Osredotočam se predvsem na islam, ker je to religija, na katero se osredotočata Hashemi in Bagherpour, vendar to ne pomeni, da ugotovitve tega prispevka ne moremo aplicirati na druge religije.

Ključne besede: religija, religijsko védenje, post-resnica, islam, porevolucionarni Iran

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