

Repositioning Sacred Texts in the Age of Post-Truth: A Hermeneutic Approach to Religious Authority and Truth

M. Rachmatullah Arken

UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia

E-mail: r.arken@uinsgd.ac.id

Corresponding authors: r.arken@uinsgd.ac.id

Abstract: *The phenomenon of post-truth has significantly affected religious life in the digital age, where emotional narratives and personal beliefs often overshadow objective truth. This paper explores how post-truth undermines the authority of sacred texts, shifting religious understanding towards subjective interpretations driven by personal and group affiliations. Using Gadamer's hermeneutics, particularly the concept of "fusion of horizons," this study offers a critical framework for reinterpreting religious texts in a dynamic and context-sensitive manner. The research employs a qualitative literature review method, analyzing works on hermeneutics, post-truth, and theological interpretation. The findings reveal that personal authority and emotional attachment to religious figures have become dominant in shaping religious understanding, often at the expense of rational and text-based theological discourse. Furthermore, the relativization of truth in post-truth societies challenges the absolute nature of divine revelation, leading to fragmented interpretations of sacred texts. However, rather than viewing post-truth solely as a threat, this paper argues that it presents an opportunity for theological renewal. By integrating critical hermeneutics with a contextual approach, sacred texts can remain relevant as sources of absolute truth while being responsive to contemporary social and moral challenges. Thus, hermeneutics serves as a bridge between the immutable essence of revelation and the evolving human understanding.*

Keywords: *Contextual Theology, Personal Authority in Religion, Post-Truth Phenomenon, Religious Hermeneutics, Sacred Texts Interpretation.*

A. Introduction

The post-truth phenomenon has become a highly relevant issue in the digital age, where objective truth is often overshadowed by narratives that prioritize emotion and personal beliefs. The term "post-truth" refers to a situation in which objective facts are easily overlooked or even disregarded in favor of ideological interests or personal preferences.¹ In this context, truth is no longer measured by verifiable facts but by what is emotionally acceptable to certain individuals or groups.² This phenomenon has permeated various aspects of life, including religious life, which should fundamentally rely on the authority of sacred texts and divine revelation as sources of absolute truth. According to McIntyre, post-truth has flourished alongside the dominance of social media and rapid information dissemination, leading to the emergence of narratives driven more by personal and group sentiments than by objective fact verification. He explains that in

¹ Keyes, R. (2004). *The post-truth era: Dishonesty and deception in contemporary life*. St. Martin Press, pp. 15-16.

² Taylor, C. (2011). *A secular age*. Harvard University Press, p. 88.

post-truth societies, emotional narratives are more readily accepted than rational facts, ultimately undermining the pursuit of truth across many facets of life, including religion.³

Amid this post-truth tide, the authority of objective facts has eroded, especially among religious communities. Many believers are more inclined to trust the authority of certain religious figures rather than truth grounded in factual evidence and rational thought.⁴ Emotional attachment to religious leaders, seen as ultimate truth-bearers, often clouds objective judgment.⁵ Sacred texts, which should serve as the primary source of authority, are increasingly accepted unquestioningly as indisputable revelation, even when confronted with critical and dynamic intellectual developments. A study by Campbell and Tsuria illustrates how social media has provided a platform for religious figures to construct their own authority, garnering followers who rely more on personal charisma and emotional messaging than on critical engagement with theological discourse. Their research notes that such personal authority tends to prioritize followers' feelings and beliefs over exploring objective theological truths.⁶

One of the primary challenges in the post-truth context is the position of sacred texts, such as scripture, within theology. These texts should serve as the theological logos, providing a foundation of absolute truth for religious adherents.⁷ However, in this era, sacred texts are often interpreted subjectively, aligned with personal or group interests rather than through objective and analytical lenses. This raises crucial questions about the relevance of scripture in addressing rapidly evolving contemporary issues related to morality, ethics, and social interaction.⁸ Foucault argues that texts cannot be understood in isolation but are always influenced by prevailing social contexts and power dynamics. In religious contexts, this means that scriptural interpretations are invariably shaped by ideological and group interests.⁹ Brown's study also highlights how postmodern thought, with its emphasis on truth relativism, further threatens the position of sacred texts, leading to highly varied and sometimes contradictory religious interpretations, often at odds with the original message of revelation.¹⁰

Given this reality, it is essential to reconsider how religion and sacred texts can maintain their relevance as guides to truth in the midst of post-truth disruptions. One viable alternative is the adoption of a more contextual hermeneutic approach. This perspective allows for religious texts to be interpreted with consideration of contemporary developments, social challenges, and the needs of the faithful, without compromising the core essence of revelation. Such an approach

³ McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post-truth*. MIT Press, p. 45.

⁴ Campbell, H. A., & Tsuria, R. (2022). *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in digital media*. Routledge, p. 60.

⁵ Pargament, K. I. (2013). *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. Guilford Press, p. 92.

⁶ Campbell, H. A., & Tsuria, R. (2022). *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in digital media*. Routledge, p. 67.

⁷ Nasr, S. H. (2002). *Islamic life and thought*. SUNY Press, p. 112.

⁸ Lyotard, J. F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. University of Minnesota Press, p. 93.

⁹ Foucault, M. (1980). *The history of sexuality, Volume 1: An introduction*. Pantheon Books, p. 90.

¹⁰ Brown, D. (2011). *The postmodern challenge to christian belief*. University of Oxford Press, p. 23.

opens avenues for more dynamic interpretations while safeguarding the integrity of religious teachings. Gadamer emphasizes that understanding texts is always bound to historical and social contexts, suggesting that religious teachings must be reinterpreted in ways relevant to present-day challenges.¹¹ Similarly, Esack advocates for a contextual hermeneutic that strives to capture the holistic meaning of religious texts, ensuring consistency with divine revelation while responding to evolving social conditions.¹² This approach enables sacred texts to remain living sources of moral guidance, addressing both historical continuity and contemporary relevance.

Another significant challenge is how to uphold religious values as moral guides within increasingly pluralistic and ideologically diverse societies. In the post-truth era, people are more easily swayed by widely circulated narratives on social media, often disregarding the accuracy or validity of information. Campbell and Tsuria point out that social media shapes how people consume information, with a tendency to follow narratives that reinforce personal biases, thereby diminishing critical understanding of religious texts.¹³ In many cases, such narratives not only distort accurate religious understanding but also foster intolerance toward differences. Reports by Pew Research Center indicate that one of the most profound impacts of post-truth on religious life is the intensification of polarization, where religious beliefs are often used to justify specific political or social views that emphasize division rather than commonality.¹⁴ These dynamic fosters isolated religious groups more focused on differences than shared values.

Moreover, post-truth significantly influences how religious communities perceive religious authority. In a society increasingly dominated by rapid and often unverified information, believers face dilemmas regarding whom to recognize as legitimate authority. This has led to confusion over credible sources of truth, particularly on social media, where many religious figures lacking formal authority can quickly amass large followings through highly personal and emotional narratives. Pargament highlights that religious authority often depends on personal influence and charisma, becoming increasingly fragmented as unverified information proliferates.¹⁵ This fragmentation results in individuals and groups easily constructing their own versions of truth, based on personal affiliations or sympathies toward particular figures, rather than adhering to broader and holistic religious teachings. The power to interpret sacred texts shifts as information control becomes decentralized and appropriated by unauthorized individuals or groups, further exacerbating fragmented religious understanding with no universally accepted authority.¹⁶

¹¹ Gadamer, H. G. (2004). *Truth and method*. Continuum, p. 267.

¹² Esack, F. (2009). *The Qur'an: A user's guide*. One World Publications, p. 121.

¹³ Campbell, H. A., & Tsuria, R. (2022). *Digital Religion: Understanding religious practice in digital media*. Routledge, p. 53.

¹⁴ Pew Research Center. (2019). *The future of world religions: Population growth projections, 2010-2050*, p. 12.

¹⁵ Pargament, K. I. (2013). *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. Guilford Press, p. 156.

¹⁶ Foucault, M. (1980). *The history of sexuality, Volume 1: An introduction*. Pantheon Books, p. 93.

In confronting the post-truth phenomenon, hermeneutics plays a crucial role in repositioning religious texts as relevant sources of truth. Hermeneutics, essentially the art and theory of text interpretation, offers approaches for understanding religious texts in more contextual and dynamic ways.¹⁷ By applying hermeneutic methods sensitive to social, cultural, and historical contexts, believers are encouraged to move beyond literal interpretations, engaging critically and reflectively with the deeper meanings of sacred texts. This approach treats sacred texts not as static entities detached from temporal dynamics, but as revelations continually addressing humanity's evolving contexts.¹⁸ Contextual hermeneutics enables the preservation of religious teaching integrity while maintaining textual relevance in confronting contemporary challenges, especially within a world increasingly shaped by post-truth dynamics.

An inclusive and dialogical hermeneutic approach, as developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, offers viable solutions to post-truth challenges in religion. Gadamer posits that understanding emerges from interaction between the text and the reader's historical context.¹⁹ In the post-truth era, religious understanding must involve openness to dialogue, not only among individuals within the same faith but also across different faith traditions. Such dialogue fosters more comprehensive understandings of religious teachings, addressing the pluralistic and conflict-prone realities of modern society.²⁰ Open and inclusive interfaith dialogue can mitigate the effects of post-truth by creating spaces for broader, more harmonious interpretations, reducing ideological polarization often fueled by exclusive religious readings.

In facing ambiguous and misleading information prevalent in the post-truth era, hermeneutics empowers believers to critically engage with religious teachings. Hermeneutics encourages viewing sacred texts through broader interpretive lenses, recognizing them not only as bearers of absolute truths but also as living documents needing contextual translation and application.²¹ Consequently, religion remains relevant as a source of truth and moral guidance in navigating contemporary complexities. Furthermore, hermeneutics allows sacred texts to be interpreted more responsively to evolving moral and ethical issues within society. For instance, in post-truth contexts where objective facts are often disregarded, believers can be guided to revisit religious teachings through approaches emphasizing justice, compassion, and peace—core tenets of most religious doctrines. Sacred texts must be understood in constantly changing contexts, where interpretations are responsive to social and ethical developments, ensuring the enduring relevance of religion in a rapidly evolving world.

The primary objective of this study is to examine how hermeneutic approaches can assist religious adherents in addressing the post-truth phenomenon and reposition sacred texts as relevant sources of truth in an increasingly polarized world. This study seeks to highlight the

¹⁷ Gadamer, H. G. (2004). *Truth and method*. Continuum, p. 268.

¹⁸ Esack, F. (2009). *The Qur'an: A user's guide*. One World Publications, p. 120.

¹⁹ Gadamer, H. G. (2004). *Truth and method*. Continuum, p. 270.

²⁰ Gadamer, H. G. (2004). *Truth and method*. Continuum, p. 281.

²¹ Esack, F. (2009). *The Qur'an: A user's guide*. One World Publications, p. 124.

importance of contextual and reflective religious understanding amidst the complexities of the information age. The novelty of this research lies in its integration of hermeneutical inquiry with the contemporary challenges of post-truth. While most studies on religious hermeneutics remain confined to traditional textual interpretations, often neglecting the profound impact of post-truth on perceptions of truth, this study offers a fresh perspective by merging hermeneutical analysis with modern societal challenges. Thus, it paves the way for more responsive and relevant interpretations of sacred texts amid the currents of post-truth.

The phenomenon of post-truth has been extensively studied across various academic disciplines, particularly in the fields of social sciences, politics, and media studies. According to McIntyre, post-truth can be understood as a condition where emotions and personal beliefs hold greater influence than objective facts in shaping public opinion. This concept initially emerged in the political sphere, where factually unfounded information spreads rapidly through social media. In this context, post-truth not only blurs the line between fact and fiction but also shapes how individuals perceive truth and reality, ultimately affecting their understanding of religion and morality. McIntyre further explains that in a world saturated with the fast flow of information, our perception of truth is often shaped more by emotionally compelling narratives than by objectively verified information.²² This phenomenon creates confusion in distinguishing between fact and opinion, consequently influencing how we comprehend various aspects of life, including religion.

In religious studies, the post-truth phenomenon is closely linked to how individuals or groups choose the authority they follow. Smith observes that in the post-truth era, many people become easily attached to religious figures or leaders they idolize, often without critically examining the validity of their claims. This has led to highly subjective and fragmented religious views, where individuals or groups claim their own version of truth, disregarding objective and universal standards.²³ Smith notes that in many cases, the emotional influence of religious leaders outweighs rational arguments or objective evidence supporting their religious assertions.²⁴ Consequently, the authority of religious texts themselves becomes questioned, as people prioritize personal views and interpretations over deeper theological understanding. These dynamic risks fragmenting religious comprehension, with each group believing their perspective is the most valid, even when lacking a strong theological foundation.

Hermeneutics, as the theory of interpretation, offers a valuable tool for believers to address the challenges of post-truth. Gadamer developed the concept of the “fusion of horizons,” emphasizing the importance of understanding texts within the historical and cultural contexts of the reader. According to Gadamer, textual understanding is never static; rather, it evolves through the interaction between the reader and the text. In relation to religion, this

²² McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post-truth*. MIT Press, p. 45.

²³ Smith, J. (2020). *Religion in the post-truth era*. Oxford University Press, p. 82.

²⁴ Smith, J. (2020). *Religion in the post-truth era*. Oxford University Press, p. 88.

hermeneutical approach opens pathways for a more dynamic understanding of religious teachings, where sacred texts are not merely interpreted literally but are also considered within the broader social, political, and moral contexts.²⁵ Adopting this approach enables believers to preserve the essence of revelation while ensuring its relevance amidst the complex challenges of the post-truth era.

Several studies also argue that contextual and critical interpretations of religious texts can help believers navigate the challenges posed by post-truth. Foucault, for instance, emphasizes the intrinsic relationship between power and knowledge in the formation of textual meaning.²⁶ In the religious context, this implies that the interpretation of sacred texts is often influenced by existing social and political structures, as well as by those who hold interpretative authority. Foucault reveals that interpretations are invariably bound to societal power dynamics, and religious texts are no exception.²⁷ Through a more inclusive and critical hermeneutical approach, believers can uncover meanings within religious texts that are relevant to contemporary conditions without compromising the essence of the teachings. Contextual religious understanding opens space for more flexible and relevant interpretations, while remaining faithful to the fundamental values of revelation.²⁸

Critical hermeneutics, as developed by Jürgen Habermas, also provides an important perspective in addressing post-truth. Habermas asserts that achieving valid and rational understanding requires participation in open and transparent dialogue. In religious terms, this underscores the importance of interfaith and interdisciplinary dialogue in interpreting sacred texts. Habermas stresses that open and inclusive dialogue allows diverse viewpoints to be considered objectively, fostering deeper understanding and preventing narrow or exclusive interpretations.²⁹ This approach is particularly relevant in the post-truth era, where information polarization and personal belief systems often overshadow the pursuit of objective truth. Therefore, critical hermeneutics creates broader discussion spaces, enabling religious teachings to be understood more holistically and deeply without being trapped in overly limited interpretations.

In response to the post-truth phenomenon, many studies emphasize the importance of religious education grounded in critical and rational understanding. Nussbaum, for example, concludes that education focusing on critical thinking skills can help individuals avoid falling victim to false or manipulative information. In this context, a more critical hermeneutic approach to religious texts becomes an effective tool for fostering deeper understanding of religious teachings and developing a more open mindset in addressing diverse viewpoints in the

²⁵ Gadamer, H. G. (2004). *Truth and method*. Continuum, p. 267.

²⁶ Foucault, M. (1980). *The history of sexuality, Volume 1: An introduction*. Pantheon Books, p. 100.

²⁷ Foucault, M. (1980). *The history of sexuality, Volume 1: An introduction*. Pantheon Books, p. 101.

²⁸ Brown, D. (2011). *The postmodern challenge to christian belief*. University of Oxford Press, p. 23.

²⁹ Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action, Volume 1: Reason and the rationalization of society*. Beacon Press, p. 98.

post-truth era. Nussbaum also highlights that education aimed at fostering critical analysis of societal narratives is essential, as without such skills, individuals are easily swayed by misleading or emotionally charged views.³⁰ This becomes increasingly important as religious understanding is influenced by information that is often unverified and filled with highly emotional narratives.

Additionally, literature on religious hermeneutics highlights the significance of approaches involving intertextual understanding. According to Fish, interpretation not only involves the text being read but also its relationship with other existing texts. In the religious context, this means that understanding a single religious text cannot be separated from its connections and influences with other sacred texts. Fish argues that the meaning of a text is never isolated from prior texts, and new interpretations are always shaped by the tradition of preceding texts.³¹ Through this approach, believers can more effectively connect religious teachings with contemporary challenges while preserving the essence of divine revelation. The post-truth phenomenon, with its tendency to relativize truth, necessitates a more responsive and contextual approach to interpreting religious texts. Through a more open, inclusive, and critical hermeneutical approach, sacred texts can be reintroduced as relevant and transformative sources of truth in an increasingly polarized world. This highlights the need for further studies that approach religion not merely from a doctrinal perspective but also as a means of understanding and addressing the social, moral, and political challenges facing humanity in the post-truth era.³²

B. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach using a literature review method to analyze the post-truth phenomenon within the context of religious theology. The literature review method was selected because this research aims to explore understandings from various theoretical perspectives and practices of religious text interpretation that are relevant to the challenges posed by post-truth.³³ Through this method, the researcher examined a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including books, journal articles, and academic publications related to hermeneutics, post-truth, and the interpretation of religious texts. Additionally, the study involves an in-depth review of hermeneutical theories proposed by prominent scholars such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, and Michel Foucault. As primary references, the theories developed by Gadamer and Habermas are particularly pertinent for understanding religious texts in the post-truth era, where objective truth is often marginalized by the rise of

³⁰ Nussbaum, M. (2010). *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton University Press, p. 78.

³¹ Fish, S. (1980). *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*. Harvard University Press, p. 143.

³² Gadamer, H. G. (2004). *Truth and method*. Continuum, p. 281.

³³ Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications, p. 37.

subjective narratives in society.³⁴ This paper also analyzes how post-truth influences the way people perceive religious truth, as discussed by McIntyre regarding the post-truth phenomenon's impact on worldview formation.³⁵

In the analytical process, the researcher applies a critical hermeneutic approach to examine the role of religious texts in confronting the post-truth phenomenon. This approach enables the researcher to scrutinize religious texts within their ongoing social, cultural, and historical contexts. The analysis focuses not only on the literal meanings of the texts but also considers the influence of power structures, ideologies, and social interactions in shaping meaning. Through this approach, the study seeks to reveal how religious texts can be interpreted more responsively to the changing times while maintaining their essence as sources of absolute truth. This is in line with Gadamer's view that the understanding of religious texts always depends on the interpretive horizon of the reader, which is inevitably shaped by their social and historical conditions.³⁶ Thus, the critical hermeneutic approach allows religious texts to be reinterpreted through a more inclusive and dynamic perspective, aligning with contemporary challenges.

This study focuses specifically on analyzing the interpretation of Islamic religious texts, emphasizing how hermeneutics can be applied to comprehend these texts amidst the post-truth phenomenon. The research examines various hermeneutic perspectives relevant to the Islamic context, particularly through the hermeneutical approach developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons" is utilized to explore the meanings embedded in Islamic texts, such as the Qur'an and Hadith, while considering the current social and historical contexts of the Muslim community. This study also compares how interpretations of religious texts in Islam may differ from those in other religious traditions, and how this approach can assist in addressing contemporary challenges faced by Muslims in the post-truth era. By employing Gadamer's hermeneutical approach, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how Islamic religious texts can be interpreted in a relevant manner without compromising the universal essence of religious teachings.

C. Results and Discussion

Personal Authority and Emotional Attachment as a Religious Reality in Society

The post-truth phenomenon, which has flourished in the digital era, has significantly impacted religious life. One of the most prominent effects is the increasing dominance of personal authority in matters of faith. In contemporary times, many individuals are more inclined to follow the religious views and interpretations of specific religious figures they idolize, rather than adhering to broader, theologically tested religious teachings. This personal authority is further

³⁴ Gadamer, H. G. (2004). *Truth and method*. Continuum, p. 267. See also Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action, Volume 1: Reason and the rationalization of society*. Beacon Press, p. 98.

³⁵ McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post-truth*. MIT Press, p. 45.

³⁶ Gadamer, H. G. (2004). *Truth and method*. Continuum, p. 267.

amplified by the rise of social media, which enables religious leaders or spiritual figures to build large followings without undergoing proper verification or possessing institutional authority. Davison observes that the digital age has given rise to new forms of religious authority that are more personal and emotional rather than institutional.³⁷

Social media has further strengthened this personal authority, allowing religious leaders to cultivate vast audiences without formal verification or authoritative legitimacy. Campbell's analysis highlights how digital media reconstructs religious relations through online platforms, fostering a robust form of "personal religious authority."³⁸ A concrete example is the phenomenon of popular religious figures in Indonesia, such as preachers with hundreds of thousands or even millions of followers on Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter. Often, these followers do not only adhere to the teachings but also develop deep emotional bonds with these figures. The influence of such religious leaders frequently surpasses that of religious texts themselves. Lindgren emphasizes that religious relationships today are not merely epistemic but also deeply affective and symbolic.³⁹

Emotional attachment also plays a crucial role in shaping religious life in the post-truth era. In many cases, followers align themselves with religious leaders or communities not due to rational conviction but because of emotional ties. This leads individuals within certain religious groups to accept narratives that align with their leader's views, even when these lack objective evidence or theological depth. Such emotional attachment exacerbates the post-truth phenomenon, as followers tend to accept claims made by their leaders without questioning their validity. McIntyre characterizes this era by a dependence on emotional narratives and a disregard for objective validity, including in religious discourse. Consequently, individuals often accept religious claims simply because they feel "close" to the leader, rather than through rational evaluation.⁴⁰

One illustrative example is found among followers of specific Sufi orders or religious sects, where allegiance is often rooted in the charisma of spiritual leaders rather than a profound understanding of religious doctrines. Many disciples follow their leaders sincerely, even when the teachings or practices advocated are not supported by strong theological arguments or may even contradict broader religious principles. Weber has long noted that religious charisma can challenge and even replace the normative authority of religious institutions.⁴¹ In such cases, emotional attachment and reverence toward a leader overshadow the pursuit of objective and rational truth.

³⁷ Davison, A. (2017). *Secularism and revivalism in Turkey: A hermeneutic reconsideration*. Yale University Press, p. 98.

³⁸ Campbell, H. A., & Tsuria, R. (2022). *Digital Religion: Understanding religious practice in digital media*. Routledge, p. 96.

³⁹ Lindgren, S. (2017). *Digital media and society*. SAGE Publications, pp. 112-113.

⁴⁰ McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post-truth*. MIT Press, p. 45.

⁴¹ Weber, M. (1947). *The theory of social and economic organization*. Free Press, p. 358-359.

Furthermore, religious leaders often employ powerful rhetoric to reinforce emotional bonds with their followers. They utilize emotionally resonant language that directly appeals to their audience's feelings. Stöckl explains that such emotional communication styles in online sermons can create instant spiritual connections, often bypassing rational verification.⁴² Followers who feel emotionally connected to their leaders are less likely to critically evaluate the religious claims presented, even when these claims lack rational accountability or contradict other religious teachings.

The influence of personal authority, supported by emotional attachment, further blurs the line between truth and personal belief. In many religious communities, personal convictions based on emotional ties to religious figures are valued more than objective scrutiny of doctrinal accuracy. Followers often place greater trust in their leaders' interpretations, even when these lack comprehensive theological grounding or deviate from fundamental religious principles. This condition echoes Al-Attas's view that without proper epistemological guidance, communities are prone to fall into pseudo-religious authorities driven by emotionalism.⁴³

This phenomenon also highlights the challenge of promoting religious education based on critical understanding amidst strong emotional attachments to personal authorities. Emotional loyalty can hinder individuals' ability to engage critically with religious teachings, leading to the acceptance of subjective and unverified religious "truths." Abou El Fadl argues that sound religious education demands intellectual freedom, openness to diverse interpretations, and the ethical and scholarly accountability of authority figures.⁴⁴ Emotional attachment without critical filtering becomes a major obstacle to this ideal.

Moreover, the influence of personal authority and emotional attachment extends beyond individuals, impacting the social dynamics within religious communities. Emotional bonds with specific religious figures often result in followers isolating themselves from differing views or groups. This fosters polarization within religious communities, where each group claims absolute truth while others are deemed misguided or heretical. In this context, the post-truth phenomenon fosters absolutist narratives, where minor interpretative differences lead to accusations of heresy. Taylor warns that excessively emotional and closed religious identities are counterproductive in pluralistic societies.⁴⁵ This represents one of the detrimental impacts of post-truth in religious contexts, where objective facts are increasingly marginalized in favor of beliefs rooted in emotional attachment and personal authority.

⁴² Stöckl, H. (2019). Emotionalization in digital preaching. *Discourse & Communication*, 13(1), pp. 76–97.

⁴³ Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1995). *Prolegomena to the metaphysics of Islam*. ISTAC, pp. 25-27.

⁴⁴ Abou El Fadl, K. (2005). *The search for beauty in Islam: A conference of the books*. Rowman & Littlefield, p. 138.

⁴⁵ Taylor, C. (2007). *A secular age*. Harvard University Press, pp. 233-235.

The Issue of Truth Standards in Sacred Text Interpretation: The Loss of Absolute Meaning

The growing reliance on emotional attachment and allegiance to specific figures in religious life is not a new phenomenon within the Islamic world. Since the passing of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the Muslim community has witnessed the emergence of various groups that claim closer affinity to divine revelation through particular personalities. Historically, this is evident in the development of theological sects (kalam) and various schools of jurisprudence (madhhab), which, despite referring to the same sacred texts the Qur'an and Hadith have produced divergent interpretations and applications. Consequently, emotional attachment to figures or groups has often supplanted objective standards in the interpretation of religious texts, which should ideally be grounded in a pure and universal understanding of divine revelation.⁴⁶

The position of sacred texts revelation as the theological logos is crucial in preserving the integrity and sanctity of religious teachings. Revelation, as received by the Prophet, is expected to serve as the ultimate source of truth, guiding humanity in all aspects of life. As Harari notes, in monotheistic traditions, revelation functions not only as a moral guide but also as an epistemological claim to the highest truth.⁴⁷ Thus, religious texts, whether the Qur'an or Hadith, should offer clear and absolute guidance, untainted by subjective interpretations that risk distorting the essence of divine revelation.

However, in the post-truth context, where truth is increasingly viewed as relative, the absolute essence of sacred texts is gradually eroding. Texts once regarded as clear, indisputable guides are now often treated as objects open to free interpretation by individuals or groups. This trend is exacerbated by the proliferation of contradictory interpretations, each claiming exclusive correctness. Such dynamics create confusion within religious understanding, where the absolute standard of truth becomes diluted by burgeoning subjectivity. McIntyre explains that this era is marked by a decline in trust toward grand narratives and a growing influence of opinion and emotion in assessing truth.⁴⁸ Consequently, sacred texts are no longer approached as divine, immutable documents but as flexible materials subject to reinterpretation aligned with specific interests.

From a postmodern perspective, sacred texts are frequently viewed as social and cultural constructs rather than absolute truths independent of interpretation. Postmodern philosophers argue that the meaning of a text is never fixed or stable, but instead depends on the reader's interpretation and social context. Lyotard critiques the notion of absolute "meta-narratives," asserting that meaning has become localized, particular, and contextual.⁴⁹ Similarly, Derrida's assertion that "there is nothing outside the text" reflects the idea that meaning is perpetually deferred, contingent upon the reader's engagement. In the religious context, this implies that

⁴⁶ Nasr, S. H. (2003). *The heart of Islam: Enduring values for humanity*. HarperOne, p. 63.

⁴⁷ Harari, Y. N. (2015). *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. Harper, p. 242.

⁴⁸ McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post-Truth*. MIT Press, p. 18.

⁴⁹ Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. University of Minnesota Press, p. xxiv.

interpretations of sacred texts are invariably influenced by social, political, and personal ideologies.

This context-driven approach to reading sacred texts leads to the erosion of absolute truth. In Islam, for instance, the Qur'an intended as a final, authoritative source of law—is increasingly perceived as a text manipulable to serve particular viewpoints. As Arkoun points out, ideological approaches to the Qur'an have long reduced the meaning of revelation to mere instruments of socio-political legitimization.⁵⁰ Interpretations are frequently employed to justify specific agendas, rather than to objectively uncover divine intent. This phenomenon is evident in how certain groups interpret the Qur'an or Hadith to support their political, social, or ideological positions, even when such interpretations conflict with the universal, immutable values of Islam.

In the post-truth era, the proliferation of conflicting views on sacred texts often leaves believers struggling to discern which interpretations reflect genuine revelation and which are products of personal or group interests. This situation has shifted the standard of religious truth from one based on divine revelation to a relativized truth shaped by social conditions and interests. Abou El Fadl warns that without a robust methodological framework for understanding sacred texts, religious communities face epistemological and theological chaos, vulnerable to manipulation.⁵¹

Sacred texts, once regarded as inviolable sources of truth, are increasingly seen as adaptable to various perspectives. Yet, in classical Islamic tradition, the interpretation of revelation is anchored in rigorous, methodical exegesis. Abandoning this framework in favor of postmodern interpretive flexibility reduces absolute truth to mere social opinion, leading to epistemological disorientation.⁵² This is particularly evident in Qur'anic interpretations influenced by specific ideological leanings. Some groups adopt conservative approaches, while others espouse liberal or progressive readings of the same verses. Both claim fidelity to Islam, resulting in widespread confusion among believers. The loss of absolute essence in sacred text interpretation makes it difficult for religious communities to uphold a consistent standard of truth.

Given this reality, a critical question arises: can the standard of religious truth still be established in the same way it was by the prophets and classical scholars, or must religion adapt to the evolving pluralistic and socially dynamic contexts? The post-truth phenomenon challenges religious adherents to reconsider the role of sacred texts in guiding contemporary life and to find ways to ensure that the truths they contain remain preserved amidst a rapidly changing world.

⁵⁰ Arkoun, M. (2006). *The unthought in contemporary Islamic thought*. Saqi Books, p. 89.

⁵¹ Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic law, authority and women*. Oneworld Publications, pp. 112-113.

⁵² Kamali, M. H. (2000). *Islamic law in Malaysia: Issues and developments*. Ilmiah Publishers, p. 22.

Is Post-Truth Dangerous to Theology?

The phenomenon of post-truth has had a profound impact on various aspects of life, including theology. Post-truth, which prioritizes emotional narratives and personal beliefs over objective facts, poses a significant challenge to the authority of sacred texts and religious teachings. In theology, where divine revelation and absolute truth should serve as the primary foundation, post-truth threatens to undermine existing structures of belief. Religious truths, which are meant to be understood as independent of individual biases, are increasingly subject to personal or group interpretations rooted in emotional experiences rather than the objective testimony of sacred texts.

One of the primary dangers of post-truth in the theological context is its tendency to blur the boundaries between theological truth and subjective personal beliefs. In a post-truth society, individuals are inclined to believe what they emotionally desire, regardless of rationality or source credibility.⁵³ This dynamic leads to the erosion of theological authority, as sacred texts once regarded as the ultimate standard of truth can easily be ignored or manipulated based on individual inner experiences. Consequently, reaching a consensus within religious communities becomes increasingly difficult, as each individual or group may claim ownership of the truth based on their personal interpretations of religious texts, often without regard for broader, universal theological understandings.

Furthermore, post-truth fosters fragmentation within religious comprehension. In an era where truth is frequently constructed around emotionally gratifying narratives aligned with group interests, religion risks disintegrating into numerous factions, each asserting their own version of the truth. Taylor emphasizes that the loss of shared narratives in modern society has intensified identity isolation, including in religious life.⁵⁴ As a result, religion loses its unifying role and instead becomes a tool for group legitimacy. This situation is perilous, as it can lead to polarization within religious communities, with each faction perceiving its perspective as the only legitimate one, while dismissing others as heretical or false. Religion, which ought to serve as a source of unity, risks devolving into a source of division and conflict.

Post-truth also threatens theology's role as an objective moral and ethical compass. Religious teachings and divine revelation are intended to provide a standard of truth that guides believers toward righteous and virtuous behavior. However, in the post-truth world, this moral standard is often neglected, as individuals are more inclined to follow their personal inclinations, which may conflict with authentic religious teachings. This can result in a decline in moral standards among believers, with religious values being supplanted by personal or group interests. In essence, post-truth jeopardizes religion's moral-theological function. Previously, religious doctrines served as objective ethical and moral guidelines, but in societies where "feeling over facts" prevails, these values are often overridden by personal judgments. Hunter describes this

⁵³ Ball, J. (2017). *Post-truth: How bullshit conquered the world*. Biteback Publishing, p. 46.

⁵⁴ Taylor, C. (2007). *A secular age*. Harvard University Press, p. 291.

phenomenon as ethical relativism, wherein religious communities no longer agree on what constitutes “right and good.”⁵⁵ In such a context, religious teachings risk losing their authority as a universal moral compass.

Nevertheless, despite its potential negative impact on theology, post-truth does not necessarily render religion and theology powerless. Rather, it presents a challenge that compels theology to become more adaptive and reflective of contemporary developments. Theology must reaffirm the foundational truths of divine revelation, while communicating them in ways that resonate contextually. According to Al-Attas, understanding revelation should stem from an Islamic epistemology that distinguishes between certain knowledge (*yaqin*) and conjecture (*zann*), as well as between revelation and personal opinion (*ra'yu*).⁵⁶

In facing this phenomenon, religious scholars and believers must return to the universal principles of religious teachings, demonstrating that Islam remains valid for every time and place (صالح لكل مكان و زمان), while wisely applying these principles within changing social and cultural contexts. Religion must offer truths that are not only relevant to the past but also address contemporary challenges. In other words, while post-truth poses a threat to established theological structures, it also opens opportunities for renewal and more contextual religious understanding. Confronting post-truth requires theology to strengthen its foundations by reaffirming absolute and objective truths derived from divine revelation, resisting the tides of emotional and subjective opinion.

Hermeneutics: Aligning Textual Authority and Context amidst the Post-Truth Era

The phenomenon of personal authority and emotional attachment, which dominates contemporary religious life, can be understood through Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical concept of the “fusion of horizons.” According to Gadamer, understanding is always realized through a dialogical process between the reader and the text, and it is never entirely objective or detached from the reader's historical, cultural, and personal context. He argues that understanding is invariably shaped by the dialogue between the reader's preconceptions and the horizon of meaning offered by the text.⁵⁷ In religious contexts, emotional attachment to religious figures or spiritual leaders creates subjective horizons of understanding, where sacred texts are read through personal and collective lenses shaped by emotional bonds with such figures.

Gadamer emphasizes that comprehension is deeply influenced by an individual's social and psychological conditions, which in turn shape how one engages with texts. Emotional attachment to a religious leader risks producing uncritical interpretations, as followers are inclined to accept such figures' views without confronting the broader textual or historical

⁵⁵ Hunter, J. D. (2000). *The death of character: Moral education in an age without good or evil*. Basic Books, pp. 18-19.

⁵⁶ Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1995). *Prolegomena to the metaphysics of Islam*. ISTAC, pp. 56-58.

⁵⁷ Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and method*. Continuum, pp. 305-311.

contexts.⁵⁸ This emotional dependence shifts religious understanding away from objective engagement with sacred teachings, replacing it with interpretations driven by emotional alignment and the charismatic authority of religious figures.

This issue is exacerbated by the influence of social media, which allows religious figures to rapidly establish their authority without adequate scrutiny. Campbell and Tsuria illustrate how social media accelerates the construction of religious identity through charismatic leaders with large followings, often dominating religious interpretations without formal oversight.⁵⁹ Similarly, Pargament et al. note how emotional dynamics in religiosity make individuals more susceptible to narratives that appeal to feelings rather than theological reasoning.⁶⁰ This reinforces Gadamer's analysis of "prejudgments" (Vorurteil) in textual interpretation.⁶¹ In post-truth religious contexts, such prejudgments are frequently shaped by personal loyalty to specific figures rather than deep engagement with sacred texts.

Gadamer further underscores the importance of recognizing the interpretive assumptions inherent in every understanding process. In the post-truth era, where emotional affiliations increasingly shape truth perception, followers often interpret religious texts through strong preconceptions regarding their chosen authorities. Heller explains that religious understanding is often molded by societal structures and power relations, leading to narrow, fragmented interpretations heavily influenced by central religious figures.⁶² Habermas adds that in modern society, truth is frequently shaped by dominant authorities rather than rational deliberation, blurring the line between communicative truth and power interests.⁶³ Gadamer's hermeneutics also offer critical insights into the erosion of absolute truth in interpreting sacred texts. He asserts that truth cannot be separated from the context of interpretation; meaning emerges from the interaction between text and reader, influenced by social, cultural, and personal conditions. Consequently, in a post-truth world, where relativism thrives, the absolute essence of sacred texts risks being diminished by subjective interpretations.

Brown highlights how postmodernism, with its emphasis on truth as a social construct, has profoundly impacted how people engage with religious texts. Changing social and historical contexts have led to highly varied religious interpretations, sometimes contradicting the original revelations.⁶⁴ This proliferation of subjective interpretations further obscures the absolute truths

⁵⁸ Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and method*. Continuum, pp. 281-283.

⁵⁹ Campbell, H. A., & Tsuria, R. (2022). *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in digital media*. Routledge, pp. 79-80.

⁶⁰ Pargament, K. I., Mahoney, A., Exline, J. J., Jones, J. W., & Shafranske, E. P. (2013). *APA handbook of psychology, religion, and spirituality* (Vol. 1). American Psychological Association, pp. 27-30.

⁶¹ Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and method*. Continuum, p. 306.

⁶² Heller, A. (2019). *The concept of the political revisited: Perspectives on the contemporary relevance of Carl Schmitt*. Brill, p. 103.

⁶³ Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action: Reason and the rationalization of society* (Vol. 1). Beacon Press, p. 85.

⁶⁴ Brown, D. (2011). *Islamic ethics and the postmodern dilemma*. Oneworld Publications, pp. 214-216.

embedded within sacred texts. Gadamer's perspective reveals that no interpretation is entirely free from personal or group influences. In religious contexts, these dynamic fosters interpretations shaped by social, political, or ideological interests. The reading of sacred texts, once grounded in the immutable word of God, now risks fragmentation due to the diversity of interpretations driven by individual or group biases.

Gadamer also affirms that understanding is a continually evolving process, arising from an active dialogue between the reader's horizon and the text's horizon.⁶⁵ Religious understanding, therefore, should not be static but adaptable to changing times. Nonetheless, there are limits to how flexibly religious texts should be interpreted. Sacred texts like the Qur'an possess inherent truths that remain constant, even as their applications may evolve. This balance is crucial in the post-truth era, where overly liberal interpretations risk distorting foundational religious principles. Esack warns that while contextual interpretations of the Qur'an are necessary, neglecting the deeper context can jeopardize the essence of original teachings.⁶⁶ Khan similarly cautions that while modern interpretations aim to address contemporary challenges, they must adhere to established hermeneutical frameworks to preserve the text's integrity.⁶⁷

Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons" provides a solution to this dilemma. By integrating the reader's interpretive horizon with that of the text, a deeper, richer understanding can be achieved. In religious discourse, this means believers must align their personal understandings with the universal teachings of their faith, avoiding the pitfalls of relativistic truth that characterize the post-truth era. Bell emphasizes the importance of an inclusive and open approach to religious hermeneutics, where the fusion of horizons allows believers to contextualize revelation without compromising fundamental doctrines.⁶⁸ This aligns with Nasr's view that religious understanding must synthesize spiritual depth and moral principles independent of prevailing social ideologies, preserving the core truths of sacred texts.⁶⁹

From Gadamer's viewpoint, post-truth poses a threat to theology's essence as the pursuit of absolute, divinely-revealed truth. Genuine understanding emerges from ongoing dialogue with the text, yet in the post-truth world, this dialogue is often disrupted by emotional and subjective preferences. Sardar notes that postmodern influences in religious interpretation blur the lines between emotional appeal and revelation-based reasoning, fundamentally altering how sacred texts are understood.⁷⁰ Habermas similarly observes that in the post-truth era, truth becomes

⁶⁵ Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and method*. Continuum, pp. 302-305.

⁶⁶ Esack, F. (2009). *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*. Oneworld Publications, p. 88.

⁶⁷ Khan, G. (2014). *Approaches to the interpretation of the Qur'an in contemporary muslim thought*. Islamic Research Institute, p. 137.

⁶⁸ Bell, R. (2018). *The future of religion in a post-secular society*. Bloomsbury, p. 62.

⁶⁹ Nasr, S. H. (2003). *The heart of Islam: Enduring values for humanity*. HarperOne, p. 119.

⁷⁰ Sardar, Z. (2013). *Reading the Qur'an: The contemporary relevance of the sacred text of Islam*. Oxford University Press, p. 101.

subject to personal narratives and individual interests, shifting away from objective truth-seeking toward subjective preference.⁷¹

Thus, theology should maintain its dialogical process between text and reader, ensuring that engagement with revelation remains open and reflective. However, in the post-truth context, theology risks becoming a mere reflection of personal or group views, detached from deeper exploration of scriptural truths. Gadamer insists that genuine understanding is never static but must evolve through open dialogue. Brown warns that post-truth tendencies toward selective interpretation result in fragmented, inconsistent religious understandings, diverging from the universal essence of religious teachings. This fragmentation threatens theological integrity, which should remain grounded in the absolute truths of divine revelation, not transient ideologies.⁷²

Moreover, post-truth challenges theology's role as an objective moral compass. When religious truths are seen as negotiable or adaptable to personal narratives, theology risks losing its authority as an absolute moral and ethical foundation. Gadamer argues that authentic understanding of truth necessitates honest, open dialogue. Therefore, in responding to post-truth, theology must reassert the inviolability of revealed truth, even as interpretative methods evolve. MacIntyre highlights how post-truth undermines traditional moral foundations, replacing them with fluid, preference-driven ethics. In religious contexts, this erodes the authority of sacred texts, which should remain the primary source of unchanging moral values, not be subject to fluctuating individual interpretations.⁷³

Nonetheless, Gadamer allows for a flexible and contextual approach to interpreting sacred texts. Rigid, ahistorical interpretations risk rendering theology obsolete and disconnected from contemporary realities. He stresses that understanding is dynamic, constantly shaped by the evolving social and historical contexts of its readers. Taylor echoes this, underscoring the need for religious understanding to remain responsive to changing times, ensuring that religious teachings continue to illuminate and guide in complex, modern contexts.⁷⁴

Therefore, post-truth can be seen not only as a threat but also as an impetus for theology to become more responsive and adaptive, while upholding absolute truths. In a world marked by information uncertainty and pluralistic perspectives, post-truth compels theology to develop interpretations that are morally and socially relevant, yet critically grounded in sacred principles. Gadamer reminds us that texts are always open to new interpretations, provided they do not compromise their core meanings. McGrath further asserts that theology must integrate social and scientific developments without sacrificing the absolute truths embedded in sacred texts. Thus, while post-truth may influence how we perceive truth, it also drives theology to engage

⁷¹ Habermas, J. (2001). *The postnational constellation*. MIT Press, pp. 45-46.

⁷² Brown, D. (2011). *Islamic ethics and the postmodern dilemma*. Oneworld Publications, p. 217.

⁷³ MacIntyre, A. (2007). *After virtue* (3rd ed.). University of Notre Dame Press, pp. 39-41.

⁷⁴ Taylor, C. (2007). *A secular age*. Harvard University Press, pp. 526-528.

more critically and contextually with contemporary challenges, without abandoning its foundational teachings.⁷⁵

The post-truth is not inherently dangerous to theology but presents an opportunity for theological growth and increased relevance in an increasingly complex world. Although often perceived as a threat to objective understanding, post-truth offers a chance for theology to adapt to the plural and fragmented nature of modern society. Theology, as a field deeply connected to moral and ethical reflection, can meet this challenge by adopting more inclusive, reflective, and contextual approaches to sacred texts. Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" illustrates how we can merge our interpretive frameworks with the text's inherent meanings, fostering richer and deeper understanding. Rahner supports this, emphasizing that theology must evolve with changing times without compromising its doctrinal core. In this light, post-truth can serve as a catalyst for renewing interpretative methods, ensuring they remain contextually relevant while upholding the absolute truths at the heart of religious teachings.⁷⁶

D. Conclusion

The phenomenon of post-truth has significantly impacted contemporary religious life, where objective truth is increasingly marginalized by emotions and personal narratives. In the context of religion, this phenomenon exacerbates the dominance of personal authority and emotional attachment to specific religious figures, often replacing a deeper understanding of sacred texts. Consequently, religious interpretation has become more subjective, with individuals and groups prioritizing emotional affiliations and personal interests over the pursuit of universal and theological truths. Gadamer's hermeneutics offers crucial insights into this issue, emphasizing the importance of open and reflective dialogue between text and reader, thereby enabling religion to remain relevant without succumbing to relativistic notions of truth.

Another critical challenge in the post-truth era is the erosion of absolute truth in the interpretation of sacred texts. Religious understanding, which ought to be grounded in divine revelation as an immutable source of truth, is now frequently overshadowed by subjective interpretations driven by social, political, and ideological contexts. This trend threatens to undermine the foundations of theology as a pursuit of clear and non-negotiable truth. In this regard, it becomes essential for believers to reintegrate their understanding with the universal teachings of their faith, free from the influence of personal biases. A more critical and contextual hermeneutic approach is thus necessary to address these challenges.

While post-truth presents serious challenges to theology, it simultaneously opens opportunities for renewal and deeper engagement with religious texts. Theology must be able to adapt to the dynamics of the modern era without compromising the absolute truths embedded

⁷⁵ McGrath, A. E. (2011). *Theology: The basics* (3rd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 74-76.

⁷⁶ Rahner, K. (1975). *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. Seabury Press, p. 95.

in divine revelation. Gadamer's hermeneutical approach, particularly his concept of the "fusion of horizons," offers a key framework for repositioning sacred texts to maintain their relevance in an increasingly polarized world. Religion must continue to serve as a guiding source of truth for humanity, maintaining a balance between the unchanging essence of revelation and the evolving understandings shaped by social and cultural transformations.

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