

Contemporary Muslim Qur'ānic Hermeneutics

TRANSLATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES



EDITED BY
ABDULLAH SAEED

BRILL

TEXTS AND STUDIES ON THE QUR'ĀN

Contemporary Muslim Qur'ānic Hermeneutics

Texts and Studies on the Qur'ān

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Edited by

Abdullah Saeed

Translations by

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Ali Akbar

Rowan Gould

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Abbreviations

CIOS	Centre for Islamic and Occidental Studies
ISID	Darussalam Institute for Islamic Studies
IAIN	Institut Agama Islam Negeri
INSISTS	Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought and Civilizations
ISTAC–IIUM	Islamic Thought and Civilization—International Islamic University Malaysia
MIUMI	Majelis Intelektual dan Ulama Muda Indonesia (Indonesian Council of Young Ulama and Intellectuals)
MUI	Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Ulama Council)
MA	Master of Arts
UIN	Universitas Islam Negeri (State Islamic Universities)

Notes on Translation and Contributors

Note on Translation

This volume brings together twelve essays originally written in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Indonesian. Each essay represents not only the voice of its author but also the interpretive tradition, historical context, and intellectual framework from which it emerges. The act of translation, therefore, involved more than the transfer of language; it required careful judgment, cultural sensitivity, and a deep engagement with the ideas being expressed.

The translators sought to render the texts in English in a way that is clear and readable to the extent possible, while remaining faithful to the substance and tone of the originals. In cases where no exact equivalent existed in English, terms were selected that most closely captured the intended meaning. Where necessary, explanatory notes in square brackets or brief footnotes have been provided to clarify some concepts and references that may not be familiar to readers.

Translation was never approached as a purely literal exercise. The translators prioritized the communication of ideas and arguments over word-for-word equivalence. At times, the essays included expressions, assumptions, or formulations that might appear unusual or unfamiliar to English-speaking audiences. These have been retained to preserve the integrity of the original text and to reflect the author's voice and intellectual context as accurately as possible. No parts of the original essays were omitted in the process of translation. Every effort was made to maintain the tone—whether scholarly, polemical, reflective, or critical—of each contribution.

Throughout this process, the translators' aim has been to preserve the richness and integrity of the original writings. We recognize that all translation involves interpretation, particularly in a field as nuanced and contextually embedded as Qur'anic hermeneutics. As such, this volume is also a testament to the dynamic engagement between languages, traditions, and scholarly communities.

About the Editor

Abdullah Saeed is the Sultan of Oman Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies and Redmond Barry Distinguished Professor at the University of Melbourne, Australia. He has a BA from the Islamic University of Medina and MA and

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Abdullah Saeed's publications include *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (Routledge, 2006); *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach* (Routledge, 2013); *The Qur'an: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2008); *Contemporary Approaches to the Qur'an and its Interpretation in Iran* (co-authored with Ali Akbar, Routledge, 2020); and *Islamic Banking and Interest: A Study of the Prohibition of Riba and its Contemporary Interpretation* (Brill, 1996). He is also editor of *Approaches to the Qur'an in Contemporary Indonesia* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

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and *Qur'anic Hermeneutics: An Analysis of Four Discourses* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Ali Akbar and Abdullah Saeed, *Contemporary Approaches to the Qur'an and Its Interpretation in Iran* (Routledge, 2019); Zahid Ahmed and Ali Akbar, *Iran's Soft Power in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023). He has also published extensively in journals such as *Culture and Religion*, *The Muslim World*, *Religions*, *British Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*, and *Third Word Quarterly*.

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About the Authors

To help readers situate each contribution, a detailed biographical note is provided at the beginning of every chapter under the subtitle "About the Author". These notes go beyond formal affiliations and academic titles. They offer some insights into the author's intellectual formation, key scholarly contributions,

and, where relevant, works written about them by other scholars. In this way, the biographical information serves not only as introductions but also as guides to understanding the broader context of the arguments advanced in each essay. As these detailed biographical profiles appear with each contribution, a consolidated list is not repeated here.

Contemporary Approaches to the Qurʾān: Context and Interpretation

Abdullah Saeed

The Qurʾān is the most important and widely discussed text in Muslim thought. It lies at the heart of Islamic scholarship and forms the foundation of Islamic law, theology, and philosophy as well as of Arabic linguistics and literature. The language of the Qurʾān—Arabic—remains a central scholarly reference for Muslims worldwide. Therefore, the centrality of the Qurʾān throughout Islamic history cannot be overstated. In this article, I briefly outline some key developments in Qurʾānic interpretation and highlight some of the main ideas that have shaped them. This overview serves as an introduction to the evolution of Qurʾānic interpretation in the modern period. Since all the articles in this book explore different aspects of contemporary Qurʾānic interpretation, this exposition provides a helpful context for understanding them. The reflections offered here are not intended as a detailed historical survey or a comprehensive analysis, but rather, as a general introduction to the themes and trends of Qurʾānic interpretation in modern times.

1 The Modern Period

In the modern period, many Muslim thinkers and scholars have interacted with contemporary scholarship from elsewhere—particularly from Europe—including in the fields of philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology, and educational thought. However, not all Muslims reacted positively to such interactions. Those Muslim scholars who used Western norms and values in their works experienced resistance from more traditional scholars.¹ Many tradition-

¹ For resistance to Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd's ideas, see Fauzi M. Najjar, "Islamic Fundamentalism and the Intellectuals: The Case of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 27, no. 2 (2000): 177–200; to Fazlur Rahman, see Fazlur Rahman, "Some Islamic Issues in the Ayyub Khan Era," in *Essays on Islamic Civilization: Presented to Niyazi Berkes*, ed. Donald P. Little (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 284–302; to Iranian modernist scholars, see Kathleen Foody, "The Limits of Religion: Liberalism and Anti-Liberalism in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Cul-*

ally trained scholars (*‘ulamā*) considered that ‘modern’ (which many identified as Western) thought had to be challenged or resisted to the extent possible. Many *‘ulamā* feared that traditional Muslim scholarship, from Islamic law to Qur’ānic interpretation, Islamic theology, and Arabic linguistics and literature—what is usually referred to as the Islamic religious disciplines—might become marginalized by modern secular thought.² For them, the secularism that became dominant in the West has reduced the prominence of religion and religious ideas and has led to an apparent reluctance to recognize religious thought as a legitimate area of human knowledge.³

Traditionally, the *‘ulamā* were the guardians of Islamic knowledge and thought and were often based in major mosque-centred institutions of learning, such as al-Azhar in Cairo and al-Qarawiyīn in Fes. The religious authority associated with these educational institutions has now been extended to many prominent Islamic universities and seminaries established during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia and Darul Uloom of Deoband in India. The *‘ulamā* have seen their role, in part, as preserving the traditional Islamic disciplines by protecting them from the encroachment of modern disciplines, such as literary theory, anthropology, hermeneutics, and sociology.⁴ However, many modern Muslim thinkers—for instance, Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī (d. 1902), Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Rāziq (d. 1966), Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945), and Amina Wadud (b. 1952)—who have often been labeled Muslim modernists or neo-modernists, have found that the resistance of many traditionalist *‘ulamā* to this modern knowledge impedes the development of Islamic thought today.⁵

ture and Religion 17, no. 2 (2016): 183–199; to modernist scholars, such as Rahman, Abū Zayd, Soroush, and Shabestari, by traditionalist scholars, see Ali Akbar, “Towards a Humanistic Approach to the Quran: New Direction in Contemporary Islamic Thought,” *Culture and Religion* 20, no. 2 (2019): 94–95.

2 Johanna Pink, “Striving for a New Exegesis of the Qur’an,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 788–789.

3 Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “Ulama,” in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, ed. Patricia Crone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 577.

4 For a general discussion on the role of *‘ulamā*, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

5 For the ideas of these modernist Muslim scholars, see Souad T. Ali, *A Religion, Not a State: Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq’s Islamic Justification of Political Secularism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2009); Annemarie Schimmel, *Gabriel’s Wing: A Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal* (Leiden: Brill, 1963); Malcolm H. Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida* (Berkeley: University of California

For instance, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, impressed by the political dominance and economic prosperity of modern Western civilization in the colonial age, ascribed its rise to the Europeans' scientific achievements. He admired modern science and deemed it his mission to grant young Muslims in India access to the latest scientific knowledge. He established modern institutions and educational centers, such as the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (which later came to be known popularly as Aligarh College), modelled after British educational institutions.⁶ He also interpreted the Qur'ān in light of contemporary scientific discoveries and produced an exegetical work in which he argued that the Qur'ān is not incompatible with the laws of nature recorded in scientific texts. His belief in the need for compatibility between Qur'ānic principles and scientific knowledge was grounded in the view that both ultimately originate from God.⁷

Similarly to Ahmad Khan, Muḥammad 'Abduh strongly emphasized the use of reason and the need for Muslims to access modern scientific knowledge and disciplines. He was familiar with the ideas of the Enlightenment and stressed the importance of Western education.⁸ 'Abduh attacked strict adherence to blind imitation (*taqlīd*) and called for new interpretations of Islamic ideas based on *ijtihād* (independent or original interpretation of the Islamic legal sources). According to 'Abduh, the Qur'ān itself asked human beings to use reason; indeed, Prophet Muḥammad "liberated reason from shackles of superstition."⁹

From the point of view of modernist scholars, such as Khan and 'Abduh, knowledge, regardless of its origin, should be duly recognized. Since knowledge production in the modern period is driven by modern concerns, one could argue that it is unwise for the *ulamā* to neglect modern thought or to attempt to preserve Islamic knowledge by isolating it from modern disciplines. Many modernist scholars believe that if traditionalist scholars insist on following this approach, over time, building bridges between modern thought and Islamic

Press, 1966); Joseph G. Rahme, "Abd al-Rahmān al-Kawākibī's Reformist Ideology, Arab Pan-Islamism, and the Internal Other," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 10, no. 2 (1999): 159–177.

6 Ahmad S. Dallal, "The Origins and Early Development of Islamic Reformism," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, ed. Robert W. Hefner, vol. 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 142.

7 Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978), 175–177.

8 Mark Sedgwick, "Muhammad 'Abduh," in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, ed. Patricia Crone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 9.

9 Rotraud Wielandt, "Main Trends of Islamic Theological Thought from the Late Nineteenth Century to Present Times," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 720.

thought may become too difficult. Instead, Islamic thought should progress and engage with the modern issues, debates, and challenges that Muslims are facing, which cannot be achieved by simply relying entirely on earlier forms of thought, reasoning, tools, and instruments. Modernist scholars, such as Khan and ‘Abduh, asserted that traditional Islamic disciplines, tools, and methods need refinement to ensure their successful use in the modern period.¹⁰

2 Islamic Disciplines and the Modern Period

Despite the efforts of ‘Abduh, Khan, and their modernist successors, traditionalist Muslim scholars, by and large, have maintained significant influence over Islamic seminaries and universities. While the curricula of Islamic seminaries have changed somewhat, those of many Islamic higher education institutions still remain traditionalist—that is, these institutions are often resistant to incorporating modern disciplines into their curricula. Therefore, it could be argued that graduates from these institutions are trained to some extent for a world that differs from their own social, political, and cultural contexts. In other words, the intellectual world in which many of them function is essentially premodern, and they are steeped in its language, terminology, and worldview.¹¹

Regardless, the curricula of all such traditionalist Islamic institutions are not stagnant. Many Islamic seminaries and universities offer traditional Islamic disciplines as well as modern disciplines as part of their Islamic higher education curricula, although these are often taught separately. For example, in some Islamic universities, the study of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) may include courses on jurisprudence developed in the West, and Islamic history may include courses on modern historiography. Examples of this type of teaching can be found in the faculties and departments of Islamic disciplines at universities such as Al-Azhar University in Egypt, the University of Qarawiyyīn in Morocco, and the state Islamic universities in Indonesia.¹² Graduate students

10 Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 7–8; Zaman notes that although Fazlur Rahman emphasized a “sustained constructive engagement with the historic formulations of Islam—juristic, theological, spiritual in the course of reinterpreting Islam in the modern world,” he was nonetheless “sharply critical of the *ulama*” (Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 9).

11 For Islamic education during the premodern, early modern, and modern periods and their differences, see Sebastian Günther, “Education,” in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, ed. Patricia Crone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 146.

12 For more information on Al-Azhar University, see Malika Zeghal, “Azhar University,” in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, ed. Patricia Crone (Princeton: Prince-

can become familiar with modern disciplines at institutions in which these are integrated with traditional Islamic disciplines. This approach influences graduates' thinking about Islamic disciplines as they move into practical life or continue their university studies. However, these changes still seem to be rather foreign to a substantial number of traditional Islamic seminaries worldwide. In such settings, there seems to be a high degree of skepticism—if not enmity—toward incorporating modern disciplines into Islamic educational curricula. Many traditionalist *ulamā* appear to be concerned that students exposed to modern disciplines may not maintain reverence for traditional Islamic disciplines or may develop a distorted mindset. Another fear is that training in both areas may lead to a diluted version of traditional Islamic disciplines or, more alarmingly, the questioning of traditionalist frameworks and methods.¹³

3 Issues of Concern for Muslims

The previous section presented a rather general overview of what appears to be the backdrop against which Muslim scholars engage with Qur'ānic studies as a discipline. While many are quite comfortable engaging with the Qur'ān in light of modern disciplines, many others are content to rely on the traditional Islamic disciplines of *tafsīr* (Qur'ānic interpretation) and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and their tools and methods. However, dividing Muslim scholars arbitrarily into “modern” and “traditional” may be unhelpful as there is often a high degree of fluidity in the use of such labels. Perhaps it is more appropriate to say that scholars can be placed on a continuum that represents the degree to which they are comfortable using modern disciplines and tools in their works on the Qur'ān—ranging from literary theory to hermeneutics and linguistics. Even the most traditionalist scholars can be influenced by certain aspects of modern disciplines and tools, although they may not necessarily be comfortable using them when engaging with the Qur'ān and its interpretation.

Many Muslim scholars are looking to the Qur'ān and its interpretation to respond to the many political, economic, legal, social, and theological concerns Muslims face currently. Therefore, interpretation has become a central concern; if the Qur'ānic texts related to these concerns can be reinterpreted and applied, then these concerns might be addressed in ways that satisfy contem-

ton University Press, 2013), 58–59; for some reforms that al-Azhar experienced during the modern period, see Sami Zubaida, *Law and Power in the Islamic World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 163–165.

13 Pink, “Striving for a New Exegesis,” 788–789.

porary needs. However, scholars on both sides of the debate do not necessarily agree on the specific methods, tools, and ideas that should be used in this interpretation process. While some argue that traditional methods and tools should be strictly followed, others challenge these approaches or propose new ones.

Examples of the current issues for which many Muslims seek Islamically relevant answers include the modernization of traditional Islamic family law; the emergence of new ideas of equality, human rights, systems of governance, and citizenship; new ways of managing money and lending; and the management of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in plural societies. These are only a few of the contemporary concerns to which the Qurʾān or its interpretation is expected to respond. Previously developed ideas and legal rulings—such as those concerning relations between men and women, marriage and divorce, inheritance, criminal law and its various punishments, and international relations—are now being questioned in terms of their relevance to the modern period. Therefore, Muslim Qurʾānic scholars need to tread carefully between the established Qurʾānic interpretation and modern demands for fresh approaches. Many Muslim thinkers, scholars, and commentators on the Qurʾān have contributed to this discourse over the past century or so, and this book reflects some of this scholarship on the Qurʾān in more recent times.

4 Reflections on Current Qurʾānic Scholarship

Modern scholarship on the Qurʾān can be divided broadly into two categories: (a) one that developed in the West and (b) the other resulting from current Muslim reflections on the Qurʾān, which are discussed next.

4.1 *Western Scholarship*

The scholarship that has been developed in Western academia, predominantly by non-Muslim scholars, is not monolithic. It ranges from works that question the divine origin of the Qurʾān, to theories that suggest that the Qurʾān was compiled a century or two after the death of the Prophet, and to those that largely accept the traditional Muslim narrative about the compilation of the Qurʾān.¹⁴ Many Western scholars are primarily interested in studying the

14 For a review of different Western approaches to the Qurʾān, see Reuven Firestone, “The Qurʾān and the Bible: Some Modern Studies of Their Relationship,” in *Bible and Qurʾān: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, ed. J.C. Reeves (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 1–22; Andrew G. Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qurʾān* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 21–29.

Qur'ān as a historical text, particularly within the context of religious or biblical studies.¹⁵

The beginning of modern Western scholarship on the Qur'ān is closely connected with works produced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the so-called Orientalists. Their interests were centered on applying biblical scholarship and studying the linguistic aspects of the Qur'ān; the process through which the Qur'ān emerged as a historical text; its relationship to the Jewish and Christian traditions in Arabia; and the historical reliability of the narrative Muslims have advanced about the way the Qur'ān emerged.¹⁶ In addition, these early Orientalists argued that the Qur'ān was deeply indebted to the Jewish and Christian traditions of the early seventh century because the Prophet had 'borrowed' many of his ideas and teachings from Jewish and Christian texts and traditions.¹⁷ For example, Abraham Geiger (d. 1874) argued that the Qur'ān was created by relying on Jewish texts—a claim he made by tracing numerous concepts and narratives, such as the creation story and prophetic stories, that occur in both the Qur'ān and in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic literature. Similarly, Charles Torrey (d. 1956) identified that certain Qur'ānic themes and concepts, such as prophetic authority, chosen people, and the sto-

15 For such approaches focusing on the influence of Jewish and Christian texts on the Qur'ān, see Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, trans. F.M. Young (New York: Ktav, 1970); Günter Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003); Christoph Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (New York: Prometheus, 2009); John Bowman, "The Debt of Islam to Monophysite Syrian Christianity," in *Essays in Honor of Griffiths Wheeler Thatcher*, ed. Evan C.B. MacLaurin (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1967), 191–216; Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment* (London: Macmillan, 1926); Joseph Horowitz, "Jewish Proper Names and Derivatives in the Koran," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 2 (1925): 145–227; Abraham Katsh, *Judaism in Islam: Biblical and Talmudic Background of the Koran and Its Commentaries* (New York: New York University Press, 1954); William St. Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur'an* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1905). For a comparison of the Qur'ān and the Bible, see Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (London: Routledge, 2010).

16 For some Western approaches to the Qur'ān, especially those that propose that the Qur'ān came into being many decades after the death of Prophet Muḥammad, see John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2004); Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). For a brief explanation of the literary approach to the Qur'ān and its possible merits and disadvantages, see Andrew Rippin, "The Qur'an as Literature: Perils, Pitfalls and Prospects," in *The Qur'an and Its Interpretive Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 38–47.

17 For this type of approach, see some of the references mentioned at note 14.

ries of prophets, can also be found in Judaism.¹⁸ Further, William St. Clair Tisdall (d. 1928), in *The Original Sources of the Qurʾan*, argued that the Prophet used Jewish and Christian texts to form the Qurʾan. He traced many Qurʾanic stories, such as those about Cain and Abel, Abraham, Nimrod's fire, and Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, to Jewish texts, including the Old Testament, the Talmud, and the Midrash.¹⁹

While early Orientalist scholars often argued that the Prophet borrowed from, or referred to, Jewish texts, some twentieth-century scholars believed that he borrowed more from Christian texts. For example, Tor Andrae (d. 1947) argued that Prophet Muḥammad was influenced by Nestorian Christianity, which, according to him, had become pervasive in the southern Arabian Peninsula.²⁰ Richard Bell (d. 1952) argued that Prophet Muḥammad was mostly influenced by Christianity and that this influence emerged via liturgy rather than direct knowledge of the New Testament.²¹ In his recent book, Gabriel Said Reynolds highlights some similarities between the Qurʾan and Christian sources. He concludes that “the Qurʾan’s account of God’s commanding the angels to bow before Adam, and the devil’s refusal to do so” is a “tradition prominent in Christian tradition” and less central in the Jewish tradition.²²

More radical theories about the origins of the Qurʾan were produced in the mid-to-late-twentieth century by a relatively small number of Western scholars.²³ For instance, John Wansbrough (d. 2002) argued that the Qurʾan’s compilation was not completed until potentially as late as the end of the eighth century CE. He asserted that the Qurʾan today is the result of a long period of canonization and codification from an “extensive corpus of prophetic logia.”²⁴ The nature of the Qurʾan suggests “not the carefully executed project of one or many men, but rather the product of an organic development from originally independent traditions during a long period of transmission.”²⁵ Moreover, “stabilization of the text of scripture (masoretic exegesis) was an activity whose literary expression is also not attested before the third/ninth century, and the appearance of the classical *masahif* literature (*variae lectiones*) was

18 Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study*, 25.

19 Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study*, 26.

20 Reynolds, *The Qurʾan and Its Biblical Subtext*, 8.

21 Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 151–152.

22 Reynolds, *The Qurʾan and Its Biblical Subtext*, 12.

23 Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 47.

24 Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 10.

25 Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 47.

even later.”²⁶ Wansbrough supported his views in part by an argument that relies on silence, thereby contending that there is no mention of an unalterable (*ne varietur*) text prior to the late second/eighth century. This is because reference to the Qur'ān as a distinct article of faith is absent from the early creedal statement *Fiqh Akbar I*, which A.J. Wensinck (d. 1939) dated to almost the middle of the second/eighth century.²⁷ According to Wansbrough, “the establishment of a standard text such as is implied by the ‘Uthmanic recension traditions can hardly have been earlier.”²⁸

Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, much like Wansbrough, argued that the Qur'ān dates from much later than the time of Muḥammad or even the Caliph ‘Uthmān (d. 36/656). They argued that no non-Islamic sources attest to the existence of the Qur'ān before the end of the seventh century CE.²⁹ Christoph Luxenberg and Günter Lüling suggested that the Qur'ān has roots in pre-Islamic liturgical texts and that its meaning may, in some cases, be discovered with reference to Aramaic or Syriac scriptures. Lüling argued that parts of the Qur'ān derive from pre-Islamic Christian strophic hymns that were later reworked by the earliest collectors of the Qur'ān.³⁰ Along similar lines, Luxenberg argued that part of the Qur'ān is rooted in early Syro-Aramaic texts. He suggested that the Qur'ān “is a mixture of both Arabic and Aramaic” and that “at least 150 years must lie between the genesis of the Qur'ān and its final codification.”³¹

Although Western scholarship does have these radical revisionist theories about the Qur'ān, most Western scholars do not seem to adopt such theories. Overall, the Muslim narrative about the origins of the Qur'ān, with some adjustments, appears to be increasingly influential in the current Western scholarship. These studies on the Qur'ān have increased considerably over the past few decades. For example, Western scholars have produced a range of interesting works on the Qur'ān in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Significant emphasis has been placed on the Qur'ān in the Late Antiquity context, for example, in the works of Gabriel Said Reynolds, Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael E. Pregill. There are also some influential literary studies of the Qur'ān. I will briefly mention two scholars who have produced such works, by way of example of recent Western scholarship: Angelika Neuwirth and Michel Cuypers.

26 Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 44.

27 Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 44.

28 Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 44.

29 Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 18.

30 Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam*, xii–xiii.

31 Bannister, *An Oral-Formulaic Study*, 24.

Angelika Neuwirth analyzes the Qurʾān using a literary approach. In her writings, she pays significant attention to its forms, structures, genres, and rhetoric. According to her, a microstructural analysis of the Qurʾān reveals clear patterns and structures.³² The microstructural analysis aids the interpreter in identifying unifying features of the Qurʾān. For example, the early Meccan suras have the following structural elements: (a) introductory oaths and oath clusters, or (b) clusters of *idhā* (when) phrases followed by themes of the Last Day, and (c) sections about signs of divine omnipotence.³³ Neuwirth also argues that the Qurʾān has a liturgical function. By emphasizing its liturgical function, Neuwirth regards the Qurʾān as having been an evolving oral tradition before it was collected and codified as a book. Neuwirth argues that Muḥammad was aware of the forms of services in the religious groups of his day, and this influenced the formation of the Qurʾān:

The centre of the monotheistic service and, similarly, of the fully developed sura of the middle and late Meccan period is occupied by a biblical reminiscence—in the case of the liturgical service, a scripture reading (*lectio*), in the case of the sura, a narrative focusing on biblical protagonists.³⁴

Neuwirth claims that to interpret and analyze the Qurʾān, the text should be placed in a dialogue not only with the Bible and Arabic poetic traditions, but also with Late Antiquity culture and the rhetorical forms of that era.³⁵

According to Michel Cuypers, the Qurʾān shares certain rhetorical structures with other Semitic texts (e.g., the Bible). The basic principle of composition in Semitic rhetoric is symmetry—which is also used in the Qurʾān. Cuypers bases his approach on the idea of pinpointing “various forms of symmetry which make up the text, defining the relationships which the different textual units have with one another.”³⁶ Having examined this approach to 30 suras of the

32 Angelika Neuwirth, “Structure and the Emergence of Community,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 147.

33 Neuwirth, “Structure and the Emergence of Community,” 147.

34 Angelika Neuwirth, “Structural, Linguistic and Literary Features,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 111.

35 Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qurʾān and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*, trans. Samuel Wilder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

36 Michel Cuypers, “Semitic Rhetoric as a Key to the Question of the Nazm of the Qurʾānic Text,” *Journal of Qurʾānic Studies* 13, no. 1 (2011): 4.

Qur'ān, both from the Meccan and Medinan chapters, Cuypers argues that the principle of Semitic rhetoric applies to these suras. Cuypers concludes that “the totality of the Qur'anic text is most likely composed in this way.”³⁷ Therefore, he considers that the Qur'ān may seem to be “disordered at a simple reading,” but a closer look demonstrates “a very sophisticated composition, according to a rhetoric widespread in the antique world of the Middle East.”³⁸ That is, the Qur'ān, despite appearances, is a deliberately constructed text with a sophisticated structure, whose parallel is found in Late Antiquity—particularly in Semitic texts.³⁹

4.2 *Muslim Scholars and Western Scholarship: The Example of Context*

Discussions about the Qur'ān in Western scholarship appear to have had some impact on Muslim scholars. While this impact can be seen in the range of areas of Qur'anic scholarship of Muslim scholars today, for the purpose of this introduction and given the focus of this book, I will emphasize only one area: the idea of context. Here, I will provide just two examples of Western scholarship that emphasize the idea of context.

According to Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921), the Qur'ān reflects the attitudes of the early community of believers and therefore cannot be detached from its immediate audience. For example, Goldziher maintained that Qur'anic polemics against Jews, which appear in the Medinan verses of the Qur'ān, reflect the historical context of Prophet Muḥammad's encounter with the Jews of Medina.⁴⁰ Similarly, the Prophet's migration from Mecca to Medina “left its mark on the style and rhetoric of the Qur'an.”⁴¹ Whereas the Meccan passages include themes such as “the dreadful day of judgment and the end of the world,” the Medinan passages are oriented around regulating “a civil and religious law for the organization that ... [was] taking shape,” meaning that they are concerned with “rules for the practical circumstances of life.”⁴² In each context, the Qur'anic revelation responded to the events and circumstances around it.

William Montgomery Watt (d. 2006) also had a great deal to say about this emphasis on the importance of context, which has been present among Mus-

37 Cuypers, “Semitic Rhetoric,” 5.

38 Cuypers, “Semitic Rhetoric,” 5.

39 Michel Cuypers, *The Composition of the Qur'an: Rhetorical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

40 Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 11.

41 Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology*, 10.

42 Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology*, 10.

lims for a long time. Watt argued that the Qurʾān was connected to Muḥammad's personality and to the development of his prophetic career. For Watt, the Qurʾān was influenced by "the intellectual and cultural outlook of the community to which it ... [was] addressed, and in which the prophet share[d]."43 He also declared that "the community is in some sense a part of the revelation."⁴⁴

While the Islamic tradition is quite familiar with the basic ideas associated with context, and there is a wide body of literature related to context (e.g., *asbāb al-nuzūl* or occasions of revelation), the debates on the extent to which 'context' should be considered when interpreting certain types of Qurʾānic texts (as well as the intensity of these debates) are somewhat new. This idea of context extends far beyond the text's linguistic foundation and *asbāb al-nuzūl* to the social, historical, political, economic, intellectual, and cultural context of the early seventh century. However, only in the last decades of the twentieth century and in the early twenty-first century did many scholars widely promote some of these ideas about this rather new understanding of 'context.' Examples include Fazlur Rahman, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (d. 2010), Muhammad Arkoun (d. 2010), Nurcholis Maḍjid (d. 2005), Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī (d. 2010), Abdolkarim Soroush, Muḥammad Mojtahed Shabestari (d. 2021), Abolqasem Fanaei (b. 1960), and Abdullah Saeed (b. 1960). These scholars have expressed ideas broadly similar to those of some modern Western scholars, especially regarding the Qurʾān's close connection to the Arabian context. The project of these scholars represents a somewhat new direction in Qurʾānic interpretation because of its strong emphasis on the human and contextual dimensions of the Qurʾān.

In contrast, Islamic scholarship of the early and classical periods has dealt with the idea of context quite differently. Its relatively narrow view of context has been applied primarily with reference to *asbāb al-nuzūl* (the "occasions of revelation").⁴⁵ A few other areas of Islamic scholarship have also dealt with the notion of context; however, historically, this scholarship has never considered whether the Qurʾān is a product of history or the result of a particular context, such as that of Arabia. In general, for Muslims the Qurʾān is the Word of God; therefore, in a sense, there is no real need to discuss its context. God spoke

43 William Montgomery Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today: A Contribution to Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 1983), 66.

44 William Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Revelation in the Modern World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969), 108.

45 For information on *asbāb al-nuzūl*, see Andrew Rippin, "Occasions of Revelation," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 569–573.

through the Prophet, and the Prophet lived in a certain time and place, yet the Qur'ān's existence is not contingent on this time and place. From this perspective, there has been little need to delve more deeply into the social, political, cultural, economic, or intellectual contexts of Arabia to understand the Qur'ān. The *tafsīr* literature has primarily been concerned with the *asbāb al-nuzūl*, to which most exegetes have referred despite questions regarding its authenticity.

Classical Muslim exegetes also generally accepted the idea that the Qur'ān is predominantly clear. Given that it is in Arabic, they believed that Arabic linguistics should be largely sufficient to explicate the basic meaning of its texts. They recognized that the *asbāb* literature could help them understand context but that it did not itself determine the entire meaning of the Qur'ānic text. This view is rather different from some of the modern Muslim views of context as outlined in this section. To engage with the ideas of context more effectively, it is necessary to first outline the development of Qur'ānic hermeneutics over the past two centuries, as this provides essential background for the contemporary debates surrounding context and interpretation.

5 Overview of Qur'ānic Hermeneutics in the Modern Period

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Qur'ānic hermeneutics underwent a significant transformation as Muslim scholars navigated the tension between classical exegesis and modern challenges, such as colonialism, scientific thought, and political reform. This period combined classical traditions with innovative approaches shaped by intellectual shifts and the sociopolitical upheavals of this period. While drawing on classical authorities, such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), many modern interpreters sought to make the Qur'ān speak to contemporary issues, primarily through reason, science, and evolving political ideals. A strong drive emerged to harmonize the Qur'ānic revelation with rational inquiry and to use scripture as a foundation for ethical renewal and anti-colonial resistance.

In Egypt, Muḥammad 'Abduh redefined exegesis as a tool for moral reform and advocated for rational and practical readings of the Qur'ān, which his disciple Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) later expanded in *Tafsīr al-Manār*.⁴⁶ Sayyid Ahmad

46 For 'Abduh's and Riḍā's approaches, see Oliver Scharbrodt, "Muḥammad 'Abduh," in *Handbook of Qur'ānic Hermeneutics*, ed. Georges Tamer, vol. 4 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), 41–58; Rebecca Sauer, "Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā," in *Handbook of Qur'ānic Hermeneutics*, ed. Georges Tamer, vol. 4 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), 117–136.

Khan, their contemporary in British India, developed a rationalist hermeneutic grounded in natural causality and scientific coherence and thus offered detailed principles to interpret the Qurʾān through reason.⁴⁷ Simultaneously, the scientific exegesis movement gained traction through figures such as Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī (d. 1940), who argued that the Qurʾān foreshadowed modern scientific discoveries.⁴⁸ Others (e.g., ‘Abduh) pursued more moderate reconciliations with science, whereas critics (e.g., Maḥmūd Shaltūt and Sayyid Quṭb) warned this approach risked distorting the divine message.⁴⁹

Another significant development was the literary turn led by Amīn al-Khūlī (d. 1966), who emphasized the Qurʾān’s linguistic artistry and historical setting. His students—such as Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalafallah (d. 1997)—continued this line, treating the Qurʾān as a living moral text with cultural depth.⁵⁰ Sayyid Quṭb and Abu’l Ala Maududi advanced a political vision, portraying the Qurʾān as a constitution for Islamic governance. By minimizing historical contextualization, they emphasized the timeless authority of the text in shaping Islamic society.⁵¹

In Algeria, ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd b. Bādīs (d. 1940) simplified Qurʾānic teachings for mass education and cultural resistance, while Muḥammad b. Yūsuf Aṭṭafayash (d. 1914) defended Ibādī hermeneutics under colonial pressure.⁵² In India, Hamīd al-Dīn Farāhī (d. 1930) introduced the concept of Qurʾānic structural unity, a method later refined by Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī (d. 1997) and others in South

47 Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*.

48 Majid Daneshgar, *Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī and the Qurʾan: Tafṣīr and Social Concerns in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2018).

49 For Shaltūt’s approach, see Kate Zebiri, *Maḥmūd Shaltūt and Islamic Modernism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Rainer Brunner, “Maḥmūd Shaltūt,” in *Handbook of Qurʾānic Hermeneutics*, ed. Georges Tamer, vol. 4 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), 241–254.

50 Christiane Paulus and Ismail Abdallah, “Amīn al-Khūlī,” in *Handbook of Qurʾānic Hermeneutics*, ed. Georges Tamer, vol. 4 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), 255–268. For similar approaches among al-Khūlī’s students, see Naguib Shuruq, “Bint al-Shāṭi’s Approach to *Tafṣīr*: An Egyptian Exegete’s Journey from Hermeneutics to Humanity,” *Journal of Qurʾānic Studies* 17 (1), 2015, 45–84.

51 For some of their work, see Abu’l Ala Maududi, *Four Basic Qurʾānic Terms* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1955); Abu’l Ala Maududi, *The Islamic Law and Constitution*, ed. and trans. Khurshid Ahmad (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1960); Abu’l Ala Maududi, *Jihad in Islam* (Beirut: Holy Koran Publishing House, 1980); for works about Maududi and Quṭb, see John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Roy Jackson, *Mawlana Mawdudi and Political Islam: Authority and the Islamic State* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

52 Abdel-Hakim Ourghi, “Muḥammad b. Yūsuf Aṭṭafayash,” in *Handbook of Qurʾānic Hermeneutics*, ed. Georges Tamer, vol. 4 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), 71–90.

Asia.⁵³ Philosopher-poet Muḥammad Iqbal called for spiritual and communal revival grounded in Qur'ānic ethics, using a language of dynamic selfhood and divine accountability.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, in the Shī'ī tradition, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī's (d. 1981) *al-Mizān* offered a philosophical exegesis that rejected sectarian polemic in favor of a reasoned, holistic understanding of revelation.⁵⁵ Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr (d. 1980), influenced by both philosophy and politics, contributed to structural readings that emphasized the interconnectedness of Qur'ānic themes.⁵⁶ Scholars such as Ṭāliqānī (d. 1979) in Iran brought local, often politically charged, readings to their contexts, blending mysticism, resistance, and reform.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, Egypt's Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī (d. 1998) became a household name, using accessible media and vivid storytelling to bring Qur'ānic reflection to popular audiences.⁵⁸

Beyond methods, this period saw broader shifts in hermeneutical attitudes. Scholars such as 'Izzat Darwaza (d. 1984) experimented with arranging verses chronologically, and many questioned or rejected the doctrine of abrogation (*naskh*), favoring contextual harmony. There was also a rising call to expunge *isrā'īliyyāt*—Judeo-Christian narratives seen as diluting Qur'ānic authenticity—especially after the creation of Israel. Meanwhile, many scholars have moved away from the traditional verse-by-verse style of *tafsīr* and are instead organizing their interpretations thematically. For instance, Quraish Shihab's (b. 1944) and Mohamed Talbi's (d. 2017) collection of verses deal with specific topics, such as gender, ethics, or religious diversity, allowing for a clearer focus on contemporary issues and a more coherent ethical vision.⁵⁹

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- 53 Kamran Bashir, "Ḥamīd ad-Dīn Farāhī," in *Handbook of Qur'ānic Hermeneutics*, ed. Georges Tamer, vol. 4 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), 107–116.
- 54 H.C. Hillier and Basit Bilal Koshul (eds.), *Muhammad Iqbal: Essays on the Reconstruction of Modern Muslim Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).
- 55 Urs Gösken, "Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī," in *Handbook of Qur'ānic Hermeneutics*, ed. Georges Tamer, vol. 4 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), 335–354.
- 56 Mohammad Reza Vasfi and S.R. Shafī'ei, "Muḥammad Bāqir aṣ-Ṣadr," in *Handbook of Qur'ānic Hermeneutics*, ed. Georges Tamer, vol. 4 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), 309–324.
- 57 Oliver Scharbrodt and Mohammed Mesbahi, "Maḥmūd Ṭāliqānī," in *Handbook of Qur'ānic Hermeneutics*, ed. Georges Tamer, vol. 4 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), 291–308.
- 58 Jacqueline Brinton, "Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī," in *Handbook of Qur'ānic Hermeneutics*, ed. Georges Tamer, vol. 4 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), 433–446.
- 59 For some studies about Quraish Shihab, see Sahiron Syamsuddin, "Differing Responses to Western Hermeneutics: A Comparative Critical Study of M. Quraish Shihab's and Muḥammad 'Imāra's Thoughts," *Al-Jamī'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 59, no. 2 (2021): 79–512; Mursalim Musawir and Siti Masrohatin, "Women's Leadership in the Perspective of M. Quraish Shihab's Thought: An Analysis of 'Tafsīr al-Misbah,'" *ISAR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, no. 12 (2024): 54–59; Tuty Wahyuni, "Women and Modern Families: An

Across the Muslim world, modern Qur'ānic hermeneutics became increasingly attuned to contemporary realities, forging a renewed engagement with the Qur'ān that was intellectually rigorous, socially engaged, and ethically driven. It is no longer limited to traditional theological approaches or to famous Muslim cities, such as Cairo, Damascus, and Tehran. Instead, it now reflects a wide range of ideas and voices from across the Muslim world—from London and Berlin to Kuala Lumpur and Melbourne. This shift has made Qur'ānic hermeneutics more global, diverse, and responsive to the real concerns of Muslims today.

The Pakistani-American scholar Fazlur Rahman's work represents a fusion of Islamic ethics with Western historical-critical tools. He distinguished the Qur'ān's core moral teachings from their historical forms. He also proposed thematic readings of the Qur'ān as a way for the reformist application of its ethical vision.⁶⁰ His method resonated with a wide range of reformers in the twentieth century.⁶¹ In addition to Rahman, scholars such as Muhammad Arkoun, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, and Abdolkarim Soroush have been central to this transformation. Arkoun called for a bold rethinking of how people study the Qur'ān, urging them to distinguish between what he called the "Qur'ānic fact" (the original historical moment) and the "Islamic fact" (the interpretations of that moment over time). He combined theology with history, anthropology, and philosophy, creating a rich, multidimensional way of reading the text.⁶² Abū Zayd took a similar path but emphasized the Qur'ān as a living act of communication—divinely inspired but also shaped by the limitations of human language and historical setting.⁶³ Soroush went even further, sug-

Analysis of Quraish Shihab's Perspectives," *Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 4, no. 1 (2024), 100–116; For Talbi, see Ronald L. Nettler, "Mohamed Talbi's Theory of Religious Pluralism: A Modernist Islamic Outlook," *The Maghreb Review* 24, no. 1–2 (1999), 19–33.

60 Fazlur Rahman, *The Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980); Fazlur Rahman, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982); Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

61 For Fazlur Rahman's influence on contemporary Islamic thought, see Ali Akbar, "Fazlur Rahman's Influence on Contemporary Islamic Thought," *The Muslim World* 110, no. 2 (2020): 129–153.

62 Muhammad Arkoun, "The Notion of Revelation: From Ahl al-Kitāb to the Societies of the Book," *Die Welt des Islams* 28, no. 1 (1988): 62–89; Muhammad Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, trans. Robert D. Lee (Oxford: Westview Press, 1994); Muhammad Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London: Saqi Publication, 2002).

63 For Abū Zayd's approach, see Yusuf Rahman, "The Qur'ān in Egypt: Nasr Abu Zayd's Literary Approach," in *Coming to Terms with the Qur'an: A Volume in Honor of Professor Issa Boullata*, ed. Khaleel Mohammed and Andrew Rippin (North Haledon: Islamic Publica-

gesting that the revelation unfolded alongside the Prophet's growing spiritual awareness. For him, religious knowledge is not static—it changes with time, similarly to human understanding.⁶⁴

Not everyone agreed with these approaches. Thinkers including Mohamed Talbi and Ḥasan Ḥanafī (d. 2021) emphasized the importance of reason and historical context but maintained a clearer distinction between Divine Revelation and human interpretation.⁶⁵ Talbi viewed the Qur'ān as a rational guide for pluralism, dialogue, and science. Meanwhile, Ḥanafī believed that interpretation has a political role—either supporting the status quo or pushing for social change. Muḥammad Shaḥrūr (d. 2019) introduced new tools, such as mathematics and linguistics, to rethink traditional Islamic norms and legal structures.⁶⁶ Moreover, Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr (d. 1980) blended rationalism with spirituality, reading the Qur'ān as a call for human dignity, pluralism, and peaceful coexistence.⁶⁷

Historical awareness is a common thread running through many modern interpretations. Scholars such as Abū Zayd and Mahmoud Ayoub (d. 2021) emphasized that meaning does not exist in the text alone—it emerges in the interaction between the reader and the scripture. In particular, Ayoub argued that the Qur'ān calls not for exclusivity but for openness to other religious paths.⁶⁸ Turkish scholars, including Yaşar Nuri Öztürk (d. 2016) and Süleyman Ateş (b. 1933), offered alternatives: Öztürk rejected ḥadīth and relied solely on the Qur'ān, whereas Ateş sought a balance between reason and tradition.⁶⁹

tions International, 2008.), 227–265; Sukidi, “Naşr Hāmid Abū Zayd and the Quest for a Humanistic Hermeneutics of the Qur'ān,” *Die Welt des Islams* 49, no. 2 (2009): 181–211.

64 Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, trans. Nilou Mobasser (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

65 Yasmeen Daifallah, “*Turath* as Critique: Hassan Hanafi on the Modern Arabic Subject,” in *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present*, ed. Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 285–310.

66 Muhammad Shahrur, *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, trans. Andreas Christmann (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

67 Vasfi and Shafi'ei, “Muḥammad Bāqir aṣ-Ṣadr.”

68 Mahmoud Ayoub, “The Qur'an and Religious Pluralism,” in *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, ed. Roger Boase (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 273–281.

69 For Turkish scholars' approaches, see Flex Korner, *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkish University Theology: Rethinking Islam* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2005); Gokhan Bacik, “Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkey: An Analysis of Turkish Historicists,” *Religions* 12, no. 11 (2021): 1–15; Yusuf Çelik, *Critical Hermeneutics: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives in Turkey on the Understanding and Interpretation of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

Another significant development in recent years has been the emergence of feminist readings of the Qurʾān. Scholars such as Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi (d. 2015), and Asma Barlas (b. 1950) have questioned centuries of male-dominated interpretations. They argue that gender inequality is not grounded in the Qurʾān itself, but in the ways that men have interpreted it. For instance, Wadud has focused on the Qurʾān's concern with justice and mutual respect and has challenged readings that associate God with oppression or domination. These women are not just offering new interpretations—they are claiming the right to interpret the text in the first place.⁷⁰

A related current development is the contributions of Muslim scholars in Western minority contexts to Qurʾānic hermeneutics, which relate the Qurʾān to life in a minority context. Abdullah Saeed, based in Australia, is known for his contributions to developing a contextualist approach that bridges revelation and modernity. He argues that seventh-century realities shaped many Qurʾānic rulings and these must now be interpreted flexibly. Emphasizing that interpretation is always context-bound, Saeed builds on the classical tradition to promote a dynamic, ethically grounded reading of the Qurʾān for the modern period, particularly about the concerns of Muslims in minority contexts.⁷¹

Meanwhile, the internet and new media have changed the way Qurʾānic interpretation reaches the public. In Malaysia, Indonesia, and Turkey, state-backed institutions publish official *tafsīrs* that address modern issues, including science, ethics, and politics. Popular figures, such as Imran Hosein, use YouTube and other social media to spread their interpretations, which are often focused on the end times and global injustice. These new platforms have made interpretation more accessible—and more contested—than ever.

Together, these scholars—Rahman, Arkoun, Abū Zayd, Soroush, Wadud, Ḥanafī, Talbi, Shihab, Ayoub, Shaḥrūr, Saeed, and others—have helped create a more open, diverse, and reflective space for reading the Qurʾān. Their work does not abandon the sacred nature of the text but maintains that its meaning must always be re-engaged with, reinterpreted, and rethought at every age. A

70 Amina Wadud, *Qurʾan and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006); Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in Islam: *Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qurʾan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1991).

71 Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qurʾān: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London: Routledge, 2006); Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qurʾan in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach* (London: Routledge, 2013).

key idea associated with their works is the idea of context, to which I now turn in exploring some of their ideas in some detail.

6 Context and Interpreting the Qur'ān Today

As this book largely focuses on issues related to the Qur'ān, its interpretation, and context, in this section, I will explore several aspects of this emphasis. Part of the contextualization project is that interpreting the Qur'ān involves an awareness that the text can be interpreted in light of contemporary epistemological paradigms while still engaging the epistemological frameworks of the classical period. Thus, the interpretative discourses, methods, and tools that previous generations of *mufasssīrūn* (exegetes) proposed may have been more appropriate for their times and places but now ought to be extended, or in some cases replaced, where necessary, by new or revised methods and tools derived from contemporary knowledge alongside traditional Islamic knowledge.

For example, Shaḥrūr embraces an evolutionary vision of human knowledge and believes that the Qur'ān needs to be liberated from classical exegesis and interpreted anew in light of contemporary knowledge so that its content may be applied to the social and moral issues of the modern period. Shaḥrūr's basic position is that if maintaining the idea that Islam (or the Qur'ān) is valid for all human beings, in all circumstances, throughout history, then there is simply no need for any past interpretations produced by a different episteme. Shaḥrūr urges his audience to receive the Qur'ān "as if the Prophet had just passed away and had informed us of this book"⁷² because, he argues, each generation of Muslims and non-Muslims has the right to interpret the Qur'ān in accordance with their context and contemporary reality.⁷³ In his view, the text allows its readers to understand it in a contemporary manner and by considering contemporary circumstances. Shaḥrūr writes: "Just as in the seventh century people understood Allah's *Book* with the help of what was *then* contemporary knowledge, in the twenty-first century we must understand it with what is *now* contemporary knowledge."⁷⁴ In other words, approaches to interpreting the Qur'ān can "change as a result of epistemological and scientific developments that take place in our societies."⁷⁵

72 Muḥammad Shaḥrūr, *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'a Mu'aṣira* (Damascus: al-Ahli li al-Ṭab' wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī', 1990), 44.

73 Shaḥrūr, *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān*, 30–32.

74 Shahrur, *The Qur'an*, 2.

75 Shahrur, *The Qur'an*, 496.

Arkoun argues that contemporary knowledge should be used to interpret the Qurʾān. As Lee notes, “Arkoun approached the Qurʾānic text as a literary document to be analyzed with modern interpretive tools.”⁷⁶ Arkoun focuses on rethinking Islam using recent findings in the humanities and social sciences to shed new light on the sacred texts and traditions of Islam and to explore the historicity of the revelation.⁷⁷ He applies the tools of semiotics, modern linguistics, and historical and anthropological analyses to interpret the Qurʾān. According to Arkoun, there is:

(a) a linguistic way that allows us to discover a profound order in an apparent disorder, (b) an anthropological way that would consist in recognising the role of language as a mythical structure ... and (c) a historical way which defines the possibilities and the limits of logical/lexicographical exegeses and imaginative exegeses that are produced up to now by Muslims.⁷⁸

Likewise, Soroush argues that the use of contemporary knowledge to interpret the Qurʾān is inevitable. In his theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge, he argues that religious knowledge depends on many variables, including the time and place in which it arose. In fact, it is always in dialogue with other modes of knowledge and science.⁷⁹ According to Soroush, all modes of knowledge are interrelated: “Different modes of knowledge, including human sciences, natural science, philosophy and religious science are all related and interconnected.”⁸⁰ Therefore, evolution in other fields of knowledge can cause changes to religious knowledge. Further, drawing upon human discoveries in other fields of learning, including humanities and social sciences, to inform religious knowledge is inevitable to some extent.⁸¹

76 Robert Lee, “The Ideas of Mohammed Arkoun,” in *Social, Ethical, Political, and Policy Implications of Interpretations of Islam’s Foundational Text: The Qurʾān* (New York: New York University’s Center for Dialogues, 2010), 14.

77 Elizabeth S. Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 175.

78 Massimo Campanini, *The Qurʾān: The Basics*, trans. Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2007), 124.

79 Abdolkarim Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te’orik-e Sharīʿat* (Tehran: Sirat, 1995), 245–246.

80 Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te’orik-e Sharīʿat*, 187.

81 Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, ed. and trans. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 32–33. See also Michael Mumisa, “Towards an African Qurʾānic Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Qurʾānic Studies* 4, no. 1 (April 2002): 61–76, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1525009702000010>.

6.1 *Historical Contextualization*

Historical contextualization entails discovering the context in which verses of the Qur'ān, especially those related to socio-legal matters, were revealed. Since the historical context of the Qur'ān is understood to shape its content to some extent, any hermeneutics of the Qur'ān—according to many contextualist scholars—should take into account the culture, history, and context of the Arabian Peninsula (especially Mecca and Medina) before the emergence of the Qur'ān and during Prophet Muḥammad's prophetic mission.

Fazlur Rahman has played a significant role in interpreting the Qur'ān from a contextualist perspective. His approach is grounded in the idea that “the Qur'an is God's response through Muḥammad's mind to a historic situation.”⁸² Rahman argues that Islamic scholarship has failed to use the *asbāb al-nuzūl* material in combination with knowledge about the sociohistorical context into which the revelations emerged: “It is strange however, that no systematic attempt has ever been made to understand the Qur'ān ... by setting the specific cases of the *sha'n al-nuzūl* ... [against] the general background [of] ... the activity of the Prophet.”⁸³

Using this approach, Rahman argues that the contingent verses of the Qur'ān should be distinguished from its universal verses—that is, those that are applicable to all times and places. The contingent verses are those principles and teachings that were formulated in a specific historical context, grew out of a particular political and cultural milieu, and cannot be implemented literally in other contexts.⁸⁴ For instance, a certain ruling that was just or in line with public interest of the time of the Prophet may no longer be just today. Therefore, according to Rahman, it is the duty of Muslim scholars to analyze the Qur'ān in order to establish the ideals of Islam and to present them in a new form that is suitable for the present.⁸⁵ He asserts that much of Qur'ānic legislation falls into the category of contingent verses: “the actual legislation of the Qur'an cannot have been meant to be literally eternal by the Qur'an.”⁸⁶

Therefore, building a genuine, viable set of Islamic laws and institutions requires a twofold movement, what Rahman refers to as the “double move-

3366/jqs.2002.4.1.61, for the use of African Qur'ānic hermeneutics within the liberative discourse.

82 Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 8.

83 Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 143.

84 Rahman, *The Major Themes*, 145–147.

85 M.J. Elmi, “Objectivity and Extra-Historicity in Understanding the Qur'an,” *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 7, no. 3 (2014): 274.

86 Rahman, *Islam*, 39.

ment” theory: from the present situation to the Qur’ānic context and then back to the present. In the first movement, the interpreter should consider the context of the Qur’ān to arrive at general principles. In this movement, the interpreter should also identify the original intentions or reasons behind the ethico-legal content, what Rahman refers to as the *ratio legis*. This enables the interpreter to understand the teachings of the Qur’ān and its key objectives as a whole. In the second movement, the general or universal ethical principles or values achieved in the first movement should be used as a basis for formulating laws relevant to the contemporary situation.⁸⁷ This process requires detailed knowledge of the conditions of the modern period, including its social and political realities.⁸⁸

According to Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, the Qur’ān cannot be divorced from the historical, cultural, and linguistic context in which it emerged. Abū Zayd argues that “the Divine origin of the text does not prevent a cultural reading of it; on the contrary, it is through its cultural, historical, and human components ... that this message can be communicated to and received by humans.”⁸⁹ Further, revelation consists of “all the possible elements of communication: argument, discussion, persuasion, challenge and dialogue.”⁹⁰ Abū Zayd’s approach to the Qur’ān is often described as a humanistic one. This approach is an intended consequence of the revelation that was disclosed and communicated in a language intelligible to humans. The Qur’ān was revealed in Arabic, the human language of the first recipients of the revelation. Abū Zayd maintains that God adapted the revelation to the language, social situation, and cultural tradition of the Arabs of Prophet Muḥammad’s era.⁹¹ He explains:

Given that humans constitute the ultimate recipients of this revelation, it would be inconceivable to imagine that the Qur’ān would address them except through their particular linguistic system and their cultural framework. ... Indeed, being a message, it is but normal that it adapted itself to the structures of this reality, including in particular its cultural and linguistic ones.⁹²

87 Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 5–8.

88 Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 5–6, 20.

89 Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 188.

90 Naṣr Hamid Abu Zayd, “The ‘Others’ in the Qur’an: A Hermeneutical Approach,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36, no. 3–4 (2010): 287.

91 Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsa fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān* (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Miṣriyya al-‘amma li al-Kitāb, 1990), 11–12, 25–26; Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *al-Ittijāh al-‘Aqlī fī al-Tafsīr*, 3rd ed. (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-‘Arabī, 1996). This argument is the main subject of this book, but see especially 70–77.

92 Abū Zayd, *Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ*, 64.

Abū Zayd's approach to interpretation revolves around his notion of *ma'na* (the meaning of the text in light of the sociohistorical, cultural, and linguistic context in which it emerged) and *maghza* (the significance of the text through the act of interpretation by human interpreters in light of their contemporary context).⁹³ He offers a 'valid interpretation' through a 'recurring movement' between the two dimensions of the *meaning* of the text in the past and its *significance* in the present context.⁹⁴ In other words, the process of interpreting the Qur'ān should follow two steps: we should first consider its meaning in its initial cultural and historical context and then determine its significance in the present context.

Similarly to Abū Zayd, Arkoun maintains that revelation was enmeshed with the social, political, and cultural structures of the seventh-century tribal societies of Mecca and Medina.⁹⁵ Thinking about revelation requires not just asking about the divine source of the revelation, but also its human dimension and its interplay with history and the created world—the world of humans. Arkoun argues that historical research can shed light on how the revelation was received and how it generated meaning and truth. According to him, "there is no way to find the absolute outside the social, political condition of human beings and the mediation of language."⁹⁶ A meaningful interpretation of the Qur'ānic revelation is one that is aware of the continuing interaction between revelation and history.⁹⁷ That is, "the role of the social-historical impact in the shaping of" Qur'ānic revelation should be taken into account in any approach to interpreting the Qur'ān.⁹⁸

This interest in contextualization is not just a Sunnī one. In the last decades of the twentieth century and in the early twenty-first century, Shi'ī scholars have also engaged in contextual readings of the Qur'ān. The most significant contribution has come from the Iranian scholar Soroush, mentioned earlier. According to Soroush, revelation is adapted to its environment through the mind of the Prophet. It is also shaped by the Prophet's personal history. Any responsible hermeneutical methodology or interpretation of the Qur'ān must therefore consider the history, culture, and context of Ḥijāzī society. In fact, these contextual and cultural adaptations, and even the psychological and spir-

93 Sukidi, "Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd," 207.

94 Sukidi, "Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd," 185.

95 Arkoun, "The Notion of Revelation," 71.

96 Arkoun, "The Notion of Revelation," 81.

97 Arkoun, "The Notion of Revelation," 80.

98 Arkoun, "The Notion of Revelation," 81.

itual state of the Prophet, must have left their marks on the text of the Qur'ān that we have today.⁹⁹

Soroush's theory of revelation entails two types of religious commands in Islam; that is, 'essentials' (eternal) and 'accidentals' (mutable), and only a contextual approach can disentangle them. The essentials constitute those aspects of the Qur'ān and the Sunna that need to be expanded and extended to our times, whereas the accidentals are those that need to be abandoned, although they will constantly be used to enter the world of the Prophet's experience.¹⁰⁰ According to Soroush, it is important to recognize the historicity as well as the human dimension of Qur'ānic revelation. Without this recognition, interpreters will have difficulty understanding the religion in a way that is relevant to their contemporary context. Therefore, they must be clear about what is essential and accidental to their religion (i.e. the accidental is, by definition, temporal and, therefore, carries no intrinsic or eternal authority).¹⁰¹ Soroush considers the Qur'ān's socio-legal rulings to be among the mutable aspects of the Qur'ān and argues that many of these rulings were only relevant to the context in which they appeared and are therefore irrelevant to contemporary circumstances. Accordingly,

all the rulings of *fiqh* are temporary and belong to the Prophet's society and societies like it, unless proven otherwise, in the sense that there would have to be definite reasons demonstrating that they had been legislated for all times and not just for those particular conditions.¹⁰²

Along similar lines, Muḥammad Mojtahed Shabestari from Iran argues that some statements in the Qur'ān should be regarded as everlasting and constant, while others (especially those pertaining to socio-legal matters) are temporary and changeable: "The assumption that instructions pertaining to socio-politic[al] issues are addressed to some unspecified, universal group of people, and that today they should [still] show the Muslims their legal duties, is entirely unjustified."¹⁰³ According to Shabestari, statements in the Qur'ān, including

99 Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 10–11.

100 "Islam, Revelation and Prophethood," on Dr. Soroush's official website, accessed April 23, 2025, <http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT%20Islam,%20Revelation%20and%20Prophethood.html>.

101 Katajun Amirpur, "The Changing Approach to the Text: Iranian Scholars and the Quran," *Middle Eastern Studies* 41, no. 3 (2005): 345.

102 Soroush, "Islam, Revelation and Prophethood."

103 Magdalena Rodziewicz, "The End of Traditional Islamic Jurisprudence in Hermeneutics of Muḥammad Mojtahed Shabestari," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2017): 215.

those of a legal nature, have a precisely defined addressee, namely, a community embedded in a specific time and space. In addition, the Qur'ān should not be approached as a book of laws: "the Qur'ān does not have the characteristics of a legislative text (*matn-e qānūnī*) and we cannot interpret the Qur'ān in the same way that we interpret a legislative text, as many *fuqahā* do."¹⁰⁴

Another Shī'ī scholar, Abolqasem Fanaei, argues that the divine message is necessarily situated in the cultural context of the period in which it was revealed. According to Fanaei, the Qur'ān has two aspects: an immutable aspect that is "beyond time and place," and a time-bound and place-bound aspect. The Qur'ān consists of a combination of both ahistorical or absolute verses and historical verses. The former are context-free and therefore applicable to all circumstances, but the latter are context-dependent.¹⁰⁵ To understand the latter type of verses, a "contextual method" of interpretation is required:

Once the ahistorical verses have been distinguished from the historical ones, what we need to do is to try to understand those verses of the Qur'ān that are tainted by historicity in light of the context-free verses, and not the other way around.¹⁰⁶

6.2 *Context, Women, and Interpretation*

The issue of context is particularly relevant to scholarship on the Qur'ān by Muslim women and to their arguments for gender equality, fair treatment, and nondiscrimination. Prominent scholars, such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, and many other 'Muslim feminists' have used the idea of context extensively in their writings.

Amina Wadud states that the Qur'ān should be read "in its context; in the light of overriding Qur'anic principles; and within the context of the Qur'anic Weltanschauung, or world-view."¹⁰⁷ Indeed, Wadud advocates reading the Qur'ān as a textual whole while also contextualizing its teachings.¹⁰⁸ In contrast to the atomistic approach, which is favored by traditional exegesis, Wadud

¹⁰⁴ "Explanation of the Basis for the Debate with Muslim Jurists," on Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari's official website, accessed April 23, 2025, <http://mohammadmojtahedshabestari.com>.

¹⁰⁵ Banafsheh Madaninejad, "The Limits of a 'Fixed' Qur'an," in *Approaches to the Qur'an in Contemporary Iran*, ed. Alessandro Cancian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 139.

¹⁰⁶ Madaninejad, "The Limits of a 'Fixed' Qur'an," 139.

¹⁰⁷ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 5.

¹⁰⁸ Asma Barlas, "Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an: Women Reading Sacred Texts," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 103.

emphasizes a holistic approach to the Qurʾān based upon its textual unity.¹⁰⁹ That is, instead of focusing on just one verse at a time, Wadud seeks to recognize themes and discuss the Qurʾān's relationship to itself thematically.¹¹⁰ In this regard, she proposes a hermeneutics based on *tawhīd*, whereby the unity of the Qurʾān extends throughout all of its parts, so that its verses (especially those about women) are considered in light of the larger, holistic framework of the Qurʾān—the Qurʾānic *weltanschauung*.¹¹¹

Wadud also uses the concept of *tawhīd* to emphasize an egalitarian reading of the Qurʾān. According to her, *tawhīd* is not only a theological concept but also a moral concept with sociopolitical implications: “*tawhīd* is the operating principle of equilibrium and cosmic harmony ... [and] relates to relationships and developments within the social and political realms, emphasising the unity of all human creatures beneath one Creator.”¹¹² Wadud concludes that “women and men must occupy a relationship of horizontal reciprocity, maintaining the highest place for God in His/Her/Its uniqueness,” meaning that men and women have the same status in God's eyes.¹¹³

In addition to this approach to *tawhīd*, Wadud uses the Qurʾānic narrative of creation to argue for gender equality. According to Wadud,

in the Qurʾānic account of creation, Allah never planned to begin the creation of humankind with a male person; nor does it ever refer to the origins of the human race with Adam. ... The Qurʾānic version of the creation of humankind is not expressed in gender terms.¹¹⁴

The issue of context is relevant for Wadud, who argues that the Qurʾān must be understood as a “text that responded to particular circumstances in Arabia at the time of the revelation.”¹¹⁵ She explains the Qurʾān's teachings in light of the social and historical contexts that Islam sought to reform.¹¹⁶ Similarly, Asma Barlas emphasizes the importance of context in Qurʾānic interpretation.

109 Barlas, “Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics,” 110.

110 Rachel M. Scott, “A Contextual Approach to Women's Rights in the Qurʾān: Readings of 4:34,” *The Muslim World* 99 (2009): 72; Amina Wadud, *Qurʾan and Woman*, x, 2.

111 Hibba Abugideiri, “The Renewed Woman of American Islam: Shifting Lenses toward ‘Gender Jihad?’” *The Muslim World* 91, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 2.

112 Wadud, *Qurʾan and Woman*, 28.

113 Amina Wadud, “Foreword: Engaging Tawhid in Islam and Feminisms,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 10 (2008): 437.

114 Wadud, *Qurʾan and Woman*, 19–21.

115 Scott, “A Contextual Approach,” 73; Wadud, *Qurʾan and Woman*, 78.

116 Barlas, “Amina Wadud's Hermeneutics,” 107.

Barlas stresses that the Qur'ān was revealed in a specific historical context, meaning that there is coherence between the content and the context of the Qur'ān. Barlas argues that the Qur'ān “occurred in the light of history” and that many of its penal precepts are responses to “the social conditions that were characteristics of the Arabian tribes fourteen centuries ago.”¹¹⁷ Therefore, the interpreter should “read behind the text” (i.e., reconstruct the historical context from which the text emerged) and “read in front of the text” (i.e., recontextualize the text in light of present needs).¹¹⁸

6.3 *Context and Literary Approaches*

A key aspect of modern scholarship on the Qur'ān concerns the analysis of its literary styles and characteristics. Again, this is not an entirely new area of scholarship. There is a large body of work on the literary and stylistic aspects of the Qur'ān in classical Islamic scholarship, such as commentaries that analyze its linguistic or stylistic aspects. Scholars such as al-Zamakhsharī, ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078), and Ibn ‘Aṭīyya (d. 541/1146) have all dealt with such issues.

The Mu‘tazilīs were particularly interested in the linguistic aspects of the Qur'ān, and under their influence, Shī‘ī and Sunnī scholars both maintained this strong interest and went on to write extensive commentaries. In the twentieth century, scholars such as Taha Hussain (d. 1973) from Egypt wrote about Arabic literature and explored the literary aspects of the Qur'ān. Hussain and his students were quite active in this space, and their works caused quite a bit of controversy in Egypt in the early twentieth century.¹¹⁹

Some Muslim scholars interested in a literary approach to interpretation have tried to question the historicity of the narratives in the Qur'ān, which are referred to as *qaṣaṣ*. The stories of Abraham and others have been analyzed by focusing on their literary features, with the view that they are not necessarily about history but, rather, stories that convey a particular lesson. This approach has evoked a strong reaction from many other Muslims, who regard any questioning of the historical validity of narratives in the Qur'ān as tantamount to blasphemy. Scholars who have embarked on such studies have been castigated and marginalized and have struggled to recover from intellectual attacks by some traditionalist scholars in response.¹²⁰

117 Barlas, “*Believing Women*,” 59.

118 Barlas, “*Believing Women*,” 62.

119 For Hussain’s literary approach, see Mohammad Salama, *The Qur’an and Modern Arabic Literary Criticism: From Taha to Nasr* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 17–36.

120 See Pink, “Striving for a New Exegesis,” 779.

A key figure of the literary approach to interpreting the Qur'ān was Amīn al-Khūlī. According to al-Khūlī, the Qur'ān, as with any work of literary art, must be understood against a background of language and stylistic conventions, as well as the sociocultural conditions of the society it originally addressed. Therefore, in addition to understanding the broader context of the Qur'ān's revelation through the *asbāb al-nuzūl* material, the Qur'ān's language and forms of literary expression should also be understood.¹²¹ This means that the language, style, and cultural horizon of the first audience of the Qur'ān are recognized as having had a significant role in shaping its content, and thus, to fully understand the Qur'ān, the horizon of the immediate recipient of the text should be studied.

One aspect of al-Khūlī's literary approach is the idea that the Qur'ān, similarly to any other literary text, sought to "appeal to the listeners' emotions, which was a more effective means of reaching its audience than a mere statement of rationally comprehensible facts would have been."¹²² For instance, if there is a reference to the movement of the stars in the Qur'ān, the text does not seek to teach its readers about astronomy but, rather, "appeals to their imagination, creating a psychological effect that fosters a deep understanding of the divine message."¹²³

The key to the literary approach is that it places the study of the Qur'ān on the same footing as the study of other sacred texts, such as the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, since it considers the Qur'ān to be a text that emerged in a particular historical context. Therefore, history (and historical analysis) is inseparable from literary analysis.

6.4 *Context and Scientific Exegesis*

The connection between science and Qur'ānic interpretation really started to take off in the modern period, especially as Muslims came into closer contact with Western scientific ideas during the colonial era. Many Muslim thinkers at the time wanted to show that the Qur'ān not only supported reason and inquiry but could also be read in harmony with modern scientific knowledge. Scholars such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muḥammad 'Abduh were among the first to argue that the Qur'ān encourages people to explore the natural world and that some verses even hint at truths that science would later uncover. Their goal was to bridge faith and reason, to show that belief in the Qur'ān did not have to mean rejecting the discoveries of modern science.

121 Wielandt, "Main Trends of Islamic Theological Thought," 737.

122 Pink, "Striving for a New Exegesis," 779.

123 Pink, "Striving for a New Exegesis," 779–780.

This idea grew more popular in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with what is now known as “scientific exegesis” or *tafsīr ‘ilmī*. The basic claim here is that the Qur’ān contains references to scientific facts that only modern science has fully revealed. Scholars such as Zaghoul El-Naggar (b. 1933) and Maurice Bucaille (d. 1988) became well-known for promoting this view, saying that the Qur’ān’s accuracy on topics such as embryology or the formation of the universe proves it must have been received from God. Many Muslims today find this idea compelling—it is often shared in books, talks, and even school lessons. But not everyone agrees. Some scholars argue that trying to read modern science in the Qur’ān can lead to misunderstanding both. A more careful approach, such as the one suggested by Nidhal Guessoum (b. 1960), focuses on how the Qur’ān encourages a mindset of curiosity, observation, and ethical thinking, rather than offering specific scientific knowledge. This debate is still ongoing, and it shows just how diverse and dynamic Qur’ānic interpretation can be.¹²⁴

6.5 *Context and Thematic Approaches*

Although the thematic study of the Qur’ān was of interest to early Muslim scholars as they considered its various themes (such as law), in the modern period it has become vital. Central to the thematic approach to interpreting the Qur’ān is the idea that the interpreter selects a group of verses related to a single theme and seeks to synthesize these verses into a single composite view. In this method, the exegete studies the Qur’ān by taking up a single theme and interprets it in light of the Qur’ān’s *weltanschauung*. The thematic approach stands in sharp contrast to the atomistic approach, since the latter does not seek to systematically connect the various themes in the Qur’ān.

In his book *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, Fazlur Rahman argues that to understand the Qur’ān, it must be examined thematically—that is, in terms of themes such as One God, eschatology and the hereafter, women, and the creation of human beings—rather than verse by verse or fragment by fragment. To read the Qur’ān thematically, the interpreter must bring together all the verses pertaining to a particular theme, topic, or issue, and then try to obtain a better understanding of it by examining all the relevant Qur’ānic verses. According

124 Zaghoul El-Naggar, *The Geological Concept of Mountains in the Qur’an* (Cairo: al-Falah Foundation, 2003); Maurice Bucaille, *The Bible, The Qur’an and Science: The Holy Scriptures Examined in the Light of Modern Knowledge* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1978); Nidhal Guessoum, *Islam’s Quantum Question: Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011); Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, vol. 2 (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1976).

to Rahman, this approach would provide Muslims with a more holistic view of the Qurʾān and a basis for engaging with contemporary issues. For example, regarding gender equality and human rights, if one identifies the Qurʾānic texts on women, gathers them in one place, and examines them theme by theme within that framework, one will gain a better appreciation of what the Qurʾān has to say about women, he suggests.¹²⁵ Interpreting particular verses related to this theme of women in light of other verses may suggest that gender equality can be supported by the Qurʾān's overall emphasis on men, women, justice, and fairness. Similarly, several topics in the Qurʾān are associated with the broad theme of the creation of human beings. Arguably, this approach to interpretation provides a better understanding of certain topics, particularly considering modern discoveries about human beings, the universe, the beginning of human life on the earth, the connections between human beings and other species, and evolution. Similarly, in criminal law, Qurʾānic penalties that might today be defined as torture or dehumanization can be better understood by, for example, considering the legal texts pertaining to theft, adultery, and murder (and their relevant punishments) in the Qurʾān as a whole.

Shaḥrūr argues that the Qurʾān is to be divided into different subject themes and considers them books (*kutub*) within the entire *al-Kitāb* (i.e., the Qurʾān). He interprets verses of the Qurʾān by assuming that “they belong to organic single units,” meaning that the Qurʾān “is neither uniform nor disjointed in its structure, but composed of many different sections.”¹²⁶ These units or themes include matters such as “the book of creation,” “the book of the Last Day,” “the book of *ʿibādāt* (acts of worship),” and “the book of *muʿāmalāt* (social transactions).” According to Shaḥrūr, these books should again be divided into other books; for example, the book of *ʿibādāt* may be subdivided into the books of prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage.¹²⁷

Another scholar who has presented a thematic approach to interpreting the Qurʾān with a focus on social and ethical issues is the Indonesian scholar Muhammad Quraish Shihab. In *Wawasan al-Qurʾān*, he discusses 33 themes, including theological topics and aspects of religious ritual. Shihab suggests that in a thematic approach to interpreting the Qurʾān, close attention should also be paid to semantic detail and to the discipline of occasions of revela-

125 Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qurʾān*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

126 Andreas Christmann, “The Form Is Permanent, but the Content Moves: The Qurʾānic Text and Its Interpretation in Mohamad Shahrouf’s *ʿAl-Kitāb waʾl Qurʾān*,” *Die Welt des Islams* 43, no. 2 (2003): 155.

127 Christmann, “The Form is Permanent,” 155.

tion (*asbāb al-nuzūl*).¹²⁸ He argues that the thematic approach is effective in making the Qur'ān relevant to the contemporary world because "it enables the exegete to derive guidance from the Qur'ānic text instead of dissecting the text in a detached academic manner."¹²⁹ Some modern Muslim scholars consider the thematic analysis of the Qur'ān to be a solution to various contemporary problems. This is of particular interest to many young Muslims and emerging scholars who are interested in interpreting the Qur'ān in light of modern contexts and concerns. From the viewpoint of scholars who favor the thematic approach, it provides solutions to many of the current concerns and challenges Muslims encounter.

For instance, according to Jasser Auda, the thematic interpretation of the Qur'ān can "meet the challenges of the present times."¹³⁰ In addition, in the thematic interpretation of the Qur'ān, the exegete plays a significant role in creating meaning because:

the exegete does not start his interpretation from the text of the Qur'ān but from the reality of life. He concentrates on the particular subject out of the great number of problems affecting humanity in relation to the ideological, social or cosmological aspect of life, and starts a dialogue with the Qur'ān.¹³¹

6.6 *Context, Hermeneutics, and Interpretation*

One major concern for many traditionalist Qur'ānic scholars today is the influence of hermeneutic theories, which have gained significant traction in the West. Contemporary ideas about language and meaning are also shaping how many Muslims today approach the Qur'ānic text. Historically, Muslim scholars engaged with language and meaning at a sophisticated level. Mu'tazilī scholars, from al-Zamakhsharī to Qādī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025), spent considerable time exploring language and meaning. These theories were quite attractive

128 M. Quraish Shihab, *Membumikan al-Qur'an: Fungsi dan Peran Wahyu dalam Kehidupan Masyarakat* (Bandung: Mizan, 2006), 81, quoted in Mazlan Ibrahim and Abur Hamdi Usman, "The Rule of Interpretation: A Comparative Study between M. Quraish Shihab with al-Ṭabarī," *Advances in Natural and Applied Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2013): 15.

129 Pink, "Striving for a New Exegesis," 785.

130 Jasser Auda, "Why Do We Need the Thematic Interpretation of the Quran?," *About Islam*, accessed April 23, 2025, <https://aboutislam.net/reading-islam/research-studies/why-do-we-need-the-thematic-interpretation-of-quran>.

131 Mahmood Namazi, "Thematic Approach to Qur'an Exegesis," accessed April 23, 2025, <https://www.al-islam.org/message-thaqalayn/vol-10-no-4-winter-2010/thematic-approach-quran-exegesis-mahmood-namazi/thematic>.

to rationalist theologians and to the scholars of the Qurʾān who were influenced by them. Many such theories died down over the centuries in traditional Sunnī Islamic institutions but have recently been revived by scholars such as Muḥammad ʿAbduh from Egypt, who appears to have been strongly influenced by Muʿtazilī ideas. This stream of thinking, which is often labeled rationalist, is attractive to many modern Muslim scholars of the Qurʾān who have been trying to come to terms with modernity. One approach they have been adopting to achieve this goal is to consider interpretation in a more rational fashion—the clues for that are already there in classical Muslim scholarship, especially in the ideas of Muʿtazilīs—but many contemporary scholars of the Qurʾān are also quite interested in what modern hermeneutics may reveal about the way human beings engage with language, text, and meaning. They also seek to understand the fluidity of meaning, the process of reading, and the ways in which readers construct meaning—what a text is all about, how to approach a historical text, and how to reconstruct a text’s meaning. They are interested in whether meaning is to be considered something given or something that is constructed—whether it emerges because of the interaction between the author, reader, and text, or is created by the reader ignoring the author altogether. All these issues of modern literary theory and hermeneutics have been of interest to scholars, including Arkoun and Sharafī. Many Muslim feminist scholars have also used modern ideas about language, meaning, interpretation, and deconstruction in the interpretation of the Qurʾān. Scholars such as Abdullah Saeed have contributed further to the development of a contextualist approach to interpreting the Qurʾān.¹³²

Among Shīʿī scholars, Hasan Yousefi-Eshkevarī also emphasizes this approach. According to him, a reliable hermeneutic method should be based on the overarching Qurʾānic *weltanschauung*. Shabestari states that:

every text is a hidden reality that has to be revealed through interpretation. The meaning of the text is produced in the act of interpretation. In reality, the text comes to speak by means of interpretation, and pour out what it contains inside.¹³³

¹³² See, for example, Abdullah Saeed, “Some Reflections on the Contextualist Approach to Ethico-legal Texts of the Quran,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 71, no. 2 (2008): 221–237; Saeed, *Reading the Qurʾan*; Saeed, *Interpreting the Qurʾan*, 4.

¹³³ Quoted in Farzin Vahdat, “Post-revolutionary Islamic Modernity in Iran: The Intersubjective Hermeneutics of Mohamad Mojtahed Shabestari,” in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qurʾan*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 201.

Shabestari argues that all textual interpreters have a particular epistemological interest when interpreting the Qur'ān: "achieving new comprehension ... is always grounded on presupposition (*pish-fahm*) and pre-understanding (*pish-dānesteh*)."¹³⁴ Indeed, interpretation of the Qur'ān is a task that involves "a dialogical relationship" between the text and the reader/interpreter, "who seeks meaning by questioning the text."¹³⁵ It is in this dialogue between the Qur'ān and the interpreter that "human subjectivity is subtly restored."¹³⁶ Therefore, "by positing a dialogue between the divine author of the Qur'an and its human recipients, a subject-to-subject relationship is established."¹³⁷

Similarly, Soroush argues that the interpreter has certain questions in mind when interpreting the Qur'ān. These questions are products of the interpreter's prior knowledge, and his responses are often given in light of existing knowledge. Therefore, Soroush pays serious attention to the contextual nature of interpretation—namely, the context in which the Qur'ān is interpreted. He suggests that the Qur'ān is "hungry for rather than impregnated with meaning" and thus concludes that meaning is given to the text rather than extracted from it.¹³⁸

Although this area of Qur'ānic scholarship is still developing, it indicates a strong relationship between modern theories of language, meaning, hermeneutics, and current Muslim scholarship on the Qur'ān. It is currently such a widespread, visible aspect of Qur'ānic scholarship that it can hardly be called marginal. Even traditionalist scholars who have been reluctant to engage with debates on hermeneutics have been influenced by this trend (e.g., Quraish Shihab from Indonesia).

6.7 *Context and Objective-Oriented Interpretation*

The *maqāsid*, or objective-oriented approach to interpretation, emphasizes the purpose and higher objectives of the Qur'ān, which are then used to interpret other verses. Classical Muslim scholars systematized this concept. For instance, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) introduced these as the five major objectives of sharī'a. They serve to protect the five essential values, namely, life (*nafs*), religion and faith (*dīn*), intellect and reason (*'aql*), lineage (*nasl*), and property (*māl*).¹³⁹ According to Ibn Qayyim (d. 748/1347):

134 Muḥammad Mojtahed Shabestari, *Hermeneutics, Kitab and Sunnat*, trans. Ali Akbar, 17.

135 Carool Kersten, *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World: Trends, Themes and Issues* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 75.

136 Kersten, *Contemporary Thought*, 75.

137 Kersten, *Contemporary Thought*, 75.

138 Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te'orik-e Shari'at*, 271.

139 Idris Nassery, "The Inviolability of Human Dignity: A Maqāsid Perspective," in *The Objec-*

Shari‘a is all about wisdom and achieving people’s welfare in this life and the afterlife. It is all about justice, mercy, wisdom, and the good. Thus, any ruling that replaces justice with injustice, mercy with its opposite, the common good with mischief, or wisdom with nonsense, is a ruling that does not belong to the shari‘a, even if it is claimed to be so according to some interpretation.¹⁴⁰

Scholars have continued to apply this approach during the modern period. For some contemporary Muslim scholars, the scope of *maqāṣid al-sharī‘a* includes matters such as the preservation of religion, life, property, dignity, intellect, and offspring. According to Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī (d. 2022), the key aims of shari‘a include “preserving true faith, maintaining human dignity and rights, calling people to worship God, purifying the soul, restoring moral values, building good families, treating women fairly, building a strong Islamic nation and calling for a cooperative world.”¹⁴¹ Mohammad Hashim Kamali (b. 1944) elaborates:

The five essential values of the sharia on which the *‘ulamā* are in agreement, namely, religion, life, intellect, property and lineage, are all premised on the dignity of the human person, which must be protected as a matter of priority.¹⁴²

Key to this approach is the idea that once the *maqāṣid* of a collection of verses concerning a particular issue is identified, commentators should interpret these verses on the basis of such objectives—namely, in a manner that does not contradict the *maqāṣid* identified.

The *maqāṣid* approach represents the flexibility of Qur’ānic rulings to respond to changing circumstances. Kamali states that “when there is a change of a kind whereby a particular law no longer secures its underlying purpose and rationale, it must be substituted with a suitable alternative. To do otherwise would mean neglecting the objective of the Lawgiver [God].”¹⁴³

tives of Islamic Law: The Promises and Challenges of the Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘a, ed. Idris Nassery, Rume Ahmed, and Muna Tatari (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 78.

140 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *I‘lām al-Muwaqqi‘in*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1973), 333, quoted in Jasser Auda, “Realizing Maqāṣid in the Sharī‘ah,” in *The Objectives of Islamic Law: The Promises and Challenges of the Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘a*, ed. Idris Nassery, Rume Ahmed, and Muna Tatari (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 35.

141 Auda, “Realizing Maqāṣid,” 39.

142 Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *The Dignity of Man: An Islamic Perspective* (Cambridge: Islamic Text Society, 2002), 90.

143 Kamali, *The Dignity of Man*, 51–52.

Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir b. ʿĀshūr (d. 1973) proposed that the *maqāṣid* are oriented around maintaining equality, freedom, orderliness, and the “pure natural disposition” (*fiṭra*).¹⁴⁴ Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1996) has called for learning “lessons from the previous fourteen centuries of Islamic history” and includes themes such as freedom and justice in *maqāṣid*.¹⁴⁵ Ṭāhā Jābir al-ʿAlwānī (d. 2016) identified the supreme and prevailing *maqāṣid* of the Qurʾān to be “the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*), purification of the soul (*tazkiya*) and developing civilization on earth (*imran*).”¹⁴⁶

Therefore, contemporary scholars have extended the scope of the *maqāṣid* to allow for Qurʾānic rulings that respond to the modern norms and concerns that Muslims encounter. According to Jasser Auda, this allows the approach “to evolve from a wisdoms-behind-the-rulings system to a system of values and practical plans for reform and renewal” in contemporary Islamic thought.¹⁴⁷ For example, the theory of *maqāṣid* could be used to encompass women’s rights, just as it has been used to include human dignity and rights.¹⁴⁸ In Mohammad Hashim Kamali’s view, since the *maqāṣid* approach is concerned with human benefits, welfare, and rights, it has the potential to include contemporary human rights discourse as “expounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, albeit with some reservations.”¹⁴⁹

In terms of the contribution of the *maqāṣid*-based approach, it leads to a methodology in Qurʾānic interpretation that is both moral and holistic (in contrast to atomistic approaches). It also has the potential to allow more flexibility in the interpretation of socio-legal rulings in response to changes in time and circumstances. As Auda notes, this flexibility is “essential for the universality of Islam and its way of life.”¹⁵⁰

7 Critique of Contextualist Approaches

One key critique of contextualist approaches is the idea that there are no explicit grounds in the Qurʾān for distinguishing between socio-legal rulings

¹⁴⁴ Auda, “Realizing Maqāṣid,” 38.

¹⁴⁵ Auda, “Realizing Maqāṣid,” 39.

¹⁴⁶ Auda, “Realizing Maqāṣid,” 39.

¹⁴⁷ Auda, “Realizing Maqāṣid,” 38.

¹⁴⁸ Auda, “Realizing Maqāṣid,” 38.

¹⁴⁹ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, “Goals and Purposes of Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿa,” in *The Objectives of Islamic Law: The Promises and Challenges of the Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿa*, ed. Idris Nassery, Rume Ahmed, and Muna Tatarī (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 23.

¹⁵⁰ Auda, “Realizing Maqāṣid,” 51.

and precepts of worship, such as prayer and fasting. Contextualist scholars often argue that while the former are changeable and not applicable in the modern period, the latter are unchangeable and fixed. Critics say that if this methodology is accepted, Muslims will not have to follow, for example, the laws of ablution, given the change of context. One Iranian scholar's criticism of Abū Zayd's approach is as follows:

If we believe that the change of context causes a change in the application of Qur'ānic laws, why would not we extend the realm of change to worshipping precepts? What is the difference between the laws of inheritance or usury, which are considered to be limited to certain contexts, and the precepts of the Qur'ān that prevent people from idolatry or the laws that ask Muslims to carry out daily prayers?¹⁵¹

According to this scholar, if we accept Abū Zayd's approach, there is no need for a Muslim to wash before prayer, since many people have access to clean water and can wash their entire body. Thus, his concern is that if we follow Abū Zayd's approach, "nothing will be left of religion because the mutability of religious precepts and regulations can simply be extended to matters of worship, religious rites, customs and rituals."¹⁵²

Aysha Hidayatullah, another scholar who is critical of certain aspects of the contextualist project, questions the success of attempts to demonstrate that the Qur'ān supports gender equality. She challenges the contextualist approaches of female Muslim scholars, such as Wadud and Barlas, and argues that the Qur'ān may not be reconcilable with contemporary notions of equality and justice. Their perspectives, according to Hidayatullah, are "guided by conceptions of justice not definitively traceable to the Qur'ānic text."¹⁵³ Further, "no amount of interpretation [of the Qur'ān] can make the text definitely cohere with our contemporary sense of justice; claims to the contrary most often rely on anachronisms and textual manipulations."¹⁵⁴ She argues that dominant interpretive approaches among contextualist scholars—especially Muslim feminist scholars—do not sufficiently demonstrate that the egalitarian content of the Qur'ān can be validly "privileged" over its hierarchical content.¹⁵⁵

151 Ali Akbar and Abdullah Saeed, *Contemporary Approaches to the Qur'ān and Its Interpretation in Iran* (London: Routledge, 2020), 30.

152 Akbar and Saeed, *Contemporary Approaches*, 30.

153 Aysha Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'ān* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 176.

154 Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges*, 153.

155 Aysha Hidayatullah, "Claims to the Sacred," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 2 (2016): 135–136.

Kecia Ali (b. 1972) also critiques certain aspects of the ideas of scholars such as Wadud and Barlas and examines the limits of contextualist approaches that seek to interpret the Qur'ān based on current egalitarian norms. According to Ali, the ḥadīth literature is patriarchal, especially as regards women's sexual autonomy. Ali refers to verses such as Qur'ān 2:237 and 2:223, arguing that they "presuppose male agency and female passivity with regard to the initiation of sex."¹⁵⁶ Ali also argues that the interpretive method of contextualization is effective for some matters, such as marriage and divorce, but does not yield an egalitarian reading of the Qur'ān for every gender-related topic.¹⁵⁷

One key concern for many Muslim scholars who do not necessarily adopt contextualist approaches is that engagement with the Qur'ān using various modern ideas, such as modern theories of meaning and hermeneutics, is likely to lead to a relativistic understanding of its meaning. Moreover, hermeneutical ideas emerging from biblical scholarship may lead to a level of chaos in Qur'ānic interpretation that could ultimately cause significant confusion for Muslims about the fundamental aspects of Islam. Ultimately, many critics would argue that such approaches may lead to the desacralization of the Qur'ānic text as well as the relativization of the values that the Qur'ān seeks to promote. Despite these concerns, many proponents of contextual approaches argue that they maintain the divine nature of the Qur'ān and their interest is in understanding this divine text in the modern context. For them, their approach is not significantly different from how many early Muslims engaged with the Qur'ānic text to address the challenges they faced in the first century of Islam and beyond.

8 Contribution to Qur'ānic Hermeneutics and Context by the Selected Scholars

In this section, a brief outline is provided of the contributions of the authors included in this volume under three categories: (a) theoretical issues, (b) criticisms of the use of modern hermeneutical tools, and (c) practical concerns.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics in Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 129.

¹⁵⁷ Kecia Ali, "On Critique and Careful Reading," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 2 (2016): 124.

¹⁵⁸ Short quotations in quotation marks in the article summaries in this section refer to the respective authors' contributions to this volume; page references are therefore omitted.

8.1 *Qur'ānic Hermeneutics and Context: Some Theoretical Issues*

The field of Qur'ānic hermeneutics has evolved significantly in the modern period, as outlined in Sections 1.5 and 1.6, with Muslim scholars grappling with the challenges and opportunities posed by a rapidly changing world. These contributions have diversified the interpretative landscape and enriched the ongoing dialogue about Islam's role in contemporary society. Some influential new ideas and approaches include contextualization, thematic and structural analysis, interdisciplinary approaches, ethical and moral reinterpretation, engagement with modernity and pluralism, and the reevaluation of classical, dialogic, and comparative approaches. Of these, in this section, contextualization is given primary emphasis. Contextualist scholars emphasize the socio-historical context of the Qur'ān and argue that many verses were revealed in relation to specific circumstances. Muslim scholars, such as Fazlur Rahman, paved the way for a better understanding of contextualization by advocating for distinguishing between the universal teachings of the Qur'ān and those specific to particular situations. In contextualization, other types of analyses are also used, such as thematic and structural analyses that consider the Qur'ān as an integrated whole, which offer a holistic understanding of its teachings. Further, insights from various academic disciplines, such as linguistics, psychology, sociology, and philosophy, are also incorporated. A key concern of contextualization involves revisiting the Qur'ān's ethical dimensions toward aligning its teachings with contemporary universal values of justice, human rights, and equality. In this section, the hermeneutical contributions of Ḥanafī (Egypt), Abū Zayd (Egypt), Shabestarī (Iran), Paçacı (Turkey), and Özsoy (Turkey) are presented.

8.1.1 Theory of Exegesis Based on Real-Life Situations of Muslims

In his article “Do We Have a Theory of Exegesis?,” Ḥasan Ḥanafī, an Egyptian intellectual and philosopher, criticizes current theories of exegesis, arguing that they are inappropriate for addressing the “real-life situations” of Muslims today. According to him, various elements of current exegetical theories should be improved by taking exegesis out of the realm of the traditional Islamic disciplines and removing the emphasis on linguistic logic to determine the meaning of a text. Despite the emphasis in Islamic *sharī'a*—particularly in its objectives (*maqāṣid al-sharī'a*), which aim to preserve religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property—he laments that much of contemporary exegesis remains more divine-oriented than human-oriented, neglecting the Qur'ān's relationship with actual, concrete real-life situations. He concludes that the aim of exegesis should be to consider contemporary problems and improve people's condition.

Ḥanafī also criticizes what he calls the Salafī approach, according to which exegetes should return to the original source, that is, the Qur'ān and the practices of the first generations of Muslims, by arguing that this approach risks dissociating one from the present. Highlighting the idea that exegesis should consider the current real-life situations of people, he argues that the Salafī approach eliminates natural changes to reality. Overall, Ḥanafī's article contributes to the field of Qur'ānic hermeneutics by emphasizing the importance of not only analysing the Qur'ān with respect to the original real-life situation in which it was revealed and modifying certain legal rulings, but also analyzing the real-life situations of Muslims today and acknowledging the need for comprehensive reform through scriptural interpretation by considering the reality of people's lives today.

8.1.2 The Qur'ān and the World as a Sign and Relevance of Semiotics
 Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, a well-known Egyptian intellectual with a specific interest in Qur'ānic studies, begins his article "The Qur'ān—The World as a Sign" by criticizing the dominant commentaries on the Qur'ān, which, according to his view, have made it a "static text in public Islamic awareness." He proposes a new reading of the text based on the idea that the Qur'ān's meaning is not derived simply from a literal reading. Throughout the article, he seeks to discover the tools through which the Qur'ān "transforms the world into a set of signs having a unified significance or a single semantic focus." According to him, language is a system of signs in which the signifier and the signified are two key components; that is, "the entire linguistic tradition is a 'signifier' in the cultural system of the 'signified.'" Using this approach, he connects the Arabic language of the Qur'ān to the worldview of the text. For Abū Zayd, the benefit of using tools available in disciplines such as semiotics is that they help unravel the symbolic language of the Qur'ān and thus enable Muslims to understand its intended messages more accurately and apply them to contemporary issues. These tools also aid in navigating the Qur'ān's textual complexities by elucidating rhetorical devices, such as repetition, contrast, and analogy, and encourage a dynamic interpretation that resonates with contemporary realities, thereby addressing ethical, social, and political issues without compromising the core principles of the text.

8.1.3 Prophetic Reading of the World and the Qur'ān in Context
 In his article "Prophetic Reading of the World," Muḥammad Mojtahed Shabestari, one of the most influential Iranian religious reformers of the past few decades, argues that the words that the Prophet communicated were of divine origin as well as his own speech, and that the Qur'ān represents the Prophet's interpretive understanding of reality, which reflects his personal per-

spectives and worldview. In Shabestari's words, the Qur'an "conveys how the Prophet saw the world, not how the world actually is." Key to the Prophet's understanding of the world is his monotheistic worldview. For example, when the Qur'an speaks of natural phenomena—such as the creation of heaven and the earth, the alternation of night and day, and sending down rain from the heavens—and the fate of human beings and communities over the course of history, God is active and present. Shabestari concludes that when the Qur'an states that there is no inconsistency in its content (Qur'an 4:82), this means that all worldly phenomena must be viewed as God's signs.

Shabestari's article, which emphasizes the importance of the Prophet's understanding of the world, contributes to the scholarly view that emerged during the past few decades that highlights the human aspect of the Qur'an. In line with this approach, he also underscores the importance of a contextual reading of the Qur'an and the relationship between the text and the society in which it emerged. In this sense, the *ahkām* (rules) pointed out in the Qur'an were consistent with the social realities of the context in which they emerged. Shabestari uses this approach to argue that "the Qur'an did not aim to stipulate precepts and rulings for all societies and for all times."

8.1.4 Importance of a Contextual Reading of the Qur'an

Mehmet Paçacı, a Turkish diplomat and university professor, advocates in his article "How Contextual are the Qur'an and I" for a historical and contextual approach to interpreting the Qur'an that "emphasizes the historical circumstances in which the Qur'an was revealed." He begins with the idea that the historicity of the Qur'an was acknowledged during the era of revelation. According to him, this is evident in the doctrine of the abrogator (*nāsikh*) and abrogated (*mansūkh*) verses, wherein the Qur'an took the historical circumstances of society into consideration.

He believes that such a historical and contextual approach to the Qur'an can be controversial, especially among Muslims. For example, some argue that this approach restricts the authority of the Qur'an to the era of revelation, which in turn leads to the idea that the Qur'an "tells nothing whatsoever for today"—an idea that was adopted by many Orientalists, in his view. Paçacı responds to this critique by arguing that rather than confining the Qur'an to a specific period, the contextual approach allows interpreters to derive the universal principles of the Qur'an—principles that are not bound to the historical context of the Qur'an's emergence. His main conclusion is that it is by applying this approach that *ijtihad* (independent or original interpretation of the Islamic legal sources) becomes dynamic and flexible, since the approach in question captures universal messages of the Qur'an and "carry these messages to novel historical

contexts.” Paçacı’s article represents a contribution to contextualist approaches to interpreting Qur’ān and answers questions about how the Qur’ān could be relevant to the challenges that Muslims encounter today and what messages it contains for believers.

8.1.5 **Contextuality of the Qur’ānic Discourse and Objective Meaning**
 Ömer Özsoy, a Turkish scholar of Qur’ānic hermeneutics, in his article “Contextuality of the Qur’ānic Discourse and the Objective Meaning of Historical Discourse,” advocates for a contextualist approach to interpreting the Qur’ān. Although he does not deny the idea that the Qur’ān is a universal text, he asserts that it should be treated as a “historical discourse.” This is based on the idea that the Qur’ān is not a text “compiled in one swoop,” but rather, includes “an aggregation of independent passages revealed” in response to various “incidents and developments over the course of twenty-odd years.” Özsoy also notes that a distinction should be made between the Qur’ān as a written text and the Qur’ān as an oral discourse because it was not designed as a written text, meaning that it was ‘textualized’ later by compiling written texts over time. In this sense, “the text of the Qur’ān (written discourse) does not convey the chronological sequence of the Qur’ānic discourse (oral discourse).”

Although the Qur’ān as an oral and historical discourse is significantly connected to its context of emergence, not all verses were revealed as a response to certain conditions. Özsoy notes that there is a specific rationale behind many verses of the Qur’ān that enables interpreters to “attain the objective meaning of the Qur’ānic discourse.” He argues that Muslims need to carry forward the objective meaning of the text in the contemporary period. Drawing on the “double movement” theory of Fazlur Rahman, Özsoy states that interpreters should understand what the text meant in the era of its revelation and then return to the present period to determine “the contemporary message of the text.” However, unlike Rahman, Özsoy notes that the second phase of interpretation (i.e. the interpretation of the objective meaning for today) is “an entirely subjective process.” Referring to the example of the punishment of the amputation of hands for theft indicated in the Qur’ān, he argues that such Qur’ānic precepts could be applicable in the contemporary context only if they continue to serve the original objective purpose.

8.2 *Critical Views on Use of Modern Hermeneutical Tools*

Many Muslim scholars are cautious about the adoption of modern hermeneutical tools to interpret the Qur’ān. This caution is partly attributable to concerns that the text’s original meanings will be distorted and its spiritual essence will be lost, and that foreign values and ideologies that may conflict with Islamic

principles will be imposed. Theological integrity and authenticity are at the heart of this reluctance, as the Qurʾān is considered by most Muslims to be the literal Word of God, revealed in Arabic to Prophet Muḥammad. Thus, it is believed that using tools developed for human-authored texts may not be appropriate for a text believed to be entirely divine.

Historical and cultural sensibilities are also key factors behind the reluctance to adopt modern tools and approaches. The history of colonialism in the Muslim world has left a legacy of skepticism toward Western forms of scholarship, which, many believe, could lead to a neocolonial intrusion into Islamic thought. Critics also believe that Western hermeneutical approaches, which often incorporate critical, rationalist, and sometimes secular perspectives, could lead to a secularized interpretation of the Qurʾān that may contradict established Islamic beliefs and practices. Relativism is another concern; many modern approaches often emphasize the subjective nature of interpretation and the role of the reader's context in shaping understanding. The fear is that this approach could lead to a situation in which interpretations become overly individualized and disconnected from traditional scholarly consensus. Two of the following contributors (Shihab and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān) are skeptical about the use of modern hermeneutical tools and the third (Rahman) appears to favor such use.

8.2.1 On the Use of Modern Hermeneutical Tools in the Interpretation of the Qurʾān

Quraish Shihab, a leading, renowned Qurʾānic scholar from Indonesia and a highly respected public intellectual, in his article "A Perspective on Hermeneutics" explores hermeneutical theories developed in the West for interpreting texts and investigates their appropriateness for interpreting the Qurʾān. He begins with the observation that if hermeneutics is tantamount to the science of *taʾwīl*, a term introduced by Muslim scholars (*ʿulamā*), then it can be said that *taʾwīl* has been discussed in detail by them. If hermeneutics refers to a nonliteral interpretation of texts, then it must be accepted by the vast majority of the *ʿulamā*.

Shihab then goes on to criticize some hermeneutical approaches adopted in the West to interpret the Qurʾān. For example, according to Shihab, hermeneutics in the West was developed mainly to study the Bible, not the Qurʾān, and given the notable distinctions between the Bible and the Qurʾān in their nature, authenticity, language, and content, hermeneutical approaches developed to interpret the Bible cannot be directly applied to interpret the Qurʾān. He also criticizes the idea that the Qurʾān can be treated in the same way as any other written texts produced by human beings, since this idea contradicts the belief

of most Muslims. Furthermore, he strongly disagrees with the idea that a text has no objective meaning because this gives rise to relativism and thus cannot be applied when interpreting the Qur'ān. Moreover, although the Qur'ān is closely related to its context of emergence, one should not assume that it is therefore a cultural product, as it was not the result of the Prophet's "musings on the condition of his society and culture."

Overall, Shihab argues against applying theories of hermeneutics developed in the West to interpreting the Qur'ān. He asserts that Muslims should instead focus on using classical theories and methods employed by the *ʿulamā* but can employ Western hermeneutical approaches that are consistent with the established methods developed by these scholars.

8.2.2 Against Modernist Readings of the Qur'ān

Tāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān (b. 1944), a Moroccan intellectual and philosopher, argues in his article "Modernist Reading of the Qur'ān and Connected Creativity" against applying modern (i.e., Western) approaches to interpreting the Qur'ān, and argues that approaches that cut the Qur'ān from its traditions and history should be rejected. To support his argument, he claims that modern approaches to interpreting the Qur'ān suffer from three "plans": the humanization, rationalization, and historicization plans.

'Abd al-Raḥmān's views are as follows. The first, the humanization plan, challenges the sacredness of the Qur'ān by "transferring the Qur'ānic verses from the status of divine to the status of human." He criticizes the approaches of scholars such as Muhammad Arkoun and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, particularly their ideas about the distinction between "the oral Qur'ān" and "the written Qur'ān" and between "revelation [of the Qur'ān] in the Divinely Preserved Tablet" and "revelation [of the Qur'ān] as uttered in Arabic." The second, the rationalization plan of modernist scholars, separates the Qur'ān from its divine source and metaphysical dimensions by applying methods from the humanities and social sciences to its interpretation. The third, the historicization plan, restricts the application of the Qur'ān's legal verses (*āyāt al-aḥkām*), limiting such verses to the context of revelation. Therefore, the historicization plan, 'Abd al-Raḥmān claims, leads to "turning the Qur'ān into a historical text like any other historical text."

Overall, 'Abd al-Raḥmān argues that the application of modern approaches to interpreting the Qur'ān represents a blind imitation of Western approaches to other religious texts, such as the Bible, and that those who use such approaches have placed themselves "under the cultural guardianship of the makers of Western modernity." Similarly to Shihab's "A Perspective on Hermeneutics," this chapter contributes to the critique of modern hermeneutical ap-

proaches to interpreting the Qurʾān and demonstrates that such approaches are not accepted by many Muslims today.

8.2.3 On Indonesian Muslim Responses to the Use of Hermeneutics in the Interpretation of the Qurʾān

Yusuf Rahman is an Indonesian scholar specializing in studies on the Qurʾān and ḥadīth. In his article “Indonesian Muslim Responses to the Use of Hermeneutics in the Study of the Qurʾān and *Tafsīr*,” Rahman discusses Indonesian responses to the use of modern hermeneutical approaches to study the Qurʾān. He explains that critiques of the use of hermeneutics to interpret the Qurʾān fall into two categories in Indonesia: scientific academic studies, and theological and polemic responses. Opponents of the use of these modern hermeneutic approaches appear to have a greater voice in Indonesia.

Proponents of the use of modern hermeneutic approaches to interpreting and studying the Qurʾān in Indonesia argue that these approaches are not alien to the Islamic tradition and do not challenge the fundamental teachings of the Qurʾān. Rahman notes that those who reject the use of these theories for interpreting the Qurʾān view them as largely postmodern approaches that reflect Western norms and the values of secularism, liberalism, and pluralism. For these opponents, hermeneutic approaches are inauthentic with respect to the *tafsīr* (Qurʾānic exegesis) tradition. They criticize the application of hermeneutics to the Qurʾān on the grounds that it challenges the Qurʾān’s sacredness and considers it a historical product. Rahman responds to some critiques raised against the use of hermeneutics in interpreting the Qurʾān, for example, by defending its proponents against the charge of relativism.

8.3 *Qurʾānic Hermeneutics and Context in Practice: Gender and Family Issues*

Many Muslim scholars, particularly women, are advocating for new interpretative approaches to the Qurʾān, with the aim of addressing gender inequalities and defending women’s rights in Islamic contexts. This scholarship is driven by the recognition that traditional interpretations often reflect patriarchal biases, which in turn lead to legal and social norms that marginalize women. The field of feminist Qurʾānic hermeneutics aims to reclaim Islam’s sacred text in a way that underscores gender equality and women’s rights as inherently Islamic values. Modern feminist Qurʾānic hermeneutics emphasizes contextual interpretation and thus challenges patriarchal readings and critiques classical *tafsīrs* that perpetuate patriarchal views. They scrutinize ḥadīth and historical interpretations used to justify restrictions on women’s public roles, inheritance rights, and personal autonomy. They also emphasize equality and justice as fun-

damental Islamic principles by arguing that the primary aims of shari'a should naturally extend to protecting women's rights and dignity. For instance, they cover the contentious issue of how to interpret Qur'anic verses related to inheritance (al-Raḍwī).

8.3.1 Reinterpretation of Qur'anic Verses on Inheritance Today

Nā'ila Sillīnī al-Raḍwī, a Tunisian academic and professor of Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic civilization, in her article "Family Affairs and the Exegetical Disagreements—Inheritance" explores Qur'anic rulings, as well as the ideas of exegetes and jurists, on inheritance. She begins with a brief discussion of the rulings on inheritance in Judaism, referencing the Old Testament and the Talmud, in particular, and then proceeds to explore pre-Islamic Arabs' treatment of inheritance. Then, she discusses the Qur'anic verses about inheritance and argues that they can be divided into two categories: those concerning wills and those concerning prescribed shares of inheritance. She also examines the context of the revelation era and its likely effects on the Qur'anic rulings on inheritance. For example, she explains that these rulings were influenced by the context, in which bequests were limited to "strong fighters and male relatives of the deceased" since they were the protectors of their tribes and families. A significant part of the article explains the ways in which classical scholars and exegetes interpreted inheritance-related verses, the challenges they faced in interpreting these verses, and the way that the rules of inheritance should be determined from a juristic perspective. Al-Raḍwī criticizes their ideas, arguing that exegetes "were selective in their classification of the inheritance verses," and she calls for interpretation based on a thorough analysis of the original context of the revelation and our present time. In doing so, she provides a practical example of such contextualist interpretation.

8.4 *Qur'anic Hermeneutics and Context in Practice: Sociopolitical and Interreligious Issues*

Part of the interest among many Muslim scholars currently is to address contemporary sociopolitical challenges in Muslim societies. This interest is driven by a changing global landscape shaped by technological innovation, geopolitical shifts, and growing social complexities. Modern Qur'anic hermeneutics emphasizes the contextualization of the Qur'an's messages by focusing on issues such as justice and equality, democratic governance, pluralism, and engagement with non-Muslims. Contextual and historical relevance is a foundational principle in modern Qur'anic hermeneutics, as many Qur'anic injunctions were directly related to the sociopolitical circumstances of seventh-century Arabia. This approach encourages a dynamic interpretation that distinguishes between divine principles and context-specific commands, thereby

allowing for a flexible application of Qur'ānic ethics to contemporary issues, such as governance, human rights, and interreligious relations. Here, the reinterpretation of Qur'ānic texts related to *qiṣās* (Vasmaghi), interfaith marriage (Mulia) and criticisms of other religions (Sirry) are covered as examples of the use of modern hermeneutical tools in practice.

8.4.1 On Reinterpretation of the Qur'ānic Concept of *qiṣās*

Sedigheh Vasmaghi, an Iranian lawyer, poet, reformist politician, and expert in Islamic jurisprudence, explores in “Reconsideration of the Meaning of *Qiṣās*” the treatment of the term *qiṣās* (retaliation) in the Qur'ān. She argues that the meaning of *qiṣās* should be reinterpreted and that it is not used in the sense of punishment, retaliation, or the killing of another person in the Qur'ān. She further argues that executing a murderer (in the form of carrying out the *qiṣās*) is not a prescribed ruling in the Qur'ān. To support her argument, Vasmaghi interprets the verses in which the term *qiṣās* is used, and she criticizes the ideas of many Qur'ānic interpreters (*mufasssīrūn*) by arguing that their approaches to interpreting the verses in question are incompatible with the spirit of the Qur'ān. According to Vasmaghi, the Qur'ān's objective in these verses is not necessarily to impose a punishment, but rather, to consider fairness and to follow the principle of proportionality. She also argues that the Qur'ān explicitly praises forgiveness in that it states that those who pardon others will be rewarded by God. This means that the Qur'ān encouraged people to forfeit the execution of a murderer in the context of its revelation—the context in which “people used to kill each other in wars and tribal conflicts.” On reading the verse in the context of the modern period, Vasmaghi concludes that the “Qur'ān does not disagree with putting an end to executions.” In fact, she considers it possible to replace execution with another type of punishment for a murderer in the contemporary world, which is more compatible with our understanding of justice and fairness today. The article contributes to the literature on the implementation and adaptability of Qur'ānic punishment rulings in the modern period, with particular emphasis on the concept of retaliation (*qiṣās*). The article rejects the dominant view in the Islamic tradition according to which the Qur'ān considers the implementation of *qiṣās* a fixed punishment for a murderer.

8.4.2 Interfaith Marriage and Interpretation of the Qur'ān

Siti Musdah Mulia, an Indonesian scholar, intellectual and activist, in her article “Interfaith Marriage—A Model for Women's *Tafsīr*” examines whether interfaith marriage, that is, marriage between a Muslim and a non-Muslim, is permissible from a Qur'ānic perspective. She begins by explaining the idea that

there have been three positions on interfaith marriage in Islam: absolute prohibition, conditional permission (between Muslim men and women of *ahl al-kitāb* [People of the Book]), and permission. Mulia analyzes the ideas of scholars from each of these positions and explains that the absolute prohibition of interfaith marriage is the mainstream view among Muslims, including the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Ulama Council, MUI). A significant part of the article includes various arguments put forward by the proponents of interfaith marriage (the third position mentioned herein), which is followed by her own argument supporting this view.

Mulia argues that women should be considered autonomous subjects, equal to men, with freedom of choice. Referring to the research that indicates that children of interfaith marriages are more likely to follow the religion of their mother, not their father, Mulia argues that from a religious perspective, it is not a problem if a Muslim woman marries a non-Muslim man. She considers that interreligious marriage needs to be prohibited only if it creates objective social problems. For example, if it could be demonstrated that such marriages increase the divorce rate or domestic violence in Indonesia, then they should be prohibited. Mulia also supports her argument by stating that interfaith marriage can be seen as “a logical consequence of the development of an increasingly pluralist community life” in today’s world. Since Islam considers plurality as God’s way, the marriage of a Muslim to a non-Muslim would not conflict with the fundamental teachings of Islam, and, it should be respected by the state. Thus, this article contributes to the literature on the Qur’ānic position on interfaith relations, especially the literature that supports social inclusivism.

8.4.3 Qur’ān’s Criticism of Other Religions and Their Interpretation

Mun’im Sirry is an Indonesian scholar and expert on interreligious relations and the Qur’ān. He examines in his article “Understanding the Qur’ān’s Criticisms of Other Religions” the passages of the Qur’ān that appear to speak negatively of other religious communities, particularly Jews and Christians (People of the Book). The importance of the article lies in the fact that the Qur’ānic verses criticizing the followers of other religions, at times, have been used to justify violence against them. Sirry’s main argument is that such verses were revealed in a particular context and reflect a conflict with the Jewish and Christian communities with whom early Muslims came into contact at the time.

Sirry begins the article by affirming that there are verses in the Qur’ān that criticize both doctrinal matters and social issues in relation to Judaism and Christianity. Then, he explains the sectarian environment in which the Qur’ān appeared, noting that there was a “polemical climate” that contributed to the Qur’ān’s criticisms of Jewish and Christian communities. He goes on to argue

that in such a sectarian environment, the Qur'ān still presented theologically inclusivist ideas that emphasize the possible salvation of Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans, and highlights that Qur'ānic criticisms are only directed against certain Jewish and Christian teachings, not their mainstream teachings.

Sirry concludes the article by noting that criticisms of other religious communities are common to the scriptures of other religions and reflect the sectarian environments in which the scriptures emerged. For example, he argues that "the Gospel's polemical verses should not be read in isolation from the sectarian context of the Church's early development." He further indicates that when a new community seeks to establish its religious identity, it often does so by distinguishing itself from others.

9 Concluding Remarks

The field of Qur'ānic hermeneutics has evolved significantly in recent years, which reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. Muslim scholars have played a crucial role in shaping this discourse by offering nuanced insights that blend rigorous scholarship with a deep reverence for the Qur'ānic text. Today, Qur'ānic hermeneutics is characterized by its multifaceted nature, which encompasses diverse methodologies and perspectives, from traditional exegesis to interdisciplinary approaches. This diversity enriches the understanding of the Qur'ān and underscores its relevance in addressing complex issues facing Muslim communities worldwide. This edited volume contributes to this ongoing dialogue by bringing together diverse voices and perspectives, highlighting the significance of Muslim scholars' contributions. Each chapter in this volume offers unique insights and approaches, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how the Qur'ān continues to guide and inspire in a rapidly changing world and reflects both continuity with tradition and adaptation to modern contexts.

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Do We Have a Theory of Exegesis?

Ḥasan Ḥanafī

About the Author¹

Ḥasan Ḥanafī, among the most influential thinkers in modern Arab intellectual history, is known especially for his bold, original contributions to Islamic thought and Qurʾānic hermeneutics. Born in Cairo in 1935, Ḥanafī dedicated his life to reinterpreting Islamic heritage (*turāth*) through the lens of contemporary philosophy by combining insights from phenomenology and hermeneutics and displayed a commitment to political and social reform. He aimed to make Islamic thought relevant to the modern world by freeing it from what he saw as the dual constraints of rigid traditionalism and political manipulation.

Ḥanafī's academic path took him from Egypt to the Sorbonne in Paris, where he completed his doctorate in 1966. In his thesis, *Les méthodes d'exégèse: Essai sur les fondements de la compréhension. Ilm uṣūl al-fiqh*, he examined the foundations of Islamic jurisprudence using Western hermeneutical methods. After returning to Egypt, he became a professor of philosophy at Cairo University in 1967, a position he held for decades, while also teaching abroad in countries such as France, the United States, Belgium, and Germany. In the early part of his life, Ḥanafī was associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, but over time, he

1 Ḥasan Ḥanafī's major works include *Min al-ʿAqīda ilā al-Thawra* 5 vols. (Cairo: al-Majlis al-ʿAlā li al-Thaqāfa, 1985); *al-Turāth wa al-Tajdīd* (Beirut: Dār al-Tanwīr, 1980); *Muqaddima fī Ilm al-Istighrāb* (Cairo: al-Dār al-Fanniyya, 1991); and *Islam in the Modern World*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop, 1995). His English-language essays include "Qiraat al-nass/ Reading the Text," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 8 (1988): 6–20; and "Method of Thematic Interpretation of the Quran," in *The Qurʾān as Text*, ed. Stefan Wild (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 195–211. Important studies about Ḥanafī's thought are found in Armando Salvatore, "The Rational Authentication of the Turath in Contemporary Arab Thought: Muhammad al-Jabiri and Hasan Hanafi," *The Muslim World* 85 (1995): 191–215; Shahrough Akhavi, "The Dialectic in Contemporary Egyptian Social Thought," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 29 (1997): 377–401; John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, "The Classic Intellectual," in *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 68–90; and Yasmeen Daifallah, "Turath as Critique: Hassan Hanafi on the Modern Arabic Subject," in *Arabic Thought Against the Authoritarian Age*, ed. Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 285–310.

became a leading voice of the movement that came to be known as the Islamic Left. He argued that Islamic thought needed to be renewed through a critical, creative engagement with tradition. For him, Islam was not just a religion but a force for social and political transformation. He believed that the Qurʾān should be interpreted thematically and contextually, with attention to the lived realities of Muslim societies, rather than through rigid, literalist readings.

Among his key works, *al-Turāth wa al-Tajdīd* outlined his vision for a revolutionary approach to Islamic heritage. In *Muqaddima fi ʿIlm al-Istighrāb*, published in 1991, he called for a critical examination of Western thought, thus reversing the traditional Orientalist gaze. His five-volume series *Min al-ʿAqīda ilā al-Thawra* (1985) presented a comprehensive program for religious and political reform, whereas *Islam in the Modern World* (1995) explored the relationship between religion, ideology, and development.

Ḥanafī also contributed to Qurʾānic studies in English, with works such as “Qiraat al-nass/Reading the Text” and “Method of Thematic Interpretation of the Quran.” His ideas have attracted wide attention. Scholars such as Armando Salvatore, Shahrough Akhavi, and Yudian Wahyudi wrote about them, and more recent studies by Carool Kersten, Yasmeen Daifallah, and Fadlil Manshur have continued to explore his legacy. John Esposito and John Voll also featured him in *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, thus highlighting his role as a key figure in shaping Islamic thought in the modern age. Through his work, Ḥanafī offered a vision of Islamic thought that is open, dynamic, and deeply engaged with the challenges of the present. His efforts to bridge Islamic tradition and modern philosophy, and to challenge both Western dominance and Islamic conservatism, have left a lasting mark on contemporary Islamic intellectual life.



1 Is There a Theory of Exegesis?

In this issue of the magazine,² I raise this question about whether we have a theory of exegesis and will then expand on this topic in subsequent issues [of the

2 The representative of *Minbar al-Islam* used to offer university professors a considerable amount of money for their articles on subjects such as asceticism, righteousness, piety, and patience and asked me to write such an article. However, I refused to write on such topics and proposed to write short articles on the issue of exegesis. After my first attempt on October 11, 1996, the representative returned trembling, and so, I understood the message (that my proposal had been rejected).

magazine]. I hope that researchers and intellectuals will participate in developing this question further and will contribute to answering it.

What is the meaning of this issue? What is the intention behind posing this question? The most important thing that distinguishes us as a nation—whether as an existing community or a preceding civilization—is that we have received a Revelation that is characterized by at least three qualities. First, it is the last stage of the historical development of the Revelation, which started with Prophet Adam and ended with Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon them). Thus, we have a complete Revelation in its final form, which can be adopted as the basis of all legislation without a need for alteration or abrogation. Second, it is preserved in writing in the Qurʾān. Therefore, it has been kept safe from the risk of distortions, unlike the other sacred books: the Torah and the *Injil* (Gospel) of the Children of Banū Isrāʾīl. Third, the Qurʾān as a sacred book was not revealed all at once—instead, it was revealed piecemeal, as contended by scholars who have studied it. This means that it is not simply a Revelation *per se*, but rather, a Revelation called for, which emerged according to people's conditions and needs. Each Qurʾānic verse emerged as a solution to a certain situation. The verses that were revealed over 23 years were compiled to form the Qurʾān. It is this Qurʾān that distinguishes Muslims from other contemporary nations and civilizations.

The Qurʾān is a book written in Arabic, and to comprehend the Revelation, we have to read and understand Arabic, as the scholars of *uṣūl*—scholars specialized in the principles of Islamic jurisprudence—argue in their writings about *maqāṣid al-sharīʿa* (objectives of the *sharīʿa*) that *sharīʿa* has been made easy for the people to understand. Understanding the Qurʾān is achieved by certain set methods to arrive at exegesis, and exegesis is nothing but a method used to understand the Qurʾān. Hence, the importance of the discipline of exegesis becomes clear because it is the most vital primary discipline required to understand the Qurʾān, and through exegesis, we can establish a religion-based theory of knowledge (*naẓariyya dīniyya li al-maʿrifa*) which depends on Divine Revelation. This means that the theory of exegesis is associated with the logic (*manṭiq*) of the Divine Revelation. Therefore, when we ask whether we have a suitable theory of exegesis, we intend to conceive the Divine Revelation anew as both a source and the associated body of knowledge simultaneously. This is the first step that should be taken before deducing any legal rulings and establishing any Islamic religious science, or before rebuilding our traditional Islamic sciences, including *uṣūl al-fiqh* (the fundamentals of Islamic law), Islamic jurisprudence, mysticism, theology, and philosophy.

On considering the current theories of exegesis, a coherent, well-grounded theory with a clearly defined goal seems to be lacking. Our exegeses are no

more than a collection of explanations, details, repetitions, and expositions of needless matters, which take no heed of people's lives, problems, and needs. In this way, the religious text engages in self-referential interpretation, deriving its meaning by elaborating on the verse's basic sense. When exegetes do abandon this simple, comfortable approach, they adopt another approach, that of becoming enthusiastic in their explanations and interpretations of the Islam they have embraced: they only extol Islam, praise shari'a, and defend their moral and spiritual values. The conditions of Muslims may be the opposite of what these exegetes focus on, but they do not try to improve or amend people's affairs and conditions, or even those of their followers. The exegetes in the first case are primarily expounders, and in the second case, orators. Neither type is a true exegete, for the true exegete is a reformer who improves the conditions of the people and notices the verses in the text on the problems of Muslims, as well as their solutions.

There are more important matters than simply how exegetical material is presented—whether in the role of an expounder or an orator. The primary conditions for an exegete, particularly if they are jurists, are twofold: they must be proficient in the sciences of both the Arabic language and of *tanzil* (Qur'an-related sciences). The sciences of language are those that help define the meaning of religious texts through the application of linguistic principles. These include distinctions such as *ḥaqīqa* (the original, literal meaning of a word) and *majāz* (figurative or metaphorical meaning); *muḥkam* (verses with clear and definite meaning) and *mutashābih* (verses with ambiguous or equivocal meaning); *mujmal* (ambiguous or abstract) and *mubayyan* (explicit or clarified); *zāhir* (apparent meaning) and *mu'awwal* (meaning requiring interpretation); *muqayyad* (restricted or conditional) and *muṭlaq* (unrestricted or absolute); and *āmm* (general) and *khāṣṣ* (particular). These categories are applied to the text to ensure that the interpretation derived is linguistically and hermeneutically sound. However, this deductive linguistic approach assumes that the text is unclear and that it requires extra effort beyond a simple understanding for its meanings to be comprehended. In addition, this approach totally overlooks the real-life situation that is depicted by the text and felt by the exegete as a human being, who has a relationship with the rest of the nation, in addressing its problems and working on solving them, or the experiences that the exegete draws on from his daily life as a human being. This means that the deductive linguistic approach overlooks the inductive empirical approach, which is the basis of the shari'a and through which rulings are deduced using analogy based on the effective cause of the ruling. It also overlooks the simple understanding of the text, which depends on straightforward intuitive understanding without any need for special organized structured reasoning.

As for the sciences of Revelation (*Tanzīl*), they provide the traditional exegete with the occasions of Revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), enabling them to determine the correct meaning of a verse in relation to the initial incident for which it was revealed. However, although this first incident refers to the cause of the revelation of the verse, it represents a real-life situation for those for whom the verse was revealed as well as a real-life situation for others. In this way, the verse is to be understood by tracing it back to its real-life situation as perceived by exegetes in their individual and community life. This means that the traditional causes of revelation refer to situations that may also occur in the present day, which allows the direct meaning of a verse to be understood when similar circumstances reoccur. Hence, the new suggested theory of exegesis is based on a straightforward understanding of situations experienced by human beings.

Thus, a proper theory of exegesis links Revelation to reality, that is, the religion to the worldly life, or Allah to the people. When current methods of exegesis are examined, it becomes evident that a coherent, unified theoretical framework is lacking. There are traditional exegetical sciences that rely on the Qurʾān and the ḥadīth. There is also the current reality with its independent human views that are not directly taken from the religious texts, but rely on understanding facts and situations based on purely human motives. This means that the current situation reveals a duality between the religious text and the world. Each has different concerns: the religious text is concerned with traditional explanations and passionate oratory, whereas the world is dominated by purely human reasoning without considering a direct interpretation of the religious text, despite their common motives.

In this regard, some modern scholars have attempted to establish an interpretation that overcomes this duality between the text and modern reality. However, these attempts have shortcomings that prevent them from being a cohesive theory of exegesis that simultaneously offers an approach of reform and change. The first shortcoming is that exegesis remains more a theory about Allah's Existence than about the human being's existence—it aims mainly at affirming Allah's Existence, explaining Allah's Essence, Names, and Actions in detail, affirming that the world is created, and that humans are accountable for their actions. This means that it is a Divine, doctrinal, and theological exegesis, although the exegesis that we currently need, given that Allah's Existence, the creation of the world, and the accountability of humans and other creeds have been already established, is to develop a theory of human beings' individual and social existence that depicts their various situations with others and in the world. The basic doctrinal objective is to explain the creation and situation of humans in the world, particularly the shariʿa's main objec-

tives that were originally developed—as the *uṣūlīs*, scholars of the principles of Islamic law, argue—aim at protecting the five necessities: religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property. However, all are aspects of a human being’s temporal life.

The second shortcoming is that the current exegesis remains linked socially and economically to the circumstances of the Islamic environment in which Islam arose. This exegesis believes in the disparity between classes in wealth and livelihood based on explicit Qur’ānic verses, and in the spiritual and moral values based on the text of the Qur’ān. However, in some cases, such as slavery, the exegesis of ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644) has concluded that it is prohibited, although the linguistic interpretation of the verse does not denote this conclusion. Thus, under certain circumstances, interpretation can aim at directly reforming people’s conditions and bringing about substantial changes in social systems, even if this goes against the text’s explicit linguistic meaning. In view of the present circumstances and the conditions of the Muslim nation, we find that every *tafsīr ṭabaqī* (i.e., class-based interpretation that aims at stressing disparity in livelihood) does not serve the interests of Muslims owing to the old and new form of feudalism still prevalent in many Muslim-majority countries. Exegesis should aim more at bridging the gap between social classes than at reinforcing disparities among them, particularly as the history of Islamic *da‘wa* (calling others to Islam) provides an interpretation calling for such an approach (e.g., Abū Dharr al-Ghafārī and ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz), when the impact of disparity between classes on Muslim interests became apparent in the Islamic society. As regards the traditional exegesis that aims to establish spiritual values, it should not have used the spiritual values as a means to pacify people and keep exploiting them, but rather, should have used these to rebel against situations that run counter to the sharī‘a and any call for reform and change. Nowadays, the term “spiritual values” is usually used to counter any revolutionary wave and to reduce the development of society from feudal capitalism to socialism. Exegesis should contain the same religious motives for the achievement of justice and the elimination of monopoly and exploitation.

The third shortcoming is that the current exegesis never begins with a critique or a call for reform or radical change of situations that run counter to sharī‘a. It is rather subsequent to, and supporter of, every reform or change that comes from outside the religious text, that is, from independent human thinking expressed and adopted by a revolutionist. Accordingly, it is the intellectual, economic, and political doctrines and not the religious text, and the social revolutionists and not the exegetes, that take precedence in calling for change, revealing problems, and developing solutions for them, although

traditional exegetes, such as Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, Abū Dharr al-Ghafārī, Ibn Taymiyya, and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, used to begin with a critique and call for reform and change. Therefore, exegesis should now take the lead in this regard, rather than remaining merely subordinate or supportive. The sharī'a position is what exegetes should first adopt, and when they remain committed to it, they become more than reformers and rebels against the positions that run contrary to the sharī'a.

If I were to ask whether we have a suitable theory of exegesis, I would reply in the negative, for the following reasons:

1. Exegesis is considered part of the traditional sciences, similarly to the Qur'ān and ḥadīth sciences, and has no precedence as a Revelation-based epistemological theory. Exegesis is the *manṭiq*—that is, a method of explaining Revelation.
2. Traditional exegesis is concerned with insignificant explanations and details that do not consider the independent meanings of the text or the current situations of the Muslim community.
3. Exegesis is often dominated by linguistic reasoning, which is reliant on textual deduction and the occasions of Revelation. However, this approach frequently overlooks the plain meaning of the text as grasped through direct engagement with its explicit message—especially as it relates to the current realities experienced by the exegete in both personal and communal life. These lived experiences represent the other side of the religious text.
4. One of the shortcomings of modern exegesis is its greater focus on divine and creedal aspects, rather than on humanity and human relationships—with one another and with the world. Modern exegesis does not analyze the current circumstances sufficiently enough to determine the likely extent of impact of these exegeses, particularly as many Muslim societies are still suffering from the yoke of feudalism and colonialism to the extent that the most revolutionary exegesis is required to address the weak condition of the *umma* (nation). These exegetical attempts are subordinate, subsequent, and supportive interpretations rather than those that take the lead and are critical and creative.

These are some of the points I would like to raise and discuss with my fellow researchers and intellectuals in universities, particularly Al-Azhar University. I hope this will be the starting point that raises the issue of exegesis and its current role in achieving national cultural unity.

2 Theoretical Approach for Exegesis vs. Analysis of Real-Life Situations

In an earlier article, I addressed the question of exegesis by inquiring whether we have a suitable theory of exegesis. The reply was negative, on account of some methodological shortcomings underlying the currently available texts of exegesis. In this article,³ I raise another question: Which came first—a theoretical approach to exegesis or a methodology of analysis of real-life situations?

What is the meaning of that question? All traditional exegeses follow the method of theoretical analysis, whether it is *naql li al-ma'thūr* (explanation of the meanings of the Qur'ān based on transmitted reports) or *tafsīr bi al-ra'y* (exegesis of the meanings of the Qur'ān based on personal reasoning). The exegete, who, as noted in the previous section, is but an expounder deduces meaning from the text using pure reason and then resorts to citing either a transmitted saying or a rational argument as evidence. However, this method of theoretical analysis has three shortcomings:

The first shortcoming is that *al-ma'thūr*—the transmitted reports—even if widely regarded as authentic and legitimate, provide the meaning of the text without offering any internal supporting argument for the validity of that meaning. The transmitted report itself is an argument in favor of the meaning of the text as deduced speculatively by the exegete. That is, the certainty of the transmitted report does not affect the speculative meaning given by the exegete, and therefore, the meaning remains speculative (*ẓannī*) and in need of certainty, which the transmitted report cannot give to it from outside.

The second shortcoming is that *tafsīr bi al-ra'y*—although it shares the same interpretive nature as the meaning derived by the exegete, since both rely on reasoning—may be considered superior to transmitted reports, yet it remains equally speculative. A speculative meaning supporting a speculative interpretation does not render any of them certain. In addition, personal opinions are numerous and often contradictory—therefore, which one should be adopted, and which considered preponderant?

The third shortcoming is that exegetes explain every text with no exception, whether an explanation is needed or required. They start from the beginning of the *sūra* (chapter) until its end, or from the beginning of the *ḥizb* (1/60th portion of the Qur'ān) until its end, or from the beginning of the quarter of the *ḥizb*

3 This article was written on December 10, 1966 for *Minbar al-Islam Magazine*, but it was not submitted to the representative of the magazine because the entire project was suspended.

until its end, although the Qurʾān has been revealed piecemeal, with each verse having a specific significance as a solution for a problematic situation in people's daily lives. Even for the verses that exegetes find difficult to explain, they exert their utmost effort. However, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb used to beat all those who asked about the meaning of such difficult-to-explain verses, such as, “By *al-mursalāt*” (understood as “By those [winds] sent forth one after another”) (Qurʾān 77:1). He even remained unaware of the meaning of some verses all his life, such as, “*And fruits and abbā* [herbage]” (Qurʾān 80:31).

Analyzing real-life situations is the normal approach of the revealed text, as explained in the previous section in discussing the “causes of Revelation.” Hence, to understand the text, it is necessary to know its meaning in relation to the real-life situation of the individual or the group for whom the verse or the text was revealed. The religious text is not an opinion, a viewpoint, or an abstract meaning; rather, it is a text that carries the concern, worry, and pain felt by a person, and it provides relief and removes his distress. Comprehending the real-life situation for which the verses were revealed not only leads to understanding the meaning of the text, but also explains the incident itself, that is, the reality expressed in the text teaches us the basic ruling behind the incident. Consequently, information about real-life situations helps people understand the religious text. In this way, exegesis brings the meaning back to its original intent—what exegetes refer to as *taʾwīl*.

Neither a transmitted report nor *tafsīr bi al-raʾy* is needed to understand a real-life situation, but rather, an analysis of the real-life situation itself is required to extract the underlying meaning and its specific significance. That is, exegetes must first analyze their personal experience to comprehend its meaning before talking or writing to their audience. They must be speakers, listeners, writers, and readers at the same time. In this case, the religious text becomes understandable, by relying only on the clear picture that the verses depict and the straightforward meaning of the text or *mushāhada* (i.e., viewing the text as a living entity), as held by Sufis. Consequently, exegetes need not explain the textual meanings of the text, but need to describe their feelings and the events that occur, not once but several times, in daily life.

Having achieved this, exegetes can then share their experience with others to be generally more certain that their analysis of their experience is true and authentic. They can refer to the experiences of other exegetes or listeners. Thus, the religious text becomes a living text, which is related to the reality of human beings (*insān*) in general, a reality that can be ascertained by more than one person. Since it is objective and is applicable to situations every person may experience, it can be considered a reality that is suitable for all people in general.

In answer to the question raised in this section about which came first, a theoretical approach to exegesis or a methodology of analysis of real-life situations, it can be asserted that the latter is the only possible way to perform exegesis because texts can only be understood in the context of the original real-life situation for which they were first revealed. The exegete is, at the same time, a reader of the book (i.e., the Qur'ān) and a human being who lives and grasps meanings based on events in daily life. That is, to understand Allah's saying, "It may be that you dislike a thing which is good for you and that you like a thing which is bad for you," exegetes need not search for its literal meaning, but need to contemplate daily life, which can provide them with one or more experiences that illustrate that what they once thought to be evil or good eventually proved to be the opposite.

By reading religious texts several times and by experiencing numerous issues in daily life, the exegete can discover the meanings of religious texts directly, without the need to adopt a strict linguistic approach—apart from the three fundamental dimensions of understanding any given "term," namely, literal, customary, and *shar'ī* (legal) meaning, which can be realized through personal understandings of these meanings. Such an understanding is derived from the daily situations that exegetes experience, and hence, the meaning they derive becomes the link between the religious text and the real-life situation. As stated earlier, exegesis is what links the Revelation to reality. Using this method, the difference between exegesis and the observable situation is removed.

An advantage of this exegesis is that it uncovers the same incidents addressed in the texts, without any verbal or semantic wrappings, or, as the scholars of the principles of Islamic law argue, exegesis does not become one of the *mabāḥith al-alfāz* or *mabāḥith al-dalālāt* (i.e., chapters in *uṣūlī* texts dealing with terms, their connotations and implications), but rather one of the *mabāḥith al-'illa* (i.e., chapters that explore the effective cause of legal rulings). The aim of exegesis is to search for the effective *'illa* (cause, reason). Thus, the analyzed experience does not require external evidence, be it a transmitted saying of a companion or a moral argument of a religious authority, because it has its own evidence from personal experiences. To express the meaning, the exegete does not need to use the same terms of the text, which may be specific terms of religious facts and may not be fully accepted or understood by each thinker, as it is sufficient to use common terms already in use in peoples' daily life.

The analysis of real-life situations as a theory of exegesis is not alien to the Islamic civilization because it developed with the rise of this civilization and manifested itself in different forms in various Islamic sciences. Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is nothing but human experiences of a *mukallaf*, (i.e., a person

meeting the conditions to be held legally accountable for their actions), and *qiyās* (analogy) is the logical analysis of such experiences by tracing them back to what the *sharī'a* refers to. The Sufi path is mainly an analysis of the Sufis' experiences of spiritual ecstasy, love, longing, and the like as expressed by them as *aḥwāl* (literally, "states") and *maqāmāt* (states of spiritual development or stations). Moreover, theologians base their theories on the analysis of different sides of a person's life, such as faith, freedom, and social behavior. Likewise, philosophers' theories of prophecy have been influenced by human and social dimensions. In addition, the sciences of the Qur'ān are mainly based on revelation, which reveal a group of ideal situations that can be experienced repeatedly by people. The sciences of ḥadīth are also based on the analysis of the narrator's feelings of whether the ḥadīth is reliable and can be verified.

Interpreting religious texts by tracing them back to their original sources of real-life situations does not mean that the Divine source of the texts is overlooked. One shortcoming of current exegesis is that it is more Divine-oriented than human-oriented. It is evident in the Islamic *sharī'a*, particularly in its objectives (*maqāṣid al-sharī'a*) and its orientation toward the necessities of life, namely, preserving religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property, which represent the basic constituents of individual and community life. Revelation is established and exists in the Qur'ān. Prophethood exists, and we know for certain about Prophet Muḥammad through the books of *sīra* (Prophet Muḥammad's biography) and the Prophet's impact on history. What is new in all of this is the attempt to find the foundation for Divine Revelation in human experience, and thus, Divine Revelation can be seen as synonymous with human existence. This is what we are in dire need of, especially in an age of intellectual and political trends that attempt to find a suitable social, political, and economic system for humanity.

Likewise, there is no fear that the subjectivity of the human experience and the objective existence of the Divine Revelation, which is independent of human existence, will affect the religious text. However, there is a difference between relativism and subjectivism. Relativism is about the impossibility of the existence of a universal objective fact about which many agree. Subjectivism is about the possible existence of such an objective fact, but it is not revealed except through the inner self of the individual. Islamic mysticism is the best example of this subjectivism; it is a purely subjective approach, but it results in an objective observation shared by more than one Sufi. In addition, the real-life situation is the material to be used in the exegesis, which comes to exegetes from the outside world in the form of a set of human situations in which the exegetes find themselves. It is the religious text that turns this material into a sort of realization and direct vision. That is, the meaning of the text,

which is an element of Divine Revelation, guarantees the objectivism of the real-life situation.

There is also no fear that the objectivity of the Islamic sharī'a will be affected if it is linked to the life of human beings as its referent, since sharī'a comes originally from the Divine Revelation. However, the various aspects of applying the sharī'a depend on the condition of humankind. It is true that a legal ruling may be incorrectly implemented on humankind. The objectivity of the sharī'a is not only *a priori*, because of its status as Divine Revelation, but also becomes part of an objectivity closely related to human existence. This is what the jurists meant by their statement that the universal principles of the sharī'a (*kullīyyāt*) are applicable at all times and in all places. That is, there is a general and absolute universal objectivism based on the nature of human beings' existence.

Consequently, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The theoretical exegeses have shortcomings because they begin with explanations of the religious text as a whole, regardless of whether the explanations depend on the transmitted reports or personal opinions. These textual meanings remain speculative because the text implies many meanings, and we need to be certain of the exact meaning of the Revelation. This exact meaning must be found from within the text and then linked to real-life situations, which would render the text synonymous with reality.
2. It is necessary to seek the meaning of the text in the real-life situation referred to by the text, thereby turning the meaning as derived by the intellect into an actual and concrete real-life situation.
3. There is no temporal precedence between understanding the meaning from the text and analysing the real-life situation from which it stemmed; rather, there is a temporal correlation because the meaning ensures the truth and credibility of the analysis of the real-life experience and its type.
4. This new approach of analysis of real-life situations is neither alien to the Islamic civilization nor dependent on other similar approaches in other civilizations, because it appeared in different forms in various Islamic sciences, including the sciences of Qur'ān and ḥadīth, Islamic jurisprudence, mysticism, and even theology and philosophy.
5. This approach—the analysis of real-life situations—should not be viewed as a threat to Revelation as a divine source for religious texts or as a way to discredit Islamic sharī'a. This is because the Divine Revelation remains as such and because the Divine Revelation is the first guarantee of the credibility of the analysis of real-life situations.

This is what we propose to our respected scholars in our research on the issue of exegesis.

3 Return to Source or Return to Nature?

The Salafi movements that call for authenticity are characterized by their call for following the tradition under the banner of “returning to the source,” which means returning to the Scripture.⁴ Luther’s slogan in his religious reform movement was “The Scripture Alone.” He rejected all traditions of the past. Likewise, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya’s (d. 751/1350) slogan was oriented around returning to the Qur’ān, in accordance with the famous ḥadīth that reads, “The latter part of this nation will not be rectified except by that which rectified its earlier part.” Likewise, Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s and Rashīd Riḍā’s slogan of religious reform was about returning to the purity of early Islam and to the age of the Companions as a model for the realization of this call. This call is still consciously and unconsciously in existence, maintaining that the salvation of the present lies in returning to the past of the first four early generations of Islam. These four generations are those of the Messenger, the Companions, the Successors, and the Successors of the Successors, in that order.

This call poses a risk to the present and involves many difficulties in dealing with the past. It risks disassociating itself wholly from the present, escaping from it, and refusing to directly face it in order to comprehend it, partake in it or to influence it through work and effort. The call attempts to compensate for the failure to connect with the present by adoring the past and separating a part of it from the course of history, taking this part of history as a model to contemplate and admire, and seeking protection with it against the internal troubles and the external storms brewing over the present. At best, this takes place in good faith, owing to one’s inability to connect with the present or in compensation for one’s failure, and at worst, this takes place in bad faith, as a way of rejecting modernity and complete reformation. In such a case, it aims at flattering the masses, depending on their religious feelings and their sanctification of the old history, and adopting the position: “It would not have been possible to create something better than what it was [the four earliest generations of Islam]!”. Eventually, the past is brought back with all its shortcomings, including claims of *tashbīh* (making an explicit likeness between Allah and the creation) and *tajsīm* (claiming that Allah has physical features like the created bodies do, or anthropomorphism) or their opposites, such as *tajrīd* (negation of all attributes of Allah) and *tanzīh* (declaring Allah’s incomparability), going far beyond reality and indulging in theoretical mazes and illusory problems.

4 This article was written for the literary appendix of the newspaper *al-Akhbār*, following the two articles titled “Originality and Contemporariness” and “Our Civilizational Situation,” but the appendix was later deleted.

If this took place in good faith, many challenges would appear and the “returning to the source” would not serve its purpose, namely, to change the present in accordance with a model from the past. The first of these challenges is the problem of language, because the “source” is the Scripture, which is a codified text that can be approached only through language. This makes it necessary to apply the approaches of exegesis. Here, one becomes confused between linguistic exegesis, meaning-based exegesis, and esoteric exegesis, especially since the language—Arabic, in particular—contains the literal, the metaphorical, the apparent, the implied, the clear, and the ambiguous. Therefore, the problem of changing reality turns into a problem of interpretation of texts and dealing with the contradictions in these texts. Consequently, nothing of reality is actually changed and there is no return to the source from which several streams flow. That is, the hope that all exegetes have the same viewpoint of how to deal with reality is lost and replaced by their disagreements, which cannot be reconciled on account of their contradictions and conflicts. It may even be said that the whole Islamic civilization, as shown in the ancient traditions, is a civilization of exegesis, of language, or of text, or one in which there is always the possibility of encountering two opinions on everything.

The second challenge is that a type of exegesis that is contrary to the course of reality is applied, making the “returning to the source” a means for eliminating the natural changes to reality, particularly if the language allows so. Accordingly, the Qur’ānic verse “And Allah has preferred some of you above others in wealth and properties” has been used to fight the social revolutionary movements, as Shaykh Muṣṭafa al-Ghunaymī al-Taftāzānī did in his attack against the socialist party after it was founded in 1921. Likewise, all other revolutions of the time were attacked in the name of faith, by accusing natural forms of thinking of atheism, praising the spiritual, and accusing all scientific thinking of materialism. That is, the “returning to the source” affirms and supports the existing conditions in the name of religion. Therefore, every change will be challenged in the name of the Scripture. Regardless of whether such challenges took place in good faith and in terms of traditional belief or in bad faith in order to maintain some class-based gains for exegeses, the result is the same.

The third challenge is that a socially progressive exegesis has, in fact, already been undertaken, as in the case of *Tafsīr al-Manār* [by Riḍā], but this progressiveness emerges from the current reality and the text becomes subordinate to it. Hence, the ‘source’ (*manbaʿ*) loses its validity, value, and rationale for its existence. The ‘source’ merely functions to approve the progress that has occurred. If serious attempts were made to link the text to reality and to create a “revolutionary theology,” the outcome may be a certain form of *tal-*

fiq (jurisprudential eclecticism; the process of selection and combination of various legal opinions caused by contradictory interpretations of the textual sources), which dominated the old legal tradition. The outcome may appear strange in front of the scientific way of thinking. The proponents of this attempt will be doomed to isolation and rejection, for they will be returning neither to the source like the Salafis nor to reality like the proponents of radical solutions.

Accordingly, “returning to the source” proves to be a dead end, which is fraught with risks and challenges, but what is the alternative? It is “returning to nature,” as nature is the source of thinking and not vice versa. The movement of “returning to nature” can be explained as follows. Its theoretical basis was developed by Spinoza in the seventeenth century, and its social and artistic dimensions were developed by Rousseau in the eighteenth century. Its scientific dimension was developed by scientists in the nineteenth century, and its existential basis was developed by philosophers in the twentieth century. This movement was a source of artistic rebellion against classicism, a factor leading to the rise of romanticism, and freedom from religion based on theology as well as the emergence of the natural religion and a rebellion against disciplines based on reward and punishment. It established the principles of natural education and freed human beings from the imposed Divine law. It gave rise to the school of natural rights and liberation from utopia, established the basics of the scientific method. It released one from what many believed to be an inevitable predetermined fate and takes one to put emphasis on human existence. “Returning to nature” is characterized by being in direct contact and fusion with reality. It indicates a strong commitment to particular positions and the rejection of all forms of failure and inadequacy. It can also remove the obstacles of language, exegesis and interpretation, and subordination. Thus, the civilization of science can rise.

The Divine Revelation was a “returning to nature,” which is known to the *uṣūlīs* and exegetes as “the occasions of Revelation.” Nature, in fact, called for Divine Revelation. The proof for this assertion is the existence of people who refused to worship idols before the prophetic mission, and the aspiration of the slaves and the poor for freedom. For the first time, Divine Revelation did not occur all at once, but was revealed in response to circumstances. Whenever an event required a theoretical basis, Divine Revelation was sent down to meet the requirements of nature. ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb had an intuition that enabled him to arrive at particular rulings, which were later confirmed by Divine Revelation. Therefore, Divine Revelation was a call from nature and a fulfillment of its requirements. It was not externally imposed upon nature to act against it or suppress it.

An exegesis in harmony with nature (or natural exegesis) may not start with language, but with an analysis of the actual incident to which the text refers and with an analysis of sensory perception, emotion, and reason. For example, the Qurʾānic verse (2:216) “it may be that you dislike a thing which is good for you” reflects a real-life situation, which one can realize in daily life. For example, the defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War was bad, but it brought about many good things, as we learned our weak points and the reasons for our failure. That is, the exegesis based on human nature does not begin with the text, but with reality. The objective of this exegesis is to understand the real-life situation, which is the perceptual meaning of the text. Accordingly, the exegete’s task is to observe reality through the text, which then means that there is no real separation between talking about the text and talking about the reality of the actual situations; both refer to the same thing. Religious texts represent human situations; the exegete listens to the former and experiences the latter, and takes hints from the former and creates reasoning from the latter. Thus, the natural exegesis of the text based on human nature turns into an analysis of human existence and moves from the word to the actual situation.

By returning to nature, one can analyze one’s present personality and social reality and can identify their components without imposing external rulings upon them from linguistic exegesis. For example, by analysing believers’ personality and psychological makeup, one can recognize that the rituals they perform may be to disguise other acts they perform because of their human nature. Being overly concerned about the soul and spirituality may point to how one is also excessively concerned about material issues. That is the reason individuals may fill their stomach with permissible foodstuff and then go to perform obligatory prayer. In both cases, they attain their share of this world and of the hereafter, as they are commanded to do so by Allah. Returning to Allah may also be because of a failure to attach oneself to the material world, or as a way of forsaking the problems of the present age. Some believers may be hard-hearted because they are sure of the lawfulness of their acts and the Divine guarantee of reward for those acts, regardless of the reality in which they find themselves. For that reason, they kill in the name of Allah, which has happened in our history. Many of our moral values, such as about decency and dressing modestly, may be based on sexual suppression—a sexual desire (*raghba jinsiyya*) in disguise that is in fact driven from its attractiveness. Often, suppressing nature leads to the opposite effect, resulting in exposing true human nature. However, “returning to nature” has the merit of orienting human nature toward perfection. Likewise, a Shaykh’s continual speech about sexual problems, saying that there should be no shame in discussing religious matters, may provide satisfaction to the listeners and compensation for their

sexual deprivation. The same is the case when a Shaykh says “Ahem” when he enters the yard of a house to signal that a male is visiting, for alerting the women of the house to disband or cover themselves. This duality is an example of true hypocrisy, which is sometimes conscious and at other times unconscious. This hypocrisy may be the core of polytheism, and the unity of nature may be the essence of monotheism. It is the “returning to nature” that can restore status to a human being’s personality, by identifying its different components, ensuring its upright formation, and rejecting both duality and double standards and their subsequent processes of compensation, hypocrisy, tiptoeing, and covering up.

In terms of our social reality, religious texts can either be explained in a way that serves current social development, or exegesis can remain subsequent to, not prior to, the movement of progress. No matter how progressive the exegesis associated with the explanation of words, the bitter reality keeps imposing its weight on those who want a revolutionary change. The idea of a “return to nature” can help start off with the actual situation one has to deal with and understand it using statistical approaches. The existence of 14 million peasants and destitute people against approximately three million landlords is stronger than any theory of ownership, be it ownership or succession, individual or collective. The fact that the owners who have less than 5 *faddān* (1 *faddān* = 24 carat = 60 meters × 70 meters = 4,200 square meters) represent 94.5% of owners who are in possession of half of the cultivated lands (about 57.1%) has a heavier weight than any agrarian reform law that set the maximum level of landownership. The reality forces the fair distribution of the seven million *faddān* to 18 million peasants.⁵ That means, each peasant’s share will be less than half a *faddān*, from which the annual income would be less than 30 pounds—or less than half the income of a tenth-grade civil servant, which is considered the minimum level on the career ladder. “Returning to nature” gives due weight to reality, and in front of it, the text stands helpless and can but give justification or redistribute the national income among the rich people so that the owners expand from 2.8 million before the revolution to 3.2 million after the revolution [in Egypt]. “Returning to nature” is a pathway that can bring about radical change in reality. It is a revolutionary approach in its own right, especially as it aligns with the scientific method in an age of revolution.

5 Editor’s note: It is unclear how these numbers were derived. If 57% is 5, then 100% is about 9, not 7. It is also unclear why 18 million is written in this sentence and 14 million in the one above.

Source

Ḥasan Ḥanafī, “Naẓariyyat al-Tafsīr,” *Fī Fikrina al-Mu’āṣir*, Cairo, Dār al-Tanwīr (1983), pp. 175–186.

Translated by Dr Said Hassan.

The Qurʾān—the World as a Sign

Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd

About the Author¹

Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, one of the most well-known, original voices in contemporary Islamic thought, is particularly known for his critical approach to Qurʾānic hermeneutics. Abū Zayd was born in Tanta, Egypt, in 1943, and dedicated his life to exploring the relationship between the Qurʾān and the cultural context of seventh-century Arabia. One of his most controversial arguments—that the Qurʾān is a *muntaj thaqāfi* (cultural product)—challenged traditional views and led to intense debates in both academic and religious circles. For Abū Zayd, the Qurʾān rearticulates pre-Islamic cultural concepts through its unique linguistic structure and engages in a dialogue with the social and cultural realities of its time.

Abū Zayd argued that the Qurʾān should be read as a historical and cultural text, rather than as a static divine command. This naturally placed him in conflict with conservative *ʿulamā* (Muslim scholars) in Egypt. In his book *Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ*, he argued that the Qurʾān developed through debate and negotiation

1 Important works by Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd include *Naqd al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī* (Cairo: Sīna li al-Naṣr, 1995); *Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsah fi ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-ʿArabī, 1991); *al-Naṣṣ, al-Sulṭa, al-Ḥaqīqa: al-Fikr al-Dīnī bayna Irādat al-Maʿrifa wa Irādat al-Ḥaymana* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-ʿArabī, 1995); *Rethinking the Qurʾān: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* (Utrecht: Humanistics University Press); *Reformation of Islamic Thought: A Critical Historical Analysis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006); and *The Voice of an Exile: Reflections on Islam*, trans. Esther R. Nelson (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004). His English-language articles include “Divine Attributes in the Qurʾān: Some Poetic Aspects,” in *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, ed. John Cooper, Ronald L. Nettler, and Mohamed Mahmoud (London: Tauris, 2000), 190–211; and “The Others in the Qurʾān: A Hermeneutical Approach,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36 (2010): 281–294. Major studies on his thought include Charles Hirschkind, “Heresy or Hermeneutics: The Case of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abu Zayd,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 12 (1995): 463–477; Navid Kermani, “From Revelation to Interpretation: Naṣr Ḥāmid Abu Zayd and the Literary Study of the Qurʾān,” in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qurʾān*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 169–192; and Ferry Muhammadsyah Siregar, *Naṣr Ḥāmid Abu Zayd on Tafṣīr, Taʾwīl, Qurʾānic Hermeneutic Discourse: A Linguistic Perspective* (Berlin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011).

with pre-Islamic norms and its own evolving discourse. His opponents used his writings in a legal case against him, to argue that Abū Zayd had committed apostasy. An Egyptian court ruled him an apostate in 1995, annulled his marriage, and effectively forced him into exile. He and his wife resettled in the Netherlands, where he held academic positions at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht and at Leiden University.

Despite the difficulties he faced in Egypt, Abū Zayd became an internationally well-known scholar. He advocated for freedom of thought and reform in Islamic traditions. His contributions to Qurʾānic studies include *Naqd al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī*; *al-Naṣṣ*, *al-Sulṭa*, *al-Ḥaqīqa*, and his English-language studies, such as *Rethinking the Qurʾān: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* and *Reformation of Islamic Thought: A Critical Historical Analysis*. These writings underline his belief that the Qurʾān's meaning is continually constructed through human interpretation.

Abū Zayd's ideas have been widely discussed by scholars. Charles Hirschkind examined the debate surrounding his apostasy and interpretative approach in "Heresy or Hermeneutics." Navid Kermani explored his views on revelation in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qurʾān*. Other critical studies include Michal Moch's analysis of his stance on *naskh* (abrogation), and comparative works, such as Ali Mostfa's study of Abū Zayd and al-Jābrī, as well as Pegah Zohouri's exploration of pluralism in his thought. Through his writings, Abū Zayd continues to influence contemporary debates on the Qurʾān and its role in the modern world.



1 Introduction

This research is a sequel to the research project on "Semiology in Turāth: An Exploratory Study,"² and it is a new adventure into the field of Qurʾānic studies from a semiotic perspective. The first research project was an attempt to read the Arabo-Islamic tradition in terms of its linguistic, rhetorical, theological, and spiritual aspects from a semiotic perspective, which integrates the linguistic system into a wider discipline (i.e., linguistic relationships). It

2 This study is available in Sīza Qāsim and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, eds., *Anẓimat al-ʿĀlāmāt fī al-Lughā wa al-Adab wa al-Thaqāfa, Madkhal ilā al-Sīmiyūtiqā* (Cairo: Dār Ilyās al-ʿAṣriyya, 1986), 73–132; it was republished in Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *Ishkālīyyāt al-Qirāʾa wa ʿĀliyyāt al-Taʾwīl*, 2nd ed. (Beirut and Casablanca: Arabic Cultural Centre, 1992), 51–118.

led to significant conclusions that unearthed a theoretical awareness of the Arabo–Islamic tradition, which assimilates language into the broader system of semantics. This research was based on the perspective of linguists, rhetoricians, and speculative theologians (*mutakallimūn*). However, the Sufis conceived language through a more comprehensive, deeper perspective, namely, the “divine speech” in its different manifestations, on existential and textual levels. Normally, they explained existence and its various levels by illustrating the different levels of language, from phonetics up to semantics. Likewise, they illustrated the levels of language by referring to the levels of existence, from the highest to the lowest. Thus, the Muslim Sufis managed to formulate a profoundly comprehensive concept for the word/logos in the Arabo–Islamic tradition.

In that study, reference was made to the Qur'ānic incentive, which alongside other incentives, provoked the Muslim mind to engage in this sort of contemplation and extensive research, given that this was an exploratory reading and that it focused on the intellectual “tradition.” In this sense, the study at hand represents a sequel to the preceding study, although it focuses on analyzing the Qur'ānic text by employing the mechanism of textual analysis, and hence its innovative aspect. The Qur'ānic text has become a static text in the public Islamic awareness, given that it is petrified by commentaries and interpretations that accumulated from the first century of Islam to nearly the end of the fifth century AH. Such commentaries have surrounded the Qur'ān and constrained it ever since. The later commentaries and interpretations mostly relied on fruitless repetitions and iterations, sometimes abridged and at other times elaborated and in great detail. Any attempt at a modern or new reading that penetrates the layers of commentaries and interpretations that make the text rigid provoke numerous objections, and even attacks and accusations, forcing one to remain on the safe side by just reporting and repeating old interpretations. This approach results in a loss of vivacity and undermines the innovativeness that had been characteristic of the tradition in earlier times.

It was imperative that this research gradually depart from established premises, toward building its own primary proposition and identifying the approach and procedures of the analysis instead. Researchers have agreed upon the major premise in the deduction process, on which the hypothesis of this research is based. This premise is that the language of the Qur'ān derives its referential authority from the Arabic language and from its pre-Islamic, historical pragmatic framework in the Arabian Peninsula. This premise is drawn directly from the Qur'ānic text, whose reference language is Arabic, and refers every preceding religious text to the referential authority of the language that represents the culture of that text. This is because every prophet—and so each

stage of revelation to this world—was sent “with the language of his people, in order that he might make [the message] clear for them” (Qur’ān 14:4).

There is no disagreement among researchers on this premise, at least from a theoretical and methodological perspective. However, the disagreement between them is limited to results that depend on this premise. While some stick to the literal meaning resulting from the referentiality of the mother tongue, others attempt to extensively transcend the framework of this referentiality. This transcendence lies in an attempt to understand the meaning of the text using the semantic developments in the structure of the mother tongue and to project these latest meanings on the language of the text by applying the concept of “denotative generality” to the totality of the text, without distinguishing between the texts of “legal rulings” and other types of texts. On many occasions, these meanings projected on the language of the text may be inapplicable in the mother tongue within the framework of its contemporary pragmatics, or may be contextually inapplicable.³

Logically speaking, this major premise is followed by a minor premise, which is also agreed upon by researchers, namely, that the Qur’ān has changed the meanings of some terms, by shifting their conventional linguistic meanings to their so-called *shar’ī* (legal) meanings. For example, terms such as “*ṣalāt*” (prayer), “*zakāt*” (obligatory charity), and “*ṣawm*” (fasting) in the Qur’ān carry more than their linguistic meanings of “praying and supplication,” “development and growth,” and “abstention,” respectively, because these terms have come to indicate religious rituals and acts of worship.

Out of these two major and minor premises, the conclusion that embodies the primary postulate of this research is that the language of the text, even

3 See Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī’s (d. 911/1505) critique in *al-Itqān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, 2nd part (Dār al-Ma’rifa, Beirut, n.d.), 78, 227–228, on the interpretation that is based on deduction and not just on transmission (*naql*). He limits the mistakes of this interpretation to two points:

One is due to people who hold certain meanings and want to construe the terms of the Qur’ān in accordance with these meanings. Others are those who interpret the Qur’ān according to what it most probably meant for the Arab speaking people, without taking into consideration the speaker in the Qur’ān, the one the Qur’ān is revealed to, and the one addressed by it. The former considered the meaning they hold without taking into account the significance and the rhetoric required for the terms of the Qur’ān, while the latter considered merely the term and what the Arabs are likely to mean by it without taking into account what befits the speaker and the context of speech.

Also see the explanation of the “Types of invalid interpretation” by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya in his book *al-Ṣawā’iq al-Mursala ‘alā al-Jahmiyya wa al-Mu’tazila* (Cairo, n.d.), 11–12. He defines the first type as being “that which the term is not likely to mean when it was originally coined.” The fourth type is, “That which is not familiarly used in this sense in the language of the addressed person, even if it is familiar in the modern usage of the term.”

if it derives meaning from the “mother tongue,” has its own code of meaning. Scholars interested in Qur'ānic studies should carefully probe this code to uncover its features without overlooking its relationship with the source. The primary proposition of this research, springing as it does from the preceding premise, is that the particular linguistic code of the Qur'ānic text does not lie only in the shift in the denotations of some terms from literal to legal usage. Rather, the boundaries of the linguistic code of the text extend to distant horizons. It is a language that attempts to formulate its own linguistics, beginning with phonetics, morphology, and lexicology, and continuing up to the level of formulating its own grammatical and semantic patterns. It is the linguistic system that 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī sought to explore in his seminal book *Dalā'il al-Ijāz* by studying its special, distinctive features using the generic concept of *nazm* (“coherence” or “systems”). This concept links language rules to the structure of the text and differentiates between both as two separate modes of speech.

However, the present research departs from such a hypothesis and tests an untrodden field of Qur'ānic studies in terms of not only its formation through the structure of the mother tongue, but also its subsequent reforming of the structure of the mother tongue itself. The impact of the Qur'ānic text on the mother tongue is not limited to the boundaries of the aforementioned levels (i.e., changing the structure by developing its components) but extends to make the mother tongue a subset in the structure of religious phraseology. This attempt is not realized through any semantic transformation process, no matter how radical they may be. It occurs through the process of transforming the entire language from signifying a system of relations into a sign in the code of the language of the religion.

This research may be somewhat venturesome, but it is a warrantable venture within the framework of scientific research. It is not a leap into a vacuum or a mere whimsical venture onto an untrodden path in the field of Qur'ānic studies. Rather, it has its methodological basis in the structure of the Qur'ānic text and in the process of reception, or the process of assimilation, in which the Muslim reader engages.

Within the structure of the text, the entire preceding linguistic tradition turns into signs that are indicative of one generic and absolute fact. With “all of the linguistic tradition,” we refer to language as a system of signs in which the “signifier” and the “signified” represent the two sides of the same coin. Thus, the entire linguistic tradition is a signifier in the cultural system of the signified. In this system in which history is inseparable from tales, stories, beliefs, patterns of behavior, rituals, ceremonies, and perceptions related to the physical and metaphysical makeup of the world, the cultural system of the signified, which

is linguistically represented in the linguistic system—the signifier—turns into semiotic “signs.”

Transforming the linguistic system into semiotic signs within another system is a process called semiosis. This fact is easily understood from al-Jurjānī’s explanation of the processes of semantic transformation that occur in rhetorical patterns, particularly metaphors, similes, and metonymies, as in such cases the meaning is not produced from words/signs or from the structure/syntax alone. Rather, it is produced through the transformation of the “generic significance,” resulting from the interaction of the word meaning and the structural relationship, into a “generic relationship” leading to the production of another meaning. This generic sign resulting from a semiotic relationship—a visual, audio, gustatory, or olfactory image—is more like an icon. In that semiotic process, “the utterance refers to the meaning dictated by its literal denotation, the listener then inferring from that meaning, based on some form of deduction, another meaning.”⁴

This process of semiosis transfers language from the field of conventionalism to that of rational “deduction.” It turns it to a nonlinguistic system of signs because the meanings of linguistic signs are essentially based on conventional usage. However, this is not necessarily the case for semiotic signs, and al-Jurjānī’s distinction between the “meaning” and the “meaning of the meaning” further clarifies this point. The meaning is the linguistic message that turns into a “mental image,” becoming a sign that refers to another level, which is “the meaning of the meaning.” In al-Jurjānī’s words, this is when “you perceive a certain meaning from the utterance, and this meaning then leads you to another meaning.”⁵

A similar process occurs with the Arabic language through the Qur’ānic text; the latter handles the former rhetorically, transferring and transforming its semantic and rhetorical functioning into signs that refer to “sensible” meanings and significances. In the context of this transformation, the language of the text always tends to prompt the recipient to uphold “rationality,” “retentiveness,” and “contemplation.” Such prompting stresses the process of transformation from the linguistic to the semiotic system.

On the level of the text, but with regard to “reception,” Muslim readers of the Qur’ān perceive these signs but do not stop at the sign itself; rather, they move directly from the sign to the “sensible” signification, whether this sign be

4 ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, *Dalā’il al-I’jāz*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākīr (Cairo: al-Khānji Bookshop, 1984), 262.

5 al-Jurjānī, *Dalā’il al-I’jāz*, 263.

a depiction of the world with regard to all its details and particulars in heaven and on the earth, including humans, animals, plants, and inanimate objects, and all that lies in between these two, or the tales and stories of those who have passed away, including the stories of the prophets, the history of Revelation, and the call to Allah. It is not the “sign” that is important in this regard, but it is the “meaning” that is of interest, which is the focal point.

However, the concept of “sign” in the Qur'ān goes beyond the boundaries of the “universe” and “history,” as the signifier “*āya*” (pl. *āyāt*) (sign/verse) refers to all of that as well as the “units” of the Qur'ānic text and to the prescribed punishments (*ḥudūd*) and rulings (*aḥkām*) stated in the text. This means that the system of signs in the text is varied enough to assimilate the language system into its structure. Under this assimilation resulting from the integration between the “text,” the “rulings,” and the “world,” the reader becomes fully immersed only in one source, namely, the Qur'ānic text. Therefore, the differences between “reading” and “contemplation,” and between “understanding” and “worship,” are effaced in a way similar to that in which the difference between the “world” and the “text,” and between the “text” and the “rulings,” are effaced. The Muslim has a right, within the framework of this process of assimilation and integration, to consider “existence” as an unuttered divine speech:

Say [O Muḥammad to humankind], “If the sea were ink for [writing] the Words of my Lord, surely, the sea would be exhausted before the Words of my Lord are finished, even if We brought [another sea] like it, in assistance.”

Qur'ān: 18:109

The Muslim reader is also entitled to see the Qur'ān as a fully self-sufficient entity, that is, it is sufficient to read it alone without referring to any other books:

And [it is] a Qur'ān which We have divided [into parts], in order that you might recite it to men at intervals.”

Qur'ān 17:106

And indeed We have fully explained to humankind, in this Qur'ān, every kind of similitude.

Qur'ān 17:89; see 18:54; 30:58; 39:27

And We have indeed made the Qur'ān easy to understand and remember; then is there anyone who will remember [or receive admonition]?

Qur'ān 54:17, 22, 32, 40

The objective of this research is to discover the tools through which the Qur'ānic text transforms the world into a set of signs that has a unified significance or a single semantic focus. In this way, the research seeks to explain how the text deals with the language of the text (i.e., Arabic) in the same way poetic expressions handle metaphors, similes, and metonymies, shifting such terms from their literal and direct “meaning” to the “meaning of the meaning”—transferring them from the linguistic sign system to the semiotic sign system. Likewise, the Qur'ānic text transfers the language of the text (i.e., Arabic) to a semiotic signifier within its own particular system [of meaning]. Hence, the language of the text of the Qur'ān—the religious language—dominates the basic language used and shifts the basic language to the orbit of its structure. Consequently, the Arabic language becomes a religious language par excellence after the text (of the Qur'ān) takes full control over the language and assimilates it into the Qur'ān's special semantic structure.

In this way, this research into the “science of signs in *Turāth*” will be completed by pointing out that the role of the Qur'ānic text in the formulation of the theoretical and philosophical concepts that exist in the language is not a secondary or a marginal one. It seems that such a marginal role for the Qur'ān was suggested by some studies that are essentially interested in the issue of theological and philosophical “legacy” or legacies that resulted from the process of civilizational interaction in the history of the Arabo-Islamic culture. This research does not intend to convey that displaying the role of the text in this research in such a way stems from any closed chauvinistic cultural stance that implicitly or openly rejects the reality of interactions between cultures and civilizations. The role of the text represents seeds in a fertile soil; were it not for its existence on the earth, no cultural elements could have efficiently materialized in practice, and were it not for the assistance of cultural elements, these seeds would not have flourished and grown. This research would not have come to light without an awareness that there is a difference between Arabic culture and the cultures that have interacted and still interact with it, and the stages of this Arabo-Islamic culture within the course of the history of this culture.

2 Semantic Relationship between “*al-‘ālam*,” “*al-‘ilm*,” and “*al-‘alāma*”

The words “*al-‘ālam* (the world),” “*al-‘ilm* (knowledge),” and “*al-‘alāma* (the sign)” are three linguistic terms derived from one linguistic root consisting of three letters of the alphabet: *‘ayn*, *lām*, and *mīm*. The semantic relationship

between these three signifiers in the structure of the mother tongue is clear to any Arabic speaker. However, our interest here is in tracing this relationship in the Qur'ān. We immediately notice that the signifier *al-'alāma* is stated only once in the Qur'ān, in the plural form, in Allah's saying,

And He has affixed into the earth mountains standing firm, lest it should shake with you; and rivers and roads, that you may guide yourselves. And landmarks [*"alāmāt"* (plural of *al-'alāma*) signposts during the day] and by the stars [during the night]; they [humankind] guide themselves.

Qur'ān 16:15–16

Up until the third Islamic century—the time of Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī—exegetes took the term “guidance” (*hidāya*) in this verse as meaning that Allah made rivers and roads so that people may be guided by them on their excursions during the daytime and made stars as signs to guide people traveling at night.⁶ I refer to this verse later to reveal its significance in the context of the Qur'ānic *sūra*. Hence, it is sufficient to mention here that exegetes have said that the meaning of the root word *al-'alāma* signifies material guidance, which is used only once in the Qur'ān in the plural form.

Unlike *'alāma*, the word *'ilm*—as a signifier—is used in many places in the Qur'ān as meaning “knowledge.” However, it also carries the meaning of *al-'alāma* in Allah's saying,

And truly he [Jesus, son of Mary] shall be a known sign (*'ilm*) for [the coming of] the Hour [Day of Resurrection] [i.e., 'Īsā's descent on the earth]. Therefore, have no doubt concerning it [i.e., the Day of Resurrection]. And follow Me [Allah] [i.e., be obedient to Allah and do what He orders you to do, O humans]! This is the Straight Path [of Islamic monotheism, leading to Allah and to His Paradise].

Qur'ān 43:61

6 See Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Rayyān li'l-Turāth, 1987) (a photocopy of Būlāq's old edition), part 14, 63. Dār al-Ma'ārif issued another edition in Egypt, which was edited by Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākīr, in which the *takhrīj* (referencing) of ḥadīth was made by his brother Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākīr. However, this edition was not printed after volume 16, which ends on 143 in part 13 of the al-Rayyān edition. Therefore, it will be sufficient to refer to the book by mentioning al-Rayyān or Shākīr to distinguish between its unedited and edited versions. Although we will always rely on the edited version, we will refer to al-Rayyān's edition after part 13, 143.

Scholars have differed concerning the referent of the attached pronoun “*hū*” (he/it/that) in “*wa-innahū*” (and truly he/it/that), and whether it refers to Jesus, who was mentioned in the previous verses, or to the Qurʾān by way of resuming the discussion about the Qurʾān. Because of this difference concerning the referent, another difference emerged concerning the reading of the signifier *ʿilm*: Should it be pronounced as *ʿilm* or *ʿalam*? However, the point is that there clearly is an implicit semantic relationship between the signifier *ʿilm* and the signifier *ʿalāma*.

Those who opine that it should be pronounced as *ʿalam* maintain that the pronoun *ʿhū* in “*wa-innahū*” refers to Jesus, who was mentioned in the preceding verses. They argue that the meaning is that the appearance of Jesus is a *ʿalam* (sign), by which it is to be known that the Hour is coming, given that his appearance is one of the portents of the Hour and his descent on the earth is an indication of the extinction of the worldly life and the coming of the hereafter. The interpretation of *ʿalam* in the sense of *al-ʿalāma* (“sign”) is stressed by another exegete, Mujāhid b. Jabr (d. 104/722), the disciple of Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687) and the main reporter of the mode of recitation quoted here, which was also adopted by both Qatāda b. Dīʿāma (d. 117/735) and al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim al-Hilālī (d. 106/724). However, as per al-Ṭabarī, the established reciters of the major provinces (*qurrāʾ al-amṣār* [which were the loci of Islamic knowledge and culture]) adopted the other recitation, namely, *ʿilm*, because they argued that the pronoun *ha* in “*wa-innahū*” refers to the Qurʾān and that the meaning (of the quoted verse) is, “This Qurʾān contains knowledge of the Hour in terms of informing you of its approach, and telling you about it and its horrors.” It is apparent that al-Ṭabarī approved the mode of recitation of *qurrāʾ al-amṣār* and thought that it was the most preponderant reading, because he said:

The correct reading is *ʿilm* based on the consensual agreement of established reciters. He mentions that this was the reading of Ubayy: “it is a reminder of the Hour.” As such, this supports the view of those who read it as *ʿilm* with a *kasra* [a small diagonal line below the letter indicating the genitive case] on the letter *ʿayn*.⁷

Turning to the third signifier of the three derivatives, “*ʿalam*,” it is stated in the Qurʾān only in the plural “*ʿālamīn*,” and in most contexts as an *idāfa* construction (indicating possession), in which the *idāfa* in “*Rabb al-ʿālamīn* (the Lord

7 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān* (al-Rayyān), part 25, 54–55.

of the worlds)” always signifies the possessive sense, with its underlying significance of creation, arrangement, and control. Therefore, al-Ṭabarī reported that Ibn ‘Abbās, when commenting on “*Rabb al-‘ālamīn*” in *sūra al-Fātiḥa* (Chapter 1), said:

Say, “Praise is due to Allah, to whom belongs all the creation, all the heavens and that which is therein, all the earths and that which is therein, and whatever is in between, including that which is known and that which is not.”

Know, O Muḥammad, that there is nothing that has any similarity to your Lord.⁸

The full absence of the signifier *‘ālam* in the singular, in the language of the Qur’ān, is significant in relation to the point of revealing the mechanisms of assimilating the mother tongue into the language of the religion. This signifier has only a partial significance in its pragmatic use outside the Qur’ānic text, although it comes under the category of “collective nouns.” Its significance is partial in terms of time and space. Illustrating its partial significance in relation to time, every century is called an *‘ālam* and its partial spatial significance is clear as it refers to the species of creation at a particular time. Regarding this partial spatiotemporal significance, al-Ṭabarī said:

‘ālamūn is the plural of *‘ālam*. The *‘ālam* is an uncountable collective noun that has no singular variant, similar to the words such as people, group, and army, and the like of such terms that are coined for a plural item and which have no singular form. The word *‘ālam* is the name of the species of nations, and each species is the *‘ālam* of the respective era or epoch. For example, humankind is an *‘ālam* and the people of each generation are the *‘ālam* of that era. Likewise, jinn are an *‘ālam* and so are the rest of the species of creatures; each species is the *‘ālam* of its respective time. Therefore, its plural form is *‘ālamūn* and the singular form indicates the plural.⁹

The presence of the plural form but not the singular form, when it is in the *idāfa* construct, leads to two conclusions. The first is that the text refers to more than

8 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, (Shākir), 1:143.

9 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, (Shākir), 1:143.

the partial meaning; it refers to the collective significance: that is, the *‘ālamīn*, not the *‘ālam*. The second conclusion is that *‘ālamīn* is represented as being absolutely and always subjected to the Lord, meaning that it is in the possession and at the disposal of the Lord who created it. That is, the word *‘ālamīn* is never introduced in the Qur’ānic text as a subject (*fā’il*) or as a subject of a sentence (*mubtada’*).

These two conclusions reveal that even though Arabic is the language of reference for the Qur’ānic text, it transcends such referentiality, subjecting the elements of the Arabic language to the broader sense of the religious text. The words, “world” (*‘ālam*) or the “worlds” (*‘awālim*), as signified by the Arabic symbolic system, are those that are assimilated in the intellectual perceptions or conceptions of the native speakers and users of that language. The religious text works on integrating and assimilating these perceptions into a pattern of perceptions and conceptions beyond that obtained from the significances of that referential language. Therefore, this language should be subjected to the mechanisms of elimination—the absence of the signifier *‘ālam*—as well as exclusion—the use of the signifier *‘ālamīn* in the *iḍāfa* construct to the exclusion of the nominative case as in the case of subject (*fā’il*) or subject of a sentence (*mubtada’*). Through the two mechanisms of elimination and exclusion, the meaning is assimilated into a system that always places the signifier in the accusative (*naṣb*) and genitive (*jarr*) cases, after shifting it from the realm of the partial to that of the universal. Thus, the *‘ālamīn* (worlds) takes the place of the object indicating subordination and falling under constant control and dominance.

3 Semantic Relationship between *‘ālam* and *al-‘alāma*

Using the *‘ālamīn* (the worlds) always in an *iḍāfa* (genitive) construction, with the “Lord,” the Creator, and attributing “teaching” (*ta’līm*) to the Lord in His saying, “Who has taught (writing) by the pen” in the first verses revealed (i.e., the introduction to the religious language of the text), invites the reader to suppose that there is a semantic relationship between *‘ālam* (world) and *‘ilm* (knowledge). From this relationship, a relationship between the *‘ālam* and the *al-‘alāma* (sign) could be established, particularly in light of the potential nexus between the *‘ilm* and the *al-‘alāma* referred to in the preceding paragraph, in the minds of the early exegetes. I argue that an analysis of the first introductory text of the Qur’ān—the verses of the *sūra* of al-‘Alaq—is useful in establishing this relationship. In addition, this analysis of the first revealed text of the Qur’ān may reveal the mechanisms of assimilation and inclusion of the religious lan-

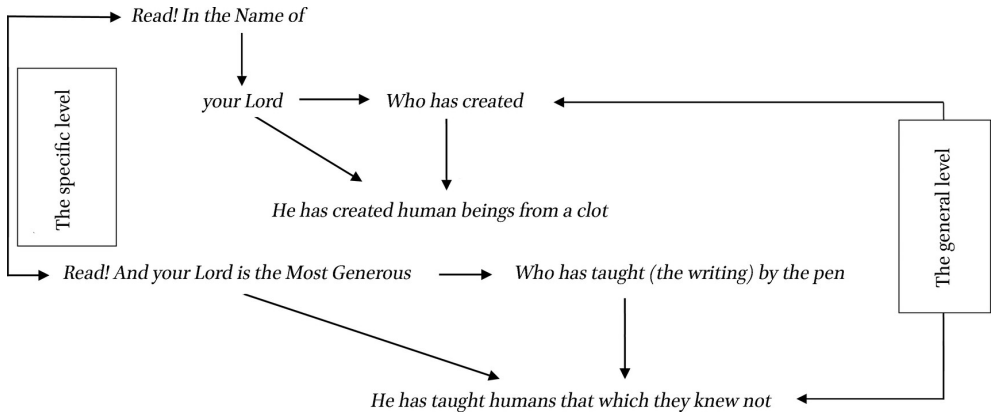


FIGURE 3.1 Example of levels in discourse

guage of the text with regard to the mother tongue from which the religious language emerged.

It is easy to notice that the text creates a semantic interrelationship between the words *al-rabb* (Lord), *al-khalq* (creation), and *al-ilm* (knowledge), and the underlying meaning of this signifier, *al-ilm*, which is "(conveying) knowledge." It is also easy to notice that the signifier "*al-rabb*" is included in an *idāfa* construction to the singular second-person pronoun, namely, *kāf* ("your") in this text (= *rabbika*), whereas the word "human being" (*insān*) is the direct object of the verb "created" (*khalaqa*) and is also the object of the verb "taught" (*allama*). These two observations lead to the conclusion that the "Lord" (*rabb*) in the *idāfa* construction, with the second-person singular pronoun, surpasses the specific underlying meaning in this *idāfa* construction to give the general meaning resulting from the description: "Who has created [all that exists]. He has created human being from a clot [a piece of thick coagulated blood]" (Qur'ān 96:1, 2). Thus, the discourse on the level of its deep structure is not limited to the second-person singular—as suggested by the surface structure—but it becomes an address to all humankind, as illustrated in Fig. 3.1.

However, this transition from the specific to the general relies on the process of a semantic shift in the signifiers "*rabb*" and "*khalaqa*" from the semantic level used in ordinary language to the deeper layer of meaning given in the Qur'ānic text, as an expression about the absolute. This "transition" or "shift" of meaning is made through "repetition," in the same way as the repetition of the verb "read" (*iqra*) leads to a shift from the specific to the general. The phrase "Who has created" (*alladhī khalaqa*) represents the ordinary level of the language, which shifts through repetition of the verb "created." Thus, the meaning becomes part of the language of the religion when the signifier "human being"

(*insān*) occurs as a direct object (*mafʿul bihī*). The semantic transfer of the verb “created” (*khalāqa*) repeats the meaning of the signifier “*rabb*” (Lord), and shifts it from its linguistic meaning to part of the religious language.

Linguistically, the term “*rabb*” in Arabic usage—as al-Ṭabarī stated—has three meanings:

The lord who is obeyed by his people is called a *rabb*; the man who fixes something is called a *rabb*; and the owner of something is called a *rabb*. The meaning of *rabb* may also have other meanings, but it usually refers back to one of these three meanings.¹⁰

The text goes beyond these three linguistic meanings through the modifying phrase “Who has created” (*alladhī khalāqa*). However, the verb “created” (*khalāqa*) needs to undergo a process of semantic transfer of the ordinary language to the language of the religious text, which is undertaken through the phrase “He has created human being” (*khalāq al-insān*).

Literally, the verb “create” (*khalāqa*) revolves in the semantic circle of “preparation,” “setting,” and “planning” for an imminent action. It represents the stage prior to “action,” “execution,” and “achievement.” Therefore, there is a semantic difference between “*khalq* (creation)” and “*fary* (n.),” which means implementation, achievement, and action that follows creation, preparation, and setting. It is evident that the original usage of the two verbs “creat(ed)” and “*fara* (v.)” was in the field of industry and treating leather with a particular color, and then the meaning was transferred from the *ḥaqīqa* (literal) to *majāz* (figurative) meaning in linguistic usage before its Qurʾānic usage.

In the context of semantic development, this figurative usage transformed into an obsolete *majāz* (i.e., it returned to the circle of the literal, non-figurative usage). This usage occurs in the Qurʾān, in the verse where Jesus addresses his people: “I will fashion (*akhlūq*) for you out of clay a figure like that of a bird, and will breathe into it, and it will become a bird by Allah’s leave” (3:49) and in the verse where Allah addresses Jesus, saying, “and when you fashioned (*takhlūq*) out of clay a figure like that of a bird” (5:110). It also occurs in other verses stating that falsehood is “created, i.e., invented,” and that people worship what “they created with their own hands,” knowing that al-Ṭabarī interpreted “*khalāqa* (created)” in these Qurʾānic verses as meaning “fashion” (*taṣwīr*).¹¹

10 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, (Shākir), 1:143141–142.

11 See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, (Shākir), 11:215.

This Qur'ānic text under analysis (from the *sūra* of al-'Alaq) transcends this literal indication through its repetition of the verb “*khalāqa*” and by positioning “human being” as the object of the verb in the verse that reads, “He has created human being from a clot.” In this way, the meaning of the verb transfers from the literal to the contextual level. Here, exegetes misinterpreted the text, either because they did not realize that these verses are the first introductory verses of the Qur'ān or because they did not mention this fact when they interpreted the text. For when the exegete handles the text (i.e., the Qur'ān) in the order it is recited, they reach the *sūra* of al-'Alaq toward the end of the Qur'ān. By then, the denotations imparted by the religious phraseology have completely prevailed in their minds, and thus, they have become incapable of noticing the shift from “Who has created” to “He has created human being from a clot.” Al-Zamakhsharī also misinterpreted it because he inquired:

If you ask how He [Allah] says “created” without mentioning its direct object, and then says, “He has created human being” [stating the object], I will reply that it is either one of two interpretations. It could be that the verb has no object [i.e., it is intransitive]. This means that it is He (Exalted be He) alone Who made the creation and there is no Creator besides Him. Or it could be that the verb has an [implicit] object, with the sentence construed as meaning “He has created everything.” This covers all created objects, and since it is absolute, no single created object is more likely to be the specific object than any other object. Allah's saying, “He has created human being” specifically mentions human being among the creatures, because revelation was sent to humankind as the most honoured creatures on earth. It is possible that the meaning [of “has created”] is “He Who has created human being,” in the same way Allah said, “The Most Gracious [Allah]! [It is He Who] has taught [you, humankind] the Qur'ān [by His Mercy]; [Who] has created human being” (55:1–3). Accordingly, the implicit object in “[Who] has created” is later stated in “He has created human being,” in glorification of the creation of humans and as an indication of their wonderful nature.¹²

Al-Zamakhsharī argued that the absence of the object of the verb implies general and *absolute* significance, given that the omission of the object and treating the transitive verb as if it were intransitive is for the purpose of

12 Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf 'an Ḥaqā'iq al-Tanzīl wa 'Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Ta'wīl* (Egypt: Muṣṭafa al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī Bookshop, 1966), 4:270; also see Nizām al-Dīn al-Naysābūrī, *Tafsīr Gharā'ib al-Qur'ān wa-Raghā'ib al-Furqān*, in the commentary on al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-Bayān* (al-Rayyān), 30:124–125.

affirming the meaning of the verb itself for the object in an *absolute* and general manner. As such, the meaning would be that the object is definitely covered by the action [of creation] or that they [humans] can only exist through it [creation]. ... Hence, the verb is intransitive, for if it were transitive, it would miss this purpose, and the meaning would change.¹³

The repetition in the verse, “He has created human being from a clot [a piece of thick coagulated blood]” is meant to specify the meaning, to transfer it from its former generality to specificity, and to honor humans by mentioning them.

The specificity meant by al-Zamakhsharī is a way of limiting the meaning, since it moves within the boundaries of rhetorical concepts set down by al-Jurjānī. Specificity here is one of the mechanisms of shifting language meanings from its level of pragmatic usage outside the religious text to the specific level used only in the religion. By means of this specification, the text encompasses the grammar of the language within its own special grammar on all levels. It is this specification that transfers the whole discourse from the level of addressing the individual to the level of addressing humanity, which occurs through repetition, which represents a central mechanism in this introductory text.

On the level of discourse surface structure, Prophet Muḥammad, the addressee in the text, realizes that it is “his Lord” who is ordering him to read. The significance of such specificity is realized only by considering the contextual condition of that orphan addressee—who consequently had no “lord”—in a patriarchal society in which affiliation was biased toward paternal relatives, which used to identify the degree of integration and inclusion in the society and determined social value and status. Thus, the text gradually develops through the language, in its sociological significance through the social and historical, toward the absolute, and from the boundaries of ordinary language to the horizons of the language of the religious text, step by step: “Who has created [all that exists]; [He] has created human being from a clot.” Such a semantic development of the meaning of the “Lord” (*rabb*) into the descriptive level of “[He] has created human being,” which implicitly refers to the creation of the world, appears to be in a state of regress by repeating the verb “read” and repeating the *iḍāfa* (genitive) construction in “And your Lord.” However, this regress is for the purpose of providing more semantic buildup, and for a more distant leap on the level of “unleashing” the meanings. This leap is made through the superlative adjective “the Most Generous” (*al-akram*), which brings other lords

13 al-Jurjānī, *Dalā'il al-I'jāz*, 54, 155.

to mind by virtue of just its morphological significance (i.e., its implicit meaning). However, this recalling is for the purpose of excluding and rejecting all other lords, which is indicated by using the definite article “*al-* (the)” and not employing the *idāfa* construction. Here, “the Most Generous” gains its *absolute* significance through the modifier “Who has taught [writing] by the pen; [He] has taught human being that which he knew not” (Qur’ān 96:4, 5). It is this modifier that develops the meaning of “the Most Generous” from the range of ordinary language semantics by incorporating it into the semantic system of the text.

Accordingly, the two meanings of “created” (*khalāq*) and “taught” (*‘allama*) intertwine at the conclusion of the text by sharing the syntactic structure because the pronoun referring to “Lord” (*rabb*) is a subject for both verbs, just as the signifier “human being” (*insān*) is an object for both. If the creation of the world is connoted through the creation of human being, explicit reference to the world emerges in the text through the two signifiers “clot,” of which humans are created, and the “pen” (*qalam*) with which humans learn. The text could refer to the world from two perspectives: the first is the perspective of the free world in its fetal shape of the clot, and the second is the perspective of the world in the form of the inanimate object, the pen. These two perspectives display the “world” from two parallel levels with regard to the definition of “the Lord,” “the Creator,” and “the Teacher.” These two levels are the “created” world and the “signifying” world, simultaneously.

If the first verses of the *sūra* of al-‘Alaq represent the introductory part of the larger holistic text, the Qur’ān, then, it is normal to consider the meanings that this introductory text carries as being the elementary semantic seeds that will grow and proliferate within the structure of the holistic text. Hence, we can claim that the description “the Most Generous” represents the seed of differentiation that distinguishes the nature of Allah from the nature of the human in the language of religion. However, this distinction does not preclude some aspects of overlapping and resemblance imposed by the nature of the language, as it bears the burden of expressing about the absolute, whereas in its original structure (i.e., in terms of being a sociocultural phenomenon), it is a means of expressing that which is relative. This dual, paired, complex dimension in the nature of language—when it shifts from one level to another—is latent in the signifier “the Most Generous,” first, in terms of its morphological form, which suggests comparison, and second, in terms of its positive meaning, which has a social dimension.

We can find in the dual indication of this “signifier”—the Most Generous—in the introductory text, the first seed carrying the dimension of the divine “attributes” in the text as a whole. The indication ranges between the two

poles of *tanzīh* (emphasis on God's transcendence) and *tashbīh* (emphasis on anthropomorphism), from which Islamic thought drew, based on the binary of *muḥkam* (perspicuous/decisive) and *mutashābih* (ambiguous/allegorical) as stated in Verse 7 in the *sūra* of Āl 'Imran. This verse is semantically controversial for two reasons: one is the problem of identifying verses that are *muḥkam* (decisive, legislative, independent Qur'ānic verses, which are closed to interpretation) and *mutashābih* (ambiguous verses, which are open to more than one interpretation or whose meaning is known only to Allah); and the other is the problem of determining the nature of the linguistic structure in terms of *'atf* (coordinating conjunctions) and *isti'nāf* (commencement of a new sentence) in Allah's saying: "And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say, 'We believe in it; all of them [clear and unclear verses] are from our Lord.'" (Qur'an 3:7).¹⁴

However, if the meaning of "the Most Generous" (*al-akram*) inclines toward indicating anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) and only implies *tanzīh* (transcendence), then, the two indications of "Who has created" and "Who has taught" affirm the aspect of *tanzīh*. This is so because "human being" (*insān*) is an object to both verbs on a syntactic level, in which subject and object are linguistically different and the Creator and the created are existentially different. This is the distinction based on the differentiation between "Allah" and "human being." This distinction would later represent the focal point of the transcendentalist (*tanzīhī*) thought in the context of the development of the Islamic thought (*al-wa'y*). The accusative position (object) of "human" means that the "world" is in the accusative position as well, given that its creation comes under the creation of the human. The absence of the signifier "*al-'ālamīn* (the worlds)" in this introductory text concerns only the level of surface structure, since it is present through the signifiers "*al-'alaq* (clot)" and "*qalam* (pen)."

If we can describe this introductory text as an "identification card," is it not clear that this card includes the concept of *al-'ālamīn* in an object (*maf'ūliyya*) relation with the Lord, and also includes the implicit relation between the *'ālam* (world) and the *'alāma* (sign) by combing the two verbs "created" (*khalāqa*) and "taught" (*'allama*)? This implicit relation is disclosed in the structure of almost the entire Qur'ānic text. Such a structure transfers the entire world into verses (*āyāt*) and signs (*'alāmāt*), including heaven, the earth, planets,

14 I have analyzed this problematic question in more than one study; see, for example, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *al-Ittijāh al-'Aqlī fī al-Tafsīr: Dirāsa fī Qaḍīyyat al-Majāz fī al-Qur'ān Inda al-Mu'tazila*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Tanwīr, 1993), 141–146, 164–190; also see Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *Mafhūm al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsa fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, 1993), 261.

plants, animals, inanimate objects, or in Ibn 'Abbās's words, as reported by al-Ṭabarī, "all the heavens and that which is in them, all the earths and that which is on them, and whatever is in between them, including that which is known and that which is not."

It is not only the world that turns into a sign (*ʿalāma*), but also the entire human history, including the stories of the ancient people and the struggle of prophets and messengers with their people, becoming a sign embodying the eternal conflict between "truth" and "falsehood," and between "belief" and "disbelief." The patterns of the two signs—the universe and history—entwine by distinguishing between two types of humankind: those who are able to comprehend cosmic signs, citing them as evidence for the existence of the "Creator," enter the fold of "faith," and enjoy salvation in the hereafter; and those who fail to comprehend these signs, and so fall into the pit of "denying" and fighting the prophets and messengers, and will plunge into the abyss of the "fire," being doomed to torture in the hereafter. This is not surprising! Is Allah (Glorified be He) not, "the Lord of the worlds," the "Creator," and the "Teacher" of human beings through the cosmic signs which He made as clear proofs of His Essence?

4 Ultimate Objective of Existence and Paramount Purpose of Creation

The first verses of the *sūra* of al-Raḥmān run parallel to the introductory text analyzed in the previous section because they repeat Allah's saying, "He created human being" and "He taught him eloquent speech" (i.e., they repeat the two processes of creation and teaching and make a connection between them and the teaching of the Qur'ān, thereby giving precedence to teaching the Qur'ān). This point drew the attention of al-Zamakhsharī, who viewed this order as leading to the following conclusions, which are highly significant from the perspective of the current approach to the Qur'ān. Al-Zamakhsharī opined that placing Allah's saying, "He has taught [you, humankind] the Qur'ān (by His Mercy)" before His saying, "He created human being" and "He taught him eloquent speech," is a case of putting the most important matter first, which is the most important matter for which humans are created and for which they are taught eloquent speech. "Religion" (*dīn*) is the purpose of creation, and it was revealed to teach humans and to bring them to life. The "Qur'ān," in relation to religion, is the most important bounty and blessing as well as the greatest revelation since it is the greatest divine book and the standard for all such books. It confirms what is stated in them. Allah delays mentioning the creation of the human being until after the Qur'ān is mentioned, to emphasize that humans

were created to follow the religion and understand His revelation. This is the very purpose of their creation. It appears as if the purpose of their creation is set down in advance. Then, He (Exalted be He) mentions that which distinguishes humans from the rest of living creatures, namely “eloquent speech,” which is the clear logical utterance that expresses one’s thoughts.¹⁵

What is noticeable here is the significance of prepositioning (*taqdīm*), which was highlighted by al-Zamakhsharī. This significance makes the “worship” of Allah, the One and the Creator, the ultimate objective of existence and the paramount purpose of creation. This purpose is deduced by the Mu‘tazilīs in general—and al-Zamakhsharī is one of them—through examination of the entire Qur’ānic text. They specifically focus on Allah’s saying, “And I created not the jinn and humankind except that they should worship Me [Alone]” (Qur’ān 51:56).¹⁶ If the worship of God is the purpose of human existence, teaching the Qur’ān and teaching eloquent speech should encompass the creation of humans who occupy a central position between “teaching (the Qur’ān),” which is the paramount purpose and ultimate objective, and “teaching (eloquent speech),” which is the means, mechanism, and medium through which that objective is fulfilled. This teaching, as a means, mechanism, and medium, is stressed in another Qur’ānic text that pertains to the issue of the “*khilāfa* (vicegerency).” Being taught was the asset with which Allah favored “Adam” over the angels. When the angels objected to Allah’s decision to appoint Adam’s descendants—who would spread corruption and shed blood—as His vicegerents on earth, the key attribute that justified Adam’s role was that Allah had taught him the names:

And He taught Adam all the names [of everything], then He showed them to the angels and said, “Tell Me the names of these if you are truthful.” They [angels] said, “Glory be to You, we have no knowledge except what you have taught us. Verily, it is You Who is the All-Knower, the All-Wise.”

Qur’ān 2:31–32

This parallelism between the beginning of the *sūra* of al-Raḥmān and the introductory text of the Qur’ān extends to the frequently repeated verse in the *sūra*, namely, “Then which of the Blessings of your Lord will you both [jinn and humans] deny?” This phrase is repeated 31 times in this 78-verse *sūra*. This

¹⁵ al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 4:43.

¹⁶ See the discussion of the interpretation of this verse in Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *al-Ittijāh*, 221–222.

repetition places the focus on the noun “Lord” (*rabb*), which is in an *iḍāfa* construction with the second-person dual pronoun (*kumā = rabb + kumā*), whereas it is in an *iḍāfa* construction in the *sūra* of al-‘Alaq, with the second-person singular pronoun (*ka = rabb + ka*). This means that the *sūra* of al-Raḥmān shifts the address from the specific to the general, or from implicit generality on the deep level structure in the *sūra* of al-‘Alaq to explicit generality in this *sūra*. The address in this *sūra* is essentially directed to the people of Mecca,¹⁷ even though the second-person singular pronoun (*ka = your*) is used in this *sūra*—which is discussed in more detail later—in the two verses (Qur’ān 55:27, 78): “And the Face of your Lord full of Majesty and Honor will remain forever” and “Blessed be the Name of your Lord [Allah], the Owner of Majesty and Honor.”

Before highlighting the significance of the second-person singular pronoun (+*ka*) in the context of the overwhelming presence of the second-person dual pronoun (+*kumā*), this dual form must be considered. Exegetes examined and interpreted it carefully in a way that suggests that the antecedent of the dual pronoun is either two, “the jinn and humankind” (*al-thaqalayn*), or just one, based on the Arab tradition of addressing a singular person using the dual pronoun. Further, al-Ṭabarī has covered these interpretations in his exegesis in which he identified the jinn and humankind as the focal referent in the address:

If it is asked how the saying, “Then which of the blessings of your Lord will you both deny?” is in the dual while only one was addressed at the beginning of the speech, namely the human, the reply will be that the reference in Allah’s saying, “Then which of the Blessings of your Lord will you both deny?” is made to the human and jinn, as evidenced by the next verse which reads, “He created human being [Adam] from clay like the clay of pottery. And the jinn, He created from a smokeless flame of fire” (55:14). Here, the addressees are two while it was only one at the beginning since it was a tradition of the Arabs to address one person in the dual form while only one is meant.¹⁸

17 al-Raḥmān is a Meccan, and not a Medinan *sūra*, contrary to what is stated in the Egyptian copies of the Qur’ān. See the first category, 17, in al-Suyūṭī’s, *al-Itqān fi ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, in which he offered additional textual proofs, such as the story of the jinn in Mecca and Asmā’ bint Abū Bakr hearing the Prophet (pbuh) recite: “Then which of the Blessings of your Lord will you both (jinn and men) deny?” while praying toward the corner of the Ka’ba before the revelation of Allah’s, saying: “Therefore proclaim openly (Allah’s Message, Islamic monotheism) that which you are commanded, and turn away from *al-mushrikūn* (polytheists, idolaters, and disbelievers)” (Qur’ān 15:94), which is indisputably a Meccan *sūra*.

18 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān* (al-Rayyān), 27:73.

Here, it is necessary to refer to al-Ṭabarī's attempt to interpret this stylistic phenomenon by tracing it back to the "language [usage] of the Arabs," without realizing its significance in the context of the *sūra* in general, which will be discussed. In this context, it is to be noted that al-Zamakhsharī regarded the word *an'ām* (creatures) in Allah's saying, "And the earth, He has put down [laid] for the creatures" (Qur'ān 55:10), as the focal referent, making the address in the *sūra* not only to the jinn and the humankind—who are also referred to as the *thaqalayn*—but also to "any creature on earth." Accordingly, the *thaqalayn* are addressed in the dual form although reference is made to all creatures. Thus, the address is for the "*thaqalayn*, as indicated by the term 'the creatures.'¹⁹

In my view, the use of the second-person pronoun in the dual form—apart from its structural accordance with the address to humankind and jinn, and with the threat in His saying, "We shall attend to you, O you two (jinn and humans)!"—has two essential and significant roles. The first entails fitting in with the rhythmical structure of the *sūra*, which is identical to the name of the *sūra* and its opening verse, "*al-Raḥmān* (The Most Gracious [Allah]!)." This structure appears not to be disrupted except in the following two verses: "He created human being [Adam] from sounding clay like the clay of pottery. And the jinn, He created from a smokeless flame of fire (*nār*)."²⁰ Nevertheless, such disruption is not that noticeable and does not have a great effect, because the sound of the *alif mamdūda* (elongated *alif*) prevails over the *rā'* in the word "*nār*," especially when the reader pauses, which prevents the voicing of the sound of the recurring *rā'*. The letter *rā'* is not one of the letters of *qalqala* (for which the friction of the consonant sound ends in a strong trembling noise)—the *qalqala* letters in Arabic are *qāf*, *tā'*, *bā'*, *jīm*, and *dāl*—which are voiced even if they have a *sukūn* (absence of a vowel), and therefore, pausing on it (*rā'*) hides its nature.

However, the issue of "adjusting the rhythm" is not merely an external feature, but also affects the meaning, which draws our attention to the second role played by the dual form. Here, we should go back to the issue of "the language of the Arabs [or traditional classical usage]" raised by al-Ṭabarī:

"The Arabic imperative form is the same for the singular and the plural, as well as for the dual." There is no need here to cite evidence for this, because such a fact is well-known in the poetry of pre-Islamic era and in particular in certain parts of the standard poem of the pre-Islamic era. ... This justification is verified by the threat made to the deniers in the Qur'ān

19 al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 4:44–45.

that Allah will deal with each one of them individually, each in isolation from the “[rest of the] group,” since the group, to the Arabs, represented values of “belonging” and “protection.”²⁰

Thus, the text in its use of this dual form for the second-person pronoun, on the surface, represents an imitation of linguistic tradition that has its own social and cultural significance. However, the dual number is a morphological form because, here, this pronoun addresses the jinn and humankind, meaning the *thaqalayn* or *al-an'ām* (all creatures). If it happens to be typically common in a language to address a singular using the dual form, it is uncommon to address the plural using the dual form. Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of the dual form for the second-person pronoun is merely customary on the surface, according to common Arab usage. Given that it is the people of Mecca who are addressed here, the dual form, which combines the jinn and humankind, semantically integrates the people of Mecca in a wider context than what covers their temporal and spatial existence. In other words, the actual addressees are concealed in the universal addressees, and referred to once as humankind and jinn and at other times as the *thaqalayn*. Through this process of concealment, the significance of the text transcends the level of the actual, historical, and the current, transferring into a universal discourse addressing all universal receivers, in general.

However, this “concealment” (= making absent) does not negate the “presence” status indicated in the use of the second-person pronoun and the dual form, which refers to the individuals in the structure of the mother tongue. The dual form is regarded as a “middle link” between the created “human,” which was mentioned at the beginning of the *sūra*, to whom “The Most Gracious” taught the Qur'ān and eloquent speech, and the addressed “group” who are

20 See, for this point, the following texts and verses:

And We shall inherit from him (at his death) all that he talks of (i.e., wealth and children which We have bestowed upon him in this world), and he shall come to Us alone. (Qur'ān 19:80)

And every one of them will come to Him alone on the Day of Resurrection (without any helper, or protector or defender). (Qur'ān 19:95)

And truly you have come unto Us alone (without wealth, companions or anything else) as We created you the first time. (Qur'ān 6:94)

Leave Me Alone (to deal) with whom I created alone (without any wealth or children etc., i.e., al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra al-Makhzūmī)! (Qur'ān 74:11)

That Day a man shall flee from his brother, and from his mother and his father, and from his wife and his children. Each one of them, that Day, will have enough concern (of his own) to make him indifferent to the others. (Qur'ān 80:34–37)

referred to by the second-person plural pronoun in His saying: “In order that you [O group] may not transgress [the due] balance. And observe [O group] the weight with equity and do not make the balance deficient” (Qur’ān 55:7, 8). Such a form creates a balance between the absence/presence relationships in the *sūra* and releases the meaning from the constraints of the current and the individual, enabling it to indicate a universal/total (i.e., the group), regardless of its morphological form.

The validity of this analysis is highlighted by the second-person singular pronoun, as already stated, in Verses 27 and 78 in two important sections of the *sūra*: The first section concludes the enumeration of Divine bounties, which begin with “teaching the Qur’ān,” creating the human being; covering, in snapshots, the sun and the moon, the stars and trees, heaven and the earth, the fruits, date palms, and grain having husks; and then returning to creating humans and jinn, and finally covering the releasing of the two seas, and the pearls and corals coming out of them (the seas), and the ships with their sails raised high in the seas. This section is concluded with His saying, “Whatever is on it [the earth] will perish. And the Face of your Lord full of Majesty and Honor will remain forever” (Qur’ān 55:27). This verse was regarded as a conclusion and an introduction to the shift toward talking about the hereafter, what occurs there, and the resulting punishment and bliss. Again, the verse, with its second-person singular pronoun (your Lord), is repeated at the end of the *sūra* reporting that the sinners who deny the Lord will abide eternally in the fire and the truthful believers will abide eternally in bliss: “Blessed be the Name of your Lord [Allah], the Owner of Majesty and Honor” (Qur’ān 55:78).

It is worth noting as well that the second-person pronoun referred to here has the same case as in the *sūra* of al-‘Alaq (i.e., the genitive case), with the word “Lord” as its modifier. Although the noun “*al-Raḥmān* (*the Most Gracious*)” linguistically dominates the whole *sūra* as the subject, at least until Verse 12, and is rhythmically overwhelming, the presence of the noun “Lord” (with the dual pronoun, *kumā*) is repeated 31 times in the repeated verse that represents the focus of the discourse in the *sūra*, namely, “Then which of the Blessings of your Lord will you both (jinn and men) deny?”. The noun “Lord” is also stated once, with “the two easts (places of sunrise during early summer and early winter) and the two wests (places of sunset during early summer and early winter)” as modifiers, in Verse 17. This heavy presence of the noun “Lord” with the modifiers in the singular, dual, and plural forms mean that the *sūra* of al-Raḥmān represents the opening of the implicit bounded meaning in the *sūra* of al-‘Alaq on all levels. The *sūra* of al-Raḥmān begins with the creation of humankind and teaching them eloquent speech. This means that it begins with the identification card that was mentioned previously, in addition to the objective and

purpose of creation, which is the worship of Allah. However, it invites enumeration of cosmic bounties and blessings.

The ever-repeated rhetorical (interrogative) question denoting rejection, “Then which of the Blessings of your Lord will you both (jinn and humans) deny?” separates each blessing from the following one until they all reach “extinction.” If extinction is the fate of all the blessings enumerated in the *sūra*, and also the fate of all “creatures” for whom the land was laid down, then the Everlasting and the Eternal One is the Grantor of all these blessings. Accordingly, the *sūra* instructs the recipient not to engage fully or be preoccupied with these blessings per se (i.e., their beneficial aspect) because one should be preoccupied with their being indications of the presence of the Ever-Living, the Everlasting, and the Eternal. If all these blessings—or the examples mentioned in the *sūra*—prostrate to their Creator and Originator, humans should rather go beyond being preoccupied with them per se to ponder about the Grantor of blessings, for these blessings are only signs and indications of His presence.

If these bounties and blessings are merely signs, they will normally vanish when the signified appears from behind the signs with His noble face, displaying His majesty. What is the need for signs when life perishes and the world vanishes? The signs are made for reading, contemplation, pondering, and moving from the “signifier” to the “signified.” When the “signified” appears, there is no longer any need for signs, for the appearance of the “signified” will be autonomous, and thus, it will be said to the denier who did not consider the signs well, “Indeed, you were heedless of this. Now We have removed from you your covering, and sharp is your sight this Day!” (Qur’ān 50:22). For this reason, the *sūra* moves after this section to the section introducing challenge and threat, pointing out the fate of the deniers and that of the believers. Further, the description of bliss in the *sūra* is long compared with the description of torture. This is because the *sūra* focuses on the challenge and threat to the people of Mecca, and the context of the religious phraseology articulates challenge and threat to the *thaqalayn* (i.e., the assembly of the jinn and humankind). Here, at the beginning of the description of torture and bliss, and in the context concerning challenge and threat in particular, the plural and the dual pronouns combine in such a way as to reveal the attempt in the language of the verse (religious phraseology) to leave out the historical and the real and to express the absolute and the total on all levels:

Whosoever is in the heavens and on earth begs [its needs from] Him.

Every day He is [engaged] in some affair [such as giving honor or disgrace, life or death, etc.].! (Third-person plural) [Qur’ān 55:29]

Then which of the Blessings of your Lord will you both [jinn and men] deny? (Second-person dual) [Qurʾān 55:30]

We shall attend to you, O you two classes [jinn and humans]! (Second-person dual) [Qurʾān 55:31].

Then which of the Blessings of your Lord will you both [jinn and humans] deny? (Second-person dual) [Qurʾān 55:32].

O assembly of jinn and humans! If you have power to pass beyond the zones of the heavens and the earth, then pass beyond [them]! But you will never be able to pass them, except with authority [from Allah]! (Second-person plural) [Qurʾān 55:33]

Then which of the Blessings of your Lord will you both [jinn and humans] deny? (Second-person dual) [Qurʾān 55:34].

There will be sent against you both smokeless flames of fire and [molten] brass, and you will not be able to defend yourselves (Second-person dual) [Qurʾān 55:35].

This context corresponds to the context of the rest of the *sūra* of al-ʿAlaq, which is not discussed in the previous paragraph, in terms of threat, which accounts for the relationship between the two *sūras*. The verses in the *sūra* of al-ʿAlaq that have not been discussed are general in that they do not explicitly, whether realistically or historically, mention the case of the transgressing and denying “man,” who forbids prayer, similarly threatening such a person, “Nay! If he ceases not, We will catch him by the forelock—a lying, sinful forelock! Then let him call upon his council (of helpers). We will call out the guards of Hell [to deal with him]!” (Qurʾān 96:15–18).

Correspondence between the two *sūras* on the levels analyzed makes the *sūra* of al-Raḥmān a model representing the transfer of bounties and blessings implied in the *sūra* of al-ʿAlaq into signs. It is true that the signifier “*āya* (sign)” is not used in the *sūra*, but the link between the creation of humans and teaching them the Qurʾān and eloquent speech, and between enumerating the bounties and blessings in the context of denouncing their denial and pointing out its grave consequences, allows us to claim that the *sūra* refers to the bounties as signs. In addition, it may not be an exaggeration to say that the signs in the *sūra* are not limited to the bounties and cosmic signs, for the *sūra* refers to the creation of humans as a sign and also to the Qurʾān as a sign. All such signs are given by “*al-Raḥmān* (the Most Gracious),” whose presence is evident through them in different forms and in reciprocal relationships with the “Lord” on several occasions. However, the sign of “man”—the link between the two *sūras* of al-ʿAlaq and al-Raḥmān—is central because it is the only sign that explains the reason for the presence of all other signs; when the reading of all the signs is

successful, the consequence will be eternal pleasure; but in case of failure and denial, the consequence will be punishment.

Source

Naşr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, "Al-Qur'ān: Al-'Ālam bi Waşfihi 'Alāma," in *al-Naşş, al-Sulta, al-Ḥaqīqa: al-Fikr al-Dīnī bayna Irādat al-Ma'rifa wa Irādat al-Haymana*, al-Dār al-Bayḍā': al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabī, 1995, 213–238.

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Prophetic Reading of the World

Muhammad Mojtahed Shabestari

About the Author¹

Muhammad Mojtahed Shabestari is widely regarded as one of Iran's most important religious reformists of recent decades. He is especially known for his work on rethinking the interpretation of the Qur'an. Shabestari was born in 1936 in Shabestar, near Tabriz, and studied in the seminaries of Qom during 1950–1968, where he earned a degree in *Ijtihad*. His intellectual path changed significantly in the 1970s when he led the Shi'i Islamic Centre in Berlin. In Germany, Shabestari became familiar with German philosophy and Protestant theology—in particular, the works of Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and all had a lasting influence on his thought.

Shabestari supported the 1979 Islamic Revolution and was elected to Iran's first parliament. However, he soon left politics and turned his attention to teaching and writing. By the late 1980s, he was a professor of Islamic philosophy at the University of Tehran. He became known for his critical approach to traditional Islamic thought, particularly for challenging the idea that only religious authorities can interpret the Qur'an and other religious sources.

1 Important works by Muhammad Mojtahed Shabestari include *Iman va Azadi* (Tehran: Tarh-e No, 1997); *Hermenutik, Kitab va Sonnat* (Tehran: Tarh-e No, 2000); *Ta'amolati dar Qer'at-e Ensani az Din* (Tehran: Tarh-e No, 2004); *Naqd bar Qer'at-e Rasmī az Din: Bohranha, Chalesha va Rāh-e ḥal-hā* (Tehran: Tarh-e No, 2005); “Cherā bayad Andisheh-e Dini ra Naqd Kard?,” *Kiyan*, no. 18 (1994): 16–21. Major studies about his thought include those of Farzin Vahdat, “Post-Revolutionary Islamic Discourses on Modernity in Iran: Expansion and Contraction of Human Subjectivity,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35 (2003): 599–631; Constance Arminjon, “Introducing Philosophical Hermeneutics in Islam: Shabestari, from the Critique of Exegetical Methods to the Theory of the Historicity of the Quran,” *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 236, no. 1 (2019): 121–149; Ali Akbar and Abdullah Saeed, “Muhammad Mojtahed Shabestari,” in *Contemporary Approaches to the Qur'an and Its Interpretation in Iran* (London: Routledge, 2024), 75–88; Mansooreh Khalilizand, “Revelation, Prophetic Reading of the World, and the End of Fiqh: Shabestari's Hermeneutical Approach to the Qur'an,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Islamic Thought*, eds. Sylvain Camilleri and Selami Varlik (Cham: Springer, 2022), 123–132; and Ezra Tzfadya, “Retrieving the Foundations and Future of Islamic Modernism: Rahman and Shabestari on Hermeneutics, Prophetic Epistemology, and the Modern Islamic State,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Islamic Thought*, eds. Sylvain Camilleri and Selami Varlik (Cham: Springer, 2022), 133–144.

Shabestari's approach to the Qur'an is shaped by modern hermeneutics. Similarly to many other Muslim thinkers of the period, he strongly emphasizes the historical context in which the Qur'an was revealed. He argues that Revelation should not be regarded as a fixed legal code, but rather as moral and spiritual guidance, and that the Qur'an must be interpreted afresh in each era. He believes that meaning emerges through human understanding, which can change over time. He expresses this view clearly in *Hermenütik, Kitāb va Sonnat* (2000), in which he critiques rigid interpretations of scripture. In *Ta'amolāti dar Qerā'at-e Ensāni az Dīn* (2004), he calls for a reading of religion that is centered on human experience, reason, and freedom. His other key works include *Imān va Azādī* (1997) and *Naqdī bar Qerā'at-e Rasmī az Dīn* (2005). These two works question the role of state-endorsed religious interpretations.

His ideas have generated considerable debate among scholars. Farzin Vahdat has examined his views on modernity. Constance Arminjon has written extensively about his use of hermeneutics, especially his belief in the historicity of the Qur'an. More recently, Ezra Tzfadya, who has compared Shabestari's thought with that of Fazlur Rahman, showed how both rethink Islamic modernism. In sum, Shabestari's work continues to influence debates on how Muslims today understand their faith and interpret their sacred texts.



1 Introduction

If one reads the Qur'an as a historical text, one can conclude that the claim of the Prophet, whose prophecy has been spoken of in the text, is that the words he conveys to his immediate addressees and asks them to accept have a Divine origin, although they were at the same time his own speech. The Prophet does not claim that the text is not his own words. It should be noted that "human speech" does not only take the form of "speech" by its "meanings," just as speech does not only take shape by its words (*alfāz*). Human speech includes a combination of both meanings and words, which arises within a system of statements, conventionally referred to as language. If one attributes only "meanings" (contents) or only the "outer words" to human speech, this does not fulfill its characteristics. When the Prophet accepts that the words uttered by him are his own words, he accepts that its meanings and words are both referring to him and that he is the speaker. However, his claim is that he did not decide to utter the words of the Qur'an. The Prophet's experience was that

God chose him (Qurʾān 2:213; 62:2) and that he received God's message through the process, which is referred to as *wahy* (Revelation).² He could speak to his audience (when he read the Qurʾān) because God enabled him to speak; that is, God enabled him to express meaningful sentences. Therefore, whatever the Prophet iterated or exists in the text are the verses and signs of God. Since the words of the Qurʾān originated from Him, the verses refer to Him and display His existence.

It can be concluded from the verses of the Qurʾān that the Prophet's claim concerning the verses was similar to that explained in the previous paragraph. The Prophet did not claim that the words and meanings of the Qurʾān's verses came from God and that he only read them for his audiences, which is the case with a Qurʾānic reciter, who does not play any role in the creation of the words and meanings of the Qurʾān and only recites the verses, or as is the case with an audio channel that only transmits voices to its addressees. I will provide some historical examples from the Qurʾān to determine the Prophet's position regarding the Qurʾān's speech.

Anyone who reads the Qurʾān as a historical text (*matn-e tārikhī*) can clearly understand that there was a dialogical relationship, understandable to both sides, between the Prophet and his community. The Prophet, during the 23 years of his prophetic mission, consistently asked the people of Ḥijāz, including the idolaters, Jews, and Christians, to believe in his prophecy and the oneness of God, and reasoned against their ideas and activities in various ways with determination and continuous effort. In the Qurʾānic verses that refer to the Prophet's reasoning against his opponents, he used a range of arguments. He asked his opponents to pay attention to natural and historical events, he expressed the fate of other communities and the prophets of past eras, and articulated the virtues of certain moral behaviors through various examples, parables, and stories. By accepting the Prophet's message, following his commands, and abstaining from what he prohibited, great changes appeared in the individual and social life of the people of the Ḥijāz (to the extent that one can claim that it ultimately led to the emergence of a new culture and civilization). Considering these historical realities, a question arises: Is it possible to imagine that these results were the product of the words uttered by a human being who did not consider them to be his own speech and did not attribute their words and meanings to himself? It should be asked whether the words of the Qurʾān could have been understandable to the Prophet's addressees had he attributed

² The Qurʾān acknowledges in more than 10 verses that revelation (*wahy*) was the ultimate origin of the mission of prophets, including the Prophet of Islam.

them to another source. Thinking about how human beings produce speech or how they communicate with each other through language demonstrates that if the Prophet of Islam introduced himself as a mouthpiece or a recording channel, whose task was limited to transferring a series of sounds to its listeners, in a way that he had only heard them or that an angel iterated them for him, his speech could not have been understandable to his addressees and would have had no meaning for them. Therefore, his words could not have formed a basis for his prophetic mission and the historical dialogue that resulted from it. In such a case, a conversation or mutual understanding between the Prophet and his community would have been impossible. It is necessary to pay attention to the definition of language from a philosophical point of view because it is only by presenting such a definition that a clearer picture will emerge of speech, dialogue, and understanding. I present here a philosophical definition of language that has many supporters among philosophers of language. This definition contributes to understanding the issue. It highlights the nature of language (*māhiyat-e zabān*) and expresses its concrete elements. In this regard, according to the German philosopher Albert Keller:

Language consists of a system of expression and signs (*ezhārāt*) that has been founded and then evolved by human beings. Mankind has formed this system to express himself, to make himself understandable to others, and to understand others. Language is a system through which human beings systematize their knowledge and inform others about it, and to conceptualize or deal with reality.³

Language, as a system of signs, consists of five elements: the speaker from whom the language originated; the listener or the addressee to whom it is directed; the context in which it is shaped; the community into which it is spoken, meaning that the language is a common way of obtaining mutual understanding among them; and last, the content it conveys.⁴

These philosophical observations concerning language, which at present have many proponents among philosophers in this field, demonstrate that language is a collective human construction that has numerous features and elements and that it comes into existence only when all those elements and features exist. If some are missing, language disappears. Wittgenstein stated that language and speech are part of the human lifestyle and behavior and pre-

³ Albert Keller, *Sprachphilosophie*, 2nd rev. ed. (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 1989), S. 42.

⁴ Keller, *Sprachphilosophie*.

sented the theory of “language-games.” Later, Austin completed Wittgenstein’s theory with his theory of “words in action.”

Based on the aforementioned definition of language, if a person claims that certain words, contents, or meanings are being read to him by an intermediary figure, such as an angel, and then expresses them to his audiences while presenting himself as a mere transmitter, claiming that these sentences are not his, the scenario would lack a “signifying affirmation” (*dilālat-e taṣdīqiyeh*) according to scholars of *kalām*. In such a scenario, there would be no “speaker” to the immediate addressees of the speech. The sentences produced in such a process cannot be analyzed or explored, nor interpreted. They lack not only a speaker but also all of the aforementioned five main features of language. Therefore, they cannot represent examples of a language. It is obvious that my sense of “speaker” is not of a person who generates a voice like a parrot does or a voice recorder that does not produce the speech itself. The speaker is a person whose speech can be understood and whose speech can be attributed to him, not to someone else. If anyone claims that some sentences are transmitted to them from God and expresses these to audiences, these sentences do not have the characteristics of language, according to the aforementioned definition. It might be claimed that in such a case God is the speaker, and there exists at least one feature of language and perhaps others. However, this claim is also invalid. If this claim is valid, the sentences uttered by the Prophet have no “speaker” for the Prophet’s immediate audiences. These sentences have a speaker (either God or the angel) only for the Prophet, but not for his immediate addressees. The audiences cannot understand the processes that the Prophet underwent in receiving the Revelation or how the sentences were read to him. Is there anyone who speaks to the Prophet? Who speaks to him? How does that person speak to the Prophet? If the Prophet reiterates sentences for his audiences and asks them to consider them the Word of God, he inevitably asks them to consider the verses of the Qur’ān to be God’s Word only because they believe in God and His Prophet (a faith-based perspective). In this sense, he should explain the meaning of the verses to his audiences in a way that they can understand; then, the audiences should again accept everything that the Prophet conveys without question, solely on the basis of their faith in God and the Prophet.

Is it possible to accept that the Qur’ānic dialogue between the Prophet and the disbelievers and all the sociopolitical and cultural changes that the Prophet introduced into society—which are all reflected in the Qur’ān—came into existence because the Prophet said to his audiences, *you should accept, based on your faith in Islam, that all the sentences of the Qur’ān (which have no features of language) are God’s words and have meaning, and you should ask me their mean-*

ing too? The Qur'ān confirms that it was revealed in "clear Arabic language." Is it possible to accept that the Prophet asked people to accept what they could not understand as the words of a person? The Qur'ān is replete with verses that are clear in terms of their meaning for the Prophet's audiences. The Qur'ān asks people to seek to understand it (47:24; 38:29; 4:82) and to think about its verses. The Qur'ān describes itself as "healing," as a "guide to mankind," and as "clear evidence" and "convincing proof" (17:82; 2:185; 45:20; 10:57; 4:174; 6:157). How can we attribute such characteristics to the text and claim simultaneously that it must be accepted solely on the basis of faith? If the Prophet functioned merely as a reciter or channel of transmission, how could we meaningfully comprehend the efforts of Qur'ānic scholars or commentators to understand the text?

The Prophet is described in the Qur'ān as an "inviter unto God," "a warner of God's punishments," a "caller to the Straight Way," an "instructor of scripture and wisdom," "a judge between people in matters wherein they differ," and "a person who releases people from heavy burdens and from the yokes that are upon them" (12:108; 17:105; 23:73; 62:2; 2:213; 7:157; 5:42). How can it be possible that the Qur'ān ascribes these characteristics to a person who merely functioned as a mouthpiece or reciter, and how can it be possible that we consider the Prophet to be a mere channel of transmission while the Qur'ān considers Muḥammad to be a person who played a fundamental role in the lives of many people?

In many Qur'ānic verses, the Prophet is described as an "envoy" or a "delegate" from God. Being an envoy means to be "excited," "animated," and "enthusiastic." After he received the first call from God and introduced himself as a Prophet, Muḥammad launched his mission with determination and continuous, tireless effort, and he believed in his mission from the bottom of his heart. If he believed that he was a mere mouthpiece, this had nothing to do with the enthusiasm and passion he displayed in his prophetic mission—since an audio transmitter is not excited to transmit a message.

One more piece of evidence from the Qur'ān is that the opponents of the Prophet of Islam accused him of being a magician, a poet, a sorcerer, and a soothsayer (10:2; 21:5; 69:42). When they ascribed these characteristics to the Prophet, Muḥammad read verses of the Qur'ān to them, which sometimes impressed them and made them believe in Islam. The reason they called the Prophet a poet or soothsayer was that poets and soothsayers impressed people, and the Prophet could do so too. If reciting the Qur'ān only meant transmitting someone else's words to people, it was unreasonable that Muḥammad's opponents accused him of being a poet or soothsayer. A poet or soothsayer is regarded as such because what they do is attributed to them, although they consider their deeds to be connected to an otherworldly power.

These facts demonstrate that the Prophet never claimed that the verses of the Qurʾān, as they are today, came from God in words and content and that he only recited them for his audiences. The Qurʾān is the Prophet's human oration in both words and content. The Prophet experienced God as his "Teacher," and what he experienced was *wahy*: "He has taught thee that thou knewest not" (4:113), and "O my Lord! advance me in knowledge" (20:114).

We can conclude that the Prophet, who brought forth the Qurʾān, never claimed that the Qurʾān was not his own words; rather he introduced it as his own words. But why did his opponents refuse to accept his message? His main message was that he was a special person chosen by God, and that God enabled him to speak his Word. Indeed, *wahy* should be understood in the sense of the ability to speak the Word. From certain verses of the Qurʾān, one can conclude that the Prophet claimed that all that he spoke of (which was reflected in the Qurʾān) was the product of Revelation. This means the Prophet was enabled to speak the Word by means of Revelation. In the Qurʾān, *wahy* is defined as "perceptions" (*eshāreh*) or signs, which themselves are considered God's actions. This description has been used for not only the prophets but also the instincts of a bee. The Qurʾān refers to the honey produced by the bee as "God's Revelation," stating, "And [consider how] thy Sustainer has inspired the bee: Prepare for thyself dwellings in mountains and in trees, and in what [men] may build [for thee by way of hives]" (Qurʾān 16:68). The Qurʾān also states:

it is not given to mortal man that God should speak unto him otherwise than through sudden inspiration, or [by a voice, as it were,] from behind a veil, or by sending an apostle to reveal, by His leave, whatever He wills [to reveal]: for, verily, He is exalted, wise.

Qurʾān 42:51

In this verse, direct Revelation or Revelation through the intermediary of an angel is described as a form of speech that can be attributed to God (as in other verses [Qurʾān 36:82], the creation of all creatures is described as a form of God's speech). From the Qurʾān's perspective, Revelation is God's speech or conversation with the Prophet of Islam, which enabled him to speak (i.e., to recite verses of the Qurʾān.) The verses of the Qurʾān are attributed to the Prophet, who speaks them, and to God's Word, such as the following:

If any of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God seeks thy protection, grant him protection, so that he might [be able to] hear the word of God [from thee]; and thereupon convey him to a place where he can feel

secure: this, because they [may be] people who [sin only because they] do not know [the truth].

Qur'ān 9:6

One may think that God's conversation with the Prophet was formed through *wahy* and by means of a particular linguistic communication, but God's speech is not ordinary human language because there is no condition for linguistic communication between God and the Prophet. For this reason, one cannot conceptualize the essence of revelation. Ṭabāṭabā'ī argued:

It is worth noting that revelation is a mysterious matter for us and we cannot conceptualize it, nor can we understand how it was shaped. That is, there exists a form of communication which cannot be realized by us. ... The Prophet conceptualized revelation with his own consciousness, realized its mysterious nature and then spoke to us with human language.⁵

Ṭabāṭabā'ī indicated that the Qur'ān consists of human language and the Prophet was its speaker, although it had Divine origin. However, one important point must be noted: although the Qur'ān attributes natural phenomena to God, this does not mean it denies their natural causes. Similarly, while the verses of the Qur'ān are attributed to God, this does not exclude the Prophet as the immediate, natural agent of their articulation. From the Qur'ānic perspective, just as all events in the world ultimately point to God as their source, so too does the Qur'ān ultimately refer back to Him.

The Qur'ānic expressions *inzāl al-wahy* and *inzāl al-kitāb* (descent of the Revelation/Book) do not necessarily indicate that the Prophet played no role in the creation of the text. The Qur'ān (25:48) states, "We send down (*anzalnā*) from the sky, pure water." The fact that God sends down rain from the sky does not necessarily mean that we should ignore the natural causes of rain. In a similar vein, the verses referring to *inzāl al-wahy* and *inzāl al-kitāb* do not necessarily indicate that the natural cause of the text—the Prophet—had no role in shaping the text, and that the Qur'ān is not the Prophet's word. The historical evidence from the Qur'ān is strong; thus, wherever one encounters a verse in the Qur'ān that appears to be inconsistent with the idea that the Qur'ān is not the Prophet's word, one should understand it in another way.

5 Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Researches in Islam*, ed. Khosro Shahi (n.p., n.d.), 249.

In sum, the Qur'ān consists of the words of the Prophet, and the Prophet's communication with his audiences occurred through human language. The text of the Qur'ān mirrors a linguistic–human relationship between the Prophet and his immediate addressees. Therefore, to explore, study, and interpret the Qur'ān, any scientific method can be used to analyze other linguistic texts, such as those employed by the philosophy of language, linguistics, hermeneutics, and historical criticism. Such a methodological approach is not a barrier to people's faith in the Qur'ān, but rather, is necessary.

2 Prophetic Reading of the World

The Qur'ān is an interpretive understanding (*fahm-e tafsīrī*) of the world from historical events and the fate of different human communities in light of God's Will and action. The Qur'ān displays that the Prophet experienced a subjective understanding of the world around him. It shows us what he dealt with, not just what he conveyed to his community. It conveys how the Prophet saw the world, not how the world actually is. In the Qur'ān, the Prophet reveals his own perspectives (*bīnesh*) of the world and his worldview (*jahān-bīnī*). Thus, the Qur'ān is a prophetic reading (interpretive understanding) of the world. The Prophet conducted this reading by means of the Arabic language. He undertook this reading of the world through his own experiences and the influence of *wahy*. The verses of the Qur'ān represent the Prophet's words in action (*fi'l-e goftārī-e payāmbār*) and convey “news” (*khābar*) that it asks its audiences to hear and think about. This news, which forms the fundamental message of the Qur'ān, is that all the phenomena and events of the world are God's signs. The Qur'ān uses the term “*āya*” in more than four hundred verses, mostly in connection to God. The Prophet's reading of the world becomes sometimes deeper than a mere explanation of the world. In these events, the Prophet experiences God, and for instance, describes Him as “the light of the heavens and earth” (Qur'ān 24:35).

Before proceeding, it is necessary to explain the term “interpretive understanding.” *Erscheinung*, which is similar to the Arabic *āya*, is the undetermined object of empirical intuition. It is a representation of how things take effect in people by affecting their senses. When they view a phenomenon as God's sign, they consider it a “sign” of an ultimate being Who is inaccessible but manifest in His signs, which are accessible. “Being an *āya*” means “viewing phenomenon as *āya*,” which is exactly what is meant by interpretive understanding. For those who experience events as God's signs, their understanding of the world is similar to their interpretation of it. Understanding and interpretation refer to the

same reality. A religious interpretation of the world is a result of a particular experience of it.

It can now be demonstrated that viewing the world and its existents as *āyas* or manifests (of God) is a dominant standpoint that prevails in the text of the Qurʾān. However, before proceeding, it is important to note that the Qurʾān does not outline a systematic perspective of the world, a perspective that views the world as a unity. The Qurʾān uses the term “*kull shay*” (everything). The Qurʾān speaks of heavens, the earth, the sun, the moon, stars, worlds, animals, humans, mountains, plants, water, communities and individuals, disasters, favors, objects, and many other things, in scattered verses. Next, I turn to considering the signs of God in natural phenomena in the Qurʾān, and then, I explore the same issue in relation to human beings, the fate of communities, and the historical matters pointed out in the Qurʾān. To avoid a lengthy discussion on each of these matters, I do not mention the whole verse, only the main content of each.

3 Prophetic Reading of Natural Phenomena

The creation of heaven and earth, the alternation of night and day and the ships that sail through the sea, sending down rain from the heavens, thereby giving life to the earth after its lifelessness, dispersing therein every moving creature, and the direction of the winds and the clouds are all signs of God (Qurʾān 2:164).

It is God who created human beings from one soul, and created from it many men and women.

Qurʾān 4:1

It is God who makes human beings sleep at night and raises them up in the morning. It is God who is the subjugator of humans and it is God who rescues human beings from the darkness of the land and sea.

Qurʾān 6:60–65

For it is He who has brought into being gardens—[both] the cultivated ones and those growing wild—and the date-palm, and fields bearing multiform produce, and the olive tree, and the pomegranate. And of the cattle reared for work and for the sake of their flesh. It is God who created cattle, some for burden and some for their meat.

Qurʾān 6:141–142

God is the One who cleaves the grain and the fruit-kernel asunder, bringing forth the living out of that which is dead, and He is the One who brings forth the dead out of that which is alive. Verily, in all this there are messages indeed for people who will believe.

Qur'an 6:95-99

Your Sustainer is God, who has created the heavens and the earth in six eons, and is established on the throne of His almightiness, governing all that exists. Unto Him you all must return: this is, in truth, God's promise—for, behold, He creates [man] in the first instance, and then brings him forth anew to the end that He may reward with equity all who attain to faith and do righteous deeds. He it is who has made the sun a [source of] radiant light and the moon a light [reflected] and has determined for it phases so that you might know how to compute the years and to measure [time]. He it is who enables you to travel on land and sea. He is who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive.

Qur'an 10:3, 5, 22, 31

It is God who has created the heavens and the earth, and who sends down water from the sky and thereby brings forth [all manner] of fruits for your sustenance; and who has made ships subservient to you, so that they may sail through the sea at His behest; and has made the rivers subservient [to His laws, so that they be of use] to you; and has made the sun and the moon, both of them constant upon their courses, subservient [to His laws, so that they be of use] to you; and has made the night and the day subservient [to His laws].

Qur'an 14:30-33

And the earth We have spread out (like a carpet), set thereon mountains firm and immovable, and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance. We send the fecundating winds, then cause the rain to descend from the sky, therewith providing you with water [in abundance]; it is We Who give life and Who give death.

Qur'an 15:17-23

He creates man out of a [mere] drop of sperm. And He creates cattle: you derive warmth from them and [various other] uses; and from them you obtain food and you find beauty in them when you drive them home in the evenings and when you take them out to pasture in the mornings. And

they carry your loads to [many] a place which [otherwise] you would be unable to reach without great hardship to yourselves. And [it is He who creates] horses and mules and asses for you to ride, as well as for [their] beauty. ... It is He who sends down water from the skies; you drink thereof, and thereof [drink] the plants upon which you pasture your beasts; [and] by virtue thereof He causes crops to grow for you, and olive trees, and date-palms, and grapes, and all [other] kinds of fruit. And He has made the night and the day and the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws, so that they be of use] to you; and all the stars are subservient to His command. And He it is who has made the sea subservient [to His laws], so that you might eat fresh meat from it, and take from it gems which you may wear.

Qur'ān 16:4–18

God has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs knowing nothing—but He has endowed you with hearing, and sight, and minds. Have, then, they [who deny the truth] never considered the birds, enabled [by God] to fly in mid-air, with none but God holding them aloft? And God has given you [the ability to build] your houses as places of rest, and has endowed you with [the skill to make] dwellings out of the skins of animals—easy for you to handle when you travel and when you camp—and [to make] furnishings and goods for temporary use of their [rough] wool and their soft, furry wool and their hair.

Qur'ān 16:78–81

God [is almighty—the One who] makes the night grow longer by shortening the day, and makes the day grow longer by shortening the night. Art thou not aware that it is God who sends down water from the skies, whereupon the earth becomes green? Art thou not aware that it is God who has made subservient to you all that is on earth? It is He who gave you life, and then will cause you to die.

Qur'ān 22:60–66

We create out of the drop of sperm a germ-cell, and then We create out of the germ-cell an embryonic lump, and then We create within the embryonic lump bones, and then We clothe the bones with flesh—and then We bring [all] this into being as a new creation.

Qur'ān 23:14

He [it is who] brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive, and gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless: and even thus will you be brought forth [from death to life]. He creates you out of dust. He creates for you mates out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you. And among his wonders is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colors. And among His wonders is your sleep, at night or in daytime, as well as your [ability to go about in] quest of some of His bounties. He displays before you the lightning, giving rise to [both] fear and hope, and sends down water from the skies, giving life thereby to the earth after it had been lifeless. The skies and the earth stand firm at His behest. [Remember all this: for] in the end, when He will call you forth from the earth with a single call. And He it is who creates [all life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew.

Qur'an 30:29–27

He [it is who] has created the skies without any supports that you could see, and has placed firm mountains upon the earth.

Qur'an 31:10

It is God who sends forth the winds, so that they raise a cloud—whereupon He spreads it over the skies as He wills, and causes it to break up so that you see rain issue from within it (30:48). God withholds the sky [rain] from falling on the earth.

Qur'an 22:65

He will give them life who created them [humans] for the first time! The same Who produces for you fire out of the green tree ... when He intends a thing, His command is “be” and it is.

Qur'an 36:76–82

He it is who has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with [an inner] truth. He causes the night to flow into the day, and causes the day to flow into the night; and He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a term set [by Him]. He has created you [all] out of one living entity; He creates you in your mothers' wombs, one act of creation after another, in threefold depths of darkness.

Qur'an 39:5–6

These Qur'ānic verses are examples of the verses that illustrate the Qur'ān's view of nature. Natural phenomena and events are described as "signs" (*āyāt*) of God—God who cannot be conceptualized without His manifestations. God is active and creates things in every moment. This prophetic reading of the world is tantamount to his understanding and interpretation. The aforementioned verses are not philosophical or indicative sentences; they are interpretative sentences, which represent the interpretation of natural phenomena, as understood by the Prophet in light of God's signs and will. Prophetic reading in the Qur'ān is not limited to natural phenomena. In the verses in which human beings and communities are referred to, God's creatures are understood in a way that their fates, be they in this world or in the afterlife, are attributed to God. In all the verses in which human beings are spoken of, God is present as an active agent. Even in those verses in which the Qur'ān refers to the natural characteristics of human beings, the main idea is centered on God's interaction with human beings.

4 Prophetic Reading of Human Fates

Next, I consider the following verses:

We created man from sounding clay, from mud molded into shape.

Qur'ān 15:26

Every man's fate We have fastened on his own neck: On the Day of Judgment We shall bring out for him a scroll, which he will see spread open.

Qur'ān 17:13–14

God has created man and He has taught him speech [and intelligence].

Qur'ān 55:3–4

O humanity! Indeed, you are labouring restlessly towards your Lord, and will eventually meet the consequences.

Qur'ān 84:6

God taught man that which he knew not.

Qur'ān 96:5

[God is] who created me, and it is He who guides me; who gives me food and drink.

Qurʾān 26:78–79

He [God] causes him [human] to die, and be buried; then, when it is His Will, He will raise him up [again].

Qurʾān 80:21–22

Nor can a soul die except by God's leave.

Qurʾān 3:145

No soul can believe, except by the Will of God.

Qurʾān 10:100

By the soul and the proportion and order given to it, and its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right.

Qurʾān 91:7–8

He who created Death and Life, that He may try which of you is best in deed.

Qurʾān 67:2

Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, We will surely bless them with a good life, a life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward, according to the best of their actions.

Qurʾān 16:97

God is the Protector of those who have faith: from the depths of darkness He will lead them forth into light.

Qurʾān 2:257

If anyone puts his trust in God, sufficient is [God] for him.

Qurʾān 65:3

He whom God guides is rightly guided; but he whom God leaves to stray—for him you will never find [a] protector to lead him to the Right Way.

Qurʾān 18:17

Those who reject Our signs We shall gradually visit with punishment, in ways they perceive not.

Qur'an 7:182

Do then those who devise evil [plots] feel secure that God will not cause the earth to swallow them up?

Qur'an 16:45

These verses illustrate the Prophet's interpretive understanding (*bīnesh-e fah-mī-tafsīrī*) of the fate of human beings. These verses, similarly to the verses related to natural phenomena, do not provide information about philosophical matters. They have an interpretive nature in that they report the fate of human beings in light of God's interaction with them. Even the verses that concern the resurrection of humankind reflect an interpretive understanding of human fate. The Qur'an states that human beings will be resurrected in the afterlife like the *trees* that sprout in the *spring*. The Prophet, from his experiential perspective, saw human beings in the form of trees and plants sprouting in the spring:

It is He who brings out the living from the dead, and brings out the dead from the living, and Who gives life to the earth after it is dead; and so will you be brought forth from the grave.

Qur'an 30:19

This verse does not include an indicative sentence but consists of an interpretive experience. The resurrection of human beings is likened to bringing them out from the dead. This interpretive understanding of human fate is illustrated in Qur'an 44:38: "We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play." The idea that "the creation of the world is not pointless" is an interpretive understanding of reality, not reality itself.

When we state that a certain deed or act is not void or pointless, or is valid, we provide an interpretation of that deed. When the Qur'an uses these expressions for the creation of world, it provides an interpretive understanding of it. Since the Prophet of Islam observed and understood the world in a non-void, valid, inalienable way, and according to his worldview everything in the universe was attributable to God, human beings could not be an exception to this general understanding. The creation of human beings and their fate attributed to God was part of this interpretive understanding. If human fate was not from God, His Creation would have been naught. It follows from this that human beings will be present before God in the afterlife. There are other verses that illustrate this notion:

O humanity! Indeed, you are labouring restlessly towards your Lord, and will eventually meet the consequences.

Qur'ān 84:6

Did you, then, think that We created you in mere idle play, and that you would not have to return to Us?

Qur'ān 23:115

Does man think that he is to be left to himself, to go about at will? Was he not once a [mere] drop of sperm that had been spilt, and thereafter became a germ-cell—whereupon He created and formed [it] in accordance with what [it] was meant to be, and fashioned out of it the two sexes, the male and the female? Is not He, then, able to bring the dead back to life?

Qur'ān 75:36–40

[and called to account] on an awesome Day—the Day when all men shall stand before the Sustainer of all the worlds?

Qur'ān 83:5–6

On that Day will all men come forward, cut off from one another, to be shown their [past] deeds. And so, he who shall have done an atom's weight of good, shall behold it; and he who shall have done an atom's weight of evil, shall behold it.

Qur'ān 99:7–8

Surely to your Lord is the return of all.

Qur'ān 96:8

He who created Death and Life that He may try which of you is best in deed.

Qur'ān 67:2

Know [O people] that the life of this world is but a play and a passing delight. ... But [the abiding truth of man's condition will become fully apparent] in the life to come: [either] suffering severe, or God's forgiveness and His goodly acceptance: for the life of this world is nothing but an enjoyment of self-delusion.

Qur'ān 57:20

And that each person will only have what he endeavored towards; and that in time [the nature of] all his striving will be shown [to him in its true light], whereupon he shall be requited for it with the fullest requital; and that to your Lord is the ultimate return of all things.

Qur'ān 53:39–42

The idea that human labor is for God, that human beings were not created in vain, that they have not been abandoned, that God will resurrect them, that they will encounter punishment in the afterlife, that God tests them, and that disbelievers say the life of this world is but play and amusement—these statements are interpretive understandings of human beings, which have been based on the idea that the world was not created in vain.

Another piece of evidence is that the Qur'ān uses several terms for the afterlife and human resurrection: “the Day of Sorting Out” (Qur'ān 44:40), “the Day of Reckoning” (Qur'ān 24:35), and “the Day of Assembly” (Qur'ān 64:9). The idea that righteous people will be distinguished from wrongdoers and that human beings will be questioned represents an interpretation of the fate of human beings in the afterlife. The term “*yawm al-ākhir*,” which is used in more than 10 Qur'ānic verses regarding the resurrection and afterlife, is an interpretive understanding. The idea that life in this world is the “first day” and life in the hereafter is “*yawm al-ākhir*” is an interpretive understanding of the fate and destiny of human beings. These are not philosophical statements from the unseen world.

5 Prophetic Reading of Human Communities

The Qur'ān provides a picture of human communities that is similar to that of nature and human beings. God is active and present in the fate and destiny of all human communities. Everything is presented as an interaction with God. Here are some examples:

Before this We wrote in the Psalms: My servants, the righteous, shall inherit the earth.

Qur'ān 21:105

It is Our will to destroy a community, We convey Our last warning to those of its people who have lost themselves entirely in the pursuit of pleasures; and [if] they [continue to] act sinfully, the sentence [of doom] passed on the community takes effect, and We break it to smithereens.

And how many a generation have We [thus] destroyed after [the time of] Noah.

Qurʾān 17:16–17

If it were His will, He could destroy you, O mankind, and create another race; for He hath power to do this.

Qurʾān 4:133

6 Prophetic Reading of Social Realities

In addition to natural phenomena and the fate of human beings and communities over the course of history, the Qurʾān provides an interpretive understanding of the social life of the people of Ḥijāz. The ethical and religious norms and regulations mentioned in the Qurʾān are a product of this understanding and experience. God interacts with humankind in the context of social realities. The fate of human beings, even in this context, is subject to God's Will, and thus, the *ahkām* pointed out in the Qurʾān should be consistent with the “social realities” of the context in which they emerged. The prophetic reading asks the people of Ḥijāz to change their social realities—be they in the realm of matters of worship or social transactions—in light of *tawḥīd* (oneness of God), *taqwā* (piety), *iḥsān* (honesty), *ithār* (fairness), and *ʿadl* (justice). These changes should also be oriented in a way that people avoid *fiṣq* (debauchery), *ẓulm* (oppression), and *sharr* (evil-doing). People are asked not only to examine the world and to interpret it according to God's Will, but also to surrender to the absolute authority of God in their practical lives (*maqām-e ʿamal*). In the Qurʾān, many social acts and relations are presented as examples of oppression, evil-doing, dishonesty, and debauchery. People are commanded to avoid them and replace them with acts that represent honesty, justice, and fairness. There are specific moral injunctions behind the Qurʾānic rulings related to social and historical realities, which form the ethical norms of the Qurʾān. The prophetic interpretation is that if these relations and norms change from unethical to ethical values—that is, if they change from oppression to justice—then human beings would have followed God's Will. Qurʾānic precepts concerning matters related to worship and social transactions reflect an interpretive understanding of social realities in light of God's Will.

Any judgment regarding relations among human beings or the relations between human beings and God can always be meaningful in a particular society (e.g., Ḥijāzī society) and always have an interpretive nature. For example, one form of worship can be considered idolatrous in a society, and thus, human

beings are called to change it to a monotheistic form. Further, a particular form of relationship in a family is seen as representing oppression, and people are called to avoid it, changing it in accordance with justice and fairness. Therefore, whether a certain social ruling is just or unjust should be determined according to the current interpretation of social norms, such as justice or injustice.

Ahkām related to retaliation (*qiṣāṣ*) in Qurʾān 2:178–179 are presented based on an interpretive understanding (*fahm-e tafsiṛi*) of themes such as forgiveness, fairness, and life. After these verses, the rulings related to will and inheritance, based on interpretive understandings of themes such as *maʾrūf*, *khayr*, and *taqwā* are outlined. Qurʾānic verses 2:222–242, which are related to marriage, divorce, and sexual relations, are based on interpretive understandings of themes such as “repentance,” “piety,” “the rights of people,” “fairness,” “consultation,” “advice,” and “forgiveness,” and the associated rulings outlined here are examples of these norms. Qurʾānic verses 2:278–283, which are related to usury, transactions, and testimony, are based on interpretive understandings of themes such as “justice,” “piety,” “choosing someone as a witness,” “fairness,” and “avoiding being harmful to someone.” Verses 5:1–6, which outline some precepts about transactions, *ḥarām* and *ḥalāl* foods, and relations between men and women, are based on an interpretive understanding of “trustfulness,” “being faithful to covenants,” “avoidance of defamation,” “blessing,” “cooperation,” and “legitimate sexual relations.” In verses 2:275–280, the prohibition of usury is based on an interpretive understanding of “evilness,” “making a contrast between usury and trade,” “piety,” “avoiding offense,” “doing deeds of righteousness,” and “putting no pressure on a debtor.” In the verses related to war (*qitāl*), which are found in different chapters of the Qurʾān, the rulings are based on an interpretive understanding of “peace” and “continuing war until *fitna* is removed.” The reason these precepts are referred to as *ḥukm* is that they have jurisprudential nature. *Ḥukm* is a term used in jurisprudence.

These are some examples that demonstrate that the precepts of the Qurʾān are based on a certain interpretive understanding of the social realities of Hijāzī society—an interpretive understanding that is consistent with God’s Will. The Qurʾān did not aim to stipulate these precepts and rulings for all societies and for all times.

7 Prophetic Reading of Human Beings’ Existential Condition

In many verses, the Qurʾān explains the existential features of human beings vis-à-vis God. The Qurʾān speaks of “patience,” “repentance,” “bowing down,”

“prostration,” “faith,” “sorrow,” “fear,” “haste,” “charity,” and “supplication.” These human conditions are interpreted according to a monotheistic worldview, based on the idea that God is actively present in the world. In these cases, the Qur’ān reveals the Prophet’s “hermeneutical experiences” of the world. The existential aspects of these themes display how Revelation was fluttering the Prophet’s soul and how Revelation dominated his existence. Faith in God is the fundamental message of the Prophet in the Qur’ān. Faith comes from the root *i-m-n* (safe), and this refers to human beings’ safety. The term “*imān bi Allāh*” (feeling safe with God) that is mentioned in the Qur’ān on many occasions shows how the experiences of “anxiety” and “safety” never left the Prophet.

In sum, it can be claimed that in the prophetic reading of the world, natural phenomena, and the fate of human life and different communities, we observe the intervention of a doer (God) who Himself is absent but Whose deeds and acts represent His signs. It is in this sense that the Qur’ān uses the term “*āya*” in more than 400 verses. The Prophet, in his reading of the world, considers all existents in the world to be the “*āyāt*” of God, which confirms God’s unbounded divinity. The Prophet speaks in the Qur’ān with God, praises Him, requests Him to assist, and prompts humanity to turn to Him, asking them to make their lifestyle and social realities consistent with His will. The Prophet praises God’s signs. These are based on an interpretive understanding of the world that enabled the Prophet to create fundamental changes in society through the experience of God, or *wahy*. The verses of the Qur’ān do not express philosophical statements about the unseen world (in contrast to what Muslim philosophers claimed later). These are the Prophet’s confessions or testimonies before God and before his audiences. The Prophet confesses in the Qur’ān that God is everywhere, that God has informed him of His presence through *wahy*, and that God has enabled him to speak. The Prophet then gained the ability to call his audiences to the One God.

In this prophetic reading, the experience of the Divine is equal to an interpretive understanding (*fahm-e tafsiṛī*) of the world. Thus, God is understood to be equal to the reality of the world. In the prophetic reading, God’s manifestations are expressed, and the world is understood in a religious form. When one speaks of God in the Qur’ān, one interprets and understands the world in a certain way. In the Qur’ān, understanding the world is tantamount to interpreting it.

In this prophetic reading, the presence of God includes His continual activity and involvement in the world. God is present because He continuously establishes and destroys the world (continual creation). The world is a sign through which God presents Himself. Sometimes, the prophetic reading

reaches its climax in a way that the Prophet experiences the essence of God in the form of light, as we read in Qurʾān 24:35:

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His light is, as it were, that of a niche containing a lamp; the lamp is [enclosed] in glass, the glass [shining] like a radiant star: [a lamp] lit from a blessed tree—an olive-tree that is neither of the east nor of the west—the oil whereof [is so bright that it] would well-nigh give light [of itself] even though fire had not touched it: light upon light! God guides unto His light him that wills [to be guided].

In this religious–interpretive understanding of the world, different parables, stories, and narratives, as well as different methods of warning and preaching were used. The Qurʾān is a prophetic reading of the world. Throughout this reading, the personality of the Prophet is illustrated in various forms. Therefore, it is possible to analyze the Prophet’s psychological state through the Qurʾān. Descriptions of heaven and hell, the merciful or harsh tone of the text concerning confrontation with believers or unbelievers, and the severe punishments inflicted upon unbelievers reflect the Prophet’s personality and character.

Some of the main conclusions of the aforementioned discussion are as follows:

1. What I have stated in the discussion thus far is a rational (free and non-dogmatic) reading of the Qurʾān as Muslims’ fundamental text. This rational reading reveals that the fundamental message of the Qurʾān is *tawḥīd* (*tawḥīd* in worldview and *tawḥīd* in lifestyle, not merely belief in *tawḥīd*). Without taking for granted the revelatory nature of the Qurʾān and assuming that the Qurʾān has a Divine nature, it can be concluded that the fundamental message of the Qurʾān is its emphasis on *tawḥīd*. The Qurʾān reflects the Prophet’s belief in *tawḥīd*. The Prophet observed the world and understood it in a monotheistic fashion, which is reflected in the Qurʾān.

2. The Qurʾān is an interpretive understanding of the world; it is a “manifestation” (*nimūd*), and anything that is a “manifestation” can only be understood through reinterpretation. Because the Prophet’s reading of the world is one reading of the world, it cannot include the “entire truth of God.” When we encounter the Qurʾān, we understand that it deals with a series of realities, some of which are apparent (*āshkār*), and some of which are hidden (*pin-hān*). The Qurʾān does not reveal all its realities to us at once, which is why it is necessary to take an interpretive understanding of the text. Even this new interpretation (the interpretation given above) does not reveal all the realities of the Qurʾān’s message, because this interpretation, similarly to other inter-

pretations, includes both apparent and hidden meanings of the text. Therefore, there is no final interpretation and reading of the text.

3. To understand and interpret the Qurʾān, we cannot determine a specific rule or regulation before we approach the text. Neither Rumi nor Mullā Ṣadrā determined a specific rule before they approached the Qurʾān. The questions facing Muslim thinkers today are as follows: How can one interpret a monotheistic reading of the world in today's world? How is it possible to interpret the world and understand it in a monotheistic way; and how is it possible to live in a monotheistic fashion? In a world in which human beings intervene on a large scale in nature and shape the future of history according to their will, how is a monotheistic understanding of the world possible? In sum, for Muslim thinkers, as for other theists who believe in God, the main issue is His existence and their belief in Him. Even prophecy and Revelation are secondary to God and the concept of *tawḥīd*. The former came into being to disclose the concept of God and *tawḥīd* for believers and had no other main purpose.

From the Qurʾān's perspective, the Prophet of Islam contributed to a monotheistic understanding of the world—an understanding founded by preceding prophets. To be a Muslim in today's context is to contribute to a monotheistic reading of the world. Whatever has been conducted in the name of religion during the past 14 centuries should be reexamined in light of a monotheistic reading of the world in today's context, and the meaning of Islam in the contemporary era is nothing but this. This is the "truth" of Islam; but because "truth" can never be achievable for human beings in an absolute way, no statement regarding this monotheistic interpretation is final and complete. That is, we should continuously interpret. It is beneficial for Muslims to consider new theological interpretations presented in contemporary scholarship by non-Muslim scholars, and not to simply confine themselves to interpretations given in Islamic philosophy and mysticism regarding God. In some of these new theological discourses, God is presented as "the meaning of all meanings"⁶ and "the secret of the world,"⁷ and the relationship between human beings and God is described as "I-Thou," in which people are partners in a conversation with God.⁸ These are some examples of this new interpretive understanding of God and *tawḥīd*.

6 Emerich Coreth, *Grundfragen der Hermeneutik: Ein philosophischer Beitrag* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1969), S 199–221.

7 Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt*, 5th ed. (Paul Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986).

8 Winfried Weier, *Religion als Selbstfindung: Grundlegung einer existenzanalytischen Religionsphilosophie*, vol. 45 of *Abhandlungen zur Philosophie, Psychologie und Soziologie der Religion und Ökumenik* (Leiden: Brill, 1991).

4. Based on the philosophical definition of “language” presented at the beginning of this article, it can be concluded that there is no sentence that does not require information from its context for its understanding, because the meaning of words and sentences, and the grammatical rules pertaining to a particular language, change and evolve during the course of history. We should not assume that a particular Arabic or Persian word has the same meaning throughout the course of the history of these languages and among the societies in which people have spoken them. Based on this generally accepted rule in the discipline of the philosophy of language, we should accept that the meaning of words and sentences in the Qur’ān as understood today differ from those understood by the immediate addressees of the Revelation.

Accordingly, the use of words such as heavens, earth, jinn, angel, resurrection of the dead, *shūrā* (consultation), and *‘adl* (justice) in the Qur’ān is consistent with the general knowledge of that time. It is not possible to decontextualize these words, nor to use them in a way that they become compatible with today’s knowledge or scientific rules. The Prophet’s interpretative experience was expressed in Arabic, and this language, similarly to other languages, has its limitations. When the Prophet spoke of the earth, the sun, and the moon, or historical events reflected in the Qur’ān, he understood them in the same way that the people of his time understood them. Today, one may encounter some concepts in the Qur’ān that could be considered legend or may come across accounts of nature and history that one finds inconsistent with contemporary knowledge. By no means do these create an obstacle in understanding the central message of the Qur’ān, which is *tawhīd*.

Therefore, the interpretive understanding (*fahm-e tafsiṛī*) of the Prophet from the world is consistent with the general knowledge of his time, but it did not aim to detail historical and scientific knowledge. In the Qur’ān, scientific and historical statements are expressed in a way that is consistent with the Arabic culture of the time. They were used to convey a message that had not dominantly existed in the Arabian society, and that message was *tawhīd*. The world in which the Prophet lived differs from the world in which people now live. The Prophet’s world was very simple. In that world, there existed no “atom,” no “galaxy,” no “simulations,” no “spacecraft,” no “democracy,” no “human rights,” among many other things.

When the Qur’ān states that there is no inconsistency in its content (Qur’ān 4:82), it is referring to the fact that all worldly phenomena must be viewed as God’s signs. The religious message of the text should be understood under the rubric of *tawhīd*. Accordingly, when the Qur’ān states that there is no inconsistency in its content, this does not mean that none of its passages is inconsistent with the philosophical and scientific knowledge of the twentieth century. Most

Muslim scholars and mystics of the premodern era believed in ancient cosmological norms, whereby they viewed the sky as a “reserved roof” (*saqf-e mahfūz*). For today’s scientists and philosophers, the sky is no longer a reserved roof—rather, it is “infinite space” (*fazāye bīkarān*). Hence, the worldview of every community in every era is similar to that reflected in its language. The “signs of God” can be understood and interpreted using the analogy of both “reserved roof” and “infinite space.”

5. The Qur’ān’s commands and precepts are no exception to what we have said so far. The role of the Qur’ān’s precepts was to change the social realities of the contemporaries of the Prophet from a condition that was inconsistent with God’s activity in the world to a condition that was consistent with it. If some Qur’ānic precepts appear to be violent in the current era, one should note that the word violence does not have an ultra-historic (*farā-tārīkhī*) or absolute definition, in the same way that justice or cruelty does not have one. Some acts might appear violent in a particular time and society, but not in another era. It is also possible that in a given society or in a particular era, the use of violence is necessary to counter enemies or to fight social corruption, although this method may not be applied in another society. What may seem violent today should be abandoned because those so-called violent precepts of the Qur’ān are closely connected to the social conditions in which they originated. Such precepts and verses are not implementable in our era. Declaring that a particular punishment or precept mentioned in the Qur’ān should always be implemented in society goes against the spirit of the Qur’ān. In the contemporary era, the social conditions of Muslims should be regulated according to whether they are consistent with contemporary ethical norms and the criteria of justice in today’s world. Political and economic matters should be established in light of this understanding, not in light of common jurisprudential approaches. I have explained this theory in some of my books, including *Faith and Freedom*, *Critique of Official Interpretation of Religion*, and *Some Observations on Humanistic Readings of Religion*.

I have attempted to explain how Muslims, based on the aforementioned criterion, can incorporate human rights and democratic values into their own cultural norms without necessarily trying to derive them from the Book and the Sunna, since this has no result but the formation of a religious autocracy. I do not argue that we should totally abandon the discipline of *fiqh*. The principles and doctrines that previous generations of *fuqahā* presented are valuable heritage whose merit should be recognized even though fallible human beings established them. They [such principles] should not prevent us from incorporating democratic norms into our cultures today. I am certain that the disagreement with human rights and democracy in the Muslim

world is based on political factors and is undertaken to maintain autocratic systems. Muslim culture can certainly absorb human rights and democratic ethics.

6. From what has been said, the meaning of *ʿiṣma* or the *infallibility* of the Prophet according to the Qurʾān's perspective can be understood. It means that the Prophet, with the aid of God, never deviated from providing a "monotheistic interpretation" of the world and never called people to worship anything but God. The Prophet is infallible in this prophecy and mission. The prophecy of Muḥammad concerned how believers should perceive the world (i.e., through a monotheistic worldview), and his mission was to convey and endorse this worldview, not how the world should be understood from a scientific or philosophical perspective.

7. We can conclude that there is "unity" in the Qurʾānic verses in that there is a central theme that unites them. If we apply a historical-critical approach to the Qurʾān, we can reach a more accurate interpretation of it. However, this does not mean we cannot interpret the Qurʾān without this approach. We can read and interpret the Qurʾān in the same way that we read and interpret other religious or non-religious texts, such as the Upanishads.

8. From what we have said about the Qurʾānic text, we can conclude that understanding the Qurʾān and accepting its message is not based on proving the epistemological validity of the Revelation (*iʿtibār-e maʿrefat-shenākhtī-e wahy*). We do not have access to the Revelation, nor can we understand what Revelation is, but the Qurʾān is understandable when we read it. The message of the Qurʾān is that human beings should fundamentally change their perspective and assumptions, in a way that the phenomena of the world can be understood as God's signs. Therefore, people should theoretically and practically choose a monotheistic way. After understanding this message, another question might arise: Why should we be monotheists? This question has always been one of the central questions for believers, but engaging with this question has nothing to do with the meaning of *wahy* or from where it [*wahy*] originates. We can understand the Qurʾānic text and its religious message without necessarily understanding the nature of the Revelation.

9. Revelation from an Islamic perspective is different from Revelation defined in Christian scholastic theology. From the perspective of Christian theology, Christians encountered the Revelation, not the product of the Revelation. The Bible is the report of "the historical interaction of God with His people," and Revelation is defined in the sense of this "historical interaction." During the past few centuries, when Christian scholars sought to understand this "historical interaction" using contemporary methods of historical criticism, this led to historical criticism (*naqd-e tārikhī*) of the Bible. As an inevitable pre-

lude to this process of understanding, they sought to understand how this history was formed. The underlying assumption of the group of Christian scholars who undertook this research was that there existed a particular knowledge (*maʿrifat*) conveyed by God to human beings, which had nothing to do with “reason” or with “feelings.” For them, this particular knowledge could be reconstructed through the historical criticism of the Holy Scriptures. To attain this knowledge—which has often been referred to as “revelatory knowledge” (*maʿrifat-e waḥyānī*)—they had to acquire historical information from the Holy Book that pertained to Jesus. Later, it was discovered that the historical–critical approach to the Bible was insufficient on its own to understand the text, although it was necessary. For this reason, different methods of interpretation came into being, 13 of which have been described by Horst Klaus Berg.⁹ Conversely, the Qurʾān does not report the life history of Prophet Muḥammad, nor does it present the development of the historical interaction between God and His community. The Qurʾān is a prophetic reading of the world. We are able to achieve a “practical understanding” (*fahm-e ʿamali*) of this text. Without approaching the religious beliefs of Muslims regarding this text, we can demonstrate that the text is a reading of the world (*qirāʾat az jahān*). However, a historical–critical approach to the Qurʾān can provide us with a more accurate understanding of the text.

Source

Muḥammad Mojtahed Shabestari. “Qerāʾt-e Nabavi az Jahān.” Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari (official website). Accessed June 9, 2025. <http://mohammadmojtahedshabestari.com>.

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⁹ Horst Klaus Berg, *Ein Wort wie Feuer: Wege lebendiger Bibelauslegung* (München: Kösel, 1991).

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How Contextual Are the Qur'ān and I?

Mehmet Paçacı

About the Author¹

Mehmet Paçacı is a Turkish scholar and diplomat, whose studies on Qur'ānic hermeneutics have contributed to contemporary discussions on the interpretation of Islamic texts, particularly in Turkey. In addition to his academic work, Paçacı has held several diplomatic posts. He was Ambassador of Turkey to the Holy See in 2014–2019 and to Pakistan in 2019–2024. He has also served as Director General of Foreign Relations in the Presidency of Religious Affairs in Ankara and as Religious Affairs Attaché at the Turkish Embassy in Washington, D.C. In his diplomatic postings, he was involved in interfaith dialogue and interreligious understanding.

Paçacı received his Ph.D. from the Faculty of Theology at Ankara University, where he taught during 1983–2008. His research has focused on questions of Qur'ānic interpretation in modern contexts. His primary interest is in uncovering ways in which traditional methods of understanding the Qur'ān can engage with contemporary ethical and philosophical concerns. He has contributed to debates on the role of the Qur'ān in shaping democratic values, human dignity, and interreligious understanding.

In his article “Democratic Values and the Qur'ān as a Source of Islam,” published in *Philosophy & Social Criticism* in 2013, he discusses how the ethical principles of the Qur'ān relate to modern ideas of governance and individual rights. In this article, he examines the Qur'ān's emphasis on justice and

1 Important works by Mehmet Paçacı include *Kur'an'da ve Kitab-ı Mukaddes'te Ahiret İnancı* (Istanbul: Nun, 1994); “Democratic Values and the Qur'ān as a Source of Islam,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 39, no. 4–5 (2013): 361–371; “Anlama (Fıkıh) Usulüne Dair,” *İslami Araştırmalar* 7, no. 2 (1995): 85–97; “Kur'an-ı Kerim Işığında Vahiy Geleneğine—Kitab-ı Mukaddes Bağlamında—Bir Bakış,” *İslami Araştırmalar* 8, no. 2 (1991): 175–193; and an unpublished paper, “İmam Şafî'nin Metodunda Öznenin Yeri,” presented at the 2nd Symposium on Islamic Thought, Trabzon, 1995. His broader intellectual contributions are examined in Felix Körner, *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkish University Theology: Rethinking Islam* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2005). Additional works that reference or engage with Paçacı's ideas include Ömer Özsoy, “The Qur'ān as a Literary Text: An Analysis of Modern Turkish Approaches to the Qur'ān,” *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 11, no. 1 (2009): 76–91.

responsibility as central to its vision of society. His book *Kur'an'da ve Kitab-ı Mukaddes'te Ahiret İnancı* (1994) explores similarities between Islamic and Judeo-Christian beliefs about the afterlife. This book is considered a contribution to comparative theological studies.

His ideas have been discussed in academic literature, including in a chapter in Felix Körner's *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkish University Theology: Rethinking Islam*, published in 2005. Körner examines Paçacı's approach to Qur'ānic interpretation in the context of modern theological debates. Paçacı's work has contributed to ongoing efforts to relate Islamic thought to contemporary social and intellectual challenges. In particular, he has paid attention to the relevance of the Qur'ān to modern ethical and political issues.



Where is the form of the Qur'ān, where is its meaning! Look at the man; where is his form, where is his meaning. If the meaning leaves the form, he will not stay at home, even for one moment.²

Nearly 1,700 years before Muḥammad, David described in the Holy Writ the God in whom he believed as follows:

He is the Maker of heavens and earth, the sea, and everything in them— He remains faithful forever. He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.³

Messengers of God, who appeared at different times, delivered the same message in different historical circumstances. However, their laws (shar'as) differed from each other⁴ because they lived in different historical conditions. What was it that remained the same without any change in religion, and what was it that changed in religion according to the circumstances in which the

2 Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Fīhi Mā Fīh*, ed. Selçuk Eraydın, trans. Ahmed Avni Konuk (Istanbul: İz, 1994), 79.

3 Pss 146:6–9; cf. Luke 1:49; Qur'ān 6:144; Qur'ān 9:60; Qur'ān 10:25; Qur'ān 46:3.

4 See Gen 32:24–32; cf. 6:146.

messengers lived? How much of the religion may alter in changing historical circumstances, and what needs to remain without change? The answers to these questions have become one of the important issues that Muslims should clarify—Muslims who are struggling to exist today and who are looking for ways of succeeding in this struggle by all means. The answers to these questions are related to understanding the Qur’ān and to the methods that will help understand it. Further, these answers are related to the ability of Muslims to create a new civilization and to the fate of their efforts to determine the direction of history. In this sense, the term “historicism” has become one of the concepts upon which our debates focus. In this study, I will examine this term in question and the multifarious repercussions it has brought about.

A short history of historicism⁵ is in order. In the first place, when people talk about terms such as *historicity* and *historicism*, it means that they are talking about an idea about a particular perspective that has developed outside of them. Western-Christian thought has had a dogmatic perspective toward the Holy Scriptures since the early periods. The exegeses of the Holy Scriptures were directed toward the objective of verifying the personality of the Christ that had been seen in Jesus. The death of Jesus, his resurrection, and his saving of humanity constituted the basis of this dogma. The Church monopolized the authority of exegesis. Grammatical, allegorical, and typological⁶ methods of exegesis were developed that were intended to prove this dogma. In this sense, the efforts of exegesis continued in a closed circle without any relation to history and historical context. The dogmatic Christian thought feared history. In his book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, written to reconcile the super-historical figure of Jesus in Christian dogma with the historical Jesus sought by the Enlightenment, Albert Schweitzer argued that Christianity, having adopted the theology of St. Paul, had strayed from the historical Jesus. He maintained that viewing Jesus as a historical figure reveals deep contradictions within the theology—contradictions that, according to him, created “one of the greatest problems of history.”⁷

This dogmatic framework of Christianity started to fracture with the reform movements that emerged in the sixteenth century. First, the monopoly of the

5 For more on this issue, see Ahmet Nedim Serinsu, *Tarihsellik ve Esbab-ı Nüzul* (Istanbul: Şule, 1996), 23–30.

6 On these issues, see Werner G. Jeanrad, *Theological Hermeneutics* (London: MacMillan, 1991), 18 ff.

7 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1954), 3 ff.

Church over exegesis was removed. After the Cartesian method was applied to theology, some theological movements sprouted. Flourishing rationalism and various disciplines emerged, which resulted in the questioning of the contents of the Holy Books within the framework of these disciplines. The first such attempt was made in the sixteenth century by a French priest, Richard Simon.⁸ The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed the development of the rational and historical–critical methods. As representatives of Enlightenment thinking, the philosopher–theologians of the University of Halle—known as the center of Protestant theology—set out to develop the rational criteria for Protestant interpretation. Among these, the historical–critical hermeneutical program of Salomo Semler established a new perspective toward the sacred texts and the dogma, which indeed resulted in initiating a new period in Protestant theology. Semler is the first to have approached the Holy Scriptures as a historian of religions and a critical researcher of history.

According to Semler, the science of exegesis should stop being an instrument of affirming certain doctrines, and the texts should be read critically. The purpose of hermeneutics was to reach an understanding of the texts as their writers understood them. Thus, synchronic reading of the sacred texts should be abandoned; instead, they should be read diachronically, and their objective and literal historical meaning (*sensus literalis historicus*) should be revealed. Semler developed two hermeneutical rules. The first was that the interpreter should be aware of the historical distance between them and the text of the Holy Scriptures. The second was that the exegesis of the Holy Scriptures should be conducted by complying with the universal principles of textual interpretation. Although the different characters and contents of the texts should be considered, a historical–critical analysis should be undertaken while conducting the exegesis, instead of imposing dogmatic interpretations on the text with a religious dogmatic reading. In this sense, Semler distinguished between the Word of God and the Holy Writ and regarded the text as the transmission of certain themes about God and His relationship with us. In Semler's view, the Holy Scriptures are not the Word of God. With a Protestant attitude, Semler stated that the Protestant reading cannot have any special place because theologians silence the text by imposing their own doctrines on the text and speak themselves instead of letting it speak. Another claim he made was that Jesus and the writers of the Bible needed to use the languages and concepts of those to whom they evangelized to communicate with them (*accommodation theory*). This idea, according to him, explains the discrepancies of language and even of

8 Raymond F. Collins, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1983), 41.

doctrine among various texts of the New Testament. To sum up, Semler strived to outline a rational and critical method of exegesis and a scientific theology.⁹

These views were the products of a rationalist Cartesian perspective that were situated against the Christian dogma. These are the views that emerged in relation to the problems of the Christian theology and were shaped by the circumstances of the Christian tradition. The whole reaction was against the oppressive domination of the dogma.¹⁰ Christian theologians and hermeneutists developed disciplines of religious hermeneutics and, in parallel, biblical criticism by applying this historical–critical approach to their books. However, the Muslim influence behind this approach that developed in the Christian world should not be overlooked. New research began unearthing the fact that critical studies of the Holy Scriptures set out with the materials developed by Muslims in the Middle Ages. Muslim critics (e.g., Ibn Ḥazm, Ibn Taymiyya, and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya) unveiled the chronological contradictions and geographical mistakes in the Holy Scriptures by applying the methods of textual criticism and source criticism.¹¹ Muslims have never held aloof from the historicist approach. The greatest factor is that the human nature of Muḥammad is emphasized in the Qurʾān. He is a human being, who spent his life in a certain period at a certain place and passed away like every other human being. In the Qurʾān, we observe Muḥammad as a thoroughly historical figure. The disciplines of ḥadīth and *Siyar* (the biography of Muḥammad) that were developed in this context are unprecedented in terms of recording history.¹²

Further, terms such as occasion of the revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*), *Makkī* and *Madanī* verses, and occasions of occurrence (*sabab al-wurūd*) of the ḥadīth are indications of the fact that it was accepted that the revelation and the prophethood occurred within a historical context. Likewise, the topic of abrogator (*nāsikh*) and abrogated (*mansūkh*) verses is perhaps the strongest evidence of the fact that the Qurʾānic revelation took historical circumstances into consideration. In the same vein, issues like the history of the Qurʾān, the factual circumstances in which it was revealed, its being textualized and memorized,

9 Jeonrad, *Theological*, 35–42.

10 Schweitzer, *The Quest*, 4. Schweitzer stated that the effort to reconstruct historically the life of Jesus did not originate from pure historical interest; rather, this effort embraced the historical Jesus as an ally against the oppression of the dogma and ventured to render the historical Jesus intelligible for its time after it eliminated this oppression.

11 See Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, “Some Neglected Aspects of Medieval Muslim Polemics against Christianity,” *Harvard Theological Review* 89, no. 1 (1996): 65 ff.

12 See W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qurʾan* (Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh Press, 1970), 40–58.

its passages being combined together, various recitations (*qirā'a*), and its being reproduced are issues that have been treated, discussed, and accepted.¹³ However, the discussion of issues such as the circumstances in which the texts of the Holy Scriptures were written, by whom and when they were textualized, the characteristics of the wording of the texts (higher criticism), typos in the texts, and translations (textual or lower criticism)¹⁴ is recent compared with such discussion in Islamic culture. It is possible to observe, behind these ideas, the influence of Islam, the influence of this historicist perspective of the Islamic tradition, which can be traced to before the reform movements, to the twelfth century.¹⁵

The secular historicist approach, in the form that developed in the West, has been applied to Islam by Orientalists.¹⁶ When the Orientalists initiated the first Islamic studies with the modernist, humanist, historical perspective, they found the historical materials related to both the Qur'ān and Muḥammad to be present.¹⁷ The greatest examples of this approach are in the books of two Orientalists, which have been recently translated into Turkish. One of them is the works of Rudi Paret (d. 1983), translated into Turkish with the title *Kur'an Üzerine Makaleler*. In this book, a typical example of this approach is provided in the article titled "The Qur'ān as a Source of History."¹⁸ Paret expressed how he approached the Qur'ān:

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- 13 Schweitzer, *The Quest*, 6–10. In contrast, historical studies in Christendom did not reconstruct the life of Jesus. No method was developed for that, and this originated from the nature of the sources. It is difficult to reconstruct the life of Jesus thoroughly by relying on the sources. Conversely, the works intending to reconstruct the whole story of the life of Jesus had begun in the nineteenth century.
- 14 See Mehmet Paçacı, *Kur'an'da ve Kitab-ı Mukaddes'te Ahiret İnancı* (Istanbul: Nun, 1994), 39–58.
- 15 See James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), 51–55; Amīn al-Khūlī, *Şilat al-Islām bi al-işlāḥ al-Masīḥiyya* (Cairo: Maṭba'a al-Azhar, 1993), 39 ff. For example, Sicily and Toledo played important roles in the transfer of culture and science from Muslim Spain to the Christian West. The religious–scientific centers that the Christians founded there transferred to the West the works of Muslim scholars (*ulamā*), such as Algoritmi (al-Khwārizmī), al-Ghazālī, Avicenna, and al-Fārābī, from the eleventh century onward and lay the foundations of the Reform and Renaissance.
- 16 Regarding the historicist character of the works on history by Orientalists, see Maxime Rodinson, "A Critical Survey of Modern Studies on Muhammad," in *Studies on Islam*, ed. Merlin L. Swartz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 23–85.
- 17 Rudi Paret, *Kur'an Üzerine Makaleler*, trans. Ömer Özsoy (Ankara: Bilgi Vakfı, 1995), 16; Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, 173.
- 18 In the same way, the first chapter of W. Montgomery Watt's book published with the title Hz. Muhammed'in Mekkesi (Ankara: Bilgi Vakfı, 1995) is as follows: "Tarihi Bir Kaynak Olarak Kur'an", 13.

The difference between this perspective, whose center is the history of the Revelation (*Heilsgeschichte*),¹⁹ and our perspective, whose center is the history of religions, catches one's eye at the first glance. The Muslim perspective of history has been shaped and delimited in the way that the Qur'ān, as the fundamental source, bore the character of the eternal of the highest authority, and with this characteristic, it remained silent as to the problems of the formation and development of man. However, what is interesting for us is to trace, relying on the Qur'ānic data, the history of the formation of Islam and the history of the founder of this great religion and the period in which he lived. Depending on that, we regard the Qur'ān as a first-class historical source and adopt it as our mission to make it speak with an in-depth interpretation.²⁰

In addition, Paret expressed his Schleiermacherian hermeneutical concerns regarding Qur'ānic studies²¹ mixed with his time's Cartesian approach:

What was out there for us to do was only to refer to the materials in the Qur'ān and do some *psychological* analysis when needed. We probed a phenomenon from very far away (in terms not only of time but also of culture), and, while doing this, we embraced the attitude of an impartial observer who had no other responsibility except scientific objectivism toward the subject that was researched, although we were very interested in the subject.²²

19 See Paret, *Kur'an Üzerine*, 30. The original word for the Turkish term "*vahiy tarihi*" (history of the revelation) is *Heilsgeschichte*, which means "*Kurtuluş Tarihi*" (History of the Salvation). This concept is employed by conservative theologians, Oscar Cullman in particular, against the idea of liberal Christian theologians that the message of Jesus is an ordinary historical reality, and it stresses the salvationist function of Jesus. Accordingly, the history of the Holy Scriptures should be treated differently from general history. The Holy Scriptures should be regarded as the record of a sacred history. This concept has been transferred to Islam and employed to imply the view that interprets history from a historical angle. Regarding this issue, see Paçacı, *Kur'an'da ve Kitab-ı Mukaddes'te*, 34 ff.

20 Paret, *Kur'an Üzerine*, 118 ff.

21 Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer, Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 13–15. Schleiermacher defined the hermeneutical problem as reaching a true understanding of the intentions of the author. It lays emphasis on analyzing the contextuality of the author, proposing a "psychological interpretation." Thus, according to him, it is possible to reach a methodical understanding by reconstructing the process of the production of a text.

22 Paret, *Kur'an Üzerine*, 70.

It was impossible that some developments in the West would not influence the underdog Islamic world and Islamic thought as the West became an influential cultural hub. A great part of the Islamic world had already become acquainted with the West by coming under its domination. Consequently, the tendency to interpret the Qur'ān within, for instance, a scientific framework,²³ emerged in a forceful fashion. These tendencies had appeared before in the West, pertaining to the exegesis of the Holy Scriptures and caused significant concern to the Church.²⁴ This time, the question of the extent to which the historical, cosmological, and geographical information in the Qur'ān fit the scientific findings appeared in Islamdom. The discussion of these topics appears to have lost its rigor with the postmodern discovery that Western science is not a unique statement of the truth. Another matter of controversy brought about by a historicist approach is the question of the degree to which the Qur'ānic stories regarding the ancient tribes reflect historical facts.²⁵ These controversies and the quests for responding to them led to the formation of various tensions in Islamic culture. Similarly, claims have been made about likely historical inaccuracies in the Qur'ān. This matter has been another point of tension. An interesting and typical example is Watt's claim that the information in the Qur'ān about Christians and Jews is inaccurate, which is a claim that behooves an Orientalist.²⁶ The Qur'ān counts Mary among the components of the belief in the Trinity. However, Christians do not consider Mary to be included in the Trinity. Similarly, the Qur'ān states that Jesus was not crucified but seemed to be so to the people. In contrast, the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection are fundamental religious beliefs in Christianity. Similarly, the Qur'ān writes that the Jews regard 'Uzayr as the son of God, but this belief has no place in Jewish theology.

According to Watt, these claims of the Qur'ān must rely on the inaccurate knowledge of Hijāzī Arabs about Judaism and Christianity. Instead of correcting such knowledge, the Qur'ān embraced it without changes and criticized the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) on this basis. In other words, according to Watt, this criticism by the Qur'ān is without an interlocutor and does not reflect historical facts. This and similar claims can be rebutted by studying the historical

23 On this subject, see J.M.S. Baljon, *Kur'an Yorumunda Çağdaş Yönelimler*, trans. Şaban Ali Düzgün (Ankara: Fecr, 1994), 113 ff.

24 The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible* (Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 9 ff.

25 On this subject, see İdris Şengül, *Kur'an Kıssaları Üzerine* (İzmir: Işık, 1994), 102–116.

26 Watt, *Hiz. Muhammed'in Mekkesi*, 25–26.

circumstances in which the Qurʾān was revealed, by accurately employing the historicist perspective and by demonstrating the partial standpoints of those who claim them. In the first place, Watt's claim did not consider the history of Judaism and Christianity in their entirety. He took these religions in their ideal definition but did not consider whether there were varied theological disagreements among these religions at a certain period and in certain places. However, it is a known fact that some Christian communities regarded Mary highly and called her the Mother of God (*Theotokos* in Greek, *Mater Dei* in Latin), and that the public saw her as a figure deserving worship.²⁷ Moreover, the Christians living in the region of Ḥijāz deemed Mary a person of the Trinity.²⁸ The existence of a historical–religious group, the Docetists, who argued that Jesus was not crucified but seemed to be so to the people, which the Qurʾān also expresses, is a historical fact.²⁹ Similarly, people know that ʿUzayr is significant for Jews. They even know that he was called the second Moses because he performed exceedingly well when he gathered divine texts after the Babylonian Exile. It is by no means surprising that such an important figure received extreme veneration from some communities. For instance, there is a narrative that the Yemeni Jews attributed to ʿUzayr such a position.³⁰ Watt digresses from the historicist perspective and takes refuge in the Christian and Jewish dogma and theology. It is possible to determine that the claims put forth in this manner hinge on the reason that the historical method adopted by the researcher is not harnessed as it should be.³¹

Apart from these matters of controversy, the fact that the historicist method at hand is employed today by Muslims more comprehensively than in the past, not in a secular sense but within a technical–methodical framework, has become another matter of controversy. What I intend to focus on is this controversy, which lingers among those who assert that the Qurʾān is not only the intervention of God into history in the seventh century CE, but also an intervention for all times. This is a discussion among the believers in the Qurʾān, namely, Muslims. Claiming that “the Qurʾān tells nothing whatsoever for today”—a

27 Samuel G.F. Brandon, “Mary,” in *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion*, ed. Samuel G.F. Brandon (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970), 431.

28 Thomas Michel, *Hristiyan Tanrıbilimine Giriş* (Istanbul: Ohan, 1992), 70 ff.

29 Samuel G.F. Brandon “Docetism,” in *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion*, ed. Samuel G.F. Brandon (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970), 245.

30 On this subject, see Mehmet Paçacı, “Kurʾan-ı Kerim Işığında Vahiy Geleneğine—Kitab-ı Mukaddes Bağlamında—Bir Bakış,” *İslami Araştırmalar* VIII, no. 2 (1991), 191.

31 For a similar example, see Fazlur Rahman, *Ana Konularıyla Kurʾan* (Ankara: Fecr, 1993), 286 ff.

view accepted by many Orientalists—may only shift the discussion to another ground.³² Conversely, the claim that Muslim historians centered their research on Western humanist–positivist thinking and interpreted Islam accordingly is an overstatement. It is true that they have been influenced by Western disciplines and perspectives. However, they share this serious problem—one that is peculiar to Muslims—with others who do not espouse the same approach. Moreover, it is almost impossible to find a scholarly, intellectual, and political attitude in Islamdom in the past two centuries that has not been influenced by Western thinking. Indeed, Muslims have certainly come under the influence of postmodernity after modernity.³³ However, to return to the main topic of discussion, the following is a fact: those who argue on the grounds that are discussed in this article, no matter by what they have been influenced, accept that the Qur'ān has the authority to address yesterday, today, and the future. The crux of the discussion is the issue of *how* the intervention of the Qur'ān will be effectuated for all times.

The most distinctive of the historicist approach to the Qur'ān can be observed in the works of the late Fazlur Rahman. In the project on the Qur'ānic hermeneutics that he proposed in *Islam and Modernity*, Fazlur Rahman elaborated this approach and claimed that the first condition to understand the Qur'ān is to examine the period in which it was revealed.³⁴ Conversely, he defined the Qur'ān as “the divine word literally revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad (between 610 and 632 CE).”³⁵ The Revelation determined his understanding of history. For example, Watt and the Orientalists, in general, discussed—in line with the characteristic approach of modernity—the notion of monotheism that had developed in an evolutionary way until the time of Muḥammad. Accordingly, the Arabs before Muḥammad somehow had come to monotheism from polytheism, and the emergence of Muḥammad was the result.³⁶ However, although he found similar views convincing since these rely on historical facts, Fazlur Rahman developed his objection to these on the idea that the belief in God brought by Muḥammad was a revealed faith:

These views are true expressions of neither the formation of Islam nor of its nature. It is true that some people had reached a monotheistic notion

32 See Paret, *Kur'an Üzerine*, 17–18.

33 See Ali Yaşar Sarıbay, *Postmodernite, Sivil Toplum ve İslam* (Ankara: İletişim, 1995), 37 ff.

34 Fazlur Rahman, *İslam ve Çağdaşlık* (Ankara: Fecr, 1996), 73–74.

35 Rahman, *İslam ve Çağdaşlık*, 68.

36 See Watt, *Hız. Muhammed'in Mekkesi*, 62–69; Fazlur Rahman, *İslam* (Ankara: Selçuk, 1981),

of religion; however, there is no reason to believe that their one God was the same as Muḥammad's one God.³⁷

In his work, *Islamic Methodology in History*, in which he applied the method in question to the disciplines of the Sunna and ḥadīth, Fazlur Rahman stated that the content of the Islamic system has been determined in history and that it would gain true meaning only within the context shaped by the circumstances of the time.³⁸ However, he was also aware that this system could never be approached with a secular historicism:

God speaks and the Prophet acts *in*, although certainly not merely *for*, a given historical context. This is what marks a prophet out from a visionary or even a mystic. The Qur'ān itself is replete with such evidence with regard both to the history of the past and the then contemporary scene. And yet the message must—despite its being clothed in the flesh and blood of a particular situation—outflow through and beyond that given context of history.³⁹

Next, I examine the matters of controversy between what may be called the universalist approach and the historicist approach, which are opposed to each other. According to historicists, a view that is based on the idea that the particular historical–religious pronouncements (*naṣṣ*) are universal, faces the danger of missing the contextuality of all individuals and generations after the Revelation because that view transfers the judgments, which belong to a particular period, to all ages despite their differences and imposes them on all societies. It is possible here to realize the concern not to ignore and transgress the basic judgments of the Qur'ān by deeming them historical.⁴⁰ Conversely, the other party claims that these judgments cannot be confined to a particular period of history for they address all ages, and that the point to which historicism will bring us is to imprison the Qur'ān in the period in which it was revealed. The historicist approach emphasizes the historical circumstances in which the Qur'ān was revealed, which leads to restricting the authority of the Qur'ān to

37 Rahman, *İslam*, 13.

38 Fazlur Rahman, *Tarih Boyunca İslami Metodoloji Sorunu* (Ankara: Ankara Okulu, 1995), 149.

39 Rahman, *Metodoloji*, 23, 81; for Rahman's objection to the Orientalists regarding the claims about the contextuality of the Qur'ān and its source, see also Rahman, *Ana Konularıyla*, 277.

40 See Rahman, *Metodoloji*, 149.

that period. In turn, historicists answer that they study the historical period in which the Qur'ân was revealed because it allows them to better understand the universal principles it contains and that they do not adopt this approach for the purpose of confining the Qur'ân to that period.⁴¹ They consider that the transfer of the message of the Qur'ân to other ages can only be actualized by applying its universal principles to new historical contexts. Universalists, who regard the particular historical elements as universal, are disturbed by the emphasis on the universal principles in the Qur'ân at the expense of particular historical elements. According to them, the Qur'ân and Islam are reduced to merely several universal principles and almost no other boundary is drawn, and thus, Islam is rendered ambiguous and left to individual opinions.

Among these different views, a discussion on the politico-cultural non-supremacy of Islam continues. According to historicists, the predicament of Islam vis-à-vis Western civilization stems from the confinement of its universal principles to that civilization's historical envelopes, which renders them ineffective. They assert that to energize and reactivate a civilization that has become cumbersome and cannot respond to new problems, the historical approach is necessary. According to universalists, there is actually no problem regarding the applicability of the Qur'ân. The Qur'ân is in people's hands, waiting to be applied. It addresses all ages and is applicable. Therefore, without losing time, people should move on to implementation and first save Muslims and then all humanity.

I believe that the tension between the two views can be summarized in this way. However, as will be immediately observed, this discussion goes on as a core issue of Islamic thought. The claim that Muslim historicists, with a humanist-rationalist approach, replace the Qur'ânic principles regarding faith and morality with an entirely secular reason should be regarded as an unjust, mistaken argument because it complicates the problem with its bizarre insinuations. It appears that the treatment of the Qur'ân with a historicist outlook has created a new debate on reason and revelation in our tradition. With this dimension, the discussion has a character with which we are familiar. Those who embrace historicism point out that they seek to reinvigorate the Islamic civilization by arguing for more human involvement in the process of understanding the sources of Islam, thereby applying it to new circumstances in which people live. The point of departure of this argument is that God sent His Revelation via a messenger and that He spoke in human circumstances and in a certain period of history to a people speaking Arabic by breaking into time

41 Rahman, *İslam ve Çağdaşlık*, 63.

and place in history. He revealed His Word. In this respect, while understanding His Word and bringing it to our own circumstances, these historical and human circumstances must be considered. However, opponents of this view are concerned that with this emphasis on humans, they and their reasoning will be elevated over the Revelation. The debate centers on how broad the human involvement will be and the extent to which the human element can be trusted. At this point, it is necessary to recall that the discussion has a long history in the Islamic tradition. The discussion is basically a debate on *method*. Therefore, the discussion of the historicism of the Qurʾān continues not on an imported and pathological ground, as is often assumed, but within the debates between the Ḥanafī–Mālikī and Shāfiʿī–Ḥanbalī schools, or between the supporters of *raʾy* (personal opinion) and the supporters of ḥadīth—grounds that are native to our own tradition.

After establishing the grounds of this discussion in the Islamic tradition in this manner, I seek to identify some aspects of the nature of the discussion. The grounds of the discussion identified here focus on guiding human life, which is the most basic goal of the Qurʾān, and on changing the world. Muslims should devote all their efforts to this aspect. The Qurʾān intends to create a society based on moral foundations.⁴² In this respect, the Qurʾān is a moral religious Revelation and treats other subjects and fields to the extent that they support this basic subject.⁴³ Setting off from here, it is essential to dwell a little more on the nature of the Qurʾān to determine how much of the Qurʾān is historical and how much is universal.

Making an ethical judgment requires striking a relationship between universal (*kullī*) moral principles and particular (*juzʿī*) circumstances, in which a universal principle is applied to a factual historical condition. As for moral knowledge, it is necessary to know how a universal moral principle is applied to a particular historical condition.⁴⁴ It is possible to say that what is done in the Qurʾān is nothing but that. In the Qurʾān, moral universal principles are applied to particular circumstances in a specific place and time. These particular historical circumstances are called *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of the Revelation). There is a historical pronouncement here, but a universal moral principle underlies it. In one sense, the judgments that were applied to the historical circumstances are the manifestations of the universal moral principles,

42 Rahman, *Ana Konularyla*, 99.

43 Ismāil Rāji al-Fārūqī, “Kurʾan’ın Yorumunda Yeni Bir Metodolojiye Doğru,” trans. Mehmet Paçacı, *İslami Araştırmalar*, VII, no. 3–4 (1994): 7.

44 See Warnke, *Gadamer, Hermeneutics*, 93.

which are accepted in the Qur'ān, on particular historical grounds.⁴⁵ In this respect, the pronouncements in the Qur'ān are historical pronouncements. The Qur'ān is historical in this sense. However, behind these pronouncements stand the universal principles of the Qur'ān, which are the reasons they were manifested in a particular Qur'ānic manner. The Qur'ān is universal in this sense, and whether one can understand the Qur'ān and bring it to one's historical context hinges on whether one presumes the existence of such a structure in the Qur'ān. This characteristic of the Qur'ān stems from its being a Word that addresses humans through a human messenger. The actualization of divine discourse within human limitations is the underlying reason for this presumption. It is because of this humanness and historical context that there has been no need in the Islamic tradition for a Church-like institution, which emerged with a superhistorical dogma as well as the requirement to protect this dogma and to which a superhistorical authority is attributed. It can be said that *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence) and the institution of *ijtihād* (interpretations produced by independent reasoning) are based on this assumption. In the process of *ijtihād*, scholars identify the more universal (*'illa, sabab, hikma*) and, gradually, the most universal, principles (*maṣlaḥa, maqāṣid, 'adāla*) in the form that these are defined in the Qur'ān, behind its particular pronouncements, and then apply these to their own historical circumstances.⁴⁶ In *uṣūl al-fiqh*, one of the most significant ways to find the purposes of the particular judgments that the sources have conveyed is to identify the factual causes of these judgments. In this respect, *sabab al-nuzūl* (circumstances of the Revelation) and *sabab al-wurūd* (occasions of occurrence) are important.⁴⁷ Further, whether

45 Regarding the relationship between the universals and particulars, see Warnke, *Gadamer, Hermeneutics*, 93.

46 On this subject, see Hayrettin Karaman, *İslam Hukukunda İctihad* (Ankara: Directorate of Religious Affairs, 1985), 25–33, 151.

47 See Aḥmad Ḥasan, *Analogical Reasoning in Islamic Jurisprudence* (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1986), 239 ff. Those who study *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence) have always considered the historical circumstances of the pronouncements (*niṣuṣ*) in determining the *ratios legis* (*'ilal*) and divine intentions (*ḥikam*). For example, the historicist approach that Rahman highlighted in his project *Qur'ānic Hermeneutics* is geared toward nothing but this end:

We see, then, that the Qur'ān and the genesis of the Islamic community occurred in the light of history and against a social-historical background. The Qur'ān is a response to that situation, and for the most part it consists of moral, religious, and social pronouncements that respond to specific problems confronted in concrete historical situations ... But, even where simple answers are given, it is possible to understand their reasons and hence deduce general laws by studying the background materials, which for the most part have been fairly intelligibly presented by the commentators. (Rahman, *İslam ve Çağdaşlık*, 63)

these pronouncements are *Makkī* or *Madanī* is important to unearth the more general historical circumstances. Similarly, it is possible to know which particular pronouncement (*nāsikh*) abrogates which pronouncement (*mansūkh*) in the history of Revelation by knowing the historical circumstances in which the pronouncements were revealed. Thus, historical knowledge is required to know the reasons and the purposes of the particular pronouncements uttered in the verses.

However, it is necessary here to distinguish between the historical–practical (*ʿamalī*) pronouncements in the Qurʾān and the historical pronouncements spawned by man. This is the case, at least for Muslims who believe that these historical pronouncements are, above all, made on a transcendent level—that is, the divine level—which is superior to human knowledge. However, these pronouncements are made by considering human circumstances. As they are made on the level of divine knowledge, these pronouncements are not different from the historical pronouncements structurally, although they are different ontologically and epistemologically. This difference originates from the fact that God is Omniscient. As He is Omniscient, the judgments He makes are inherently and absolutely right. This, in itself, reflects the distinct nature of His judgments. The reason we can fathom these judgments that were made on the transcendent level is because they were uttered by taking human circumstances into consideration and were structurally similar to human judgments. The Qurʾān offers a set of judgments whose rightness is certain and which are historical but objective. These ethical–religious judgments are undoubtedly right judgments within their own historical contexts. The meaning of this fact is that the Qurʾān allows people to reach reliably the universal principles described in it as right, via particular historical judgments.

For a Muslim, the particular historical judgments in the Qurʾān are sources of the right descriptions of these universal principles in it. Therefore, there is an unquestionable sound source from which one can rightly learn the most basic principles. However, historical judgments made within the limits of human knowledge lack this definitiveness, because there is no criterion to determine the indubitable rightness of judgments made on the human level. People may make right judgments that are true within their own historical contexts, but substantiating the rightness of such judgments within human circumstances is impossible because the subject cannot be removed from the process, and there is no criterion to assess the good deed (*ʿamal*) of the subject within the process.⁴⁸ Those who study *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence) have

48 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), 92–95,

identified the position of the subject in the process of making judgments.⁴⁹ Embracing a contrary opinion will necessitate accepting that human judgments are of the same rightness and definitiveness as those in the Qur'ān, although the criterion needed to do so is unavailable.

At this very point, the element at this side of the process of understanding—the understanding element (subject) and their historical context—comes into prominence. The historical circumstances surrounding the subject, and the fact that the subject approaches the Qur'ān within the context of these circumstances, grasps its historical pronouncements, comprehends its universal principles, and applies them to the historical circumstances of the Qur'ān, are themselves the most significant aspects of the historical context of the process of such understanding.⁵⁰ As the subjects engaged in understanding, we approach the Qur'ān from within the constraints and concerns of our own historical moment. The problem becomes difficult on this side of this issue because there is a problem primarily on the existential level, which creates

115–121. Aristotle's insights into the nature of making moral–practical judgments can shed light on this discussion. MacIntyre evaluated these insights as follows: According to Aristotle, scientific knowledge (*episteme*) differs from practical–moral reasoning (*phronesis*). Experience is significant in practical knowledge. More experienced individuals can make more appropriate judgments. As people depend entirely on their experiences in making practical judgments, the principles of the rightness of a deed are present in the deed that is done. Likewise, Aristotle stated that practical judgments cannot be shaped by rules because these judgments pertain to particular situations that cannot be encompassed even by the rules that are formulated in the best way. In making practical–moral judgments, there is no single reliable way by which one can reach more difficult, more complex judgments from simple ones, and which one can use to corroborate these complex ones. In the same vein, a single way by which one can arrive at more complex definitions of “justice” from simple ones does not exist. Although there are methods to assess the efficiency of a complex judgment one makes, there is no single reliable way or criterion by which one can gauge the rightness of the judgment. For instance, one can come to make more just judgments over time by reaching a more appropriate definition of justice and knowing particular incidents better or by comparing the decisions one makes with those of others in a dialectical relationship. Nonetheless, outside of these decisions, there is no criterion by which we can measure their rightness. According to Aristotle, although there is natural justice, people differ in formulating justice, and there is a lack of universal agreement on the understanding of justice. According to him, such agreement may exist only among the gods. In making practical–moral judgments, people attempt to determine why a particular situation is the application of a universal principle or they understand that the application of a certain universal principle in a certain way is the right application, but there is no certain rule for this process.

49 See Mehmet Paçacı, “Anlama (fikh) Usulüne Dair,” *İslami Araştırmalar* 8, no. 2 (1995): 90–91.

50 See Karaman, *İctihad*, 176.

an unacceptable existential vacuum. The existence of the subject that understands and applies the pronouncements of the Qur'ān is dubious. Therefore, it is difficult to talk of an "understanding"⁵¹ because the process of understanding contains not only the subject understanding the text but also the subject applying the text they have understood to their situation. The understanding is accomplished insofar as the subject can bring the meaning of the text to their own historical context. The task of the subject is not to reiterate what is told in the text. Understanding a text means understanding that text every moment again and interpreting it in the face of new situations. In this sense, understanding is contextual as much as the contextuality of the text. A true understanding is accomplished when one applies the meaning of the text to one's own historical context, when one finds a place in that context for that meaning. Moreover, an understanding that considers only the circumstances in which the text has been written but cannot come back to one's own historical context is an inadequate understanding because a text exists not to be comprehended in its own historical circumstances but to be concretized again in other historical contexts by being interpreted.⁵² In this respect, Muslims' experience an existential impoverishment born of their inability to bring into the present the Islam with which they see themselves associated.

For Muslims, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were a period replete with great defeats, sufferings, and chagrins. Muslims have experienced failure, breakdown, and setback in economic, military, scholarly, cultural, educational, social, and individual respects. I will try here to dwell not on the reasons for these defeats but on the historical circumstances that these have created. As a result of defeats, Muslims and their civilization have been swept away from the scene of history. Of course, I do not mean that the people and the communities called Muslims vanished or were wiped off the face of the earth,

51 Kenneth Baynes, "Rational Reconstruction and Social Criticism: Habermas's Model of Interpretive Social Sciences," in *Hermeneutics and Critical Theory in Ethics and Politics*, ed. Michael Kelly (London: MIT Press, 1990), 124.

52 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), 308–310. Gadamer claimed that it is essential to adopt theological and legal hermeneutics as the model to facilitate the process of understanding holistically because the concern of historians is limited to the circumstances in which the text that they study has been written and to the psychology of the writer. Therefore, he criticized the romantic hermeneutics that sees Schleiermacher and the process of understanding only within the framework of the contextuality of the text. However, as the purpose of a muftī (interpreter of the Islamic law), qāḍī (Muslim judge), or secular judge is to carry the meaning of a pronouncement to its own historical context, his concern includes his own historical context as well. Also see 327 ff.

but that Muslims have been pushed out of history and remained there after these developments. Whether Muslims like it or not, the Western civilization shapes human relationships of every kind in the world today. Muslims still have almost no contribution and no say in economic, military, cultural, scholarly, or aesthetic fields. No type of relationship is configured according to Islam. This situation in which Muslims live now is very difficult. The Muslim generation live in this world, but they cannot give any direction to events or activities in the world and cannot be effective in the course of events. They are inside history but *de facto* outside it; they are in the position of passive objects. Muslims believe that this history is wrong and is being made by bad people and civilizations who have become servile to Satan; those who are making history are those who commit injustices, exploitation, and inhuman crimes in the world. With the apologetic manner of a propagandist, the Muslim goes on like this: If Islam had command of this world, none of these things that are going on would have happened. Islam recommends the most “beautiful” human relationships, the most “magnificent” economic relationships, the most “organized” system and so on. Islam has nothing to do with the crimes that are being committed. Thus, Muslims cannot have a place in such a historical situation. The bad mentality that has engendered the problems of this historical situation must find a solution to these problems. The effort to produce Islamic solutions to the problems that another civilization has created is wrong because these problems are their problems. Islam either exists holistically with its system or it does not exist. Islam cannot be practiced piecemeal. The Muslim considers this modern history to be a *spurious* history, which should not exist. Naturally, this may only be the reactive attitude of a skewed consciousness that could not find its personality and generated such an attitude for self-defense. When one asks the Muslims today about their recommendations for solving the problems that were caused by human, economic, sexual, and familial relationships shaped by the current historical context, the response in many Muslim parts of the world may be as follows: Islam has its answer to these issues, and they are very “thorough” and “beautiful” answers, but these problems are not our problems; they are the problems of others who have created the current situation; they must find solutions to them; if we *prevail* in the world, we will put into practice the solutions of these problems in the Islamic way.

We Muslims take as our basis the historical context in which the Qur'ān was revealed; we accept as authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) only this historical context and those that are similar to it, and because we do not accept as authentic those historical contexts that have developed in different ways, we do not have to become involved in these *spurious* historical contexts. Although we may have a solution for them, humanity can make use of our solution only when we prevail. If one

pays close attention, it becomes clear that the prevailing mood is not one of seeking solutions to humanity's current problems, but rather, one of indifference and postponement. For example, the historical form of the relationship between man and woman, and their roles in the economy at the time when the Revelation of the Qur'an ended, is fundamental. The Qur'an provides solutions to the problems of this historical context and similar circumstances. The circumstances except for these ones, that is, the historical contexts in which the roles of man and woman in the economy differed from this original situation, are *spurious* circumstances. It is not up to the Qur'an to develop religious-moral judgments, that is, to produce novel solutions for these circumstances. According to this view, it is not possible to decide about inheritance within the framework of the Qur'an by considering these circumstances,⁵³ because this understanding does not have the skill, will, and capacity to reconcile the Qur'an and the historical context in which we live. The unacceptable consequence of this is to remain necessarily outside of history. Muslims are gradually espousing this condition. Given such an attitude, a Muslim trader trades but she experiences the difficult mood of conducting this trade within economic relations that are illegal for Islam. Perhaps more important, the Muslim community has nothing to say about the economic relations called *repurchase agreements*. Its apologetic and reactionary response leads only for it to remain outside this economy. Therefore, while the capital of a Muslim trader continuously dwindles and weakens, those who make unjust profits from the economic system grow stronger and greater. Muslim scholars have nothing to do but to recommend that Muslim traders await the supremacy of Islam. However, the question of how a community that steadily shrinks economically will one day hold sway over the world does not receive attention. Thus, the principles of the protection of property, life, reason, progeny, and even religion are in danger.

In this situation, Islam is *de facto* outside history because how Islam should organize economic relations in the current historical context has not been understood. I use the word understanding here in the hermeneutical or *ijtihādī*⁵⁴ sense. We have not attained the universal principles of the Qur'an by

53 However, in the history of Islam, making judgments by "considering the spirit and the purpose of the shari'a as well as its shape and form" according to the changing historical circumstances has been applied since the outset. The Companions of Muḥammad (*aṣḥāb*) made judgments by considering the original purpose of the shari'a. Their practices "even show that they made modifications that would actualize this purpose in judgments and punishments" (Karaman, *Īctihād*, 77; for further examples, see 30–33, 77–79).

54 Karaman, *Īctihād*, 22. *Ijtihād* is summarily defined as "understanding the religion and applying it to the practical life."

setting out from its particular moral pronouncements and have not produced, on the basis of these principles, its proposal about the economic relations in this historical context in which we de facto live. However misguided it may be, this remains a lived historical context—and within the framework of the Qur'ān's principles, a solution can still be found. The statement that the Qur'ān has a solution to problems of every age should be understood in this way, not that we should live in every age in the historical context in which the Revelation was delivered. The approach of the messengers of God was also in line with this direction. However, Muslims are left in a position to wait for the coming again of a similar historical context because they cannot afford to live in the historical context that they take to be real. This is the way that the existential vacuum of the understanding subject of the Muslim, in the process of understanding, comes into existence. The people and the mentalities that Muslims consider to be misguided necessarily fill the vacuum with their own ways.

Humanity lives in a terrible injustice in every aspect. At the time of writing, 80% of the natural resources of the earth today are consumed and controlled by 20% of the overall population. Every year, this imbalance leads to 40 million deaths, of which 15.5 million are children, according to the United Nations Children's Fund, because of malnutrition and famine. This means that the model of economic growth of the most privileged costs the poorest deaths that are equal in every two days to the number of those who died in Hiroshima. In such a world, Muslims should ask themselves this question very seriously: How can these injustices happen in a world in which there are Muslims? At which part of history are Muslims standing while these are taking place? They should also ask a much more existential question: What does the Muslim do in this world; of what use is he? Do Muslims have a choice not to enter history, in which we de facto live, and to not interfere until these mistakes somehow end because this history is not made by us but by wrong and bad people and civilizations? Can we accept that the times in which we in fact live are not lived? What does the fact that the Qur'ān was revealed for all ages mean for us? Does the adoption of the notion of *spurious* historical contexts not mean distinguishing between the historical context to which the Qur'ān can be applied and the ones to which it cannot? Here is the difficulty with the universalist view: it loses its universalism at this point. Such an understanding can never give rise to a new Islamic civilization, because it cannot enter, shape, or change any real historical context, and instead, waits in vain outside of history for a context that is, for it, entirely utopian. The odds of an understanding, which cannot prevail in history, to reach such a situation is left to chance. What is up to Muslims in any case is to produce judgments that are congruent with the Qur'ān for historical conditions and to produce *ijtihāds* (interpretations produced by independent

reasoning). Muslims need to solve their existential problems and to have their existence accepted by history.

A perspective that creates confusion here should be distinguished from the aforementioned concerns. These understandable concerns should be distinguished from a naive discourse that argues that punishments implemented today should be more modern and humane(!), and emphasizes the punishments of *hudūd* (punishments fixed in the Qurʾān and the ḥadīth) and the place of women in Muslim societies. It seems that this discourse has developed because of the attitude that seeks to defend Islam against secularist and positivist attacks, which claim that Islam is a backward, ungraceful, inhumane religion. Confusing the desire of Muslims to change history by re-entering it with these pseudo-concerns will result in nothing but the creation of new quasi-problems for Muslims. The attempt to alter the *aḥkām* (the rules of Islamic law) with these unreal justifications is not the internal problem of Muslims but the imposition on them of a groundless problem, which has been shaped outside of them. Regarding the contextualist concerns as identical to these pseudo-concerns and judging them by this view will only make the already difficult problems of Muslims who could not manage to enter history more difficult and more confusing. Such a judgment will not be able to create a solution for Muslims' benefit, and it will cause the noble purpose of entering history to be treated as a pseudo-problem. Therefore, this problem of Muslims will remain unresolved. Whether a discussion constitutes a problem peculiar to Muslims depends on whether Muslims—and others—stand to benefit from its solution.

Entering history and giving it direction has its difficulties and risks. The most important problem here for a Muslim is to enter a historical context that has not been shaped by Muslims and, despite this, to apply Qurʾānic judgments and to remain Muslim. It is necessary to accept here that we are individuals of the historical context in which we exist. We face a duty to observe the universal elements in the Qurʾān, elements that do not change and should not be changed, and its constantly changing history.⁵⁵ The universal principles given to us in the Qurʾān are presented in historical envelopes.⁵⁶ In this respect, both elements have their own functions. What should we think of the historical elements that are the holders of the universal principles and their contours? Should we consider them only to be containers and holders, or should we give

55 Cf. Baynes, "Rational Reconstruction," 124.

56 Roger Garaudy, *Yaşayan İslam*, trans. Mehmet Bayraktar (Istanbul: Pınar, 1995), 99. Garaudy contends that "the Qurʾān reveals us eternal values: It reveals them to us with particular answers it gave to certain historical issues."

them greater importance? At this point, it is important to clarify the historical and universal elements of the Qur'ān; the natures, boundaries, and functions of these elements; and the form of the relationship between them; and to answer the question of how the relationship between these two elements should be shaped. The answer one gives to this question would contain cues about the type of method of understanding or approach of *ijtihād* one has designed.

Understanding and applying the Qur'ān are possible by reaching the universal essence behind its historical pronouncements. However, the contextuality of the person who understands affects the meaning. The circumstances in which one lives and the mentalities widespread at the time are the factors affecting the understanding of the subject. The understanding occurs in a historical setting. The meanings of the pronouncements and of the historical events change as the historical perspective changes. The meanings of historical facts change according to the historical context from which they are examined. Perspective is necessarily effective in understanding, and historical understanding is necessarily partial. It is not possible to grasp events superhistorically, in the manner in which God grasps them, in the way that would encompass all the knowledge, and it is not possible to reach an objective understanding. In this respect, historical understanding is always the expression of a historical perspective and is not independent of the historical circumstances, and, therefore, it cannot be objective.⁵⁷

Now, this characteristic in the nature of the process of the historical understanding is the characteristic that underlies the concern behind Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī's (d. 204/820) opposition to *istiḥṣān* (juristic preference), because in *istiḥṣān* or generally in *ijtihād*,⁵⁸ the subjectivity and contextuality of the *mujtahid* (one who exercises independent reasoning, *ijtihād*) play a role in how religion is understood—and, in a certain sense, in religion itself.⁵⁹ The historical context of *mujtahids* in which they live and their knowledge, morality, and psychological moods⁶⁰ affect their evaluations of historical pro-

57 Warnke, *Gadamer, Hermeneutics*, 19 ff.

58 Mehmet Paçacı, "İmam Şafi'nin Metodunda Özenin Yeri" (Unpublished conference paper presented at the 2nd Symposium on Islamic Thought, Trabzon, 1995), 3.

59 See Baynes, "Rational Reconstruction," 124. In the process of understanding, one must comprehend the reasons for the pronouncement from one's own angle.

60 Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Risāla*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Turāth, 1979), 510. See Karaman, *İctihad*, 176. Further, see MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 106, 127. MacIntyre reveals that Aristotle asserted that individuals must have a strong character and must be courageous and generous to make sound, just, and practical judgments. They must also be experienced and well-educated and should not act with the desire of earning money and reputation.

nouncements and define the most fundamental principles on that basis. This is one of the leading concerns of the universalist approach today. Unless Muslims apply the historical Qur'ānic pronouncements as they are, the concern about the alteration and distortion of the religion, or, in al-Shāfi'i's words, the danger of *legislating with taking pleasure in it*,⁶¹ remains. This is the fear that the historical context in which we live will pull us into itself and assimilate us. However, as will immediately be observed, this is a defensive stance and the greatest obstacle to Muslims' intervention into history through *ijtihād*.

This fear confuses two things that are wholly different from each other. The first is that tradition entirely loses its point of reference and withers away by losing its identity in history. This is a passive and apologetic stance. The second is that tradition changes its point of reference according to itself by entering history without losing sight of its point of reference. This is an active and effective stance. In this respect, there is a danger that the view that does not value the historical part of the Revelation—that does not consider its own point of reference—may face a situation such as this: losing all its reference in its history and tradition and thus succumbing to another tradition and merging into it. In the history of Revelation, the situation that befell Christianity after Jesus can be the greatest example of this situation. Jesus was an Israelite (Banū Isrā'īl) prophet who followed the sharī'a of Moses and who acknowledged him.⁶² In the Christianity that was shaped after Jesus, historical pronouncements carrying the basic principles of the revelation lost their holders because of St. Paul,⁶³ who says, "But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code."⁶⁴ Following this stance, once the historical pronouncements that determined the definitions and outlines of the Revelational values were discarded, new holders for these were required, and these holders became the holders of the Hellenic tradition. Thus, the definitions of the principles changed together with their holders. Christianity lost its tradition; it should have remained in the Semitic tradition, but it jumped into the Hellenic tradition and perished in it. The new situation that developed shaped the basic concepts of the religion, including their positions, definitions, and functions in the system. The definitions of the basic values Israelite prophets and Jesus adopted were altered. The religion of God was distorted. The theology

61 al-Shāfi'i, *al-Risāla*, 507; al-Shāfi'i, *Umm*, 6:203.

62 Matthew 5:17.

63 To the Romans 3:19; to the Galatians 3:10–29; to Timothy 1:3–11; Acts of the Apostles 15:5–15.

64 To the Romans 7:6.

was shaped in such a way that there was no need to examine the historical pronouncements determining the universal principles, although they existed at that time. Instead of these documents, the mythology and philosophy of the Hellenic tradition were embraced as the basis of the religion. Christianity could manage only by throwing itself out of history into a superhistorical dogma.⁶⁵ However, in the Islamic intellectual tradition, even the philosophers who represented the most marginal point in this respect never lost sight of the points of reference in the Qur'ān and the Sunna.

At this point, the contextuality of the Qur'ān and its historical pronouncements become significant. Otherwise, the *mujtahid* first will have no reference according to which they can identify the universal principles.⁶⁶ For example, what will the *mujtahid* refer to in arriving at judgments on various issues, such as homicide, abortion, self-defense, and euthanasia? Will they approve or disapprove of these? Regarding these issues, different cultures and traditions will adopt different attitudes because of differing definitions of the relevant basic concepts, such as man, life, death, justice, and afterlife. They can only attain their definitions by referring to the essential texts of their own cultures and previous historical concrete practices regarding this issue, that is, by examining the previous understandings and *ijtihad*. As historical contexts consistently change, *mujtahids'* understanding and application of the basic concepts in the Qur'ān and the universal principles will change as well. Nonetheless, the historical pronouncements in the Qur'ān will unceasingly impose on us the definitions of these basic concepts, the definitions that need to be conveyed. This should be the very reference point and normative side of the Islamic tradition.⁶⁷ Fazlur Rahman articulates the relations between the historical pronouncements and the universal elements in the Qur'ān as follows:

We especially and carefully reject that vagrant attitude of empty liberalism or negative spiritualism that seeks to drive a wedge between the form and the essence and says that what matters is the essence and that the

65 Schweitzer, *The Quest*, 3. Schweitzer indicated that the early Christian–Greek theology and eschatological theology that saw in Jesus an eschatological savior were both indifferent toward the historical Jesus whom the Gospels wrote about, and they developed an understanding of a new supernatural Bible later, which posed a threat against their dogma.

66 MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 97 ff. Aristotle stressed *polis* in this matter. Man lives in the *polis*, is trained by it, and learns its values and virtues. By implication, for a man to live virtuously and make right judgments, the *polis* is required. The one who is bereft of the criterion of justice of the *polis* will have no criterion in his hand, because it is the *polis* that provides him with this criterion.

67 Warnke, *Gadamer, Hermeneutics*, 95–97.

form is at best its cumbersome companion. *We say that the form and the essence are coevals, interdependent and each necessary and desirable.* But we know that even forms have a way of changing and yet remaining the same. What is injurious to a living faith and a living society is not forms but formalism (italics added).⁶⁸

In conclusion, we can say that entering history and developing a new civilization by proceeding along the tradition of the prophets is a serious existential problem for Muslims. Not only Muslims but also the whole of humanity await the renewal of the message of salvation of the Revelation that the prophets brought into their own historical contexts. This we can do for our historical context by taking the prophets as examples. For that, the Qurʾān is in our hands. The Muslim–historicist perspective directed toward the Qurʾān is the expression of this concern, which cannot be portrayed as the modification of the pronouncements of the Qurʾān or their being confined to a historical period. The goal is to make the Qurʾān intervene in the contextuality in which we exist, in the current circumstances of the world. What is proposed is to render the institution of *ijtihād* functional. In this respect, no one can have a right to claim that *ijtihād* will not be for the benefit of Islam and will lead to a reform in Islam in a period when modernity, or in other words, Satan, prevails. Such a claim can by no means be reconciled with the methods of the prophets. Instead of running away from the ignorance (*jāhiliyya*) of their ages, they set out to solve the problems of humanity that their ages engendered. No matter who builds a historical context, Muslims must give a response. This is the aim of the existence of a Muslim on the earth as Muslim. Otherwise, they cannot define themselves and cannot exist. Conversely, every type of ignorance is as human and historical as Islam. It is not that the paradigm of ignorance (*jāhiliyya*) belongs to the world and the paradigm of Islam to the realm of a super-world. The *livability* of Islam originates from here. The solutions and answers Islam will devise will develop on the ground of this earth, no matter how profane and secular the earth has grown. The prophets transitioned to the ground that fits the original human nature (*fiṭra*) very naturally by stepping first on the ground that the ignorance (*jāhiliyya*) before them designed in a wrong way. They accomplished their struggles (*mujāhada*) by proceeding with *ijtihād* step by step. If one cannot take the risk of stepping on this filthy ground for fear of becoming filthy, one can never arrive at the clean ground because both grounds exist on the earth.

68 Rahman, *Metodoloji*, 195.

In *ijtihād*, one necessarily must be interested in the history of the Qur'ānic judgments. However, this is a dynamic interest. The purpose is not to fix these judgments in that historical context forever. The purpose is to capture their universal messages and carry these messages to novel historical contexts. In his work *İslam Hukukunda İctihad (Ijtihād in Islamic Law)*, which is a defense of *ijtihād*, the likes of which we severely need today, esteemed scholar Karaman expressed:

[Imams of the *madhhabs*] not only have made judgments according to the legitimate *maşlahas* (public interests) where there is no relevant *naşş* (clear legal injunction of the Qur'ān and the Sunna), but they have also sometimes gone beyond *the wording of some of the legal injunctions (alfāz al-nuşūş)* by drawing on the ethos and the meaning or the general rules of the Book and the Sunna. No doubt that this attitude cannot be regarded as an opposition against the legal injunctions (*nuşūş*) as it depends on the principle that the judgment changes with the change of the “*ratio legis* (*illa*)” which is the ground of the dictate of the legal injunction (*naşş*).⁶⁹

What is done here is not to leave out some elements of the religion. The *nuşūş* of the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth* are the fundamental sources of Islam. However, the nature of the *nuşūş* should be explained, and their historical and universal components should be properly determined. The historical and universal components and their functions should not be confused. The historical judgments that the Qur'ān has carried to us as judgments whose rightness is certain will always continue to be the holder and container of the universal message of Islam. Via them alone do we have the possibility of attaining the right definitions of this message and of its principles. In this respect, they cannot be viewed as any set of historical judgments. This fact demonstrates the requirement that attention always be paid to the particular judgments in the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth*. Therefore, *ijtihād* is the outcome of the understanding that can properly handle these historical and universal elements of Islam. *Ijtihād* is the product of the concern to carry the principles of Islam to different ages because the Qur'ān is for all times.

69 Karaman, *İctihad*, 151. Karaman further stated in this context that “when the *Mecelle* [The *Mecelle-i Ahkam-ı Adliye*, which was the civil code of the Ottoman Empire from 1869 onward] wrote, ‘There is no place for *ijtihād* in the presence of a *naşş* (*Mevrid-i nassta ictihada mesağ yoktur*),’ it undoubtedly considered *ijtihād* within a very narrow framework.”

An approach that regards not the principles of Islam but the particular judgments of it as being universal will not have the chance of carrying the Qur'ān to new historical contexts, because it is waiting for the return of the historical context in which the texts (*nuṣūṣ*) were revealed. This approach differentiates between two periods, the first being that to which Islam can be applied and the second being that to which it cannot. The claim that *ijtihād* will benefit not Islam but the modernist paradigm and will alter Islam is a consequence of this distinction. According to this view, Islam is inapplicable until the required historical setting emerges. Therefore, what is to be done in this situation is to *await* the time when Islam will be applied. According to this view, the age in which we live is an age that should not exist. The inevitable outcome of this attitude is Muslims removing themselves from history by regarding the time in which they live as belonging to Satan. In the final analysis, Islam never allows such a dualism that lets secularism gain ground and bisect history. Islam does not categorize historical contexts as one that belongs to God and another that belongs to Satan. All eras belong to God. *Ijtihād* is the means of realizing this in human history. The Islamic tradition places *ijtihād* in its proper place by becoming aware of the Muslim *practices* of miscellaneous cultural forms after the revelation of the Qur'ān and rejects the aforementioned dualism to its full extent. *Ijtihād* is the way of rendering the *divine statement* in all times:

Considering all the legal injunctions (*nuṣūṣ*) and the practices, a large part of the scholars of *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence) put forward that the fact that the *nuṣūṣ* subsume all the religious judgments and explicate them is not always literal, and that the judgments derived from the *nuṣūṣ* in various deductive ways are to be regarded divine statements as well.⁷⁰

Conversely, the practical consequence of the anticipation in question of universalism is the confinement of the Qur'ān to its historical period, although its purpose may not be so. This runs the risk of overlapping interestingly, but for Muslims quite bitterly, with the claims of the Orientalists about the contextuality of the Qur'ān. God knows best (*Wa Allāhu a'lam*).

70 See Karaman, *İctihad*, 25.

Source

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Contextuality of Qur'ānic Discourse and Objective Meaning of Historical Discourse

Ömer Özsoy

About the Author¹

Ömer Özsoy, a prominent Turkish scholar in contemporary Qur'ānic studies, is particularly known for his research on the historical context and interpretation of the Qur'ān. Özsoy studied at Ankara University and graduated from the Faculty of Theology in 1985. In his doctoral research, he focused on how key Qur'ānic terms were transformed into theological concepts after the Qur'ān's revelation.

During 1991–1993, Özsoy continued his research in Germany at Heidelberg University. There, he focused on Western scholars' approach to the Qur'ān. Later, during his time as a Humboldt Fellow at the University of Göttingen in 2004–2005, he studied early Qur'ānic manuscripts and deepened his interest in the way the Qur'ān moved from oral recitation to written text. This research led him to explore the effects of that transition on the ways that the Qur'ān has

1 Ömer Özsoy's major contributions include *Kur'an ve Tarihsellik Yazıları* (Ankara: Kitabiyat, 2004), which explores the historical study of the Qur'ān, and *Sünnetullah: Bir Kur'an İfadesinin Kavramsallaşması* (Ankara: Fecr, 2017), a detailed analysis of the conceptualization of the Qur'ānic term *sunnatullāh*. His recent works include "Die Koranexegese im Spannungsfeld zwischen Kompositionalität und Kontextualität: Text, Geschichte und Erfahrung," in *Zwischen Dogma und Erfahrung—Figuren der Glaubensbegründung im Dialog der Religionen*, ed. D. Ansorge and B. Knorn (Münster: Aschendorff, 2021), 153–166; "Islamische Theologie heute: Orte, Gesichter und Tendenzen," in *Islam III—Vom 19. Jahrhundert bis heute*, ed. P. Antes (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2022), 177–217; "Die koranische Verkündigung: Eine theologische Einführung," in *Christlich-islamische Interaktion. Theologische Grundlegung*, ed. F. Körner et al. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2023), 13–50; "Hermeneutik der religiösen Wahrheit im Koran zwischen Monopolismus und Pluralismus," in *Handbuch für islamische Religionspädagogik*, ed. H. Aydin (Cologne: Plural Publications, 2024), 73–89. For studies on Özsoy's hermeneutical approach, see Gökhan Bacık, "Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkey: An Analysis of Turkish Historicists," *Religions* 12, no. 11 (2021): 1–15; Yusuf Çelik, *Critical Hermeneutics: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives in Turkey on the Understanding and Interpretation of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2023); Felix Körner, *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkish University Theology: Rethinking Islam* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2005).

been interpreted throughout history. Özsoy has played a major role in developing the idea of the “historicity of Qur’ānic discourse” within Turkish scholarship and has influenced current debates about the Qur’ān’s relationship to its historical context.

Özsoy was appointed full professor at Ankara University in 2004 and moved to Goethe University Frankfurt in 2006, where he has continued his teaching and research. In his research, he examines how much of the Qur’ān’s original meaning can be recovered today. He is also interested in how early interpretations of the Qur’ān were formed and passed down. His book *Kur’an ve Tarihsellik Yazıları* has become a key reference in these discussions.

Since 2018, he has directed the Linked Open Tafsir project, which aims to make classical Qur’ānic commentaries, such as al-Ṭabarī’s, more accessible to modern scholars by providing detailed digital annotations. His recent writings include studies on how Qur’ānic interpretation balances the structure of the text with its historical context. One example is his essay “Die Koranexegese im Spannungsfeld zwischen Kompositionalität und Kontextualität,” which explores this balance in detail. Many studies have explored Özsoy’s hermeneutical approach, such as those of Gokhan Bacik, “Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkey: An Analysis of Turkish Historicists,” *Religions* 12, no. 11 (2021): 1–15, and Yusuf Çelik, *Critical Hermeneutics: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives in Turkey on the Understanding and Interpretation of the Qur’an* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

Ömer Özsoy’s work brings together classical Islamic thought and modern methods of interpretation. His research has opened up new ways of thinking about how the Qur’ān was understood in the early seventh century and how it continues to be understood today. His influence can be seen in ongoing debates about Qur’ānic interpretation, both in Turkey and more widely.



1 The Problem

The Islamic belief that the Qur’ānic message is universal led to a tradition among Muslims to read the Qur’ān as a superhistorical text. The thesis that “the Qur’ān is a universal text”—often repeated without a clear understanding of its meaning—has, over time, become a kind of *sui generis* dogma in Islam. It has come to represent the only acceptable way of believing in the Qur’ān, to the extent that alternative understandings are often treated as equivalent to denying the Qur’ān’s binding authority. The fact that lay people cannot

distinguish between the Qur'ānic message and its discourse, have no understanding of what it means to consider the Qur'ān a "text," and are vulnerable to exploitation by those who should know better, has played a significant role in the emergence of this tradition. Unfortunately, the people who have the competence, sincerity, and scientific erudition required to take the discussion of "the Qur'ān and historicism"—which has recurred with a distinctive form and content in our country—to a fruitful platform of discussion do not seem prudent and diligent to prevent the issue from being steered in the direction that these exploitation lovers have pushed it.

The fundamental issue of this article is the following question: Is the Qur'ān a discourse that considers its interlocutors living within the period in which it was revealed in an immediate fashion, or is it a universal text revealed in a way that it takes its prospective readers into consideration? It is possible to call the search for an answer to this question an investigation for a factual essence of the Qur'ān, conducted over the Qur'ān's historical reality. I admit that I stand on a particular side of the current discussion and that I may necessarily reiterate my views and opinions, which I have stated elsewhere.

2 Assessing Prevailing Dogma

The prevailing dogma that the Qur'ān is a universal text is by no means an original dogma for Islam; on the contrary, it is an indirect consequence of the deviations that occurred throughout history in Muslims' understanding of history. It is a known fact that the Qur'ān aims to draw lessons, with its historical accounts (parables), regarding the situations in which its interlocutors live. The Qur'ān wants to give its interlocutors a consciousness regarding history. According to the Qur'ān, the way an event occurs, its causes, and its consequences are issues to be reflected upon; that is, the way history unfolds and the sequence of events are not coincidental or predestined and can be understood with a specific rationale.² This is valid for all human actions. Until this

2 I am unable to go into the details of this topic, although it is very attractive to do so. Instead, I shall simply mention some of the works about the approach of the Qur'ān toward history: Muhammed Bakır Es-Sadr, *Kur'an Okulu*, trans. Mehmet Yolcu (Istanbul: Bir, 1987; rev. 2nd ed., Ankara: Fecr, 1995); Cevdet Said, *Bireysel ve Toplumsal Değişmenin Yasaları*, trans. İlhan Kutluer (Istanbul: İnsan, 1984); Beheştî, M.H., and C. Bahonar, *İnsan ve Tarih*, trans. Ahmed Erdiñç (Istanbul: Bir, 1989), 117 ff.; Abdülhamid Sıddıki, *Tarihin Yorumu*, trans. M. Beşir Eryarsoy (Istanbul: Düşünce, 1978), 107 ff.; Mazharuddin Sıddıki, *Kur'an'da Tarih Kavramı*, trans. Süleyman Kalkan (Istanbul: Pınar, 1982), 13–60; in addition, for my arguments about

point, there is no problem from the perspective of Islamic culture. The problem arises when speaking about the *Sīra* (life) of Muḥammad and the history of the Qurʾān. In these two fields, almost a halo of unknowability has been woven over the events. The prevalent opinion holds that everything occurs when it is due according to an eternal and divine plan, such that even the pre-prophethood life of Muḥammad is treated using this approach. Accordingly, he has eventually been transformed into a metahistorical figure who can never be taken as an example, and the period in which he lived (*‘aṣr al-sa‘āda*, period of happiness) becomes a unique model whose level of success cannot be reached, and which can merely be mimicked. The role of the Qurʾān within such an understanding is nothing but the implementation of the eternal plan on the earth, step by step. Although I disregard the gnostic ideas³ that take this understanding to its extreme forms, my argument is completely valid for the prevailing culture: the whole being is explained with *nūr muḥammadī* (Muḥammadan light) or with *ḥaqīqa muḥammadiyya* (Muḥammadan truth), and the whole history is construed as the preparation of a convenient setting for the Revelation of the Qurʾān. As for the resolution of the discrepancy between the notion that the text of the Qurʾān has always existed in a written form, which stems from misunderstanding the Qurʾānic passages about Divine knowledge (*lawḥ mahfūz, al-kitāb*), and the historical information about the revelation of the Qurʾān, the formula of the *bayt al-‘izza* (Abode of Glory) is invoked. Based on this formula, the Qurʾān was revealed in its eternal form on the Night of Qadr at a celestial location and then was sent to the earth, step by step.⁴ According to this idea, God fixed the Qurʾānic text from the outset of creation and revealed it, no matter the cost. Once this idea is accepted, it becomes difficult to understand how

the Qurʾān's approach to history, see Ömer Özsoy, *Sünnetullah: Bir Kur'an İfadesinin Kavram-sallaşması* (Ankara: Fecr, 1994), 137–182.

3 For information on works that have interesting suggestions related to the neoplatonic and gnostic origins of the alienation of Muslims' understanding of history, see Ignaz Goldziher, "Neuplatonische und gnostische Elemente im Hadit," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und verwandte Gebiete* 22 (1908): 317–344.

4 For a critique of similar understandings about the revelation of the Qurʾān in pieces, see Şubḥī al-Şāliḥ, *Mabāḥith fi ‘Ulūm al-Qurʾān*, 7th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm li al-Malāyīn, 1972), 49 ff. It may be in order here to recall a significant claim that needs to be investigated. In his study on Madani additions in Makkī şūras, Tilman Nagel stated that the sources that Ibn ‘Abd al-Kāfi depends upon in relation to these additions and that constitute the foundation of Nagel's study are Qadārī sources, and accordingly, he argued that the Sunnī circles seek to cover up the narratives pertaining to this issue because these narratives support the view that the Qurʾān is created (*makhlūq*); see Tilman Nagel, *Medinensische Einschübe in mekkanischen Suren* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 100 ff.

the congruity between the literal signification of the Qur'ān and the historical milieu of the period of revelation can be accounted for—except by mere coincidence or the theory of *jabr* (compulsion).

It is likely that the earliest interpretations of the Qur'ān considered it a text in literature that is free of contradictions—that is, as integrated and homogeneous—and examined it from this perspective. However, although the Qur'ān was regarded as a “text” throughout the classical period of Islamic history, it was nonetheless treated as a historical discourse. The exegetes searched for coherence even in the alternation of the *sūras* in the Qur'ān (*tanāsub al-suwar*), thereby pushing the limits of searching for coherence among the verses, whereas the *fuqahā* (Islamic lawyers or jurists) had to resort to examining the ways in which the Qur'ān had been practiced; that is, they had to treat the Qur'ān with a historicist outlook, by going beyond its textual structure. Therefore, concepts such as *nāsikh–mansūkh* (abrogator–abrogated), *Makkī–Madanī* (Meccan and Medinan), and *aṣbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation), which add a historicist dimension to the Qur'ānic text, have gained a special import for the Islamic law (*fiqh*). The dilemma of choosing between these two different approaches, determined by the exigencies of the time, often undoubtedly created problems. The interpretations are full of examples of the differences in meaning that arise from taking the textual context of a passage as the criterion for determining its meaning, as opposed to taking its historical context as the criterion. The importance of reading the Qur'ān as a text or not as a text appears here.

It is a natural illusion for the people who lived after the period of the revelation of the Qur'ān and faced with a completed text to perceive the Qur'ān as a text. Therefore, many people—not only Muslims but also non-Muslims—treat the Qur'ān as a text and harness the methods of textual criticism when seeking to interpret it.⁵ However, the only condition to render this attitude legitimate and correct is to demonstrate that the Qur'ān had been designed in this form in the very beginning. Otherwise, despite knowing that the passages constituting the Qur'ānic *sūras* were revealed at different times, treating each *sūra* as if it were designed as a unified text would expose the Qur'ān to criticism—that

5 The studies of Neuwirth, a contemporary Orientalist who considered the Qur'ān a structural whole and applied the deconstructive method to it, are leading examples of this approach; see her “Zur Struktur der Yūsuf-Sure,” in *Studien aus Arabistik und Semitistik. Festschrift Anton Spitaler zum 70 Geburtstag*, ed. Werner Diem and Stefan Wild (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1980), 123–152; *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren: Die literarische Form des Koran—ein Zeugnis seiner Historizität* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1981), 433.

it is an incongruous composition lacking integrity. Moreover, this method is internally inconsistent, a flaw that is evident from the outset. I wonder what reason those who attempt to examine the Qur'ān as a "whole" have to explain why they prefer this method, except that the Qur'ān exists today between two book covers. The weaknesses that the Qur'ān displays from the perspective of literary textual criticism (e.g., disjointedness, contradictory statements, and reiterations) are indications, from the viewpoint of the historicist approach, of the fact that the Qur'ān was not designed as a text.

3 The Qur'ān in Terms of the Distinction between Text and Speech

Regardless of whether one believes in the Qur'ān, one must consider a historical reality: the Qur'ānic passages that appear to be inconsistent in themselves when put between two covers as a book were not considered untenable by opponents of Islam during the period of Revelation and were not criticized from this angle. This is the clearest, most objective proof that the Qur'ān does not have a logical contradiction. Therefore, none of the understandings of the Qur'ān that deem it "an incoherent whole in itself," no matter whether they view it as a "text" composed by Muḥammad or as a "text" determined in God's eternal knowledge, is congruous with the historical facts. The most significant fact that makes it impossible for us to read the Qur'ān as a whole in itself that is pre-designed is its history, that is, the history of the textualization of the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān is not a text compiled in one swoop; it is a collection of independent passages revealed in relation to miscellaneous incidents and developments over the course of about 20 years.

The differentiation between text and parole, which is essentially a contemporary topic, hinges in one respect on the difference between oral language and written language. To explain the difference between oral and written language, Paul Ricoeur invoked the distinction in the structural linguistics between "langue" and "parole." This distinction is interesting to the extent that it sheds light on the true nature of the Qur'ānic discourse.

The most significant difference between text and parole originates from the way that they are designed. Whereas an author is alone while writing a text, a speaker's interlocutor stands tangible before them. In this respect, a text is a linguistic setting in which its author cannot see whether their purpose is realized. In contrast, the setting of a parole allows the speaker this opportunity because it is a live dialogue. In addition, certain goals may be intended in the composition of a text. In this case, the author composes the text by considering all eventualities and possibilities of misunderstanding, depending on the impor-

tance of the text. Accordingly, the text contains its context within itself; it is a whole. As for oral discourse, the context is outside of the parole, and one needs to reach this extra-parole context to understand the parole. In this sense, it is evident that the Qur'ān was not designed as a "text." It was written later and textualized by compiling the pieces of written texts. Therefore, the distinction between the modality of the "oral discourse" of the Qur'ān during the period of Revelation and the modality of the "written discourse" it gained later will help us to understand the nature of the Qur'ān.

According to Ricoeur, understanding a discourse has different meanings in literate and oral cultures. In oral language, a discourse appears at one moment and disappears at another, whereas there is a record—a fixation—in writing. However, what the writing can pin down is not the act of discourse but what is discoursed; that is, the meaning of the act of the discourse (*noema*). The meaning of the act of the discourse refers to what is said.⁶ Another field in which the distinction between text and discourse has gained significance is the relation between the meaning of a discourse and the subjective intention of the discourseser. In oral discourse, the subjective intention of the discourseser and the meaning of the discourse overlap so that understanding what the discourseser means and understanding what the discourse means become the same thing. However, in the literate discourse, the mental intention of the author differs from the meaning of the text recorded. What the text says becomes more significant than what the author intends to say, because the discursive elements that aid understanding—such as intonation, speaking style, facial expressions, and gestures—cannot be recorded.⁷

To sum up by borrowing several terms from linguistics, the Qur'ānic passages are written discourses. Therefore, each Qur'ānic passage gives us a parole (*noema*), which requires one who is to understand its meaning to learn the extra-discursive, extratextual context, which the text does not include. The entire Qur'ānic body of text is a compilation of "paroles" that have these characteristics. In this sense, it means that a reader who has a compilation of these paroles has only part of the material required to understand the Qur'ān, because the text of the Qur'ān (written discourse) does not convey the chronological sequence of the Qur'ānic discourse (oral discourse), the characteristics of the setting of its discourse, and the intonation of the paroles. It merely draws the picture of the parole.

6 Erol Göka, Abdullah Topçuoğlu, and Yasin Aktay, *Önce Söz Vardı: Yorumlama Üzerine Bir Deneme* (Ankara: Vadi, 1996), 75 f.

7 Erol Göka, Topçuoğlu, and Aktay, *Önce Söz Vardı*, 76.

4 Meaning of Contextuality of Discourse

The need to read each Qur'ānic passage in its historical context in order to capture the objective meanings of the Qur'ān originates from the relationship between these passages and their historical circumstances. The Qur'ān witnesses its strict connection to the history, which permeates, although in differing levels, the entire Qur'ān: "O you who believe! Ask not questions about things which, if made plain to you, may cause you trouble. But if you ask about things when the Qur'ān is being revealed, they will be made plain to you" (Qur'ān 5:101).

As understood from this verse, the interlocutors of the Qur'ān have made their contributions to the formation of the Qur'ānic text. The Qur'ān is only one of the possible forms of God's last oral intervention on the earth through Muḥammad. To be able to propound that it is the unique—and predetermined—form of this intervention, it is necessary to demonstrate the difference between the (historical) elements that constitute this form, that is, the elements that enter the text of revelation, and the elements that the revelation excludes; in other words, the difference between the events and circumstances that were the subject of revelation while the Qur'ānic revelation was ongoing and those that are not reflected in the Qur'ān. It cannot be claimed that the reason for becoming the subject of the Revelation is the "importance" of the relevant incidents and circumstances. No one can argue that the incident of Bī'r Ma'ūna, when many Muslims were martyred, is less significant than that of Muḥammad behaving indifferently toward Ibn Umm Maktūm in terms of their impact on Muslims and on the future of Islam. What determines the Qur'ān's touching on an incident or a circumstance is the need of Muḥammad or of the Muslim community; that is, the need of the interlocutors of the Revelation, or more patently, the process of open dialogue between the transcendent and the immanent.

The Qur'ān abounds with the examples. They asked about the private matters of women; God replied. They asked whether it was right to make war during the *ḥarām* (sacred) months; God replied.⁸ Now can we say that these questions encompass all the possible questions that humanity may ask God? Can it be put forth that the answers provided for these questions are universally satisfactory for all humankind? How many persons may there be today who feel a need

8 To observe in one volume many examples of this vivid connection of the Qur'ān to the history, examples that made their way into the Qur'ān, see Ḥasan Ḥanafī, "al-Waḥy wa al-Wāqī'," in *al-Islām wa al-Ḥadātha* (Tunis: al-Dār al-Tūnisiyya li al-Naṣr, 1991), 154 ff.

to ask God how the crescent is formed in the sky or who will be content with the Qur'ān's response to the question about its formation? In the same vein, it is evident that the answer to the question regarding the sacred months is a political, time-dependent response, which considered the intentions of those who asked the question. What is more important, then, is why a certain thing was placed in the Qur'ān, rather than the mere fact that it is mentioned. The following question is even more significant: If waging war during the sacred months while the Qur'ān was being revealed had not been a problem, would the passages regarding the sacred months have still appeared in the text of the Qur'ān?

Owing to its strict connection to history, the Qur'ān is the most important source for those who investigate the history of the period of *nuzūl* (Revelation). In the period of the Revelation, in the passages of the Qur'ān that accompany the Islamic movement led by Muḥammad, the wrong decisions and practices of Muḥammad and the Muslims were criticized and corrected and some of their decisions and practices were supported,⁹ but there are no examples of their right decisions being approved. The meaning of this fact is that the decisions made, and the strategies followed by Muḥammad throughout the span of his prophethood, were approved by God unless rejected by the Qur'ān. In this respect, as Muḥammad led a struggle under the supervision of the Revelation, his leadership was as guiding and exemplary as the Qur'ān. Therefore, when those who uphold the dogma of the Qur'ān's universality while accepting the contextuality of the Sunna base this distinction on the difference in their origins, they are merely avoiding the debate. What they need to demonstrate is the essential difference between the incidents and circumstances featured in the Qur'ān and those not mentioned in the Qur'ān but found in the Sunna. This does not mean that the Sunna of Muḥammad is the sole model of conduct congruent with the spirit of the Qur'ān. On the contrary, this is the consequence of the fact that the universal message of Islam is plain enough to encompass the possibilities of practice that are not confined to one. God's assurance that people will not have trouble (in the ontological and epistemological sense) in understanding the divine message and in doing what is demanded stems from this plainness. Therefore, the choices that Muḥammad made among an infinite number of possible models of conduct are exemplary as appropriate *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) unless the Revelation intervened. In that respect, regarding the Qur'ān with all its content as the essence of the religion (*al-dīn*),

9 Some of these practices were developed by Muslims, but others were traditional practices that had continued since ancient times.

and the practices (Sunna) of Muḥammad and Muslims that are not mentioned in the Qurʾān as a historical form of religion, is a point that requires reflection. Whatever the grounds on which those who assert the contextuality of the Sunna base their claims, it can still be propounded that the Qurʾānic discourse was directed toward the age in which it was revealed. The religion (*al-dīn*) that is universal was delivered to Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad in varying forms; the Qurʾān is the final form, which enabled the descent of *al-dīn* to the level of humankind. In this sense, we cannot speak of *al-dīn* on the human level in any moment of history. Every manifestation of *al-dīn* on the immanent is, to invoke a fitting term, *al-tadayyun*.¹⁰ A point to consider here is the fact that the practice shaped by the Prophet does not pose any risk for understanding *al-dīn* conveniently by means of this authentic form of *tadayyun*. Therefore, the Qurʾān is the final manifestation of *al-dīn* at the human level, not *al-dīn* itself. So long as we do not realize this and regard the Qurʾān as the essence (of *al-dīn*), whether the understanding of religion we develop invites people to Islamization or Arabization will always be a matter of dispute because we would be elevating the historical element to the level of values.

5 Objective Meaning and Its Enemies

I have stated that the textualization of the Qurʾān, because of its being written and all its passages being combined, inevitably created a difference between the “meaning of its oral discourse (*qaṣd al-mutakallim*)” and the “meaning of its text,” which is the written form of its oral discourse. This statement is valid for all oral discourses that have been written, and the most effective means to overcome this difference (between the two discourses) is to carry the written discourse again to the oral milieu and reconstruct the *speech act*. In this sense, what is alluded to with the “objective meaning” is the meaning of the oral discourse, which is the original meaning that may be intended by the discourser.

In the authentic Islamic tradition, scholars have spoken about the “right meaning” and “wrong meaning” in relation to understanding the Qurʾān, which

10 See Tahsin Görgün, “Türkiye’de İslam Düşüncesinin Geleceği ve İslami Düşünce Geleneği” (unpublished conference paper presented at *Değişim Sürecinde İslam*, symposium held in Istanbul during the Birthday of the Prophet Week), 6 ff.

Translator’s note: The term *al-tadayyun* is employed in Turkish to indicate the way a religion is interpreted, lived, and practiced by its believers in a particular place and at a particular time, although *al-tadayyun* means religiosity, religiousness, and devoutness in Arabic.

is an indication of the belief in the existence of the “objective meaning.” This differentiation is named *iṣāba* (success) and *khaṭa'* (mistake) in *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence). What is significant from the perspective of *fiqh*, which can never be reduced to a technique of understanding, is the intention of the *mujtahid*. Since what is important is to go after the truth, the *mujtahid* who could not attain the truth is nevertheless commended. This truth can be *murād ilāhī* (God's wish), *maṣlaḥa* (the common good), or *mā'nā waḍ'ī* (the delivered meaning), according to its context. The theory of *ijtihād* acknowledges the objective meaning and considers its discovery possible.

The oldest enemies of the objective meaning are the literal (*zāhirī*) and esoteric (*bāṭinī*) approaches. While esotericism does not employ any objective criteria in interpreting the Qur'ān, literalism cannot protect the significance of the text by emphasizing its verbal expression. Because the literal approach destroys the historical dimension of the Qur'ān by reducing the parole—which is meaningful only within its context—to mere verbal expression, it remains sensitive to attempts to attribute meanings to the text that could not have been intended, even though the text serves as the mold of the Revelation. As literalists approach the religious texts and the language literally, they overlook metaphorical uses of the language.

We can safely claim that there has been, in addition to the literal and esoteric interpretations, a certain disease, namely, anachronism, among Muslims throughout the history of Islam. The origin of the notion that a passage may signify more than one meaning is this anachronism in question. In all periods of Islamic history, one can observe a tendency toward anachronism: the belief that everything needed is found in the Qur'ān, while simultaneously assuming that the Qur'ān cannot contain anything considered inappropriate in the present circumstances. The fact that the changes in the outer world were less noticeable than they are today renders this weakness of the medieval Muslims understandable. However, in the modern era, which allows us to clearly observe the changes in what the Qur'ān speaks about, the fact that there are still people who want to make the Qur'ān speak literally about modern objects and phenomena is surely not easy to understand. Moreover, almost everybody in the contemporary world has become an enemy of the original literal significations of the Qur'ān. Those who interpret the Qur'ān in a way that it tolerates all kinds of meanings ground this assumed ambiguity of the Qur'ān on their argument that it is open to many exegeses and place great emphasis on freedom of thought. The common characteristic of these enemies of objective meaning—who are from diverse political, cultural, sociological, and ideological backgrounds—is that they all regard the Qur'ān as a universal text; some

even treat it as if it were “being revealed today.” This shared perspective is what unites them.

When people say that the objective meaning of the Qur’ānic discourse can be attained only by considering each passage within its specific historical context, they do not mean that every Qur’ānic passage was revealed in response to a specific incident. Not all verses were revealed as a response to a certain incident. Nonetheless, in the situations in which a certain incident cannot be taken as the occasion of the Revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*), there is a context that can be called the “setting of the Revelation.” People read and understand the Qur’ān within a particular context, whether they are aware of it or not. If the goal is to understand what a specific passage alludes to, the context within which they place that passage to make it mean something is its original historical context. For example, the statement *Lakum dīnukum wa-liya dīn* (To you your religion, and to me my religion) will be understood differently in each case if it is taken as a verse revealed before Hijra (*Makkī*) or after Hijra (*Madanī*). The same wording may be taken as a statement of tolerance or as one of mutiny and challenge. What determines the meaning of this wording is the relationship of domination between the maker of the statement and their interlocutor.

Without noticing these difficulties, to read the Qur’ān as if it is “being revealed today” or to ask the Qur’ān constantly the question “What is being said to me here?” to understand it, one must have already discarded the objective meaning.

To see the level of abuse of the Qur’ānic verses caused by ignoring the objective meaning of the Qur’ān, that is, to see the power of imagination of those who take the Qur’ān in their hands and ask, “What is being said to me here?,” Baljon’s examples are instructive. When the Turkish translation of this book¹¹ was released, there were some people who rejoiced at the mushrooming interpretations of Indo–Pakistani origin, which that book contains, but the Muslims of our country are accustomed to receiving such types of exegeses with dislike, exegeses such as that praying (*ṣalāt*) means “walking on the right path.”¹² Since the enemies of the objective meaning in Turkey are also often enemies among themselves, there is ironically less risk of collectively distorting the Qur’ān. For example, political Islamists interpret Verse 26:227 as “The oppressors will see with what kind of a revolution they will be overthrown,”—a verse that clearly refers to the return to God after death (Qur’ān 26:227)—within

11 J.M.S. Baljon, *Kur’an Yorumunda Çağdaş Yönelimler*, trans. Şaban Ali Düzgün (Ankara: Fecr, 1994).

12 Baljon, *Kur’an Yorumunda* 100.

a revolutionary-Islamist framework. These same political Islamists strongly oppose the reformist Islamists, who interpret the verse commanding the cutting off of a thief's hand as merely referring to marking or scarring the hand. In turn, the reformists are opposed to those who advocate for "Islam in the Qur'ān" alone, and who search for signs of concepts such as reincarnation in its verses. Last, those who promote "Islam in the Qur'ān" are themselves the detractors of individuals who claim prophethood based on their own readings of the Qur'ān. However, it appears that the enemies of objective meaning—despite raising objections against themselves in an effort to protect the Qur'ān—fail to understand that they have no right to treat the Qur'ān as a discourse directed toward themselves (toward this age).

6 Difficulties in Objectivist, Historicist Interpretation of the Qur'ān

The recognition of the Qur'ān as a historical discourse renders it necessary to interpret it today for Muslims who want to be interlocutors for its message. This necessity has been met throughout history with some level of smoothness. Muslims can detect the discrepancy between the given contemporary circumstances and the Qur'ānic discourse so manifestly only with modernity. Modern circumstances have not created this discrepancy but have made it noticeable. However, in doing so, they have also introduced—not only for Muslims but for all human beings—a set of problems whose resolution does not give us any reason for optimism about the future. The typical characteristic of modernity is the assumption that the modern condition is not only different from all premodern conditions but also superior to them.¹³ It may be said that this assumption, which is fundamentally mistaken, is the hallmark of modernity. The problem with modernity is not the aberrances that are impossible to solve and are encountered in all ages of the history of humankind in miscellaneous forms, but rather, the atmosphere that encourages us to consider these aberrances to be "developments," as well as the modern consciousness that has been created by this atmosphere. Therefore, modern consciousness lacks the possibility of experiencing the process of self-criticism, that is, foresight, penitence, repentance, and improvement. The dungeon of the modern man is the fact that this consciousness has for a long time surrounded those who were aware of this aberrance. Therefore, using postmodern arguments while criticizing modernity, only because they are postmodern, and assuming that they

13 Peter L. Berger, *Modernleşme ve Bilişç*, trans. Cevdet Cerit (Istanbul, 1985), 13.

are more progressive and have advanced beyond modernity, attracts criticism. Likewise, rejecting the current condition in all its forms is a modern reaction that offers little hope for humanity.

This deadlock is part of a web of deadlocks, which pose many other types of problems. Muslims feel responsible for determining the problems of the given condition and for searching in the Qur'ān for solutions to these problems, or producing solutions congruous with the Qur'ān. The factor that ensures the accuracy of defining them as "Muslim" is that they have undertaken these two burdens, which have existed in parallel since the advent of Islam. It can be argued that there is a consensus among Muslims on the problems of the given condition. However, the problems of the given condition of the Qur'ān are different from those of the contemporary Muslim. How can one develop solutions for the problems of the modern condition by relying on the Qur'ān? The point of disagreement appears in the responses given to this basic question.

The historicist approach views the Qur'ān as a discourse directed toward the contemporaries of Muḥammad and searches for objective meanings of the passages of the Qur'ān in the context to which they belong. The natural consequence of this approach is that the verbal signification is deemed to be historical. This demonstrates the need to "carry" the message of the Qur'ān to the post-Qur'ānic ages. Fazlur Rahman called this process I have described "double movement," which means going back to the period of the Revelation (*nuzūl*) and understanding the text at that time, and then coming back to the contemporary period and determining the contemporary message of the text. There is no doubt that the first phase of this double movement, which we can safely call the reconstruction of the history of the Revelation (*nuzūl*), shares the same difficulties as all other historical studies. However, what we want to dwell on here are the problems of the second phase, interpretation. As suggested by Amīn al-Khūlī, while it is possible and necessary for the first phase—the process of "understanding" the message of the text—to be objective, the second phase—the interpretation of the objective meaning for today—is an entirely subjective process.¹⁴ The basic problem of the common examples of the historicist approach is their relative inability to realize that the contemporary condition is also "historical," whereas they have no difficulty in realizing the historical and local dimension in the Qur'ānic passages.

To illustrate with an example, saying that the prescribed punishment of "cutting off the hand," which the Qur'ān ordered to be applied to theft, is a type of

14 Amīn al-Khūlī, "Al-Tafsīr" (Tehran: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-Islāmiyya, 1966), 267 ff.

punishment for the period of the revelation (*nuzūl*) will not mean that it will necessarily be inapplicable today from a consistent historicist perspective. The same punishment can fulfill today the objective for which it was revealed at the time of the Revelation. Without questioning whether this punishment prescribed by the Qur'ān still fulfills the objective for which it was revealed, there is no difference between insisting on this form of punishment only because the Qur'ān prescribes it or wanting to change it only because it is considered repulsive and barbaric. The two attitudes amount to universalizing what is manifestly contingent and historical. If the goal of the objectivist and historicist interpretation of the Qur'ān is to penetrate the semiosphere of the parole and uncover its other possible meanings (the universal message) in different contexts, then such whims should not be tolerated. Therefore, there is nothing that has changed; the problem is still the same: our understanding of Revelation and history.

7 Summary and Conclusion

During a course on *Risāle-i Nūr* [of Said Nursi] that I attended, a chapter [of *Risāle-i Nūr*] written during the First World War—on a situation that was assumed to be parallel to the contemporary situation—was read to determine an answer to the question of what our attitude toward the Gulf War should be. At the session of deliberation conducted after the end of the course, a person in the audience suggested that the passages that were read should be assessed within the context of the circumstances of the period in which they were penned, on the grounds that the attitude recommended by the passages did not fit the current situation. Another group asserted that what is written should be valid to the same degree for all similar situations. What drove them to think in this way was that they believed that the Teacher (*Ustādh*)¹⁵ authored the chapter in question by taking into consideration or predicting current developments. There was no doubt that the disciple (*shakird*) who advocated for the contextuality of *Risāle-i Nūr* acknowledged its guidance at least as much as the others did. However, this is the way he asked the question: “What would the attitude of the Teacher toward the Gulf War be if he were living today?” Undoubtedly, while he was formulating the question in this manner, he was confident that he knew the Teacher’s political stance well enough to

15 Translator’s note: The word “Teacher” denotes here the author of *Risāle-i Nūr*, namely, Saīd Nursī, a Kurdish scholar of Islam (d. 1960).

give a correct response—or at least that he had sufficient objective criteria to defend his thesis.

My political identity has given me such a chance of observation, but I know, as someone living in Turkey, that it is possible to observe the same approach and provide similar examples about the discussions of the Kemalists on the interpretation of the discourse, texts, and practices of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, or about the discussion of the Marxists on the discourse, texts, and practices of Marx. It is obvious that this difference does not stem from whether one believes in an authority. Members of both approaches do not doubt that the texts whose authorities they acknowledge will help us understand today's issues. The difference between them lies in those who advocate for taking the Qur'ān as "universal" do not or cannot realize that these texts appeared within a certain historical context. Therefore, the disagreement between them is not a disagreement about the obligatory force and value of the texts, but regarding how to approach the Qur'ān since they understand "history" differently. Those who prefer the "historicist approach" feel compelled to take every novel situation in its own conditions because of their notion that any historical event is "unique" and does not occur again in the same manner, whereas those who prefer the other approach do not have such a sensitivity. Therefore, the problem is the problem of consciousness about history, and the discussion is one regarding history.

The two ideal approaches about the contextuality of the Qur'ān show basically no difference from the approaches to human texts, approaches that I have summarized above, and the problem is the same. The most significant difference between them is that the Qur'ān is of Divine origin. However, so long as the object on which we speak is "historical," whether the origin of the text is Divine or human matters only in relation to the chances of success of the assessments and judgments in the text. Accordingly, one can assert the absolute rightness of the former while criticizing the latter. However, this difference does not remove the need to understand the texts in question within their historical contexts. It should be accepted not only that any judgment in *Risāle-i Nūr* or in Atatürk's Great Speech—regardless of whether one believes the judgment to be true—is valid within the context to which it pertains, but also that it should be evaluated according to that context. Any judgment in the Qur'ān was established by taking the relevant historical context into consideration because they are equally historical. Otherwise, it would be impossible for us to have any chance of understanding the Qur'ān and other texts. We have come to know that very marginal views on Atatürk's attitude toward religion are in circulation, just as we know that there is nothing left unsaid about the attitude of the Qur'ān toward, say, People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*). These are not

genuine predicaments and dilemmas but counterfeit problems put before us by the lack of method motivated by the interests of men. The common sense here is not to accept at the same time and to the same degree the view that Atatürk was against Islam or the view that he was in favor of Islam. Either one is true, and the other is wrong, or Atatürk's stance toward religion changed over time. The only way to determine this is to read his texts, speeches, and practices, which will shed light on his stance toward religion, within their own historical contexts. However, we can do this only if our intention is to fathom the nature of his attitude toward Islam as a historical phenomenon, not if our intention is to abuse Atatürk for our personal and group-based objectives.

Source

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A Perspective on Hermeneutics

M. Quraish Shihab

About the Author¹

M. Quraish Shihab, born in Rappang, South Sulawesi, in 1944, is one of Indonesia's most respected scholars of the Qur'an and a prominent public intellectual. He pursued his higher education at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, where he completed his master's degree in 1969. He later earned his doctorate in Qur'anic sciences with distinction in 1982 from the same university. His academic work has always aimed to make the Qur'an accessible and relevant to the everyday lives of Indonesian Muslims.

Throughout his career, Shihab has combined scholarship with public service. He served as Rector of IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta in the period 1992–1998 and was Vice Chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council during 1985–1998. He also held a seat in Indonesia's People's Consultative Assembly during 1982–2002, representing religious scholars in an appointed role. In 1998, he briefly served as Minister for Religious Affairs before serving as Indonesia's Ambassador to Egypt during 1999–2002.

1 M. Quraish Shihab's major works include *Tafsir al-Mishbah* (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2003), a widely respected multivolume Qur'anic commentary; *Membumikan Al-Qur'an* (Bandung: Mizan, 1994), in which he calls for grounding the Qur'an's teachings in the realities of Indonesian society; *Wawasan Al-Qur'an* (Bandung: Mizan, 1996), a thematic study of Qur'anic values; *Kaidah Tafsir* (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2013), in which he outlines key principles of interpretation; and "Tafsir, Takwil, dan Hermeneutika: Suatu Paradigma Baru dalam Pemahaman Al-Qur'an," *Jurnal Sufuf* 2, no. 1 (2009): 25–43. For studies on his thought, see Sahiron Syamsuddin, "Differing Responses to Western Hermeneutics: A Comparative Critical Study of M. Quraish Shihab's and Muhammad 'Imāra's Thoughts," *Al-Jamiah Journal of Islamic Studies* 59, no. 2 (2021): 479–512; Mursalim Musawir and Siti Masrohatin, "Women's Leadership in the Perspective of M. Quraish Shihab's Thought: An Analysis of Tafsir al-Mishbah," *ISAR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, no. 12 (2024): 54–59; Tuty Wahyuni, "Women and Modern Families: An Analysis of Quraish Shihab's Perspectives," *Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 4, no. 1 (2024): 100–116; and M. Jamil, Muhammad Faisal Hamdani, Iman Jauhari, M. Jafar, and Dahlan, "Muslim Scholars' Interpretation of Religious Tolerance Verses: The Cases of Quraish Shihab, Yusuf Qaradawi, and Khaled Abou El Fadl in Qur'an 60:8–9," *Journal of Namibian Studies* 33 (2023): 106–129.

Shihab's contributions to Qur'ānic interpretation have had a significant impact on Islamic thought in Indonesia. His most celebrated work is *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, a multivolume Qur'ānic commentary first published in 2003, in which he offers a contextual reading of the Qur'ān. He highlights its ethical and spiritual teachings while addressing the challenges of modern life. Shihab encourages a balanced approach to interpretation, which honors the historical context of the text without losing sight of present-day realities.

In addition to *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, Shihab has authored more than 40 books on Islam and the Qur'ān. Key titles include *Membumikan Al-Qur'an* (1994), in which he argues for grounding Qur'ānic teachings in contemporary Indonesian society, and *Wawasan Al-Qur'an* (1996), in which he explores core values and themes within the text. His *Kaidah Tafsir* (2013) explores guiding principles for interpreting the Qur'ān. He argues that one must be faithful to the Qur'ān's message and also responsive to modern contexts. In his article "Tafsir, Takwil, dan Hermeneutika: Suatu Paradigma Baru dalam Pemahaman Al-Qur'an" (2009), Shihab reflects on how hermeneutics can open new avenues for understanding the Qur'ān while remaining rooted in Islamic tradition. Many scholars, in particular, in Indonesia, have explored Shihab's contribution to Qur'ānic hermeneutics, such as Sahiron Syamsuddin, "Differing Responses to Western Hermeneutics: A Comparative Critical Study of M. Quraish Shihab's and Muḥammad 'Imāra's Thoughts," and Mursalim Musawir and Siti Masrohatin's, "Women's Leadership in the Perspective of M. Quraish Shihab's Thought: An Analysis of Tafsir al-Mishbah,"

In 1999, Shihab founded the Pusat Studi Al-Qur'an (Centre for Qur'ānic Studies) in Jakarta, which he continues to lead. His work has inspired many scholars, particularly in Indonesia. He continues to influence debates on how Muslims today engage with their sacred text in a changing world.



The first thing that must be emphasized concerns the heading of this article, "A Perspective on Hermeneutics." What is intended by "hermeneutics" here does not include all issues concerning it, because to discuss these would require more space than the pages of this book and an expertise and diligence that is beyond my ability. Moreover, the "perspective" intended here is mine, using the lens of the principles of interpretation (*kaidah penafsiran*), which has been presented in the preceding pages [of my book from which this extract was taken] and may differ in its details from other perspectives. Added to this is the firm belief that the Qur'ān is the *kalām* (speech) of Allah, untouched by falsehood or error in any way.

In my view, not all ideas proposed by the various streams and scholars of hermeneutics are incorrect or negative. Among them are some that are good and new, and can be taken advantage of to expand our horizons and enrich our interpretations, including the interpretation of the Qur'ān. However, from this early point it must be emphasized that there is a likelihood of errors in their application. In addition, the views of intellectuals regarding a particular philosopher's ideas may differ because of differences in their backgrounds, knowledge disciplines, and personal tendencies, an aspect that has been emphasized by Muslim scholars long before the birth of Western hermeneutics. Furthermore, the translation of these ideas from their original language to another can be a factor in the differences in their reception. Therefore, it is unreasonable for those who disagree with hermeneutics to simply reject it wholesale. This is not only because its scholars have proposed views that are in line with the views of Muslim scholars, just as there are those that, with a little interpretation (*penakwilan*), can lead us to an acceptance of their substance—but also because there are core ideas that give rise to many details, some that can be accepted and others that cannot. Clearly, diversity is a reality in daily life and is evident in several fields, including hermeneutics. Indeed, differences of opinion are a given in life, but this does not mean that everything is to be disputed or that everything is relative (*nisbī*). No—even in matters that are relative, there is a reference point (*tolak ukur*) that should be agreed upon and on the basis of which relative views can be accepted or rejected.

Nor should it be denied that some of the discussions and issues of hermeneutics have been discussed in the science of Qur'ānic *tafsīr* and that solutions have been presented and accepted by Muslim scholars. However, the reemergence of some of these issues, combined with the shallowness of some people's knowledge regarding *tafsīr* and its principles, have caused confusion and both positive and negative effects. Those interested in Qur'ānic studies often ask, "Is hermeneutics the same as the science of Qur'ānic *tafsīr*?" and "Is it necessary to use hermeneutics to understand and interpret the Qur'ān?". The answers are not black and white, "yes" or "no." If hermeneutics is merely understood as the science of clarifying the meaning of the words of Allah, it is not incorrect to say that Muslim scholars engaged in hermeneutics long before it emerged in Europe. Thus, they were aware of at least some of the discussions of hermeneutics, and classical hermeneutics contains many foundations that are the same as, or similar to, aspects known from the discussions of Muslim scholars concerning the sciences of Qur'ānic interpretation.

On closely analyzing the primary objective of studying this science—which is to interpret and understand the meaning of the words, as well as the deepest and most hidden context, of a sacred scripture—it can be said that this sci-

ence's analysis is needed for understanding the Holy Qur'ān. The awareness of this need is not something that has recently emerged but has long been discussed and formulated by the *'ulamā*. The principles of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, which are widely adopted by scholars of the Qur'ān, were created by Imām al-Shāfi'ī more than a thousand years ago, and this science has continued to develop until today. The same is true for the many discussions of linguistics.

Some of what we have presented in the preceding pages may indicate the extent to which past Muslim scholars have entered into deep discussions concerning the meanings of the Holy Qur'ān, which range from discussions of various aspects of lexical meanings, literal and metaphorical meanings, polysemy and synonymy, the meanings of utterances and their forms, the general and specific, and the clear and ambiguous, to the various exceptions related to them. These discussions have been extended to discussions of the semantic meanings of a word and their extensions, giving rise to explicit and implicit meanings; likewise, the construction of words and their variety as well as the various meanings of context and its role in understanding the text. They have made knowledge of these a condition for those who wish to interpret the Qur'ān. Thus, if hermeneutics is the science of *ta'wīl* or *al-ta'wīliyya*, which is a name that Muslim scholars have introduced, then it can also be asserted that *ta'wīl* has been known and discussed in detail by the *'ulamā*.

As for literal interpretation, which is strongly opposed by the followers of hermeneutics, it must be recognized that this too occurred in the Muslim world, and even today there are those who still strongly defend literal and textual interpretation. However, today, the nonliteral interpretation of texts (*penakwilan teks*) has been accepted by the majority of *'ulamā*, with certain conditions.² In this context, we should note the view of Imām al-Ghazālī in his book *al-Iqtisād fī al-I'tiqād*, his last work. There, he argued:

One should not be transfixed by the literal words of a religious text and ignore reason, nor should one prioritise reason over religious text to the extent of sacrificing the text. The one who holds to the text of the Qur'ān (or the Sunnah) only is like one who looks directly at the sun, forcing him to close his eyes to avoid going blind. When he does this, he is no different to one who is blind. Because of this, looking at the sun must be done "just so (*sedemikian rupa*)," that it might light the path, guiding us to the destination that is hoped for.³

² See the discussion on *ta'wīl* in the preceding pages.

³ See Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād fī al-I'tiqād*, ed. Anas Muḥammad 'Adnān

What is meant by “just so” is “by using reason, which produces knowledge.”

It is true that before the third Hijrī century, the *‘ulamā* were still reluctant to use reason in determining the meaning of texts that might have meanings that contradict the general principles of religious teaching, but they did not consider such texts to contain errors. They accepted them as they were, while saying “*Allāh a‘lam* (Allah knows best),” unlike the followers of hermeneutics in Europe, who judged the text to be incorrect.

The various “ifs” that have been presented thus far in this discussion do not end there, because the issue of hermeneutics in relation to interpreting the Qur’ān is not limited to these matters. The presence of many differences in ideas and their application has meant that hermeneutics has not been immediately and completely accepted, whether by many Muslim scholars or even by the followers of the various streams of hermeneutics itself, which is reflected in the preceding brief summary.⁴ Next, some general and specific comments concerning the views of some scholars of hermeneutics are presented.

1 General Comments

First: As is well-known, the first and foremost objective of Western scholars in using hermeneutics (principles of interpretation) is to study the Bible, whereas the *‘ulamā* and Muslim scholars intend to study the Qur’ān. The Bible (the Old and New Testaments) differs from the Qur’ān, a fact recognized by Christian scholars. The Bible differs not only in its characteristics but also in its history and authenticity. The chain that connects today’s generation to the period of the Qur’ān’s revelation is very strong and accurate because it was transmitted through memorization and writing—it was written in the presence of the Prophet at the time of its revelation. The Qur’ān does not face ontological problems when subjected to historical criticism, as does the Bible. The texts of the Hebrew Bible were written down a long time after the period of its revelation: approximately 2,000 years later. Moreover, prior to this, the ancient Jewish people were forced to scatter to various areas outside Jerusalem because of oppression by other nations, which, in turn, gave rise to linguistic and cultural assimilation with local peoples.

al-Sharafāwī, (Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2008), 66: there is no reference for this quotation in the original, but the section *Shihab* refers to is found at the end of al-Ghazālī’s introduction to his *Iqtīṣād*. In particular, the last sentence appears to be a paraphrase of the ideas found in the relevant passage.

4 Translator’s note: This refers to a section preceding the beginning of the translated excerpt.

The New Testament now in circulation is considered similar to the ḥadīth attributed to Prophet Muḥammad. The similarity meant here is that both refer to Prophet Muḥammad and Prophet Jesus: their utterances and actions, the events they witnessed and agreed to, and the stories of their lives. The ḥadīths of Prophet Muḥammad have been analyzed in terms of their transmission and their authenticity, because all agree that there are falsehoods attributed to Prophet Muḥammad and these types of transmissions should be rejected, even if they are found in books of ḥadīth written by famous *‘ulamā*. The Qur’ān, by contrast, is not subject to such doubts regarding attribution or authenticity.

Further, the Bible and the Qur’ān differ in their language and popularity. The Arabic language used by the Qur’ān lives on today. Almost the entire vocabulary of the Qur’ān is still used by Arabs and their meanings are clear. This situation differs from that of the original text of the Tawrāt and the Injīl. In addition, the Qur’ān’s richness of vocabulary is open to a variety of new interpretations. The Qur’ān is recognized by linguists and Islamic scholars as *ḥammālat li al-wujūh*—it can contain a variety of meanings, so it is quite possible for it to accommodate new meanings without any difficulty. The *‘ulamā* of *tafsīr* do not need to edit the Qur’ān or correct it if there are new discoveries or developments, because it is quite possible for the text to accommodate the proposed idea.

There is also another prominent difference between the Qur’ān and the Bible from the perspective of language. The Qur’ān was written and has been recited in its original language from the time of its revelation until today, which is not the case for the Bible. It is strongly believed that the original languages of the Bible were Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament. Meanwhile, Jesus himself spoke in Aramaic. The Bible was then translated in its entirety to Latin, and then into other European languages, such as German, English, French, and so forth, including into Indonesian, which relies significantly on the English-language Bible. Now, because there are no longer any native speakers of Ancient Hebrew, to understand the language of the Hebrew Bible, Jewish and Christian theologians need the assistance of a language that is from the same Semitic language family, namely Arabic. Aware of the undeniable facts presented above, Western scholars consider the Bible to be a cultural product (*produk budaya*), which contains errors in some areas and also contradicts scientific developments, yet the Church is reluctant to reinterpret it. The conflict between the Church and scientists is no secret. This position of the scientists means that they can state without hesitation that there are errors in the Bible and that its authenticity is in doubt, and hence, the leading figures of hermeneutics suggest that we should take care in approaching, or be “suspicious” of, the text.

For Muslim *ʿulamā* and scholars, the situation is different. For them, there is no doubt concerning the text of the Qurʾān. It is entirely authentic and has its source in Allah; it is all true, word for word, with everything in its place, and the text has not changed in the slightest. This position is not only because of faith in the guarantee given by Allah, in which He says, “Indeed, We revealed the Qurʾān and We are its Guardian” (Qurʾān 15:9), but also based on scientific and historical arguments. Even Orientalists who are objective recognize the authenticity of the Qurʾān. In addition, the criticisms that non-Muslims have put forward of Qurʾānic texts have been adequately disproven, at least to the extent that, even if others are not yet satisfied, Muslim *ʿulamā* and scholars are.

It should be noted that doubt toward God, the Most Knowing and All-Powerful, cannot touch, let alone reside in, the heart of someone who believes in Him. However, doubt toward human beings is only human. Everyone is born in a field of prejudgments, and there are some who have the tendency to doubt. Conversely, there are some who accept certain views, especially ones deemed to have authority, without any critical argument; they are the ones who need to be cautioned.

Allah states in Qurʾān 3:144:

Muḥammad is only a messenger; indeed, before him have passed many messengers. If he passes away or is killed, will you turn your backs [leave Islam]? Whoever turns back, he cannot harm Allah in the slightest, and Allah will repay those who are grateful.

This statement has been understood by Malek Bennabi (d. 1973), an Algerian Muslim thinker, as a warning to avoid assessing an idea based on our admiration for its bearer or on other external factors, such as material gain; rather, it should depend on the values inherent in that idea. Several of the Prophet’s Companions embraced Islam only because of their admiration for him. In this verse, Allah corrected them so that they would not merely be in awe of the Prophet, but rather, that their Islam would emerge from the teachings that he conveyed.

Again, suspicion (*kecurigaan*) or doubt (*keraguan*) is reasonable and sometimes necessary. Suspicion is not only caused by negative prejudices but may also be based on a supposition that someone has forgotten or made a mistake, or that what they are saying was true at that time, but is no longer true in the time of the interpreter because there have been developments in time and the condition of society.

No matter how high one’s value as a human being or one’s knowledge is, there is still the potential to commit error. This is why Prophet Muḥammad

admitted that he could be wrong in worldly matters, and that even in the Qur'ān we find Allah's reminders to him because of his "errors"—which are insignificant when measured by normal human standards. These reminders show that as a human being, the Prophet could make mistakes, but conversely, they show that if he was mistaken in a matter of religion, Allah would correct him so that his teachings would be accepted and their truth believed with certainty.

Nor does the Qur'ān forbid those who do not yet believe from doubting. What it urges is to refrain from the kind of doubt that is accompanied by negative prejudice. This is one of the meanings of His words in Qur'ān 2:2: *lā rayba fīhi* (in it there is no doubt). The Qur'ān does not forbid someone from doubting and Islam does not intend its followers to be "believers while closing the eyes of reason and the heart." It calls for belief that is supported by argument, so that this belief will become firmly entrenched and rooted in the human self. In the eyes of Islam, faith that is entrenched in the heart cannot conflict with science, which is based on reason. The two must proceed in harmony.

The Qur'ān does not forbid *shakk*—doubt that pushes someone to think objectively and positively—because this type of doubt will lead to the discovery of the truth. One who has doubts is invited to study the Qur'ān objectively from the perspective of its miraculous nature, whether this relates to the way that it informs us about the unseen, its language, scientific allusions, or the biography and character of Prophet Muḥammad. An extensive stream of literature by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars discusses these topics.

Subjectivity is one of the causes of misinterpretation. Therefore, although a Muslim interpreter cannot—based on their belief and scientific satisfaction—doubt the Qur'ānic text, there must still be positive suspicion or caution about the interpreter and their interpretation. This means that *anyone's interpretation*, other than that authorized by Allah, namely, that of Prophet Muḥammad, must be criticized. Even interpretations and information attributed to the Prophet must be examined for their soundness, whether in their *matn* (content) or their *sanad* (chain of their transmitters), and even if they are sound in those two aspects, they must still be analyzed in terms of their status and meaning, which has been alluded to in the discussion of *al-tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* (interpretation by transmitted tradition). In addition, we must remember that apart from caution and healthy suspicion about other people's interpretations, everyone must also have suspicion and caution about themselves, lest they are themselves mistaken or have a subjective view that is misplaced. This aspect is often forgotten!

Second: Some of the questions that those interested in hermeneutics or its scholars attempt to answer have been comprehensively discussed by the

‘ulamā of Islam and have been accepted, whether based on logical argument or faith. For example: How is it possible to convey the will of God, who uses the language of the heavens, to human beings, who use the languages of the earth? How can the Unlimited One (God) communicate with limited human beings?

This question was resolved by many *‘ulamā* by referring to the words of Allah: “Indeed, We have made it an Arabic Qur’ān, so that you will understand [it]” (Qur’ān 43:3). According to them, there is something known as *kalām nafsi*, which is what is intended by the pronoun (*damīr*) in *ja‘alnāhu* (We have made it). There is also *kalām lafẓī*, which is the Arabic Qur’ān. The concept can be compared with humans speaking to animals. Humans’ abilities exceed those of animals; for example, they can speak in “chicken language” so that the animal will understand. God also does not speak in “His language” or the language of the heavens, but makes His language resemble human language so that humans may understand. The question of whether the *kalām* of Allah is “ḥadīth,” which means its existence is preceded by nonexistence, or whether the reverse is true and it is *qadīm*, was once a lengthy and exhausting discussion, and even resulted in torture for many prominent individuals, but today, this question is considered resolved. It is true that it is not easy to explain how this occurred. However, the differences over this process do not detract from the consensus of the *‘ulamā* that the Qur’ān that is in the hands of the Muslim community today does not differ in its utterances from what was conveyed by the angel Gabriel to Prophet Muḥammad, nor from what was recited and conveyed by the Prophet to the Muslim community, and Prophet Muḥammad did not have even the slightest involvement in the matter of the Qur’ān, except to convey it and explain its meaning.

Now, because the Qur’ān that is in the hands of the Muslim community is in the form of utterances (*lafẓ*), some people argue that the Qur’ān’s utterances are no different from other utterances, and thus, the Qur’ān can be approached as one might approach any other text. For Muslims, this view is not entirely correct, because the utterances contained in the verses of the Qur’ān are believed to have come from Allah. Hence, a Muslim cannot treat the Qur’ān in the same way as a text produced by human beings. Diamonds and pebbles are both stones, but our treatment of diamonds differs significantly from that of pebbles, however beautiful the pebble might be. Likewise, the Qur’ān’s utterances have a special character that is not possessed by anything else.

There are some who ask: How can we guarantee that the angel who conveyed God’s Revelation to Prophet Muḥammad did so correctly and exactly? Likewise, how can we guarantee that what the angel conveyed was perfectly understood by Prophet Muḥammad? Further, was Prophet Muḥammad’s con-

veyance of the message to his community no more and no less than what he received?

These types of questions are entirely reasonable if this interaction has occurred between two human beings.⁵ But this problem, for a Muslim who understands their religion well, is easily resolved through their belief in the Qurʾān, which affirms that the angel Gabriel, the messenger of God entrusted with conveying the revelation of the Qurʾān, is a figure of highly trustworthy character (Qurʾān 26:193), and that Prophet Muḥammad received the revelation exactly as it was conveyed. This is because from the time of its revelation, the verses he revealed were preserved so that they were not touched by the slightest falsehood from any direction (Qurʾān 72:27; 41:42). In addition, Allah authorized the Prophet to explain these (Qurʾān 16:44). One interesting fact in this context is the attitude of the Prophet, who was so careful to completely convey what he received that the word *qul* (say) is found repeatedly in the Qurʾān—yet this word would not be required in everyday speech and would in fact be strange. If one said to A, “Say such-and-such to B,” then A would not need to repeat the word “say,” and neither would B. However, neither the angel Gabriel nor Prophet Muḥammad omitted a single word, not even a letter, from the Divine Revelations, and thus, they both recited the word *qul*. Once again, this is a matter of faith, affirmed strongly by the Muslim community, but perhaps doubted or rejected by one who is not a believer. It is this faith and belief that constitutes one of the foremost differences between Muslim and non-Muslim interpreters of the Qurʾān.

Some of those interested in hermeneutics ask: How is it possible to explain the message of a text that was uttered or written in a time, place, and culture that is different from that of the society that wants to understand and implement that message? They say: “A collection of spoken or written words cannot properly be understood unless we have a good understanding of the speaker, their interlocutor, and the context of the speech, as well as the social, cultural, and psychological conditions in which the text was conveyed.” Separating a text from its speaker and from the psychological and social situation that gave rise

5 I have experienced many doubts in presenting this explanation of hermeneutics. First, because the explanations concerning the scholars named here are in the form of translations, such as from German to Arabic or Indonesian. Therefore, do the translation and the translator’s understanding agree with the intent of the author whose work has been translated into Arabic or Indonesian? In addition, is my understanding of those translators’ explanations in accord with the intent of the translator? However, any doubt will disappear when the author of the text Himself testifies to the truth of its transmission and the truth of the interpretation of the utterance or text that He has written. This is the case with the Qurʾān for the Muslim community.

to it, or from the interlocutor, can make the text dry and disconnected from social reality. This question is very reasonable, and the issue to which they refer does exist. However, if they were to study more deeply the *khiṭābat al-Qurʾān* (the Qurʾān's discourse), *sabab al-nuzūl* (occasion of revelation), *munāsaba* (relationship between verses), *siyāq* (context), and the *sīra* (biography) of the Prophet, all of which are primary requirements for those who wish to interpret the Qurʾān, probably their questions and the problems they envisage would not arise. Moreover, if they study the meaning of *ʿilla* (operative legal cause) and its role in legal rulings,⁶ and learn more about the nature of Islamic teachings, which do not sacralize particular forms, but rather, state that welfare (*kemaslahatan*) and the prevention of problems is the objective of religion; and if they understand that it is possible to develop the content of the interpretations of the Prophet, which has been briefly mentioned in this book—if they study all of these things, it is certain that some of their questions or objections will no longer arise.

From the beginning, the *ʿulamā* have differentiated between *sharīʿa* and *fiqh*. *Sharīʿa* is immutable because it comes from Allah, the Most Knowing, whereas *fiqh* is human understanding, which can vary. “None can inhale the scent of *fiqh* if he does not know the variety of differences of opinion,” goes a popular saying.

An expert in *fiqh* must not create conflict between social reality and religious texts, but instead, must find a solution while paying attention to *maqāṣid al-sharīʿa* (the objectives of the *sharīʿa*). “A legal expert,” wrote Ibn al-Qayyim, “may not create conflict between these two things such that it causes enmity between the two, because each era has its own ruling.” A legal expert must be able to find a path that does not cause burden—if necessary, by using various religiously permitted means, such as the conditions of *ḍarūra* (necessity), *ḥāja* (need), and *ʿumūm al-balbā*—when conditions have deteriorated to the point where many things must be tolerated, although they may have something of the impermissible (*aroma keharaman*) about them.

6 For this reason, after the time of the Prophet, many of his rulings were considered by the *ʿulamā* to no longer apply or have been changed, because their *ʿilla* no longer exists or a new *ʿilla* emerged, resulting in a new law. For example, the Prophet(s) forbade taking a payment from the owner of a buffalo or bull that was used as a breeding male, but Imām Mālik permitted it because if the animal's owner did not receive a payment, they would incur a loss owing to the costs of taking care of the animal. Similarly, the Prophet's ruling in rejecting *tasʿīr*, or price-fixing, and letting the market set prices is not to be applied now according to many *ʿulamā* because of social developments. This is a ruling that the Prophet made before the spread of fraud and greed.

Those who have engaged with the field of interpretation of sacred texts or hermeneutics also recognize that interpreters need guidelines in the form of principles that function as a reference for understanding texts. This is because a text cannot be interpreted only in relation to itself, for it relates to many other things. In the context of Qur'ānic interpretation, these principles include what is presented in this book, which is known as the principles of *tafsīr* (*Kaidah-Kaidah Tafsir*).

The fact that a particular text cannot be interpreted in isolation from its interpreter, according to many scholars of hermeneutics, and the fact that its interpretation is influenced by many things, including social conditions and developments in knowledge and the times, as is often stated by interpreters—all this must be recognized and has been discussed in this book [from which this extract is taken] in the chapters on the Qur'ān's discourse and understanding the messages of the Qur'ān. However, there is a need for caution, lest an interpretation that aims to follow the times deviates from the meanings contained in the text. In this book, I have discussed the fact that each text is a container (*wadah*) for meaning. Its content should be no more and no less than the size of the container. The container should also not be filled with something that was not intended for it. One should not put oil into a teacup, nor fill a plate with drinking water. Likewise, in interpretation one should not follow negative social developments in the name of accommodating social change or take illusory welfare (*kemaslahatan semu*) to be genuine welfare (*kemaslahatan hakiki*).

2 Specific Comments

Next, I examine some of the ideas that scholars of hermeneutics, especially Romantic and philosophical hermeneutics, have proposed. Of course, the following comments, whether positive or otherwise, do not cover everything that is proposed by these two ideologies.

2.1 *Romanticism*

The previous discussion [earlier in the original book] of Romantic hermeneutics revealed several things, about which important comments can be made in the context of interpretation, including some that are positive and some that are not. The focus of the hermeneutics of this era on the meaning intended by a text's writer, speaker, or author, as presented by the two figures whose ideas have been discussed above (Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey),⁷

⁷ Translator's note: This refers to a section preceding the beginning of the translated excerpt.

as well as the establishment of guidelines for *obtaining the true and final meaning for the object being discussed*, and on the necessity of understanding a text's language and its apparatus, are all positive things, which are very much needed by all who wish to discover and understand the truth. This is also emphasized by the *ʿulamā* of the Qurʾān. Another positive thing is the Romantic hermeneutic stream's warning concerning the many ways of falling into misunderstanding, such that the interpreter must always use caution. The *ʿulamā* of the Qurʾānic sciences have also warned of this issue, by clearly stating that interpretation may not be based on "conjecture" or "unfounded suppositions," and that if the interpreter has not yet properly understood the meaning of a text based on a strong supposition, they should refrain from interpreting while saying "*Allāh aʿlam*" (Allah is Most Knowing).

The statement of Romantic hermeneutics that an interpreter must enter wholly into the depths of the self of the owner/author of the text by submerging in this individual's thoughts and feelings to truly understand the meaning of the text is accompanied by a warning that this is not easy and that mistakes are common. This statement must be understood and put in its proper place. In this context, it is necessary to emphasize the statement's continuation, namely, that the similarity in humanity between the interpreter and the author of the text helps in understanding the text's meaning and intention. This means that their idea applies only to texts created by human beings, not those believed to be the Word of God.

It is not easy to enter wholly and submerge oneself in the thoughts and feelings of another person, especially if the temporal gap between interpreter and author yawns wide. It is not excessive to declare that it is impossible to implement the aforementioned suggestion in relation to the owner (*pemilik*) of the Qurʾānic text, or let us say the Author of the Qurʾān, namely Allah, whether before or after touching on the text. In fact, it is impossible, unless such knowledge is obtained in line with the Islamic creed (*ʿaqīda islāmīyya*) and in accordance with the requirements of interpretation (*syarat-syarat penafsiran*).

It is impossible in relation to Allah because divinity is something that is only possessed by Allah; one cannot imagine that anyone would understand it except Allah or His equal, and since He has no equal, therefore nothing knows Him except for Allah, as al-Ghazālī wrote in his book *al-Maṣṣad al-Asnā*, which discusses the Most Beautiful Names. For this reason, he wrote in another part of his book, "If you ask what is the pinnacle of knowledge of the Gnostics (*orang-orang arif*) about Allah? I answer that the pinnacle of knowledge of the Gnostics is the inability to know Him." This is what Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq meant by his statement, "The awareness of the inability to know Him is itself [true] knowledge."

This is also what is indicated by Prophet Muḥammad in his statement: “I cannot encompass the praise of You. My praise of You is in accordance with Your praise of Yourself” (ḥadīth narrated by Aḥmad). Even the Qur’ān reports the statement of Prophet Jesus, who said, “You know what is in my self, and I do not know what is in Your Self; Indeed, you are the Most Knowing of all that is unseen” (Qur’ān 5:116). Now if a holy Prophet says this, what about an ordinary human being? Hence, the requirement of submerging oneself and entering the heart of the author of the Qur’ānic text cannot be fulfilled by a Muslim who believes that the Qur’ānic text, and its utterance and meaning, have emerged from the presence of Allah. It can only be applied to human-made texts, religious texts that are thought to be the work of human beings, those that are thought to have undergone changes from the original text that comes from God, which is the belief of Western intellectuals regarding the Old and New Testaments, or by a Muslim who does not understand the nature of the Qur’ān.

It is possible to come to know someone well through their works, but can one truly and accurately know Allah through His creations when scientists have discovered only a very small number of these as they themselves admit? If not, then from this perspective, a Muslim does not fulfill the requirements for undertaking this approach to understand the Qur’ān’s texts. Through this explanation, it can be observed that the factor of ease of understanding the text’s meaning, namely, the similarity in humanity between the interpreter and the utterer of the text, is not relevant for a Muslim in relation to the words of Allah.

Regardless, I am reluctant to completely close off the possibility of gaining knowledge of Allah, within certain limits, as part of the effort to study the Qur’ānic text. This knowledge, in my view, may be attained through the knowledge of His attributes, which He has shown us, including that He is Unique, Most Just, Most Compassionate, His Compassion prevails over His Wrath, He intends ease and not hardship for humankind, and so forth.

If this is what is intended or applied when interpreting the Qur’ān, then, in reality or in theory, it should never be absent from the mind of the interpreter when extracting the meanings of this sacred scripture or determining laws in His name. However, it should be noted that this knowledge is in accordance with Allah’s self-disclosure to humankind. This is why the experts in the Qur’ānic sciences have determined that one of the requirements for someone who intends to interpret the Qur’ān is knowledge of correct Islamic belief (*‘aqīda*), which, among other things, includes knowledge of God and His attributes.

Hence, if Schleiermacher’s view is to be applied to the Qur’ānic text, it is within the limits of the knowledge described above and the knowledge of the

biography of Prophet Muḥammad. This is what was in fact undertaken by the *‘ulamā* of *tafsīr* and *fiqh* when explaining the meaning of verses of the Qur’ān.

As suggested by Schleiermacher, there have been some seekers of knowledge who have attempted to enter the mind of the author by attempting to study the personality of Prophet Muḥammad, and on that basis to draw conclusions/interpretations about verses of the Qur’ān that are not always correct. This is because they measure Prophet Muḥammad against themselves. My teacher at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd (d. 1978), when translating Alphonse-Étienne Dinet’s (Nasreddine Dinet, d. 1929) book *Muhammad Rasulullah*, criticized in his foreword many Orientalists who, in his estimation, used their own logic and culture to understand the biography of the Prophet. They made Prophet Muḥammad speak and think like a German if the biographer was German, or an Italian if the author was Italian, so that the Prophet’s image changed according to his biographer’s nationality. Meanwhile, it has not been uncommon for even Muslim writers to fall into the same error and forget that he was a Prophet with a perfect personality and a highly praised character, such that the image they convey is far removed from the personality of Prophet Muḥammad.

The Romantic view is that the certain, true, and final meaning of the text or the substance of that meaning is within the reach of the interpreter, as long as the given methods and signposts are considered. This can be agreed to, with certain caveats. As was explained in the discussion [in the original book] on *dilāla* (textual indicant), *qaṭ’ī* (certain, definite), and *ẓannī* (speculative, uncertain), the only one who can *determine the true intent* of a text is its author. Therefore, the terms *dilāla ḥaqīqīyya* (absolute evidence) and *dilāla nisbiyya* (relative evidence) are used in the field of *uṣūl al-fiqh*. Thus, the above view can be agreed to if what they mean by *reaching the conclusion* is the same as the term *qaṭ’ī* in *uṣūl al-fiqh*, namely, reaching a very strong supposition about the meaning by gathering a range of arguments that lead to certainty about the intent of the text being investigated. If this is the certainty meant by the scholars of hermeneutics, it accords with, and was established by, the *‘ulamā* of Islam long before its discovery by the figures mentioned previously.

Notwithstanding limitations in knowledge and reading, I have not found in discussions of Romantic hermeneutics any other details of requirements for applying this method, so it cannot be stated how far or near it is from the requirements of the interpreters of the Qur’ān and their principles. However, the strong impression from the discourses of the scholars of hermeneutics of this era is that this method was created to be applied to texts created by human beings. This means that a Muslim who believes that the Qur’ān is the word of

Allah cannot reasonably apply it, except within the limits that can be affirmed by religious logic (*logika agama*) and the requirements for interpreting the Qurʾān.

2.2 *Philosophical Hermeneutics*

From the preceding explanation of philosophical hermeneutics, their perspective in the field of interpretation of texts can be summarized as follows:

1. The text has an existence of its own, independent of its author. It is not important to know the intent of the author, because if it is connected to its author, the text becomes chained to a particular meaning and no more than that meaning, even though “the author is dead.”
2. The text does not have a permanent meaning, and its meaning need not be connected to the time of its creation.
3. The experience, ideas, and knowledge of the interpreter play a significant role in determining meaning.
4. The author may be one of the interpreters and their understanding is one of many possible interpretations, and if so, it has no more weight than the interpretations of others.
5. The text has a broader meaning than the intention of the author; it may have an interpretation that was not intended by the author as well as interpretations that continue to emerge in accordance with changing developments.
6. The process of interpretation is a dialogue between the interpreter and the text. The understanding of the text emerges from that dialogue, which begins with the interpreter’s questions that emerge from their pre-existing knowledge, assumptions, inferences, and predictions, which are then answered by the text, perhaps affirming them, perhaps negating them, or perhaps correcting the view of its interlocutor. Probably, the text will correct its own view, which it had previously thought was correct, but because of this dialogue, “the text” realizes its mistake.

My comments regarding these points are as follows. **First:** Concerning *the independence of the text*: although this idea in general can be accepted, such independence is not absolute, because there are verses of the Qurʾān that cannot be separated from the explanation of Prophet Muḥammad. Further, there are many verses that cannot be understood on their own but must be connected to other verses. The *ʿulamā* of *tafsīr* discussed this aspect when they considered the concepts of *mutlaq* (absolute) and *muqayyad* (limited). In addition, for many verses the help of the Sunna is needed to determine their meaning. For example, the command to perform the *ṣalāt* cannot be understood except with the explanation of Prophet Muḥammad. The relationship between the Qurʾān

and the Sunna is similar to the relationship between a law (*Undang-undang*) and an elucidation of a law (*Penjelasan Undang-undang*). The two cannot be separated. There are even Qurʾānic texts that, in their interpretation, must be added to or deleted (i.e., they must undergo *ziyāda* [addition] or *ḥadhf* [ellipsis]), in the terminology of the *ʿulamā* of the Qurʾān).

Thus, as regards the advice of the *ʿulamā* concerning the interpretation of the Qurʾān, they have not recommended the idea of *independence from the author of the text*, namely, Allah in relation to the Qurʾān, even for verses that might be understood on their own. Many statements of the *ʿulamā* indicate the necessity of feeling the presence of Allah and His greatness in reading, studying, and interpreting the text of the verses of the Qurʾān. It may be true that there is a statement attributed to ʿAlī: “Look at the statement and do not look at who said it.”

However, this was not said in the context of interpreting a text—let alone the Qurʾān. ʿAlī made this statement after the text was understood and its truth was admitted. Namely, if the meaning of the text is already correct, then one should accept it as it is without considering who said it. This accords with the statement of the Prophet: “Wisdom is the lost property of the believer; wherever he finds it, he has the most right to it.” It also accords with the proverb, “Take wisdom, even if it is from the mouths of the insane.”

The idea of *the death of the author* has become widespread and has been accepted by many Western philosophers. We can also accept it within certain limits, although the term “dead” cannot be applied to Allah. Some Muslim scholars use the expression: “The direct connection between heaven and earth ceased with the ending of revelation (*waḥy*).” However, does this imply entirely ignoring the author of the text? In Arabic literature, there is a well-known expression: *al-uslūb huwa al-rajul* (the style of the utterance is identical to its author). This statement clearly contradicts the idea of *the death of the author*, because the meaning of the word *death*, according to the scholars of hermeneutics, is that the author should be entirely removed from the mind of the interpreter, although they may yet be drawing breath. Yet the aforementioned literary expression [*al-uslūb huwa al-rajul*], which is accepted both by the *ʿulamā* and linguists, indicates how strong the presence of the author is, such that they cannot be separated from the text they have authored. Often, we read something a person has written, and it tells us something about them through their discourse concerning other people. The writer is unable to separate themselves from their beliefs, customs, culture, and other external influences. The writer may have attempted to avoid these influences, or these may be submerged below their consciousness. Despite this, psychologists often pay close attention to these factors, although they may seem insignificant, and try

to bring them to the surface to understand someone's statements and actions as well as their writings and works. Consequently, how can the author be separated from their work? If two poets or novelists produce works critical of their society, but one uses rude and coarse language, while the other conveys their criticisms in a polite and refreshing style, we might ask: "What caused the differences in their presentation and approach, even though their objective is the same?" It is undeniable that the differences result from differences in their personalities, backgrounds, and environments. Therefore, we cannot entirely separate the author from their background and consider them to be *dead*. Even if we could imagine doing so for works of human authors, it cannot be applied in the interpretation of the Qur'ān. The presence of Allah in the verses to be interpreted is a necessity, and the historical events from the background of the verse's revelation must be considered, because if they are not, the conclusions that will be drawn about its meaning will be very far removed from what He intended. In addition, the impact of the same utterance may be quite different because of the presence of the speaker when they made the utterance or the attitude of their interlocutor. A threat from a small, weak child is very different from the same threat from a powerful, cruel adult. Hence, we should not separate the speaker from their utterance. In the previous explanation concerning *khūṭābat al-Qur'ān* (the Qur'ān's discourse), we gave the example of how some *ʿulamā* fell into error because they were fixated only on the text and did not consider the Speaker or His interlocutor.

Separating a text from its author may be possible if the text is an independent piece of writing that is not directed at a particular group of people, as is the case when finding a text in a pile of old books when one does not know the author's name, the purpose for which they have written it, or the target audience. However, such separation is not possible for someone who believes with certainty that the Qur'ān's texts—its commands, prohibitions, threats, and guidance—are directed at them, because they were directed at the generation encountered by Prophet Muḥammad and at the generations of today and the future, and are believed with certainty to come from the source of the text, who is the Lord of all the universe. The ideas put forward by hermeneutics cannot be applied by a Muslim who is commanded and taught to read the Qur'ān as if its verses had been revealed to him or her. Did not Prophet Muḥammad advise his Companions and the generations after them to answer the questions posed in the Qur'ān—such as *fa bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhdhibān* (Which of your Lord's blessings will you deny?), a phrase repeated often in *sūra al-Raḥmān* (see the discussion on *khūṭābat al-Qur'ān*)?

As for the contention that it is not important to know the intent of the author of a text, because if it were connected to them, the text would be chained to

only one particular meaning, and no more than that meaning—this also cannot be accepted, because the most important thing for an interpreter of the Qurʾān is *to understand the intent of the author of the text*, in this case Allah. As has been explained previously, the definition of Qurʾānic *tafsīr* according to the *ʿulamā* of Islam is the explanation of the intent of Allah that is contained in His words in accordance with the interpreter’s ability. This contention of philosophical hermeneutics constitutes a prominent and fundamental difference with the views of Qurʾānic *tafsīr* scholars.

As for the idea that *a text, if given a particular meaning, then becomes chained*, this too must be put to rest. It is undeniable that, in principle, texts may have a range of interpretations, including texts of the Qurʾān: *al-Qurʾān ḥammāla li al-wujūh* (the Qurʾān may contain a range of meanings). According to the *ʿulamā*, one is not a competent interpreter of the Qurʾān if one cannot present a range of meanings for the verse being interpreted. A great scholar, Abdullah Draz (d. 1958), compared the Qurʾān to:

a diamond, each of whose facets emits a different kind of light to every other facet. It is not impossible that if you allow someone else to look upon it, they will see more than [or something different than] what you see.⁸

8 For example, Allah’s words in Qurʾān 2:212: “Wa Allāhu yarzuqu man yashāʾ bi-ghayri ḥisāb” [And Allah gives His bounty to whom He will, without measure]. This may mean:

1. Allah gives His bounty (*rezeki*) to whomever He wills, without anyone having the right to question Him regarding why He chooses to bestow more on some than on others. This means that the bounty of Allah is fundamentally a matter of divine provision and not determined by human efforts. Are there not those who strive, but fail, and are there not those who do nothing, yet are given bounty?
2. Allah gives His bounty to whomever He wills, and He does not count this providence. (He is the Wealthiest, like someone who does not care what they spend.) This is to emphasize the immense wealth of Allah (*swt*).
3. Allah gives His bounty to someone without them expecting it. This signifies that there are people who receive Allah’s bounty from sources that they do not expect.
4. Allah gives His bounty to someone without counting in detail that person’s good or bad deeds. This may mean that there are believers whom Allah enters into paradise, without counting their deeds in detail.
5. Allah gives His bounty to someone in such a quantity that it cannot be counted. The meaning is that Allah multiplies His bounty such that the receiver is unable to count it.

These meanings are encompassed by the short text above, and it is possible that more meanings can be extracted from it. The *ʿulamā* have seen a similarity in this aspect between the Qurʾān and the universe. They affirm that the Qurʾān and the universe are signs (*ayāt*) of Allah—signs (*tanda*) of His Unity and Power. Just as human beings can, through observing

Of course, this variety of meaning may not depart from the container of meanings held by the text, nor may it depart from the principles of *tafsīr*. Now, once this is recognized, does it mean it is true for all verses of the Qur'ān? The *‘ulamā* of the Qur'ānic sciences have clearly answered: No! There are texts that cannot accept more than one meaning. This is what is known by the term *qaṭ‘ī*! How chaotic would our lives be if every text that we read or heard contained many meanings? When an employer instructs their employee to come the next morning, will the employee surmise that what they actually intend is next year? When a mother points to her child and says, “This is my birth child (*anak kandung*),” will a listener doubt that the child was once in that mother's womb and that it was she who gave birth to it? To repeat, there are texts that cannot accept more than one meaning (*qaṭ‘ī*), but there are not many of them in the Qur'ān.

Second: Concerning the second point of the specific comments: a text does not have a permanent meaning, nor does its meaning have to be connected to the time of its creation; rather, its interpretation is only related to the text and the thoughts and perspective of the interpreter.

This view gives rise to relativism. This way of thinking, as we can see from the above discussion, connects the understanding of the text with its interpreters and their individual thoughts and perspectives. Because there are many interpreters, there are many interpretations, and if each interpretation is said to be correct, it may have to be said that two things are correct when they are diametrically opposed. If a person believes in the existence of God and interprets a text according to that perspective, and another person denies His existence and interprets the same text according to that perspective, then the meanings of that text will be diametrically opposed, and because both interpreters are said to be correct, a contradiction occurs.

The term used by some scholars, “the relativity of knowledge,” contains the seeds of its own destruction, because if we adopt this view, it must also affect the theory of relativity that is being proposed. Thus, the question is posed: Is the theory correct or not? Does it always apply (*konsisten*) or is it relative? If the proposer answers, “It always applies, and is not relative,” then the theory fails, whereas if they answer, “It is relative,” then the theory may be disproved by someone else.

Do not say that the narrations concerning the interpretations of Qur'ānic verses attributed to the Prophet's Companions differ. Do not use this as evi-

and studying the universe, uncover its mysteries from time to time and discover new things, such is also the case with the written signs (*āyāt*) of Allah: those in the field of Qur'ānic studies will in time be able to grasp new, as yet undiscovered, meanings.

dence for the view stated above, because some of these narrations are not sound and some of those that do differ, differ in expression, not substance. Different opinions are not contradictory (*bertolak belakang*); rather, they vary (*beragam*). Ibn Taymiyya provides an example of the interpretation of *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* (the straight path). There are some who interpret it as “following the guidance of the Qur’ān,” others who state “it is Islam,” and yet others who understand it as “following the Sunna and the *jamā’a*, or obedience to Allah and His Messenger.” These meanings, if examined, will be found to have the same substance. Differences may also arise because one interpreter gives the meaning in general, whereas another gives one example of that general meaning. This was the view of Ibn Taymiyya in his epistle, as presented by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d. 1814) in his *tafsīr*. I must add a third view, which is that even if there are some differences, their agreement in interpretation far outweighs their differences, whose nature was discussed above.

Nor should one say that among the Muslim community there are differences in legal rulings and that they can all be said to be correct, or that the *‘ulamā* have “legitimized” a variety of differing *fatwās* (Islamic legal opinions) from the *muftis* (those who issue *fatwās*). This is true, but it must be realized that *fatwās* are connected to an *‘illa* (effective cause),⁹ and also to an argument: one that may be acceptable to A, but rejected by B. The laws of religion are connected to general welfare, which, in turn, is connected to the conditions faced at the time, so that when conditions change and the *‘illa* no longer exists, the *fatwā* of a *muftī* may change. Lying is bad, but lying to reconcile two parties in conflict is permissible, even recommended. What changes is the case at hand. Conversely, not all matters are relative. Some are certain (*qaṭ’ī*) and agreed upon by all *‘ulamā* and all humankind. The differences are in the details and in matters that are unclear. These differences are not connected to truth or reality, but to the efforts to determine what is true in accordance with reality, which is unitary rather than multiple. It is true that if the opinion of a *muftī* who has fulfilled the requirements of being a *muftī* is different from that of another *muftī* who has also fulfilled those requirements, then that difference is tolerated as long as it does not relate to general principles that have been agreed upon. Their *fatwās* may be different and both may be correct, but one may be better than the other. The difference in legal opinions between the Prophet Solomon and his father, the Prophet David, is well-known among seekers of knowledge and is mentioned in passing in the Qur’ān (see Qur’ān 21:78–79).¹⁰

9 See the preceding pages concerning the meaning of *‘illa*.

10 This father and son, who were both prophets sent by Allah, differed in their views regard-

The interpretation of the meanings of Allah's words in the verse *wa allāhu yarzuqu man yashā' bi-ghayri ḥisāb* is an example of variety and difference that does not violate the principles of the teachings of religion.

Third: Concerning the role of the interpreter's own perspective, which this stream of thought deems inseparable from him or her, and even if one attempts to separate or remove it, it will still emerge, although in a hidden way. This view clearly has some truth, which is proven by the emergence of many types of interpretation, including legal, linguistic, theological, philosophical, and socio-cultural interpretation. These have all emerged because of the perspectives and tendencies of the interpreters. Despite this, the individual perspectives, tendencies, and unconscious minds of interpreters cannot be given free rein.

When I discussed *tafsīr bi al-ra'y*, namely, *tafsīr* using reasoning (*nalar*), I clarified that *tafsīr* is the explanation of the words of Allah in accordance with human ability. This means that *tafsīr* is the result of human thought in relation to the words of Allah, and because human thought is influenced by many things, there is no doubt that such influences will give rise to the possibility of differences in interpretation, whether between the interpreters of today and those of the past, or between those of the same era, or between interpreters in different regions. In that discussion, I affirmed that the developments in knowledge and social conditions that influence interpreters in turn influence their interpretations, which may result in differences in interpretation from one era to another. This influence cannot be denied; indeed, sometimes it must be taken into account in order to extract the correct meaning.¹¹ However, I hope the reader remembers that in that discussion I also emphasized that there are interpretations based on reasoning and the interpreter's own perspective that are *praised*, and also those that are *condemned*, and that, in general, interpretation that is forbidden or condemned is that which someone does to support a preconception with no basis in religion and sound logic, but is merely what has crossed their mind or a mistaken idea they have absorbed. In the view of the *'ulamā* of the Qur'ān, a person must set aside their preconceptions or per-

ing the case of some sheep that had eaten another person's crops. Prophet David judged that the sheep should be given to the owner of the land as compensation for the crops, whereas Prophet Solomon judged that the sheep should be given to the owner of the land for a certain period only, namely, until the plants had grown back to their previous condition. Allah judged that Solomon's decision was the better one.

11 In the past, the *'ulamā* understood Qur'ān 31:34, which states that "Allah knows what is in the wombs," to mean that He knows its gender, but with developments in technology, this meaning is no longer relevant, and thus, the phrase "what is in the wombs" now covers all the details of the fetus.

sonal ideas if these contradict the principles of interpretation. Through this, the *‘ulamā* of the Qur’ān placed methodological boundaries so that an interpreter would not be led astray by their thoughts, which could contradict the intent of the text or the principles of religion.

Some questions that are reasonable to ask concerning the followers of philosophical hermeneutics on this issue: If it is true that all ideas and interpretations are influenced by the interpreter’s background and that they are all true, then why do they criticize the views of people who hold a different view from themselves? Why do they seek to monopolize the truth? For example, if there is a follower of philosophical hermeneutics who interprets the view of Heidegger or Gadamer according to their own background, and this interpretation contradicts that of another person who is also from this group of philosophical hermeneutics, can both these differing or opposing interpretations be accepted, or is there a reference point that can be used to determine which of them is correct? As far as I am aware, no such principle or reference point exists, or if it does, it is not mentioned by this intellectual stream. In interpreting the Qur’ān, there is such a reference point, namely, the teachings of religion and the principles that have been agreed upon, relating both to language and religion.

Fourth: That the author of a text may become one of the interpreters and their interpretation may be one of the text’s interpretations. Up to this point, the statement is correct and includes the interpretation of verses of the Qur’ān because it is true that *al-Qur’ān yufassir ba’duhu ba’dan* (the verses of the Qur’ān interpret each other; see the examples given in the discussion of *tafsīr bi al-ma’thūr*).

However, the statement that “it may be that the view of the text’s writer (i.e., Allah in the case of the Qur’ān) is no stronger than the interpretation of another” cannot be accepted by those who believe that Allah is the Most Knowing. It should not be acceptable to anyone, because it is certain that the speaker is the one who knows what they mean more so than the hearer. In the explanation of *dilāla ḥaqīqīyya* and *nisbiyya*, I provided an example of the statement, “I have not yet eaten,” which may be understood by those who hear it in many ways, such as “I am still full,” or “I am hungry,” or “Do not finish that food.” Therefore, the phrase *no stronger than* is inappropriate, indeed incorrect, especially in the context of interpreting the verses of the Qur’ān. If this judgment is aimed at *the value of narrations*, it may be acceptable, because there are narrations that contain interpretations of verses by other verses, or views of *‘ulamā* that state that this verse negates that one, although the narrations or the views of the *‘ulamā* may be weak. The same is true if the meaning of an interpretation given by a verse is explained by a scholar; another scholar’s interpretation of it

may be better, as long as they do not deviate from the interpretation given by the verse that interprets the other verse.

Fifth: That there may be an interpretation that exceeds the intention of the text. This is possible; in the language of the scholars of the Qurʾān, this is called *tahmīl al-lafẓ mā lā yaḥtamīluhu* (giving the utterance a meaning that it does not contain). This is what caused some books of *tafsīr* to be called “containing everything but *tafsīr*.” Again, this kind of interpretation can occur, but, in general, scholars of the Qurʾānic sciences do not have a positive view of it, even if the meaning that it explains is correct. Errors can occur owing to:

1. mistakes in the use of arguments, along with mistakes in the content of the text that is sought to be proven;
2. mistakes in the content, even if the arguments used are correct; or
3. incorrect arguments, even if the content is correct.

Interpretations that exceed the content of the text are not viewed positively because, as was presented in the explanation of “The Utterance is the Container of Meaning (*Lafazh adalah Wadah Makna*),” each utterance is like a container that should contain meaning. This content is what must be understood by the interpreter, no more and no less, particularly in the context of the words of Allah. If it is more, it will overflow in vain, and if it is less, the intended meaning does not fully correlate. To put it another way, is not *tafsīr* defined as the explanation of the intent of the words of Allah in accordance with human ability?

Certainly, some meanings are not explicitly contained by the text. These can be accepted if they fulfill the requirements, which was explained in the discussion of *uṣūl al-fiqh* concerning *mafhūm* (implicit) and *manṭūq* (explicit), but the meaning extracted cannot be considered a meaning that is outside the text.

It was stated above that interpretation exceeding the meaning of the text is generally not viewed positively, because there were some *ʿulamā* who approved of giving meanings to the text of a verse beyond the outward (*ẓāhir*) meaning of that text, as was done by some Sufis. However, the meanings they presented have been verified according to certain conditions, as was explained [in the original book] in the discussion of *tafsīr ishārī*.

Sixth: Gadamer’s view regarding the imaginary dialogue between the interpreter and the author of the text, although the two differ in time and place. This in essence can be accepted. A statement attributed to ‘Alī is: “Invite the Qurʾān to speak”. This can be accomplished through the *mawḍūʿī* method, as has been explained previously.

To state that the text can correct its own view—which was at first thought to be correct, but because of this dialogue “the text” realized it was in error—might be possible for a dialogue between human beings regardless of whether they are of the same level—such as a dialogue between a professor and a stu-

dent, in which the student or the professor might correct themselves. However, in the context of the Qurʾān, this notion of *correction* is obviously unacceptable from the perspective of a Muslim who believes in the carefulness of the Qurʾān's compilation (*redaksi*) and its truth and the fact that not even one letter in it could be changed, even by the Prophet (see Qurʾān 10:15). Similarly, correcting the view of Gadamer or another key figure of this stream and then stating that this correction is being done in the name of Gadamer would be just as unacceptable.

Correction in the context of the Qurʾān may only occur in relation to an interpreter's interpretation of a verse. The interpreter may correct or change it in the next printing of their work, or someone else may correct it, but not in the name of the author or interpreter whose interpretation is being corrected. Some people who do not have expertise in the Qurʾān have been influenced to the extent of following Gadamer's view, leading one of them to suggest that the Qurʾān's statement in Qurʾān 3:19, *inna al-dīn ʿinda Allāh al-islām* (Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam) should be replaced and corrected with *inna al-dīn ʿinda Allāh al-ḥanafyya al-samḥāʾ* (Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is the upright and gentle way). They proposed this correction because they did not understand what was meant by *islām* in that verse, and they were seeking tolerance, even though it was in a matter of *ʿaqīda* (creed). This approach cannot be accepted, because fundamentally creedal matters may not be sacrificed in the name of tolerance, nor may tolerance be sacrificed in the name of creedal matters.

Thus, to reiterate, this idea of correction may only occur in texts that it is possible to change, and not the verses of the Qurʾān. However, the correction of an *interpretation* of the Qurʾān by any *interpreter* is not only theoretically acceptable, but has occurred throughout history, as found in the books of *tafsīr*.

Seventh: Concerning the use of hypothetical reasoning (*pengandaian*) by this stream of thought: we can say that among the *ʿulamā* of *tafsīr*, there are those whose use of hypothetical reasoning is prominent, such as al-Zamakhsharī, who often wrote in his *tafsīr* work *al-Kashshāf*: "If you say X, then the answer is Y." Here, he engages in a dialogue with another person and attempts to give the answer through the Qurʾānic text. Outside the field of *tafsīr*, hypothetical reasoning was used by many and was named *al-fiqh al-iftirāḍī*. This is what made *fiqh* so rich and broad. The *ʿulamā* of Iraq, who generally followed the *madhhab* of Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767), were widely known as *al-araʿaytaʿyyūn*, the hypothetical theologians, because they were fond of asking questions and using the phrase *araʿayta*, meaning "What do you think if ..." The hypothetical questions they asked were truly far-fetched for that era, but there are several that have actually occurred in modern times, or are now within the realms of

possibility. For example, one question was, “What is the ruling if there is a fetus which has been miscarried, but is still alive, and is then placed in the womb of another woman; who would be deemed to be the mother?” Another was, “What happens if a woman sits in a certain place that is full of semen, and this semen enters her womb, causing her to become pregnant; who should be considered the father of the child? Is she deemed to have had illicit sex?” The answers to these hypothetical questions may help us to provide legal responses to issues of surrogacy or *in vitro* fertilization, which were once considered impossible but are now possible.

This has been a brief discussion of the many points that could be presented concerning Romantic and philosophical hermeneutics.

3 Is the Qur’ān a Cultural Product (*Produk Budaya*)?

There are similarities and differences between the principles of interpretation that have been formulated by the *‘ulamā* of Islam and those proposed by Western hermeneutics. Some differences can be tolerated and reconciled after making certain adjustments, but others cannot. One issue that constitutes a threshold and a red line that cannot be crossed for the *‘ulamā* of Islam is the view that states that the Qur’ān is a cultural product (*produk budaya*). Certainly, the supporters of hermeneutics can understand this if they understand Muslim beliefs about the Qur’ān, even if they do not share them, because their ideas have always been directed at texts created by human beings. Furthermore, in my view, although many opinions are not accepted by the majority of *‘ulamā*, their proponents have not been considered to have “left” the fold of Islam. However, this is different from those who believe that the Qur’ān is a cultural product.

Is the Qur’ān truly a cultural product? Was it truly compiled by Prophet Muḥammad as the result of his musings on the condition of his society and culture? The texts of the Qur’ān clearly reveal that Prophet Muḥammad did not have that authority. When the polytheists suggested that the Prophet change the content of several verses, he was commanded to reply:

When Our clear Verses are recited to them [the Meccan polytheists] [that they are from Us], the people who do not hope for the encounter with Us say, “Bring another Qur’ān or replace it.” Say, “It is not fitting for me to replace it on my own account. I do not follow except what is revealed to me. Verily, I fear the punishment of the great day [the Day of Resurrection] if I were to disobey God, my Guardian.”

Qur’ān 10:15

In addition, in the Holy Qurʾān, we find a threat from Allah if Prophet Muḥammad were to change the revelation that he received. The intended meaning of these verses is as follows:

If the Qurʾān was not from God, Guardian of the universe, surely you would have been able to compile the like of it, or the Prophet Muḥammad would be able to create the like of it, and if Prophet Muḥammad were to make things up in Our name not even all, but merely some words that We had not uttered or that We had not permitted him to convey then We would truly punish him with the right hand that is with great strength. Then We would truly and certainly cut off his pulse so that he would not continue living even for a moment. When We take action there is none among you O human beings who can prevent Us from taking action and cutting off that pulse.

See Qurʾān 69:44–47

I cannot imagine how a Muslim who believes that the Qurʾān originates from Allah can claim that the Qurʾān is a cultural product authored by Prophet Muḥammad after reading these verses and similar verses. Therefore, my conscience asks: “Are there really those who claim to be Muslims who believe that the Qurʾān is a cultural product compiled by the Prophet Muḥammad?” I am reluctant to answer affirmatively to this question, despite some views in the Muslim community, whether in written form or through interpretations that are sometimes clear and sometimes veiled, that might lead to an affirmative reply. For instance:

Today, we need a new paradigm that cannot escape the Qurʾān as a product of human culture (*produk budaya manusia*) in grasping the presence (*keber-“ada”-an*) of God. This is what is called the communicative Qurʾān, where human beings are given the freedom to interpret it, free from the many preconceptions about the Qurʾān that have become Most Sacred, even immune from criticism.

This statement is from a book by Edi Mulyono.¹² If what he means by “the Qurʾān” is its interpretation, then the mistake in this passage is in its expres-

¹² See M. Ag Edi Mulyono, *Belajar Hermeneutika* (Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2012), 225. The author presents the view of the late Harun Nasution, which he describes as follows:

According to Harun, the Qurʾān is not complete, because the Qurʾān does not speak of aspects of science, technology, and socialism, in a systematic and comprehensive way—if we do not say that it does not speak of them at all ...

sion rather than its substance, because nobody can reasonably believe that the interpretations of past and present *‘ulamā* are something sacred or absolutely true and immune from criticism. Even the opinions of the Prophet’s Companions are not immune from criticism, even rejection, let alone those of later generations. It is a mistake to say that past generations have monopolized the truth and that later generations can only follow them uncritically (*bertaklid*)! The Qur’ān keeps itself open to interpretation because, just as it engaged in dialogue with past generations and condemned those who do not ponder its contents, so too does it engage in dialogue with later generations and command them to read and ponder its contents. As long as the command to ponder it exists, so too is the door opened wide for the emergence of new interpretations and divergence from old views. However, this thought must of course be based on agreed-upon principles, including knowledge of the Arabic language and the principles of interpretation, which have been formulated by scholars of hermeneutics or the *‘ulamā* of the Qur’ān. I ask again, if what is meant by “the Qur’ān” in the passage above is its interpretation, then the mistake is not fatal, but is that in fact what he means?

One of the strongest advocates of hermeneutics in Egypt, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, was formally declared in an Egyptian court to have left the fold of Islam, after being accused—and found—to have regarded the Qur’ān as a cultural product. Many of his writings in several of his books were used as proof or evidence for his apostasy—for example, his call to break free from the limitations of the text and limitations that obstruct human progress. The texts to which he refers include the Qur’ān. This is understood from his book *Maḥfūm al-Naṣṣ*, in which he states that a text in its reality and substance is a cultural product and that this is an axiom that does not require proof.

However, this is not the place to explain the reasons, or let us say the pretexts, for Abū Zayd’s conviction. There is agreement among the *‘ulamā* of Islam

First, it must be emphasized that Harun Nasution’s view was expressed in the context of proving that “not all issues are discussed in the Qur’ān,” not in the context of the “incompleteness of the Qur’ān.” Second, the lack of discussion on science and technology is because these matters are outside the objective of the Qur’ān’s presence. This Holy Book came down to give religious guidance. If you send someone to the market to buy rice, fish, and meat, and they return with all three, then in essence, they have completed their task—even though they did not buy clothes, or writing tools, or other things offered at the market. The same is true of the Qur’ān: not all issues are presented in it, but all necessary issues relating to religious guidance have been presented in it, and therefore, it is complete in fulfilling the objective of its presence. It is enough for the Qur’ān to give guidance to develop science and technology by encouraging human beings to think, observe the universe, and be objective, because these are the keys that can lead to scientific discoveries and developments.

that whoever is clearly proven to have deemed the Qur'ān, and here I stress the Qur'ān and not its interpretation, to be a cultural product, has essentially left the corridor of the religion of Islam. However, this judgment was only handed down after it was clear what he meant by "cultural product." If what he meant was that the language used by Allah in conveying His messages was human language, which is a cultural product, or that the Qur'ān conveyed its messages in a society with a culture—that is, it did not arrive in a society without culture—and then Allah through the Qur'ān interacted with that society and culture and used its culture in providing His examples and guidance, then it seems this meaning is not too far from what has been alluded to by the *'ulamā* of Islam. Were there not verses that were revealed to correct the culture of society or to strengthen it? Does not some of His style of expression follow that of the Arabs? Allah did this so that humans would understand. Therefore, it does not appear incorrect to say that Allah in His Holy Book that He revealed to Prophet Muḥammad used human culture to explain His guidance, but not that the Qur'ān is a cultural product. However, if what is meant by "cultural product" is that the language used by the Qur'ān or its contents are a product of human creativity and feeling, as culture is defined, then this clearly contradicts Islamic *'aqīda*. From Abū Zayd's writings, some *'ulamā* and scholars gained the strong impression or clear proof that it was this second meaning that he intended.

For me, it is not easy to make a judgment about leaving the corridor of religion, as long as there is still a shred of possibility, however small, that could exonerate someone. Because of this, regardless of whether it was the second meaning or the first intended by Abū Zayd, what is clear is that the judgment was handed down. In addition, the scholars who supported that judgment provided more evidence from some of Abū Zayd's other opinions, such as his call to "demythologize" the texts of the Qur'ān by giving them logical and scientific meanings. This is the path taken by some followers of hermeneutics in relation to biblical texts. For example, some of Abū Zayd's critics claimed that he criticized the understanding of the Muslim community, which still holds firmly to:

the image of God, who is depicted as a King with His Throne, footstool and scepter, and His kingdom and soldiers in the form of angels ... and likewise hold firmly to the literal meaning of Satan, jinns, the recording of human deeds, and even worse, to the literal meaning of the depictions of rewards and punishments, the torment of the grave, the pleasures, the events of the Resurrection, the journey across the *ṣirāṭ* (the bridge across Hell) and so forth, all of which are the result of mythical descriptions.

Understanding these things as myths, regardless of whether the interpretation of their texts is logical or illogical, and sound or unsound, is sufficient proof that the one who does so believes that there are Qur'ānic texts that are "culture" and that the Qur'ān uses myths to attain its objective. Such a view is incompatible with the Qur'ān's repeated affirmation that it is not a myth and that those who claim this are disbelievers (see, *inter alia*, Qur'ān 6:25). It is also incompatible with the view of the *'ulamā*, who affirm that Islam does not accept the use of incorrect methods to reach an objective. In reality, as I have stated when discussing the stories of the Qur'ān, this sacred scripture does not discuss any mistaken idea except to correct it. (See the discussion on the stories of the Qur'ān.)

I ask again: "Is the Qur'ān truly a cultural product, from the mind of Prophet Muḥammad, or is it the result of his work?" If this is the case, then of course there would be people who could produce something like the texts of the Qur'ān. Yet, why was it that when the Qur'ān challenged the community it encountered, and indeed anyone for all time, even working together, to compile even one chapter like the Qur'ān (see Qur'ān 2:23)—why could they not rise to meet that challenge? If there was someone who could produce something like it, why did they not appear? Would that not be the easiest way to prove the falseness of the Prophet's claim that he was a Messenger of Allah who had been given the Qur'ānic revelation? Why did those polytheists take the difficult path of taking up arms, killing and being killed, to prove the Prophet a liar? This proves that the difficult path they took was because they realized, as proven by history and reality, that no one can produce something like the Qur'ān because it is beyond the ability of human beings to produce anything like it, even if they were to work together. In addition, the ḥadīth of Prophet Muḥammad, which are his own utterances, are very different in terms of their style and beauty to the Qur'ān, even though so many verses were revealed spontaneously. Even in comparing the literary works of *jāhiliyya* society to the verses of the Qur'ān, scholars have found significant differences. Further, why did the Prophet sometimes wait for days for a Qur'ānic revelation to come—and even when he greatly needed it, it still did not come? See, among other verses, Qur'ān 24:11 onward, which mentions the rumor that befell the Prophet's wife 'Ā'isha, or the occasion of revelation of Qur'ān 18:23. The fact that the verses of the Qur'ān did not emerge even when the Prophet greatly needed them demonstrates that he had no power to invite their revelation, nor did he have the power to reject them when they were revealed.

Moreover, if the verses of the Qur'ān are deemed to be a cultural product, then are they a product of logical causal factors? Could *jāhiliyya* society have led to the emergence of such a product? 'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād (d. 1964),

a renowned Egyptian intellectual and literary figure, wrote in the introduction to his work *Maṭlaʿ al-Nūr*:

There are many different types of antecedents (*muqaddima*) for something's emergence and occurrence. There are those that lead to their result (*natīja*) and end there, like a disease that is the antecedent for the occurrence of death. This is unavoidable in the reality of life. There are also a variety of antecedents whose results are like a reaction to them, and an effort to treat their causes and effects. This is like one who is sick, takes medicine, and is cured. There are also other antecedents that are diseases, and these diseases lead to medicine. But of course, this medicine in reality is not caused by the disease.

Al-ʿAqqād concludes that there are some antecedents that result in outcomes in accordance with the laws of nature (*sunnat Allāh*), and there are also antecedents that result in outcomes based on *ʿināyat Allāh* (Allah's direct care and protection)—namely, the “hand” of Allah plays a part in that *natīja*. This is even truer if the awareness of the need for treatment does not come from the sufferer, but rather, is imposed upon the patient, who does not wish to be cured.

If someone who has an acute illness is reluctant to take medicine, and indeed is reluctant to be cured, and then, they are cured without using any known method of treatment, there is no other way to describe what has happened other than through the *Protecting Hand of Allah*, or *ʿināyat Allāh*. The presence of Islam and the Qurʾān among the Arabs and in the world is one of the examples of Allah's *ʿināya*, namely the intervention of Allah. This did not occur because of Prophet Muḥammad, nor was it through a cultural process!

How could pure *tawḥīd* (monotheism) come after the mixing of *tawḥīd* with *shirk* (polytheism) and the confusion of different religions, worshipping a variety of gods and idols? How could a religion for all humanity emerge when what had existed previously was religions based on tribal and ethnic fanaticism? Why is it that a miracle is believed in after faith has appeared, whereas in earlier times faith was based on the evidence of miracles? How could respect for women be the cultural product of a society that denigrated women?

According to al-ʿAqqād, the *jāhiliyya* was not the antecedent for the birth of Islam, nor was the bankruptcy of the world's society the antecedent for the appearance of good. It was neither the tribe of Quraysh, nor the Arabian Peninsula, nor the Persian Empire, nor the magnificence of its Emperor, that sent Muḥammad to oppose the fanaticism of the Quraysh. It was not they who taught the Arabs to criticize their ancestral traditions or to destroy the thrones of tyrants upon which the transgressors had deified themselves. These

were the “victims” of the presence of Allah’s Messenger, the patients who were cured through his presence, which was intended by Allah, without their being aware of their disease and without them attempting to be cured of it. This is the antecedent whose *natija* was brought about through *‘ināyat Allāh*.

If the deniers seek to present another view or interpretation, they are welcome, but they will not have an interpretation except that brokenness has brought about brokenness, a disease has cured a disease, and that a series of causes has proceeded along its path, but then deviated and headed in a direction it was not supposed to go toward. Was Muḥammad able to achieve this, or was Muḥammad able to do it because of *‘ināyat Allah*? The answer closest to the truth is the one that includes faith. If it were not because of Allah’s arrangements, then Allah would not have prepared the Arabian Peninsula for this message of Islam, which brought all humanity into a new world, a new era.

This was ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād’s view, reaffirming that when Prophet Muḥammad was sent, the Arabs, and indeed, the world, were not only not ready to accept the teachings of Islam, but their condition was diametrically opposed to those teachings. Therefore, Allah played a great role in the message that was conveyed by Prophet Muḥammad. Indeed, Allah says in the Qur’ān:

The disbelievers, namely the People of the Book [Jews and Christians], and likewise the polytheists, will not leave [their religions] until a clear proof has come to them. [The clear proof is] a Messenger from Allah [the Prophet Muḥammad] who recites purified pages [the Qur’ān], which contains within it books [i.e., guidance and commandments, or parts] that are very straight.

Qur’ān 98:1–3

This must be remembered each time any scholar undertakes any study of Prophet Muḥammad and his teachings, so that they do not say that what the Prophet conveyed originated from his own self or was a cultural product of his society. The success that Prophet Muḥammad achieved is far beyond the ability of reason to comprehend and far from any human effort to attain. This is what led Michael Hart (d. 2011), who did not believe in him as Allah’s Messenger, to state in his book *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, that (the Prophet) Muḥammad was the greatest human being history has ever known if measured by his influence.

As Muslims, we are not surprised about Prophet Muḥammad’s success, because we are convinced it was not the result of his own personal efforts, but rather, from the help and intervention of Allah.

In fact, “They desire to extinguish the light of Allah with their statements, whereas Allah refrains from doing anything except perfecting His light, though the disbelievers may dislike it” (Qur’ān 9:32).

And Allah knows best.

Source

M. Quraish Shihab, “Hermeneutika dan Tafsir Al-Qur’an,” in *Kaidah Tafsir: Syarat, Ketentuan, dan Aturan yang Patut Anda Ketahui dalam Memahami al-Qur’an*, Tangerang, Indonesia: Lentera Hati, 2013, 426–480.

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Modernist Reading of the Qur'ān and Connected Creativity

Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān

About the Author¹

Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān, born in 1944 in al-Jadida, Morocco, is one of the most original, influential philosophers in the contemporary Arab-Islamic world. He is deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition, yet also fully engaged with modern philosophical questions. 'Abd al-Raḥmān has developed a distinctive approach that weaves together classical Sunni Sufism, Arabic logic, and an ethical critique of Western modernity. He earned his *doctorat d'État* in philosophy from the Sorbonne in 1979 and taught for many years at Muhammad v University in Rabat. In teaching, he focused on logic and the philosophy of language. He is no longer active in a formal academic post, but his influence continues to grow.

'Abd al-Raḥmān's intellectual project centers on rethinking modernity through the lens of Islamic ethics and spirituality. He is a leading critic of what

1 Important works by Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān include *Rūḥ al-Ḥadāthah: al-Madkhal ilā Ta'sīs al-Ḥadāthah al-Islāmiyya* (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi, 2006); *al-'Amal al-Dīnī wa Tajdīd al-'Aql* (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi, 1997); *Tajdīd al-Manhaj fī Taqwīm al-Turāth* (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi, 2006); *Dīn al-Ḥayā'* (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi, 2017); *Su'āl al-Akhlāq: Musāhama fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqī li al-ḥadāthah al-Gharbiyya* (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi, 2000); *al-Ḥaqq al-Islāmī fī al-Ikhtilāf al-Fikrī* (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi, 2000); *Rūḥ al-Dīn: Min Dīq al-'Almāniyya ilā Sa'at al-'Itimāniyya* (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi, 2012); "Arab Dialecticians on Rational Discussion," in *Across the Lines of Disciplines: Proceedings of the Conference on Argumentation 1986*, ed. Frans H. Van Eemeren (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1987), 73–78; "Renewing Religious Thought in Islam: Prerequisites and Impediments," *Islam Today*, no. 25 (2008): 87–100; and "On the Trusteeship Critique of Modernism," *Islam Today*, no. 32 (2016): 57–70. For studies about his thought, see A.Z. Obiedat, *Modernity and the Ideals of Arab-Islamic and Western-Scientific Philosophy: The Worldviews of Mario Bunge and Taha Abd al-Rahman* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); Abdessamad Belhaj, "The Fall of the Western Family": Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān's Critical Islamic Ethics," *Reorient* 4, no. 1 (2018): 24–43; Monir Birouk, "Taha Abderrahman's Moral and Spiritual Foundations of Dialogue," *Global Media Journal* 9, no. 2 (2016): 115–120; and Samuel Kigar, "Arguing the Archive: Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān, Muḥammad 'Abid al-Jābirī, and the Future of Islamic Thought," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 11, no. 1 (2015): 5–33.

he describes as the “univocal thought” of Western modernity—its claim to universal values that, in his view, mask a deeper ethical and spiritual void. Instead, he proposes what he calls the “theory of trusteeship” (*naẓariyyat al-amāna*), which grounds human reason and action in a divine trust, thereby emphasizing moral responsibility, spiritual depth, and intellectual humility.

In his work, he adopts a fresh approach to Qur'ānic hermeneutics. For him, reading the Qur'ān is not just an intellectual exercise but a moral and spiritual encounter. He believes that the interpreter must engage with the text ethically, allowing it to shape the heart and mind. In his book *al-'Amal al-Dīnī wa Tajdīd al-'Aql*, he outlines this vision and calls for a reawakening of Islamic rationality that remains faithful to the spiritual and ethical dimensions of the tradition. Similarly, in *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha*, he argues for an Islamic modernity that stands apart from Western models. In his view, this modernity should be rooted in the unique moral resources of the Islamic worldview.

ʿAbd al-Raḥmān is also known for his critical engagement with fellow Moroccan philosopher Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī. While al-Jābirī emphasized historical materialism and rational critique of Islamic heritage, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān insists on the necessity of a spiritually infused rationality and argues that any true renewal of Islamic thought must embrace both ethical depth and metaphysical awareness. His contributions have been widely recognized. He received the ISESCO Prize in Islamic Philosophy in 2006 and the Muhammad VI Prize of Thought and Islamic Studies in 2014. Scholars such as A.Z. Obiedat, Abdessamad Belhaj, and Samuel Kigar have explored his work and have highlighted its importance in debates on modernity, ethics, and the future of Islamic thought.



I mentioned at the beginning of the second chapter [of the original book] that the Islamic approach to the pillar of creativity—one of the pillars of the spirit of modernity—takes the form of a *connected creativity*, in which a Muslim maintains a connection with elements from the nation’s (*umma*) *turāth* (heritage and tradition) that have been proved to be beneficial. Significantly, the effects of the benefits this nation seeks to achieve do not cease at the boundaries of the individual but exceed those to benefit others. Moreover, its effects go beyond the realization of immediate goodness in this life and extend to the pursuit of ultimate success in the life to come. The objective of this chapter is to reveal how *connected creativity* meets the requirements of the modernist reading of the Qur'ān in a way that disconnected creativity, upon which the practice of Qur'ānic reading is built in the modern age, cannot.

In this regard, the authors of some readings of the Qur’ān attribute these to modernity, but these are not the outcomes of a direct application of the spirit of modernity. They are nothing but a mimicry of the Western approach, which is based on the “reality of modernity.”² It is well-known that this Western approach was intentionally made to cut ties with the past and its effects owing to the different forms of stagnation its practitioners suffered from in the Middle Ages, which are still stamped on their memories to the extent that they run away from their past, even the near past, in the same way they run away from death. Although this situation does not apply to Muslims’ memory since such centuries in the past witnessed the rise of their civilization, even though they fell into stagnation later, some researchers have insisted that the Muslim nation should follow the Western approach in relation to its traditions and history. Accordingly, they produced readings of the Qur’ān that cut ties with the preceding interpretations, thereby aspiring to begin a new age of interpretation. If we were to accept that these readings include some form of new ideas, we would not regard these new ideas as real creativity, because real creativity should have continuity. This creativity is discontinuous because it has cut ties with its traditions and mimicked others instead of practicing one’s own *ijtihād* (independent reasoning). Consequently, any such creativity is nothing but a *bid’a* (innovation). Therefore, we should consider these disconnected readings—or what can be called *bid’a* readings—to reveal how these readings mimic the Western approach concerning the pillar of creativity, which leads to results that eliminate the uniqueness of the Qur’ānic text.

These modernist readings seek to achieve a cognitive rupture with the so-called traditional readings. These are of two types: first, the foundational readings undertaken by the early scholars, including exegetes, jurists, theologians, and Sufis; second, the revivalist readings undertaken by the late scholars, including reformist Salafis, fundamentalist Salafis, and Islamists.³ It is well-known that these readings are Qur’ānic interpretations meant to establish theoretical bases of faith or to strengthen its practical aspects, which means that they are readings with a clear doctrinal imprint. As for the modernist readings, they are interpretations of some Qur’ānic verses that go beyond this doctrinal

2 I remind the reader that I differentiate between “the spirit of modernity” and “the reality of modernity.” The former is the constellation of values and principles that are able to improve the civilizational presence of humans in any place and time, whereas the latter is the realization of these values and principles in a specific time and place. Of course, this realization differs according to the spatial and temporal circumstances, and the most well-known realization of the spirit of modernity manifests in the Western reality of modernity.

3 Examples of the scientific exegetes include Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī and Mustafā Maḥmūd.

feature. These readings are the opposite of a doctrinal reading; they are “critical” readings. Modernist readings do not seek to attain a set of beliefs from the Qur'ānic verses but to apply a critical approach to these Qur'ānic verses.⁴

1 Modernist Mimetic Readings

If it is established that the reading of the Qur'ān can realize its modernity through a critical, rather than a doctrinal, reading, it is possible to find attempts to read some Qur'ānic verses in terms of this critical requirement, including Muhammad Arkoun's reading (and his school among the Tunisians—exemplified by 'Abd al-Majīd al-Sharafī and his team in Tunisia, as well as by other Tunisians living in Paris, such as Yūsuf Siddīq), along with Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd's reading and Ṭayyib Tīzīnī's reading.⁵

Here, “modernist reading” should be differentiated from “contemporary reading.” In my view, modernity differs from contemporariness because the former is linked with the causes of the civilizational and cultural history of Western society, whereas this link is not necessary in the latter. This is because contemporary readers adopt the different [ideas and] achievements of their age without occupying themselves with reproducing the historical causes of these [ideas and] achievements; they may seek to replace these with other historical causes that may be relevant to the research area of their reading.⁶ One example of contemporary readings is the work of Muḥammad Shaḥrūr in his *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān (The Book and the Qur'ān)*.⁷ There are two proofs for this

4 Although the modernist readings claim that they interpret “the Qur'ānic text” in their own way, as the early exegetes interpreted it in their own way, they do not go beyond the interpretation of certain verses from different *sūras* (Qur'ānic chapters) or certain sections from the short *sūras* in the Qur'ān. For this reason, I purposely chose to use the phrase “Qur'ānic verses” instead of “Qur'ānic text.”

5 See Ḥasan Ḥanafī, “Method of Thematic Interpretation of the Qur'an,” in *The Qur'an as Text*, ed. Stefan Wild (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 195–211. “The thematic interpretation of the Qur'ān,” in the way Ḥasan Ḥanafī interprets and perceives it, may be considered a type of modernist reading. Ḥanafī based such interpretation on premises and rules that are influenced by the postulates of the Western context of modernity, although he would usually insist in his writings that he wants to cut away from this Western context and build an original context of modernity peculiar to the Arab Islamic society.

6 I do not accept the claim of those who historicize, contrary to the requirements of the methodology of historicization itself, that progress can only be achieved by following the same phases that Western modernity passed through.

7 Another example of a contemporary reading is that of Abdolkarim Soroush in his book *al-Qabḍ wa al-Baṣṭ fi al-Sharī'a* (Beirut: Dār al-Jadīd, 2002).

view; one is that Shaḥrūr described his reading in the title of his book as being a “contemporary reading.” The second proof is that the modernist exegetes criticized his reading and denied that it was modernist.⁸

Having explained these points, next, the following question should be asked: How did the modernist mimetic readings develop their critical project?

2 Plans of the Modernist Mimetic Readings

To develop their critical project, these readings followed different critical “strategies” or plans, each one of them comprising three elements, which are called *the pillars of the plan*. The first element is the critical objective they aim to realize. The second is the coordinating mechanism that leads to this objective. The third is the methodological processes that are followed to reach this objective. The objective sought by each one of these critical plans is to remove a certain doctrinal barrier or aspect. Next, I simplify each of these critical strategies according to three elements: objective, mechanism, and process.

2.1 Humanization Plan

The first plan on which the modernist mimetic reading is built is the humanization plan, which basically aims to remove the obstacle of ‘sacredness.’ This obstacle is represented by the belief that the Qur’ān is sacred speech.⁹ The coordinating mechanism used in this humanization plan to remove this barrier is by transferring the Qur’ānic verses from the status of divine to the status of human. This transfer is achieved by using particular methodological processes, including the following:

1. **Omitting phrases and terminology indicating reverence:** The modernist reader omits phrases that the majority of Muslims use to glorify the Book of Allah, such as “*al-Qur’ān al-karīm*” (the Noble Qur’ān), “*al-Qur’ān al-‘azīz*” (the Holy Qur’ān), “*al-Qur’ān al-ḥakīm*” (the Wise Qur’ān), “*al-Qur’ān al-mubīn*” (the Clear Book), “*āya karīma*” (Noble Verse), “*qāla Allahu Ta‘ālā*” (Almighty Allah said), or “*ṣadaqa Allahu al-‘azīm*” (Allah the Almighty has told the truth, said after citing the Qur’ān).

8 Those modernists and their works include the following: Muhammad Arkoun, *al-Qur’ān: Min al-Tafsīr al-Mawrūth ilā Taḥlīl al-Khitāb al-Dīnī* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalī‘a, 2001), 14–15; Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *al-Naṣṣ, al-Sulṭa, al-Ḥaḥīqa: al-Fikr al-Dīnī bayna Irādat al-Ma’rifa wa Irādat al-Haymana* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-‘Arabī, 2000), 115–122.

9 See ‘Abd al-Majīd al-Sharāfi, *Fī Qirā‘at al-Naṣṣ al-Dīnī* (Tunisia: Dār al-Tūnisiya li al-Naṣr, 1989), 95. Some insist on the necessity of developing the reading through “demythologization of the sacred text by trying to humanize it through the secularization of the reading.”

2. **Substituting new terminologies for established ones:** This modernist reader uses their own terms in place of commonly used terms, such as substituting the term “the prophetic discourse” for “the divine discourse,”¹⁰ “the Qur’ānic phenomenon or the Qur’ānic event” for “the revelation of the Qur’ān,” “the legal canon” (“*al-mudawwana al-kubra*”) instead of “the Holy Qur’ān,” and “the phrase” instead of “the verse” (*āya*).
3. **Treating the divine discourse like human discourse in terms of citation:** The modernist reader considers that there is nothing wrong with regarding the citation of human quotations as being similar to Qur’ānic citations by citing at the beginning of the chapters of his book some Qur’ānic verses accompanied by quotations from non-Muslim scholars or even non-believers.¹¹
4. **Differentiating between different levels of divine discourse:** These readers differentiate between “*wahy*” (revelation or inspiration) and “*tanzīl*” (the sending down of revelation) and between “*wahy*” (revelation) and “*muṣḥaf*” (Qur’ān compiled in a book format).¹² They also differentiate between the “Qur’ān” and the “*muṣḥaf*”; between “the oral Qur’ān” and “the written Qur’ān”; and also between “the revelation in the Divinely Preserved Tablet” and “the revelation as uttered in Arabic.”
5. **Likening the Qur’ān to Prophet Jesus (peace be upon him):** Modernist readers accept the following claim of similarity: “Just as the word of Allah is embodied in Jesus, son of Mary, the speech of Allah is embodied in the Qur’ān as well.” Then they build on the following ruling: “Just as Muslims deny the divine nature of Jesus and affirm only his human nature, they should also deny the divine nature of the Qur’ān and affirm only its human nature.”¹³

10 Muhammad Arkoun said in *al-Qur’ān: Min al-Taḥsīn*, 5:

I have pointed out in a number of previous studies that the concept of “prophetic discourse” is used to refer to texts compiled in the Old Testament, Gospels, and the Qur’ān, as a concept denoting the linguistic and semiotic structures of texts, rather than the theological and doctrinal definitions and interpretations.

Likewise, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd said in *Naqd al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī*, 206, “Maintaining that texts are divine and insisting on their divine nature necessarily implies that humans are incapable of understanding them, through their own approaches, unless the Divine Providence grants the humans special capacities that enable them to understand them.”

11 Arkoun, *al-Qur’ān: Min al-Taḥsīn* 11, 145.

12 Arkoun, *al-Qur’ān: Min al-Taḥsīn*, 9.

13 Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd argued:

Drawing a comparison between the Qur’ān and Jesus in terms of the nature of “the descent” of the former and the nature of “the birth” of the latter reveals aspects of similarity between the religious structures of each of them within the doctrinal structure

The application of these methodological processes for humanization leads to turning the Qur’ān into a linguistic text like any other human text. This linguistic likeness between the Qur’ānic text and human texts leads to the following results:

1. **The cultural context of the Qur’ānic text:** The Qur’ānic text becomes just a text produced according to the requirements of the culture of its language, and therefore, it can be understood or interpreted only by referring to this language-specific cultural realm,¹⁴ thus transferring the Qur’ān from the state of the absolute to the state of the relative.
2. **The problematic nature of the Qur’ānic text:** The Qur’ānic text becomes an ambiguous as well as a problematic text, open to multiple possibilities and innumerable interpretations, with no single interpretation having advantage over the others, let alone claiming to be the only true interpretation, or to having exclusive knowledge of the original significance of any Qur’ānic verse.¹⁵
3. **The Qur’ānic text is independent of its source:** The Qur’ānic text is separated from its sublime source and becomes completely associated with the human reader, based on the argument that there is no way to understand the real objectives of the Sublime Speaker [God] owing to His dissociation and His absence from us. This absence should clearly lead to a loss of knowledge of the intentions of this source. All that readers can deduct from the Qur’ānic text is the result of their examination of the Qur’ān, which they perform through their cultural and cognitive background and their social and political position. This outcome is nothing but clear human concerns and issues.

of Islam itself. It is no exaggeration to say that they are not two structures but rather one structure, regardless of the different components of each of them. The Qur’ān is the speech of Allah, and Jesus is also the Messenger and word of Allah. (*Naqd al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī*, 204–205)

See also Arkoun, *al-Qur’ān: Min al-Tafsīr*, 23–24.

14 Naṣr Ḥamid Abū Zayd, *Naqd al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī*, 203, 206: “Religious texts, in the final analysis, are nothing but linguistic texts, i.e., they belong to a certain cultural structure produced according to the laws of this culture that considers language its central indicative system.”

15 See Ṭayyib Tizīnī, *al-Naṣṣ al-Qur’ānī Amām Mushkilāt al-Bīnya wa al-Qirā’a* (Damascus: Dār al-Yanābī’, 1997), 256–257; see also 183 ff., 263 ff. He said:

The social settings as embodied in the Arabic society, and as underlying certain economic, political, and cultural characteristics and demands, contributed to the process of disrupting and fragmenting the Qur’ānic text. They managed to redirect the Qur’ānic text structurally and functionally toward multiple ethnic, national, caste attitudes. As such, the text appeared re-structured according to possible multiple readings that reflect these attitudes and their outcomes of the previously mentioned social settings.

4. **Incompleteness of the Qur'ānic text:** The Qur'ānic text becomes in this way “incomplete” because it does not negate the possibility of the existence of any shortage represented by the omission of speech attributed to the divine source during the codification or writing of the *muṣḥaf*. It also does not negate the possibility of the existence of additions because of the addition of speech attributed to a non-divine source¹⁶ (i.e., speech that serves the interests of a certain group), for strengthening its position or legitimizing the group's authority.

2.2 *Rationalization Plan*

The second plan on which the modernist mimetic reading is built can be called the rationalization plan, and it aims at removing the metaphysical aspect, which lies in the belief that the Qur'ān is *waḥy* brought from the unseen world. The coordinating mechanism used to achieve this aim involves the use of all the means of study and research provided by modern methodologies and theories when reading the Qur'ānic verses.¹⁷ This is mostly done through the following methodologies:

1. **A Critique of Qur'ānic Sciences (*'ulūm al-Qur'ān*):** The modernist reader thinks that the Qur'ānic sciences that Muslim scholars developed constitute an archaic cognitive medium that prevents the person from connecting with the Qur'ānic text or from reading this text by employing open rational tools of investigation. Consequently, this (modernist) reader strongly criticizes these sciences based on the scriptural tradition.¹⁸
2. **Drawing on methodologies used in the field of religious studies:** The modernist reader does not hesitate to use the methodologies of religious studies adopted in the analysis and criticism of the Torah and Injil (Gospel) for Qur'ānic studies, considering that all revealed scriptures are at the same level and fulfill the same religious requirements. Examples of

16 Tizīnī, *al-Naṣṣ al-Qur'ānī*, 385–414. On p. 405: “In the current debate, we face the question in terms of completeness of the Qur'ānic text, and it becomes clear that a consensus on this completeness becomes, in such a case, beyond the documented historical truth.”

17 See Arkoun, *al-Qur'ān: Min al-Taḥsīr*, 58:

But we think that any real criticism of the religious mind should be represented by the use of all the sources of reasonableness and thinking, presented to us by humanities and social sciences for the sake of moving the problematic question of *waḥy* from the intellectual system and epistemological stand of the dogmatic spirit to the spaces of analysis and interpretation that are now produced by the recently emerging exploratory mind.

18 See Abū Zayd, *Maḥmūd al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsa fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabī, 2000).

these sciences used include the comparative religion, history of religions, history of exegesis, and history of theology.

3. **Drawing on methodologies used in the fields of humanities and social sciences:** Modernist readers feel no qualms in applying different methodologies used in the fields of humanities and social sciences to the Qur’ānic text, for they consider that the research requirements for the Qur’ānic text do not differ from those for other texts. Examples of these sciences include linguistics, semiotics, historiography, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and psychoanalysis.
4. **The use of all newly developed critical and philosophical theories:** The modernist reader does not shy away from making use of all critical theories that have emerged in the literary and intellectual arena since the 1950s. Moreover, they are indifferent to the consequences of these theories and to the degree to which they contradict each other; not to mention the fact that some of these have already started to fade away. These theories include “discourse analysis” and “new trends in literary criticism,” such as structuralism, hermeneutics, archeology, and deconstructionism.
5. **Giving rein to reason:** Modernist readers decide that it is not difficult to interpret any Qur’ānic verse using intellectual and independent reasoning (*ijtihād*). They believe that there are no limits to the matters that can be perceived by reason and that there are no horizons that reason cannot explore. If this is the case for reason with regard to the Qur’ānic verses, what will be the case with regard to interpretations developed by earlier exegetes? If reason does not deprive these interpretations [of early exegetes] of their validity or usage, it will at least raise various doubts regarding them.

The application of these methodological processes of rationalization turns the Qur’ān into a religious text that is like any other religious text, be it monotheistic or polytheistic. This religious similarity of the Qur’ānic text to other such texts leads to the following results:

1. **Change to the concept of *wahy* (revelation):** The modernist reader thinks that the concept of *wahy* based on the traditional religious understanding is no longer acceptable and should be replaced by a hermeneutical, rationally justified concept.¹⁹ This involves rejection of what they may call irrational reports and ancient myths as well as what they may con-

19 Arkoun, *al-Qur’ān: Min al-Tafsīr*, 76: “Through this study, we aim to shake the meaning of *wahy* and go beyond it, i.e., go beyond the naive and traditional perception developed by the theological systems.”

sider irrational forms of worship and rigid rituals. This rational interpretation of *wahy* becomes equivalent to “a talent a human being is endowed with,” be the person a prophet or a genius. Or it can represent “a function a being is endowed with” whether this being is a human, animal, or inanimate.²⁰ Henceforth, the purport of *wahy* becomes limited to only ethical and moral aspects.

2. **The non-superiority of the Qur'ān:** The modernist decides that the characteristics, rulings, and facts established in the Torah and Injil should also be established for the Qur'ān because what is established for something could be equally established for something else that is similar. Accordingly, it is not possible to claim that the Qur'ān has advantages over these two books in any respect, even in terms of preservation from alteration,²¹ because (in the modernist's opinion) the changes that occurred to the Torah and Injil can be applicable to the Qur'ān as well.
3. **Lack of consistency in the Qur'ānic text:** This reader thinks that the Qur'ānic *sūra* (chapters), *āyāt* (verses), and topics are organized in a way that lacks logical coherence, leading to contradictions in understanding their goals and a lack of historical consistency,²² which creates disorder in the sequence of events.
4. **The dominance of metaphors in the Qur'ān:** The modernist notices that metaphorical expressions dominate over clear textual evidences in the Qur'ānic text. Consequently, one may infer that the mind that is built upon this text tends to be more mythical than rational and logical because its rational perceptions are not separate from imagination and emotion.²³
5. **Overlooking the verses that clash with reason:** The modernist reader establishes that all that in the Qur'ānic text that clashes with reason (issues, cases, and reports) are nothing but examples of historical refer-

20 They based their argument on the Qur'ānic verses that mentioned the term *wahy*, such as Allah's saying, “And your Lord inspired the bees, saying, ‘Take your habitations in the mountains’” (16:68).

21 Abū Zayd, *al-Naṣṣ, al-Sulṭa, al-Ḥaqīqa*, 8: “All discourses are alike in terms of their entity, and no one is entitled to assume to be in possession of the truth, for in such a case, it would be judging itself to be a false discourse”. Arkoun also argues that we should replace the concept “*aḥl al-kitāb*” (people of the Scriptures), which excludes the people of the Qur'ān, with a new one that encompasses them, namely, “*mujtama' al-kitāb*” (the community of the Scriptures), for stressing that these three religions are equal in terms of origin, impact, and fate.

22 Tizīnī, *al-Naṣṣ al-Qur'ānī*, 253.

23 Muhammad Arkoun, *Qadāyā fi Nadq al-'Aql al-Dīnī* (Beirut: Dār al-Talī'a, 1998), 283. See also Muhammad Arkoun, *Lectures du Coran* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1982), 110–111.

ences to a stage of human consciousness that has passed away.²⁴ Accordingly, these issues and reports should remain confined to their original context and their signification should not go beyond this stage of consciousness to other stages that are superior to it in terms of rationality.

2.3 *Historicization Plan*

The third plan on which the mimetic modernist reading is built (called historicization plan) aims at removing the barrier of *al-ḥukmiyya* (obligations and rulings). This *ḥukmiyya* aspect suggests that the Qurʾān has come with eternal and irrevocable rules and laws. The coordinating mechanism used to remove this barrier is associated with linking Qurʾānic verses with their various times and circumstances as well as the contexts of revelation of the verses.²⁵ This link is established by adopting many methodologies, including:

1. **Referring to the widely accepted historical incidents in the interpretation of the Qurʾān:** Truly, early scholars of *tafsīr* explored certain questions that reveal that some of the *āyāt al-aḥkām* (verses pertaining to legal rulings) were related to certain historical incidents. These questions are as follows: *asbāb al-nuzūl* (causes of revelation of verses), *nāsikh* and *mansūkh* (abrogating and abrogated), *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* (clear and ambiguous), Meccan and Medinan verses, and the gradual revelation of the Qurʾān. Proponents of the modernist reading used these questions to affirm the historical and dialectical nature of Qurʾānic verses and to legitimize the application of historical criticism to these Qurʾānic verses, and thus went beyond the limits at which the early exegetes and jurists stopped. They even demonstrated the contradictions those early scholars fell into as these scholars acknowledged historicity and affirmed the eternity of the Qurʾān at the same time.
2. **Declaration of ambiguity in the concept of *ḥukm* (legal ruling):** The mimetic modernist readers argue that it is not possible to put the “*āyāt al-ḥukm*,” that is, verses stating obligations, and “the legal rule” on the same level. A specific legal rule represents a requirement to follow a particular matter or conduct in specific circumstances, and violators of this require-

24 Abū Zayd, *Naqd al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī*, 212: “Sorcery, envy, jinn, and Satan are vocabularies built into a mental structure related to a certain stage in human awareness.”

25 Abū Zayd, *al-Naṣṣ, al-Sulṭa, al-Ḥaqīqa*, 96:

It is sufficient to stop at the level of common and very general contexts, such as the cultural social context, the external context (discourse), the internal context (intra-relationship), the linguistic context (sentence structure and the relationship between sentences), and finally the reading or interpretation context.

ment will be punished. However, the modernists would argue that the rulings in the Qur'ānic text are not the same because they are sometimes in the form of a command and at other times as a statement. Consequently, modernists claim that its legislative content is indeterminate. Moreover, the Qur'ānic obligation may be general or specific, or may refer to abrogating or abrogated decisions. All this leads, in their view, to a great difference in the legislative value of the *āyāt al-aḥkām* (verses related to legal rules) and their mandatory features.²⁶

3. **Minimizing the number of the *āyāt al-aḥkām*:** The modernists maintain that the *āyāt al-aḥkām*, which represent only a small part of the overall Qur'ānic verses, are affected by the particular circumstances and times in which they were revealed. They believe that most of them have been abrogated and that some have been irretrievably passed over by history. Therefore, they urge that these verses related to legal rules should be reduced to only the minimum possible number, as little as 80,²⁷ owing to likely situations that would cause one to move beyond these verses.
4. **Relativizing the *āyāt al-aḥkām*:** These readers argue that the *āyāt al-aḥkām* not only refer to their occasions of revelation, as the meaning of these verses is connected with these occasions, but also to the history of their multiple interpretations. This history demonstrates that the meanings given to these verses are attached to the contexts of their interpretation, because exegetes and jurists understood these verses differently according to their different cultural, social, economic, and political preoccupations in the context of the changing historical circumstances of the Muslim society. Accordingly, these verses cannot bear stable, or *a fortiori*, absolute meanings.
5. **Making the historicization feature generally applicable to the creed:** Mimetic modernist readers argue that historicization is not only applicable to the verses of the *ḥudūd* (prescribed punishments for violating Allah's Law), *qiṣās* (just retaliation), and public affairs, but also to verses related to worship. This is because the doctrines produced through these verses are—according to them—related to the knowledge level at the time they were revealed. Thus, the Qur'ān has adopted certain perceptions related to the degree of awareness of the people addressed, and given that their awareness has a lower status than critical awareness, some of these perceptions should definitely be considered mythical.²⁸

26 Al-Ṣādiq Bal'īd, *al-Qur'ān wa al-Tashrī'* (Tunis: Markaz al-Nashr al-Jāmi'i, 2000), 50–62.

27 Muḥammad Sa'īd al-'Ashmāwī, *Ma'ālim al-Islam* (Cairo: Sīna li al-Nashr, 1989), 99.

28 Abū Zayd, *al-Naṣṣ, al-Sulṭa, al-Ḥaqīqa*, 134–135.

The application of these historicizing methodological processes leads to turning the Qur’ān into a **historical text like any other historical text**. This likening, in terms of historicization, of the Qur’ānic text to other historical texts leads to the following results:

1. **Invalidating of the postulate that the Qur’ān contains clarification of all matters:** The modernists hold that in addition to adopting the view that the *āyāt al-aḥkām* are very few compared with other verses, one should also take the position that most of them are specific or restricted, that is, addressed to only certain people, incidents, or occasions. The absence of these specifics now leads to doing away with these rules as these may not be applicable now.²⁹ As for the rulings the jurists deduce from the Qur’ānic texts, they are the result of human practices of *ijtihād* and are added to what the Qur’ān contains. This indicates that the Qur’ānic text does not include a complete Islamic legislation. According to modernists, the verse usually quoted in this respect, namely, “This day, I have perfected your religion for you,” does not indicate, that the legislation is complete, but rather, that the revelation is complete.³⁰
2. **The *āyāt al-aḥkām* are turned into verses of guidance, with no requirement to enforce them:** According to modernists, the *āyāt al-aḥkām* are merely ethical recommendations and not laws. They are pieces of advice that help Muslims solve the problems they face in their social life, particularly in relation to managing their family and undertaking some economic activities.³¹ Only one verse of these *āyāt al-aḥkām* was excluded by some modernists, and this verse is believed to have civil law significance.³² This verse, which is related to *ribā* (usury), reads:

Those who consume usury will not stand [on the Day of Resurrection] except like the standing of a person beaten by Satan leading him to insanity. That is because they say, “Trading is only like *ribā*,” whereas Allah has permitted trading and forbidden *ribā*.

Qur’ān 2:275

3. **Limiting the Qur’ān to internal private ethics.** The Qur’ānic directives, according to modernists, are in the form of advice and instructions tar-

29 Al-Ṣādiq Bal’id, *al-Qur’ān wa al-Tashrīḥ*, 297.

30 Al-Ṣādiq Bal’id, *al-Qur’ān wa al-Tashrīḥ*, 296.

31 ‘Abd al-Majīd al-Sharafī, *al-Islām wa al-Ḥadātha* (Tunis: Dār al-Junūb li al-Nashr, 1998), 14.

32 Al-Ṣādiq Bal’id, *al-Qur’ān wa al-Tashrīḥ*, 156.

getting mainly Muslims' conscience and inner self, which urges them to maintain a relationship with their Creator and adopt right conduct.³³ Their evidence is that these instructions begin with phrases such as "O you who believe!" and end with phrases such as "if you indeed are believers" and "if you are truthful." Moreover, many of the *āyāt al-ahkām* provide punishment only in the Hereafter, and even those that prescribe punishment in the worldly life, such as *hudūd*, open the door to repentance.³⁴ The basic principle for repentance is that it should be an ethical act of the heart, and not a legal act.

4. **Calls for modernizing religion.** According to modernists, there is a need to deduce from the Qur'ānic text a sort of religiosity in harmony with the philosophy of modernity. The only religiosity that corresponds to modernity is the one that has no apparent coercion that curtails individuals' freedom, no tyrant ritualism that stifles their conduct, and no outdated myths that their minds do not accept. In this sense, religiosity should be based on personal faith whereby a person chooses their own pattern of worship in private life. This is not all that modernists have done. They have even developed a concept of faith that is entirely alien to the religious authority of all revealed religions. It is well-known that faith, in the view of all these religions, brings about tranquility to the soul and is strengthened by the acts of the body. But those modernists hold that faith brings about tension in the soul because it raises many questions and that it is weakened by practices of worship that entail the performance of particular rituals. Thus, as much as one eliminates traditional forms of religion, modernity thrives.

3 Criticism of Mimetic Modernist Readings

Having explained the three critical strategies or plans used by the mimetic modernist readings in the interpretation of Qur'ānic verses, I will evaluate these readings in terms of their reference point: modernity.

33 Tizīnī, *al-Naṣṣ al-Qur'ānī*, 184:

The overall format in which the Qur'ānic text formulates its principles and most of its rulings as well as the pattern of its discourse make it look like "a book of guidance," "a book of good news," and "a book of mercy" for the believers, and not an educational legal book comprising every small and great thing, even at its time.

34 Al-Ṣādiq Bal'īd, *al-Qur'ān wa al-Tashrīḥ*, 301–306.

If it is true that the reality of Western modernity, or, say, the Western application of the spirit of modernity, is characterized by cutting off ties with the entire past and traditions, it is also true that it opens doors for future horizons that cannot be realized by those who are committed to past traditions. Therefore, this form of modernity represents a comprehensive, continual creative practice, but it is a creative practice peculiar to the Western people and not necessarily applicable for other nations. Considering these readings in light of this fact, it is clear that the proponents of modernist readings, as demonstrated in the previous sections, were not creative in their modernizing practices, nor have they been spurred by the particularity of their history. They have merely reproduced the modernizing practices, as implemented in the history of others and imitated their historical stages and roles. This imitation is manifested by the fact that their three stated plans are derived from the conflict between the proponents of European Enlightenment and the men of the Church, which resulted in the acknowledgment of three principles that constituted the basis of the reality of Western modernity:³⁵

First, it is a must to focus on human being[s] and not preoccupy oneself with matters related to God. This principle aims at undermining the spiritual guardianship of the Church.

Second, one should depend on human reason and not refer to revelation. This principle is meant to undermine the intellectual guardianship of the Church.

Third, one should focus on this life and overlook the hereafter. This principle helps to undermine the political guardianship of the Church.

A scrutiny of the critical ideas followed by modernist readers shows that these are based on the following principles of the Western context:

- Their humanization plan stems from the first principle, which focuses only on the human person.
- Their rationalization plan stems from the second principle, which is about reliance only on human reason.
- Their historicization plan stems from the third principle, which requires a focus only on this worldly life.

Consequently, it is unsurprising that these readers follow the knowledge, sciences, approaches, mechanisms, and theories that have been produced be-

35 See the second chapter of this book [the original book] to know the ethical effects of following these principles within the modern Western family.

cause of the implementation of these Enlightenment ideals in Western society. These readers rushed to project these ideals onto the Qur'ānic verses and thus often replicated the results of Western scholars regarding the Torah and Injil.³⁶

It is obvious that these projections have clear methodological defects, which deprive the resulting analyses of their value as well as the results of any credibility. However, of these methodological defects, I will mention the following.

First, the loss of the ability to criticize: Projecting and using any (analytical) approach with any subject requires legitimacy that is based on verifying the existence of an appropriate connection between this approach and the subject matter under investigation. This connection cannot be upheld unless this approach maintains its procedural features after being transferred from its original source, and the subject matter under investigation maintains its peculiarity after applying this approach. The modernist readers lack the ability to criticize their borrowed [Western] approaches to establish the connection between the sources of these approaches and the relevant subject matter even though such criticism is a condition for the realization of modernity in their work. Therefore, it would have been better had they not used those approaches, or had they at least developed the ability to criticize their borrowed approaches [from the West]. This would have allowed them to maintain the procedural features of the approach used and the peculiarity of the subject under investigation.

Second, weak use of borrowed tools: Modernists were not able to master many of the methodologies and theories they adopted [from the West], nor have they determined the theoretical reasons and the methodological decisions on which such theories were built. Therefore, to hide the shortcomings in their own formation, they confuse people by using some unknown or unclear concepts, such as enclosure (*ighlāq*), articulation (*talaffuẓ*), textuality (*naṣṣiyya*), intertextuality (*tanāṣ*), discourse (*khitābiyya*), argumentation (*hijājīyya*), plurality of voices, and linguistic constraints. Moreover, they should not have adopted some of these methodologies and theories, given that the bases of these methodologies have not been scientifically proven yet because they are still being developed and their possible uses are still being investigated [in the West] or because these approaches are closer to temporary intellectual currents than to established scientific achievements.

Third, insistence on using outdated approaches and tools: These modernists built upon their borrowed methodologies and theories certain positions

36 In his preface to the translation of Arkoun's book, *Qadāyā fī Nadq al-'Aql al-Dīnī*, Salih Hashim said, "What Arkoun does in respect to Islamic tradition is very similar to what the European scholars did in respect to Christianity."

with which they wanted to be decisive and analyses with which they wanted to be incisive. They have accused those opposing such approaches of being “traditional,” “mimetic,” “salafi,” and “rigid.” But soon, it became necessary to move beyond these transferred approaches and rulings as well as the results that were built on them. However, this did not make the modernists revise their projection, doubt its advantage or validity, or blame themselves for following it. In contrast, they projected all the tools they received from others on the Qur’ānic text, taking no account of the historicity of these tools and their relative yields.

Fourth, exaggeration of the results yielded: As these modernists were unable to criticize the borrowed tools or invent others that matched them, they praised these tools and glorified their inventors. They became keen to display their different types and levels and attached great value to their analytical and critical uses. They made readers think that their conclusions fulfilled the goal to modernize the reading of the Qur’ānic text. These conclusions almost always come under one of three cases: replication of conclusions arrived at by Western scholars, replication of the conclusions arrived at by Muslim scholars, or poor-quality conclusions amounting to neither Western nor Islamic conclusions. In addition, the modernists’ ideas are ambiguous and their linguistic expression is poor.

Fifth, changing of the order of the Qur’ān-related facts: As the topics on which modernists projected their borrowed tools are different from the ones for which these tools were originally developed, the outcome of their efforts was chaos in relation to the way Islamic practices give priority to some matters over others. Modernists prioritized what should have taken second place [according to Islamic practice]; they turned what was principal to be subsidiary and vice versa. They made the inferior tantamount to the superior and vice versa. Moreover, they treated reports and opinions that early exegetes regarded as odd, doubtful, or baseless—as ideas not to be followed or even taken seriously—as essential facts for judging well-known scholarly views and firmly established principles. They used these so-called facts to arrive at conclusions that were not only poorly deduced but also odd in content. It is obvious that those who follow the solitary or odd sayings of exegetes and their mistakes tend to deviate from the truth, whereas those who follow the well-known scholarly opinions and agree with the majority of jurists follow the truth.

Sixth, creating doubts and generalizing them to all levels of the Qur’ānic text: As modernists often tended to use various tools that were not originally developed to analyze such texts and were unable to rework the tools for their new context, they also applied the mechanism of doubt to the Qur’ānic text. They claimed that their desire to uncover the unknown and discover the secrets of the Qur’ānic text urged them to begin their work with doubt, on the pre-

text that it is the approach that leads to knowledge. However, as soon as they had finished their different applications [of tools to the text], they promoted doubt to the rank of a comprehensive law. They also began to doubt the origin, sacredness, completeness, and validity of the Qur'ānic text. As they borrowed the tool of doubt from others and applied it at face value, generalizing it on all aspects of the Qur'ānic text, this inevitably led to disordered analyses, questionable rulings, and problematic results. In fact, had they contemplated this tool [of doubt] deeply and taken an independent view of it, they would have discovered, contrary to the claims of those [people] the modernists imitated, that it does not lead to truth in relation to everything, and its use is limited to one area, namely, the area of phenomena. Qur'ānic verses do not come under this area; they belong to the area of values. The way to arrive at truth in this area (of value) is to follow a path contrary to the path of doubt—the path of faith and certainty. The more one believes in a value, the more it reveals itself to the believer. The less one believes in a value, the less it reveals itself to the believer, until it fades away completely when it is totally doubted.³⁷

Thus, the reading of the Qur'ānic verses as practiced by modernists is but a blind imitation of what modernity has produced in the context of Western society, with different methodological flaws relevant to that context. It should not be said that the creativity of those readers manifests itself in their application of methodologies and theories that were not applied to the Qur'ān before, because this application is nothing but an automatic projection, and there is no creativity in this projection. This blind imitation made their reading return in fact to the premodern concept of guardianship [and authority] against which modernity rebelled. In this way, they have accepted to willfully place themselves under the cultural guardianship of the makers of Western modernity. Accordingly, their readings belong, under the spirit of modernity, to the immature rather than to the mature.

Source

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37 See the introduction of *Fiqh al-Falsafa* 11 by the author.

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Indonesian Muslim Responses to the Use of Hermeneutics in Studying the Qur'an and *Tafsir*

A Critical Assessment

Yusuf Rahman

About the Author¹

Yusuf Rahman, a leading Indonesian scholar in Qur'an and Ḥadīth studies, is widely respected for his work on contemporary Qur'anic interpretation. He teaches at the graduate school of Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University (UIN) Jakarta and has made a significant contribution to Islamic scholarship in Indonesia, particularly in the area of Qur'anic hermeneutics. After completing his early education in Indonesia, Rahman went on to pursue his MA and Ph.D. at McGill University in Canada. His doctoral dissertation, completed in 2001, focused on the hermeneutical theory of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, one of the most influential modern thinkers in the field of Qur'anic interpretation. This early research has set the tone for much of Rahman's later work. He explores how the Qur'an can be read in ways that speak meaningfully to the challenges of modern life.

1 Important works by Yusuf Rahman include "Feminist Kyai, KH Husein Muhammad: The Feminist Interpretation on Gendered Verses and the Qur'an-based Activism," *Al-Jamī'ah* 55, no. 2 (2017): 293–326; "Pendekatan Tradisionalis dan Revisionis dalam Kajian Sejarah Pembentukan al-Qur'an dan Tafsir pada Masa Awal Islam," *Journal of Qur'an and Ḥadīth Studies* 4, no. 1 (2015): 1–20; "Tren Kajian Al-Qur'an di Dunia Barat," *Studia Insania* 1, no. 1 (2013): 1–8; "Penafsiran Tekstual dan Kontekstual terhadap Al-Qur'an dan Hadis (Kajian terhadap Muslim Salafi dan Muslim Progresif)," *Journal of Qur'an and Ḥadīth Studies* 1, no. 2 (2012): 297–302; "Akidah Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) dan Penafsiran Sastrawi terhadap Al-Qur'an," *Tsaqafah* 7, no. 1 (2011): 1–18; "The Qur'an in Egypt: Nasr Abu Zayd's Literary Approach," in *Coming to Terms with the Qur'an: A Volume in Honor of Professor Issa Boulata*, ed. Khaleel Mohammed and Andrew Rippin (North Haledon, NJ: Islamic Publications International, 2008), 227–265; and his Ph.D. dissertation, "The Hermeneutical Theory of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: An Analytical Study of His Method of Interpreting the Qur'an" (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 2001). Rahman's contributions are frequently cited in Indonesian Qur'anic studies, especially in discussions on contextual and gender-sensitive interpretations of the Qur'an.

Much of Rahman's writing has focused on the balance between traditional and modern approaches to the Qur'ān. He has explored the differences between literalist and contextual interpretations, especially in the debates between Salafi and progressive Muslim thinkers. His article "Penafsiran Tekstual dan Kontekstual terhadap Al-Qur'ān dan Hadis" (2012) looks closely at how these two groups read Islamic texts and the resulting implications for current religious understanding. Rahman argues that while the text of the Qur'ān remains central, the context in which it is read is just as important for understanding its full meaning.

Rahman has also written on the development of Qur'ānic studies outside the Muslim world. In "Tren Kajian Al-Qur'an di Dunia Barat" (2013), he examines how Western scholars have approached the Qur'ān and what Indonesian readers can learn from these Western methods. Another important part of his work deals with the early history of the Qur'ān and its interpretation. His 2015 article on traditionalist and revisionist approaches to early Islamic history sheds light on how scholars have debated the formation of the Qur'ānic text and its meanings.

An important area of Rahman's work is his engagement with gender issues in Qur'ānic interpretation. In his article "Feminist Kyai, KH Husein Muhammad" (2017), he highlights the efforts of Indonesian Muslim activists to read gendered Qur'ānic verses in ways that promote equality and social justice, and thus shows how the Qur'ān can support activism for women's rights.

Rahman has also contributed to international debates, notably with his chapter "The Qur'an in Egypt: Nasr Abu Zayd's Literary Approach," in which he offers insights into Abū Zayd's methods and their place in the wider field of modern Qur'ānic studies. Throughout his career, Yusuf Rahman has remained committed to reading the Qur'ān as a living text. For him, the Qur'ān offers guidance when read thoughtfully and in light of the times.



1 Introduction

At its National Congress in July 2005, the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Ulama Council, MUI) issued a *fatwā*, No. 7/MUNASVII/MUI/11/2005, on the prohibition of religious pluralism, liberalism, and secularism. Hermeneutics, some people claimed, was a contributing factor to the issue of this *fatwā*, since it is deemed to produce a liberal understanding of Islam. In MUI's definition, religious liberalism (*liberalisme agama*) connotes "the understanding of religious

texts (the Qur'ān and Sunna) using free reasoning and only accepting religious doctrines that accord with pure reason."²

Prior to the issue of this *fatwā*, there were debates and controversies on the use of hermeneutics in Islamic studies and its effects on Islamic thought. Jaringan Islam Liberal (Liberal Islam Network), which was established in 2001, was among the groups targeted by this *fatwā* because it promoted critical and liberal thinking through the use of hermeneutics and other critical methods. Apart from this group, certain other Muslim organizations, such as Paramadina and Jaringan Intelektual Muda Muhammadiyah (Young Muhammadiyah Intellectuals Network), endorse the rethinking and reinterpretation of Islamic teachings. Conversely, the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought and Civilizations (INSISTS), which is discussed in the next section, opposes these liberal groups and was established in 2003 to counter their secular and liberal ideas.

Despite the issue of the *fatwa* in 2005, theories of hermeneutics are still taught in Islamic universities, especially the Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN; State Islamic Universities) in Jakarta and Yogyakarta, often described as “the Progressive State Islamic Universities/Institutes” in Indonesia. From these courses on hermeneutical theories, several books on hermeneutics written by lecturers and by graduates of these two universities have been published. However, for many reasons, including the fear of controversy or lack of expertise in hermeneutics among their lecturers, most Islamic universities do not yet offer a course on hermeneutics. UIN Jakarta and UIN Yogyakarta, as can be observed from the discussion presented later in this article, may be regarded as promoters of theories of hermeneutics, who publish works on hermeneutics and produce its advocates.

This article discusses the controversy and the responses of Indonesian Muslims to the use of hermeneutics in Qur'ān and *tafsīr* studies after MUI issued its *fatwā*. Following Morteza Karimi-Nia,³ I classify the responses into progressive and scientific academic studies on one hand, and theological and polemical responses on the other. I will critically assess the latter by responding to some of their apologetic criticisms.

2 A copy of the *fatwā* is available at <http://mui.or.id/wp-content/uploads/files/fatwa/12.-Pluralisme-Liberalisme-dan-Sekularisme-Agama.pdf>.

3 Morteza Karimi-Nia, “Contemporary Qur'anic Studies in Iran and its Relationship with Qur'anic Studies in the West,” *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 14, no. 1 (2012): 45–72, esp. 61.

2 Contemporary Discussion of the Hermeneutics Controversy in Indonesia

Izza Rohman has comprehensively discussed the heated debate on the use of hermeneutics in Qur'anic studies in Indonesia, through a bibliographical survey of printed works—articles and books—published in Indonesia up to 2006.⁴ According to Rohman, three main issues are debated between those who support hermeneutics and those who reject it.⁵ The first is whether hermeneutics is something new and foreign or has been present for a long time in Islamic tradition, the second is whether hermeneutics can be used in Qur'anic studies, and the third is whether using hermeneutics for Qur'anic studies adds anything that is not provided by existing methods of *tafsīr*.

On reading Rohman's survey, I note that most of these works represent two groups or *madhhabs*: the proponents of hermeneutics are from UIN Yogyakarta and UIN Jakarta—under the mentorship of Amin Abdullah and Komaruddin Hidayat, respectively—where hermeneutics is taught, especially in the Department of Tafsīr and Ḥadīth Studies; meanwhile, the opponents of hermeneutics are Indonesian scholars who are studying and teaching at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization—International Islamic University Malaysia (ISTAC–IIUM) in Kuala Lumpur.⁶

Since Rohman's 2006 survey, most works discussing this issue have not departed from this categorization. This is mainly because the supporters and the opponents of hermeneutics are still associated with the same “camps.” The former group, especially academics from UIN Yogyakarta and UIN Jakarta, have produced some important works in response to their opponents' criticism. The role of M. Amin Abdullah, the “Indonesian father of hermeneutics,”⁷ is espe-

4 Izza Rohman, “Controversies over Western Hermeneutics in Indonesia: Mapping Main Issues,” in *Islam, Society and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Yusuf Rahman (Jakarta: Faculty of Graduate Studies UIN Jakarta, 2006), 29–53; Izza Rohman, “New Approaches in Interpreting the Qur'an in Contemporary Indonesia,” *Studia Islamika* 14, no. 2 (2007): 203–264, esp. 235ff. These articles are based on Izza Rohman, “Rethinking Approaches to Interpreting the Qur'an in Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Thought” (master's thesis, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, 2006), esp. chap. 5.

5 See Rohman, “Controversies over Western Hermeneutics,” 36–51.

6 I have discussed the debate between these two groups, which I classify as the reformist, and the theological and polemical, in their reception of Western scholarship on the Qur'an, in my article: Yusuf Rahman, “Indonesian Muslim Responses to Non-Muslim Approaches to Qur'anic Studies,” in *New Trends in Qur'anic Studies: Text, Context, and Interpretation*, ed. Mun'im Sirry (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2019), 45–60.

7 See Izza Rohman, “New Approaches,” 235. This title for M. Amin Abdullah, which Adian Husaini seems to have given, originates from the many works related to hermeneutics that bear Abdullah's name as the author, editor, or promoter.

cially prominent. Together with Sahiron Syamsuddin,⁸ Abdullah teaches a postgraduate course on “Hermeneutika al-Qur’an dan Hadis” at UIN Yogyakarta.⁹ As a result of this course, a book¹⁰ has been published, which is a compilation of student papers presented in the class that discuss the views of Muslim scholars who accept hermeneutics and use it in their studies of the Qur’an and hadīth, such as Fazlur Rahman, Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī, Naṣr Ḥāmīd Abū Zayd, Amina Wadud, and Khaled Abou El Fadl.

In addition, Abdullah, who was Rector of Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN)/UIN Yogyakarta from 2001 to 2010, in seeking to enhance critical thinking and reform religious thought,¹¹ assigned Syamsuddin and some other lecturers together with the Research Centre (Lembaga Penelitian) of UIN Yogyakarta to translate some important works of hermeneutics in both the Western and Islamic traditions. The purpose of these translations was to assure

8 Sahiron Syamsuddin obtained his Ph.D. from Bamberg University, Germany and wrote his dissertation on the Qur’anic hermeneutics of Muḥammad Shaḥrūr. See Sahiron Syamsuddin, “Die Koranhermeneutik Muḥammad Shaḥrūrs und ihre Beurteilung aus der Sicht muslimischer Autoren: eine kritische Untersuchung” (Ph.D. diss., University of Bamberg, 2006).

9 This is quite different from UIN Jakarta, where hermeneutics is only offered at the undergraduate level in the Department of Qur’an and Hadith Studies. At UIN Yogyakarta, it is also offered at the postgraduate level. Starting in 2015, the postgraduate program at UIN Yogyakarta has begun offering a new course called “Hermeneutics of the Qur’an.” See http://pps.uin-suka.ac.id/attachments/01_Leaflet%20S2%url20Hermeneutika%20al-Qu%27an.pdf.

10 See Sahiron Syamsuddin, ed., *Hermeneutika Al-Qur’an dan Hadis* (Yogyakarta: eLSAQ Press, 2010).

11 Abdullah strived to reform religious thought not only on campus, but also through mass organizations, especially Muhammadiyah. Before becoming Rector of IAIN Yogyakarta, during his term as the chair of Muhammadiyah’s Majlis Tarjih dan Pengembangan Pemikiran Islam (the Council of Law-Making and Reformation of Islamic Thought) from 1995–2000, Abdullah commissioned the publication of *Tafsir Tematik al-Qur’an tentang Hubungan Sosial Antarumat Beragama* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka SM, 2000), which uses a form of hermeneutical theory—to use his term, *al-qirā’a al-muntija*. For more information on this publication, see Ahmad Najib Burhani, “Lakum Dīnukum wa-Liya Dīnī: The Muhammadiyah’s Stance towards Interfaith Relations,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 22, no. 3 (2011): 329–342, esp. 330–334. I would like to thank Ahmad Najib Burhani for providing a soft copy of *Tafsir Tematik*, which is very difficult to find at present because of its controversial nature, and also his article, during the presentation of this paper at a workshop on September 2, 2015 at Aula Kopertais UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. See also the debate on the use of hermeneutics in Muhammadiyah in Ahmad Najib Burhani, “Liberal and Conservative Discourses in the Muhammadiyah: The Struggle for the Face of Reformist Islam in Indonesia,” in *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the “Conservative Turn,”* ed. Martin van Bruinessen (Singapore: ISEAS, 2013), 105–144.

those who would like to either understand or reject hermeneutics that they need to first read about these theories, most of which are written in English, French, and German. From this project, two books were published: *Pemikiran Hermeneutika dalam Tradisi Barat: Reader*¹² and *Pemikiran Hermeneutika dalam Tradisi Islam: Reader*.¹³

In addition, the Research Centre of UIN Yogyakarta published a book in 2009 entitled *Upaya Integrasi Hermeneutika dalam Kajian Al-Qur'an dan Hadis (Efforts to Integrate Hermeneutics in the Study of the Qur'an and Ḥadīth)*. This book invited Indonesian scholars of hermeneutics to contribute ideas about ways to integrate hermeneutics into the study of the Qur'an and ḥadīth. For example, Fariz Pari, a lecturer of hermeneutics and logic at UIN Jakarta, who wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on "Hermeneutika Paul Ricoeur untuk Penelitian Keagamaan" ("Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics for Religious Studies"),¹⁴ contributed a chapter proposing the hermeneutics of al-Ghazālī in interpreting the Qur'an.¹⁵

Syamsuddin himself has proposed the contribution of philosophical hermeneutics in developing the present sciences of the Qur'an in his book *Hermeneutika dan Pengembangan Ulumul Qur'an*.¹⁶ This book, as can be observed from the title, aims to prove the importance of hermeneutics in the study of the Qur'an, through the author's exploration of similarities between the trends of general hermeneutics and those of modern *tafsīr*, and the compatibility between Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics and some aspects of *'ulūm al-Qur'an*. Last, by referring to the interpretive theories of Jorge Gracia, Syamsuddin offers a more philosophical and sophisticated definition of *tafsīr* and *'ulūm al-Qur'an*.

Another lecturer of hermeneutics from UIN Jakarta, Kusmana, further argues in favor of using hermeneutics in Qur'anic studies, stating that "by deploying hermeneutical reading, various possibilities may occur in reading the Qur'an, including possibilities of questioning, refining, or to its extreme, of proposing a replacement of the previous wisdoms for the sake of answering new

12 Syafa'atun Almirzanah and Sahiron Syamsuddin, eds. *Pemikiran Hermeneutika dalam Tradisi Barat: Reader* (Yogyakarta: Lembaga Penelitian UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2011).

13 Almirzanah and Syamsuddin, eds. *Pemikiran Hermeneutika*.

14 Fariz Pari, "Hermeneutika Paul Ricoeur untuk Penelitian Keagamaan: Kajian Metodologi dan Terapan terhadap Kebudayaan Shalat dan Makam Sunan Rohmat Garut" (Ph.D. diss., Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah, 2005).

15 Fariz Pari, "Hermeneutika Gazali," in *Upaya Integrasi Hermeneutika dalam Kajian Al-Qur'an dan Hadis*, eds. Syafa'atun Almirzanah and Sahiron Syamsuddin (Yogyakarta: Lembaga Penelitian UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2009), 3–58.

16 Sahiron Syamsuddin, *Hermeneutika dan Pengembangan Ulumul Qur'an* (Yogyakarta: Pesantren Nawasea Press, 2009).

problem[s] and challenge[s].”¹⁷ Moreover, in his book,¹⁸ Kusmana offers some practical approaches to applying hermeneutics in interpreting the Qur’ān.

From these works, it is clear that academics from UIN Yogyakarta and UIN Jakarta have argued that theories of hermeneutics can be used in Qur’ān and *tafsīr* studies. These theories were applied by *‘ulamā* in the past as well as modern Muslim thinkers. In addition, similarly to progressive and reformist scholars, they have selectively and critically studied Western theories of hermeneutics and applied them to the study of the Qur’ān and *tafsīr*. They have also provided strategies to appropriate these theories in the study of the Qur’ān and also *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*. Perhaps the most important works published by these scholars are the translation and introduction of Western theories of hermeneutics to Bahasa Indonesia, since literature on hermeneutics remains rare in this language and most students who would like to read about these theories need to still rely on secondary sources.

Whereas the scholars who support hermeneutics and have authored studies on it are mainly from UIN, those who refute hermeneutics are mostly from INSISTS in Jakarta, whose main objective is to counter the danger of “Secularism, Liberalism, and Pluralism,” which they mockingly abbreviate to SIPILIS, a reference to syphilis. In addition to holding training sessions, discussions, and workshops on these issues, INSISTS publishes a journal, *Islamia*, and books. The main publisher of their works is Gema Insani Press.

Among the works after 2006 that reject hermeneutics, which have been published by Gema Insani Press, is that of Fahmi Salim.¹⁹ This work is Salim’s Master of Arts (MA) thesis, which he wrote at Al-Azhar University in 2007 under the supervision of ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Farmāwī and ‘Abd al-Badī’ Abu Hāshim. In it, Salim argues that hermeneutics originates from the Christian theological tradition,²⁰ its purpose is to criticize the Bible,²¹ and it has been applied by

17 Kusmana, “Some Implications of Hermeneutical Readings for the Study of the Qur’an,” *Journal of Qur’an and Hadith Studies* 2, no. 2 (2013): 267–288, esp. 271.

18 Kusmana, *Hermeneutika Al-Qur’an: Sebuah Pendekatan Praktis Aplikasi Hermeneutik Modern dalam Penafsiran Al-Qur’an* (Jakarta: UIN Jakarta, 2004). I would like to thank Kusmana for providing me with this book as well as his other works.

19 Fahmi Salim, *Kritik Terhadap Studi Al-Qur’an Kaum Liberal* (Jakarta: Perspektif, 2010). Note that the publisher Perspektif belongs to Gema Insani Press. After his return from Al-Azhar, Salim became a member of the Research Commission of MUI and Muhammadiyah for the period 2010–2015, and at the time of writing is Vice Secretary of Majelis Intelektual dan Ulama Muda Indonesia (Indonesian Council of Young Ulama and Intellectuals), MIUMI.

20 Fahmi Salim, *Kritik Terhadap Studi Al-Qur’an Kaum Liberal* (Jakarta: Kelompok Gema Insani, 2010), 124 ff.

21 Salim, *Kritik*, 157 ff.

Orientalists to the study of the Qurʾān.²² Salim, a researcher at INSISTS, also criticizes some liberal Muslim scholars, such as Amīn al-Khūlī, Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalaf Allāh, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, and Muhammad Arkoun, who have used hermeneutics in studying the Qurʾān.

Adian Husaini, one of the founders of INSISTS, has written several works criticizing hermeneutics.²³ He added to this collection of publications by repeating his previous arguments in his book published in 2009.²⁴ In addition, in a book he co-authored with Abdurrahman Al-Baghdadi in 2007,²⁵ they warn about the negative effects of hermeneutics, namely, that it will produce relativism in *tafsīr*, cast doubt on and criticize classical *ʿulamā*, and ultimately, question the authenticity of the Qurʾān.²⁶ Similarly to Husaini, Syamsuddin Arif, another founder of INSISTS, argues about the negative impact of applying hermeneutics to the Qurʾān. First, hermeneutics considers all texts to be the same, in such a way that it rejects the sacredness of the Qurʾān and its authenticity. Second, hermeneutics considers all texts to be historical products, and therefore, it contradicts the view of the universality—being beyond time and space—of the Qurʾān. Third, hermeneutics implies the necessity of doubt, which undermines belief in the truthfulness of the Qurʾān. Fourth, hermeneutics asserts the relativism of interpretation, because it is linked to a specific context. According to Arif, if this view is accepted, hermeneutics will produce many stupid interpreters of the Qurʾān, whose ideas are wrong and deviant.²⁷

22 Salim, *Kritik*, 189 ff.

23 See, for example, Adian Husaini, “Problem Teks Bible dan Hermeneutika,” *Islamia* 1, no. 1 (2004): 7–15; Adian Husaini, *Wajah Peradaban Barat: Dari Hegemoni Kristen ke Dominasi Sekular-Liberal* (Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 2005); Adian Husaini, *Hegemoni Kristen-Barat dalam Studi Islam di Perguruan Tinggi* (Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 2006). Husaini received his Ph.D. from ISTAC–IUM in 2009, with a dissertation entitled “Exclusivism and Evangelism in the Second Vatican Council: A Critical Reading of the Second Vatican Council’s Documents in the Light of the Ad Gentes and the Nostra Aetate.” Among his present positions, he is Head of the Doctoral Program at Ibn Khaldun University, Bogor, and Vice Chairman, MIUMI.

24 Adian Husaini, *Virus Liberalisme di Perguruan Tinggi Islam* (Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 2009). It is quite interesting to compare the book titles of these two groups. Those who argue against hermeneutics write about hermeneutics “versus” or “and” *tafsīr*/the Qurʾān, whereas those who argue for hermeneutics generally title their books “*hermeneutika al-Qurʾan*” (hermeneutics of the Qurʾān).

25 Adian Husaini and Abdurrahman Al-Baghdadi, *Hermeneutika & Tafsir Al-Qurʾan* (Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 2007).

26 See Husaini and Al-Baghdadi, *Hermeneutika & Tafsir Al-Qurʾan*, 17 ff.

27 Syamsuddin Arif, *Orientalis & Diabolisme Pemikiran* (Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 2008), 181 ff. Arif obtained his MA and Ph.D. degrees from ISTAC in 1999 and 2004 on “Ibn Sinā’s

In addition to Gema Insani Press, works that reject hermeneutics have also been published by the Centre for Islamic and Occidental Studies (CIOS) at the Darussalam Institute for Islamic Studies (ISID), Gontor. These include books by Daden Robi Rahman²⁸ and Lalu Nurul Bayanil Huda.²⁹ These works are the product of the ‘Ulama Formation Program (Program Kaderisasi Ulama), a program founded in 2009 in cooperation between MUI and CIOS–ISID Gontor. The main objective of this program, as can be seen from these works, is to stem the tide of liberal Islamic thought in Indonesia.

Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi plays an important role in this anti-liberalism movement. Zarkasyi is the Director of both INSISTS and CIOS–ISID, and is now the chair of a new organization, Majelis Intelektual dan Ulama Muda Indonesia (MIUMI, Indonesian Council of Young Ulama and Intellectuals), which was founded on February 28, 2012.³⁰ He was born to an *‘ulamā* family; his father K.H. Imam Zarkasyi was one of the founders of the well-known, influential Darussalam Modern Islamic Boarding School in Gontor, Ponorogo. Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi was educated in Islamic religious tradition at ISID Gontor and obtained an MA from Punjab University in Pakistan, as well as an MA in Western Islamic studies from Birmingham University, and last, a Ph.D. from ISTAC–IIUM in Malaysia. Thus, he is well equipped with knowledge on both the Islamic intellectual tradition and the Western philosophical tradition. These are some of the reasons he has been appointed to chair these organizations and research institutions.

In an in-depth, academically researched article in which he focuses on Indonesian intellectuals,³¹ Zarkasyi discusses how liberalism and liberalization

Theory of Intuition” and “Ibn Sīnā’s Cosmology,” respectively. He is presently a lecturer at the Centre for Advanced Studies on Islam, Science and Civilization at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, and is also enrolled for a second Ph.D. degree at the Orientalische Seminar, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe Universität, Frankfurt.

28 Daden Robi Rahman, *Infiltrasi Hermeneutika Terhadap Penafsiran Ayat-Ayat Ahkam: Kritik atas Pemikiran Fazlur Rahman dan Muhammad Syahrur* (Ponorogo: CIOS–ISID, 2010).

29 Lalu Nurul Bayanil Huda, *Kritik Studi Al-Qur’an Nashr Hamid Abu Zaid* (Ponorogo: CIOS–ISID, 2010).

30 See <http://www.republika.co.id/berita/dunia-islam/islam-nusantara/12/02/29/m05sml-didek-larasikan-majelis-intelektual-dan-ulama-muda-indonesia>; <http://www.antaranews.com/print/2993-16/sejumlah-intelektual-dan-ulama-deklarasikan-miumi>. In its coverage, Voice of Al-Islam celebrates the establishment of MIUMI as a “tough opponent” of liberal ideas. See <http://www.voai-islam.com/read/indonesiana/2012/03/01/17994/allahu-akbar-miumi-bakal-menja-di-lawan-tanggung-para-pengasong-liberal/#sthash.mH0w3Jlc.dpbs>.

31 Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, “Liberalism, Liberalization and Their Impacts of Muslim Education: Special Case of Indonesian Intellectuals,” *Jurnal Tsaqafah* 8, no. 1 (2012): 183–210. He has also published a book entitled *Liberalisasi Pemikiran Islam* (Ponorogo: CIOS, 2008).

have influenced Muslim education as well as Islamic thought. He argues that liberalism, which is a Western ideology, “marginalizes religion or separate[s] religion from social and political affairs in [a] gradual manner. Religion has no place above social and political interest. ... In this situation the first problematic point was the concept of God.”³² Here, Zarkasyi insists on the danger of liberalism toward religion, including Islam.

Zarkasyi further argues that this type of liberalism differs from the Islamic worldview, whose main foundations are based on revelation (the Qur’ān) and the prophetic tradition, from which the truth can be derived, as well as from reason, experience, and intuition.³³ Zarkasyi worriedly observes that, unfortunately, this type of liberalization program and liberal movement has been “rigorously and systematically implemented” toward the Muslim world through a “Western program” after the tragedy of 9/11, especially against fundamentalist Muslims.³⁴ The Western program to which he refers was a proposal of RAND Corporation, which offered some strategies and measures to tackle fundamentalist and traditionalist types of thought and to promote moderate, democratic, and liberal Islam.³⁵

Hermeneutics, Zarkasyi asserts, is a main cause and criterion for this liberal thought.³⁶ He associates hermeneutics with nihilism and postmodern philosophy, which support relativism. Referring to Ernest Gellner, Zarkasyi asserts that in this relativism of postmodern philosophy “the truth ... is elusive, subjective, and internal, therefore it cannot admit single, exclusive, objective, external and transcendental truth. In short, postmodern philosophy dissolve[s] the highest value, denying God as the reference of every values.”³⁷

It should be noted here that many believe that the use of hermeneutics in Qur’ānic interpretation—among other factors—is what caused MUI to issue the July 2005 *fatwā* on the “prohibition or illegitimacy of secularism, liberalism, and pluralism,” especially religious liberalism, because it strongly advocates the use of reason in Islamic thought.³⁸ This implies that hermeneutics is,

32 Zarkasyi, “Liberalism, Liberalization and Their Impacts,” 185–186.

33 Zarkasyi, “Liberalism, Liberalization and Their Impacts,” 191.

34 Zarkasyi, “Liberalism, Liberalization and Their Impacts,” 191ff. See also Zarkasyi, *Misykat: Refleksi tentang Islam, Westernisasi & Liberalisasi* (Jakarta: INSISTS, 2012), especially his chapter on “Moderat, Radikal dan Liberal,” 196 ff.

35 See Angel Rabasa et al., *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND_MG574.pdf.

36 Zarkasyi, *Misykat*, 277.

37 Zarkasyi, “Liberalism, Liberalization and Their Impacts,” 188.

38 See Budhy Munawar-Rachman’s interview of KH Ma’ruf Amin in Jakarta on April 30, 2008 in *Argumen Islam untuk Liberalisme* (Jakarta: Grasindo, 2010), 1–2.

by association, prohibited or *ḥarām*. It is not quite clear whether individuals from INSISTS had a role in the issuance of this *fatwā*, but Moch Nur Ichwan has observed that a process of “conservatization” or “radicalization” occurred at MUI during this period.³⁹ It is certain that this *fatwā* has generated several different responses, from liberal–progressive and fundamentalist–conservative Muslims, and also from non-Muslims.⁴⁰

Before presenting my position on the use of hermeneutics in the study of Qurʾān and *tafsīr*, I would like to respond specifically to Zarkasyi’s description of liberalism and its dangers. Liberalism is not monolithic. Its nature has been subjected to debate by scholars, as can be seen from the sources Zarkasyi uses to support his claim of liberalism as being anti-religion/truth/God.⁴¹ Contemporary liberal theory has developed from its Enlightenment origins. Zarkasyi’s sources may support the view that liberalism “marginalizes religion,” and that “religion has no place above social and political interests,” but John Rawls, the most influential contemporary liberal theorist, argues that “there is, or need be, no war between religion and democracy. In this respect, political liberalism is sharply different from, and rejects, Enlightenment liberalism, which historically attacked orthodox Christianity.”⁴² This argument demonstrates that liberalism, in general, cannot simplistically be described as being anti-religion and anti-God, as Zarkasyi would have us believe.

In fact, Zarkasyi’s discussion in the last part of his article on the impact of liberalism on Islamic thought represents a particular theory of liberalism:

39 Moch Nur Ichwan, “Towards a Puritanical Moderate Islam: The Majelis Ulama Indonesia and the Politics of Religious Orthodoxy,” in *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the “Conservative Turn,”* ed. Martin van Bruinessen (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, 2013), 60–104, esp. 65. Ichwan mentions the inclusion of Adian Husaini in MUI as the deputy head of its Commission for Harmony among Religious Believers.

40 See Ichwan, “Towards a Puritanical Moderate Islam,” 82–84; Munawar-Rachman, *Argumen Islam untuk Liberalisme*; Moch Nur Ichwan, *Argumen Islam untuk Pluralisme* (Jakarta: Grasindo, 2010). For the conservatives’ response, see Adian Husaini, *Pluralisme Agama Haram: Fatwa MUI yang Tegas & Tidak Kontroversial* (Jakarta: Pustaka Al-Kautsar, 2005). See also Asfa Widiyanto, who discusses the responses of A. Mustafa Bisri and Emha Ainun Nadjib in his “Religious Pluralism and Contested Religious Authority in Contemporary Indonesian Islam,” in *Contrasting Images and Interpretations*, ed. Jajat Burhanuddin and Kees van Dijk (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 161–172.

41 See especially Zarkasyi, “Liberalism, Liberalization and Their Impacts,” 185, n. 3, in which he refers to Alan Brinkley’s *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), John Gray’s *Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), and James T. Kloppenberg’s *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

42 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 803–804.

religious liberalism, or theological liberalism, to use Paul Rasor's terminology.⁴³ Rasor has discussed some of the similarities in values and commitments between political liberalism and theological liberalism. Referring to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, he finds that the definition of liberalism in politics and theology is similar; that is, "the holding of liberal opinions in politics or theology."⁴⁴ He further states that being "liberal" in religion means "those members of a church or religious sect who hold opinions 'broader' or more 'advanced' than those in accordance with its commonly accepted standard of orthodoxy," and in politics, it means being "favorable to constitutional changes and legal or administrative reforms tending in the direction of freedom or democracy."⁴⁵ This explanation shows the similar meaning between the two.

Rasor goes on to explain the defining characteristics and features of political liberalism and theological liberalism. However, what is important to note here is his discussion of the main characteristics of theological liberalism: its critical engagement, emphasis on social justice, understanding of human freedom, theological pluralism, and theological openness.⁴⁶ These correspond to the views that Zarkasyi criticizes: the relativity of truth, religious pluralism, feminism and gender equality, and deconstructing shari'a.⁴⁷

This discussion aims to clarify that liberalism as explained in this section is neither Enlightenment liberalism nor postmodern liberalism, which disregard the role of religion or God, but refers to political liberalism in the form of theological or religious liberalism. Second, the main concerns of religious and theological liberalism are the same regardless of the religion, whether Christianity or Islam, that is, to offer new meanings of religion vis-à-vis the current multicultural, plural world.

43 See Paul Rasor, "Theological and Political Liberalisms," *Journal of Law and Religion* 24, no. 2 (2008–2009): 433–462. Munawar-Rachman, using Charles Kurzman's classification of Liberal Islam, would name this "Interpreted shari'a" as against "Liberal shari'a" and "Silent shari'a." See Munawar-Rachman, *Argumen Islam untuk Liberalisme*, 187 ff.

44 Rasor, "Theological and Political Liberalisms," 435.

45 Rasor, "Theological and Political Liberalisms," 435. See also *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., prepared by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, vol. 8 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 882.

46 Rasor, "Theological and Political Liberalisms," 436 ff.

47 Zarkasyi, "Liberalism, Liberalization and Their Impacts," 193. Compare with Munawar-Rachman, *Argumen Islam untuk Liberalisme*, 193 ff., who lists the main themes of "Interpreted shari'a" as the issues of an Islamic state, democracy, gender and women's rights, non-Muslims' rights, and freedom of thought.

3 Critical Assessment of the Hermeneutics Controversy in the Indonesian Context

Zarkasyi is right when he states that liberalization aims to confront and challenge the fundamentalist and traditionalist understanding of religious text. The traditionalists, especially the fundamentalists, claim that they hold the true and authentic Islam, and reject any other interpretations “deviating” from this understanding. Liberal and progressive Muslims oppose and challenge this view. However, liberal thought and liberalization cannot simply be described as a Western project. M. Dawam Raharjo has admitted that liberalization in Islam can be understood as a form of global liberalism, but at the same time, he maintains that it is also an essential part of Islamic thought.⁴⁸ This is confirmed by the numerous Qur’anic verses that command the use of reason, the Sunna of the Prophet, and the intellectual tradition of Islam in the Muslim world, including Islamic intellectual history in Indonesia. This argument may be considered apologetic by some, but the point is to emphasize that liberalization is maintained and reinforced in the Islamic tradition itself and is not completely a project of Westernization.

Even if it is considered a sort of Westernization, the same thing can be said of its opponents’ project as being one of Arabization—to Arabize Islamic thought and purify it from Western, local, and other values. However, as has been eloquently argued by Martin van Bruinessen in his discussion of “foreign” thought in Indonesia:

The talk of Arabization versus Westernization implicitly assumes an essentialized, homogenized Arab world, or an equally monolithic West, impinging upon a vulnerable and malleable Indonesian *umma*. It is undoubtedly true that the numbers of Indonesians travelling abroad have dramatically increased during the past few decades and that the flows of goods and ideas from the Middle East as well as the West (and from other regions) towards Indonesia have accelerated and become more massive. However, these cultural flows have been highly complex and richly varied, and so has their impact. Muslims across the spectrum, from secular-minded liberals and progressives to Islamists and Salafis, have in various ways incorporated some influences of Western origin (or mediated by actors in the West) as well as influences traceable to the Middle East,

48 M. Dawam Raharjo, “Kata Pengantar,” in Munawar-Rachman, *Argumen Islam untuk Liberalisme*, xliiiff. In fact, the entire book’s aim is to confirm the Islamic argument of liberalism.

alongside yet other influences. The adoption of foreign ideas and practices has always been selective, and made in accordance with perceived local needs.⁴⁹

Western hermeneutics, which is the main issue in this article, is also adopted, selected, and modified by many progressive Muslim scholars in their study of the Qurʾān and *tafsīr*. I deliberately include the study of *tafsīr* because most criticism refers to the use of hermeneutics in the study of the Qurʾānic text, but it can also be used for the study of other texts, religious or non-religious.

For example, Burge argues for the significance of hermeneutics in *tafsīr* studies and states:

The field of hermeneutics, and in particular theories of reading, have much to offer to the field of *tafsīr* studies, since they provide a theoretical background to what is going on in both the action of “doing *tafsīr*” and of “writing a *tafsīr*.”⁵⁰

According to him, hermeneutics can explain how the Qurʾān can generate so many meanings, as recorded in the *tafsīr* literature, and can also explain how an exegete can control the meaning of the Qurʾān in their written *tafsīr*.

By referring to Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons,” Burge explains a variety of *tafsīr* literature as an outcome of the meeting and alignment between the text of the Qurʾān and the worldview of the exegete.⁵¹ In “doing a *tafsīr*,” the exegete reflects upon the meaning of the Qurʾān, which is influenced by their theological inclinations, intellectual tradition, the literature they have read, and so on. In “writing a *tafsīr*,” the exegete must decide and select one clear meaning from the many possible meanings offered by the Qurʾānic text. The theological and subjective inclination of the exegete again shapes this selection of meaning. Burge states:

The aim of *tafsīr* is to provide an interpretation or an elucidation of what the Qurʾān means, yet the meaning of the Qurʾān provided in a *tafsīr* is

49 Martin van Bruinessen, “Ghazwul Fikri or Arabization? Indonesian Muslim Responses to Globalization,” in *Southeast Asian Muslims in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Ken Miichi and Omar Farouk (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 80.

50 Stephen R. Burge, “The Search for Meaning: Tafsīr, Hermeneutics, and Theories of Reading,” *Arabica* 62, no. 1 (2015): 54.

51 Burge, “The Search for Meaning,” 57 ff.

highly personal to that exegete: it is no longer the “meaning of the Qur’ān,” but the exegete’s own meaning of the Qur’ān.⁵²

Similarly, Ulrika Mårtensson has analyzed some *tafsīr* literature, especially the works of al-Ṭabarī and al-Ghazālī, to determine whether they belong to an author-centered interpretation or reader-centered interpretation. By comparing Gadamer’s and E.D. Hirsch’s theories of interpretation, Mårtensson concludes that al-Ṭabarī and al-Ghazālī are more in agreement with Hirsch than Gadamer, because they both define the aim of Qur’ānic interpretation as to discover “God’s intended meaning.”⁵³

However, the hermeneutical question that follows from Mårtensson’s finding is whether the meaning that has been identified by these exegetes is truly God’s intended meaning. How can they—or anyone else—claim that they have reached and discovered God’s meaning? It is this absolute belief that causes the problem or the tension between fundamentalist–conservative and liberal–progressive Muslims. The fundamentalists, believing that they know the correct meaning and purpose of the Qur’ān, disapprove of and exclude other meanings and interpretations, and then prohibit or excommunicate them. Khaled Abou El Fadl portrays this group’s claim as “speaking in God’s name,”⁵⁴ although God has not directly authorized them to speak on His behalf.

Therefore, unlike this literalist absolutist interpretation, modern Muslim scholars—as well as other religious scholars—find hermeneutics quite instructive in explaining the diversity of meaningful interpretations. It is true that the Qur’ān has only one divine and original meaning, *ma’na ḥaqīqī*, which is God’s intended meaning, but whether God has informed us of the true meaning of all Qur’ānic verses through His Prophet, Muḥammad or through other lines is not always clear. I would argue that the reason that the interpretation of the Qur’ān, which started in the formative period of Islam and continues until today, will continue endlessly until the End of Days, is not because of the internal aspect of the Qur’ān or its external aspects,⁵⁵ but rather, hermeneutically speaking,

52 Burge, “The Search for Meaning,” 73.

53 Ulrika Mårtensson, “Through the Lens of Modern Hermeneutics: Authorial Intention in al-Ṭabarī’s and al-Ghazālī’s Interpretation of Q. 24:35,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 11, no. 2 (2009): 20–48.

54 See Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001).

55 See Amin al-Khūlī’s “mā fī al-qur’ān” and “mā ḥawla al-qur’ān” in his *Manāḥij Tajdīd fī al-Naḥw wa al-Balāghah wa al-Tafsīr wa al-Adab* (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Miṣriyya, 1995), 233 ff. See Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur’ān: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (New York:

because no one can claim that they have discovered God's intended meaning for all the verses of the Qur'an.

For the same reason, I argue against those who label others as being apostates or deviant. For instance, in his book, Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī⁵⁶ condemns the interpretations of Mu'tazilīs, Shī'īs, Sufis, and others as deviant interpretations. Al-Dhahabī provides reasons to support his judgment, but hermeneutically speaking, the only logical criterion in his evaluation of these "deviant" interpretations is his theological leaning, the Ash'arī theology, which for him is the only "correct" Qur'anic interpretation. There are no heretical interpretations of the Qur'an by Ash'arīs in al-Dhahabī's book. However, I believe that neither the Mu'tazilīs, nor the Shī'īs, nor the Sufis feel that they are interpreting the Qur'an heretically. In this respect, it is worth quoting Emha Ainun Najib's statement:

Islam is not the same as the interpretation of Islam. It is not the same as the views of its adherents, who have a variety of opinions about Islam. Islam is not the same as Sunnī, Shī'ī, Muhammadiyah, NU, Hizbut Tahrir, or any other application of the interpretation of Islam. The real Islam is only the true Islam intended by God. All Muslim believers strive with their own understandings to approach the true Islam. Therefore, there is not one group that can legally and logically claim that the real Islam is the Islam of this group or that group.⁵⁷

This statement is clear in saying that each exegete and interpreter strives to their utmost to reach the true Islam, the intended meaning of God; therefore, no one can claim that their interpretation is the true interpretation of the Qur'an. In Abou El Fadl's words, "A person can strive, hope, and aspire to be God's soldier, but no person may claim that they have, in fact, achieved this status."⁵⁸

Zarkasyi does not like the type of argument that states that "human thought is relative and only God is absolute," and he accuses this of being "the relativity of truth."⁵⁹ This kind of statement, for Zarkasyi, implies that the interpretations

Routledge, 2006), 2; he too argues for new interpretation of the Qur'an owing to the changing context.

56 Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, *al-Ittijāhāt al-Munḥarifa fi Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār al-I'tiṣām, n.d.).

57 Emha Ainun Nadjib, "Islamic Valentine Day," *Seputar Indonesia*, September 21, 2007.

58 See Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*, 3.

59 Zarkasyi, "Liberalism, Liberalization, and Their Impacts," 193–195.

of Muslim scholars in the past and in the present should not be regarded as authoritative. Husaini would add that it casts doubt on and criticizes previous Muslim scholars (*‘ulamā*).⁶⁰ Despite this, I agree with the many Muslim scholars who differentiate between revelation and interpretation. The interpretation of the Qur’ān is human interpretation, which is classified as *ijtihād*. As Abdullah Saeed has identified, interpretation is a human endeavor, and there is no sacred interpretation, even the interpretations of the earliest scholars, *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*. Saeed maintains:

There is nothing sacred about the personal interpretation given to a verse even by a Companion of the Prophet, or by a Successor or by early imams. Their understandings, like ours, are limited by context and culture and may or may not be relevant outside *their* culture, *their* context.⁶¹

Similarly to Zarkasyi, Husaini and Arif also attack hermeneutics with the charge of relativism. To respond to this charge, I refer to Jean Grondin, a philosopher and specialist on Gadamer, who has written an article whose title specifically tackles this issue: “Hermeneutics and Relativism.”⁶² Grondin states that relativism is the view that all opinions and beliefs are equally true and good. However, this principle “has never been advocated by anyone. For there are always *reasons*, be they contextual or pragmatic, that urge us to choose in favor of one opinion rather than another.”⁶³ This means that even though we may find many different and competing Qur’ānic interpretations and views, we finally choose and prefer one that is dearer to us. This means that, in principle, we do not say all interpretations are equally valid, because we actually prefer and must prefer one of them.

The second argument put forward by Grondin is that the charge of relativism “only makes sense if one presupposes an absolutist point of view. Only one who claims an absolutist standard can speak of relativism.”⁶⁴ Those who label others as relativists do so because they claim that they are in the absolutist position, that they know the absolute truth. However, as discussed previously, the question remains: Is it possible to claim that we have reached the absolute truth,

60 See Husaini, *Hermeneutika & Tafsir Al-Qur’an*, 17.

61 Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur’ān*, 4. Italics in the original.

62 Jean Grondin, “Hermeneutics and Relativism,” in *Festivals of Interpretation: Essays on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Work*, ed. Kathleen Wright (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 42–62.

63 Grondin, “Hermeneutics and Relativism,” 46. Italics in the original.

64 Grondin, “Hermeneutics and Relativism,” 47.

the intended meaning of God? Thus far, the conclusion is that we cannot and that we strive to approach it.

Many modern Muslim thinkers have been influenced by these theories of hermeneutics. For instance, Victoria Harrison explains their attraction to these theories of hermeneutics as follows:

Many have, no doubt, found liberating the idea that they are responsible for the meaning of traditional religious texts. One who accepts the general approach of hermeneutical philosophy will be less inclined to accept as authoritative any one supposedly “orthodox” interpretation of a text’s meaning. In an age in which religious authorities are widely regarded with suspicion, many religious people no doubt find it advantageous to have the meaning of religious texts in their own hands, or, at least, in the hands of the interpretive community to which they belong.⁶⁵

Therefore, the meaning of religious texts—in this case the Qurʾān—is the one that the individual chooses and prefers, from the many meanings offered by previous exegetes or from the *madhhab* with which they affiliate.

The term “theories of hermeneutics” is deliberately written in the plural form, because there are many theories of hermeneutics. Therefore, when someone asks about hermeneutics or would like to reject hermeneutics, they must be certain about its meaning or to which hermeneutics they refer. Stanley Porter and Jason Robinson outline several different theories of hermeneutics in their book,⁶⁶ including Romantic hermeneutics, phenomenological hermeneutics, philosophical hermeneutics, hermeneutic phenomenology, structuralism, deconstruction, literary hermeneutics, and theological hermeneutics. Each theory differs from the others. A specific theory may select some parts of the previous ones but reject the aspects that do not suit its purpose to build a new theory. For example, theological hermeneutics is a combination of several interpretive theories that are “faithful to the Christian theological tradition.”⁶⁷ Some of the main hermeneutical questions raised by theological hermeneutics include, “How do the two horizons of the ancient text and of modern readers actively *engage with each other creatively without merely bland, passive,*

65 Victoria S. Harrison, “Hermeneutics, Religious Language and the Qurʾan,” *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 21, no. 3 (2013): 220.

66 Stanley E. Porter and Jason C. Robinson, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

67 Porter and Robinson, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, 245.

*domesticating assimilations?*⁶⁸ and “What effects [do] biblical texts produce on thought and on life, and especially *on what basis [do] these effects come about?*”⁶⁹

Similarly, modern Muslim scholars have attempted to appropriate theories of hermeneutics in the study of the Qur’ān. They also attempt to answer the question of how to bridge the gap between the Qur’ānic text, which was revealed in the past, and modern Muslim readers, who live in the present. Fazlur Rahman has shown in his book that Gadamer has influenced him, but at the same time, Rahman criticized some of Gadamer’s theories,⁷⁰ on the basis of which he proposed his “double movement theory.” However, Ebrahim Moosa argues that Rahman’s double movement theory is closer to Emilio Betti’s hermeneutics.⁷¹ Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd has also used the hermeneutical theories of Gadamer and Hirsch in his work. Abū Zayd’s last work clearly indicated his debt to Western hermeneutics as well as his proposal for Qur’ānic hermeneutics, namely, humanistic hermeneutics.⁷² Other Muslim scholars, such as Muhammad Arkoun, Farid Esack, and Amina Wadud, have also used hermeneutics.⁷³ In the concluding part of this article, I focus on Rahman and Abū Zayd, since many of the criticisms directed at hermeneutics in Qur’ānic studies lay the blame on these two Muslim scholars.

The main criticism directed at Rahman and Abū Zayd is about their definition of the Qur’ān. For example, Ugi Suharto, another *INSISTS* scholar, has argued:

Hermeneutics is different to *tafsīr* or *ta’wīl* in Islamic tradition. Hermeneutics, whether theological or philosophical, is not compatible with Qur’ānic studies. Theological hermeneutics leads to questioning the clear (*ẓāhir*) verses of the Qur’ān, considering them problematic. Among the

68 Porter and Robinson, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, 250. Italics in the original.

69 Porter and Robinson, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, 253–254. Italics in the original.

70 Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), especially 10 ff.

71 See Ebrahim Moosa, introduction to *Revival and Reform in Islam*, by Fazlur Rahman, ed. Ebrahim Moosa (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 18 ff.

72 See Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur’an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* (Utrecht: University of Humanistics, 2004).

73 For discussion of these scholars’ theories of hermeneutics, see Harrison, “Hermeneutics, Religious Language and the Qur’an,” and Fred Dallmayr, “Opening the Doors of Interpretation: In Memory of Nasr Abu Zayd and Mohammed al-Jabri,” in *Being in the World: Dialogue and Cosmopolis*, ed. Fred Dallmayr (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 177–194.

views of theological hermeneutics is doubt concerning the Uthmānic codex, which has been agreed upon by all Muslims, Sunnīs, and Shī'īs, as a *textus receptus* (agreed upon text). ... Philosophical hermeneutics will destroy the Muslim belief that the Qur'ān is God's Word. Among the views of philosophical hermeneutics is that of the late Fazlur Rahman, who stated that the Qur'ān is both "the Word of God and the word of Muḥammad." None of this gives any benefit for Muslims, and only decreases the validity of the Qur'ān, as if it is the same as any other text⁷⁴

Before commenting on this statement, I would like to discuss Rahman's, and also Abū Zayd's, definitions of revelation. I believe that any effort to apply modern and new approaches to the Qur'ān are not possible before redefining and rethinking the Qur'ān and revelation in Islam. This view is contrary to that of Abdullah Saeed,⁷⁵ who argues against a redefinition of the traditional concept of revelation and states that "a revision of the theory of Revelation in Islam is unwarranted ... because ... a careful and literal reading of the linguistic evidence available, primarily in the Qur'ān, does not support such a revision."⁷⁶ He further argues that if the purpose is to make the Qur'ān interpretable for the modern era, it is not the definition of revelation that has to be revised, but rather, the method of interpretation.

Rahman and Abū Zayd would contest Saeed's proposal because both would like to challenge the existing concept of Qur'ānic revelation, which has dominated the Muslim world, and to revive concepts of revelation that have previously been banned and buried in Islamic history; that is, the Qur'ān as the Created Speech of God. Moosa describes this as a polemic between Ash'arī theocentrism and Mu'tazilī humanism.⁷⁷

On the basis of Qur'ān 26:193–194 (*nazala bi-hi al-rūḥ al-amīn 'alā qalbika litakūna min al-mundhirīn*—"the Trustworthy Spirit brought it down upon your heart, so that you would be among the warners"), Rahman argued in his book *Islam* that the Qur'ān is both the Word of God and the word of Muḥammad.⁷⁸ Responding to the objections of many Muslims, he later defended this stance, saying:

74 Ugi Suharto, "Apakah Al-Qur'an Memerlukan Hermeneutika," *Jurnal Tarjih* 6 (2003): 52.

75 See Abdullah Saeed, "Rethinking 'Revelation' as a Precondition for Reinterpreting the Qur'an: A Qur'anic Perspective," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1999): 93–114.

76 Saeed, "Rethinking 'Revelation,'" 95.

77 Moosa, introduction, 22.

78 Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 31, 33.

I defended the idea of the verbal revelation of the Qurʾān, which is the universal belief. However, it seemed to me that the standard orthodox accounts of revelation give a mechanical and externalistic picture of the relationship between Muḥammad and the Qurʾān—Gabriel coming and delivering God’s messages to him almost like a postman delivering letters. The Qurʾān itself says the Angel “comes down to the heart” of Muḥammad. I stated that the Qurʾān is *entirely* the Word of God insofar as it is infallible and absolutely free from falsehood, but, insofar as it comes to the Prophet’s heart and then his tongue, it was entirely his word.⁷⁹

Here, Rahman sought to situate revelation in history, and connected revelation with the role of Prophet Muḥammad. According to Moosa, in this definition Rahman would like to insist on the internality of the Prophet’s revelatory experience, as against its externality, which is the belief of the majority of Muslims.⁸⁰

In almost the same tone, Abū Zayd redefines revelation by calling the Qurʾān a “linguistic text,” a “historical text,” a “product of culture,” and so on.⁸¹ As Sukidi has comprehensively discussed, for Abū Zayd this “humanistic”⁸² Qurʾān rests in its manifestation in the created historical world of humans, that is, “the Qurʾān was sent down to the Prophet Muḥammad in a humanly comprehensible language ... it was transformed into a linguistic text, and became subject to the general rules that produce other linguistic texts in a specific language, culture, and reality.”⁸³

In response to the charge that a humanistic definition of the Qurʾān signifies the pure humanity of the Qurʾān, Abū Zayd affirms:

My basic argument about the Qurʾān is that in order to make Islamic thought relevant, the human dimension of the Qurʾān needs to be reconsidered. Placing the Qurʾān firmly within history does not imply that the

79 Fazlur Rahman, “Some Islamic Issues in the Ayyub Khan Era,” in *Essays on Islamic Civilization: Presented to Niyazi Berkes*, ed. Donald P. Little (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 299.

80 Moosa, introduction, 13–15.

81 I have discussed this in my article, Yusuf Rahman, “The Qurʾān in Egypt III: Naṣr Abū Zayd’s Literary Approach,” in *Coming to Terms with the Qurʾān: A Volume in Honor of Professor Issa Boullata, McGill University*, ed. Khaleel Mohammed and Andrew Rippin (North Halendon, NJ: Islamic Publications International, 2008), 227–265.

82 Sukidi, “Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd and the Quest for a Humanistic Hermeneutics of the Qurʾān,” *Die Welt des Islams* 49, no. 2 (2009): 181–211.

83 Sukidi, “Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd,” 187.

origins of the Qurʾān are human. I believe the Qurʾān to be a divine text revealed from God to the Prophet Muḥammad through the mediation of the archangel Gabriel. That revelation took place through the use of language—a language (Arabic) rooted in a historical context. The Qurʾān addressed the Arabs living in the seventh century, taking into account the social reality of those particular people living on the Arabian Peninsula at that time. How else could they have understood the revelation?⁸⁴

This humanistic definition of the Qurʾān provided by Rahman and Abū Zayd is actually a return to the Muʿtazilī definition of the Qurʾān as “the Created Speech of God,” which rejects the view of it as the “Eternal Speech of God,” held by most Muslim theologians. Since the Muʿtazilī definition is rejected today, the same fate also applies to Rahman’s and Abū Zayd’s definitions. However, it should be noted that similarly to the Muʿtazilīs, both Rahman and Abū Zayd still believed in the divine origin of the Qurʾān as well as its *textus receptus*.

The final accusation that Suharto makes against the application of hermeneutics to the Qurʾān is that it will question the clear verses of the Qurʾān. However, theories of hermeneutics, as discussed in the previous sections, operate as theories of meanings. Their role is not to question or doubt the clear verses of the Qurʾān or to reject its authenticity, as claimed by Arif. However, what they do allow scholars to question is *the authentic meaning* of these verses of the Qurʾān. The *tafsīr* literature has recorded many discussions and interpretations of Qurʾān 3:7 on the “clear” and “ambiguous” verses. For example, Stefan Wild has discussed the difference between “the standard reading” and “the minority reading” of this Qurʾānic verse, from the earliest *tafsīrs* to the modern ones,⁸⁵ pointing out “the different, often contradictory attempts of the Islamic exegetical tradition to establish one correct interpretation, or in many cases to accept a multitude of equally acceptable correct interpretations.”⁸⁶ The issue can be taken further, with the “5W and 1H” question: What is the standard reading; why, when, and where did it become the standard reading; who made it the standard; and how did it happen?

84 Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd and Esther R. Nelson, *Voice of an Exile: Reflections on Islam* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 57.

85 Stefan Wild, “The Self-Referentiality of the Qurʾān: Sura 3:7 as an Exegetical Challenge,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 422–436.

86 Wild, “The Self-Referentiality,” 432.

The INSISTS scholars found some support from Josef van Ess, who they claim has refuted hermeneutics in Islamic studies.⁸⁷ It is unusual for them to refer to Orientalists to support their position. However, in this case, since a non-Muslim scholar is on their side, they quote his statement:

We should, however, be aware of the fact that German hermeneutics was not made for Islamic studies as such. It was originally a product of Protestant theology; Schleiermacher applied it to the Bible. Later on, Heidegger and his pupil Gadamer were deeply imbued with German literature and Greek antiquity. When such people say “text” they mean a literary artifact, something aesthetically appealing, normally an ancient text which exists only in one version, say a tragedy by Sophocles, Plato’s dialogues, a poem by Hölderlin. This is not necessarily so in Islamic studies.⁸⁸

Unfortunately, they have misunderstood van Ess’ statement and his entire thesis in the article, because they take that sentence out of the context of the whole paragraph. There, he refers exclusively to texts such as *akhbār*, which are early historical reports that consist of many different versions with unknown authors. In the quotation cited here, he states that hermeneutics has been used to interpret a text, which is “a literary artifact, something aesthetically appealing, normally an ancient text which exists only in one version.”⁸⁹ The INSISTS scholars may dislike comparing the Qur’ān with a literary artifact, but many scholars have emphasized the literary nature of the Qur’ān.⁹⁰ The important point to stress here is that the Qur’ān is a literary text, produced or revealed in the past. It exists in one version and was authored.

Furthermore, it is unclear how the INSISTS scholars could conclude that van Ess rejects hermeneutics, while in the last sentence of the same paragraph he declares that “there is no doubt, however, that German hermeneutics is especially helpful in this respect because it has always been the theoretical basis of philology.”⁹¹ A further piece of evidence showing that van Ess was conversant with different theories of hermeneutics and applied them in his study are his indications in the same article that he follows Gadamer’s notion of the

87 See Zarkasyi, *Misykat*, 245, and Arif, *Orientalis & Diabolisme Pemikiran*, 183.

88 Josef van Ess, “Text and Context: A Few Casual Remarks on the Topic,” in *Text & Context in Islamic Studies*, ed. Irene A. Bierman (Los Angeles: Ithaca Press, University of California, 2004), 7.

89 van Ess, “Text and Context.”

90 See, for example, my article, Rahman, “The Qur’ān in Egypt III.”

91 van Ess, “Text and Context,” 7.

“fusion of horizons,” the “hermeneutic circle” of Wilhelm Dilthey, and also Paul Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion.”⁹²

In sum, in this article, I have attempted to present a critical evaluation of the INSISTS researchers’ arguments against hermeneutics. I classify their reactions to hermeneutics as being polemical and theological, since they are mostly based on their antipathy toward “Western/non-Muslim” methodology, based on an exclusively traditionalist and sometimes fundamentalist reading of Islamic thought. Further, their references to non-Muslim sources aim to support their argument, but typically, these are taken out of context and are not in keeping with developments in Western scholarship.

4 Conclusion

In this article, I have surveyed Indonesian Muslim responses to the use of hermeneutics since MUI’s *fatwā* in July 2005. The debates are mainly between scholars of hermeneutics at UIN Yogyakarta and UIN Jakarta, and researchers from INSISTS and CIOS-ISID, who generally do not concentrate on theories of hermeneutics or refer directly to the main sources of hermeneutical ideas.

Although the MUI *fatwā* has not resulted in the termination of the teaching of hermeneutics in the UIN curriculum or to the use of hermeneutics in Islamic studies, the image of hermeneutics as being bad and dangerous has now reached a broad audience. This is because the main actors, who reject hermeneutics as well as liberal ideas, are very active in disseminating their views using many channels and media. In addition to printed media—books, journals, and the national newspaper *Republika*—they use online channels, such as *insist.or.id*, *inpasonline.com*, blogs, and so on. Mosques and *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) also provide opportunities for them to deliver their views, because many of them are involved as preachers and *‘ulamā*, and affiliated with organizations such as MIUMI. In contrast, the means for disseminating views supporting hermeneutics are limited to academic channels, such as academic works and seminars. Therefore, it is essential to disseminate those views more actively and publicly through other available channels in order to enlighten Indonesian Muslims with these differences of opinion.

92 van Ess, “Text and Context,” 6–8.

Source

Yusuf Rahman. "Indonesian Muslim Responses to Use of Hermeneutics in Studying the Qurʾān and Tafsīr: A Critical Assessment." In *Qurʾanic Studies in Contemporary Indonesia*, edited by Imam Subchi, 107–139. Jakarta: UIN Jakarta Press, 2015.

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Family Affairs and Exegetical Disagreements—Inheritance

Nā'ila al-Sillīnī al-Raḍwī

About the Author¹

Nā'ila al-Sillīnī al-Raḍwī is a Tunisian scholar whose work has generated heated debates about how Muslims read the Qur'ān today, particularly in relation to justice, gender, and the role of religion in society. She teaches about Qur'ānic exegesis and the Islamic civilization at the University of Sousse and is known in Tunisia and the wider region for her outspoken views on reforming traditional interpretations of Islamic law. She insists that the Qur'ān must be read with an awareness of the ethical challenges of the current time, not just as a set of rules from the past.

An important issue for al-Raḍwī is gender equality and, in particular, inheritance. She questions the continued practice in most Muslim majority countries, which is that women receive half the share that men do in many cases. She argues that this practice does not reflect the Qur'ān's commitment to justice and, therefore, inheritance-related verses must be reinterpreted in their historical context. Such interpretation is expected to reflect the Qur'ān's concerns about social justice more effectively. She believes that the Islamic teachings are not fixed in time and must evolve.

1 Important works by Nā'ila al-Sillīnī al-Raḍwī include *Tārikhiyyat al-Tafsīr al-Qur'ānī* (al-Dār al-Bayḍā': al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabī, 2002); "De la nature de la shari'a: loi de Dieu ou loi des hommes?", paper presented at the seminar *La charia: qu'est-ce à dire?* April 15, 2013; and "Tunisian Women's Participation in Political Life and Voting" (New York: Arab Forum for Citizenship in Transition, September 2014), www.ipinst.org/images/pdfs/FACTReport-Women_Participation-Arabic-September2014.pdf. For media discussions of her work, see "L'interview du dimanche: Naila Silini, islamologue et professeure de civilisation islamique: 'Nous sommes responsables d'avoir offert nos enfants au despotisme religieux'" *Le Temps*, January 17, 2016, www.letemps.com.tn/article/95279, last accessed June 26, 2025; "Liqa' ma'a al-duktūr Nā'ilah al-Sillīnī li al-Shurūq," *Al-Chourouk*, January 10, 2019, www.alchourouk.com/article/; and "Na'ilah al-Sillīnī tarudd 'alā taṣrīḥāt Muḥammad al-Ṭālibī wa-tufassiru maḥmū al-bighā' fi al-Qur'ān," *Jomhouria*, March 13, 2015, www.jomhouria.com/art27223, last accessed June 26, 2025.

She also believes strongly in separating religion from politics. In a paper she presented in 2013, “De la nature de la shari‘a: loi de Dieu ou loi des hommes?” she raised a provocative but vital question: Is shari‘a divine and untouchable, or is it shaped by human understanding and therefore open to change? For al-Raḍwī, the answer is clear—religious law is not beyond critique, and reform is necessary if it is to serve people justly in the modern world.

Her concerns are not just academic. Al-Raḍwī is active in public life and often speaks out on the role of women in Tunisia’s democracy. In a 2014 report, she highlighted how women’s political participation is both a civic duty and an act that is supported by the ethical values of Islam. She has not hesitated to criticize religious authorities who, in her view, have allowed extremist views to take hold. In a 2016 interview with *Le Temps*, she stated that society shares responsibility for letting religious despotism grow.

Al-Raḍwī has been equally critical of political Islam and has warned that integrating Islamist movements into democratic politics is not only difficult but potentially harmful. Her 2019 interview with *Al-Chourouk* reflects her belief that true democracy requires a clear boundary between faith and governance. Al-Raḍwī continues to challenge both scholars and the wider public to rethink how the Qur’ān speaks to our lives today. Her message is simple but clear: the Qur’ān’s ultimate concern is justice—and justice demands that we read its verses with courage and honesty in the face of changing times.



Given that the social system is based on kinship and that the family system is established and preserved by blood relationships, it is not surprising that this fact is reflected in social relationships. It is particularly manifested in the question of marriage and rulings on the attribution of a child to their father. Such concerns have been integral to the basis upon which inheritance rulings can be established, as a system of property sharing in a way that retains the memory of the deceased and ensures to those left behind social influence through property and prestige.

Therefore, the issue of inheritance has an important place in the commentaries on the Qur’ān. Whoever understands the laws of inheritance is considered to have acquired half of religious knowledge, while whoever is ignorant of them is likened—according to the saying—to the Bedouins. This area of knowledge is known by different names, such as the science of inheritance and the science of *farā’iḍ* (assigned shares of inheritance).²

² Among the many studies on inheritance are those of Muḥammad Makhlūf, *al-Mawāriṭh fī*

In this chapter, I shall discuss inheritance rulings and analyze the methodologies of the exegetes and jurists in deducing the rulings of inheritance while keeping in mind the aforementioned considerations. I will adhere to the same issues I discussed in the previous chapters, including:

- consideration of the legislative space in which the inheritance rulings were revealed,
- the nature of legislation in the Qurʾān, and
- last, an investigation of the interpretative space between the revealed text and the ruling that has become binding.

1 Legislative Space in Which Inheritance Rulings Were Revealed

When exploring the concept of inheritance for pre-Islamic Arabs, the researcher can refer to two authoritative sources: one based on what is mentioned in the Torah and the rulings of wealth transference and division that the Jewish rabbis detailed in the Talmud, and the second, references by reporters and exegetes to pre-Islamic customs and traditions of inheritance.

For the purposes of this chapter, in the first authoritative source, I focus on the distinct nature of the various rulings on inheritance. I will draw a comparison between them and the instructions revealed in the Qurʾān and the rulings the jurists arrived at. Several inheritance-related questions have been stated in the Torah, and the most important are those verses in the Book of Numbers:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inher-

al-Sharīʿa al-Islāmiyya, n.p., n.d.; Muḥammad Abū Zahra, *Aḥkām al-Tarikāt wa al-Mawārith*, n.p., n.d.; Badrān Abū al-ʿAynīn Badrān, *al-Mirāth wa al-Waṣīyya wa al-Hiba*, n.p., n.d.; Aḥmad al-Ḥuṣarī, *al-Tarikāt wa al-Waṣāyāʾ fī al-Fiqh al-Islāmī*, n.p., n.d. In general, the Arabic studies did not avoid using the juristic postulates established by jurists, and these studies were just a reproduction of these postulates. Conversely, the use of foreign studies provides the necessary historical tools to address the exegetes' approaches in interpreting the verses on inheritance. However, Ṭāhir al-Ḥaddād, in *Imraʾatunā fī al-Sharīʿa wa al-Mujtamaʿ*, n.p., n.d., contributed a new view in dealing with the issue of inheritance. The studies referred to in this chapter include Robert Brunschvig, "De la Filiation Maternelle en Droit Musulman," *Studia Islamica* 9 (1958): 49–59; Robert Brunschvig, "De l'Acquisition du Legs dans le Droit Musulman Orthodoxe," *M.A.I.D.C.* 111/4 (1955): 95–110; Robert Brunschvig, "Un Système Peu Connu de Succession Agnatique dans le Droit Musulman," *Revue Historique de Droit Français et Étranger* 27 (1950): 23–34; Joseph Schacht, "Mirāth," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 7, 109–113; Frédéric Peltier and Georges-Henri Bousquet, *Les Successions Agnatique Mitigées* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1935).

itance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them. You shall also say to the Israelites: "If a man dies and has no son, then you shall pass his inheritance on to his daughter. If he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers. And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the Lord commanded Moses."

Numbers 27:6–11, New Revised Standard Version

These verses contain the most important rulings that governed Jewish society at the time. The son excludes his sisters from inheritance. In the absence of a son, the daughter comes second in order and takes the inheritance to the exclusion of the rest of the relatives. In addition, note here the status of affinity between kin (particularly the relative by marriage) in the Jewish family and that there is no reference to the daughter-in-law because she is included in the non-family members who have no share in inheritance.

Four clear facts are apparent in all the inheritance rulings detailed in the Talmud. First, the Talmud differentiates between the categories of relatives in these rulings. That is, there are those who inherit and are inherited from, such as sons; those who do not inherit but are inherited from, such as the mother, wife, and maternal uncle; those who inherit but are not inherited from, such as the son in relation to his mother and the husband in relation to his wife.³

The second fact appearing in the rulings stems from patriarchal societies: the inheritance goes to the sons to the exclusion of the daughters, the elder son taking double the share of his brothers. However, this does not mean that the daughters receive nothing, because their brothers are responsible for providing them with food and clothing provided that this does not exceed half of the share of each son. Moreover, the inheritance keeps transferring from fathers to sons, who provide sustenance for their womenfolk.

3 I refer to the disorder that characterizes the legislative text in the Talmud, particularly in the rulings related to the mother. Therefore, I preferred to take the trouble to translate the following from Joseph Bonsirven, *Textes Rabbiniques des Deux Premiers Siècles Chrétiens pour Servir à l'Intelligence du Nouveau Testament* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1955), 491:

Those who inherit and transmit the inheritance: sons in relation to their father and the father in relation to his sons, paternal brothers among themselves. Those who inherit but do not transmit the inheritance: a man in relation to his mother and his wife, the sons of sisters. Those who transmit the inheritance without inheriting: the woman in relation to her sons and in relation to her husband, the brothers of the mother. Those who neither inherit nor transmit the inheritance: the brothers of the mother.

The third fact stresses the concept of patriarchal authority by which I do not mean maleness (*dhukūriyya*), since the Talmud texts give the daughter the right to inherit from her father in the absence of sons and grandsons. In such a case, she excludes the paternal and full brothers of the deceased from inheritance. The fourth fact extends the rights of the deceased male by considering the will to be a legal right. The Jewish law does not stipulate fixed provisions for the legatee, whether he is a relative or not, provided that the legacy is made in a contract and has not been written during the illness that led to death.⁴

Thus, these rulings were developed based on division of labor in Bedouin societies, by considering guardianship of men over women in terms of maintenance and authority, to the extent that even the poor brother was obliged to beg from door to door to provide for his sisters.⁵ The Talmud texts are not limited to such provisions, but generated subdivisions that reflected the importance in Jewish society of property and the way it is transferred. Therefore, their scholars classified them in a separate chapter called *Baba Batra*,⁶ which is translated as “the Last Gate.”

I have elaborated on these ideas because the pre-Islamic Arabs were undoubtedly aware of the legislations applied by the Jewish societies, given their interaction with the Jews. However, it is immaterial whether their knowledge of these legislations was detailed and accurate, or superficial. I have attempted to follow the contents of the legislative rule at the time the inheritance rulings were revealed to know whether the rulings of the Qurʾān have certain elements in common with preceding legislations.

As for the second authoritative reference, that is, textual traditions, reports on the Arabs’ inheritance customs are limited. Researchers have been aware of a report on which the exegetes and the reporters depend to obtain a sense of the Arabs’ pre-Islam inheritance traditions. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) mentioned these provisions in detail in the following:

Know that the people of *jāhiliyya* (pre-Islamic times) used to inherit through two ways: one was *nasab* (blood relation, lineage) and the other was *ʿahd* (agreement). With regard to *nasab*, they used to not let minors or females inherit. They used to transfer the inheritance to male relatives who fight on horseback and obtain booty. With regard to *ʿahd*, it has two

4 Bonsirven, *Textes Rabbiniques*, 492.

5 Bonsirven, *Textes Rabbiniques*, 492: “Si les biens sont peu nombreux, les filles sont nourries et les fils ont à mendier aux portes.” (Translation: If wealth is scarce, the daughters are fed, and the sons must beg at the doors.)

6 A. Cohen, *Le Talmud*, “Baba Batra,” 482–502.

forms: one, *ḥilf* (oath of alliance), a man in *jāhiliyya* would say to another one: “My blood is your blood,” and “*hadamī hadamuka*;⁷ you will inherit from me and I shall inherit from you; you shall be sought for my offenses and I shall be sought for yours. If they had concluded such an alliance and one died first, the other used to receive, from the property of the deceased, what they had agreed upon. Second, adoption: if one adopts the son of another man, this son was attributed to him and not to his birth father, and inherited from him. This adoption was a kind of alliance. When Allah sent Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh), he let them [the Muslims], at first, do what they used to do in the time of *jāhiliyya*.⁸

This text has two useful points—one is that the Arabs were influenced by the general framework in which the inheritance rulings were revealed to the Jews, although it was mostly marked by a *jāhiliyya* tendency toward gaining power and influence through expansions and battles. Therefore, inheritance was limited to the strong fighters and male relatives of the deceased because they were the protectors of the authority of the clan and defenders of its power. They were more entitled to the wealth owing to their exceptional minds and their strength in fighting when defending their clan.

The second useful point supports the first one, even if it is based on a different ruling expressed as *‘ahd* (agreement) by *al-Rāzī*. This *‘ahd* regulated the relationships between tribes to ensure coexistence and was reflected in alliances, by which the weaker tribes sought the protection of the stronger ones to enforce their power through more weaponry and forces, as well as in the agreements between individuals, particularly those who had left their tribes and sought protection from other tribes. Ibn Hishām referred to some of them, including ‘Awf b. Lu’ayy, about whom he said:

They claim that ‘Awf b. Lu’ayy traveled with a caravan from Quraysh. When he arrived at the territory of Ghaṭafān b. Sa’d b. Qays b. ‘Aylān, he was delayed so the rest of his people left him behind and went off. Then Tha’laba b. Sa’d b. Dhubyān b. Baghīd b. Rayth b. Ghaṭafān, being

7 Ibn Manẓūr says the following in *Lisān al-‘Arab*, n.p., n.d., part 3, 785:

al-Azharī reported that Ibn al-Haytham said in an alliance: “My blood is your blood. If someone kills me, you shall ask (i.e., demand retaliation) for my blood as you ask for the blood of your relative, i.e., cousin or brother. *Hadamī hadamuka*, whoever ruins my honor it is as if he has ruined yours, whoever kills one of my patron[s], it is as if he has killed one of yours, and whoever intends to destroy you it is as if he intends to destroy me.”

8 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafāṭīḥ al-Ghayb*, n.p., n.d., part 9, 167.

his brother through the genealogy of Banū Dhubyān, came along, forced him to stay with him, arranged his marriage, and adopted him as a brother. His new lineage became widely known among Banū Dhubyān.⁹

Thus, adoption was a type of *‘ahd*, which made the outsider belong to the tribe, particularly if he had the characteristic of manliness that the Arabs desired to be present in their lineage. Hence, transferring the wealth to such a person protected it from being squandered and was considered a trust assigned to him by the deceased to invest and develop.

The statement of al-Rāzī gains significance on referring to the historical periods the inheritance rulings passed through during the time of the Prophet. Al-Rāzī offered an analytical overview that revealed the historical origins that contributed to the development of inheritance rules that Muslim societies regarded as final and to which they committed:

As for the ways by which one inherits in Islam, we have mentioned that it, at first, approved alliances and adoption, and added two other ways, one being *hijra* (immigration) whereby an immigrant inherited another immigrant even if he was not related to him, as both had become more sincerely attached to each other (*mukhālata* and *mukhālasa*, in Arabic). The immigrant was not to be inherited from by a non-immigrant, even if he was one of his relatives. The second is *mu‘ākha* (bond of brotherhood) which the Messenger established between each two of them. This association, that is, bond of brotherhood, entitled one to inherit from the other. Then Allah (Exalted and Glorified be He) annulled and abrogated all such ways by saying, “They who are [thus] closely related have the highest claim on one another in [accordance with] God’s decree. Verily, God has full knowledge of everything (Qur’ān 8:75).”¹⁰

This statement demonstrates al-Rāzī’s interest in showing the gradual steps that the Messenger followed, after Hijra, when enacting the laws of inheritance that, in effect, were contrary to those applicable in pre-Islamic times. Nevertheless, one question arises: Is not relying on Hijra (migration) and *mu‘ākha* (brotherhood) a manifestation of inheritance by means of *‘ahd* (agreement) and *ḥilf* (alliance), and evidence that they were applied at that time? How-

9 Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawīyya*, n.p., n.d., part 3, 36.

10 al-Rāzī, *Mafāṭīḥ al-Ghayb*, part 9, 165.

ever, it should be noted that I do not think the Messenger made two types of rulings for Muslims during this stage of Revelation because there was a time lag of a few months between Hijra and *mu'ākha*, particularly since the books of ḥadīth and the Prophet's biography only addressed the legislations that the Messenger established in the "*ṣahīfa*" (Charter of Madina). Its most important terms include approval of the practice of paying blood money on behalf of each other and paying ransom for each other, such terms being exercised by the immigrants (from Mecca) and *al-anṣār* (helpers, inhabitants of Medina who supported the Prophet). But it did not address their practice of mutual inheritance at all. In the same year, that is the first year after Hijra, the Messenger established the bond of brotherhood between the immigrants (from Mecca) and *al-anṣār*, without making any distinction between them. It is reported that he held the hand of (his cousin) 'Alī and declared him to be his brother, and made a bond of brotherhood between his paternal uncle Ḥamza and Zayd b. Hāritha, who was at that time the Prophet's adoptive son, between Abū Bakr and Khārija b. Zuhayr al-Khazrajī, and between 'Umar and 'Utbān b. Mālīk al-Khazrajī.¹¹

Can we understand from al-Rāzī's reference to Qur'ān 8:75 that it is the introduction to the revelation of inheritance-related rules and that the rest of the verses of inheritance that prescribe shares are subsequent to it? It becomes apparent that this is the case on examining the historical relationship between the verses related to prescribed shares.

2 Verses of Inheritance and Their Implications

Verses related to inheritance follow various linguistic styles. For instance, some verses combined statements with imperatives, as in the verse:

And unto everyone have We appointed heirs to what he may leave behind:
parents, and near kinsfolk, and those to whom you have pledged your
troth: give them, therefore, their share. Behold, God is indeed a witness
unto everything

Qur'ān 4:33

Others had an explicit order in the verse:

¹¹ Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawīyya*, part 3, 36.

It is ordained for you, when death approaches any of you and he is leaving behind much wealth, to make bequests in favour of his parents and [other] near of kin in accordance with what is fair: this is binding on all who are conscious of God.

Qur'an 2:180

This form is similar in terms of structure to the form in which the command of fasting was revealed.¹² A command was also revealed to pay a year's maintenance for the widow, in Allah's saying, "And if any of you die and leave wives behind, they bequeath thereby to their widows [the right to] one year's maintenance without their being obliged to leave [the dead husband's home]" (Qur'an 2:240). Inheritance provisions also came in the form of answers to two problematic questions for the Muslims. The first answer is related to the orphan boys and girls, as in Allah's saying:

And they will ask thee to enlighten them about the laws concerning women. Say: "God [Himself] enlightens you about the laws concerning them"—for [His will is shown] in what is being conveyed unto you through this divine writ about orphan women [in your charge], to whom—because you yourselves may be desirous of marrying them—you do not give that which has been ordained for them; and about helpless children; and about your duty to treat orphans with equity. And whatever good you may do—behold, God has indeed full knowledge thereof.

Qur'an 4:127

The answer to the second problematic question was revealed in Allah's saying:

They will ask thee to enlighten them. Say: "God enlightens you [thus] about the laws concerning [inheritance from] those who leave no heir in the direct line: If a man dies childless and has a sister, she shall inherit one-half of what he has left, just as he shall inherit from her if she dies childless. But if there are two sisters, both [together] shall have two-thirds of what he has left; and if there are brothers and sisters, then the male shall have the equal of two females' share." God makes [all this] clear unto you, lest you go astray; and God knows everything.

Qur'an 4:176

¹² Qur'an 2:183 says, "O you who believe! Observing fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may (learn) self-restraint."

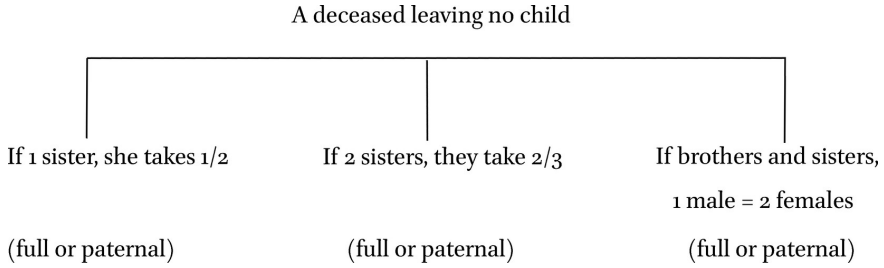


FIGURE 10.1 Concept of *al-kalāla*

It is evident from the clear meaning of the verse that the revealed text gave a detailed explanation of the term *al-kalāla*, whose meaning was unclear to the believers (Muslims), and it stands as evidence that this term was unknown to the Arabs. If it was known, the revealed text would not have needed to explain it further. Fig. 10.1 illustrates these provisions and identifies, in detail, the concept of *al-kalāla*, to trace the development of its meaning.

Undoubtedly, this verse is in dialogue with the other inheritance-related verses. This verse is considered the principal rule of inheritance provisions in terms of the precision of the aspects it covers. However, it has also led to many controversies. Because of its distinctive details, I classify the provisions reported in it in Fig. 10.2 in order to facilitate drawing a comparison between different juristic positions.

Although the inheritance provisions are so interconnected that it is difficult to find a historical link between them, two inheritance-related verses are particularly different from the remainder of the verses. In the exegetical works, these verses are considered among the most difficult to understand. The first verse is as follows:

The male shall have the equal of two females' share; but if there are more than two females, they shall have two-thirds of what [their parents] leave behind; and if there is only one, she shall have one-half thereof. And as for the parents [of the deceased], each of them shall have one-sixth of what he leaves behind, in the event of his having [left] a child; but if he has left no child and his parents are his [only] heirs, then his mother shall have one-third; and if he has brothers and sisters, then his mother shall have one-sixth after [the deduction of] any bequest he may have made, or any debt [he may have incurred].

As for your parents and your children—you know not which of them is more deserving of benefit from you: [therefore this] ordinance from God. Verily, God is all-knowing, wise.

Qur'ān 4:11

The second verse is as follows:

And you shall inherit one-half of what your wives leave behind, provided they have left no child; but if they have left a child, then you shall have one-quarter of what they leave behind, after [the deduction of] any bequest they may have made, or any debt [they may have incurred]. And your widows shall have one-quarter of what you leave behind, provided you have left no child; but if you have left a child, then they shall have one-eighth of what you leave behind, after [the deduction of] any bequest you may have made, or any debt [you may have incurred]. And if a man or a woman has no heir in the direct line, but has a brother or a sister, then each of these two shall inherit one-sixth; but if there are more than two, then they shall share in one-third [of the inheritance], after [the deduction of] any bequest that may have been made, or any debt [that may have been incurred], neither of which having been intended to harm [the heirs]. [This is] an injunction from God: and God is all-knowing, forbearing.

Qur'an 4:12

Thus, these two verses include nine detailed inheritance rulings, which are presented in Table 10.1.

TABLE 10.1 Rulings in Qur'an 4:11–12

Verse	Ruling	Male (son)	Female (daughter)	Hus- band	Wife	Mother	Father	Two females (daughters)	Brothers and sisters
No. 11	1	2 parts	1 part						
	2	○	1/2					2/3	
	3	*	*			1/6	1/6		
	4	○	○			1/3			
	5					1/6			*
No. 12	1	○	○	1/2					
	2	*	*	1/4					
	3	○	○		1/4				
	4	*	*		1/8				

* means that it is mentioned in the verse, but a prescribed share is yet to be specified.

Fig. 10.2 illustrates the fifth ruling in Qur'an 4:12 and the ruling of *al-kalāla* in Qur'an 4:176.

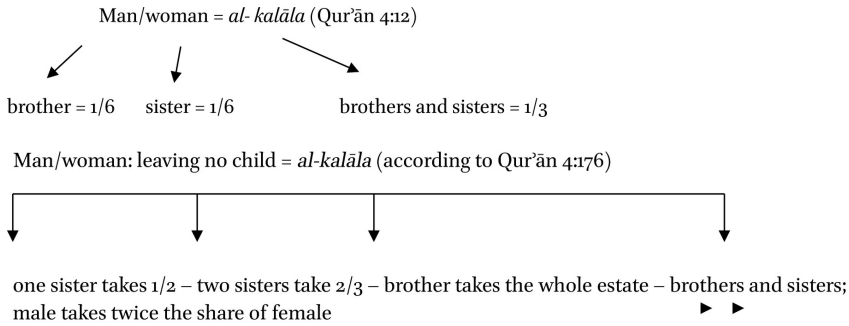


FIGURE 10.2 Fifth ruling in Qurʾān 4:12 and the ruling of *al-kalāla* in Qurʾān 4:176

A comparison of the two verses of *al-kalāla* reveals the following two points:

1. Although there is no reference to children (*walad*) in Verse 12, Verse 176 stipulates that there should be no child for the *al-kalāla* to take effect. However, both verses do not refer to the position of the spouses (*azwāj*) and parents in such a case. Affirmation remains based on *tarjih* (preponderance) if the text intends their absence or presence. This style of discourse appears again in other rulings, such as the second ruling in Verse 11, which concerns the inheritance of a daughter or two daughters when there is no son. In this case, the text does not mention the presence of parents—as it does in the next ruling—of the wife. This raises a problematic question: Who is addressed in the second ruling, the man or the woman?
2. Both verses agree that the rulings of *al-kalāla* refer to the brothers and sisters (*ikhwa*) alone. While the ruling in Verse 12 tends to be brief, it is detailed in Verse 176. Consequently, this results in contradictory rulings: Verse 12 divides the inheritance equally between the brother and his sister, designating a share of one-sixth to each of them, and limits the total amount in *al-kalāla* inheritance to one-third, while saying nothing about the remaining two-thirds of inheritance or the case of one having many brothers and sisters. Meanwhile, the legal implication of Verse 176 tends to raise the sister's share of one-sixth to one-half if there is only one sister, and to two-thirds if there are two sisters but does not set the total amount of inheritance if there are brothers and sisters. The verse just decides that if there are brothers and sisters, the male will have twice the share of the female.

This comparison is not meant to establish a historical sequence between the two verses or determine which was revealed later, but rather, to highlight the range of issues the term *al-kalāla* indicates. Further, this Qurʾānic text may have been revealed as an explanation for a special matter and for a particular

occasion, and hence, what is left unsaid in the text was clear for the group of Muslims at the time of its revelation. However, over time, it became detached from its occasion of revelation and thus appears to be “obscure” and alien to the new reality. Undoubtedly, these meanings are reflected in the approaches of the exegetes and jurists when declaring how to allocate prescribed shares of inheritance.

Apart from the prescribed inheritance shares, additional rulings were revealed, which can be referred to as “inheritance ethics.” The Qur’ānic text addresses those responsible for the property of orphans in strong terms, covering all situations that might lead to harm or humiliation for the orphans. Accordingly, the Qur’ān prohibits devouring the properties of the orphans: “And come not near to the orphan’s property, except to improve it, until he [or she] attains the age of full strength.” This prohibition is revealed twice, in Qur’ān 6:152, and Qur’ān 17:34. Moreover, the Qur’ān (4:8) prescribes that the orphans and the poor who are present at when the estate of the deceased is being divided should be given a share. The Qur’ānic text severely threatens those who devour the property of orphans; Allah says, “Behold, those who sinfully devour the possessions of orphans but fill their bellies with fire: for [in the life to come] they will have to endure a blazing flame” (Qur’ān 4:10). The Qur’ānic text here appears to reflect the confusion Muslims faced regarding certain problematic provisions, particularly those concerning orphan girls:

They will ask thee to enlighten them about the laws concerning women. Say: “God [Himself] enlightens you about the laws concerning them”—for [His will is shown] in what is being conveyed unto you through this divine writ about orphan women [in your charge], to whom—because you yourselves may be desirous of marrying them—you do not give that which has been ordained for them; and about helpless children; and about your duty to treat orphans with equity. And whatever good you may do—behold, God has indeed full knowledge thereof.

Qur’ān 4:127

This verse is similar to another that has long posed significant challenges for exegetes and jurists owing to its correlative structure, which seems to contradict linguistic conventions and the theories of *uṣūl* (principles of jurisprudence). That verse is Qur’ān 4:3, which reads as follows:

And if you have reason to fear that you might not act equitably towards orphans, then marry from among [other] women such as are lawful to

you—[even] two, or three, or four: but if you have reason to fear that you might not be able to treat them with equal fairness, then [only] one—or [from among] those whom you rightfully possess. This will make it more likely that you will not deviate from the right course.

There is only one explanation for the Qur'ān's strict position in relation to the guardians of orphans. It can be traced to the unjust customary pre-Islamic practice of depriving the young and women of their inheritance. When the prescribed inheritance shares were revealed—contrary to earlier customs—the rulings became definitive. The text carefully guided Muslims through each stage of accepting this new legal position, firmly upholding every ruling without exception. The objective of doing so was to tame the Muslim community so that they could follow an inheritance approach different from that of pre-Islamic times or that of the People of the Book, even if the difference was merely partial. Therefore, rulings for inheritance in Islam are characterized by diversity and seek to include as many situations as possible. The legal significance of provisions in Qur'ān 4:3 is yet to be explained, but these will be addressed at a later stage of this analysis, once all the background on inheritance issues has been covered. There are 20 Qur'ānic verses of inheritance in all, including two about the poor and the relatives, 10 about orphans, and eight about the distribution of inheritance.

3 Exegetes' Classification of Inheritance-Related Verses

The exegetes have classified inheritance-related verses into two categories: those concerning wills, and those concerning prescribed shares of inheritance. I prefer to conform to this categorization in this analysis with the purpose of dealing with the questions that were too problematic for the exegetes to solve.

3.1 *Verses concerning Wills*¹³

Abū Bakr b. al-'Arabī (d. 545/1150) defined the will as being “a statement clarifying an act to be resumed and/or carried out. We use it here in reference to [the will] after death. This is the common understanding of the word and its customary meaning.”¹⁴ Exegetes and jurists considered it one of the areas

13 Joseph Schacht, “Waṣīyya,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 11, ed. P.J. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 171–172.

14 Ibn al-'Arabī, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, n.p., n.d., 1:70.

of law of inheritance, despite the prevailing difference in their commentaries as to whether its rulings are obligatory or have been abrogated. The differences among jurists may stem from the moral contexts in which the term “will” appears in the Qur’ānic text. These contexts led exegetes to distinguish between the legislative context and other contexts revealed to clarify the provisions and conditions of wills. To indicate the juristic relationship between these verses, exegetes cite Allah’s saying,

It is ordained for you, when death approaches any of you and he is leaving behind much wealth, to make bequests in favor of his parents and [other] near of kin in accordance with what is fair: this is binding on all who are conscious of God.

Qur’ān 2:180

This was considered the foundation on which the rules related to inheritance in wills are based. Scholars have provided different interpretations that explain in detail what is mentioned briefly in the verse. Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī, most of the Mālikīs, and another group of scholars argued that it was the first verse revealed in relation to inheritance rules. Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī said on the authority of al-Suddī:

When this verse was revealed, people did not have any specific assigned shares for inheritance. A man used to bequeath his estate to his father and relatives so that it would be divided among them, until this verse was abrogated by the verse in chapter 4 (al-Nisā’) beginning with, “Allah commands you as regards your children’s [inheritance].”¹⁵

Qur’ān 4:11

However, the compilations of exegesis make no reference—even as a suggestion—to the approximate date of the verse’s revelation. In this broad legislative context, exegetes seem to group together all the verses related to making a will.

For example, they attached Allah’s saying, “And if any of you die and leave wives behind, they bequeath thereby to their widows [the right to] one year’s maintenance without their being obliged to leave [the dead husband’s home]” (Qur’ān 2:240) to the rulings related to paying maintenance to the widow in her *‘idda* (woman’s prescribed waiting period after the husband’s death). This opinion is maintained on the authority of the Companions and Followers. Al-

15 Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl Āy al-Qur’ān*, n.p., n.d., 2:25.

Ṭabarī reported from them about the time when this ruling began to be implemented:

This was before the revelation of the verse of inheritance. A woman whose husband died would have housing and maintenance provided for her for a year, if she so wills. This was abrogated by the verse in Qurʾān chapter 4 which prescribed for her a specific share.¹⁶

In their interpretation of that verse, the exegetes likened it to the verses in Chapter 5 that read:

O you who have attained to faith! Let there be witnesses to what you do when death approaches you and you are about to make bequests: two persons of probity from among your own people, or—if the pangs of death come upon you while you are traveling far from home—two other persons from [among people] other than your own. Take hold of the two after having prayed; and if you have any doubt in your mind, let each of them swear by God, “We shall not sell this [our word] for any price, even though it were [for the sake of] a near kinsman; and neither shall we conceal aught of what we have witnessed before God—or else, may we indeed be counted among the sinful.” But if afterwards it should come to light that the two [witnesses] have become guilty of [this very] sin, then two others—from among those whom the two former have deprived of their right—shall take their place and shall swear by God, “Our testimony is indeed truer than the testimony of these two, and we have not transgressed the bounds of what is right—or else, may we indeed be counted among the evildoers!” Thus it will be more likely that people will offer testimony in accordance with the truth—or else they will [have cause to] fear that their oaths will be refuted by the oaths of others. Be, then, conscious of God, and hearken [unto Him]: for God does not bestow His guidance upon iniquitous folk.

Qurʾān 5:106–108

All reported narrations agree that the reason for the revelation of these verses goes back to the tradition reported by Tamīm al-Dārī, even though the books of exegesis differ concerning the chains of transmission through which this narration was reported. Ibn al-ʿArabī offered a comprehensive presentation of the most well-known positions reported in the interpretation of these verses:

¹⁶ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, 594.

There are different narrations through various chains of transmissions which are too many to report or for which the narrators' status in terms of validation or invalidation are too many to explain. Therefore, we shall state here the simplest narration, leaving a detailed discussion to the larger edition.¹⁷

He said that al-Tirmidhī narrated from Muḥammad b. Isḥāq from Abū al-Naḍr from Bādhan (the *mawlā*, freedman, of Umm Hānī), from Ibn 'Abbās from Tamīm al-Dārī in relation to this verse that he said:

“The people are ignorant of it [the rulings mentioned in this verse], other than myself and ‘Adī b. Badda’. We used to be Christians who used to frequent Syria before Islam. We went to Syria on business. One day, we were approached by a client of Banū Sahn, who was called Budayl b. Abī Maryam, with some trade goods. He had a bowl made of silver which he wanted to sell to the king, and which was the biggest and most valuable piece of his trade goods. Then he became ill and left a bequest to us in which he commissioned us to hand over his property to his family.” Tamīm continued, “When he died, we took that bowl and sold it for one thousand dirhams. ‘Adī b. Badda’ and I divided it [the money] among us. When we went to his family to give them what was with us, they searched for the bowl and asked about it. We said, ‘He did not leave behind other than this, nor did he give us other than this.’” Tamīm then said, “When I accepted Islam after the Messenger of Allah (pbuh) had arrived in Medina, I felt guilty about that, so I went to his [the deceased’s] family and informed them about what had happened. I gave them five hundred dirhams and told them my companion had the same. They took him to the Messenger of Allah (pbuh) but he asked them for their proof, which they did not have. Consequently, he ordered them to make him take an oath in accordance with whatever the people of his religion revered, so he took an oath. Then Allah revealed this verse.”¹⁸

It is apparent from these different accounts that scholars unanimously agreed that the verse of will was revealed after Tamīm had accepted Islam, that is, after the ninth year of Hijra. This suggests that the provisions regarding wills were fully explained toward the end of the Prophet’s life. If this reasoning is correct,

17 Ibn al-‘Arabī’s major text of exegesis is *Aḥkām al-Qur’ān al-Kubrā*.

18 Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, 2:713.

it cannot be confirmed that making a will was initially ordained at the beginning of Revelation and later annulled by the laws of inheritance. This is why some scholars rejected this narration, as shown by what Ibn al-‘Arabī reported regarding al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), who classified it as a good *gharīb* ḥadīth (a ḥadīth in which only one narrator is found at any stage of its chain of transmission).¹⁹ However, these verses were regarded as a textual source by all schools of law, despite their differences over the ruling on wills—specifically, whether fulfilling them was obligatory or whether they had been abrogated. Each school uses it as textual evidence, and scholars have focused on it, pointing out its legislative function, but with the exclusion of the parenthetical phrase “after the payment of legacies he may have bequeathed or debts,” which was repeated in Qur’ān 4:11 and 12, although this phrase may probably be a reference to the execution of wills. It is only al-Rāzī who pointed out the function of this parenthetical phrase, while justifying his opinion that the verse of wills was abrogated. He said, “As for the majority of scholars who maintain that this verse is abrogated in respect of the non-heir relatives, it is more proper for them to adhere to Allah’s saying, ‘After the payment of legacies he may have bequeathed or debts.’”²⁰

What is the ruling on wills according to the scholars? There is no doubt that the scholars’ positions will only become clear once their views are traced through history and the periods when differences emerged are considered. In doing so, the extent to which juristic and exegetical perspectives complemented each other can be understood.

To this end, I have chosen to distinguish between the discussions of jurists and those of exegetes, although jurisprudential concerns remain the domain where practical application matters most, allowing to assess how relevant the theory is in practice. A jurisprudential discussion historically comes first, as the jurist is tasked with providing practical solutions to various issues. We choose to present the exegete’s discussion here because it is less constrained by the specific reasons for revelation and is based on the view that the revealed text offers guidance for all situations. The exegete’s role is to uncover the different layers of meaning in the Qur’anic discourse to reveal the underlying legislative intent relevant to a given issue.

3.2 *Do Exegetes Have a Unified Stance on Ruling regarding Wills?*

Al-Ṭabarī collected the different positions of early and his contemporary scholars and limited them to these three:

19 Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, 2:714.

20 al-Rāzī, *Mafāṭīḥ al-Ghayb*, 5:54.

- One is the position of al-Ḍaḥḥāk, al-Masrūq, and al-Sha‘bī. They said:

The ruling on wills is well-established and has not been abrogated. If the people of knowledge [Muslim scholars] disputed over its abrogation, we are not allowed to conclude that it has been abrogated except with a [definite] proof that should be acknowledged.²¹

- Second is the opinion reported from Qatāda, ‘Ikrima, Ibn Abī Ṭalḥa, and al-Rabī‘:

It is a verse whose ruling is obligatory and was acted upon for some time. Then Allah revealed the inheritance verse to abrogate the part of the verse pertaining to leaving a bequest to the deceased’s parents and relatives who are legal heirs, and approved bequeathing to the relatives who were not heirs.²²

- The third stance was adopted by Ibn Zayd, Ibn ‘Abbās, Ibn ‘Umar, and Qatāda in another narration ascribed to him: “Allah has abrogated all this [the rulings contained in the verse of wills] and enjoined prescribed shares and inheritance, and so there is no will whose ruling is obligatory for any near or distant relative.”²³

From these stances, it becomes evident that examining the history of “wills” was a pressing need, to which the Followers referred. Meanwhile, books of exegesis indicated that the Companions continued to apply wills as Abū Bakr and ‘Umar left a bequest. It was also reported that ‘Alī deemed it permissible.²⁴ Al-Ṭabarī reported on the authority of Ibrāhīm al-Nakha‘ī, that when it was said to him [‘Alī] that Zayd and Ṭalḥa used to stress the importance of making a will, he said, “They should not have done so, the Prophet (pbuh) passed away and bequeathed nothing, while Abū Bakr made a will: so whichever you do is good.”²⁵ However, the majority of jurists adopted the second position because it reconciled the various opinions. Nevertheless, debate persisted through the ages—especially after al-Ṭabarī—over whether the verse had been abrogated. In my view, this indicates that there was no final stance on one position that was acknowledged by all schools.

21 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, 2:121.

22 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, 2:122.

23 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, 2:124.

24 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, 2:126.

25 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, 2:125.

Ibn al-ʿArabī tried to summarize this problem in a text, which we consider as proof that understanding the history of this ruling varied with the changes in time. This also demonstrates how the jurist deals with such issues. He said:

Our scholars, along with Ibn al-Qāsim, reported from Mālik that he said: “This verse was revealed before the fixed shares of inheritance were assigned. Then Allah revealed the fixed shares, which abrogated making a bequest to parents or to any heir—unless the heirs grant permission, in which case it is permissible.”

All scholars [of Malikī school] agreed that the verse was abrogated, but they differed concerning the abrogating text, and so, they held four opinions in this regard:

1. It was abrogated by the inheritance verse.
2. It was abrogated by Allah’s saying, “And when the relatives and the orphans and al-*masākin* (the poor) are present at the time of division, give them from the property, and speak to them properly and courteously” (Qurʾān 4:8).
3. It was abrogated by the ḥadīth of the Prophet, which states that Allah has appointed for everyone his due right and hence no bequest may be made to a standard heir who is entitled to inherit.
4. It was abrogated by the consensus of the community that it has been annulled and that it is not permissible to make a will to anyone who has an assigned share prescribed by Allah or an ordained right made by the Prophet (pbuh).²⁶

The new position that the scholars adopted after the fourth century of Hijra has become clear. Undoubtedly, there are grounds for the dominance of the proponents of abrogation, most importantly the dilemma resulting from the contradiction between the rulings for wills (if they are permissible or not) and those of inheritance. In addition, Ibn al-ʿArabī outlined the opinion prevailing in his time (that no will should be bequeathed to an heir) by relying on a deductive approach that manifested the argument on which the *uṣūlīs* (scholars of the principles of Islamic jurisprudence) based their position and restricted the function of wills. It is an approach based on the authority of transmission of a ḥadīth from the Prophet that reads, “No bequest may be made to an heir.”²⁷

²⁶ Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-Nāsikh wa al-Mansūkh*, n.p., n.d., 2:17–18.

²⁷ Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, n.p., n.d., “Ḥadīth on the authority of ʿAmr b. Khārija,” 5:204.

In turn, it is essential to examine the authoritativeness of this ḥadīth and how scholars' interpretations of it were historicized, in order to discern the historical gap between the revealed text and its interpretive elaboration.

Concerning the Authoritativeness of the Ḥadīth “No Bequest May Be Made to an Heir.”

If this ḥadīth is a key piece of evidence for viewing the verse on wills as abrogated, it is also a major source of serious disagreement among exegetes. The question is when was this ḥadīth first mentioned in the authoritative books of ḥadīth? Based on historical chronology, the following can be noted:

1. There is no mention of this ḥadīth in *al-Muwattaʿa* (of Imam Mālik). However, “the chapter on wills” includes ḥadīth that recommend that a will should be made and provide its rulings in detail. There is only a slight reference to the meaning of this ḥadīth in a narration on the authority of Yaḥyā from Mālik, in which he says:

I heard Mālik say, “The established Sunna in our community about which there is no dispute is that it is not permitted for a testator to make a bequest [in addition to the fixed share] in favor of an heir, unless the other heirs of the deceased have given their permission for the legatee [to receive it]. If some of them permit it and others refuse, the legatee is allowed to deduct the share from those who have given permission. Those who refuse will take their full share from the inheritance.”²⁸

By “the established Sunna,” does he mean the actions of the Messenger Himself, or the customary practice that the Prophet left for the Muslims to continue following?

2. There is no mention of this ḥadīth in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, although he designated a chapter for wills and gathered in it all the ḥadīth that he considered to be authentic, which stress that making wills is a firmly established legislation.²⁹
3. If the assumption that the books of *al-Umm* and *al-Risāla* of al-Shāfiʿī, as well as the *Musnad* of Aḥmad, are works written down toward the end of the third century of Hijra is correct, I consider that this ḥadīth first emerged at the end of the third century after Hijra, ninth century CE. This is because al-Shāfiʿī's traditions were collected by his student al-Rabīʿ

²⁸ Mālik b. Anas, *al-Muwattaʿa*, n.p., n.d., 2:765.

²⁹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Book of Wills, 11:74–95.

al-Murādī through his dictation (to other students). Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's narrations were compiled by his son 'Abd Allāh. It is not a secret that a narration is like a living being that is constantly influenced by the concerns of the society and develops itself accordingly. Clearly, there is no consensus on the authenticity of this ḥadīth, as shown by the following:

- al-Shāfi'ī reported this tradition abridged and most scholars went along with him.³⁰

Although 'Abd Allāh b. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal narrated it as meeting the conditions required for accepting a ḥadīth, it is a solitary tradition, transmitted by only one narrator—'Amr b. Khārija—from whom no other narration is reported. He said, 'Abd Allāh narrated from his father from 'Affān from Abū 'Awāna from Qatāda from Shahr b. Ḥawshab from 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ghunm that 'Amr b. Khārija said:

I was holding onto the reins of the Messenger of Allah's she-camel while it was chewing its curd, with her saliva dripping between my shoulders. He (pbuh) said: "Verily, Allah has given to everyone, who has a right, his due right. Thus, no bequest may be made to a [legal] heir. The child belongs to the bed [legal husband], and the adulterer's share is the stone [the legal punishment; stoning to death]. Whoever claims to be the son of one who is not his father and whoever claims to be the slave of one who is not his master, on him rests the curse of Allah, the angels and all humanity." 'Affān said, "Ḥammām added through this chain of transmission without mentioning '*Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ghunm* 'and while I was under the front of the neck of his riding animal.' He also added 'Allah shall not accept his repentance or redemption.'" Moreover, in the ḥadīth narrated on the authority of Ḥammām, he added "The Messenger of Allah (pbuh) gave a sermon" and, "as a way of neglecting them."³¹

- In his biography of 'Amr b. Khārija, Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1449) quoted al-'Askarī's opinion about Shahr b. Ḥawshab: "It is not correct that Shahr heard from him ['Amr b. Khārija] in relation to another ḥadīth reported by al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971)."³²
- Such stances demonstrate that ḥadīth scholars doubted the authenticity of this narration. This may be the reason that al-Ṭabarī did not

30 Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Umm*, n.p., n.d., 4:33.

31 Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad Aḥmad*, n.p., n.d., 5:204.

32 Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Iṣāba*, n.p., n.d., 4:627.

narrate it, even though he reflected its meaning in the third view in consideration of the ruling for wills. Did he not mention this tradition because he was ignorant of it, or because there was much controversy over its authenticity? Instead, did he prefer to depend on the historical relationship between the verses based on the exegetes' opinion that the Qur'ān explains itself as Qur'ānic verses interpret each other? However, it was sufficient for him to mention that the inheritance verse abrogated the verse enjoining making a will to parents.

Notably, this debate between scholars concerning the authenticity of this ḥadīth peaked at the time of Ibn al-'Arabī. They reexamined the issue and sought the original evidence on which the ruling—that the verse on wills was abrogated by this ḥadīth—was based. Ibn al-'Arabī said:

As for those who argue that it was abrogated by “No bequest may be made to an heir,” we would have maintained the same opinion had it been an authentic, *mutawātir* [a continuously recurrent tradition through generations of ḥadīth narrators] ḥadīth so that the abrogating material would be similar to the abrogated one in terms of certainty and application, as we have set this principle as a condition [to accept a ruling as being abrogated]. However, this tradition is not authentic evidence at all. As for those who argue that it was abrogated by the consensus of the *umma*, we say that our scholars have agreed that consensus cannot abrogate any ruling because consensus came into effect only after the death of the Prophet and it is inconceivable that a law should be renewed after his death. This is the general apparent meaning, but it can be explained in detail as follows: consensus is to be concluded only if it is based on a tradition and rational reasoning. If consensus is arrived at based on rational reasoning, it cannot abrogate other rulings, but if it is made based on a tradition, it can abrogate, and the [reason for] abrogation is the tradition upon which consensus was made. This is the question at hand, because the Muslim *umma* unanimously agreed that no bequest can be made to the parents based on the statement of the Messenger. However, this prophetic statement has been obliterated but the definitely authentic consensus has remained. There also remains what gives evidence to it in the authentic ḥadīth narrated from the Prophet: “Give the shares of the inheritance that are prescribed in the Qur'ān to those who are entitled to receive it. Then whatever remains after division of inheritance should be given to the closest male relative of the deceased.”³³

33 Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Nāsikh wa al-Mansūkh*, 2:18–19.

This stance reflects the scholar's confusion over the discrepancy between the original theoretical principles—approved by the *salaf* as essential for understanding the Qur'ānic text—and the other methodological sciences (*'ulūm al-wasā'il*) used to interpret its meanings. It also shows what happened when later scholars found it difficult to stick to the literal meaning of the text or to use these fundamental methodological tools, which acted as a barrier between them and the text. Through this text, Ibn al-'Arabī realized that there was a lack of consistency between the revealed ruling and the nature of the legislative text that abrogated it. Therefore, he contributed to an effort to replace the authoritative reference approved by the *salaf* with another source of legitimacy, derived from ḥadīth and grounded in the conditions established by later scholars. These later scholars addressed textual references that seemed apparently diverse but were difficult to handle or to reconcile, because each one of these authoritative references was developed as a result of a particular occasion. The ḥadīth “No bequest may be made to an heir” became widely known and was intended to limit the growing number of solutions that society devised to expand upon the limited set of established rulings. Here, the available texts show that questioning the authenticity of this ḥadīth began at the end of the fifth century AH, as scholars developed new critical approaches to evaluate the methods of earlier jurists and to compare them with the foundational principles of legal rulings. Hence, al-Kiyā al-Harrāsī was preoccupied with seeking a compromising justification between reaffirming the validity of al-Shāfi'ī's theory that it was not valid to abrogate the Qur'ān by *āḥād* ḥadīth (a ḥadīth transmitted through a single chain, or a limited number, of narrators) and what happened concerning people's practices. His reply was, “This could be probable by taking into consideration the original principles of jurisprudence. As the justification to continue to apply the ruling is speculative and based on probability, it could probably be abrogated by the like of it [i.e., by a text that is not definite].”³⁴

Principles that are considered original principles or foundations in Islamic legislation are, in fact, textual references that were systematized into laws and organized into chapters in legal texts, primarily by al-Shāfi'ī. These principles continued to evolve through scholarly debate. Therefore, they developed into broad concepts aimed at accommodating various solutions, driven by a concern that failing to address juristic issues adequately would undermine the jurist's authority in society. Al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) disagreed with all his predecessors in his interpretation of the verse of wills and became occupied with

34 al-Kiyā al-Harrāsī, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, n.p., n.d., 1:58.

deducing the various rulings pertaining to “wills.” In my view, this is evidence that supports the scholars’ agreement on the view established by ‘Amr b. Khār-ija (in his narration) rather than on the apparent meaning of the Qur’ānic text.

3.3 *Prescribed Inheritance Shares*

The exegetes were selective in their classification of the inheritance verses, designating some as foundational rules of inheritance legislation, while treating others as specifying or clarifying aspects had been revealed earlier. Through this approach, they managed to avoid the dilemma of “abrogation” and the problematic question of invalidating a ruling in a verse by prescribing another one. Although they managed to do this, they faced another historical problem that required them to put the inheritance-related verses in a chronological, systematic order to support the notion of specification (*takhṣiṣ*) on the basis of engagement with the reasons for their revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). While this difficulty led exegetes to explore the historical sequence of revelation, it also served as a goal for them—to develop a commentary (*tafsīr*) in which historical context was brought into harmony with the revealed text.

What Is the Nature of This Historical Text? Does It Provide Sufficient Evidence to Explain in Detail the Concise (mujmal) and to Specify the General (‘amm)?

“Inheritance” was covered in the revelation in explicit terms, as Allah says, “O you who have attained to faith! It is not lawful for you to [try to] become heirs to your wives [by holding onto them] against their will” (Qur’ān 4:19). In addition, exegetes based their interpretation of inheritance-related verses on a set of verses whose explicit terms do not carry the meaning of inheritance and whose implication revolves around property and disbursement of funds, including Allah’s sayings,

Hence, render unto the orphans their possessions, and do not substitute bad things [of your own] for the good things [that belong to them], and do not consume their possessions together with your own: this, verily, is a great crime.

Qur’ān 4:2

And do not entrust to those who are weak of judgment the possessions which God has placed in your charge for [their] support; but let them have their sustenance therefrom, and clothe them, and speak unto them in a kindly way.

Qur’ān 4:5

In addition, the exegetes hold the opinion that the meaning of the word “*naṣīb*” (share) in the Qur’ān is a reference to inheritance in Allah’s saying, “Men shall have a share (*naṣīb*) in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind, and women shall have a share (*naṣīb*) in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind, whether it be little or much—a share (*naṣīb*) ordained [by God]” (4:7).

Similarly, they gave the same interpretation to the order to provide or give (*rizq*) in Allah’s saying, “And when [other] near of kin and orphans and needy persons are present at the distribution [of inheritance], give (*fa-rzuqūhum*) them something thereof for their sustenance, and speak unto them in a kindly way” (Qur’ān 4:8).

Such verses distinctively included detailed rulings that represented a textual contextualization on which exegetes based their opinions regarding inheritance. It is pertinent to analyze the approaches the exegetes and jurists followed to understand these verses. They followed two approaches when categorizing the inheritance-related verses. In the first approach, they gathered the verses that stipulate explicit and accurate rulings in terms of inheritance distribution and listed them under the title “Book of prescribed inheritance shares.” They unanimously agreed that these are the first verses to abrogate the making of a will. They based their argument on the two verses pertaining to the prescribed inheritance shares in Chapter 4 (al-Nisā’), namely, Verses 11 and 12, and on the traditions reported about the reasons for revelation of these two verses.

Al-Ṭabarī traced the reason for revelation back to the incident when ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, brother of Ḥassān, the poet, died and left behind a wife named Umm Kajja, along with five sisters. The heirs came to take his possessions, and so, Umm Kajja complained to the Prophet (pbuh). Thereupon Allah (Exalted be He), revealed this verse.³⁵

Meanwhile, Ibn al-‘Arabī mentioned three different traditions as being reasons for the revelation of these verses. The first, he called “the tradition of Sa’d,” meaning Sa’d b. Abī Waqqāṣ. He had apparently quoted it from *al-Muwaṭṭa’*.³⁶ Sa’d said:

The Messenger of Allah (pbuh) came to visit me when I was very sick in the year of the Farewell Ḥajj. I said, “O Messenger of Allah, I have property and who inherits me is only my daughter. Shall I give all my property as charity?” The Messenger of Allah (pbuh) said, “No.” I said, “Two-thirds?” The Messenger of Allah (pbuh) said, “No.” I said, “Half?” He said, “No.”

35 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān*, 3:617.

36 Mālik, *al-Muwaṭṭa’*, 2:763.

Then the Messenger of Allah (pbuh) said, “A third, and a third is a lot. Leaving your heirs wealthy is better than leaving them dependent, begging people.”³⁷

Ibn al-‘Arabī mentioned the second narration on the authority of Jābir b. ‘Abd Allāh, but this narration is not mentioned in *al-Muwattaʿa*. The most important part in this report is that a woman from al-Anṣār—the Helpers in Medina—was the grandmother of Khārīja b. Zayd b. Thābit, came to the Messenger of Allah with her two daughters and said:

O Messenger of Allah, these are the daughters of Sa’d b. al-Rabīʿ who was killed as a martyr when he was with you at the Battle of Uḥud. Their paternal uncle has taken all their property and inheritance, and he has not left anything for them. What do you think, the Messenger of Allah? They can never marry unless they have some property.³⁸

Ibn al-‘Arabī reported the third narration from al-Bukhārī on the authority of Jābir b. ‘Abd Allāh who stated that the verse was revealed in relation to him.³⁹

The conclusion drawn from these traditions is that there were different reasons for the revelation of the verse in question. This variation arose because of the significant time gap between these revelations, which ranged from the third to the ninth year of Hijra—a period when most legal rulings were revealed. In addition, the exegetes adopted these traditions to interpret the reasons for the revelation of other verses. For example, the tradition of Jābir b. ‘Abd Allāh was employed by al-Ṭabarī when he reported the story behind the revelation of the following verse:

They will ask thee to enlighten them about the laws concerning women. Say: “God [Himself] enlightens you about the laws concerning them”—for [His will is shown] in what is being conveyed unto you through this divine writ about orphan women [in your charge], to whom—because you yourselves may be desirous of marrying them—you do not give that which has been ordained for them.

Qurʾān 4:127

37 Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, 1:331.

38 Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, 1:333.

39 Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, 1:333.

A tradition is reported in a narration of al-Suddī, who said:

Jābir b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī al-Sulamī had a blind and ugly female cousin who had inherited a large fortune from her father, but he neither wanted to marry her nor agreed to let anyone else marry her for the fear that her husband may take her property away. He asked the Messenger of Allah (pbuh) about that, saying, “Is the ugly blind maid entitled to inherit?” The Messenger replied, “Yes.” Then Allah revealed this verse in relation to them.⁴⁰

The conclusion from these different narrations is that scholars did not agree on any one reason for the revelation of this verse, although most of them maintained that the verse of the prescribed inheritance shares was revealed in relation to the daughters of Sa’d b. al-Rabī‘ (i.e., after the Battle of Uḥud in the third year of Hijra). This date is a historical mark or sign by which scholars can distinguish the different meanings of inheritance, and based on which they stress that rulings related to inheritance began to be sent down earlier than the conquest of Mecca. However, this date is only considered a probable historical sign or mark when we learn that Jābir b. ‘Abd Allāh is the narrator of the tradition concerning Sa’d b. al-Rabī‘, and that scholars of ḥadīth said that he was considered too young to participate in the Battles of Badr and Uḥud.⁴¹ Thus, it is unlikely that he witnessed and reported this incident, which other Companions did not report. It is also only a probable sign if taking into account the scholars’ failure to agree on one opinion in relation to the reason for the revelation of this verse. Based on all these, al-Qurṭubī refrained from stressing the stories reported in relation to the reason for revelation, and rather, tended to investigate the Qur’anic phrases for finding formulas that address society’s concerns.

This is the second approach, which focuses on identifying linguistic evidence that determines rulings. This issue has been the subject of *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) by scholars seeking to understand the historical relationship between verses, particularly in relation to their objectives and the depth of their explanation. It is like “immersion in the depths of the text” in search of *qarā’in* (indicators), which help determine the precise meaning that should be comprehended from the verses of inheritance. The exegetes may have taken this approach in their effort to understand verses they found useful for deduc-

40 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, 4:299.

41 Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb*, n.p., n.d., 1:350.

ing rules of inheritance. However, al-Ṭabarī avoided this approach to interpretation in relation to the verse: “To those also with whom you have made a pledge [brotherhood], give them their due portion” (Qurʾān 4:33). Al-Ṭabarī said:

The correct opinion in the interpretation of this verse is as we have explained: Allah’s saying, “you have made a pledge,” refers to an oath, and His saying, “give them their due portion,” refers to offering support, help, advice, and sound judgment, as commanded by the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) [in the traditions reported from him]. This excludes the view of those who interpret “give them their due portion” as referring to a share in inheritance.⁴²

Scholars have reversed the meanings of the oath (*ḥilf*) and support (*nuṣra*) that are reported in Qurʾān 4:33 and have deliberately employed the different meanings that these two terms carry to interpret the verses at the end of Qurʾān 8 (*al-Anfāl*):

As for those who have come to believe without having migrated [to your country]—you are in no wise responsible for their protection until such a time as they migrate [to you]. Yet, if they ask you for succour against religious persecution, it is your duty to give [them] this succour

Qurʾān 8:72

And they who have attained to faith, and who have forsaken the domain of evil and are striving hard in God’s cause, as well as those who shelter and succour [them].

Qurʾān 8:74

They who are [thus] closely related have the highest claim on one another in [accordance with] God’s decree.

Qurʾān 8:75

They considered that all these verses include the rulings elaborating the terms of *wilāya* (i.e., patronage, support, and protection) and inheritance, and based their argument on what is reported by Ibn ‘Abbās and Qatāda. Such interpretation entails placing the last verses of Chapter 8 (*al-Anfāl*) in a historical context

⁴² al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, 4:59.

by outlining all the stages through which the rulings passed, from wills, to the institution of brotherhood among Muslims, to inheritance.

However, al-Ṭabarī disagreed with the interpretations made by most scholars, and instead, provided an explanation of these verses that deviated from the interpretative context. He said:

Abū Ja'far said, "The more likely of the two interpretations of Allah's saying 'The disbelievers are protectors one of another' (Qur'ān 8:74) is in line with those who say: its meaning is that they are protectors [and supporters] of each other to the exclusion of the believers, and that it suggests that it is prohibited for the believers to stay in the abode of war without migrating, because the term *walī* [translated in the verse as protectors] is commonly used by the Arabs in the sense of a protector and supporter or cousins and kinsmen. Meanings of *walī* do not include an heir (*wārith*), except in the sense of a person taking responsibility for one's inheritance after his death. However, even if such a meaning is probable, it is not supported by the context of the verse. It is preferable to understand Allah's words in their most apparent and well-known sense, rather than relying on obscure interpretations."⁴³

Had al-Ṭabarī continued the interpretive approach he applied to these verses to the remainder, he might have uncovered new insights. However, he soon shifted his line of reasoning, focusing instead on the concept of protection (*walā'*), which was assigned at times to believers and at other times to kin. Al-Ṭabarī argued that this varied use of the term supports the view of scholars who held that *walā'* signifies both support and inheritance.⁴⁴

This position reflects the scholar's method of investigating juristic questions by seeking linguistic *qarā'in* (indicators or evidence) while carefully considering the placement of terms in the Qur'ānic text. In doing so, he opens the text to deeper juristic exploration—this is precisely the meaning of "immersion in the depths of the text." By examining the various meanings associated with the term *walā'*, al-Ṭabarī showed an awareness of the juristic debates surrounding cases of interest for which jurists struggled to find explicit textual evidence. Thus, he contributed a juristic treatise that argued against "giving a share of inheritance to the disbelievers (*kāfir*)" based on the concept of *wilāya* (protection) in religion. The issue is not a simple one, if we consider that the Qur'ānic

43 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, 6:296.

44 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, 6:296.

text allows Muslim men to marry women from the People of the Book, while the juristic position forbids her from receiving inheritance on account of her being a disbeliever. Even if jurists retracted by adopting a juristic solution that allows a man to make a will to his Christian or Jewish wife, al-Ṭabarī closed all doors to interpretation and *ijtihād*, particularly since he based his argument on a Qurʾānic verse.

Through this approach, the scope of the legislative text concerning inheritance can be broadened by bringing together a range of terms and meanings that are construed as referring to inheritance. Although the scholars were interested in categorizing them according to the order of their revelation, they fell short in doing so because they did not find the historical events that clarify the relationship between their different meanings. However, in the following I explain these diverse terms and meanings.

Can the Rulings of Inheritance Be Ordered Historically?

I pose this question because some Orientalists interested in Qurʾānic sciences were keen on classifying the significant legislative verses according to their order of Revelation. Most notably, Schacht contributed detailed studies on the two issues of “inheritance” and “wills” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. He based the two articles on a comprehensive historical classification, which contributed to a clarification of the perspective of meaning and details of inheritance. His stance is presented as follows.⁴⁵

Schacht held the opinion that the verses of inheritance were revealed in two historical stages in Medina. The first stage began from the immigration to Medina and ended in the month of Ramadan of the second year of Hijra (i.e., after the Battle of Badr). Scholars of ḥadīth hold the opinion that this period lasted for almost 18 months after immigration.

Schacht argued that during this period, two rulings were revealed. The first is the ruling for wills, in Allah’s saying, “It is ordained for you, when death approaches any of you and he is leaving behind much wealth, to make bequests in favor of his parents and [other] near of kin in accordance with what is fair” (Qurʾān 2:180). It is more likely that it was revealed before Ramadan in the second year of Hijra. However, it did not call for discontinuation of the pre-Islamic legislations. Its interest was to restrict a bequest to parents and kindred. Therefore, other verses were revealed setting forth how to make a will and deal with testimony, namely, Qurʾān 2:176 and 240 as well as Qurʾān 4:37 and Qurʾān 5:106–108.⁴⁶

45 Schacht, “Mirāth.”

46 Here is the text of these verses. At first, it appears that by Qurʾān 2:176 Schacht meant the verse following it in order, namely, Qurʾān 2:177, which reads:

The second ruling is about the institution of brotherhood (*mu'ākha*),⁴⁷ which according to Schacht, occurred in two stages. The first stage relates to the approval of mutual inheritance between the immigrants while depriving their relatives who stayed at Mecca of inheritance, even if they were Muslims. In the first year after Hijra, the Messenger of Allah abrogated this ruling by instituting brotherhood between the immigrants and *al-Anṣār*, and a divine text was revealed recommending his action in two verses in Qur'ān 8 (*al-Anfāl*). The first is as follows:

As for those who have come to believe without having migrated [to your country]—you are in no wise responsible for their protection until such a time as they migrate [to you]. Yet, if they ask you for succour against religious persecution, it is your duty to give [them] this succour—except

It is not *al-birr* (piety, righteousness, and each and every act of obedience to Allah, etc.) that you turn your faces towards east and (or) west (in prayers); but *al-birr* is (the quality of) the one who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the Angels, the Book, the Prophets and gives his wealth, in spite of love for it, to the kinsfolk, to the orphans, and to *al-masākīn* (the poor), and to the wayfarer, and to those who ask, and to set slaves free, establish *ṣalāt* (prayer), and give *zakāt* (alms) ...

In addition:

And those of you who die and leave behind wives should bequeath for their wives a year's maintenance and residence without turning them out, but if they (the wives) leave, there is no sin on you for that which they do of themselves ... (Qur'ān 2:240)

It is unclear whether by Qur'ān 4:37 Schacht meant "Those who are miserly and enjoin miserliness on other men and hide what Allah has bestowed upon them of His Bounties. And We have prepared for the disbelievers a disgraceful torment," or he meant Verse 38, which begins, "And (also) those who spend of their property to be seen of men." As for Qur'ān 5:106–108, which read:

O you who believe! When death approaches any of you, and you make a bequest, (then take) the testimony of two just men of your own folk or two others who are strangers to you, while you are travelling through the land and death befalls on you. Detain them both after *ṣalāt* (the prayer), (then) if you are in doubt (about their truthfulness), let them both swear by Allah (saying), "We do not wish for any worldly gain in this, even though he (the beneficiary) be our near relative. We shall not hide the Testimony of Allah, for then indeed we should be of the sinful." If then it is known that these two had been guilty of sin, let two others stand forth in their places, nearest in kin from among those who claim a lawful right. Let them swear by Allah (saying), "We affirm that our testimony is truer than that of both of them, and that we have not trespassed (the truth), for then indeed we should be of the wrong-doers." That should make it more likely that they will give their testimony more properly, or be afraid that their oaths will be refuted by (other) oaths. (Qur'ān 5:106–108).

47 W. Montgomery Watt, "Mu'ākhāt," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 7, 255.

against a people between whom and yourselves there is a covenant: for God sees all that you do.

Qurʾān 8:72

The second verse reads:

And as for those who henceforth come to believe, and who forsake the domain of evil and strive hard [in God's cause] together with you—these [too] shall belong to you; and they who are [thus] closely related have the highest claim on one another in [accordance with] God's decree. Verily, God has full knowledge of everything.

Qurʾān 8:75

Schacht concluded this first historical stage with the revelation of Qurʾān 33:6, which abrogated the ruling of (inheritance by) brotherhood:

The Prophet is closer to the believers than their own selves, and his wives are their [believers'] mothers [as regards respect and marriage]. And blood relations among each other have closer personal ties in the Decree of Allah [regarding inheritance] than [the brotherhood of] the believers [of Medina] and the Muhājirūn [emigrants from Mecca], except that you do kindness to those brothers. This has been written in the [Allah's Book of Divine] Decrees.

Qurʾān 33:6

The second historical stage begins with the revelation of rulings of inheritance after the Battle of Uḥud (i.e., after Shawwāl of the third year of Hijra), when many Muslims were martyred and left behind orphans and widows. The Prophet was confused regarding how inheritance should be divided among them, particularly since the Qurʾānic text had abrogated the *jāhiliyya* customs by instituting wills and prescribing the payment of a year's maintenance to the widow in her *ʿidda* (i.e., waiting period of the divorced woman or the widow) from her dead husband's property. Then, the verses about the prescribed inheritance shares, namely, Qurʾān 4:7–14, were revealed, and later, after an unspecified period, the question of *al-kalāla* was mentioned in Qurʾān 4:176. Thus, inheritance legislations, according to Schacht, were complete in the third year of Hijra.

However, I present two observations in relation to Schacht's analysis. First, he attempted to simplify the historical relationship between these verses, but I think that they are more complicated because they were revealed in changing

circumstances and passed through a transitional stage in which an earlier one was repealed and an alternative perspective in which faith mingled with action was founded. In my view, this approach required several stages to reach its full development, especially when considering the challenges the Messenger faced early in his migration to Medina in instilling attachment to the principles of the Islamic faith among Muslims. He accepted to interact with the hypocrites, and this lasted until after the conquest of Mecca, in respect of those whose hearts were reconciled (i.e., persons who were given *zakat* to soften their hearts toward Islam), and in how the *ḡayʾ* (booty gained with no fight or war) was distributed. That is why the Messenger was not eliminating the Arab customs as much as he was engaging with them.⁴⁸ It is difficult to consider that all the rulings for wills were completely revealed in the second year of Hijra. Schacht based his argument on some of the narrations reported by exegetes concerning the reasons behind the revelation of these verses. Their positions appear certain and definitive, but they overlooked the early scholars' positions about the reasons for Revelation. These positions led to heated arguments and verbal abuse [among scholars].⁴⁹ The scholars of ḡadīth have unanimously stated that the Messenger set out for the Battle of Badr with 77 men from the immigrants and 236 men of *al-Anṣār*.⁵⁰ I deem this number offered by the traditionists to be partially true in terms of the small number of Muslims shortly after Hijra. Prophet Muḡammad aspired to achieve victory by disseminating the Islamic call and by encouraging Muslims to seek Allah's pleasure (*targhīb*) rather than by threatening them with Allah's punishment. Therefore, it is unlikely that many laws were revealed, or that any were revealed in full, at that time—especially those concerning inheritance.

The second point relates to the meaning of the verses that Schacht regarded as falling under the concept of inheritance—Qurʾān 2:176 or 177, Qurʾān 4:37 or 38, and Qurʾān 8:72 and 75.⁵¹ The reader cannot find any term in these

48 Watt, "Mu'akhāt," 255.

49 Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-Nāsikh wa al-Mansūkh*, 2:146–147.

50 Muḡammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk*, n.p., n.d., 1:25; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh*, n.p., n.d., 2:118.

51 These verses are as follows:

That is because Allah has sent down the Book (the Qurʾān) in truth. And verily, those who disputed as regards the Book are far away in opposition. (2:176)

And gives his wealth, in spite of love for it, to the kinsfolk, to the orphans, and to *al-masākīn* (the poor), and to the wayfarer, and to those who ask, and to set slaves free. (2:177)

Those who are miserly and enjoy miserliness on other men and hide what Allah has bestowed upon them of His Bounties. (4:37)

verses indicating that they were revealed concerning inheritance. Surprisingly, Schacht trod the steps of the exegetes and used these verses to widen the legislative area of inheritance; they interpreted the terms “*walā*” and “*infāq*” (spending) in the sense of bequeathing as well as receiving inheritance from the estate.⁵² Meanwhile, juristic literature offers a different interpretation of the two verses in Qur’ān 8 (*al-Anfāl*), and such interpretation is rendered legitimate if it was issued by scholars specialized in jurisprudential issues related to inheritance, *kharāj* (land tax), or *zakāt*. Of these scholars, Abū ‘Ubayd al-Qāsim b. Sallam categorized these two verses under the chapter on “Bestowal upon the urban people and favoring them over the Bedouins.” In relation to their interpretation, he said:

Ibn ‘Abbās said, “When the Messenger of Allah (pbuh) passed away, people were divided into four categories: (a) immigrant believers; (b) *al-anṣār*; (c) Bedouins who did not emigrate and who would have supported the Prophet if he had asked them, but were not obligated to do so unless requested as this was a permission granted to them, relieving them of that duty. However, if they asked the Prophet (pbuh) for help, it was his duty to help them; and (d) the fourth category were those who followed the believers in faith and righteousness.”⁵³

To conclude, it is nearly impossible to uncover the historical sequence of the inheritance verses. This difficulty arises because concerns about the historical relationship between the verses only emerged after the Qur’ān was compiled as a *muṣḥaf*, and because scholars were committed to adopting formal positions that supported the general direction of jurisprudence and sought to reconcile the views of different schools—an aim that has largely remained unachievable in the history of Islamic law.

And (also) those who spend of their substance to be seen of men, and believe not in Allah. (4:38)

And as to those who believed but did not emigrate (to you O Muḥammad, pbuh), you owe no duty of protection to them until they emigrate; but if they seek your help in religion, it is your duty to help them. (8:72)

And those who believed afterwards, and emigrated and strove hard along with you (in the Cause of Allah), they are of you. But kindred by blood are nearer to one another (regarding inheritance) in the decree ordained by Allah. Verily, Allah is the All-Knower of everything. (8:75)

52 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, 4:59.

53 Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, n.p., n.d., 292.

Source

Nā'ila al-Sillīnī al-Raḍwī. *Tārīkhiyyat al-Tafsīr al-Qur'ānī*. al-Dār al-Bayḍā': al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī, 2002. 205–230
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Reconsideration of the Meaning of *Qiṣās*

Sedigheh Vasmaghi

About the Author¹

Sedigheh Vasmaghi is an Iranian scholar, lawyer, and poet whose work plays an important role in contemporary discussions on Islamic jurisprudence and Qurʾānic interpretation in Iran. She is known for her thoughtful, courageous approach and brings together deep knowledge of classical Islamic law with a strong commitment to rethinking its application in today's world. Vasmaghi began her religious education at a women's seminary in Iran during the 1980s before continuing her studies at Tehran University, where she earned both her BA and Ph.D. in Islamic jurisprudence.

In her work, she strongly asserts that the ethical message of the Qurʾān should take precedence over inherited interpretations. According to her, such interpretations do not serve the needs of modern societies. She challenges many rulings related to social and political life that have been upheld in classical Islamic law. For her, such rulings reflect historical contexts rather than timeless truths. She considers that Islamic law must be open to critique and reinterpretation if it is to remain relevant and just.

In her book *Bezāʿte Fiqh va Gostareh Nofuz-e Fuqahā* (2009), she questions the authority traditionally granted to jurists and calls for a reevaluation of their role in shaping religious norms. In her later work, *Bāzkhānī-e Sharīʿat* (2017),

1 Important works by Sedigheh Vasmaghi include *Bezāʿte Fiqh va Gostareh Nofuz-e Fuqahā* (self-published electronically 2009); *Women, Jurisprudence, Islam*, trans. Ashna and Philip G. Kreyenbroek (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014); *Hatman Rahī Hast* (Paris: Kharavan, 2014); and *Bāzkhānī-e Sharīʿat* (Tehran: Qalam, 2017). For discussions of her work and influence, see Ali Akbar, “Sedigheh Vasmaghi: A New Voice of Iranian Religious Reformism,” *Iranian Studies* 55, no. 4 (2022): 1045–1064; Abbas Poya, “Desacralization of Religious Concepts: The Prophecy from the Perspective of the Iranian Reformist Scholar Seddigha Wasmaghi,” *Religions* 14, no. 12 (2023): 1452, 1–12; Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Sedigheh Vasmaghi,” in *Journeys Toward Gender Equality in Islam* (London: Oneworld, 2022); “Sedigheh Vasmaghi: An Imprisoned Female Islamic Jurist Defying Iran’s Supreme Leader for Women’s Rights,” interview by Rira Ahmadi, *Radio Zamaneh*, <https://en.radiozamaneh.com/36448/>; and Ali Sadrzadeh, “The Iranian Theologian and Feminist Sedigheh Vasmaghi: A Revolution in Islamic Law,” *Qantara*, 2024, <https://qantara.de/en/article/iranian-theologian-and-feminist-sedigheh-vasmaghi-revolution-islamic-law>.

she continues this line of thought and advocates for a more flexible, ethical understanding of Islamic law. She also addresses these themes in her book *Women, Jurisprudence, Islam* (2014), in which she explores how women's rights can be grounded in a fresh reading of Islamic texts.

Vasmaghi has also been active in public life. She was a member of Tehran's City Council in 1999–2003, and later held visiting positions at Göttingen University and Uppsala University until her return to Iran in 2017. She has been an important voice calling for reform within Iranian society and critiques religious authoritarianism. Her poetry adds another dimension to her intellectual work and often reflects on themes of justice, faith, and freedom. She has also translated classical Arabic poetry into Persian, thus bringing new life to these texts for contemporary readers.

Scholars such as Ali Akbar and Ziba Mir-Hosseini have written about Vasmaghi's influence, especially her efforts to bring Islamic law into conversation with the realities of modern life. Through her scholarship and activism, Sedigheh Vasmaghi continues to push for a vision of Islam that is both faithful to its principles and open to change.



The term *qiṣāṣ* is used in the Qur'an in four verses: 5:45, 2:178, 2:179, and 2:194. What are the messages these verses convey about *qiṣāṣ*? Is it possible to conclude from these messages that executing murderers or cutting off the hands of a person who has committed a specified crime is obligatory, as many religious scholars (*fuqahā*) and commentators on the Qur'an believe?

I believe the messages understood by the *fuqahā* and the Qur'anic interpreters from the verses that mention *qiṣāṣ* stand in sharp contrast to what these passages seek to convey and to the spirit of the Qur'an, which includes forgiveness, peace, and patience, rather than renegefulness, punishment, and murder. It should also be taken into consideration that concepts such as mercy and forgiveness are highlighted in the verses related to *qiṣāṣ*. Therefore, is it possible that God invites people to seek revenge or considers revenge a necessary religious precept that must be implemented (as many *fuqahā* and commentators of the Qur'an have stated), yet asks people to forgive, telling them that forgiveness is best rewarded by God and that forgiveness is a sign of His mercy? In my view, the ideas that many *fuqahā* and commentators on the Qur'an have presented about the interpretation of *qiṣāṣ* are invalid. I have explored books of *tafsīr* that have commented on *qiṣāṣ* and have realized that the interpretation of the term *qiṣāṣ* conveyed by most Qur'anic interpreters (*mufasssīrūn*) is incorrect. It is incompatible with the spirit of the Qur'an.

Qiṣāṣ, from the Arabic root system, is from the root *fīʿāl*. Its meaning is close to *mithāl* and it refers to equality, likeness, or proportionality between two things. Some Qurʾānic interpreters have interpreted *qiṣāṣ* to mean equality, but when interpreting the verses concerning *qiṣāṣ*, they have not paid enough attention to the real meaning of this word. They have interpreted *qiṣāṣ* in the sense of the punishment or execution of those who have committed murder. Since the verses related to *qiṣāṣ* were revealed in the context of war and conflict between tribes, the real meaning of *qiṣāṣ* (i.e. equality and likeness) has been deemphasized in the works of *tafsīr*. Thus, the real meaning of the term *qiṣāṣ* has been overshadowed by the interpretations of *mufasssīrūn*. For example, the Qurʾān states:

We ordained for them in that [Torah]: A life for a life, and an eye for an eye, and a nose for a nose, and an ear for an ear, and a tooth for a tooth, and a [similar] retribution for wounds; but he who shall forgo it out of charity will atone thereby for some of his past sins.

Qurʾān 5:45

When interpreting this Qurʾānic verse, most commentators understand it within the context of punishment and therefore conclude that an intentional homicide should be punished by taking the murderer's life. They have also stated that the person whose eye has been injured by another person should carry out an offending action against the perpetrator in compensation. However, the verse should not be interpreted in this fashion. If we interpret *qiṣāṣ* to mean equality, the verse simply means that life is equal to life and an eye is equal to an eye.

I believe several meanings can be drawn from the expressions mentioned in the verses related to *qiṣāṣ*, and we should adopt the one that is consistent with the spirit of the Qurʾān, its other verses, and the historical context. The first meaning that can be drawn from the aforementioned verse is that peoples' lives are equal, and no one's life or body is more valuable than that of another. The second meaning is that one life is equal to one life, not to two lives. One eye is equal to one eye, not to two eyes and not to one life. This means that *qiṣāṣ* is very different from revenge.

These interpretations of this verse, which I support, are confirmed when examining the occasion of the revelation of this verse and other Qurʾānic verses related to *qiṣāṣ*. This verse prevents people from carrying out additional measures to kill others, which was common in pre-Islamic Arabia. According to many historical sources, blood feuds were almost unrestricted in scope in the pre-Islamic era—for the death of a tribesman, more than one person (the mur-

derer) from the offending tribe was often killed. If someone was wounded in a conflict, sometimes, another person was killed in response. The *diya* (the prescribed amount of blood money) determined by some tribes was often more than that of others, for some groups considered their lives more valuable than those of others. This Qur'ānic verse (5:45) prohibits the continuation of unjust practices and affirms the equal value of every person's life and body.

In addition, another meaning can be understood from this verse. According to this interpretation, life is equal to life and an eye is equal to an eye, and therefore, any person who deliberately kills another should also be killed. Similarly, if someone hurts another person's eye, the injured person can cause the same damage to the perpetrator. However, the verse praises forgiveness and encourages people to forgive. Indeed, the verse tells us that the Qur'ān does not endorse the punishment of a life for a life and an eye for an eye. This means the Qur'ān prefers that this punishment be avoided. According to the *fuqahā* and most *mufasssīrūn*, the Qur'ān considers it necessary to execute the punishment of "a life for a life" and "an eye for an eye." In contrast, the Qur'ān prefers forgiveness and peace and states that those who choose to punish will not have their reward from God. This verse certainly states that those who wish to punish should consider the principle of proportionality and avoid using excessive measures, and that if they forgive and do not punish the other person, this forgiveness will serve as atonement for their bad deeds. That is, the verse emphasizes that it is better not to execute the punishment of "a life for a life" or "an eye for an eye."

In this article, I argue that *qiṣāṣ* is not used in the Qur'ān to mean punishment—the meaning of *qiṣāṣ* in the Qur'ān is equality (*musāwāt*). When the Qur'ān speaks of punishment, *qiṣāṣ* simply refers to proportionality between the punishment and the crime committed. In fact, the Qur'ān considers it necessary to avoid imposing a punishment, to consider fairness, and to follow the principle of proportionality.

1 Introduction

Qur'ān 2:179 is the main verse that considers *qiṣāṣ* a legitimate form of punishment: "retribution saves life for you." From this, Qur'ānic commentators and the *fuqahā* of all Islamic sects consider *qiṣāṣ* an obligatory (*wājib*) religious precept. *Qiṣāṣ* also has a special position in the laws of many Muslim-majority countries, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran. Therefore, we should ask ourselves what *qiṣāṣ* means and how we should understand it from the verses of the Qur'ān

that mention this topic. As I will argue in this article, most *mufasssīrūn* and *fuqahā* consider *qiṣās* a punishment to be imposed for a crime committed by a member of society. According to them, *qiṣās* is a religious precept sanctioning punishment and Islam has invited people to punish or take revenge on those who have committed certain crimes. Some *fuqahā* even argue that if one denies *qiṣās*, one has abandoned Islam. They conclude that the person who questions the punishment of *qiṣās* should be treated as an apostate and punished according to the law of apostasy (*irtidād*).

For example, Ayatollah Khomeini positioned *qiṣās* within the obligatory principles of the religion. When the National Front (*jibheh-e millī*) objected to the bill on *qiṣās*, Khomeini explicitly stated that “the National Front is doomed to *irtidād*.”² Along similar lines, Ayatollah Golpayegani, a contemporary Iranian religious scholar, stated that “if a Muslim questions the punishment of *qiṣās*, he is considered an apostate because he has denied a religious precept explicitly mentioned in the Qur’ān, a precept which is of the necessities of the religion.”³ The Islamic penal law of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is based on Shī’ī jurisprudence and has been confirmed by the Guardian Council, considers *qiṣās* a form of punishment: “*Qiṣās* is the main punishment for intentional bodily crimes against life, limbs, and abilities which shall be applied in accordance with Book One of this law.”⁴

These examples show that *qiṣās* is interpreted in the sense of punishment. The *fuqahā* have a similar understanding of the verses on *qiṣās*, based on which they argue that if a person kills another person deliberately, the perpetrator must be killed. Moreover, a person who hurts someone else must receive a similar level or degree of injury to that caused.⁵ For example, if someone causes an injury to the eye, ear, or nose of another person, the latter may cause similar damage to the eye, ear, or nose of the former.⁶ However, I believe that if we view the Qur’ān from another lens, we can arrive at another understanding of *qiṣās*—one that is confirmed by many penal codes worldwide today. This understanding of *qiṣās* stands in sharp contrast to the conclusions of the *fuqahā*.

2 Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, *Sahīfeh-e Nūr* (Tehran: Imam Khomeini Institute, 1999), 15:19.

3 Keyhan Magazine, 26 Khordad 1360.

4 Islamic Penal Law in Iran, art. 14.

5 See, for example, Muḥammad b. Jamāl al-Dīn Makki al-Ameli, *al-Luma’ al-Dimashqīyya* (Qom: Hekmat Publication, 1406 AH), Book of Qiṣās, 248–249.

6 Makki al-Ameli, *al-Luma’ al-Dimashqīyya*, 254.

2 Meaning of *Qīṣāṣ* from the Perspective of Linguists and *Mufasssīrūn*

First, it is important to understand the way that Arab linguists defined *qīṣāṣ*. In *Lisān al-ʿArab* several definitions of the term *qīṣāṣ* are mentioned. *Qīṣāṣ* is from the root q-ṣ-s. One definition of q-ṣ-s includes “following the sign and effect of something.”⁷ According to Azharī, a tale is called *qīṣṣa* in Arabic because it seeks to express something and to follow a narration. *Lisān al-ʿArab* includes the views of other scholars, according to whom q-ṣ-s means to follow the effect or sign of something step by step.⁸ The author of *al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qurʿān* defined *qīṣāṣ* as “to follow (or to explore) the effect of something,” but adds that *qīṣāṣ* refers to the act of retaliation or reprisal when someone’s blood has been shed.⁹ It should be noted that the term *qīṣāṣ* does not itself refer to reprisal from a linguistic perspective, but the author of *al-Mufradāt* has interpreted *qīṣāṣ* to refer to concepts such as retaliation and reprisal.¹⁰ When interpreting Qurʿānic verses 2:178–179, al-Ṭabarsī said the word *qīṣāṣ* comes from the root q-ṣ-s. He emphasized that the root q-ṣ-s means to follow something one after another—one by one or one after another—therefore, *qīṣāṣ* makes sense after a crime has been committed or blood is shed. In this sense, *qīṣāṣ* means to demand an exact punishment for someone who has committed a crime.

As for the interpretation of Qurʿān 2:194, al-Qurṭubī stated, “*qīṣāṣ* means equality (*musāwāt*).” Although al-Qurṭubī highlights concepts such as reprisal and revenge when interpreting this verse, he interprets *qīṣāṣ* to mean equality. As explained above, *qīṣāṣ*, from a linguistic perspective, denotes the emergence of something followed by something else equal to the effect of the first thing, such as the image of an object in a mirror. Most *mufasssīrūn* understood *qīṣāṣ* to mean equality between two things, although they also mentioned that *qīṣāṣ* denotes punishment for a wrongful act. While this latter meaning of *qīṣāṣ* is secondary in importance to its primary meaning, it has gradually gained further importance in the history of *tafsīr*. Thus, *qīṣāṣ* simply means equality between two things, just as something is equal to its image. “Punishment for a wrongful act” and “reprisal” are not concepts that can initially be deducted from the term *qīṣāṣ*. Given that interpreters of the Qurʿān had the concept of equality in

7 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1410), 12:122.

8 Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, 12:121–122.

9 Abu al-Qāsim Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qurʿān* (Tehran, 1373), 404.

10 See also Fakhrīd Dīn Tarīhī, *Majmaʿ al-Baḥrayn* (Tehran: Farhang Eslami Publication, 1367), 4:180.

mind when interpreting the Qur'ānic verses related to *qiṣāṣ*, they often emphasized that there must be proportionality (equality) between the crime and its punishment.

The reason most Qur'ānic interpreters have interpreted *qiṣāṣ* within the context of punishment is that *qiṣāṣ* seems to be used in the Qur'ān in this sense. As will be explained later, the Qur'ān uses the term *qiṣāṣ* four times, all of which are related to the notion of punishment. However, associating *qiṣāṣ* with punishment has resulted in the marginalization of the primary meaning of *qiṣāṣ* (i.e., equality and likeness) and has led many interpreters of the Qur'ān to believe that *qiṣāṣ* means punishment, revenge, and reprisal. Given that *qiṣāṣ* originally meant equality and likeness, interpreters of the Qur'ān often emphasize that the punishment should be in proportion to the crime committed. In fact, the phrase “*qiṣāṣ* for something” means the likeness of something. When it is said two things are *qiṣāṣ* vis-à-vis each other, this means that the two are equal. Therefore, when it is said the *qiṣāṣ* for *naḥs* (*qiṣāṣ al-naḥs*) is *naḥs*, this means that *naḥs* is equal to *naḥs*. This does not necessarily mean that the punishment for *naḥs* is *naḥs*.

This meaning of *qiṣāṣ* was replaced by another conventional meaning (i.e. revenge and punishment) during the history of *tafsīr*. Therefore, whenever people speak of *qiṣāṣ*, they automatically think they are speaking of punishment, especially bodily punishment. Since commentators on the Qur'ān have often understood *qiṣāṣ* within the context of punishment and revenge, and have ignored the original meaning of *qiṣāṣ*, they have gone as far as to interpret the Qur'ānic verses on *qiṣāṣ* in an inappropriate and incorrect way. I will explore this issue in the next section. Overall, Qur'ānic commentators, as aforementioned, acknowledge that *qiṣāṣ* may convey meanings such as equality and balance, but they have not considered such meanings of *qiṣāṣ* as their primary focus.

3 *Qiṣāṣ* in the Qur'ān

The term *qiṣāṣ* is used in the Qur'ān in four verses:

We ordained for them in that [Torah]: A life for a life, and an eye for an eye, and a nose for a nose, and an ear for an ear, and a tooth for a tooth, and a [similar] retribution for wounds; but he who shall forgo it out of charity will atone thereby for some of his past sins. And they who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed—they, they are the evildoers.

Qur'ān 5:45

Fight during the sacred months if you are attacked: for a violation of sanctity is [subject to the law of] just retribution. Thus, if anyone commits aggression against you, attack him just as he has attacked you—but remain conscious of God, and know that God is with those who are conscious of Him.

Qurʾān 2:194

O You who have attained to faith! Just retribution is ordained for you in cases of killing: the free for the free, and the slave for the slave, and the woman for the woman. And if something [of his guilt] is remitted to a guilty person by his brother, this [remission] shall be adhered to with fairness, and restitution to his fellow-man shall be made in a goodly manner. This is an alleviation from your Sustainer, and an act of His grace. And for him who, none the less, willfully transgresses the bounds of what is right, there is grievous suffering in store.

Qurʾān 2:178

For, in [the law of] just retribution, O you who are endowed with insight, there is life for you, so that you might remain conscious of God.

Qurʾān 2:179

Next, I will focus on four topics for each of these verses: (a) interpretations of the verse by *mufasssirūn*, (b) the occasions of revelation for the verse, (c) analysis of the interpretation of the verse, and d) the key message of the verse.

3.1 *Qurʾān 5:45*

3.1.1 Interpretation of the Verse by *mufasssirūn*

This verse has two parts: the first part explains reprisal—a life for a life and a wound for a wound—and the second part encourages believers toward forgiveness. The *mufasssirūn* have interpreted the first part of this verse to mean that a life should be taken for a life (and similarly, an eye for an eye, or a wound for a wound), and consequently, a person must be executed if they kill someone deliberately. Likewise, the one who harms another person or causes intentional bodily injury must experience a similar level or degree of injury. For example, if a person has injured another person's eye, the victim must inflict an equal injury to the perpetrator's eye. According to many *mufasssirūn*, the punishment of the perpetrator is necessary because the word *katabnā* mentioned in the verse means to affirm the necessity (*wujūb*) of undertaking a task. However, even though many *mufasssirūn* have interpreted *qiṣāṣ* in the sense of punishment, they have also emphasized the importance of proportionality between

the crime and the punishment. For example, ‘Allāma Ṭabāṭabā’ī stated that no more than a single life should be taken for murdering a person and there should be equal punishment for all injuries (e.g., an eye for an eye or an equal wound for a wound).¹¹ Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, who held the same opinion in the interpretation of Qur’ān 5:45, stressed that “no more than one person should be killed in the case of an intentional homicide.” This means God considers equality in *qiṣāṣ*; for instance, a community (*jamā’a*) should not be killed if one person is killed. Al-Qurṭubī stated that the Qur’ān:

abrogates the pre-Islamic practice of tribal feuding, from which tribal pride would demand several victims (up to one hundred) as the equivalent of one fellow tribesman. God emphasizes proportionality and equality and orders Muslims to kill the perpetrator alone—not anyone else.¹²

Al-Qurṭubī also stated that “in the case of intentional homicide, *diya* is not a co-equal alternative to *qiṣāṣ*, but if *diya* is accepted by the heirs of the victim, the punishment of execution should not be carried out.”¹³

Although this verse explicitly uses the expression “life for a life, an eye for an eye, an ear for an ear, etc.” and emphasizes absolute equality and proportionality, the *mufasssirūn* did not agree on the interpretation of the concept of equality. Many *mufasssirūn* did not consider equality between men and women, the slave and the free man, and a Muslim and non-Muslim in relation to the implementation of *qiṣāṣ*. These interpreters referred to Qur’ān 2:178 and some ḥadīths to justify this position. For example, ‘Allāma Ṭabāṭabā’ī stated:

In the cases of murder, *qiṣāṣ* is prescribed, but a free man should be executed if the murderer kills another free man, a slave should be executed if he kills another slave, and a woman should be killed if she kills another woman.¹⁴

These Qur’ānic interpreters divided human beings into three main groups—Muslims, non-Muslims, and slaves—and each group into two groups—men and women. For example, Muslims were divided into Muslim men and Muslim

11 Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā’ī, *al-Mizān*, trans. Seyyed Muḥammad Bāqer Musavī Hamadānī (Qom: Islami Publication, 1382), 5:553.

12 Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Anṣārī al-Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth, n.d.), 6:194.

13 al-Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr*, 2:248.

14 Ṭabāṭabā’ī, *Tafsīr al-Mizān*, 5:564.

women, and the codes of criminal punishment were implemented differently for each. As for the punishment of non-Muslims, the *fiqh* literature divided them into *ahl al-kitāb* and non-*ahl al-kitāb*. The former refers to Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, while the latter refers to the followers of other religions.

Most of the *mufasssirūn* and *fuqahā* have confirmed this division, but some scholars have interpreted equality in a different context. For example, Abū Ḥanīfa stated that the term “life for life” mentioned in Qur’ān 5:45 means that people, including men and women, slaves and the free, and Muslims and non-Muslims, should all be executed if they commit murder.¹⁵ Some scholars have argued that Qur’ān 2:178 was abrogated by Qur’ān 5:45, given that these two verses are contradictory.¹⁶ Other interpreters have noted that free men and free women are equal, and that male and female slaves are equal when *qişāş* is implemented.¹⁷ Based on this Qur’ānic verse—especially the expression “life for life”—the majority of *fuqahā* deemed it necessary to execute a person who had committed intentional homicide.

In the second part of the verse, believers are encouraged to forgive perpetrators. Although this part does not explicitly speak of *diya* and the Qur’ān encourages believers to forgive perpetrators without receiving any money in compensation for a wrongful death or physical injury, many commentators argued that Islam recommended that the victim (or the heirs of the victim) receive a sum from the perpetrator. Al-Ṭabarī stated that Islam gave the victim or heirs of the victim the opportunity to choose between *qişāş*, *diya*, and forgiveness. Indeed, Islam considered *diya* and forgiveness as alternative options to *qişāş*. According to al-Ṭabarī, these alternative options were not common among the Jews: “In case of an intentional homicide or physical injuries, the Jews only implemented *qişāş* and there was no alternative method of punishment such as *diya*.”¹⁸ Some interpreters encouraged the believers to show forgiveness toward the offender by putting aside the demand for retaliation. According to Ibn Kathīr, if the victim does not make a demand for retaliation, this will atone for his bad deeds.¹⁹

Therefore, to establish a connection between the first part of the verse (which invites people to take revenge) and its second part (which invites people to show forgiveness), many *mufasssirūn* reasoned that *diya* was not common

15 Ibn Kathīr al-Dimashqī, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Mar’ifa, 1412AH), 3:110.

16 See Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Mar’ifa, 1412), 8:470.

17 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 8:470.

18 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 3:374.

19 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 3:109.

among the Israelites and that they implemented *qiṣāṣ* in case of a homicide, but the Prophet modified this law. In this context, *diyya* should be considered mercy from God.

3.1.2 Occasion of Revelation for This Verse

The *mufasssīrūn* mentioned several occasions based on which this verse was revealed. Al-Qurṭubī pointed to the tensions between two Jewish tribes: Banū al-Naḍīr and Banū Qurayṣa. According to al-Qurṭubī, when a person from Banū al-Naḍīr killed a person from Banū Qurayṣa, the perpetrator was not killed in retaliation, but when a person from Banū Qurayṣa killed a person from Banū al-Naḍīr, he would be killed. This verse was revealed to abrogate the discrimination that was common at the time.²⁰ Ṭabāṭabā'ī observed that prior to the rise of Islam, Christians prescribed *diyya* or asked people to show forgiveness when a person was killed. At times, Christians applied *qiṣāṣ*, but this was not an established ruling. According to Ṭabāṭabā'ī, this verse was revealed not only to endorse *diyya* and forgiveness, but to legalize *qiṣāṣ*. Al-Ṭabarī noted:

Some believe that this verse was revealed because people did not execute a woman who murdered a man, but they executed a man who murdered another man. Revealing this verse, God commanded people to declare that the same code of punishment be implemented equally for everyone.²¹

Al-Ṭabarī added:

When there was conflict between Banū al-Naḍīr and Banū Qurayṣa, the *diyya* of the latter was half of that of the former. The *diyya* for everyone from Banū al-Naḍīr was 140 *wasq* of dates, but the *diyya* for everyone from Banū Qurayṣa was 70 *wasq* of dates. The Prophet declared the blood money of Banū Qurayṣa equal to that of Banū al-Naḍīr.²²

It was also narrated that some Jews used to kill two people in retaliation for a single person being killed. This verse was revealed to ensure equality between everyone.²³ It shows that some tribes, especially those that were more powerful, considered the lives of their members more valuable than those of people

²⁰ al-Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr*, 6:192.

²¹ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 10:360.

²² al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 10:469.

²³ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 10:360.

from other tribes. Thus, the disproportionate retaliation for the killing of people that was common at the time was abrogated by the Qurʾān.

3.1.3 Analysis of the Verse

It can be concluded from the expressions used and the ideas mentioned in the works of Qurʾānic commentators that most interpreters presupposed that the term *qiṣāṣ* should be interpreted in the sense of punishment and retribution. This assumption had an important role in the interpretation of Qurʾān 5:45. The first part of the verse states: “We have prescribed for the Israelites that a life is for a life, an eye is for an eye and a tooth is for a tooth.” However, the *mufasssirrūn* simply concluded that a life should be taken for a life (and similarly, an eye for an eye, etc.) and that the victim must inflict an equal injury on the perpetrator. This stands in sharp contrast to the message of the verse. The *mufasssirrūn* even defined the term *qiṣāṣ* in the sense of the punishment or execution of a murderer, but as I have already argued, the term *qiṣāṣ*, from a linguistic perspective, means “to follow the effect of something.” Although many *mufasssirrūn* emphasized proportionality between the crime and the punishment, they failed to understand that the principle of proportionality exists in the meaning of the term *qiṣāṣ*. It is not simply associated with the condition of *qiṣāṣ*. The Qurʾān states in this verse that a *naḥs* is equal to a *naḥs*, an eye is equal to an eye, a tooth is equal to a tooth, but this does not convey the idea that a *naḥs* should be taken in retaliation for a homicide, or similar injuries must be inflicted on the perpetrator for the physical injuries he has caused.

The occasion of the revelation of the verse and other historical data demonstrate that the people of Ḥijāz used to kill each other in retaliation for a homicide and demanded several victims in response to the murder of one fellow tribesman. This Qurʾānic verse endorses the precept that God had legislated for the people of Israel, emphasizing that the life of all people should be considered equal. The verse also emphasizes the principle of proportionality. Key to this principle is likeness, equality, and justness. That is, *qiṣāṣ* should not be interpreted mainly in the sense of punishment. In this verse, the Qurʾān also asks believers to show forgiveness. It praises forgiveness in such a way that it is considered atonement for a person’s bad deeds. Since the *mufasssirrūn* interpreted *qiṣāṣ* in the sense of punishment, they stipulated that the term *taṣaddaqa bihī* refers to forgiveness from *qiṣāṣ*. According to many *mufasssirrūn*, the pronoun “*hi*” followed by “*bi*” refers to *qiṣāṣ*. However, this is incorrect. How is it possible that God considers *qiṣāṣ* and the execution of the murderer necessary (*wājib*) and then immediately invites people to show forgiveness and mercy toward those who have committed a crime? In fact, the necessity of *qiṣāṣ* stands in sharp conflict with God’s invitation to people to show forgiveness.

To resolve this contradiction, the *mufassirūn*, as already mentioned, declared that the people of Israel had no measure of punishment but *qiṣāṣ*. God favored Muslims and legislated forgiveness and *diyya*, and thus gave them an option to choose between *qiṣāṣ*, forgiveness, and *diyya*.

This approach does not appropriately justify the aforementioned contradiction for three reasons. First, it stands in sharp contrast to the occasion of the revelation for this verse. As pointed out in the narrations related to the occasion, the *diyya* of Banū al-Naḍīr was more than that of Banū Qurayṣa. This demonstrates that the Israelites used to implement *diyya* and considered it among codes of punishment. Second, the *mufassirūn* divided this verse into two parts. They speculated that the first part of the verse refers to *qiṣāṣ* (which was common among the Israelites), but the second part refers to God's favor toward Muslims because it asks them to show forgiveness. However, there is no valid reason to divide the verse into two parts. In the same way that God asks for "a life for a life," He invites the believers to show mercy toward the person who has committed the crime. Third, if we believe that it is a religious obligation to implement *qiṣāṣ*, this is not compatible with God's encouragement of believers to show forgiveness. The verse explicitly invites people to forgive, considering it atonement for their bad deeds. This means forgiveness should be prioritized over punishment. Other verses of the Qur'ān endorse this idea too: "But [remember that an attempt at] requiting evil may, too, become an evil: hence, whoever pardons [his foe] and makes peace, his reward rests with God—for, verily, He does not love evildoers" (Qur'ān 42:40). According to this verse, God rewards anyone who does not implement *qiṣāṣ*. The Qur'ān never states that punishing someone or taking revenge will be rewarded by God. The Qur'ān emphasizes patience, forgiveness, and mercy in many verses, and people with these characteristics will be rewarded by God. Therefore, given the Qur'ān's emphasis on forgiveness, it does not make sense that the text should emphasize punishment and consider it an obligatory aspect of the religion (*wājib*). Showing forgiveness and patience and controlling anger are moral virtues, and the Qur'ān prioritizes these over the implementation of punishment. In societies where forgiveness and patience are more developed, the rate of violence and crime significantly decreases.

Although *qiṣāṣ* should not necessarily be defined in terms of punishment as already discussed, I define *qiṣāṣ* in this verse to mean the proportionality between the crime and the punishment. There is some evidence in the verse (e.g., its emphasis on forgiveness and its occasion of revelation), which indicates that the verse is related to the notion of punishment. As already stated, most *mufassirūn* and *fuqahā* believe there must be proportionality between the crime and the punishment. I endorse this idea too. However, what I present

as “the proportionality between the crime and the punishment” differs from the way the *mufassirūn* have approached this notion.

If *qişāş* is defined as equality and likeness, as I have defined it, then the verse states, “in the Torah we have stipulated that *nafs* is equal to *nafs*, the eye is equal to the eye, and a wound is equal to a similar wound.” The verse repeats this notion by presenting other examples, such as the equality of a tooth to a tooth, an ear to an ear, and a nose to a nose. These are examples by which the verse attempts to define *qişāş*, meaning that it does not emphasize punishment. On examining the occasion of the revelation for this verse, it can be observed that the verse rejects the discriminatory behavior of certain Arab and Jewish tribes in Medina, who would kill several people in retaliation for the murder of one person. They sometimes killed two men in retaliation for the murder of one man, and sometimes, if the victim was a woman, the male perpetrator was not executed. That is, they did not consider men and women equal when applying *qişāş*.

This discrimination existed in the case of *diyya* too. The *diyya* of some tribes was more than that of others. The *diyya* of a man was more than that of a woman. Slaves were not considered equal to free men in the codes of punishment. Therefore, this verse declares that all human beings should be considered equal. The verse does not say that a life should be taken for another life, or the eye or ear of the perpetrator should be injured for an injury to the victim. Rather, the verse conveys two key meanings. First, the life and bodies of all people are equal; no one has inherent superiority over another. Second, in the case of punishment (if we define *qişāş* in the sense of punishment), *qişāş* means proportionality between the crime and punishment. For example, one person should be killed in retaliation for the murder of one person (i.e. two people should not be killed). The Qur’ān states in another verse:

If you have to respond to an attack [in argument], respond only to the extent of the attack leveled against you; but to bear yourselves with patience is indeed far better for [you, since God is with] those who are patient in adversity.

Qur’ān 16:126

Significantly, in Qur’ān 16:126, the expression “if you have to respond” demonstrates that the Qur’ān does not highlight punishment. Similarly to Qur’ān 5:45, this verse states that if punishment is applied, it should be proportionate to the crime committed.

Therefore, this verse invites people toward the principle of proportionality between the crime and the punishment. The expression “*fa-man taşaddaqa*

bihi fahuwa kaffāra lahū” does not mean that if a person forfeits *qīṣāṣ* it will serve as atonement for their bad deeds, but if a person decides to waive punishment (all sorts of punishment, not necessarily punishment in the sense of retaliation), it will serve as atonement for their bad deeds. A ḥadīth endorses this meaning: “If one forfeits the blood of another person, this will serve as atonement for him from his birth until death.”²⁴ The last part of the verse states, “Those who do not judge according to what God has revealed are doing grave wrong.” This sentence refers to proportionality between the crime and the punishment, stating that those who do not consider such proportionality necessary are wrongdoers. This sentence does not mean that if a person does not endorse the punishment of execution, they are a wrongdoer, because the verse has already invited people to show forgiveness. Therefore, if we interpret *qīṣāṣ* to mean equality and proportionality, there is no contradiction between the two parts of the verse analyzed thus far: that is, there is no contradiction between the necessity of *qīṣāṣ* (*qīṣāṣ* as defined in this article) and forgiveness from punishment.

This verse, as explained, seeks to proclaim all people equal, challenging the discriminatory laws that existed in pre-Islamic era. What is strange is that most *mufasssīrūn* attempted to enforce similar discriminatory laws for Muslims that existed in the pre-Islamic era. For instance, the *mufasssīrūn* found it inconceivable to consider a free man equal to a slave, and therefore, they often allocated much lesser *dīya* for a slave than for a free man. The Prophet tried his best to eradicate the discriminatory laws prevalent among the Arabs, but he could not change all such laws in a short period. Although the Qur’ān sought to change the discriminatory traditions and beliefs of the pre-Islamic era, the *mufasssīrūn* often interpreted Qur’ānic verses in a way that such beliefs were still applied. *Nafs*, mentioned in Qur’ān 5:45, refers to all people, and the term “*al-nafs bi al-nafs*” refers to the idea that all people are equal. Yet, the *mufasssīrūn* did not consider all people equal. They believed that *nafs* applies to free Muslim men alone. Thus, they thought that different laws should be stipulated in codes of punishment for a free Muslim man, vis-à-vis a non-Muslim, slave, or woman.

3.1.4 The Message of the Verse

In light of the discussion thus far, the primary message of Qur’ān 5:45 is that there should be no distinction between the value of different people’s lives. The lives of all people are considered equal before God. The verse invites people to

²⁴ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 3:114.

avoid excessiveness when applying punishment and asks believers to consider the proportionality of the punishment in relation to the crime. Those who do not follow these rules are considered wrongdoers. Unlike the ideas of many *mufassirūn*, this verse does not invite people to follow rules such as the death penalty or the amputation of bodily organs, but invites them to show forgiveness toward the perpetrators, stating that this will serve as atonement for their bad deeds. This means the focus of the verse is forgiveness, and forgiveness must be prioritized over punishment. This argument stands in sharp contrast to the views that consider execution and bodily punishment necessities (*wājibāt*) of the religion. When something—that is, forgiveness—is prioritized over something else—that is, punishment—the latter cannot be considered a *wājib* of the religion.

3.2 *Qurʾān 2:194*

3.2.1 The Interpretation of the Verse by the *mufassirūn*

Although the *mufassirūn* do not often refer to Qurʾān 2:194 when they discuss *qiṣāṣ*, this verse is one of the four verses that mention *qiṣāṣ*. An analysis of the verse will help understand the concept of *qiṣāṣ* from the Qurʾān's perspective.

This verse is similar in structure to Qurʾān 5:45, which has been analyzed in Section 11.3.1. Qurʾān 5:45 begins with the expression “a *naḥs* for a *naḥs* and an eye for an eye.” Similarly, this verse begins with “sacred month for a sacred month” and then states that “*al-ḥurumāt*” are *qiṣāṣ*. Some *mufassirūn* have given the same type of interpretation as Qurʾān 5:45 when interpreting this verse. According to *Tafsīr al-Jalālyn*, “*ḥurumāt* is the plural of *ḥurma*, and it is what must be treated as sacrosanct. If these holy things are violated, *qiṣāṣ* (taking revenge) is necessary.”²⁵ Al-Alūsī stated, “*al-ḥurumāt qiṣāṣ* refers to those things that should be considered holy and treated as sacrosanct.” He then added, “if the *ḥurumāt* of those things are violated, *qiṣāṣ* should be implemented.”²⁶ Ṭabāṭabāʾī said: “just as they violate the holiness of the sacred month, you do so because God has stipulated *qiṣāṣ* in all *ḥurumāt*.” He adds, “whoever commits aggression against you, you should commit aggression against him in the same manner that he committed it against you.” Then he concludes:

25 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālyn* (Beirut: al-Nūr Publications, 1416), 2:30.

26 Sayyid Maḥmūd al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Maʿānī fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAzīm* (Beirut: al-Nūr Publications, 1416 AH), 2:77.

This verse tells us that God has stipulated *qiṣāṣ* in the sacred month too, because He has stipulated *qiṣāṣ* in all *ḥurumāt*, among which is the sacred month. God has ordered us to commit transgression against those who have committed transgression against us.²⁷

This shows that Ṭabāṭabā'ī interpreted *qiṣāṣ* in the sense of revenge and retribution. Al-Ṭabarī stated:

ḥurumāt is the plural of *ḥurma*, referring to the sacred months, sacred places and sacred things. Muḥammad and the believers were prevented from entering the sacred place (i.e. the Ka'ba in Mecca) and God permitted them to avenge the idolaters' treatment of them in the next year; these are the *ḥurumāt* for which God has stipulated *qiṣāṣ*.

In its second part, the verse states that if someone transgresses against an individual, in turn, they should transgress against the transgressor, but fear God and know that God is with the pious. *Tafsīr al-Jalālyn* comments on this part:

Whoever commits aggression against you by fighting in the Sacred Enclosure or during a state of ritual purity or in the sacred months, commit aggression against him in the manner he committed it against you. The [Muslim] response is referred to as "aggression" because that is what it resembles formally.²⁸

Similarly, al-Ṭabarī comments, "if someone commits aggression against you and fights you, you fight him in the same way you were afflicted because God has considered *qiṣāṣ* for *ḥurumāt*."²⁹

3.2.2 Occasion of Revelation for the Verse

In terms of its occasion of revelation, al-Qurṭubī stated,

This verse was revealed when the Prophet went for *ʿumra* during the sixth year of Hijra. The idolaters of Mecca prevented him and the Muslims who had come with him from entering the Ka'ba, thus the Prophet returned to Medina. Then God promised Muḥammad he would soon enter the Ka'ba.

27 Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*, 2:92.

28 al-Maḥallī and al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālyn*, 2:30.

29 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 3:311.

The Prophet entered the Ka'ba in the seventh year of Hijra and performed the pilgrimage.³⁰

Al-Ṭabarī narrated a similar occasion of revelation, but under the expression *fa-man i'tadā 'alaykum* he added Ibn 'Abbās' idea that this part was revealed in Mecca when there were only a few Muslims, who were under pressure from the idolaters but could not fight them. God allowed Muslims to punish the idolaters if they punished them. Al-Ṭabarī himself rejected this idea. Most *mufasssīrūn* have repeated al-Qurṭubī's narration.

3.2.3 Analysis of the Verse

As I have explained, most *mufasssīrūn* have interpreted this verse in the sense of punishment and revenge. The verse states *ḥurumāt* are *qişāş*. However, most *mufasssīrūn* and translators of the Qur'ān state that if *ḥurumāt* are violated, *qişāş* is required. This interpretation stands in contrast to the literal meaning of the verse. The *mufasssīrūn* often added terms such as retribution, revenge, and punishment when interpreting the verse—terms that are not actually mentioned. The first part of the verse states, “sacred month for a sacred month, and *ḥurumāt* are *qişāş*.” If *qişāş* is the focus of the two parts of this sentence the verse can be translated in this way: the sacred month is *qişāş* (equal) to a sacred month and *ḥurumāt* are *qişāş* of (or equal to) each other. Among the *mufasssīrūn*, al-Ṭabarī interpreted this verse in a way that is closer to its literal meaning.

The words after the first part of the verse reveals its key message: it says that if someone transgresses against you, you transgress likewise against him, but it also exhorts people to fear God and tells them that God is with the pious. This means the verse warns believers against committing additional aggression and discourages them from taking revenge greater than what they were afflicted with. The verse emphasizes that a response to aggression should be proportionate, while a greater reaction than this is contrary to piety. The verse uses the term *mathal*, meaning in the same way or similar. This refers to people in Arabian society who often used to kill many people in retaliation for the murder of a single person from their tribe. The occasion of the revelation for this verse reveals that the people of Mecca prevented the Muslims living in Medina from entering Mecca to perform the *'umra*. This could have led to further tension between the Muslims and the Meccan idolaters that could have ultimately resulted in war. However, the Prophet reached an agree-

30 al-Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr*, 2:354.

ment with the Meccan idolaters that he, along with the Muslims, would enter Mecca the following year. The Qur'ān thus states that Muslims' entry to Mecca in the following year was an appropriate response to the Meccans preventing the Muslims from entering Mecca. No further response (e.g., launching a war against them) should be undertaken by the Muslims. Here, the Qur'ān highlights that a response to a transgression should be proportionate to that transgression.

Many *mufasssirūn* have interpreted this verse to mean that if someone attacks one or fights one, one can likewise fight them. Yet, this interpretation seems to be incorrect. Similarly to Qur'ān 4:45, this verse emphasizes proportionality alone, preventing believers from carrying out excessive violence and revenge. Therefore, the verse does not spur believers toward war and *qitāl*, but emphasizes that the response to a transgression should not include war and bloodshed. The verse does not speak about murder, punishment, or crime, and hence, the term *qiṣāṣ* used in the verse should not be interpreted in a way to convey such meanings. This is one of the Qur'ānic verses on *qiṣāṣ* that explicitly rejects revenge and punishment, especially bodily punishment.

What does the term *mithāl* mean? As explained, the second part of Qur'ān 2:194 states that the response to a transgression should be, at the very maximum (*hadaksarī*), similar to it. The response mentioned is the maximum response for two reasons. First, applying punishment is not obligatory (*wājib*) because forgiveness is recommended. Some verses of the Qur'ān invite people to show forgiveness, stating that forgiveness should be prioritized over punishment (see Qur'ān 5:45; 16:126; 42:40 and 2:178). Second, implementing a punishment greater than the crime itself is a transgression. Therefore, it is fair to conclude that the response to a transgression, from the Qur'ān's perspective, ranges from forgiveness to applying a similar punishment.

The term *mithāl* follows the pattern *fi'āl*. *Qiṣāṣ* has a similar meaning to *mithāl*. It is for this reason the verse uses *mithāl* to refer to maximum punishment. The term *mithāl*, similarly to *qiṣāṣ*, does not connote punishment. The reason terms such as *mithāl* and *qiṣāṣ* are used when the Qur'ān speaks about retaliation and punishment is that it is only in retaliation that a greater transgression (one greater than what was afflicted) might be carried out.

It should be noted that execution is one way to respond to murder, but it has never been the only way. *Dīya* has been an alternative form of punishment. According to many *fuqahā*, since an eye is equal to an eye and an ear is equal to an ear, retaliation (*qiṣāṣ*) must be applied to the same organ that was harmed—meaning, for example, an eye for an eye or an ear for an ear, not an eye for an ear. However, this ruling was not always applied in Muslim-majority societies,

since the customs (*urf*) of these societies could not accept such a ruling. In addition, it was often difficult to apply an exact punishment on perpetrators in retaliation for the injury they had committed.

One question that still arises is whether the *mithl* of every act should be a similar act? If a person has committed aggression against us, should we commit the same aggression against him? The Qurʾān does not say this. An analysis of the punishment of an act of aggression in the way recommended by most *fuqahā* shows that people can insult someone who has insulted them, or slander someone who has slandered them, or if someone hurts or disturbs their family, they too can hurt or disturb that individual's family. Yet, the Qurʾān does not endorse such acts, but rather, endorses punishment only to emphasize the value of life, protect the interests of society, and prevent people from engaging in acts of violence. Furthermore, laws of punishment change over the course of history. If people in a particular era considered execution or physical injury a reasonable method of punishment, it does not mean this punishment will always be considered just and rational. To determine *mithl*, we should refer to reason (*aql*) and custom (*urf*). In other words, the punishment should be proportionate not only to the crime, but also to the customs of the society in which the code of punishment is applied.³¹

3.2.4 The Key Message of the Verse

The occasion of the revelation for this verse tells us that the *ʿumra* the Muslims performed in the seventh year of Hijra was equivalent to the *ʿumra* they were supposed to perform in the sixth year of Hijra. Therefore, the message of the verse is that the appropriate response to aggression is not to engage in an act of violence. If someone does not forgive another person's aggression, it can be responded to proportionally. The proportionate response, as I explained, should be compatible with the *urf* and moral codes of the time and place. Moreover, it is important to note that the Qurʾān encourages people toward forgiveness.

3.3 Qurʾān 2:178

3.3.1 Interpretation of the Verse by the *mufasssirūn*

This verse, one of the most important verses related to *qiṣāṣ*, has two parts. The first part states, "Just retribution is ordained for you in cases of killing: the free for the free, and the slave for the slave, and the woman for the woman." This part includes three matters: (a) whether *qiṣāṣ* is a necessity (*wājib*) of the reli-

³¹ For the importance of customs from the Qurʾānic perspective, see Qurʾān 2:228.

gion, (b) how to interpret *qiṣāṣ*, and (c) how to interpret the expression “the free for the free, and the slave for the slave, and the woman for the woman.”

Most *mufasssirūn* interpreted the term *kutiba* to mean it is obligatory to retaliate for the slain. According to al-Ṭabarī, *kutiba ‘alaykum* means it is obligatory (*wājib*) for you.³² Al-Ṭabarsī and al-Alūsī held similar ideas.³³ The *mufasssirūn* interpreted the term *kutiba* in this verse and the term *katabna* in Qur’ān 5:45 to refer to an obligatory precept. The *mufasssirūn* also interpreted *qiṣāṣ* in this verse in the sense of punishment. Al-Alūsī stated, “the fact that the heirs of the victim have the capacity to forgive the culprit does not contradict the necessity of *qiṣāṣ*.”³⁴ For al-Alūsī, it is incumbent upon a judge or jurist to endorse and apply *qiṣāṣ*. The onus is on the culprit to accept such a ruling.³⁵ About the expression “*al-qiṣāṣ fi al-qatlā*” used in this verse, al-Ṭabarsī stated, “this term refers to the concept of proportionality, which means that the murderer should experience the same thing that he did to the victim.”³⁶ Al-Ṭabarī indicated another idea. According to him:

Some believe that this verse was revealed about two groups who fought each other during the time of the Prophet. Some people were killed from both groups. The Prophet ordered them to establish a peace treaty among themselves, according to which the *diyya* of the women of both groups, the *diyya* of the men of both groups and the *diyya* of the slaves of both groups would be exchanged.³⁷

Al-Ṭabarī added, “what God has ordered us to do with regards to *qiṣāṣ* is to prevent us from implementing additional punishment. This means no one should be killed except the murderer.”³⁸ Ibn Kathīr maintained that in this verse God has ordered us to follow the criterion of justness when implementing *qiṣāṣ*.³⁹

Another matter in this verse is how to interpret the expression “the free man for the free man.” As I have explained, some interpreters, such as al-Ṭabarī, maintained this expression meant that the *diyya* of free men from two tribes

32 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 3:93.

33 Faḍl b. Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma‘ al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (Qom: Seyda, 1354), 1:480; al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma‘ānī*, 2:49.

34 al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma‘ānī*, 2:49.

35 al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma‘ānī*, 2:49.

36 al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma‘ al-Bayān*, 1:479.

37 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 3:94.

38 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 3:94.

39 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 1:357.

during wartime should be exchanged with one another. The same ruling should also be applied to slaves and women separately, because the *diya* of a free man is equal to that of a free man, and not to the value of a slave or woman. For al-Ṭabarī, “if a free man kills another free man, the value of life of the murderer and the murdered is equal, and thus the murderer should be killed alone, and no one except the murderer should be killed.”⁴⁰ This means a free man should be killed for a free man and not for a slave, a slave should be killed for another slave, and a female should be killed for another female.

There are other relevant ideas about this verse. Some believe Qur’ān 2:178 was abrogated by Qur’ān 5:45,⁴¹ and others believe the reverse.⁴² Those who considered Qur’ān 2:178 *mansūkh* (abrogated) believe in equality in *qişāş*; whereas those who considered Qur’ān 5:45 *mansūkh* believe that all people should not be treated equally in *qişāş*. For example, Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim Khoei argued that men, women, and slaves should not be treated equally when implementing *qişāş*. Another idea was presented by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, who said:

A group of people who have killed a person should not be killed because God has ordered us to consider equality (*musāwāt*) in retaliation, and there is no equality between a person and a group of people. *Qişāş* in this verse refers to the killing of the person who has killed another person. This verse was revealed to abrogate the Arab tradition where someone other than the murderer was killed in retaliation, or more than one person was killed in retaliation for the murder of a person. That is, the killer is the only one to be killed in *qişāş*.⁴³

Another important point about this verse is that it encourages believers to show forgiveness in its second part. Here, the question arises: How is it possible that the Qur’ān considers retaliation for the slain obligatory, and simultaneously asks believers to forgive the culprit? This seems contradictory. The *mufasssīrūn* have attempted to resolve this paradox. According to al-Ṭabarsī, some interpreters stipulated that the term *kutiba ‘alaykum* means this ruling had been dictated upon believers in the Preserved Tablet (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*). Then, he stated:

40 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 3:94.

41 See Abu al-Qasim Khoei, *al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 292.

42 Khoei, *al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 292.

43 Quoted in al-Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr*, 2:251.

Someone may ask how it is possible that the Qur'an says *qiṣāṣ* is obligatory but the Qur'an gives the option to the heirs of the victim to choose alternative ways such as forgiveness or taking blood money. *Qiṣāṣ* is obligatory only when the heirs of the murdered choose to apply *qiṣāṣ*, which means an obligatory precept can sometimes be optional.⁴⁴

Al-Ṭabarī stated, "this verse says if a free man kills another free man, the obligation to apply *qiṣāṣ* applies solely to the perpetrator of the murder, not to any other individual. It is *ḥarām* to kill anyone except the murderer."⁴⁵ According to al-Ṭabarī, this verse does not tell us that *qiṣāṣ* is obligatory in the same way that prayer and fasting were made obligatory for us. The obligation refers to the idea that *qiṣāṣ* must be applied only for the murderer.⁴⁶

As in the case of Qur'an 5:45, some interpreters argued, "God had mercy on the *umma* by giving them the *dīya*, which was not allowed for any nation before it. *Dīya* is possible when the heir of the victim accepts it."⁴⁷ Ṭabāṭabā'ī also argued that the heirs of the victim have the right to take blood money from the murderer, stating, "they are allowed to pardon the murderer and accept the blood money, and this is a mercy from God."⁴⁸ Regarding the last part of the verse, which states, "if anyone exceeds these limits, grievous suffering awaits him," Ṭabāṭabā'ī said if someone chooses to forgive the murderer but then changes his mind, choosing instead to apply *qiṣāṣ*, grievous suffering will await him.⁴⁹ Some *mufassirūn* had different ideas, stating that the last part of the verse means:

If someone violates the rulings mentioned in the verse, for example if he kills another person other than the murderer, or if someone takes the blood money but then chooses to kill the murderer, he will be afflicted with grievous suffering.⁵⁰

44 al-Ṭabarsī, *Majma' al-Bayān*, 1:480.

45 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Taḥsīn al-Qur'ān*, 3:109–110.

46 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Taḥsīn al-Qur'ān*, 3:109–110.

47 al-Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr*, 2:255; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 1:358–359.

48 Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*, 1:656–657.

49 Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*, 1:656–657.

50 al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī*, 2:51.

3.3.2 Occasion of the Revelation for the Verse According to Ibn Kathīr,

Just before the advent of Islam, a war broke out between Banū al-Naḍīr and Banū Qurayza. Banū al-Naḍīr defeated Banū Qurayza. From this time onward, they made it a law that when a person from Banū al-Naḍīr kills a person from Banū Qurayza, he is not killed in retaliation, but only pays a hundred *wasq* of dates. However, when a person from Banū Qurayza kills a Banū al-Naḍīr man, he would be killed. If Banū al-Naḍīr decided to forfeit the execution of the murderer and pay a ransom, the Banū Qurayza man should pay two hundred *wasq* of dates [double the amount Banū al-Naḍīr pays in *diya*]. God abrogated this law and commanded that justice must be observed regarding the penal code.⁵¹

Al-Qurṭubī stated:

A war broke out between two tribes and many people belonging to both tribes were killed. One of the tribes stated that if a woman was killed from our tribe, a man should be killed in retaliation from the other tribe. If a man killed from the other tribe, a woman from our tribe should be killed. They referred the case to the Prophet and agreed to pay *diya* to each other, however, the *diya* of one tribe came out as double the *diya* of the other. Then, this verse was revealed.⁵²

Al-Ṭabarī narrated a *khbar* (report) with regards to this verse:

According to some, this verse was revealed about a tribe. They made it a rule that if a slave from their tribe was killed by a slave from another tribe, they would ask for the murder of the culprit's master. If a man from their tribe was killed by a woman of another tribe, they would ask for the death of another man from the family of the culprit. God revealed this verse and informed them that the killer was the only one who could be killed in *qiṣāṣ*.⁵³

According to al-Ṭabarsī:

51 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 1:357.

52 al-Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr*, 2:244.

53 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 3:93–94.

This verse was revealed with regards to two tribes, one of which was more powerful than the other. They made a law among themselves that in retaliation for the murder of a slave from one tribe (the stronger one), a free man from the other tribe should be killed, and that in retaliation for the murder of a man from one tribe (the stronger one), two men from the weaker tribe must be killed. Also, the stronger tribe believed that the *diyya* of the members of their tribe should be double amount of that of the other tribe. Islam abrogated this law and God revealed this verse.⁵⁴

3.3.3 Analysis of the Interpretation of the Verse

The *mufasssīrūn* had different approaches to *qiṣāṣ* in this verse. For example, when interpreting this verse, al-Ṭabarsī emphasized the law of equality for cases of murder. According to him, “the murderer should be killed in the same manner in which he committed the murder.”⁵⁵ This opinion does not seem to be correct. Although al-Ṭabarsī interpreted *qiṣāṣ* in this verse to mean equality, he was preoccupied with the notion of punishment and thus interpreted the verse in a way that was very different from its literal meaning. He considered *qiṣāṣ* (i.e., executing the murderer) an obligatory feature of the religion. As stated above, al-Ṭabarsī attempted to resolve an apparent contradiction in the verse, which considered retaliation obligatory, but also asked believers to forgive the culprit. This is what many *mufasssīrūn* dealt with when interpreting this verse. In order to resolve this paradox, *mufasssīrūn* such as al-Ṭabarsī, al-Alūsī, and Ṭabāṭabāʾī argued that *qiṣāṣ* is conditional upon it being deemed necessary by the heirs of the slain.

Mufasssīrūn such as Ibn Kathīr argued that the heirs of the murdered person must demand *qiṣāṣ* and could not take *diyya* instead, unless the murderer accepted it.⁵⁶ Al-Ṭabarī presented another idea. According to him, *qiṣāṣ* was not an obligatory precept but only *mubāḥ* (permitted). In this verse the obligation is in relation to the use of excessive measures, not *qiṣāṣ* itself; for example, no one should be killed except the murderer. Al-Ṭabarī concluded that *qiṣāṣ* was not a *wājib* of the religion in the same way that prayer and fasting are prescribed for Muslims.⁵⁷ Indeed, al-Ṭabarī interpreted *qiṣāṣ* in the sense of punishment, but, unlike other *mufasssīrūn*, held that executing a murderer was not an obligatory precept of the religion. To resolve the apparent contradiction between

54 al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-Bayān*, 1:479.

55 al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-Bayān*, 1:479.

56 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 1:358–359.

57 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, 3:109–110.

the two parts of the verse, al-Ṭabarī considered *qiṣāṣ* permissible (*mubāḥ*). Yet, if we define *qiṣāṣ* in a different way to the *mufassirūn*—that is, *qiṣāṣ* to mean equality—then, the necessity of implementing *qiṣāṣ* is not contradictory to the other part of the verse.

It is now important to consider how the *mufassirūn* interpreted phrases such as “the free man for the free man,” “the slave for the slave,” and “the female for the female.” Many *mufassirūn* interpreted these terms in light of Qurʾān 5:45. They argued that these expressions refer to the idea that a free man is equal to a free man, a slave is equal to a slave, and a woman is equal to a woman. They concluded that a free man is not equal to a slave, and a man is not equal to a woman in relation to the codes of punishment. Indeed, *qiṣāṣ* must only be applied when the victim and the perpetrator are equal in terms of their social status (free or slave) and their sex (male or female).⁵⁸

This idea has not been accepted by all *mufassirūn*. The consensus (*ijmāʿ*) of the *fuqahā*, as pointed out in *Kanz al-Irfān*, made it clear that a slave may be killed in retaliation for a free person, and a woman may be killed in retaliation for a man. Indeed, most *fuqahā* believed that a person with a lower social status (i.e. a woman or a slave) may be killed in retaliation for a person belonging to higher social status (i.e. a man or a free person).⁵⁹ This idea stems from the sociopolitical context, which accepted discrimination. That is, the Qurʾānic verse was interpreted in light of this norm. The discrimination that distinguishes between a free man, woman, and slave is never endorsed by the Qurʾān itself. In the Qurʾānic verses related to *qiṣāṣ*, whenever the term *mithl* is used it refers either to equality or to the proportionality between the crime and its punishment. This means the Qurʾān did not distinguish between men and women or between free people and slaves in terms of the codes of punishment.

Most *fuqahā* and *mufassirūn* believed that people belonging to different social groups should receive different codes of punishment, but Abū Ḥanīfa argued that the term “*al-naḥs bi al-naḥs*” mentioned in Qurʾān 5:45 refers to the equal value of human life, regardless of a person’s social status or religious orientation.⁶⁰ The Qurʾān, I argue, emphasizes equality between human beings. There are even prophetic ḥadīths that indicate that similar punishments should be applied to both free people and slaves. For example, it is narrated from the Prophet that whoever kills his slave should be killed in retaliation.

58 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān fi Tafṣīr al-Qurʾān*, 3:109–110.

59 Fāḍel Miqdād, *Kanz al-Irfān fi Fiqh al-Qurʾān* (Tehran, 1365), 2:355.

60 Fāḍel Miqdād, *Kanz al-Irfān fi Fiqh al-Qurʾān*, 2:355.

The occasion of the revelation for the verse may shed light on the key message it conveys. As explained in Section 11.3.1, many occasions of revelation were narrated for this verse, yet, these narrations agree on the idea that the verse was revealed to abrogate discriminatory laws between two groups of people (such as the Arab and Jewish tribes). The occasions of revelation narrated for this verse show that stronger tribes treated weaker tribes just as a free man would treat a slave. In some cases, more than one person was killed in retaliation for the murder of a single person. The *diyya* of a man was more than that of a woman, and the *diyya* of a free man was more than that of a slave. This verse was revealed to abrogate such discriminatory laws. However, when interpreting this verse, the *mufasssīrūn* did not distance themselves from these discriminatory laws, and instead, emphasized the distinction between men and women or between free men and slaves.

If phrases such as “a free man for a free man,” “a slave for a slave” and “a female for a female” in this verse are interpreted to refer to an explanation of *qiṣāṣ*, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, the meaning of *qiṣāṣ* in this verse refers to likeness and equality, which is compatible with the linguistic meaning of *qiṣāṣ* and the context (*siyāq*) of previous verses related to *qiṣāṣ*. Second, *qiṣāṣ* does not refer to punishment and therefore does not stand in conflict with the Qur’ān’s encouragement for people to show forgiveness. *Qiṣāṣ* here refers to implementing proportionality, likeness, and justness. Third, this interpretation is compatible with the occasion of the revelation for the verse because it is narrated that the Prophet encouraged tribes to practice equality and to abstain from committing aggression toward one another. This means the Prophet’s primary objective was to put an end to the conflicts prevalent among Arabian tribes. The second part of the verse encourages people to forgive each other and considers both sides of a conflict to be brothers, endorsing the idea of human relations. In contrast, if interpreting *qiṣāṣ* to mean killing, the verse encourages both sides of a conflict toward further bloodshed. This is inconsistent not only with the occasion of the revelation of the verse but also with its key message.

3.3.4 The Message of the Verse

Qur’ān 2:178 encourages justice, discourages discrimination and aggression, and asks believers not to kill innocent people. Similarly to Qur’ān 5:45, this verse invites people to pardon the culprit as an act of mercy. The verse also prioritizes forgiveness over revenge, highlighting that forgiveness will atone for a believer’s bad deeds.

3.4 *Qurʾān 2:179*

3.4.1 The Interpretation of the Verse by *mufasssīrūn*

Many interpreters have praised this Qurʾānic verse in terms of its *iʿjāz* (inimitability) and *balāgha* (eloquence). Ṭabāṭabāʾī stated, “this verse is one of the best verses of the Qurʾān in terms of *balāgha*, the argument presented in this verse is very strong and its meaning is elegant.”⁶¹ The majority of *mufasssīrūn* interpreted the verse to mean that there is a benefit for society in the law of retribution. According to al-Zamakhsharī, “When one speaks of *qişāş*, one often speaks of killing and taking one’s life, but this verse states that there is life for you in *qişāş*.”⁶²

According to al-Ṭabarsī, this verse emphasizes the necessity of implementing *qişāş*:

The verse states that there is life in retaliation because if a person intends to kill another and thinks of *qişāş*, this may prevent him from killing another for fear of retaliation. It is for this reason that the verse says there is life in *qişāş*. There is another interpretation of this verse. The verse states there is life in *qişāş* because, unlike in the pre-Islamic era, no one should be killed in retaliation except the actual murderer.⁶³

According to al-Qurṭubī, “there is life in *qişāş* because when people fear retaliation, this often prevents them from killing one another, and thus two people remain alive.”⁶⁴ Similarly, Ṭabāṭabāʾī stated, “*qişāş* has not been stipulated by God only for the purpose of revenge and retaliation. It is stipulated to prevent people from further aggression. This carries great benefit for society.”⁶⁵

Qurʾān 2:178 considers forgiveness an act of mercy from God, and Qurʾān 2:179 stipulates that there is life in *qişāş*. According to Ṭabāṭabāʾī, Qurʾān 2:179 deals with the reasoning behind the stipulation of *qişāş* and explains the benefits that *qişāş* can create for society. For Ṭabāṭabāʾī, forgiveness is better for the *maşlahā* (benefit) of society than revenge and retaliation. Forgiveness is a human virtue; however, the *maşlahā* of society is fulfilled when *qişāş* is stipulated. *Qişāş* can guarantee the value of an individual’s life.⁶⁶ Similarly, al-Alūsī

61 Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *Tafsīr al-Mizān*, 1:657.

62 Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī, *Tafsīr al-Kashshāf*, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿArabī, n.d., 1:222–223.

63 al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-Bayān*, 1:481.

64 al-Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr*, 2:256.

65 Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *Tafsīr al-Mizān*, 1:664.

66 Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *Tafsīr al-Mizān*, 1:657.

argued that there is life in *qiṣāṣ* in the sense that the fear of *qiṣāṣ* prevents a person from killing another person; therefore, *qiṣāṣ* saves the life of two persons. In addition, Arabs in the pre-Islamic era used to kill people who had not committed murder. Sometimes they killed one group of people in retaliation for the murder of an individual. *Qiṣāṣ* prevents people from carrying out such acts, and thus, there is life in *qiṣāṣ*.⁶⁷

3.4.2 Occasion of Revelation for the Verse

Most *mufasssīrūn* do not mention any particular occasion of revelation for this verse, given that it comes immediately after Qurʾān 2:178. However, al-Qurṭubī mentioned an occasion:

In the pre-Islamic era, it was common that when a person killed another person from another tribe, war broke out between the two tribes and many people were killed. After the revelation of this verse, Arab tribes did not fight each other anymore when a person from one tribe killed another person from another tribe. It is in this context that the Qurʾān says there is life in *qiṣāṣ*.⁶⁸

3.4.3 Analysis of the Interpretation of the Verse

When interpreting this verse, most *mufasssīrūn* sought to emphasize how *qiṣāṣ* (or killing another person in retaliation for committing a murder) can save life. In the interpretive discourse, three ideas can be found. First, there is life in *qiṣāṣ* because people know that if they kill someone, they themselves will be killed. Second, executing a murderer is beneficial for society. Third, because the law of *qiṣāṣ* presented in the Qurʾān resulted in the execution of the murderer alone, not a group of people or an innocent person, there is life in *qiṣāṣ*. This latter idea seeks to emphasize equality and proportionality with regard to *qiṣāṣ*, although it still defines *qiṣāṣ* in terms of punishment.

These three ideas sought to establish a connection between killing the murderer and life (*ḥayāt*). However, they do not resolve the apparent contradiction between the two parts of the verse. This verse emphasizes the application of *qiṣāṣ* and considers that there is life in *qiṣāṣ*. If we define *qiṣāṣ* in terms of executing a murderer, the Qurʾān seems to consider it a *wājib*, on the one hand, saying that *qiṣāṣ* saves lives, but it also states that forgiveness will serve as atonement for people's bad deeds and is a mercy from God. How is it possi-

67 al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Maʿānī*, 2:51–52.

68 al-Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr*, 2:256.

ble that the Qurʾān designates something as valuable because it saves lives, yet also instructs believers not to use it—promising a reward from God for those who refrain? The *mufasssirūn* have not provided a convincing response to this paradox. Ṭabāṭabāʾī said that forgiveness creates more benefit for society than revenge and retaliation do, but he is quick to say that only *qiṣāṣ* saves lives, not forgiveness and *diya*. He believes that there is mercy for killers when they are pardoned, but the Qurʾān considers forgiveness a mercy for all people. In this interpretation, the Arabic term *lakum* (for you) is supposed to refer to killers, which sounds incorrect because if this were so, *ulu al-albāb* (people of understanding) should be considered to refer to killers too.

This problem, which emerged in most commentaries, demonstrates the incorrect meaning associated with *qiṣāṣ*. What saves life is not killing murderers but the implementation of equality, justness, and proportionality. This verse emphasizes concepts such as proportionality between the crime and its punishment, equality between all people, equality between all tribes and nations, and appropriate behavior in life. If we apply equality and the principle of proportionality (which shape the actual meaning of *qiṣāṣ*), this saves lives; conversely, discrimination and injustice do not and only result in aggression and corruption.

3.4.4 The Message of the Verse

In this verse and the other three verses related to *qiṣāṣ*, the Qurʾān explains *qiṣāṣ* by referring to different examples. In Qurʾān 2:179, the Qurʾān invites people toward *qiṣāṣ*, saying there is life in *qiṣāṣ*. The Qurʾān emphasizes the principles of proportionality and justice in this verse and connects them to human life. In the case of punishment, *qiṣāṣ* means proportionality between the crime and the punishment. In the case of aggression, *qiṣāṣ* must be interpreted to mean that we should consider proportionality. Excessive responses must be prevented. In the relationships between human beings, nations, and tribes, *qiṣāṣ* means equality between all people. That is, *qiṣāṣ* should not be interpreted in terms of punishment. Therefore, the message of this verse is to apply the principles of proportionality and justice. These guarantee human life, preventing us from excessive reactions, war, or corruption.

4 Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn from the discussion presented in this article. First, the Qurʾān does not use the term *qiṣāṣ* in the sense of punishment, retaliation, or the killing of another person. Second, if *qiṣāṣ* is understood

purely in terms of punishment and execution, the interpretations of the verses about it result in contradictions. Third, *qisās* means equality and proportionality, not punishment and execution. Fourth, in terms of punishment, the Qurʾān invites people to consider the proportionality of the punishment in relation to the crime. Fifth, Qurʾān 5:45 and Qurʾān 2:178 explicitly praise forgiveness and state that those who pardon others will be rewarded by God. This means the Qurʾān does not encourage people to engage in violent acts. Sixth, there are other Qurʾānic verses that emphasize such a concept. For example, “But [remember that an attempt at] requiting evil may, too, become an evil: hence, whoever pardons [his foe] and makes peace, his reward rests with God—for, verily, He does not love evildoers” (Qurʾān 42:40). In addition: “If you have to respond to an attack [in argument], respond only to the extent of the attack leveled against you; but to bear yourselves with patience is indeed far better for [you, since God is with] those who are patient in adversity” (Qurʾān 16:126). In these two verses, the Qurʾān encourages people toward forgiveness and states those who forgive will be rewarded by God. In Qurʾān 16:126, the Qurʾān’s expression “if you have to respond” shows that the text does not consider retaliation an obligatory matter. If the Qurʾān intended to make punishment an obligatory precept of the religion, it would have ordered believers to carry out punishment.

Seventh, according to Qurʾān 5:45, 2:178, 2:194, 42:40, and 16:126, applying a punishment equal to the crime is the maximum punishment permitted by the Qurʾān for retaliation. The Qurʾān prevents us from committing excesses in punishment, and instead, asks people to consider proportionality between the crime and its punishment. Eighth, the Qurʾān’s encouragement of forgiveness, its promise of reward for those who pardon the offender, and its provision for alternative forms of punishment, such as *dīya*, all indicate that the Qurʾān does not promote bodily injury or execution—even for killers. Ninth, accordingly, the idea that the Qurʾān supports executions is naïve because it praises those who forgive a killer. Last, the Qurʾān encourages people to forfeit the execution of a murderer in a time when people used to kill each other in wars and tribal conflicts and often killed many people in retaliation for killing one person. It can be argued that when the Qurʾān speaks about forgiveness in this context, it does not disagree with putting an end to executions in today’s world.

In this article, I did not argue that we should not punish the culprit—instead, I argued that the Qurʾān does not support execution. I rejected the argument of those who believe that the execution of murderer is a necessary precept of the religion. The Qurʾān encourages believers to pardon a murderer and praises forgiveness. In this way, the Qurʾān seeks to recognize the value of human life. This

means that it is not incompatible with basic principles of Islam if we stipulate an alternative punishment to execution in the case of murder.

Source

Sedigheh Vasmaghi. "Tajdīd-e naẓar dar ma'nā-ye Qişāş." *Sedigheh Vasmaghi (blog)*. May 2014. <https://sedighehvasmaghi.blogspot.com/2014/05/blog-post.html>. Accessed June 9, 2025.

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Interfaith Marriage—a Model for Women’s *Tafsīr*

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About the Author¹

Siti Musdah Mulia, one of Indonesia’s respected Muslim scholars, is also a leading voice in the movement for gender equality and human rights within an Islamic framework. Mulia was born in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. She has dedicated her life to rethinking Islamic teachings in ways that uphold justice, compassion, and dignity for all. In 1997, she made history as the first woman to earn a doctorate in Islamic political thought from UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta. Two years later, she became the first woman appointed as Research Professor in Religion by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences. This role gave her a platform to engage in national and international discussions on Islam and social reform.

Mulia’s studies on Qur’anic interpretation focus on the need to read the text in light of contemporary realities. She is particularly interested in women’s

1 Important works by Siti Musdah Mulia include *Muslimah Reformis: Perempuan Pembaru Keagamaan* (Bandung: Mizan, 2005); *Perempuan dan Politik* co-authored (Jakarta: Gramedia, 2005); *Islam and Violence Against Women* (Jakarta: LKAJ, 2006); *Islam dan Inspirasi Kese-taraan Gender* (Yogyakarta: Kibar Press, 2007); *Islam dan Hak Asasi Manusia* (Yogyakarta: Naufan Pustaka, 2010); *Mengupas Seksualitas* (Jakarta: Serambi, 2015); “Towards Justice in Marital Law: Empowering Indonesian Women,” in *Gender and Islam in Southeast Asia: Women’s Rights Movements, Religious Resurgence and Local Traditions*, ed. Susanne Schroter (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 111–139; and “Promoting Gender Equity through Interreligious Marriage: Empowering Indonesian Women,” in *Muslim–Non-Muslim Marriage: Political and Cultural Connections in Southeast Asia*, edited by Gavin W. Jones, Chee Heng Leng, and Manzah Mohamad (Singapore: ISEAS—Yusof Ishak Institute, 2009), 255–282. See also her interview, Rira Ahmadi, “In the Land Where Everyone’s God: Interview with Musdah Mulia,” Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies, August 2014, <https://csbronline.org/?p=721>. For studies about her work, see Sebastian Partogi, “Musdah Mulia: Injecting Spirituality into Human Rights Activism,” *The Jakarta Post*, October 18, 2020; “Musdah Mulia, Indonesia’s Fore-most Islamic Woman Scholar and the Influences on Her Thinking,” *Independent Observer*, October 21, 2021; Yusefri, “The Law of Polygamy in Islam: A Methodological Review of Siti Musdah Mulia’s Legal Thought,” *Academic Journal of Islamic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2017): 121–146; and Saadah Mardiyati and Laras Shesa, “Polygamy in Musdah Mulia’s View and Its Relevance to Marriage Law in Indonesia,” *Academic Journal of Islamic Studies* 8, no. 2 (2023): 387–401.

rights and has long argued that many interpretations of the Qur’ān have been shaped by patriarchal cultures, not by the core message of the Qur’ān itself. She considers the Qur’ān to be rooted in equality and justice. In her influential book *Muslimah Reformis: Perempuan Pembaru Keagamaan* (2005), she highlights the role of women as agents of religious renewal and calls for a reexamination of Islamic teachings from a gender-sensitive perspective. In a later work, *Islam dan Inspirasi Kesetaraan Gender* (2007), she offers a theological foundation for gender equality, thus using the Qur’ān as a source of empowerment rather than restriction.

Mulia has also played an active role in civil society. She cofounded the Indonesian Conference on Religions for Peace and has served as its General Chair. She has also been involved with the Indonesian Ulama Council, Fatayat NU, and Muslimat NU, where she has consistently pushed for reform in religious thought and practice. Her efforts to bring about change have not gone unnoticed. In 2007, she was awarded the International Women of Courage Award by the US government, followed by the Yap Thiam Hien Human Rights Award in 2008 for her advocacy on behalf of minorities in Indonesia.

Mulia’s writings are not only academic but also deeply engage with important social issues of the day. In her essay “Towards Justice in Marital Law: Empowering Indonesian Women,” she critiques discriminatory laws and calls for reforms that align with both the ethical teachings of the Qur’ān and universal human rights. She argues for rethinking long-held assumptions and seeing the Qur’ān as a living text that is capable of guiding Muslims toward a more just and compassionate society. Mulia has become a symbol of progressive Islamic thought, in both Indonesia and the region.



1 What Is Religion?

A basic question arises when discussing this issue, which not only concerns women’s rights, but is rather a crucial question about religion itself: In facing controversial religious attitudes toward interfaith marriage, do we still need religion? In all honesty, this is a question that has often arisen of late. How can it not, when people who engage in interfaith marriage often receive discriminative and unfair treatment? In addition, those who suffer the most are the women and their children from these marriages. However, before answering this question, another, even more fundamental question needs to be posed: What is religion?

As I explained in the first chapter of this book,² the true nature of religion is seen in the humanitarian values (*nilai-nilai kemanusiaan*) it contains, and an elaboration of these values is the sincere recognition of the equality and unity of humanity. All human beings are equal and originate from the same source, which is God. In Islam it is believed that what differentiates human beings is only the level and quality of their piety (*taqwā*), and only God alone has the right to judge this aspect. The true objective of all religions is to develop human beings so that they become good in all aspects: physical, mental, moral, spiritual, and social. A fundamental requirement of religion is the obligation to respect all human beings, regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, or even religion.

Accordingly, every religion always has two aspects to its teachings: one related to God, and the other, to human beings. The first is vertical, the second is horizontal. In Islam, the vertical aspect constitutes the teachings that contain humanity's obligations toward God, whereas the horizontal aspect contains the guidance that regulates relationships between human beings as well as their relationship with the world around them. The human dimension in Islam receives more concrete attention in its aspect of Sufism. This is seen in its explanations of the concept of love, as taught by the well-known Sufi figure of the Middle Ages, Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240 CE). One of his famous poems states, "*udīnu bi-dīn al-ḥubb*" (my religion is the Religion of Love). This Sufi teaching affirms that all beings exist because of Divine Love, and human beings are obliged to implement the spirit of this Divine Love in the reality of human life on earth. The concept of love taught in Sufism not only includes love of God, the Creator, in the form of sincere worship without any reserve, but also love of all humanity, in the form of willingness to have good and sincere communications without being affected by several differences: gender, language, ethnicity, race, skin color, culture, and even religion. People are called on to do good to not only their fellow human beings but also to all creatures. Islam teaches people to have compassion for fellow human beings and also for all creatures.

It is a great pity that this extremely noble and holy mission of Islam is not well-implemented in the religious life of its followers. In matters of religion, human beings tend to focus more on building a good relationship with God. Or, in other words, they focus on "satisfying" God—rather than building peaceful and harmonious relations with their fellow human beings, which, in fact, is the essence of the religion's teachings. Therefore, many conflicts and acts

2 Translator: This refers to the book *Muslimah Reformis*, the source of the present chapter.

of exploitation, violence, and discrimination, including gender discrimination, resulting in great suffering, especially for women, are carried out in the name of the Islamic shari‘a.

In this regard, Imām al-Ghazālī asserted that the true aim of the Islamic shari‘a is to protect the five fundamental rights of human beings: the rights to life, to religious freedom, to hold opinions and express them, to reproduce, and to hold property. These five fundamental rights are what became known in *fiqh* by the term “*al-kulliyāt al-khams*” (the five fundamental principles). Thus, all the teachings of Islam should be directed toward protecting and upholding these five fundamental rights.

To return to the question at the beginning of this chapter, I personally am completely convinced that, from whatever perspective we approach it, religion is still very much needed in human life. However, the greatest challenge is identifying ways to formulate and then disseminate religious teachings that are accommodative and appreciative of humanitarian values, so that they can help the people who follow them become more humane. This is what I focus on in the following discussion.

2 Appreciating Interfaith Marriage

One of the privileges and unique qualities of human beings, compared with other creatures on this earth, is their appointment as *khalifa fi al-ard* (vicegerent on earth), who are given the task and responsibility of managing life on the earth. In successfully carrying out this task, human beings are permitted and indeed encouraged to marry, among other things, so that the continuity of human life is guaranteed until the Day of Resurrection. However, it needs to be emphasized that reproduction is not the only aim of marriage in Islam.

Marriage in Islam constitutes a contract or transaction. This is revealed in the existence of the elements of *ījāb* (offer) and *qabūl* (acceptance). A contract or transaction should involve two equal parties who reach a common view or consensus. It is not incorrect to define marriage as a contract that binds two equal parties, a man and a woman, each having fulfilled the applicable legal requirements, on the basis of mutual consent and free choice, to form a family.

It is interesting to note that the Qur’ān discusses marriage in quite a detailed way. No fewer than 104 verses discuss this issue, whether they use the term *nikāḥ*, which means “to become gathered together,” or the word *zawj*, which means “to form a couple.” The word *nikāḥ* in its various forms is mentioned 23 times, whereas the word *zawj* is found 81 times. Thus, to understand properly

the true meaning of marriage we should closely examine all of these verses and extract the common thread that connects them all together. It is this common thread that explains the moral message of the Qurʾān concerning marriage.

A critical study of the verses that discuss marriage yields several basic principles that should become the foundation for marriage.³ These principles are as follows: *first*, the principle of monogamy; *second*, the principle of *mawadda wa raḥma* (love and compassion); *third*, the principle of complementarity and protection; *fourth*, the principle of *muʿāshara bi al-maʿrūf* (living together in courtesy and respect); and *fifth*, the freedom for both men and women to choose a partner, as long as it does not violate the requirements of the sharīʿa—for example, not choosing people whom it is forbidden to marry, such as one’s mother, father and siblings.

In relation to marriage, the Qurʾān tends to treat the male as the active party, especially in choosing a partner and proposing marriage, whereas it positions women as the passive party or the party that waits to be asked for marriage. Consequently, almost all the commands relating to marriage are addressed to men. Therefore, the male party is always the actor, the taker of initiative, or the party that proposes marriage, whereas the female only waits to be proposed to.

Of course, this situation reflects the social context in which the Qurʾān was revealed, namely, Arab society with its strongly patriarchal culture. Therefore, it is understandable that at that time women were not considered independent subjects, and thus did not have the freedom to hold and express opinions, unlike men. However, with the passage of time, many things have changed in the ordering of our society, in accordance with the needs of social dynamics and because of advances in technology and information technology. Today, women are increasingly independent and able to express their views and wishes, such that it is now appropriate to reexamine any regulations that do not accommodate their interests and aspirations.

An interfaith marriage, as referred to in this chapter, is the marriage of a Muslim with a non-Muslim. In relation to this issue, the Qurʾān (98:1) divides non-Muslims into three categories: *mushrik* (polytheists), *kāfir* (disbelievers), and *ahl al-kitāb* (People of the Book). Interestingly, there is no agreement among the *ʿulamā* about who can be categorized as such. In general, the description of *mushrik* is attached to people who associate partners with God or claim

3 Siti Musdah Mulia, *Poliigami dalam Pandangan Islam* (Jakarta: LKAJ, Solidaritas Perempuan, and The Asia Foundation, 2000), p. 9. This discussion of marriage will be presented in Chapters 17 and 18 along with some issues regarding government intervention in marriage and the control of women.

that there are other gods apart from Allah, such as idol worshippers and fire-worshippers (see Qur'ān 29:61–63; 31:25; 39:38; 43:9, 87).⁴ *Kāfir* is generally understood to mean anyone who is not a Muslim. Meanwhile, the *ahl al-kitāb* are those who follow a religion that has a sacred scripture, or a divinely revealed religion, such as Judaism and Christianity.

The issue of interfaith marriage has been a controversial one in Islamic history. Essentially, the *ʿulamā*'s position on this issue can be divided into three views.

- Absolute prohibition: Some *ʿulamā* completely forbid any marriage between a Muslim and a non-Muslim, whether they are categorized as *mushrik* or *ahl al-kitāb*. This prohibition applies to both Muslim men and women.
- Conditional permission: A number of *ʿulamā* permit the marriage of a Muslim man and a non-Muslim woman, as long as she is from the *ahl al-kitāb*, but not the reverse.
- A number of other *ʿulamā* permit marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims, and this permission applies for both men and women.

Next, I examine the arguments of each of these three opinions. The first opinion⁵ proceeds from an understanding of Qur'ān 2:221:

Do not marry *mushrik* women until they have faith: a slave woman who is a *mu'min* [believer] is certainly better than a *mushrik* woman, even though she may please you. And do not marry *mushrik* men to *mu'min* women until they have faith: a *mu'min* slave is certainly better than a *mushrik* man, even though he may please you. Such people call you to Hell, while Allah calls you to Heaven and forgiveness by His leave. And Allah makes His verses clear to human beings, so that they may take a lesson from them.

Those who follow this view do not differentiate between *mushrik* and *ahl al-kitāb*, because, in reality, the two groups are the same, according to the statement of the Prophet's Companion, 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar: "I do not know a greater *shirk* [polytheism] than the *shirk* of someone who states that their God is Jesus or one of the slaves of God."⁶ What is meant here by "someone who states that

4 In these verses, the Qur'ān states that *mushrik* are those who, in addition to believing in Allah as the Creator of the heavens and the earth, worship idols.

5 The *ʿulamā* that can be categorized as being in this first group include 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, Aṭā', 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar, and Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya. For a more detailed discussion, see Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995), 3: 62, 6: 150.

6 al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr al-Yamāma, 1987), 5: 2024.

their God is Jesus or one of the slaves of God” is Christians and Jews. Thus, this group categorizes Christians and Jews as *mushrik* and not *ahl al-kitāb*, because, in practice, they have worshipped something other than God. Christians have deified Jesus, while Jews have deified ‘Uzayr (Ezra).

Another argument of this group is that although there is a verse in the Qur’ān that permits a Muslim man to marry an *ahl al-kitāb* woman, namely Qur’ān 5:5, this permission is said to have been abrogated by Qur’ān 2:221, as seen above.⁷ Another argument is based on an interpretation of Qur’ān 60:10:

O you who have faith, if *mu’min* women come to you as emigrants, then test [their faith]. Allah knows best about their faith; so if you have found that they [truly] have faith then do not return them to [their husbands] the *kāfir* people. They are not lawful for those *kāfir* people and those *kāfir* people are not lawful for them. And give to [their husbands] whatever bride-gifts they have paid. There is no sin upon you if you choose to marry them once you have paid their bride-gifts. And do not yourselves hold on to [marriage] ties with *kāfir* women; you should ask for repayment of the bride-gifts you have paid, and they should ask for repayment of the bride-gifts they have paid. This is the law of Allah that He has determined among you. Allah is All-Knowing and All-Wise.

On the basis of this argument, the *‘ulamā* have agreed to prohibit interfaith marriage, and this agreement is seen as an *ijmā’* (consensus). According to this group, *ijmā’* can be used as one of the sources of Islamic law. This absolute prohibition on interfaith marriage has become the mainstream view among Muslims in Indonesia, the majority of whom follow the Shāfi’ī school. This view has been made into law by the state through the Kompilasi Hukum Islam, which has been ratified by Presidential Instruction No. 1 of 1991, and a monolithic interpretation of the Law on Marriage, No. 1 of 1974.

Consequently, the state does not provide any room for interfaith marriage in Indonesia. This is evident from the fact that those who marry across religious lines cannot register their marriages, whether at the Kantor Urusan Agama (Religious Affairs Office) or Kantor Catatan Sipil (Civil Registry), although many interfaith marriages could eventually be registered at the latter after obtaining permission from the courts. A further consequence for those whose marriages have been rejected is that they cannot obtain a marriage certificate as legal proof of their marriage, which affects the fulfilment of their other civil

⁷ Quraish Shihab, *Wawasan Al-Qur’an* (Bandung: Mizan, 1996), 196.

rights as a citizen. Furthermore, the parties that generally become the victims are the women and, eventually, the children from these marriages.

The Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Ulama Council, MUI) have also spoken strongly about this. Through a *fatwā* issued on June 1, 1980, Central MUI have declared all forms of interfaith marriage to be forbidden, including the marriage of a Muslim man with a non-Muslim woman, whether or not she is from the *ahl al-kitāb*. The reason given is that the harm (*mafsada*) caused by such interfaith marriages is greater than the benefit (*maṣlaḥa*) that they bring, especially for the Muslim community. In this context, the *fiqh* maxim (*qā'ida fiqhīyya*) that they rely on is “*dar' al-mafāsīd muqaddam 'alā jalb al-maṣāliḥ*” (avoiding harm takes precedence over seeking benefit)—a type of preventive measure.

Despite not being accommodated by the existing legal framework, the number of couples engaging in interfaith marriages continues to increase and can easily be found in the reality of society. They undertake many strategies: for example, to obtain marriage certificates, some wealthier Indonesians are forced to conduct their marriages overseas, such as in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Australia. Strangely, the certificates issued by these overseas marriage registries are treated as a valid reference by the Civil Registry in Indonesia. Another strategy is for one partner to pretend to convert to the other's faith so that the marriage can be properly registered, whether at the Religious Affairs Office or the Civil Registry. After this, they return to their original religion. The conversion is done only to fulfill administrative requirements. Yet another strategy is for the couple to conduct marriages according to each of their religions, without any registration. However, if problems occur in their marriage, it is usually the wife and children who become the victims because there is no marriage certificate. They struggle to obtain their legal rights, such as maintenance, support, and inheritance.

I now turn to the argument of the second group,⁸ who permit a Muslim man to marry a non-Muslim woman from the *ahl al-kitāb*, basing their argument on Qur'ān 5:5:

8 See 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jazīrī, *al-Fiqh 'alā al-Madhāhib al-Arba'a* (Cairo: al-Maktab al-Thaqāfi, 2000), 4:64. The *ulamā* who can be categorized as belonging to the second group include Sa'īd b. al-Musayyab, Ibn 'Abbās, and the Ḥanbalis, although there are differences of opinion among them about who is meant by the term People of the Book in the verse in question. For Sa'īd b. al-Musayyab, it includes both *dhimmīs* and *ḥarbīs*, whereas Ibn 'Abbās limits it to *dhimmīs*. Meanwhile, for the Ḥanbalis, it includes all groups.

And [it is lawful for you to marry] honoured women from those who were given a scripture before you, as long you have given them their bride-gifts, and with the intention of marrying them, not taking them as lovers [committing adultery], nor to make them concubines.

According to the supporters of this view, this verse clearly permits the marriage of a Muslim man and an *ahl al-kitāb* woman, whereas the reverse (the marriage of a Muslim woman and an *ahl al-kitāb* man) is not explicitly permitted. This leads to the conclusion that the marriage of a Muslim woman and an *ahl al-kitāb* man is forbidden. If it were permitted, it would have been clearly stated in this verse.

The *‘ulamā* who permit the marriage of a Muslim man and an *ahl al-kitāb* woman still differ concerning who is intended by the term *ahl al-kitāb* in this verse. Some limit it to the Jews and Christians during the time of the Prophet. Other *‘ulamā*, among them Quraish Shihab, believe that the meaning of *ahl al-kitāb* includes all Jews and Christians up until the present.⁹ However, this is on the condition that the *ahl al-kitāb* woman is someone of good character, as stated in the verse: “*wa al-muḥṣanāt min alladhīna ūtū al-kitāb*” (honored women who always guard their purity, who were given a sacred scripture). This means that those permitted for marriage are not just any *ahl al-kitāb* women, but only a certain subset of them.

The well-known Egyptian scholar Maḥmūd Shaltūt had a different view. According to him, the marriage of a Muslim man to an *ahl al-kitāb* woman could be permitted as a strategy of *da‘wa*. As the husband, a man has the right to educate his family, his wife, and their children with proper Islamic conduct (*akhlāq*). It is hoped that the marriage will eliminate any hatred and resentment among non-Muslims toward Islam, especially in the wife’s heart. Likewise, with the husband’s good treatment of her, it is hoped that the wife will come to know the beauty and goodness of Islam, and that Islam gives perfect rights to wives. However, if this hope cannot be fulfilled, then it is better that such a marriage is forbidden.¹⁰

Commenting on Shaltūt’s view, Quraish Shihab states that if such a marriage is forbidden because of fear of being influenced by the religion of the husband, then the marriage of a Muslim man and an *ahl al-kitāb* woman should also be forbidden if it is feared that he or his children will be influenced by values that contradict those of Islam.¹¹ This is the case if Shaltūt’s argument is valid. Of

9 Shihab, *Wawasan Al-Qur’an* p. 198.

10 Maḥmūd Shaltūt, *Min Tawjihāt al-Islām* (Cairo: al-Idārat al-‘Āmma li al-Azhar, 1959), 253.

11 Quraish Shihab, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

course, there are other arguments that can be made, such as that put forward by Maulana Muhammad Ali. According to him, even though it is not clearly stated in the Divine Revelation, in practice, the majority of Muslims have never agreed to the marriage of a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man. This disagreement is based only on the *ijtihād* that a Muslim woman who marries a non-Muslim man will feel discomfort if she lives with a non-Muslim family, because she will lose the rights that she would have had if she were in a Muslim family environment. A wife will follow the traditions of her husband, and the husband will influence her status as a Muslim woman.¹²

Last, a third view¹³ permits the marriage of a Muslim and a non-Muslim, and this applies not only to men, but also to women. This group also bases itself on the three verses that have been used by the two other groups, namely, Qurʾān 2:221, 60:10, and 5:5. What is different is the way these are interpreted.

This group has made numerous arguments. *First*, that Qurʾān 2:221 only prohibits a Muslim from marrying a *mushrik*. Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā explain that what is meant by *mushrik* women in this verse is limited to the *mushrik* Arabs at the time of the Prophet.¹⁴ The evidence for this view is that in the text of that verse, apart from the prohibition on marrying a *mushrik*, there is also an encouragement to marry a slave. Clearly, the context is that of the *mushriks* at the time of the Prophet, who no longer exist, just as slaves no longer exist. Another view of Qurʾān 2:221 is that it has been abrogated by Qurʾān 5:5, which was revealed later.¹⁵

Second, that Qurʾān 5:5 in fact permits a Muslim man to marry an *ahl al-kitāb* woman, and that this permission can be understood as applying in reverse. In the Arabic language, there is a rhetorical style known as *al-iktifāʾ*, namely, that it is enough to state one part of the point, and the rest can be understood from that. For example, in this verse it is stated that a Muslim man can marry an *ahl al-kitāb* woman; the *mafhūm mukhālafa* (“contrary implication”) of this is that there is no obstacle to a Muslim woman marrying an *ahl al-kitāb* man.

Third, Qurʾān 60:10 only explicitly prohibits the continuation of marriage with *kāfir* women (also see Qurʾān 7:190, 4:12, and 43:39). Given the context at the time this verse was revealed, this prohibition is very reasonable, consider-

12 Maulana Muhammad Ali, *Qurʾan Suci: Teks Arab Terjemah dan Tafsir* (Jakarta: Darul Kutub al-Islamiyah, 1993), 119.

13 The *ulamā* who can be categorized as holding this third view include Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā.

14 Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsir al-Manār* (Beirut, n.d.), 193.

15 Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Taʾwīl Āy al-Qurʾān* (Cairo: Dār al-Rayyān li al-Turāth, 1987), 2:390.

ing that the disbelievers of the Quraysh were extremely hostile to the Prophet and his followers. At that time, the context was one of war between the believers and the disbelievers. The prohibition of continuing these relations was intended to facilitate clear identification of enemies and friends. Therefore, this verse should be understood contextually. If these conditions of war no longer exist, then this prohibition is automatically cancelled. Moreover, another argument concerning Qurʾān 60:10 is that it has been abrogated by Qurʾān 5:5.

Significantly, a *fatwā* from the Jakarta branch of MUI differs from the view of Central MUI. This *fatwā* of September 30, 1986 follows this third view, namely, that interfaith marriage is permitted:

This *fatwā* follows the view of the majority of the *ʿulamā* of *fiqh*, Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā, and the *ʿulamā* of India and Pakistan. It also relies on the Qurʾān, in accordance with the characteristics and attitude of Islam, as it is followed by many Indonesian Muslim scholars and *ʿulamā*. This opinion is in accordance with Indonesian conditions [of a plural society], as a country based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution, and in accordance with the nation's history, the formation of the Republic of Indonesia, the history of the determination of the 1945 Constitution as the constitution of the state on 18 August 1945, and the spirit of unity and togetherness based on Pancasila.

It would be more appropriate to say that this *fatwā* of the Jakarta branch of MUI was made based on the laws and policies that apply in Indonesia and in accordance with the conditions and situation of Indonesia. This view would strengthen the bonds of Indonesian national and state unity and togetherness.¹⁶ According to data presented by the Jakarta MUI, from April 1985 to July 10, 1986 there were 239 cases of interfaith marriage, 117 of them between a non-Muslim man and a Muslim woman. Relying on this *fatwā*, the Religious Affairs Office was permitted to perform marriages between Muslim men and *ahl al-kitāb* women, and the Jakarta Civil Registry was permitted to register interfaith marriages.

The question is, what is meant by the terms *mushrik*, *ahl al-kitāb*, and *kāfir* in these Qurʾānic verses? What are the differences between these three groups?

16 Ichtiyanto, *Perkawinan Campuran dalam Negara Republik Indonesia* (Jakarta: Badan Litbang Departemen Agama, 2003), 143–144, footnotes no. 164, 167. However, this *fatwā* of the Jakarta MUI was revised in 2000 to a *fatwā* that all forms of interfaith marriage are *ḥarām*.

According to the exegetes (scholars of *tafsīr*), *mushrik* designates someone who associates God with something, which could be a human being, an object, power, wealth, and so on (Qurʾān 2:264). Therefore, it is not impossible for a Muslim to also be a *mushrik*.¹⁷

However, most exegetes always interpret the term *mushrik* narrowly to mean worshipping idols, fire, or similar things. However, in the reality of society, including in the Muslim community, in fact, there has been a deification and worship of power, wealth, status, or of God's creation. To understand the term *mushrik* only to mean non-Muslims is very misleading, and this is what has caused Muslims to lose the ability to be self-aware or to avoid the danger of *shirk*.

According to the classical exegete al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. ca. beginning of the eleventh century CE), from a legal perspective, *shirk* is divided into two, namely, lesser *shirk* and greater *shirk*. Lesser *shirk* means to associate God with something else for a particular purpose, for example, to seem pious to others or seeking praise (Qurʾān 12:106; 3:36) whereas greater *shirk* is associating God with one of His creatures in the matter of divinity.¹⁸ This lack of agreement shows how difficult it is to determine whether someone is a *mushrik*, because it deals mainly with a person's religious beliefs, which are very private and personal.

Similarly to the term *mushrik*, the term *ahl al-kitāb* has also given rise to numerous interpretations. Many *ʿulamā* have limited the definition of *ahl al-kitāb* to Jews and Christians at the time of the Prophet. However, the majority believe that *ahl al-kitāb* means all Jews and Christians, including those the Prophet encountered during his lifetime, and those that are alive today. Other *ʿulamā* say that the term *ahl al-kitāb* is not limited to Jews and Christians, but also includes Buddhists and Hindus, and some even include others, such as Magians, and those who follow the ancient Persian religion and the religions of India, China, and Japan.¹⁹

The term *kāfir* also gives rise to diverse interpretations. In general, the *ʿulamā* understand *kāfir* to mean the denial of Allah, the prophets and all their teachings, and the Last Day. The Qurʾān itself uses the term *kāfir* for a variety of

17 According to Qurʾān 41:7, a Muslim who consciously refuses to pay *zakāt* could be categorized as a polytheist.

18 See Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Qurʾān al-Karīm, 1981); Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-Ḥakīm al-Shahīr bi-Tafsīr al-Manār* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Manār, 1910), 6:185, 193.

19 Quraish Shihab (ed.), *Ensiklopedia Al-Qurʾan Kajian Kosakata dan Tafsirnya* (Jakarta: Bimantara, 1997), 189.

groups, namely, the *kāfir* people before the mission of Muhammad; the *kāfir* people of Quraysh who denied God and persecuted the Prophet; those who deny the blessings of Allah; those who seek aid and protection from other than Allah; those who will not heed an example and love the world; and those who are hypocrites and apostates.²⁰ In view of this diversity of meanings of *kāfir*, it is not impossible that many Muslims could be called *kāfir*—at the very least, *kāfir* toward the blessings of Allah.

In commenting on these three terms, the Pakistani Muslim thinker and activist Abu'l Ala Maududi explains that a study of the contents of the Qur'ān would reveal three terms that mean three different things, namely, *mushrik*, *ahl al-kitāb*, and *ahl al-īmān* ("people of faith"). *Mushrik* people are described in the Qur'ān, such as in verses 5:17, 30, 73, and 9:30, as essentially *ahl al-kitāb* who have deviated from the original teachings of their scriptures. However, the Qur'ān does not use the term *mushrik* to describe them, but rather, *ahl al-kitāb*.²¹

This explanation reveals that the view that prohibits interfaith marriage in general proceeds from a desire to create happy, harmonious families. These families are usually built on the existence of commonalities between husband and wife, especially in the matter of religion. The logic is that the more differences there are between the couple, especially religious differences, the more fragile will be their marriage bond. Therefore, it is strongly supposed that differences in religion will influence the cohesiveness and happiness of marriage and the harmony of intrafamilial relations.

Another reason is the fear of religious conversion or apostatization (*pemurtadan*). Consequently, the view that permits a Muslim man to marry an *ahl al-kitāb* woman is based on the belief that it is usually the man who is stronger in religion, so that by the marriage his spouse and also their children will be brought into Islam.

There is a view that the type of Muslim man who can marry a non-Muslim woman is only a man of strong faith. Conversely, a Muslim woman is not permitted to marry a non-Muslim man although he may be from the *ahl al-kitāb*, because there is a concern that she may be tempted to adopt her husband's religion and that her children will then suffer the same fate. Unlike men, all women are assumed to have weak faith. This view reflects a clear gender bias and is shaped by patriarchal values, because it is based on a stereotypical view of women: that they are weak and their faith is easily swayed. According to this

20 Shihab, *Ensiklopedia*, 189–192.

21 Abu'l Ala Maududi, *al-Islām fī Muwājahat al-Taḥaddīyyāt al-Mu'āṣira* (Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam, 1983), 112.

logic, it is best—as a preventive measure—that a Muslim woman not marry a non-Muslim man even if he is from the *ahl al-kitāb*.

Meanwhile, the view that forbids a Muslim man from marrying an *ahl al-kitāb* woman is also based on a stereotypical view of women as temptresses and sources of discord (*fitna*). Marriage to an *ahl al-kitāb* woman has the risk of negative consequences because it is feared that the husband and his offspring will turn to her religion. On this basis, some of the *ʿulamā* have affirmed that if it is feared that the husband and children will fall into *fitna*, then marriage to *ahl al-kitāb* women is clearly forbidden.²²

It is interesting to note the decision of the Indonesian Supreme Court (*Mahkamah Agung*) on this issue. In Decision No. 1400 K/Pdt/1986 the Supreme Court granted the cassation request of Andi Vonny Gani P., a Muslim, who was marrying Andrianus Petrus Hendrik Nelwan, a Protestant Christian, and annulled the decision of the Central Jakarta State Court of April 11, 1986 No. 382/PDT/P/1986/PN JKT.PST, which had refused to permit the marriage to be performed by the Special Official of the DKI Jakarta Province Civil Registry. According to the Supreme Court, the Marriage Law did not contain any provisions that difference of religion between prospective husband and wife constitutes a barrier to marriage. This accords with Article 27 of the 1945 Constitution, which provides that all citizens have equal rights under the law, which includes the basic right to marry another citizen, even if they have a different religion. As long as there is no legislative stipulation that difference of religion constitutes a barrier to marriage, this principle is in line with the spirit of Article 29 of the 1945 Constitution, which provides that the state guarantees “the freedom for each citizen to follow their own religion.”

The decision also states that there is a legal lacuna in the Marriage Law. In reality, and according to the case law (*yurisprudensi*), in cases of interfaith marriage there are two schemes of marriage legislation that apply simultaneously, and therefore, a determination must be made about the one that is to be applied. Meanwhile, Article 2 section (1) of Law No. 1 of 1974 *jo.* Article 10 section (2) of Government Regulation No. 9 of 1975 only applies to marriages between two people of the same religion. In addition, the reality is that in Indonesia, with its plural or heterogeneous society, it is not uncommon to find interfaith marriages or the intention to have an interfaith marriage. To fill this lacuna, and based on the plural reality of society, the Supreme Court decided to permit the marriage and to request the Civil Registry to register it.

22 ‘Alī al-Ṣābūnī, *Rawāʿīʿ al-bayān: tafsīr āyāt al-ahkām* (Mecca: Dār al-Qurʿān al-Karīm, n.d.), 537.

This Supreme Court decision also rejected the arguments of the Kantor Urusan Agama and the Kantor Catatan Sipil, which had not registered Andi Vonny's marriage on the basis of Article 60 of the Marriage Law. According to the Court, this Article must be read together with Articles 57, 58, and 59 of the Marriage Law relating to mixed marriages on the basis of differences in citizenship and not religion.²³

3 Perspective of Women as Subjects

In the view of the *'ulamā* of *fiqh*, women are generally perceived as an object, specifically a sexual object. In particular, women are labeled as inferior creatures, weak and easily influenced into leaving their religion. This leads to the prohibition for a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man. Simultaneously, they are also stigmatized as the source of dangerous temptation. The implication is that Muslim men are also forbidden to marry non-Muslim women, even *ahl al-kitāb* women, because it is feared they will lead them out of Islam.

Even if a Muslim man is permitted to marry an *ahl al-kitāb* woman, there is a hope that accompanies this permission, namely, that he will be able to bring his wife and children into Islam. This hope may be fulfilled, but the reality is that it is often not the case. One study of interfaith marriages yields an important finding: if a Muslim man marries a non-Muslim woman, in 50% of these marriages their children will take the religion of their father. Conversely, if a Muslim woman marries a non-Muslim man, in almost 80% of these marriages their children will take their mother's religion.²⁴ This finding indicates that in cases of interfaith marriage the potential of a Muslim woman to determine the identity of her children is in fact greater than that of a Muslim man. Thus, the view of women as weak and easily "trapped" is not entirely correct. Evidently, they have more influence and are more dominant than men in family life, such that they have greater success in bringing their children into the religion that they follow. The result is that most children follow the religion of their mother, not their father.

In my view, the fear that there will be conversion out of Islam if a Muslim marries a non-Muslim is one that emerges from a particular psychological syn-

23 The Supreme Court's decision in its entirety can be found in S.H. Soedharyo Soimin, *Hukum Orang dan Keluarga: Perspektif Hukum Perdata Barat/BW, Hukum Islam dan Hukum Adat* (Jakarta: Sinar Grafika, 2004), 2nd printing, 98–105.

24 Nuryamin, *Penelitian tentang Implementasi UU Perkawinan* (unpublished research report, PSW IAIN Jakarta, 1990).

drome. We, the Muslim community, are often afflicted by a lack of confidence and excessive or unfounded fear. Muslims in Indonesia are the majority, but we always behave as, and indeed have the mindset of, a minority. One indication of this is that even if we permit interfaith marriage, we always hope that the Muslim partner will be able to influence their spouse into conversion. Conversely, we disapprove if the opposite happens. In other words, we celebrate the conversion to Islam of someone from another religion, but we are angered at the reverse. The first condition is seen as a victory, while the second is seen as a defeat. We only want to win, and do not want to lose. We should be honest and admit that this attitude or mentality is very unhealthy and could even be called mean-spirited. Even worse, it is found not only among Muslims, but also among those of other religions. I am truly saddened and concerned: how is it possible that such an attitude could find its way into our religious thought?

I would agree more with prohibiting interfaith marriage if this were based on a consideration of objective social conditions—for example, if such marriages were proven to be a causal factor in the high divorce rate or the rate of domestic violence in Indonesia, or if interfaith marriages were part of the *modus operandi* of criminals trafficking in women and children, which of late has become a serious problem in Indonesia. The reasons for prohibiting it would thus be to prevent social harm in the community, or, to use *fiqh* terminology, *sadd al-dharāʿiʿ* (preventive action).

Conversely, if interfaith marriage were permitted, there should be efforts to increase awareness in society about the associated positive and negative effects. These efforts are needed in order to forestall the likely negative effects, as discussed in this section, and also to increase awareness and understanding in society about choosing a spouse. Then, the risks that must be considered will be apparent to all, regardless of their choice about their partner. This is important in order to protect society, particularly women, from discrimination, exploitation, and violence within marriage.

From this analysis, it can be concluded that all opinions regarding marriage between a Muslim and a non-Muslim, that is, interfaith marriage, are *ijtihādī* in nature. There are no evidentiary texts (*dalīl*) from the Qurʾān and ḥadīth that clearly and definitively (*qaṭʿī*) prohibit or permit it. According to the *fiqh* maxim, the lack of evidence is itself a piece of evidence (*ʿadam al-dalīl huwa al-dalīl*). In other words, if there is no clear text (*naṣṣ*) that prohibits or commands something, it is returned to its original legal status. Another *fiqh* maxim states that in matters of social transactions (*muʿāmalāt*), such as marriage, the original legal status is permission (*mubāḥ*) (*al-aṣl fī al-ashyāʾ al-ibāḥa*).

The laws that are produced by *ijtihād* are called *fiqh*. *Fiqh* is the formulation of an understanding of Islam that is extracted from the Qurʾān and the Sunna,

and thus, it is of course not certain and not absolute (not *qaṭʿī*). As it is the product of human intellectual endeavor, there is no guarantee that such a view does not contain errors. The product of *ijtihād* is always influenced by socio-cultural and sociohistorical factors in the society around it or in the life of the *ʿulamā* in question. Therefore, the product of *ijtihād* cannot apply to all people for all time. It may be appropriate for one particular period, but not another. It may be appropriate for one society, but not another with a different culture and different needs. In other words, we can accept a particular product of *ijtihād*, but this acceptance should not prevent us from being critical or accepting other products of *ijtihād* that may be better suited to our welfare.

Nevertheless, in day-to-day reality Muslims generally understand *fiqh* as religious teachings that are absolute in nature. Accordingly, changing a *fiqh* understanding is often seen as a rejection of the teachings of Islam. This perception emerges because of the inability to differentiate between religious teachings and the interpretation of those teachings. The former comes from Revelation and is therefore absolute and unchangeable, whereas the latter comes from human analysis of the Revelation and is therefore relative and can be changed for the sake of human welfare. On this basis, it can be concluded that Islamic law is essentially the product of Islamic legal thought, which, in turn, is the result of interactions between the *ʿulamā* as thinkers and their social contexts.

Although the Qurʾān and ḥadīth contain legal rules, these are very few compared with the number of issues in life that require legal determination.²⁵ To fill this gap, the *ʿulamā* perform *ijtihād* using their own reason. The result is the products of legal thought that exist today. Whether the nature and dynamics of these products of legal thought will be allowed to persist in their current form depends entirely on the courage of contemporary Islamic legal thinkers. However, as I affirmed in the previous chapter [of my book] in relation to the *fatwās* of MUI, if a person or community moves from one product of legal thought to another, it does not mean they have left the ambit of Islamic law.

To face the reality of interfaith marriage in the community, the state must be capable of passing regulations that can articulate the needs of, and provide facility to, all parties in society. In concrete terms, as I have proposed in a previ-

25 See ʿAbd al-Wahhāb Khallāf, *ʿIlm Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (Cairo, 1956), 7th printing, 34–35. He studied the legal verses of the Qurʾān and explained that the number of verses containing clear legal provisions is only around 5.8% of the total, or 368 verses, whereas the largest number of verses is in fact those that contain universal values, such as justice, compassion, peace, and freedom, which are all religio-moral messages that can be taken as guidance in social life.

ous chapter [of my book], the state should make immediate changes, at the very least in three major areas: *first*, amend the Kompilasi Hukum Islam as legalized in Presidential Instruction No. 1 of 1991; *second*, revise Law No. 1 of 1974 on Marriage, and immediately produce a reformist Law on the Civil Registry; and *third*, annul several MUI *fatwās* relating to marriage.

4 A Woman's *Tafsīr* of Interfaith Marriage

Islam is believed by its followers to be the last religion to be sent down to the earth by Allah through Prophet Muḥammad. The teachings of Islam in the form of fundamental principles are clearly laid out in the Qur'ān and Sunna, and these are universal in nature and not limited by time or place. That the Qur'ān and Sunna are the primary guide for Muslims was revealed in a social context that was not a cultural vacuum. For this reason, these two texts have a human dimension in addition to the divine dimension.

Certainly, religious texts in the form of the Qur'ān and Sunna are endowed with lofty, ideal values. However, when these values interact with different human cultures, distortions may arise in their understanding or interpretation, and even more so in their implementation. These distorted understandings emerge because of factors such as differences in intellectual capacity and the influence of the sociocultural and sociohistorical backgrounds of the human beings who interpret them. In addition, the texts of the Qur'ān and Sunna themselves contain both literal and symbolic meanings. The vocabulary of Arabic is well-known for being rich in meanings, such that one word can have many different meanings depending on the context.

The existence of a variety of interpretations in understanding religious texts is inevitable. It seems that this is what was meant by the ḥadīth of the Prophet, "*Ikhtilāf ummatī raḥma*" (differences of opinion in my community are a mercy). Hence, there is a need for wisdom, precision, and a democratic approach to reading religious texts, including those that speak about interfaith marriage. In other words, there is a pressing need for new interpretations of religious texts in order to rediscover their universal religio-moral messages, such as justice, freedom, equality, fraternity, and peace.

It is in this spirit that many *ulamā* have signaled the need for a critical attitude toward different types of understandings of texts. The adoption of this approach is essential because each interpretation reflects social conditions and developments in society at a given stage, the level of education attained, and the hidden interests behind each act of interpretation. Hence, it is quite reasonable to begin the work of reactualization and renewal of *tafsīr* from this point.

In brief, what is needed is a way of reading the text in a productive way that does not merely repeat the same method of reading and interpreting texts (in other words, merely reproduction).

In this context of reactualization and renewal of *tafsīr*, we can learn from the experiences of a female exegete, ‘Ā’isha bt. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, who always used the pseudonym Bint al-Shāṭi’ in her works. This scholar of *tafsīr* developed a thematic method (*dirāsāt al-mawdū‘ al-wāḥid*, i.e., the study of a single theme) for reinterpretation. The lack of methods for inductive interpretation among the *‘ulamā* of the classical period and the Middle Ages spurred Bint al-Shāṭi’, born in Egypt in 1913, to undertake a reinterpretation of the Qur’ān. With full responsibility and scientific honesty, she launched a sharp critique of traditional or conventional methods of interpretation in her work *Al-Qur’ān wa al-tafsīr al-‘asrī*.

According to Bint al-Shāṭi’, the conventional model of interpretation has at least five weaknesses. First, it is very much influenced by sectarian views (*al-ta’wīlāt al-‘aṣabiyya*). Second, the products of religious interpretation yielded by this model appear to be arbitrary. Third, these interpretations are greatly colored by non-Muslim views, such as those found in the “Isrā’īliyyāt” or materials that originate in ancient Judeo-Christian tradition. Fourth, the miraculous nature of the Qur’ān (*ijāz*) tends to be ignored in conventional *tafsīr*. Finally, the uniqueness and grandeur of Qur’ānic rhetoric escapes the analysis of the traditional exegetes.²⁶

Bint al-Shāṭi’ not only launched a critique but also offered a concrete interpretive solution that is worth expanding upon, particularly in responding to contemporary issues, such as interfaith marriage. Her interpretive model is termed the cross-referential or integralistic method, also called the inductive method. This interpretive method is based on a theory that asserts that the entire Qur’ān is an indivisible, cohesive unity, and that one part of the Qur’ān explains its other parts (*al-Qur’ān yufassiru ba‘ḍuhu ba‘ḍan*). In fact, this was already a widely used theory during the time of the Companions.

Through this theory, Bint al-Shāṭi’ wanted to invite interpreters to reinterpret the Qur’ān by using the information contained within the Qur’ān itself and not according to external opinions or teachings. Hence, in her *tafsīr* she stresses the importance of understanding the words, sentences, and linguistic structure of the Qur’ān. In more detail, she divides her method into three approaches. First, she emphasizes the importance of understanding the lexical meaning

26 ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Bint al-Shāṭi’, *al-Qur’ān wa al-Tafsīr al-‘Asrī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1970), 24–32.

of any Qur'ānic word. According to Bint al-Shāṭi', understanding the original meaning of the words of the Qur'ān will greatly assist interpreters in understanding the intended meaning (*al-ma'nā al-murād*) in accordance with the verse's occasion of revelation. Second, she calls for investigating and selecting all verses related to the subject under consideration. According to this principle, the Qur'ān is given the freedom and autonomy to speak about itself, such that the result is an objective interpretation and not a subjective one colored by the political opinions of the exegetes. Third, she specifies that in understanding the words, sentences, and linguistic structure of the Qur'ān, there must be an awareness that some religious texts were revealed in a particular context (*al-siyāq al-khāṣṣ*), whereas others were revealed in a more general context (*al-siyāq al-ʿāmm*).²⁷ In other words, interpretation must incorporate both textual and contextual approaches.

In line with Bint al-Shāṭi', the Indonesian *tafsīr* scholar Quraish Shihab also argues that, in principle, all exegetes used both textual and contextual approaches, whether in extracting the meaning and messages of the Qur'ān or in their efforts to derive religious laws from its basic texts. The difference is only in the intensity of use of these two approaches. Some *ʿulamā* apply a more intensively textual approach, whereas others tend more toward contextualization.²⁸

The Indonesian Islamic law scholar Satria Effendi explains further concerning the textual and contextual approaches in deriving law (*istinbāt*). According to him, the jurists who approach this issue can be categorized into at least three groups. The first group believes that, in principle, all texts of the Qur'ān and ḥadīth are *ta'abuddī*, both in the area of worship (*ibāda*) and in social transactions (*mu'āmalāt*). *Ta'abuddī* means they cannot be subjected to analysis or be understood in any way other than literally, unless there is an indication in the text itself that the ruling or legal intent is not identical to the textual meaning. Imām al-Shāfi'ī consistently followed this method.

The second group holds the view that, essentially, texts in the field of *ibāda* are *ta'abuddī* in nature, unlike texts in the field of *mu'āmalāt*. This means that the motivation or reasons for a law can be analyzed and investigated rationally. The literal meaning of these texts is only maintained if there is an indication that they are *ta'abuddī* in nature. Imām Abū Ḥanīfa followed this method.

27 Quraish Shihab, "Penetapan Hukum Islam secara Tekstual dan Kontekstual: Tinjauan Mufasir," *Dialog* 16, no. 35 (1992): 3–5.

28 Satria Effendi, "Menetapkan Hukum Secara Tekstual dan Kontekstual Menurut Fuqaha," *Dialog* 16, no. 35 (1992).

The third group states that the literal meaning of religious texts that contain *mu'āmalāt* matters need not be maintained. What must be preserved is only their essential values. This group differentiates between teachings that are technical or *furū'īyya* and those that are essential or *qaṭ'īyya*. The former can change in accordance with the needs of the times, and their function is to preserve the teachings of the latter, which are the essential teachings. These essential teachings are stable, absolute, and unchangeable, and they are the true foundation for determining laws. For example, the texts of the Qur'ān concerning cutting off hands fall into the category of technical teachings, but their essential aim is to forbid stealing. This aim is what must be maintained, whereas what is technical in nature can be changed in accordance with the conditions and needs of the times. Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfi (d. 716/1316) consistently followed this method.

From this range of views about the approaches to be adopted toward religious texts, it can be concluded that adopting a democratic attitude to interpreting texts is essential, including when interpreting texts that discuss interfaith marriage. Further, it should be understood that these texts were revealed solely for the interests and welfare of human beings, male and female, so that they may obtain the mercy and benefit of these texts in accordance with Islam's universal mission as *rahma li al-'ālamīn*, a mercy for all the universe.

In this context, the relevance of the view of Imām al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388), the Andalusian *uṣūl al-fiqh* scholar, becomes clear. According to him, the teachings of religion must be seen according to the aims that they were laid down for. According to him, we must refer to the *maqāṣid al-sharī'a*, the aims of the shari'a. The Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman describes it using the term "moral ideal," which is rooted in the concept of justice or *al-'adl*. Thus, in the context of *maqāṣid al-sharī'a* as a reference point, what must be upheld in society is not the laws, but *maṣlaḥa* as the concrete realization of the *maqāṣid al-sharī'a* or morals themselves. The laws can and must be changed if they can no longer support the realization of *maṣlaḥa* and moral ideals in life. This is what is intended by numerous *fiqh* maxims: *al-ḥukm yataghayyuru bi-taghayyur al-azmina wa al-amkina wa al-awā'id wa al-aḥwāl* (the legal ruling changes in line with changes in time, place, situation, and condition); *al-ḥukm yadūru ma'ā illathī wujūdan wa 'adaman* (the legal ruling follows the reason that binds it, whether written or unwritten); and *al-'ibra bi-'umūm al-laḥz lā bi-khuṣūṣ al-sabab* (consideration is given to the generality of the wording and not to the specificity of the cause).

As has been explained in detail in Chapter 1 of this book, at the normative level Islam places women as equal to men, namely, as human beings, the creations and slaves of Allah. From the perspective of creation, Islam teaches that

men and women were created from the same source, that is, from earth (an extract of clay), such that there is absolutely no reason to view women as inferior to men. From the perspective of actions, both are promised rewards if they perform actions that are good (*ma'rūf*) and threatened by punishment if they do evil (*munkar*).

As human beings, women have both the right and the obligation to perform the same acts of worship as men. Women are also recognized as having the right and obligation to improve themselves through increasing knowledge and piety, as well as the obligation to carry out the humanitarian tasks that in Islam are called *al-amr bi al ma'rūf wa al nahy 'ani al-munkar* (commanding what is good and forbidding what is evil), toward creating a just, peaceful, and prosperous society. This ideal society is known among Muslims as *balda ṭayyiba wa rabb ghafūr* (a good land and a forgiving Lord), a phrase that refers to the ideal society led by Queen Bilqis, whose story is preserved in the Qur'ān.

Nevertheless, unlike at the normative level, at the empirical level women are often treated in unequal ways. Many Qur'ānic verses and ḥadīths are often used as a basis for legitimizing gender inequalities between men and women. It is not uncommon for these to also be used to build a theological foundation for the dependence of women on men for their salvation. This inequality stems from the longstanding influence of patriarchal and gender-biased values in society in viewing the power relations between men and women. Patriarchal values always require society to recognize the authority of men and everything that is masculine. In the patriarchal view, men and women are two very different types of creatures, such that they need to be tightly segregated. Men occupy the public sphere, whereas for women, the domestic sphere is sufficient. In sum, women's position is to be subordinate to men.

Because of this view, in order to close this gap between genders, there is a need to continuously press for a new, more humanist, and more gender-sensitive perspective among religious leaders, both male and female. This will build an awareness among them of the need for reinterpretation of religious teachings in a way that is appreciative toward humanitarian values, especially religious teachings concerning gender relations.

There is no way out of this situation other than to deconstruct all religious interpretations that position women as an object. From there, a form of interpretation can then be built that positions women as an autonomous subject with freedom of choice on the basis of her rights, which are identical to those of men. Has not the Qur'ān clearly stated, "Whoever does good deeds, whether male or female, while they have faith, We shall certainly give them a good life, and We will reward them in a way that is better than what they have done" (Qur'ān 16:97)?

Thus, interfaith marriage can be regarded as a logical consequence of the development of an increasingly pluralist community life in society. Islam teaches that plurality is God's way (*sunnat Allāh*), that its existence cannot be denied, and that it was created for the sake of the happiness of humanity itself. It is this pluralism that is truly taught by Islam, as the Qur'an states:

Say, O Muhammad: "Who gives you bounty from the heavens and the earth?" Say, "Allah, and truly we or you [non-Muslims] must be in manifest truth or misguidance." Say, "You [non-Muslims] will not be held responsible for our sins, nor will we be questioned about what you do." Say, "Our Lord will gather us all together, then He will decide justly between us; He is the Giver of Decisions, the Most Knowing."

Qur'an 34:24-26

Although almost all followers of religions, including Muslims, generally prefer or prioritize marriage to someone of the same religion, the state as an institution that must protect its citizens can still provide a solution. This solution, in accordance with the spirit of this chapter, should be to position women as a subject whose rights as a complete human being are recognized, and not as a subordinate object whose fundamental rights are often ignored. We value the existence of different religious views regarding interfaith marriage. Yet, those holding certain views certainly cannot claim that these are the most correct and absolute and that other differing views are incorrect and deviant.

Source

Siti Musdah Mulia. "Pernikahan Lintas Agama: Model Tafsir Perempuan." *Muslimah Reformis: Perempuan Pembaru Keagamaan*. Bandung: Mizan, 2005. 52-83.

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Understanding the Qurʾān's Criticisms of Other Religions

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About the Author¹

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Sirry's contributions to Qurʾānic hermeneutics are especially well-known for their focus on interreligious themes, particularly the Qurʾān's engagement with Judaism and Christianity. His book *Scriptural Polemics: The Qurʾān and Other Religions* (2014) offers a critical examination of how the Qurʾān responds to the scriptures and beliefs of other religious communities. In it, he explores how

1 Mun'im Sirry's major works include *Scriptural Polemics: The Qurʾān and Other Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); *The Qurʾān with Cross-References* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2022); and *Controversies over Islamic Origins: An Introduction to Traditionalism and Revisionism* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2021). His key articles include "Compete with One Another in Good Works': Exegesis of Qurʾān Verse 5:48 and Contemporary Muslim Discourses on Religious Pluralism," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20, no. 4 (2009): 423–438; "The Early Development of the Qurʾānic 'Ḥanif,'" *Journal of Semitic Studies* 56, no. 2 (2011): 345–356; "Fatwas and Their Controversy: The Case of the Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 44, no. 1 (2013): 100–117; "Early Muslim-Christian Dialogue: A Closer Look at Major Themes of the Theological Encounter," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 16, no. 4 (2005): 361–376; and "Who Are Those in Authority? Early Muslim Exegesis of the Qurʾānic Ulu'l-Amr," *Religions* 12, no. 7 (2021): 483. He also contributed the chapter "Other Religions" in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān*, ed. Andrew Rippin and Jawid Mojaddedi (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2017), 320–332. For critical engagement with his work, see Johanna Pink, "Review of Scriptural Polemics: The Qurʾān and Other Religions," *Journal of Qurʾānic Studies* 17, no. 3 (2015): 152–156; and Gabriel Said Reynolds, "The Qurʾān and its Polemical Context: Reflections on Mun'im Sirry's Scriptural Polemics," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 78, no. 2 (2015): 349–351.

polemical passages in the Qur'ān have been interpreted and what they reveal about early Muslim attitudes toward religious diversity.

Sirry also authored *The Qur'an with Cross-References* (2022), an important tool for readers of the Qur'ān, which helps trace connections between verses across different themes and contexts. This book reflects his commitment to making the text more approachable for scholars and students who are trying to understand the Qur'ān's inner structure. He also engages with broader debates in Islamic thought, including on the origins of Islam and the development of early Muslim beliefs. His book *Controversies over Islamic Origins: An Introduction to Traditionalism and Revisionism* (2022) introduces readers to some of the major scholarly debates about how Islam emerged and how the Qur'ān was formed and transmitted.

His articles contribute on topics such as religious pluralism and authority in the Qur'ān. For example, his essay “Compete with One Another in Good Works’: Exegesis of Qur'ān Verse 5:48 and Contemporary Muslim Discourses on Religious Pluralism” offers insights into how Muslims interpret this verse currently in light of a pluralistic world. Similarly, his study “Who Are Those in Authority? Early Muslim Exegesis of the Qur'anic Ulu'l-Amr” explores how early interpreters understood the concept of authority in the Qur'ān. Sirry continues to contribute to modern discussions on Qur'ānic interpretation, thus bridging traditional Islamic scholarship with contemporary concerns about theology, history, and interfaith relations.



1 Introduction

Many verses of the Qur'ān criticize other religions, in particular, Judaism and Christianity. These criticisms cover doctrinal matters, ranging from the authenticity of their holy texts (Qur'ān 2:75; 4:46; 5:13; 5:41) to the divinity of Jesus and the doctrine of Trinity (Qur'ān 5:72; 5:116), as well as social issues, including the prohibition of believing in Jews and Christians (Qur'ān 2:120) and taking them as friends or leaders (Qur'ān 5:51), and calls for war and the discrimination of *jizya* (Qur'ān 9:29). Some radical Muslims use these verses to justify acts of violence toward other religions, and several Western polemicists refer to the same verses to argue that Islam is an intolerant religion. To date, these verses are the “favorites” of radical Muslims and Western polemicists, while moderate and inclusive Muslims avoid discussing them and instead prefer other verses that appear to support their ideas.

The argument this article aims to develop is that these Qur'ānic criticisms reflect a conflict at the beginning of Islam's emergence and the formation of a Muslim communal identity. The trigger for the Qur'ān's criticisms was the refusal of other religious communities to acknowledge Muḥammad's prophethood. This article begins with a discussion of the sectarian context (to borrow John Wansbrough's phrase: the "sectarian milieu") when Prophet Muḥammad conveyed his message. It is hoped that from this discussion, first, the reason for the emergence of the verses that are critical of other religions will be understood and, second, a solid foundation will be created for reinterpreting them in the context of religious diversity in the modern era. I will also clarify many problems that have caused difficulties for classical and modern interpreters. In the final section, I discuss a question that has drawn a great deal of scholarly attention: Does the arrival of Islam invalidate previous religions?

2 The Qur'ān and the Sectarian Context

According to Islamic literature, some verses of the Qur'ān were revealed in Mecca and others in Medina. Although these two parts are not completely different, there are important differences between them in several areas. For example, in Mecca, the Qur'ān's criticisms are most often directed toward the pagan Arabs, who it calls *mushrikūn*. This word is derived from *shirk*, which means "polytheism," because the polytheists tended to associate partners with God. *Shirk* also means the worship of idols. What needs to be emphasized is that accusations of polytheism or idol worship are inherently subjective, and no religious group describes its own faith in such terms. Patricia Crone, professor of early Islamic history at the Institute of Advanced Studies, showed in a recent study that the pagan Arabs were no less monotheistic than those who believed in the God of the Qur'ān.² In addition, as Gerald Hawting showed, the Qur'ān actually uses the word *mushrikūn* in a polemical way, directed at those who perhaps considered themselves to be monotheists.³

During the Meccan period, the main challenge Prophet Muḥammad encountered was how to invite the Meccan *mushrikūn* to stop worshipping idols and come to worship the One God. Many Meccan verses record their rejec-

2 Patricia Crone, "The Religion of the Qur'ānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities," *Arabica* 57, no. 2–3 (2010): 151–200.

3 See Gerald R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

tion of the Prophet's message (e.g., Qur'ān 38:4–7). In response, the Qur'ān emphasizes two arguments. First, the Prophet's mission is portrayed as a continuation of the message of the previous prophets. Several verses also mention previous scriptures, such as “the *ṣuḥuf* of Abraham and Moses” (Qur'ān 87:18–19). The aim of these verses is to affirm that the revelation received by the Prophet was in line with the content of these previous scriptures. Second, by implication, those who reject the invitation of the Prophet will face punishments similar to the ones experienced by those who rejected previous prophets. For example, the Qur'ān describes the punishments that were meted out to Pharaoh and the tribes of 'Ād and Thamūd. An interesting study by David Marshall reveals that the “punishment narratives” of the Qur'ān undergo change from one period to the next, from those that are temporal to those that are eschatological.⁴

Because the Prophet was more concerned with the negative response of the pagan Arabs, the lack of direct references to Jews and Christians is not surprising. In the Qur'ān, Christians are called “*naṣārā*,” while Jews are sometimes called “*yahūd*,” “*hūd*,” “*alladhīna hādū*,” or “*banū isrā'īl*.” Interestingly, both “*naṣārā*” and “*yahūd*” only appear in Medinan *sūras*, which shows that the Prophet did not focus on them in Mecca. There is no historical evidence that Jewish or Christian communities lived in Mecca at the birth of Islam. Perhaps they did not feel comfortable living together with such polytheistic diversity. In any case, several Meccan verses speak positively about Jews and Christians, using the term “*ahl al-kitāb*” (People of the Book) to describe them. The influential English scholar Richard Bell states: “During the whole of the Meccan period of his activity, Muḥammad's attitude toward the People of the Book, which must be taken as including both Jews and Christians so far as known to him, was consistently friendly.”⁵

The Prophet's friendly attitude is clearly reflected in the Qur'ān. Those who were given the scripture, says the Qur'ān, “recognize it [the Qur'ān or Muḥammad] as they recognize their own children” (Qur'ān 6:20); “Whenever it [the Qur'ān] is recited, they say: ‘We believe in it. It is the truth from our Lord’” (Qur'ān 28:53). The Qur'ān even describes “those to whom We have given the scripture rejoic[ing] at what has been revealed to you” (Qur'ān 13:36). Several explanations have been offered for why the Jews and Christians are described as being overjoyed at Muḥammad's prophetic mission. According to Goitein, the Prophet did indeed receive a positive response from Jews and Christians

4 See David Marshall, *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999).

5 Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment* (London: Macmillan, 1926), 147.

in Mecca.⁶ Fazlur Rahman supported this view, although more cautiously. According to Rahman, “among the followers of Judaism and Christianity there were those who affirmed the truth of Muḥammad’s mission.”⁷ Rahman admitted the difficulty of producing historical evidence to support this claim. Therefore, he acknowledged that it is possible the Meccan verses’ descriptions of the People of the Book are based on a theoretical assumption about how Jews and Christians should have responded to Muḥammad and the Qur’ān.

I prefer Rahman’s latter view. It seems that the Prophet did have high expectations that Jews and Christians would accept his prophethood and the authenticity of his revelation. For this reason, he was very disappointed when he arrived in Medina—then called Yathrib—where they rejected his call. Several Medinan verses show a negative attitude toward them. These increasingly treat even the religions of Judaism and Christianity themselves as rivals, and there emerges a kind of “competition” with the People of the Book. For example, Prophet Abraham, who is an important figure in the history of Judaism and Christianity, is now claimed as the founder of the religion of Muḥammad, rather than of Judaism and Christianity. This had not occurred before. In the Meccan period, the Qur’ān had focused more on Moses than on Abraham. Even the word *milla* (often translated as “religious community”) was not exclusively associated with Abraham—for example, “*millat Ibrāhīm wa-Ishāq wa-Ya’qūb*” (the religion [or way] of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) (Qur’ān 12:38). In the Medinan verses, the word *milla* is positioned as equivalent to the religion of Abraham, and he becomes the founder of the religion of Muḥammad. The Qur’ān begins to criticize those who assume that Abraham is a Jew or a Christian (Qur’ān 3:67), and he is instead given the enigmatic designation “*ḥanīf*.”⁸

Thus, Abraham has become the symbol of competition between the new religion of Islam and the established religions of Judaism and Christianity. The Qur’ān’s discourse concerning Abraham (Qur’ān 2:124–141) ends with the verses discussing the change in the direction of the *qibla* (Qur’ān 2:142–150) from Jerusalem to Mecca. This change is often portrayed as the decisive moment in the severing of relations between the Prophet and the Jews, an issue that has been much discussed. In this regard, Dutch scholar Snouck Hurgronje proposed a theory known as “Muḥammad’s break with the Jews.” The question

6 See Shelomo D. Goitein, “The Concept of Mankind in Islam,” in *History and the Idea of Mankind*, ed. W. Warren Wagar (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971), 72–91.

7 Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’ān* (Minneapolis, MN: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1982), 137.

8 For a discussion of the word “*ḥanīf*,” see Mun’im Sirry, “The Early Development of the Quranic *Ḥanīf*,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 56, no. 2 (2011): 345–366.

that interested Hurgronje was as follows: What was Muḥammad's motivation for making the Jewish patriarch the model for Islam? Hurgronje concluded that the Prophet wanted Islam to be free from the shadow of Judaism. The Qur'ān's call to return to the *milla* of Abraham, according to Hurgronje, was directed at the Jews, so that they would abandon the innovations that had emerged more recently and return to the pure monotheism taught by Abraham.⁹

Many scholars accept Hurgronje's theory, but some do not. For example, Rahman takes issue with the theory of "Muḥammad's break with the Jews," because the Qur'ān's view of the religion of Abraham was not something the Prophet introduced only after severing ties with the Jews. Rahman does not consider the change in the Qur'ān's narrative to be spontaneous. Instead, he contends that even in Mecca, the religion of Abraham had already been introduced as the model for monotheism and was differentiated from the beliefs of the Meccan pagans. Rahman's theory is that the Prophet had already created an independent religious entity during the Meccan period. However, theories such as this have recently been called into question by historians of early Islam, such as Fred Donner, a professor at the University of Chicago. Donner makes the case that the crystallization of Islam as an exclusive confessional identity occurred more slowly than the way it is presented in Islamic tradition.¹⁰ Without becoming involved in that debate, it can be noted that, in fact, the Qur'ān does take a very serious view of the Jews' rejection of Muḥammad's prophetic mission. Even when discussing Jesus, some Medinan verses include polemics toward the Jews.

Consider the verses that reject Jesus's crucifixion (Qur'ān 4:156–158). The *mufasssīrīn* understood these verses as proof that Jesus did not die through crucifixion, but rather was raised up to the heavens while another person was crucified. However, if they are read carefully, these verses do not directly criticize Christian belief, but rather, the Jews of Medina, because what is rejected is the Jewish claim that the crucifixion is a symbol of their victory. Of course, several verses do specifically criticize Christian beliefs, reflecting the Prophet's interactions with Christians in the later Medinan period. However, the division of these Qur'ānic criticisms should not be understood chronologically—that is,

9 For a discussion of Hurgronje's view, see Willem A. Bijlefeld, "Controversies around the Qur'anic Ibrāhīm Narrative and Its 'Orientalist' Interpretations," *The Muslim World* 72, no. 2 (1982): 81–94.

10 See Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers at the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). See also Fred M. Donner, "From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community," *al-Abhath* 50–51 (2002–2003): 9–53.

that the early Medinan verses are entirely concerned with the Jews, while the later Medinan ones are focused on Christians. There is an overlap, in the sense that some verses that criticize Christians also emerged in the early Medinan period. Despite this, the later Medinan verses generally position Jesus and Mary at the heart of a theological controversy. It was within this polemical climate that the Qur'ān's criticisms emerged, and thus, they should be understood as the result of a complex process of religious formation.

3 Ambiguity of the Qur'ān's Criticisms

The complexity of early religious formation is also reflected in the ambiguity of the Qur'ān's criticisms. "Ambiguity" here refers to the fact that the Qur'ān does not present a singular attitude in its treatment of other religious communities. This is understandable, because many of the Qur'ān's verses respond to a variety of phenomena. Thus, the sectarian environment of the Qur'ān is recorded in the variety of topics for its criticisms. However, this does not mean that the Qur'ān is always critical about other religions. Amid this sectarian environment, the Qur'ān still presents an ecumenical view by extending the umbrella of salvation to cover Jews, Christians, and Sabeans. The chronology revealed by the renowned German scholar Theodor Nöldeke shows that the verses that promise salvation for non-Muslims emerge at the beginning and end of the Medinan period (Qur'ān 2:62; 5:69). This fact is what led Mahmoud Ayoub to conclude that "neither the words nor the purport of these two identical verses were abrogated."¹¹

What/who is the Qur'ān actually criticizing? This question is difficult to answer, because the Qur'ān does not appear to be directing its criticisms toward "mainstream" Jewish and Christian teachings. In fact, many of the Qur'ān's criticisms of Jews and Christians are difficult to explain. Consider the following examples. The first is the Qur'ān's criticism of a Christian doctrine that is seen as deviant, namely, the Trinity. Qur'ān 4:171 invites Christians to believe in God and His Messengers, while calling on them to "Say not 'Three.' That is better for you." Qur'ān 5:73 says, "They have disbelieved, those who say God is the third of three [or, one of three]." What then becomes of the other two persons of the Trinity? On the basis of Qur'ān 5:116, many of the *ulamā* have concluded that

11 Mahmoud Ayoub, "The Qur'an and Religious Pluralism," in *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, ed. Roger Boase (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 273–281, 277.

the concept of the Trinity found in the Qur'ān consists of God, Jesus, and Mary. Has the Qur'ān misunderstood the doctrine of the Trinity? Is not the Christian Trinity made up of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

In this regard, many theories have been offered. The standard explanation is presented by Geoffrey Parrinder, who was a professor at the University of London, in his book *Jesus in the Qur'an*. According to Parrinder, the Qur'ān was responding to the religious practices of the Collyridians, a sect that would offer small cakes of bread (in Greek "*collyrid*") to Mary. According to Parrinder, the Collyridians were present in the Arabian Peninsula in the fourth century CE. He concluded that "the Qur'an may well be directed against this heresy. It gives its support against Mariolatry."¹² Two years after the publication of Parrinder's book, W. Montgomery Watt authored a short article entitled "The Christianity Criticised in the Qur'ān," which reaffirmed that the Qur'ān does not actually attack orthodox Christianity, but rather, Christian heresies.¹³ The problems with Parrinder's explanation are that there is insufficient information about the existence of the Collyridian sect, and its influence, if any, on the Qur'ān's discourse is still a matter of debate.

Another explanation that scholars have usually ignored is the possibility that the Qur'ān is in dialogue with noncanonical Christian texts that place Mary on the same level as the personalities of the Trinity, or even as a manifestation of one of them. For example, the *Gospel of Philip* tends to identify Mary with the Holy Spirit, while the *Gospel of the Hebrews* describes her as an incarnation of the angel Michael.¹⁴ Although this explanation is more reasonable, we are still faced with the difficult question of why the Qur'ān alludes to an understanding of the Trinity as three gods, while the Christian concept of the Trinity is not polytheism, but rather, trinitarian monotheism.

Next, I consider a second example, concerning Judaism: Why does the Qur'ān accuse the Jews of calling Ezra ('Uzayr) "the son of God"? In Qur'ān 9:30, it is stated: "The Jews say Ezra is the son of God, and the Christians say Jesus is the son of God." The first difficulty that the *mufasssirūn* faced was the fact that Jews do not call Ezra the son of God, because they do not believe in Ezra

12 Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, 1965), 135.

13 W. Montgomery Watt, "The Christianity Criticized in the Qur'ān," *The Muslim World* 57, no. 3 (1967): 197–201.

14 For further discussion of this issue, see Hans-Josef Klauck, *Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 38–42, 123–134; John Davidson, *The Odes of Solomon: Mystical Songs from the Time of Jesus* (Bath: Clear Press, 2005). See also Chris Maunder, "Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary in the New Testament," in *Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (London: Burns and Oates, 2008), 23–39.

in the same way that Christians believe in Jesus. From the earliest times, the *mufassirūn* have admitted that Jews do not call Ezra the son of God; however, they disagreed over why the Qurʾān makes this claim. Early *mufassirūn*, such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī, al-Qurṭubī, and Ibn Kathīr, tended to consider that because Ezra had a major role in the restoration of the Jewish Holy Scripture, some Jews called him “the son of God.” This type of explanation is premised upon the belief that the Qurʾān cannot possibly contain inaccurate information. As Mahmoud Ayoub has stated, these early *mufassirūn* attempted to minimize the significance of the title of “son of God” for Ezra by “admit[ting] that not all [Jews] made such a claim, but only ‘some of the foolish among them.’”¹⁵ Once again, it is difficult to ascertain why the Qurʾān directs this accusation toward them in a general way.

Even in relation to issues that are often discussed, such as the accusation of *tahrīf* (the alteration or falsification of the Jewish and Christian Holy Scriptures), it is difficult to be certain about what the Qurʾān is actually criticizing. In general, the *ʿulamā* are divided into two groups: some say that *tahrīf* took place in the text of the Holy Scriptures (*tahrīf al-naṣṣ*), whereas others say that *tahrīf* only concerns understanding and interpretation (*tahrīf al-maʿnā*) and that the Holy Scriptures remain authentic. More recently, the accusation has emerged of *tahrīf* that covers both text and meaning. The problem is that the Qurʾān does not have a singular stance—it has verses that indicate that textual distortion occurred and others that indicate distortion of meaning. Before continuing the discussion of how difficult it is to resolve the issue of Qurʾān’s criticisms concerning *tahrīf*, I ask: Why did the accusation of *tahrīf* toward pre-Qurʾānic Holy Scriptures emerge? This question needs to be answered because, as discussed in the previous section, the Meccan verses tend to affirm the authenticity and originality of those scriptures. The question can be reformulated as follows: Why does a shift occur in the Qurʾān’s approach toward the previous scriptures?

Several scholars have argued that the accusation of *tahrīf* may be understood as an expression of the Prophet’s disappointment with the Jews. At first, not only did the Prophet hope that the Jews and Christians would recognize him as a prophet, but he also believed that their Holy Scriptures were in accordance with his own mission. This is why he called them “*ahl al-kitāb*,” people who had the Holy Scriptures. However, when they rejected him, the Prophet

15 Mahmoud Ayoub, “Uzayr in the Qurʾān and Muslim Tradition,” in *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions*, ed. William M. Brinner and Stephen D. Ricks (Atlanta, GA: Scholar Press, 1986), 12.

had no option but to accuse them of concealing the foretelling of his prophecy in their Holy Scriptures. Likewise, when it appeared that there were many differences between their scriptures and the revelations he was receiving, the Prophet made the accusation that there were errors in those previous scriptures. This type of explanation can be found in the works of Western scholars from the early period until today, such as Arent Jan Wensinck, Frants Buhl, and Hava Lazarus-Yafeh.¹⁶ We can disagree with this theory about the emergence of the claim of *tahrīf* in the Qur'ān, but a question remains to be answered: If the Qur'ān at first affirmed the previous scriptures, why did the Jews and Christians who were reading those scriptures not accept the revelation of the Qur'ān and recognize Muḥammad as a prophet?

The Qur'ān's criticisms do not end with *tahrīf*. In other verses, the Qur'ān accuses some Jews and Christians of deliberately concealing certain parts of their Holy Scriptures (Qur'ān 2:42, 140, 146, 159; 3:71, 187; 5:15; 6:91). We also find the Qur'ān accusing them of forgery: "Woe to those who write the book with their hands, and then say 'This is from God,' so that they can sell it for a paltry price." (Qur'ān 2:79) Some of the People of the Book are also accused of twisting their tongues (Qur'ān 3:78). Thus, we may ask: What is the Qur'ān actually criticizing about the previous scriptures? A variety of answers can almost certainly be found in the *tafsīr* literature. Quite apart from their significant contribution to Islam's intellectual heritage, the *mufasssīrūn* generally failed to solve the puzzle of the ambiguity of the Qur'ān's criticisms. Rather, they used those criticisms as textual proof that the Qur'ān's revelation had nullified the validity of the pre-Qur'ānic scriptures.

Is the Qur'ān Supersessionist?

The argument of Islam's nullification or supersession/abrogation of previous religions is partially based on the supposition that the previous Holy Scriptures became invalidated after the revelation of the Qur'ān. Another supposition is that the Prophet came to purify religion by returning to an Abrahamic model of monotheism. Two questions arise: Does the Qur'ān's sharp criticism of other religions mean that it nullifies their legitimacy? How does the Qur'ān position itself vis-à-vis the previous scriptures: as their replacement or as an affirmation of them?

16 See Arent Jan Wensinck, *Muḥammad and the Jews of Medina*, trans. Wolfgang Behn (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1975); Frants Buhl, "Tahrīf," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. M.Th. Houtsma et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1934); Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, "Tawrāt," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., ed. Th. Bianquis et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

This question is often answered in one of two ways: some *‘ulamā* consider the Qur’ān to be supersessionist, whereas others do not see the Qur’ān as nullifying the legitimacy of previous holy texts. The two camps recognize that there is ambiguity in the Qur’ānic text but differ in their method of reconciling the Qur’ān’s seemingly contradictory position. Among contemporary Muslim scholars, these two approaches are respectively represented by Tim Winter (his Muslim name is Abdul-Hakim Murad) and Abdulaziz Sachedina. Winter, a professor of Islamic studies at Cambridge University, argues that “an honest assessment of the Muslim body of scripture ... appears to confirm the classical Sunni reading of the revelation as ... proclaiming the abrogation (*naskh*) of prior religion by Islam.”¹⁷ Conversely, Sachedina, a professor at the University of Virginia, claims that there is no “explicit or implicit statement of the Qur’ān in support of the subsequent Muslim belief that the Islamic revelation has superseded the earlier revelations.”¹⁸

Through an analysis of the sectarian environment of the Qur’ān during the time of the Prophet, it can be stated that the apparent dichotomy between the claims of the supersessionists and anti-supersessionists is overly simplistic and does not adequately describe the complex dynamics of the initial relations between Islam and the other religions. When the matter of the relationship between Islam and other religions is expressed through the framework of supersession, there are only two options: adhering to the claim of Islam’s exclusivity or accepting Judaism and Christianity as valid religions. The problem of the supersessionist argument lies in the assumption that the Qur’ān’s criticisms of other religions are “normative” in interreligious dialogue, as discussed earlier. However, the Qur’ān’s criticisms emerged in a polemic and sectarian climate. Under normal conditions, the Qur’ān teaches that interreligious relations are governed by the principles of equality, justice, and mutual respect.

These principles apply whether in social or theological interactions. A cautious reading of the Qur’ān’s theological criticisms reveals that the Qur’ān does not intend to replace the previous religions, but rather, to correct certain aspects that it considers to have deviated from purity. This goes some way to explaining why the Qur’ān does not appear overly interested in the theological discourses of other religions or provide much information concerning

17 Tim Winter, “The Last Trump Card: Islam and the Supersession of Other Religions,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 9, no. 2 (1999): 137.

18 Abdulaziz Sachedina, “Political Implications of the Islamic Notion of ‘Supersession’ as Reflected in Islamic Jurisprudence,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7, no. 2 (1996): 162.

other religions, including Judaism and Christianity. As described above, when it mentions the doctrine of the Trinity, which is central to Christian theology, the Qur'ān only forbids the saying of “*thalātha*” (“Three” or perhaps “the Trinity”) and does not explicitly explain what is meant by the Trinity. This has led many scholars to assume that the Qur'ān has misunderstood the doctrine of the Trinity. Perhaps it is not misunderstood, but rather, the Qur'ān is not interested in its details—the Trinity is only mentioned as an (unorthodox) belief to be corrected.

In this context, we can see the role of Muḥammad as a Prophet–reformer, and the religion that he brought as one that carried a spirit of reform, rather than nullification or abrogation. The Prophet freed himself from the polytheism of the pagan Arabs and advocated a mission of return to the pure monotheism taught by Abraham. As a reformer, he only paid attention to the parts of Judaism and Christianity that were to be corrected. F.E. Peters, a highly prolific emeritus professor from the University of New York, considered Prophet Muḥammad's reforming spirit to be similar to that of Prophet Jesus. In his book *Jesus and Muhammad: Parallel Tracks, Parallel Lives*, Peters demonstrated that there are many parallels in the biographies of Jesus and Muḥammad, including their struggle to reform the religious cultures of their times. The difference, according to Peters, is that Muḥammad's reform was conservative because he wished to return to the purity of the pristine past, whereas Jesus was more progressive because he did not suppress the roots of his tradition.¹⁹

The difference in the reforming characters of Jesus and Muḥammad, as explained by Peters, is open to debate. However, what escapes Peters' attention, is that neither Muḥammad nor Jesus ever claimed to abrogate the other religions that existed in their time. Jesus was born a Jew and lived as one until the end of his life, whereas Muḥammad claimed to inherit the tradition of Abraham and the previous prophets, including Jesus. If this is the case, why is the theology of supersessionism so dominant in the Christian and Islamic traditions? According to Sachedina, the argument of Islam's supersession of Christianity and Judaism not only resembles Christian claims of supersessionism of Judaism, but was influenced by the debates occurring among Christians. Sachedina asserted:

It is not far-fetched to suggest that debates about Islam superseding Christianity and Judaism, despite the explicit absence of any reference to it in

19 F.E. Peters, *Jesus and Muhammad: Parallel Tracks, Parallel Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 119.

the Qur'ān, must have entered Muslim circles through the most thoroughgoing Christian debates about Christianity having superseded Judaism, more particularly when Christians claimed to be the legitimate heirs to the same Hebrew Bible that was the source of Jewish law.²⁰

Of course, it is not easy to ascertain the extent to which this supersessionist theology influenced Muslim views. However, what is certain is that supersessionism can be traced to the early history of the Church. Numerous scholars take the view that the theology of supersessionism began with the authors of the New Testament and became widely accepted from the post-Apostolic period up to the mid-nineteenth century.²¹ Despite this, over the past few decades, culminating in the Second Vatican Council in 1965, several attempts at reinterpretation of Christian theology regarding Judaism have been made, which have led to this doctrine of supersession being considered increasingly less relevant. Following the Catholic Church's declaration of *Nostra Aetate*, several Protestant churches have also produced non-supersessionist declarations. However, it must be frankly admitted that efforts toward reinterpretation in a non-supersessionist theological direction are yet to be seen in a significant way among Muslims, and the grip of supersessionist theology remains strong.

4 Closing Remarks

In conclusion, it needs to be mentioned that harsh criticisms of other religions are not unique to the Qur'ān. Many discourses that attack other religious communities can be found in the holy texts of other faiths. For example, in the Gospel of John (New American Standard Bible):

So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine."

John 8:31

20 Abdulaziz Sachedina, "Is Islamic Revelation an Abrogation of Judaeo-Christian Revelation? Islamic Self-identification in the Classical and Modern Age," *Concilium* 3 (1994): 32.

21 See Robert R. Hann, "Supersessionism, Engraftment and Jewish-Christian Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 27 (1990): 327–342; John S. Feiberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988); Helga Croner, ed., *More Stepping Stones to Jewish-Christian Relations* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

I know that you are Abraham's descendants; yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you.

John 8:37

You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

John 8:44

He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason, you do not hear them, because you are not of God.

John 8:47

As in the case of the Qur'ān's criticisms, the Gospel's polemical verses should not be read in isolation from the sectarian context of the Church's early development. In this article, I have shown that the Qur'ān's criticisms emerged in a sectarian environment in which the Prophet and his followers were pioneering the formation of a religious identity independent of Judaism and Christianity. Moreover, the uniqueness of an identity is built by emphasizing the differences from the "other," and often, the "other" is portrayed negatively. It is evident that the Qur'ān's critical verses are connected to the conflicts surrounding the dynamics of the formation of a religious identity, and consequently, they should be reinterpreted in the context of the non-polemical interactions of the modern era. I conclude this article with a penetrating observation from Reuven Firestone, an academic active in interreligious discourse:

Scriptural polemic inevitably records the tension and arguments of specific events and times early on in religious formation. Continuing to apply them to the current age is simply an error and misunderstanding of the role and meaning of scriptural polemics.²²

22 Reuven Firestone, "The Way that New Religions Emerge," in *Triologue: Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, ed. Leonard Swidler, Khalid Duran, and Reuven Firestone (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2007), 53.

Source

Mun'im Sirry, "Memahami Kritik al-Qur'an terhadap Agama Lain" (unpublished paper).
Translated by Rowan Gould.

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This book brings together leading Muslim thinkers – from Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Iran, Turkey, and Indonesia – offering bold, diverse perspectives on how to interpret the Qur'ān in a changing world. From gender justice and interfaith relations to critiques of tradition and modernity, these essays tackle urgent questions facing Muslim communities. Many appear here in English for the first time. Whether defending classical methods or proposing reformist approaches, each author engages deeply with the Qur'ān's meaning and relevance. A unique resource for students, scholars, and all who seek to understand contemporary Qur'ānic hermeneutics from within the Muslim tradition.

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