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THE QUR'ĀN AND INTERPRETATION IN THE CLASSICAL MODERNISM: TAFSIRCENTRIC APPROACH OF MUHAMMAD 'ABDUH

Hakan Çoruh*

Abstract: This article focuses on Muslim modernist exegesis. In the mid-19th century, Muslim modernist exegesis emerged under the influence of Western science in various parts of Muslim lands such as India and Egypt. Some main characteristics of this approach in early Muslim modernism are: a central focus on the Qur'ān as the primary text; a sceptical approach to *hadīth*; emphasis on *ijtihād* (independent reasoning); emphasis on a new systematic theology (new *kalām*); a critical approach to classical Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*); and interpreting the Qur'ān in the light of reason and modern sciences. The current literature describes Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) as a modernist *Salafī* or intellectual modernism (by Fazlur Rahman). Because more emphasis is given to the Qur'ān rather *hadīth* in 'Abduh's thought, 'intellectual modernism' seems to be the best description for 'Abduh's way. This article also argues 'Abduh attempts the *tafsīr*isation of other Islamic disciplines through his text-based approach.

Keywords: *Modernist Qur'ān exegesis, Muhammad 'Abduh, S. Ahmad Khan, Salafism*

INTRODUCTION

The world has experienced many changes in the modern period like globalisation, migration, scientific developments, materialism and positivism, secularism and the emergence of nation-states affecting the Muslim world. At this point, Muslims' encounters with modernity and their reactions to it should be examined. Unfortunately, many Muslims' first introduction to modernity was via colonial occupation and military conquest. Naturally, Muslims' way of understanding Islam in the face of modernity was to look at the analyses and studies of the fundamental document: the Qur'ān.¹ Therefore, the Qur'ān played a major role in responses to concerns of modernity. It is important to bear in mind that reform (*islāh*) and renewal (*tajdīd*) are significant concepts in Islamic tradition. When Muslims are faced with the challenges of modernity, Muslim scholars turn to the Qur'ān to accomplish this renewal.² In this context,

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¹ Massimo Campanini, *The Qur'ān Modern Muslim Interpretations*, trans. Caroline Higgitt (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

unlike in the West, modernisation in Muslim countries emerged as religious movements.³ It may be concluded that endeavours to interpret the Qur'ān, and in general Islam, were major reactions to modernity.

For decades, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897) and Muhammad 'Abduh's reformist movement was called *salafiyya*, providing the basic foundation for the history of *salafiyya* as the history of Islamic modernism and its advocates. Western scholars often described the story of Salafism in terms of the ideas and principles considered characteristics of Islamic modernist reformism, such as rejection of blind imitation (*taqlīd*) and promotion of rationality.⁴ In 2010, Henri Lauzière, from Northwestern University, however, emphasised the term *salafiyya* is not an appropriate description for al-Afghani and 'Abduh. French scholar Louis Massignon's (d. 1962) narrative of *salafiyya* and its resulting typology have been repeated in countless works through a chain of Western scholars. However, in Lauzière's view, primary sources do not support the claim that al-Afghani and 'Abduh used the term or identified themselves in the late 19th century, while they initiated the Islamic reformism that later became known as modernist Salafism. Lauzière developed his argument using various reasons. For example, the term *salafiyya* or any Salafī epithet (*Salafī, salafiyyūn*) is not mentioned in journal of *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqa* (The Indissoluble Bond), and neither man emphasised the concept. Moreover, Lauzière underlines it is difficult to prove the claim that Salafī epithets initially referred to a broad movement of modernist reform. Rashid Rida (d. 1935) did not think being a Salafī was sufficient to be considered among the proponents of the Islamic modernist school. Therefore, the intellectual connection between *salafiyya* and al-Afghani and 'Abduh is not established.⁵

On the other hand, Frank Griffel re-evaluates Lauzière's approach and argues that Massignon did not make a mistake. By analysing reform movements, Griffel concludes there is a historic continuity that justifies calling the Islamic modernist school of al-Afghani and 'Abduh and contemporary Sunni reform movements "Salafī".⁶ Griffel thinks there is a strong sense of Salafism in 'Abduh's thinking. 'Abduh speaks about a revival of the *salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, and this caused Massignon to adapt the word *salafiyya* as a meaningful analytical category. Therefore, Massignon identifies al-Afghānī and 'Abduh as leaders of the *salafiyya*, and he presents al-Afghānī and 'Abduh or Riḍā as examples of a wider and broader movement of Salafist reform.⁷ In Griffel's view, al-Afghānī and 'Abduh were committed to reform and revival according to the method of Salafism, and "there was in Islam a broad Salafist movement of reform that began around 1870 or 1880 and became stronger throughout the rest of the century."⁸

³ Ismail Albayrak, *Klāsik Modernizmde Kur'ān'a Yaklaşımlar* (Istanbul: Ensar Neşriyat, 2004), 27.

⁴ Henri Lauzière, "The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism From the Perspective of Conceptual History," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010), 374.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 374-6.

⁶ Frank Griffel, "What do we Mean by 'Salafī'? Connecting Muḥammad 'Abduh with Egypt's Nūr Party in Islam's Contemporary Intellectual History," *Die Welt des Islams* 55 (2015), 186.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 200-2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 217.

In his response, Lauzière highlights that he found no indication the Arabic word *salafiyya* was ever used as an abstract noun to mean “Salafism” prior to the 1920s. The word did not work as a reformist slogan in the late 19th century. While some Muslim scholars sometimes used the term *Salafī* in that period, they did not use it to name proponents of a modern movement of Islamic reform. Therefore, it is not an established idea that al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh either founded or led a movement of reform called *salafiyya* in the late 19th century. Lauzière points out, while the abstract noun *salafiyya* is not used prior the 1920s, the word “Salafi” was clearly employed to call adherents of the Hanbali theology in ‘Abduh’s lifetime. ‘Abduh basically described “the Salafis” in such terms in 1902, stating it refers to Sunnis who differ from the Ash‘aris in creed.⁹ The confusion is between adherents of Salafi theology and proponents of Islamic modernism. While some reformers in ‘Abduh’s network were Salafi in creed, not all self-proclaimed Salafis were Islamic modernists and not all Islamic modernists were Salafi in creed.¹⁰

In addition to the common description of *Salafī* for ‘Abduh, Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) prefers to describe him as a Muslim modernist.¹¹ In her book, Samira Haj considers ‘Abduh as a Muslim reformer who is critical of traditionalist religious authority and colonial modernity. ‘Abduh attempted to reconfigure Islam to challenge and accommodate the changes in his age. While Haj places ‘Abduh’s reform project within an intellectual genealogy of *tajdid-islām* (renewal), she thinks ‘Abduh drew on multiple tendencies and arguments within the parameters of the Islamic tradition to establish a counter-discourse that could compete with established Islamic orthodoxy on the one hand and Europeanisation on the other. For example, he relied on al-Ghazali’s doctrine of the mean (*mizan*) and the Mu‘tazila’s notion of ‘*aql*, along with ibn Taymiya’s right to *ijtihād*, which allowed him to reconfigure orthodoxy as a space within which he could integrate elements of colonial modernity (e.g. the nation-state) and remain within tradition.¹² Taking into account the above, several approaches to ‘Abduh’s method are proposed for the decades.

As a continuation of this debate, this article analyses approaches to the Qur’ān in the early Muslim modernism and reviews characteristic features of modernist exegesis. It will examine early modernist intellectuals’, particularly ‘Abduh’s, approaches to interpretation of the Qur’ān, the place of *hadīth* in exegesis, approaches to *kalām* (systematic theology), Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the concept of *ijtihād*, and the place of reason in exegesis. In addition, the article gives examples to provide a broad outline of modern exegesis. The article argues ‘intellectual modernism’ seems an appropriate description to classify ‘Abduh’s approach to Islam in general. What ‘Abduh attempts to do is *tafsīrisation* of other Islamic disciplines through his text-based approach.

⁹ Henri Lauzière, “What we mean Versus what they Meant by ‘Salafi’: A Reply to Frank Griffel,” *Die Welt des Islams* 56 (2016), 90-2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 49-51.

¹² Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 71-2.

MODERNIST EXEGESIS AND ITS MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

It is significant to make a distinction that Muslim modernism is divided into two periods: early modernism and neo-modernism. Early modernism emerged in the colonial period, aiming to synthesise Western thought and sciences with the best of Islamic tradition. However, neo-modernists are more aware of the possibility of modernity's compatibility with the needs of their society. Moreover, while earlier modernists called for reforms to catch up to the West, neo-modernist intellectuals are more critical about the components of the modelled development and result in the Western model of development. Furthermore, the writings of early modernists were apologetic. As for neo-modernists, they are more concerned with issues of their own society, such as social problems.¹³ While Fazlur Rahman is considered as a neo-modernist, Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) and Muhammad 'Abduh, considered to be the beginning of Islamic modernism, are major representatives of early modernism.¹⁴

In the mid-19th century, modernist exegesis emerged under the influence of exposure to Western science in various parts of Muslim lands such as the Indian subcontinent and Egypt. Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad 'Abduh are significant figures of modernist exegesis. Their approach to the Qur'ān are different from the previous tradition in many respects, while they have similar ideas. Both emphasised the importance of moving away from imitation of the past towards a sensitive approach compatible with modern life. Moreover, while they were connected with rationalist scholars in early Islam, such as Mu'tazilīs, they believed there was the need for interpretation of the Qur'ān with a scientific worldview in mind. Furthermore, they wanted to reinterpret miracles in the Qur'ān in line with modern science and reason. In addition, both underlined the Qur'ān should be made familiar to the modern mind, becoming aware that exegetical procedures and jargon of previous commentaries had made the Qur'ān unclear, especially to the modern mind and social context.¹⁵ This point is very important as these scholars clearly expressed their dissatisfaction with classical methodologies and encouraged their followers to develop a new way to look at the Qur'ān.

It is worth mentioning that reform was a key theme for modernist intellectuals. Scholars such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839-1897) maintained that Muslims should have a reform movement like the ones that emerged in Christian Europe. The modern context required a reassessment of the intellectual heritage of Muslims, and the result of this was giving up the blind imitation of early scholars.¹⁶ The main ideas of early modernists were: a return to the pure Islam of the earliest Muslims (*salaf*), revitalisation of the Islamic intellectual tradition, interpretation of tradition and sources in response to the challenges of modernity, their emphasis on harmony between reason and revelation, learning from the West, and reform of

¹³ Azhar Ibrahim, "Contemporary Islamic Thought: A Critical Perspective," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 3 (2012): 285.

¹⁴ Abdullah Saeed, *Islamic Thought: An Introduction* (UK: Routledge, 2006), 139.

¹⁵ Abdullah Saeed, "Qur'ān: Tradition of Scholarship," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2005), 7567; See, for 'Abduh's methodology, Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān Al-Ḥakīm al-mushtaher bismi Tafsīr al-Manār, Muqaddima* (Dār al-Manār: Cairo, 1947), 17-31.

¹⁶ Saeed, *Islamic Thought*, 134.

significant institutions such as educational schools and their curriculums.¹⁷ In a way, calling for a return to the Qur'ān as the primary text and the earliest Muslims (*salaf*) was an inevitable consequence of critiquing traditional scholarship and triggered change.

Moreover, 'Abduh also believed a reform movement was essential for the Muslim world. Early modernist intellectuals such as 'Abduh attempted to join the colonial state and use its structures and educational institutions to reform Islam from within the state.¹⁸ 'Abduh was heavily influenced by the European Enlightenment about the role of reason and religion in society.¹⁹ In this context, while he attempts to introduce rationality and Enlightenment humanist concepts into an essentially immutable religion,²⁰ he also believes "Protestant Christianity – which he thinks carried the Enlightenment – was, with the exception of belief in Muhammad's prophecy and its rites of worship (*ibāda*), 'different from Islam in name, but not in meaning."²¹ This was a way of justifying the inspiration received from the European Enlightenment. As for Sayyid Ahmad Khan, his statement clearly shows his view in this regard: "The fact is that India needs not merely a Steele or an Addison, but also, and primarily, a Luther."²² It can be seen 'Abduh has also a reform idea and is influenced by reformist movements. As Ahmad Khan's statement clearly shows, early modernist thinkers attempted to establish a paradigm around the main scripture of Islam (the Qur'ān) to make reform (*islāh*) and renewal (*tajdīd*) in Islamic thought.

The Qur'ān and Hadīth in Muhammad 'Abduh's Thought

I shall start to review characteristic features of modernist exegesis by pointing out the place of Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*) as a discipline in the eyes of modern thinkers. Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*) became the paramount discipline in the modern period although it was among the other Islamic disciplines in the classical period. According to Mehmet Paçacı, from Ankara University, the reason for this is Protestant textualism, the notion of *sola scriptura* and Western thought influenced modern scholars. Therefore, *sola corano* became a widespread principle among modernist exegetes.²³ Moreover, Islamic law (*fiqh*) and systematic theology (*kalām*), which are prescriptive disciplines in Islamic tradition, played passive roles because leading Muslim states, such as the Ottoman and Mughal empires, lost their political power, and many Muslim countries were controlled by colonialist powers and secular elites. For example, the British government disregarded Islamic law in new courts in India under their control in that period.²⁴ As a result, modern thinkers attempted to give the task of these influential normative

¹⁷ Ibid., 134–5.

¹⁸ Griffel, "What do we Mean," 195; Reinhard Schulze, *A Modern History of the Muslim World* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 90.

¹⁹ Griffel, "What do we Mean," 195.

²⁰ Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, 68.

²¹ 'Abduh, cited in Griffel, "What do we Mean," 196; Muḥammad 'Abduh, *The Theology of Unity*, trans. I. Musa'ad and K. Cragg (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), 150.

²² Mazheruddin Siddiqi, *Modern Reformist Thought in the Muslim World* (Islamabad, Pakistan: Islamic Research Institute, 1982), 3-5.

²³ Mehmet Paçacı, "Çağdaş Dönemde Kur'an'a ve Tefsire Ne oldu?," *İslāmiyāt* VI, no. 4 (2003), 96.

²⁴ Albayrak, *Klāsik Modernizmde*, 53.

disciplines to *tafsīr*. Based on the above, it seems, with the emergence of modern nation states, Muslim scholars lost their civic authority in *fiqh* and *kalām*, which were normative disciplines. As a result, while governmental courts provided rules and regulations, Muslim modernists gave more tasks to *tafsīr* to make a paradigm around the Qur'ān. In addition, Egypt was colonised in 1882 and 'Abduh was writing within a colonial political context. However, he may have thought the change required was far deeper and had to be in the thought of Muslims, so appeal to the Qur'ān would achieve this more than any other discipline.

In relation to the above, it should be said modernist discourses and opinions were produced in the light of the Qur'ān and *tafsīr*, which are considered to be the primary resource and discipline. Consequently, the functions of Islamic disciplines were considered under the general title of *tafsīr*, whose function is “solely true understanding of the Qur'ān,”²⁵ in the modern period. As a result, reformist thought aimed to ignore tradition, mainly holding the idea of *sola corano*. The Qur'ān was recognised as a document by itself and was considered to be independent of tradition. In modernists' view, the Qur'ān was the primary source of salvation, whereas tradition was the greatest obstacle to it.²⁶ Therefore, it can be reasonably concluded, for 'Abduh, *tafsīr* became a major field in response to the concerns of modernity. In his commentary, 'Abduh clearly says he will be satisfied with the Qur'ānic text only and will not go beyond the text.²⁷ 'Abduh's sole reliance on the Qur'ān may seem to be in line with Salafī thought, but 'Abduh's method is more Qur'ān-based and this approach is a necessity for him to start everything from the beginning and make a flexible space for his approach through *tafsīr*.

One of the most significant aspects of modernist exegesis is its emphasis that the Qur'ān should guide Muslims towards becoming a moral community.²⁸ 'Abduh's pupil M. Rashīd Riḍā notes:

The duty of the Muslim is to read the verse remembering that it was revealed to give directives and provide lessons for those who believe ... The Prophet came and the Qur'ān was transmitted in order to guide humankind. A true commentary is one that explains perfectly what Allah expects of humankind, and the road he wishes it to take.²⁹

In this context, 'Abduh thinks understanding the Qur'ān should be based on a perception of it as divine guidance. Therefore, he is highly critical of the classical *tafsīr* tradition that is based on the views of earlier exegetical authorities, considering classical commentaries did not focus

²⁵ Paçacı, “Çağdaş Dönemde Kur'an'a,” 97-9.

²⁶ Ibid., 95, 103, 99, 100-1, 96-8.

²⁷ Muhammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Manār (Tafsīru'l-qur'āni'l-ḥakīm)* (Qairo: Matba'atu'l-Manār, 1954), I/347, accessed November 13, 2018, <https://al-maktaba.org/book/12304/1387#p1>.

²⁸ Paçacı, “Çağdaş Dönemde Kur'an'a,” 75, 101; Rotraud Wielandt, “Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Early Modern and Contemporary,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2002), 127; Johannes Marinus Simon Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 5, 37; Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 1978), 167.

²⁹ Jacques Jomier, cited in Campanini, *The Qur'ān*, 17; 'Abduh and Riḍā, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān Al-Ḥakīm*, 17, 25.

on the purpose of revelation.³⁰ It can be seen here that ‘Abduh is not satisfied with the nature and structure of classical commentaries.³¹

Moreover, modernist exegetes emphasise that everyone is allowed to ponder the meanings of the Qur’ān, and Qur’ānic exegesis is not the monopoly of scholars and religious leaders.³² Obviously, the notion of *sola scriptura* is the dominant theme among modern Muslim thinkers’ response to the challenges of modernity. It is clear in ‘Abduh’s view, *tafsīr* should function as a guide to Muslims rather than focusing on technical and theoretical details as practised in the classical period. It is interesting that Salafīs also enjoy a relatively superficial and limited hierarchy of scholarly authorities, not supporting a developed and layered scholastic tradition of religious interpretation.³³

Just as ‘Abduh’s and modernists scholars’ views of the Qur’ān are important, so are their perspectives on the second source of Islam: *hadīth*. It is safe to assume modernist exegetes are very sceptical about prophetic traditions.³⁴ For example, according to Ahmad Khan, very few prophetic traditions are reliable.³⁵ Aziz Ahmad (1913-1978) states his ideas on the doubtfulness of even the six most reliable classical collections of *hadīth* are not very different from the conclusions reached by Western scholars such as Goldziher (d. 1921) and Schacht (d. 1969).³⁶ As mentioned before, Protestant textualism influenced a number of modernist scholars.³⁷ Their approach to *hadīth* remind of this influence. In addition, modernist intellectuals also denied the early scholars’ interpretation about certain terms in the Qur’ān as indicating *hadīth*. For example, the concept of *ḥikmah* (literally “wisdom”) is considered to refer to the *sunna*. ‘Abduh denied the exposition of *ḥikmah* in the Qur’ān 2:129 as *sunna* and he interpreted this term as “understanding the purposes of the Qur’ān, its emphasised reasoning, the Qur’ān’s congruence to people’s nature, the laws of human society, and the people’s interests in all places and times.”³⁸ As an another example, Parwez (d. 1985) argues against the traditionists’ Qur’ānic arguments for commending faith in *hadīth*, insisting that considering *ḥikmah* an equivalent of the Prophetic traditions is not right. It is a general term representing “wisdom” and cannot have that special meaning. Parwez thinks there is nothing in the Qur’ān about putting equally certain belief in the Qur’ān and *hadīth*.³⁹

As for ‘Abduh, he is not as interested in *hadīth*, underlining that the only way to avoid innovation is to establish one’s interpretations solely on the Qur’ān.⁴⁰ ‘Abduh rejected any

³⁰ Johanna Pink, “‘Abduh, Muḥammad,” In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, edited by, Jane Dammen McAuliffe. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2015), advance online publication, accessed January 22, 2017, doi: 10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_050483.

³¹ ‘Abduh and Riḍā, *Tafsīr Al-Qur’ān Al-Ḥakīm*, 18.

³² Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran*, 16.

³³ Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” in *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

³⁴ Albayrak, *Klāsik Modernizmde*, 32-33.

³⁵ Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 144.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁷ Paçacı, “Çağdaş Dönemde Kur’an’a,” 85-104.

³⁸ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur’ān* (London: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), 19.

³⁹ Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran*. 17-8.

⁴⁰ Pink, “‘Abduh, Muḥammad.”

hadīth reports that could not be authentically proved to have originated with the Prophet or were not universally accepted by Muslims.⁴¹ His sceptical approach to *hadīth* could be connected with his scripture-based *tafsīr* approach. ‘Abduh believes the Qur’ān and *sunna* of the Prophet are sources of Islam, but he only accepts *mutawātir ahadīth*, and the proof-value of such reports is certain and clear evidence. In his view, only a small part of the Prophet’s *sunna* is at the level of *mutawātir*, such as practical *sunna* like daily prayers (*salāt*) and almsgiving (*zakāt*). However, in general, ‘Abduh is very sceptical and flexible about authenticity of *āhād* (solitary) *hadīth*.⁴² For example, ‘Abduh rejects authentic *āhād* reports about magic (*sihr*) and its effect on Prophet Muhammad, stating such solitary reports conflict with reason, the Qur’ān and the infallibility of the Prophet.⁴³ As can be seen, he focuses more on the text and content (*matn*) of *ahādīth* rather than chains of transmission (*sanad*) adopted by *muḥaddithūn* (*hadīth* scholars) and critically evaluates the content of solitary *hadīth* using the Qur’ān (*naṣṣ al-kitāb*) and reason (*dalīl al-‘aql*).⁴⁴ However, *ahl-hadīth* (people of tradition) school and later Salafī hermeneutics are based on *hadīth* and their understanding of Islam is more connected with *hadīth literature*. Salafī scholars emphasise this point in their writings. For example, Al-Atharee holds the view that truth is discovered in the creed of the *ahlul-hadīth*, and only the *ahl-hadīth* group is on the path of the righteous predecessors (*as-salaf as-salih*, the first three generations). Al-Madkhalee also highlights “‘The religion of the prophet Muhammad is the narrations’; ‘the knowledge that is followed is that what contains “*qaala haddathana*”’; and everything else is whispers from the *Shaytaan* [The Devil]”⁴⁵ As can be seen here, religious understanding in Salafī thought can be only achieved through reports from the earliest generations and the religion of Islam is fully completed in that period. This approach is not seen in ‘Abduh’s method. As Bernard Haykel highlights, Salafīs rely only on sound proof-texts from revelation as the basis for their views, believing the Qur’ānic text and in particular *hadīth* are unconditionally authoritative for the elaboration of teachings and opinions. However, ‘Abduh was not a literalist and did not maintain that “the *hadīths* were unconditionally authoritative.”⁴⁶

‘Abduh’s Attempt to Revitalise Kalām (Systematic Theology)

While Salafīs do not get involved in *kalām*, ‘Abduh is one of the significant proponents of the new *kalām* in the modern period. Because science and philosophy developed rapidly and new challenges such as materialism and positivism emerged in the modern period, leading Muslim theologians argued classical *kalām* had lost its basis, which was logical argumentation, once empirical method became used in scientific research. Therefore, they highlighted the urgency of a substantial methodological change in the field of *kalām*. Muhammad ‘Abduh from

⁴¹ Aisha Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur’ān* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7.

⁴² Muhammad ‘Abduh, *Risalat al-Tawhid* (Beirut: Dar al-Ilm al-Malayin, 7. Edit., 1992), 158.

⁴³ Muhammad ‘Imara, ed., *al-A‘mal al-kamilah lil-Imam Muhammad ‘Abduh* (al-Qahira: Dar al-Shuruq, 1993), V/543-4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, V/544.

⁴⁵ Adis Duderija, “Neo-Traditional Salafi Qur’ān-Sunna Hermeneutics and Its Interpretational Implications,” *Religion Compass* 5/7 (2011): 317.

⁴⁶ Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought,” 3-4, 11.

Egypt, Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Shiblī Nu'mānī (d. 1914) from India were leading theologians of the new *kalām* movement.⁴⁷ In this context, modernist intellectuals such as Ahmad Khan and 'Abduh sought to form a theology based on the Qur'ān in the confine of the *tafsīr* discipline and they prioritised Qur'ānic commentary over all other disciplines.⁴⁸

In line with the above, another important aspect of the modernist approach is “simplicities of faith.” For example, Ahmad Khan attempted to eliminate from his creed and code of practice all additional material included by Muslim jurists, commentators, theologians (*ahl al-kalām*) and Šūfis, limiting himself only to the Qur'ān and a few authentic Prophetic traditions.⁴⁹ As for 'Abduh, his work *Risālah al-Tawhīd* (the Theology of Unity) is an example of this modern tendency. He aimed to renew *kalām* in response to modern concerns and remove any theoretical speculations and old polemics.⁵⁰ Based on the above, it could be said 'Abduh aimed to develop *kalām* based on the Qur'ān via *tafsīr*. The Qur'ān was a sufficient source to clarify theological issues and respond to current needs, and faith topics were simple enough without any need for old theoretical speculations.

On the other hand, Salafīs believe they “are true Muslims, not like the misguided ones and the people of innovation, such as the Ash'aris, the Sufis and the Kharijis, who believe in x and y heresy.”⁵¹ As can be seen, Salafīs consider *kalām* discipline and *kalām* scholars like the Ash'aris as a creed of misguidance. Moreover, while Salafīs are strictly literal in theology,⁵² the early reformist scholars like 'Abduh were not involved in the antirationalist and literalist theological teachings of Ibn Taymiyya on the nature of God or His oneness (*tawhid*). Also, early modernists like 'Abduh were not literalists and they did not maintain *hadīth* were unconditionally authoritative. In addition, they did not focus on the boundary that separated true Muslims from false ones, but their vision was more inclusive, even ecumenical, engaging with the West, learning from it and adopting some of its traits in the sciences.⁵³ While 'Abduh and Salafīs have some similarities, such as purity of faith (*'aqida*) and removal of any theoretical speculations, 'Abduh had a distinct methodology in his theology.

A New Jurisprudence Based Solely on the Qur'ān

As a religion of logic, Islam is based on *ijtihād* (independent reasoning); therefore, *ijtihād* is *sine qua non* of the religion. One of the significant aspects of modernist Qur'ānic reading is the concept of *al-'aql al-awwal wa al-naql al-mu'awwal* (first reason and then the text or text should be interpreted using rational explanation). One of the extensions of this approach is to emphasise the concept of *ijtihād*, arguing that previous scholars' *ijtihād* are not binding upon

⁴⁷ M. Sait Özervarlı, “Attempts to Revitalize Kalām in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries,” *The Muslim World* 89, no. 1 (1999): 93-100.

⁴⁸ Paçacı, “Çağdaş Dönemde Kur'an'a,” 99, 100.

⁴⁹ Siddiqi, *Modern Reformist Thought*, 4-5.

⁵⁰ 'Abduh, *Risālah al-Tawhīd*.

⁵¹ Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought,” 8.

⁵² Joas Wagemakers, “Salafism or the Quest for Purity,” *Oasis*, July 26, 2018, <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/what-is-Salafism-quest-for-purity>.

⁵³ Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi thought,” 11-2.

modern Muslims because they are historical. Moreover, they maintain it can be exercised through new Islamic jurisprudence that is based only on the Qur'ān, disregarding other traditional juristic sources.⁵⁴ For instance, 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā believe *ijtihād* is a fundamental device of Muslim law, and to close its gate would make divine law unadaptable to the changing circumstances of modern life.⁵⁵ Their emphasis on a new Islamic jurisprudence based only on the Qur'ān supports the argument of this article. Comparatively speaking, Salafīs in general completely reject *taqlid* (imitation) of any *madhhab* and prefer to communicate directly with the revealed sources. They are also *ijtihād*-minded and *ijtihād* is emphasised in the formulation of legal opinions.⁵⁶ In this regard, 'Abduh and many Salafīs have a similar approach. However, 'Abduh uses *ijtihād* to provide more flexible interpretations to adapt to changing circumstances of modern life. However, Salafīs urge *ijtihād* within the revealed sources, particularly *hadīth*, and reject imitation. Salafīs restrict the scope of reasoning practiced by *ahl ra'y* (people of reason, e.g. Hanafīs) and rely solely on *hadīth* and statements of the companions of Prophet Muhammad.⁵⁷

Moreover, almost all Muslim modernist intellectuals aim to go back to the Qur'ān and *sunna*, and they reject the medieval Muslim jurisprudence developed by the famous four jurists. In response to modern problems, the modernist scholars rely on *ijtihād* (independent reasoning), taking the Qur'ān and the *Sunna* as a starting point.⁵⁸ In line with this approach, they highlight a high degree of flexibility regarding their interpretation of Qur'ānic verses, in order to adapt Muslim life to the needs of the modern age.⁵⁹ For example, 'Abduh became aware of the great advantage to be found in exegetic flexibility, urging the use of all schools of thought and scholars' works as sources to choose the most suitable law for any present problem. The obvious contradiction between Islam and modern society comes from the rigidity of Muslims. In his view, this rigidity in Sharia rules results in difficulties. However, in the days of true Islam, Sharia was tolerant, to the extent that it embraced the whole world.⁶⁰ Comparatively speaking, many Salafīs also completely reject *taqlid* (imitation) of any *madhhab*. According to Haykel, Salafīs adopted the anti-schools' position and it seems this comes from Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya's (d. 1350) teachings. Unlike his teacher Ibn Taymiyya's (d. 1328) position, Ibn al-Qayyim highlighted the importance of *ijtihād* for a qualified scholar and maintained "ordinary Muslims should be liberated from the imitation of the four schools of law."⁶¹ In line with this Salafī view, the Afghani and 'Abduh school had an approach that is similar to Ibn al-Qayyim's position in the area of legal interpretation. Both

⁵⁴ Albayrak, *Klāsik Modernizmde*, 121, 33.

⁵⁵ Johannes J. G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Qur'ān in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 87.

⁵⁶ Haykel, "On the Nature of Salafī Thought," 8.

⁵⁷ "Mehmet Ali Büyükkara ile Çağdaş Selefî Akımlar Üzerine", interviewed by Meltem Kural, *Perspektif*, March 2013 (No: 219), Germany, p. 28-35. German trans.: "Salafīyya: Entstehung, Hintergründe, Strömungen", translated by M. Musab Özden, retrieved from <<http://www.islamiq.de/2014/01/09/moderne-salafitische-stroemungen/>>.

⁵⁸ Siddiqi, *Modern Reformist Thought*, 83, 73.

⁵⁹ Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran*, 102.

⁶⁰ M. A. Zaki Badawi, *The Reformers of Egypt* (London: Croom Helm, 1976–8), 81-2.

⁶¹ Haykel, "On the Nature of Salafī Thought," 9.

underlined the significance of independent derivation of legal rulings (*ijtihād*) and the return to the textual revealed sources. However, the Afghani and ‘Abduh school did not consider *hadīth* as an unconditional authoritative source, which is the primary interpretive methodology of Salafīs.⁶² As can be seen, ‘Abduh has some similar approaches with Salafī thought. They maintain the independent derivation of legal rulings (*ijtihād*) and reject imitation. They point out the earliest period of Islam is called “true Islam.” Nonetheless, ‘Abduh is more interested in exegetic flexibility to respond to certain modern issues, not arguing for *hadīth*-based *fiqh*.

Furthermore, ‘Abduh and his student Rashīd Riḍā maintain those prescripts of traditional Islamic law that are inapplicable in a modern society are “additions” to the command of God. The jurists of the past are responsible.⁶³ Furthermore, ‘Abduh believes the jurists made people stray from the Qur’ān and *sunna*, and they distorted the Qur’ān and *sunna* more than the Jews had distorted the Torah. He also says the misguidance and loss of the religion took place because of the jurists.⁶⁴ On the other hand, ‘Abduh emphasised the changing nature of Sharia and public interest in Muslim jurisprudence. In ‘Abduh’s view, *mu‘amalat* (civil transaction), where there is no explicit text, should depend on public interest. ‘Abduh adopts the principle of *maṣlaḥa* (public interest) in Mālikī jurisprudence, giving it a more general meaning.⁶⁵ ‘Abduh’s text-based and pragmatic approach to Islamic jurisprudence can be clearly recognised from the information above.

Finally, ‘Abduh is highly critical of classical Islamic law and its rules. They believe “only the Qur’ān” is a sufficient source of Islam and classical Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is a great obstacle to understanding the Qur’ān. As underlined before, the normative disciplines, such as *kalām* and particularly *fiqh*, largely lost their functions in the modern period, so their functions were given to the *tafsīr* discipline.⁶⁶ Therefore, it seems ‘Abduh holds the view that *ijtihād* can be practised via a new Islamic jurisprudence that is based only on the Qur’ān. The following example from ‘Abduh’s *fatwā* on polygamy provides a clear picture of his Qur’ān-based jurisprudence, which is independent and rational.

‘Abduh and the Case of Polygamy

A good case to illustrate ‘Abduh is not a Salafī but an intellectual modernist is polygamy, which was heavily criticised by European scholars in the 19th century. The traditional juristic approach on polygamy is based on the Qur’ān 4:3, which allows a Muslim man to marry up to four wives.⁶⁷ Salafīs would uncritically accept this as not only based on the Qur’ān and established by the *hadīth* that Muslims can marry up to four wives irrespective of how modern

⁶² Ibid., 11.

⁶³ Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Qur’ān*, 87.

⁶⁴ Mehmet Suat Mertoğlu, ““Doğrudan Doğruya Kur’an’dan Alıp İlhamı”: Kur’an’a Dönüş’ten Kur’an İslamı’na.” *Dīvān* 15, no. 28 (2010/1): 91.

⁶⁵ Badawi, *The Reformers of Egypt*, 82-3, 85-6; Siddiqi, *Modern Reformist Thought*, 73.

⁶⁶ Paçacı, “Çağdaş Dönemde Kur’an’a,” 95, 103, 99, 100-1.

⁶⁷ For example, see for classical juristic approach, Al-Marghinani, *al-Hidayah*, accessed October 20, 2018, <https://al-maktaba.org/book/11820/284#p1>; Al-Mawṣilī, *al-Ikhtiyār*, accessed October 20, 2018, <https://al-maktaba.org/book/1066/459#p1>.

society changes. However, ‘Abduh argued against polygamous marriages and considered polygamy intrinsically incompatible with the nature of marital love. Although the four legal schools allow polygamy, ‘Abduh called for banning this practice because it is disruptive to social order, causing conflict within the family and humiliation of women.⁶⁸ In ‘Abduh’s view, polygamy is contingent in the Qur’ān on the fact one cannot love and provide for multiple wives equally and it is an impossible task. Therefore, the Sharia privileges monogamy and forbids polygamy except in exceptional circumstances. ‘Abduh underlined that Muslims had been misled by their jurists when they were told polygamy was permitted, because the Qur’ān emphatically warns against it in verses 4:3 and 4:129 (“and it will not be within your power to treat your wives with equal fairness⁶⁹”). ‘Abduh argues these verses discourage polygamy and “one can easily conclude from reading these verses that polygamy should be prohibited.”⁷⁰ In addition, he maintained the practice of polygamy was especially degrading to women because it contested one against another. It was also a source of conflict among wives. ‘Abduh called for the prohibition of polygamy based on individual and collective harms.⁷¹

‘Abduh puts forward a legal opinion, or *fatwā*, that went against the traditionally unconditional permission of this practice by judges and political authorities. Also, he emphasised the role of “justice” in his interpretation of the Qur’ānic verses on polygamy to establish the theoretical justification of conditioning the effect of the permission to practice polygamy. Unlike medieval jurists, ‘Abduh does not limit conception of the just treatment to matters related only to financial support or sexual intercourse, and he develops the achievement of ‘justice’ in polygamous marriages and makes it harder via his interpretation of the relevant verses. The question is whether ‘Abduh comes to his untraditional opinion by adhering to the traditionalist methodology in classical legal theories (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) or by adopting a new methodology.⁷²

Critically speaking, it can be derived from the above that ‘Abduh relies heavily on his interpretation of Qur’ānic verses and not the traditional juristic approach. Based on the relevant verses, he comes to his conclusion via the Qur’ān and use of reason in his interpretation within *tafsīr*. Also, he is critical of traditional jurists due to their juristic opinions of polygamy. This criticism is typical of Muslim modernists against traditional *fiqh*. Fazlur Rahman, for example, remarks “the rigidity of the jurists’ interpretations, and their denial of a historical context to the revelation, resulted in archaic laws that not only prevented Muslims from dealing with modern problems, but also undermined the vibrancy of Islam itself.”⁷³

⁶⁸ Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, 131; ‘Imara, *al-A‘mal al-Kamilah*, III/249-50.

⁶⁹ M.A.S. Abdel Haleem’s translation of Qur’ān is used in this article.

⁷⁰ Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, 132; ‘Imara, *al-A‘mal al-Kamilah*, III/250; Riḍa, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, IV/286-7.

⁷¹ Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, 132-3.

⁷² Yasir Ibrahim, “The Spirit of Islamic Law and Modern Religious Reform: Maqāsid al-Sharī‘a in Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashīd Ridā’s Legal Thought” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2004), 90-1.

⁷³ Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur’ān*, 25.

In the scholarly history of Islam, *tafsīr* was not a normative discipline. Imam Ghazālī (d. 1111) describes *tafsīr* and *hadīth* disciplines as pure traditional sciences (*naqlī mahd*). He adds that mastering such sciences is easy; the power of memorisation is enough and there is not much scope for the intellect in these fields. At this point, he also underlines that *tafsīr* only deals with the meaning of the Qur’ān (explanation and understanding).⁷⁴ *Tafsīr* follows a method of linguistic and historical analysis, using necessary sub-sciences such as grammar, rhetoric, *hadīth* and history for this purpose. With its analytical and descriptive character, *tafsīr* became the most fundamental means for carrying the language, history and basic texts (Qur’ān and *hadīth*) to every generation. Qur’ānic exegesis strengthened the primary meanings of the Qur’ān, providing the groundwork for subsequent points of analysis, which are carried out by *kalām* and *fiqh* as primary disciplines. In Islamic tradition, *tafsīr* does not complete the process of interpretation. The normative disciplines of *fiqh* and *kalām* continue the process of understanding from the place where the discipline of *tafsīr* finished and they derive rules that have practical results.⁷⁵ Thus, *kalām* and *fiqh* use *tafsīr* and *hadīth* materials to derive normative conclusions.

This relatively secondary role of *tafsīr* is where the most significant distinction in ‘Abduh’s thought enters. Unlike traditional scholars, ‘Abduh attempts to establish his legal opinion on a topic like polygamy in an area of practical matters of Islam (*fiqh*) directly with his interpretation in *tafsīr*, criticising classical jurists and *fiqh* that they misled Muslims and misinterpreted Qur’ānic injunctions on polygamy. This analysis supports the main argument of this article that ‘Abduh attempts to make *tafsīrisation* of other Islamic disciplines (*kalām* and *fiqh*) through his text-based approach.

Another critical point is that ‘Abduh could have come to the same conclusion to limit or ban the practice of polygamy within the area of *fiqh* by relying on juristic principles in Islamic legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) like *istihsān* (juristic preference or equity in Islamic law). In its juristic definition, “*istihsān* is a method of exercising personal opinion in order to avoid any rigidity and unfairness that might result from the literal enforcement of the existing law.”⁷⁶ This secondary source of Sharia is considered an antidote to literalism, taking a broad view of the law that must serve the ideals of fairness and justice. For example, Caliph ‘Umar (d. 644) set aside the established law in a number of cases on the grounds of public interest, equity and justice such as his prohibition of marriage with *ahl al-kitāb* (Christians and Jews) and not to enforce the *hadd* penalty for theft during a widespread famine.⁷⁷ Therefore, by consulting classical *fiqh*, ‘Abduh could derive a similar *fatwā* on polygamy if more harm derived from the action than benefit and to preserve the public good. However, he preferred to rely on his broad interpretation of justice only on the relevant Qur’ānic verses. This implies the classical *fiqh* framework did not satisfy him and he believed going beyond the classical *fiqh* structure was

⁷⁴ Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī, *Al-Mustasfa* (Medina: Al-Jami’a al-Islamiyya, 1992/1993), vol. I, 3-4, 12.

⁷⁵ Paçacı, “Çağdaş Dönemde Kur’an’a,” 88-92, 94; Hakan Çoruh, *Modern Interpretation of the Qur’ān: The Contribution of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Switzerland: Palgrave, 2019), 98-105.

⁷⁶ M. Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Islamic Text Society, 2003), 323-350.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

essential to accommodate modern changes in his time and to synthesise Western modern values with Islamic tradition.

‘Abduh’s broad concept of justice in polygamous marriages indicates his methodology of reform and separates him from Salafī thought. His interests are values and objectives, such as justice and benefit in the Qur’ān rather than specific details and formulas in classical works and he develops them broadly via his interpretations within *tafsīr*, thereby accommodating Western modern thoughts.

Reason (‘Aql) as a Primary Source in Interpreting the Qur’ān

Another facet of modernist exegesis and the way it differs with Salafism is that it is based on reason and modern science. The power of reason has significantly impressed Muslim modernism.⁷⁸ Muslim modernists such as ‘Abduh argue Islam was compatible with the notions of rationality defended by the European Enlightenment and modern science.⁷⁹ For example, ‘Abduh maintained Islam and the Qur’ān are rational. Moreover, he stressed the Qur’ān is the only sacred text that argues in a deductive and demonstrative way, and he sees it as a necessary obligation of human beings to ponder it scientifically and systematically. ‘Abduh underlined frequently that Muslim faith stands on reason.⁸⁰ ‘Abduh also said a miracle had an apologetic character that functioned to support the reliability of revelation, arguing the era of the miracle is now over. From the time of Prophet Muhammad onward, this has been the age of reason. Miracles were essential at the time when humanity was in its childhood.⁸¹ Similarly, Ahmad Khan emphasises that God’s word, the revelation, cannot contradict his work, i.e. nature. Any religion sent by God must necessarily be within the grasp of human intellect. The reason for this is that we can perceive the obligatory character of a religion only by means of the intellect. As a practical result of this approach, he eliminated miraculous events from his understanding of the Qur’ānic text as much as possible and supranatural phenomena that were not compatible with his scientific opinion.⁸² However, although Khan tried to eliminate these supernatural events in Qur’ānic narratives, other more moderate modernists only attempted to minimise or rationalise the miraculous elements.⁸³ ‘Abduh’s rationalistic approach to the text can be seen here and he is heavily influenced by modern reason.

‘Abduh, in his commentary, demonstrates the importance of reason and a positive approach to science in Islam. ‘Abduh underlines that many Qur’ānic verses call for reflection upon the signs of God in nature, and these verses comprise approximately half the Qur’ān. Basically, there is no conflict between religion and science since both are based on reason and examine the same occurrences to a certain extent. In this respect, religion is a friend of science. He advocates for Muslims the duty of acquisition of the sciences in which Western countries are

⁷⁸ Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran*, 21; Albayrak, *Klāsik Modernizmde*, 35.

⁷⁹ Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur’ān*, 5.

⁸⁰ Campanini, *The Qur’ān*, 14; ‘Abduh, *The Theology of Unity*, 124-5.

⁸¹ Campanini, *The Qur’ān*, 15; ‘Abduh and Riḍā, *Tafsīr Al-Qur’ān Al-Ḥakīm*, I/315.

⁸² Wielandt, “Exegesis of the Qur’ān,” 126-7.

⁸³ Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran*, 24; Albayrak, *Klāsik Modernizmde*, 36.

proficient, to be able to contend against these countries. In his view, God has given two books: nature, which is created, and the Qur'ān, which is revealed. The Qur'ān urges us to study nature through intelligence. 'Abduh believes the spirit of Islam, as truly comprehended, is tolerant of all scientific study.⁸⁴

In 'Abduh's view, because Islam is the religion of reason and progress, the Qur'ān fits in with the laws of nature, instructing people about the laws involved in the historical development of nations and societies. Consequently, 'Abduh, in his commentary, attempts to see the discoveries of modern science in the Qur'ānic text. For example, he thinks the *jinn* indicated in the Qur'ān could be equal to microbes. He also considers the flocks of birds, mentioned in chapter 105, to be swarms of flies, which, through their polluted legs, transmitted a disease to the army of the elephant. In this way, he interprets this miraculous content of the Qur'ān in a way that is acceptable to modern science.⁸⁵ Moreover, 'Abduh endeavours to make compatible the theory of evolution with the story of Genesis in the Qur'ān.⁸⁶ However, 'Abduh's interpretations through his reason of European Enlightenment and modern science are heavily criticised by Muslim scholars. Further, his interpretations, such as those above, do not have similarities to the proponents of scientific exegesis: 'Abduh's aim was to prove to his public that the Qur'ānic passages in question were not contrary to reason according to modern scientific standards. As for the supporters of scientific exegesis, they attempt to prove the Qur'ān is many centuries ahead of Western scientists and modern scientific discoveries were foreseen in the Qur'ān.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, 'Abduh's attitude towards prophetic miracles is not only to rationalise them. He does not see prophets' miracles to be impossible in terms of reason. For this reason, 'Abduh does not always attempt to make rational explanations for every miraculous event, and he acknowledges many miraculous events of previous prophets. At the same time, he thinks the era of the miracle ended with the coming of Prophet Muhammad. Humanity entered the time of maturity through Islam.⁸⁸

'Abduh refers to reason (*'aql*) as a primary source in interpreting the Qur'ān and calls for the "rationality" of Islamic thought for his modernisation project. While declaring the primacy of revelation through the sacred texts over reason, reason plays a great role in understanding and interpreting God's word. 'Abduh shows more interest in using his own interpretation of many Qur'ānic verses even though this interpretation goes against traditionalist ones. In 'Abduh's method, letting the text speak for itself is important so the reader can comprehend the meaning through his rational ability. Also, following traditions of earlier authorities should not make a barrier between the Qur'ān and the modern reader. Through his method, 'Abduh provides the modern interpreter more freedom in using his own interpretation independent from many traditions.⁸⁹ This "independent reasoning" plays a major role in interpreting the sacred

⁸⁴ Charles C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muḥammad 'Abduh* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2010), 134-142.

⁸⁵ Wielandt, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān," 127-9.

⁸⁶ Badawi, *The Reformers of Egypt*, 57.

⁸⁷ Wielandt, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān," 129.

⁸⁸ Albayrak, *Klāsik Modernizmde*, 125, 129-30; 'Abduh and Riḍā, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān Al-Ḥakīm*, I/315.

⁸⁹ Ibrahim, *The Spirit of Islamic Law and Modern Religious Reform*, 32-7.

text, and it shows in ‘Abduh’s hermeneutics by supporting the primacy of the Qur’ān over other sources of religious knowledge. He also rejects the sweeping use by early jurists of *ijmā’* (consensus) and *qiyās* (analogy). As a result, “the Qur’ān,” as the primary revealed text, and “independent reasoning” are more emphasised as sources of religious knowledge than others. ‘Abduh’s position departs to a great extent from the traditional Sunnī one, which uses legal sources such as the Qur’ān, *sunna*, *ijmā’* and *qiyās*.⁹⁰ Critically, the information above clearly shows ‘Abduh considers the Qur’ān as the primary revealed source of Islam independent from tradition and “independent reasoning” as the major source in the interpretation of the Qur’ān.

However, in the Islamic tradition, the Qur’ān is considered a primary source along with the *sunna*, the living form of the first Muslims, *ijmā’*, the applied and experienced form of the Qur’ān and *sunna* by the Muslim community, and *qiyās*, a method of analogical reasoning that works by following the experience and used by Muslim jurists. In other words, while the Qur’ān was always the first source, it was not alone within classical Islamic tradition. The Qur’ān shared authority with other sources, and along with other sources, established the tradition. Therefore, the Qur’ān was understood in the context of other sources like the *sunna* and *ijmā’*.⁹¹ For this reason, ‘Abduh’s method seems to depart to a great extent from the traditional Sunnī method (*uṣūl*) and he does not mention much *sunna* and *ijmā’* with the Qur’ān.

Comparatively speaking, it seems ‘Abduh’s hermeneutics is not in line with the Salafī method either. Salafīs believe “the only valid sources of authority are the Qur’ān and Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad (the latter is equated with the canonical Sunni *hadīth* collections) and the consensus of the Prophet's companions”⁹² Because of Salafī belief that the religion of Islam is the report (*naql*),⁹³ it could be even said Islam equals the *sunna* (canonical *hadīth* collections) more than the Qur’ān in Salafī thought.⁹⁴ However, ‘Abduh gives more emphasis to the Qur’ān independently from the tradition, and not much is give attention to the *sunna* and *ijmā’*. Also, it seems while Salafīs aim to restrict the religious authority to the revealed texts and the earliest period of Islam (the first three generations), ‘Abduh seeks to provide more space for reason and more flexible modern interpretations of the Qur’ān by rejecting the authority of earlier scholars. It seems the Salafī disdain for *‘aql* (reason) is a clear demarcation from modernists.

Furthermore, ‘Abduh appears loyal to the traditional Sunnī doctrine that Sharia can provide a legal rule for new cases based on the extension of God’s law. On the other hand, he limits the traditional juristic methods by which this extension can be made, namely *ijmā’* and *qiyās*. According to Yasir Ibrahim, looking at ‘Abduh’s legal opinions (*fatāwā*) on several legal questions, ‘Abduh continuously refers to human reason as a tool for discovering Sharia rules more than a specific traditional method. Importantly, ‘Abduh considers this role of human reasoning as a continuation of his “independent” rational interpretation of the Qur’ān. This “independent reasoning” in the field of law, however, follows clear Qur’ānic legal injunctions.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 38-9.

⁹¹ Paçacı, “Çağdaş Dönemde Kur’an’a,” 97.

⁹² Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafī Thought,” 6.

⁹³ Duderija, “Neo-Traditional Salafī Qur’ān-Sunna Hermeneutics,” 317.

⁹⁴ “Mehmet Ali Büyükkara ile Çağdaş Selefi Akımlar Üzerine”, interviewed by Meltem Kural, , p. 28-9.

When ‘Abduh uses human reason in legal interpretation, he frequently makes the traditional reference to *ijtihād* and *ra’y* as representing a human effort to discover the Sharia rules for legal cases not considered by the sacred texts.⁹⁵

With all things considered, it is reasonable to conclude ‘Abduh considers the Qur’ān as the primary revealed text independent from the traditional sources and his main purpose solely understands the Qur’ān. In the process of understanding and interpreting the Qur’ān, “independent reasoning” plays a major role and becomes a more important tool than a specific traditional method. In this method, ‘Abduh makes interpretation and derivation of theological and legal rules through the Qur’ān and independent reasoning in the discipline of *tafsīr*, thereby giving the functions of *fiqh* and *kalām*, which were normative disciplines in the classical period, to *tafsīr*. Finally, what ‘Abduh sought to do is *tafsīrisation* of other Islamic disciplines through his text-based approach.

CONCLUSION

This article analysed approaches to the Qur’ān in early Muslim modernism, reviewed characteristic features of modernist exegesis and situated ‘Abduh within this tradition. The Qur’ān played a major role in modernism as a response to concerns generated by European modernity. Early modernism emerged in the 19th century colonial period and it aimed to synthesise Western thought and sciences with the best of Islamic tradition. Reform was a key theme for modern thinkers. Modern intellectuals’ central concern is the Qur’ān and they attempt to revitalise the Muslim world through the Qur’ān. All these indicate that Muslims dealt with the current subjects at that time. Modernist exegesis focused on the Qur’ān and had a sceptical approach to *hadīth*. This approach emphasised *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) and interpreting the Qur’ān in the light of reason and modern sciences. ‘Abduh is one of the major scholars with this approach even though he has some different views compared to other modernist intellectuals. This article showed, while ‘Abduh has some similar ideas with the Salafis, “intellectual Muslim modernist” would be the best description for ‘Abduh and his movement rather than “modernist Salafi” for four primary reasons. First, the European Enlightenment about the role of reason and religion heavily affected ‘Abduh, and he mainly relied on the Qur’ān as a text and human reason. ‘Abduh produced his reform projects around the Qur’ān at the sole text and *tafsīr* as the primary discipline. Second, unlike Salafis, ‘Abduh was less interested in *hadīth* and not prepared to consider it as unconditionally authoritative. Third, ‘Abduh was among the leading theologians of the new *kalām* movement in the modern period. Fourth, while ‘Abduh emphasised *ijtihād*, he argued for a new Islamic jurisprudence that is based only on the Qur’ān, disregarding other traditional juristic sources.

This article also developed the argument that what ‘Abduh attempts to do is *tafsīrisation* of other Islamic disciplines (*fiqh* and *kalām*) through his text-based approach. While *tafsīr* is not a normative discipline and follows a method of linguistic and historical analysis in the Islamic scientific tradition, ‘Abduh seeks to establish his legal opinions in legal and ethical matters of

⁹⁵ Ibrahim, *The Spirit of Islamic Law*, 37-42.

Islam, as in the case of polygamy, directly with his interpretation in *tafsīr*, criticising classical jurists and *fiqh*. When Muslim scholars lost their civic authority in *fiqh* and *kalām* in the modern period, Muslim modernists gave more weight to *tafsīr* to make a paradigm around the Qur'ān.

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