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Editors' Introduction

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# **TAFSIR IN THE NON-ARAB MUSLIM WORLD – I**

## **EDITORS' INTRODUCTION**

Prof. Peter G. Riddell\* and Dr. Hakan Çoruh\*\*

This issue of the *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies*, together with the following issue, address the topic of Qur'ānic exegesis, or *tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, in the non-Arab world. Much scholarly attention has been devoted to exegesis of the Qur'ān produced in Arabic down the centuries, and deservedly so. Arabic language exegetical output represents an invaluable treasure of Islamic studies. Furthermore, exegetical writings outside the Arab world through time have often drawn on, and sometimes closely mirrored, exegetical writing in Arabic. We need look no further than the profound influence exerted on non-Arab exegetes by works such as al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, the *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, and the exegetical output of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī.

Nevertheless, exegetical gifts and callings are found across Muslim communities the world over. Islamic exegetical activity is not unidirectional from the Arab world to non-Arab Muslim communities. Rather, it is a dynamic dialogue, a call and response. Richly diverse Muslim cultures have specific requirements in terms of interpreting the Qur'ān. Thus, the world of Islam produces a rich mosaic of interpretations of the Qur'ān, which all Muslims can draw on.

This issue of AJIS carries strong flavours of Islam in Southeast Asia and Africa. Of the ten authors included in the papers, nine originate from Indonesia and Malaysia, while the tenth is a North American scholar of African origin. All thus speak with considerable authority about their topics and regions of focus.

Further, the authors are engaged in diverse educational settings, again outside the Arab world. Five are faculty members of state universities and institutes of Islam in Indonesia; three are faculty members of private Islamic institutions in Indonesia; one is on the faculty at the National University of Malaysia; and the last is on the faculty at Adelphi University in the United States. Three are currently undertaking PhD research into topics related to Qur'ānic exegesis. In this way, this issue of AJIS presents readers with rich perspectives from diverse settings on a range of vitally relevant topics in the field of *tafsīr al-Qur'ān*.

The first article by Dr. Ervan Nurtawab serves as an appropriate opening to this issue as it bridges pre-modern and modern *tafsīr* in Indonesia. Dr. Nurtawab argues, while the famous classical work, the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, was the dominant exegetical work in pre-modern

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Indonesia, its role had waned by the early 1900s. Moreover, discussion of grammar and the *qirā'āt al-Qur'ān*, so integral to the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* and pre-modern Malay-language commentaries based on it such as *Tarjumān al-Mustafīd*,<sup>1</sup> noticeably moved outside the modern Indonesian exegetical corpus. Dr. Nurtawab then turns his attention to a famous 20<sup>th</sup> century work of Indonesian *tafsir*, the *Tarjamah Qur'an Karim* by Mahmud Yunus. He notes how Yunus took full advantage of modern printing technologies to prepare a work that was cutting edge in presentation and content for the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the second article, Dr. Aqdi Rofiq Asnawi, Dr. Syukron Affani and Zaenatul Hakamah bring our attention squarely into the present day, with consideration of the reception of scientific Qur'ānic exegesis in Indonesia. They demonstrate there has been a steady output of scholarly works on scientific interpretation in several phases since the 1960s and consider the views of a range of leading Indonesian scholars. The authors present a pair of challenges in relation to this topic: persuading institutions of the need to incorporate the study of scientific exegesis in their curricula as well as persuading students of the importance of this study. This research reveals that some institutions, tertiary and secondary, are addressing these challenges and developing programs that integrate the study of Islam with science. The Indonesian government has made its own commitment to the integration of science and faith through sponsoring the publication of a series of works of scientific Qur'ānic exegesis.

The next two articles consider interpersonal relations from various angles and how the Qur'ān and its exegesis speak to insider–outsider distinctions that are deeply rooted in tradition. Dr. Ulya Fikriyati, Dr. Ah. Fawaid and Subhani Kusuma Dewi address a little studied topic: the production of *tafsir* in Madura, an island off north-eastern Java. They explain how the local Madurese language is structured according to three layers that relate to social status, which potentially runs counter to the Qur'ānic idea of equality of all people regardless of class. The authors pose a question: how can the Qur'ān's message of equality be rendered into a hierarchical language that structurally distinguishes people according to class and status? Their research conclusions are striking, based on the notion of transposing the language's differentiation of level among people to a theological differentiation of level between believers and God.

The other paper that develops an insider–outsider theme is Dr. Mohamad Nasrin Nasir's "The view of the other in modern Malay exegesis of the Qur'ān." He shifts the reader's attention to Malaysia by considering attempts to use exegetical materials to shape attitudes that Muslims should hold towards people other faiths. Dr. Nasir examines three works of *tafsir* in Malay, arguing that in some cases the message of the commentaries is effectively hijacked by the agenda of popular interpreters who negatively stereotype non-Muslims. He raises an important dilemma: the laudable effort to make the Qur'ān's message accessible to the masses can run the risk of over-simplifying and thereby distorting the essential message of particular themes.

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<sup>1</sup> By Acehese scholar 'Abd al-Ra'ūf of Singkel (d. 1693).

As with the previous contributions, the next article is also the product of a scholar from Southeast Asia. Indonesian researcher Muammar Zayn Qadafy is completing a PhD dissertation at the University of Freiburg. His topic spans from past to present, considering the famous medieval Andalusian Maliki-Ash'ari scholar Ibn 'Aṭīyyah, but focusing on something that is profoundly relevant to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: thematic reading of the Qur'ān taking account of the chronology of Islam's sacred text. The author considers the theme of *zakāh* (prescribed alms) as addressed in seven verses, seeking to identify whether there is thematic development if the verses are organised following the chronology of the Qur'ān's revelation. Although Ibn 'Aṭīyyah's famous commentary, *al-Muharrar al-wajīz fī tafsīr al-Kitāb al-'azīz*, follows the traditional order of Qur'ānic *sūrahs*, Qadafy argues that he shows clear awareness of the developing sense of *zakāh* through the chronological phases of the Qur'ān.

The final article is a fascinating study by Associate Professor Abdin Chande of Adelphi University (USA) of a little studied translation of the Qur'ān into Swahili in Arabic script. The process of translation has the act of interpretation at its heart, so this article sits well within this issue of AJIS. The translation was undertaken by Shaykh Ali al-Buhriy, a scholar of Arab descent from the prominent Buhriy family that settled in Swahili speaking areas of present-day Tanzania. Shaykh Ali al-Buhriy's translation was designed to be accessible to a broad readership through its use of Mrima Swahili, a coastal Swahili dialect, rather than standard Swahili. Assoc. Prof. Chande's article offers wide-ranging and interesting perspectives on the mechanics of Qur'ān translation, in the process looking closely at the rendering into Swahili of *sūrah* al-Fātiḥah and providing an overview of the manuscript's treatment of *sūrah* al-Baqarah.

The six articles in this issue of AJIS demonstrate the richness of resources in *tafsīr al-Qur'ān* produced outside the Arabic-speaking world. These articles provide a snapshot of the rapidly developing interest in this field of studies in Southeast Asia and Africa. Further exciting glimpses into non-Arab world research into Qur'ānic exegesis will be on display in the next issue of AJIS, focusing on scholarship from India, Iran, Turkey and central Caucasus.