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THE FIRST VERNACULAR *TAFSIR* IN THE CAUCASUS: THE LEGACY OF TWO 20TH CENTURY AZERBAIJANI QUR'ĀN COMMENTARIES

Mykhaylo Yakubovych*

Abstract: The Azerbaijani language (also referred as Azerbaijani Turkish) is one of the most important languages of Islam in the South Caucasus region. Nowadays spoken by at least 25 million people in the Republic of Azerbaijan, Iran and Georgia, usage of Azerbaijani as a vernacular language has played an important role in the rise of Islamic reformism in the area during the first decade of the 20th century and, almost a century later, in the Islamic revival that has taken place since 1991. At the turn of the 20th century, two vernacular Qur'ān commentaries by Azerbaijani scholars, *Kashf al-Ḥaqā'iq 'an Nukat al-Ayāt wa'l-Daqā'iq* (1904–1905) by Mīr Muḥammad Karīm al-Bākuwī and *al-Bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (1908) by Muḥammad Mawlā Zādah al-Shakawī, opened new avenues in the debate about the translatability and interpretation of the Qur'ān in non-Arabic discourses, as well as the status of those sources in local Islamic education. This study argues, despite the many dramatic changes brought about by atheist Soviet policies between 1920 and 1991, the impact of these two early 20th century *tafsir* on modern-day Azerbaijani Islamic education and scholarship has remained substantial, and their influence can be seen in everything from Qur'ānic studies courses in the current curricula of theological colleges to the most recent translations of the Qur'ān in Azerbaijan and beyond.

Keywords: *Azerbaijani language, Qur'ānic studies, vernacular Qur'ān, tafsir, Islamic reformism, Azerbaijani tafsir*

INTRODUCTION

On 30 May 1908, the well-known Egyptian proponent of Islamic reformation Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935) published in his newspaper, *Al-Manār*, a form of *fatwā* (legal ruling) under the title “Ḥukm tarjamat al-Qur'ān” (A Statement on the Translation of the Qur'ān). An Islamic scholar from Imperial Russia, Aḥsan Shāh Aḥmad, had asked him about the “Russian Turks” who were challenging the “prohibition” on Qur'ān translation and had started to publish it part-by-part (*tadrījan*) in the city of Kazan. In addition, he was deeply concerned by the fact “a

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patron from the Caucasus” (*aḥad fidā’iyah al-Qafqāz*), Zayn al-‘Abdīn Ḥajjī al-Bākuwī, had “initiated the translation [of the Qur’ān] into the Turki language.”¹ In his statement, which later became a reference point during the long years of discussion on Qur’ān translatability in Egypt and beyond, Riḍā provided a fairly comprehensive refutation of any claims from a religious basis for translation of the Qur’ān into other languages.² However, the reality was that the translations Aḥsan Shāh Aḥmad mentioned, which led to Riḍā’s *fatwā*, were not published as translations (*tarjamāt*) per se; rather, they were “interpretations” (*tafāsīr*). It is likely, if Rashīd Riḍā had known this detail, he would not have been so sceptical.

The Kazan initiative mentioned in Riḍā’s *fatwā* refers to several publications funded by Hacı Zeynalabidin Taḡıyev (1823–1924), a well-known industrial magnate and philanthropist from Baku. Between 1904 and 1906, he sponsored the publication of three volumes of the Azerbaijani *tafsir Kashf al-Ḥaqā’iq ‘an Nukat al-Ayāt wa’l-Daqā’iq* (Exploring the Realities in the True Points of the Verses and Sublime Issues), written by the prominent Azerbaijani scholar Mīr Muḥammad Karīm al-Bākuwī (1858–1938). Just two years later, Taḡıyev also funded another significant contribution, *al-Bayān fī Tafṣīr al-Qur’ān* (The Clear Explanation of the Interpretation of the Qur’ān) by Muḥammad Mawlā Zādah al-Shakawī (1853–1932).³ As is clear from their respective titles, both works belong to the genre of *tafsir* rather than translation. The former (which was mentioned by name in Aḥsan Shāh Aḥmad’s enquiry to Riḍā) never mentions words meaning translation like *tarjamah* or *tarcūma*,⁴ while the latter uses *tarcūma* in the sense of *tafsir*. The relationship between translation and interpretation (especially in the field of Qur’ānic studies) is a complicated issue, which is still discussed in Muslim and academic contexts,⁵ but in the early 20th century Azerbaijani context, these “interpretations” clearly belonged to the tradition of *tafsir*, albeit with some initial steps towards incorporating translation in a modern sense, first of all, verse-by-verse rendition understood as a “direct” and not “explanatory” meaning.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of these two works, however, lies in their relationships with two discourses surrounding their production, publication and reception. The first of these discourses relates to the rise of the sense of national consciousness and identity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries among Muslim people in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus. The second relates to the appearance of various reformist movements in these areas, ranging from pan-Islamic discourse to secular visions of the path to renewal and progress. After Azerbaijan was finally divided between Persia and Russia in the Treaty of Turkmenchay,

¹ Rashīd Riḍā, “Ḥukm Tarjamah al-Qur’ān,” *Al-Manār* 4, no. 11 (1908): 269.

² See M. Brett Wilson, “The First Translations of the Qur’ān in Modern Turkey (1924–38),” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009).

³ Since the cover pages for both original works bear the authors’ names and titles in the Arabic language, those variants are used as primary sources in the paper to avoid ambiguity (since historical and modern Azerbaijani, Turkish and Persian variants could differ).

⁴ All Azerbaijani texts from inside the *tafsir* are transliterated in accordance with modern Azerbaijani orthography (if not stated otherwise).

⁵ Travis Zadeh, “The Fātiḥa of Salmān al-Fārisī and the Modern Controversy over Translating the Qur’ān,” in *The Meaning of the Word: Lexicology and Tafṣīr*, ed. Stephen Burge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2015).

signed in 1828, Azerbaijani scholarly circles of Sunni and Shii backgrounds preserved and developed their relations with Muslim movements on the other side of their domestic border, and beyond. For example, the authors of *Kashf al-Haqā'iq* and *al-Bayān* received their Islamic education in Ottoman Baghdad. For this and other reasons, which will be discussed below, the appearance of these first Azerbaijani commentaries by al-Bākuwī and al-Shakawī constitute an important contribution to the modern Muslim exegetical tradition. Moreover, they exemplify the significance of the rise of non-Arabic *tafsir* in the Caucasus, as well as in other Turkic-speaking Muslim communities. This study will consider both *tafsir* from the broad perspective of Qur'ānic studies, with reference to the historical and modern editions of the *tafsir* (i.e. the primary sources), but also to their further reception (i.e. the later translations of these texts into Persian and Turkish, and modern Azerbaijani renditions of the Qur'ān). Two methodological perspectives are employed: analysis of both authors' approaches (primarily with reference to the authorial agenda set out in the introductory parts of the *tafsir*) and analysis of specific cases of interpretation in the body of the commentaries. The first perspective relates to the source text, i.e. the ways the author conveys the meaning of Qur'ānic wording, and the second relates to the audience, i.e. how this meaning is explained and what the authors considered meaningful for the reader.⁶ Although a few studies have been published on these two Qur'ānic commentaries, these are mostly concerned with their respective historical contexts,⁷ and a lot of research questions remain unanswered, especially with regard to the reception of both works and their place in the 20th century Islamic exegetical tradition. Given these two *tafsir* constitute the cornerstone of the historiography of Qur'ānic studies in modern Azerbaijan,⁸ following the rise of religious revivalism after the beginning of the post-Soviet era in 1990/1991, further exploration of their significance is clearly desirable.

CONTEXTUALISING THE APPROACH: STRATEGIES OF QUR'ĀNIC INTERPRETATION

Azerbaijani (also known as Azeri Turkish) was one of a number of Turkic languages that played a part in vernacular religious discourse from the late Middle Ages onwards, with many pieces of religious literature, mostly poetry, written at this time.⁹ One of the first well-known

⁶ This means, for example, when discussing late 20th century Qur'ānic interpretation, some of the issues addressed are especially modern (e.g. gender, violence or human rights) while attention to these is hardly to be expected from early 20th century traditional *ulema*, in whose case other features can be used for in-depth research. See Amer Ali, "A Brief Review of Classical and Modern Tafsir Trends and the Role of Modern Tafsir in Contemporary Islamic Thought," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2018).

⁷ See the most important contributions: Əli Fərhadov, *XIX əsrin sonu XX əsrin əvvəllərində şimali Azərbaycanda İslami maarifçilik və İslahatçılıq hərəkatı (Mir Məhəmməd Kərim Mir Cəfərzadə əl-Bakuvinin "Kəşful-Həqayiq" əsəri əsasında)* [The Islamic Enlightenment and Reformist Movement in Northern Azerbaijan in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries (based on Mir Muhammad Karim Mir Jafarzadeh al-Bakuvini's "Kəşful-Həqayiq")] (Baku: Azər nəşr, 2016); Şahlar Şərifov, *Məhəmmədhasən Mövlazadə Şəkəvi və Onun "Kitabul-Bəyan fit-Təfsiril-Quran" Əsəri* [Muhammadhasan Movlazzade Shekevi and his Work "Kitabul-Bəyan fit-Təfsiril-Quran"] (Baku: Elm və Təhsil, 2018).

⁸ Mehman İsmayilov, *Təfsir üsulu və tarixi* [Method and History of Tafsir] (Baku: Baku Islamic University, 2011).

⁹ Hamlet İsaخانli, "History and Policy of Translating Poetry: Azerbaijan and its Neighbours," *Meta: Journal des Traducteurs/Meta: Translators' Journal* 59 (2014).

local Turkic contributions to non-Arabic *tafsir* was probably *El-Fevâtiḥu'l-Ilâhiyye* (Divine Openings) by Ni'mat Allāh b. Maḥmūd al-Nakhjuvānī (d. 1514), who is also considered to be one of the first Ottoman Qur'ān commentators.¹⁰ Azerbaijani vernacular influences are also evident in late-medieval Sufi poetry, as Aida Gasimova argues in her 2013 study.¹¹ When it comes to the modern Azerbaijani language, which has its roots in late 18th and early 19th century language, standardisation only began in the early 20th century, and the language has experienced significant changes in grammar and orthography (Arabic – Cyrillic – Latin) in the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan, while Iranian Azerbaijani remains under the influence of the Persian language and uses the Arabic alphabet and some Persian vocabulary. Recent studies estimate the number of Azerbaijani speakers to be somewhere between 35 and 50 million.¹²

A new chapter in the history of the Azerbaijani language and Islam in Azerbaijan began at the turn of the 20th century, a period of religious and nationalist reform in the Islamicate world. The Russian Revolution of 1905 (which reverberated among the Muslim subjects of the Russian empire) and the Ottoman Jön Türk Devrim (Young Turks Revolution) of 1908 gave rise to much discussion on the future of Muslim societies, as did the activities of prominent reformers such as İsmail Gaspirali (also known as Gasprinski, 1851–1914) and Musa Bigi (also known as Bigiyev, 1873–1949) in the Russian Empire and Mehmet Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924) in Turkey. In Azerbaijan, the main protagonist of modernist reform was Gasān-Bek Zardābī (1852–1907), a graduate of Moscow University.¹³ Zardābī mainly envisaged reform in terms of mass education, the use of vernacular language, the integration of natural and religious sciences, and the establishment of the national press. His publishing project *Əkinçi* (the Sower, 1875–1877) was the first regular Turkic-language newspaper to be published within the Russian Empire, and in it he advocated for the development of a national literature and press in Azerbaijan and beyond.¹⁴ The high level of mutual intelligibility between the Turkish, Azerbaijani, Kazan Tatar and Crimean Tatar languages also strengthened ties between the different Islamic movements of the early 20th century Russian Empire, as can be seen, for example, in the creation of the İttifāq al-Muslimīn party in 1905, which consisted mostly of representatives from the various Turkic nationalities.¹⁵

Despite their conservatism, many of the traditional Islamic clergy, from Shii and Sunni backgrounds, involved themselves in these reform developments, especially in Baku, the

¹⁰ İbrahim Görener, “İlmî Cazibe Yurdu Osmanlı’da Çok Yönlü Bir Müfessir: Nimetullâh-i Nahcuvânî” [The Land of Scientific Attraction: A Versatile Commentator in the Ottoman Empire: Nimetullah-i Nahcuvani], *Osmanlı Toplumunda Kur’an Kültürü ve Tefsir Çalışmaları* (Istanbul: İlim Yayma Vakfı, 2011), 1.

¹¹ Aida Gasimova, “The Hair on my Head is Shining: Qur’ānic Imagery of the Curl in Classical Azeri-Turkish Şūfī Poetry,” *Journal of Qur’ānic Studies* 15, no. 1 (2013).

¹² Payam Ghaffarvand Mokari and Stefan Werner, “Azerbaijani,” *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 47, no. 2 (2017).

¹³ Austin Jersild, “Rethinking Russia from Zardob: Hasan Melikov Zardabi and the ‘Native’ Intelligentsia,” *Nationalities Paper* 27, no. 3 (1999).

¹⁴ Akif Aşırılı, *Azərbaycan mətbuatı tarixi* [History of Printing in Azerbaijan] (Baku: Elm və Təhsil, 2009).

¹⁵ Dilara M. Usmanova, “The Activity of the Muslim Faction of the State Duma and its Significance in the Formation of a Political Culture Among the Muslim Peoples of Russia (1906-1917),” in *Muslim Culture in Russia and Central Asia from the 18th to the Early 20th Centuries*, ed. Anke von Kügelgen, Michael Kemper and Allen J. Frank (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag GmbH, 1998).

capital city of Russian Azerbaijan. Mīr Muḥammad Karīm al-Bākuwī, the author of the first vernacular *tafsir* in the modern Azerbaijani language, belonged to a family of local Shii clergy: his father, Agā Sayid Muḥammad, was descended from a long lineage of seyyids and served as the *akhūnd* (religious leader) of a Shii mosque in İçərişəhər, Baku's historical downtown. Following in his forefathers' footsteps, Mīr Muḥammad Karīm left Baku to receive an Islamic education in the Ottoman Empire, particularly in Baghdad.¹⁶ According to biographical reports, he spent around ten years, between 1871 and 1881, gaining training in Arabic, *tafsir*, *fiqh* and other religious sciences. At this time, the traditional *madrasa* system in Iraq had entered a phase of modernisation (especially in the 1870s),¹⁷ but in religious schools like those in Najaf and other big cities, the curriculum remained untouched. On his way back to Baku, al-Bākuwī also visited Tabriz and Tehran.¹⁸ After his return to his home city, his activities were mostly related to religious preaching: around 1895, he became an *akhūnd* in Shāh Mosque (located in the İçərişəhər district), and by 1904 he had become a member of the Shii religious council and a *qāḍī* (judge on religious issues). He had also published a number of translations from Arabic, including the novels of Lebanese writer Jurjī Zaydān (1861–1914),¹⁹ as well as writing newspaper articles.²⁰ An active member of Baku's intellectual elite (due to his good relations with Zeynalabdin Tağiyev, one of the wealthiest people in Azerbaijan and the sponsor of many social and religious projects), al-Bākuwī had to cease all his religious undertakings in his mid-20s, after the Soviet occupation of Azerbaijan (which began in 1920). Persecuted by Stalin's regime for years, al-Bākuwī died in 1939.²¹

Al-Bakūwī's magnum opus, *Tafsir Kashf al-Ḥaqā'iq 'an Nukat al-Ayāt wa'l-Daqā'iq*, appeared in three volumes (volume 1 came out in 1904; volumes 2 and 3 in 1906) and was published by the printing press in Tiflis (present-day Tbilisi, Georgia). According to some studies, the initiative for this project came not from the translator but his sponsor, the rich oil baron Zeynalabidin Tağiyev. Tağiyev had been the primary donor behind the construction of the first Azerbaijanian national theatre (completed in 1883) as well as the establishment of the first secular school for Muslim girls in the Russian Empire, the Aleksandra Imperator Rus-müsəlman Qız Məktəbi (the Empress Alexandra Russian Muslim School for Girls), which opened in 1901. In 1905, he also initiated the establishment of the Bakı Müsəlman xeyriyyə cəmiyyəti (the Baku Muslim Charitable Society), which remained active up to 1920.²²

¹⁶ Əli Fərhadov, "Mirməhəmməd Kərim Mircəfər əl-Bakuvı və maarifçilik" [Mirmuhammad Karim Mircefer al-Bakuvı and the Enlightenment], *Bakı Universitetinin Xəbərləri: Humanitar elmlər seriyası* 2 (2012): 176.

¹⁷ Nūrī Aḥmad, 'Abd al-Qādir and Zāfir 'Abd al-Nāfi', "Al-Tarbiyyah wa'l-ta'lim fi al-Müşul fi al-'ahd al-Uthmāni" [Education and Learning in Mosul of Ottoman Times], *Majjalat Abḥāth al-Tarbiyah al-Asāsiyah* 9, no. 2 (2009).

¹⁸ Əhməd Niyazov, "Mır Məhəmməd Kərim və "Kəşful-Həqaiq" Təfsirində Xurafat" [Mir Muhammad Karim and 'Kəşful-Həqaiq' and the Interpretation of Superstitions], *İrfan İctimai-Fikir Jurnalı* (2013): 14.

¹⁹ These included, among others, *Armansura al-Mişriyya*, *17th Ramadān* and *Fatāt Ghassān*.

²⁰ Məmmədəli Babaşlı, "Axund Mır Məhəmməd Kərim Mircəfər əl-Bakuvinin ərəb dilindən tərcümə tarixindəki yeri və rolu" [Ahund Mir Muhammad Karim Mircefer al-Bakuvı's Translations into the Arabic], *İpək yolu* 2 (2015).

²¹ Əli Fərhadov, *Şimali Azərbaycanda islam maarifçiliyi hərəkatı (XIX-XX əsrin əvvəlləri)* [Islamic Enlightenment Movement in Northern Azerbaijan (19th-20th centuries)] (Baku: AzPoligraf, 2017), 100-110.

²² Manaf Süleymanov, *Hacı Zeynalabdin Tağiyev* [Haji Zeynalabidin Tagiyev] (Baku: Gənclik, 1996), 17.

Tağiyev's initiatives, which reflect his dedication to the promotion of education, included sponsoring the provision of wide public access to the Qur'ān. Apart from financing the publishing (and purchasing typefaces for printing from Leipzig),²³ Tağiyev donated huge amounts to make special luxury copies in silver and gold fabric, and additional copies were published in 1907.²⁴ The publication gained much attention, not only among the Muslim press in the Russian Empire,²⁵ but also in the Ottoman Empire (and a copy of *Kashf al-Ḥaqā'iq* was presented to Sultan Abdulhamid II by Azerbaijani scholar Yusuf Talipzade).²⁶

The first volume of the *tafsir* (which includes surahs 1–9) starts with a short but informative introductory statement. After a rather traditional outline of what the Qur'ān means to Muslims, al-Bakūwī says he supports having the Qur'ān translated and interpreted (*tərcümə və təfsir*) into other languages, since without that “it is impossible for people from other nations to understand its doctrines and other features.”²⁷ With the exception of this description of his own work, al-Bākūwī never uses the word *tərcümə* (translation) in *Kashf al-Ḥaqā'iq* and his definition of this work as *tafsir* reveals a discourse of Islamic enlightenment (*Həmd olsun, bu dövrə islam ümməti arasında elm və maarif günbəgün yayılmağa başlayıb*; Praise be to [Allah], science and education among the Islamic Ummah during this period began to spread day by day).²⁸ When arguing for his decision to write *Kashf al-Ḥaqā'iq* in a vernacular language (*Azərbaycan Türk dilində*), al-Bākūwī mentions the necessity of preventing “distortions” in meaning caused by scholarly “ignorance and imitation” (*cəhalet ... və təqlid*) as well as providing access to the essence of the Qur'ān:

*Türk dilində danışan müsəlmanlardan ötrü onların dilində sa da bir təfsir yazmaqdır ki, bu sayədə onlar Qurani-Şərifin mətləblərini asan şəkildə dərk edib, onun uca məzmunundan ləzzət alıb, həqiqi insanlıq xüsusiyyətlərinə sahib olsunlar.*²⁹

(For Turkic-speaking Muslims, it is important to write a commentary in their language so they can easily understand the content of the Qur'ān, enjoy its sublime content and acquire true human qualities.)

This sets an early precedent on the question of Qur'ān translatability, a subject that was the focus of a great deal of discussion among Muslim scholars (mainly in Turkey and Egypt) in the first few decades of the 20th century and reached its peak in the 1930s. For instance, the

²³ Əli Fərhadov, “MİR MƏHƏMMƏD KƏRİM ƏL-BAKUVİ VƏ ‘KƏŞFÜL-HƏQAYİQ’” [Mir Muhammad Karim al-Bakuvi and ‘Kəşfül-həqayiq’], *Dövlət və din* 1 (2015).

²⁴ Ramil Nifteliyev, “Qur'āni-Kərim'in Azərbaycan Dilinə Tərcümə Edilməsində H.Z. Tağiyevin rolu” [The Role of H. Z. Tağiyev in Translation of the Qur'an into Azerbaijanian language], in *Proceedings of II International Symposium on Islamic Civilization in Caucasia* (Baku: AIT, 2019).

²⁵ See, for example, Gasprinski's reaction (praising the author and first volume of his work) in his *Tercüman* Crimean Tatar newspaper: İsmayıl Gaspıralı, “Bakı Qazısı” [A Judge of Baku], *Tercüman* 77 (1904): 2.

²⁶ Murad Aghayev, “20-yüzyıl təfsirlerinde, aile hayatı konusunda yaklaşımlar (Baküvi, Şekevi, Tabatabaîi özelinde)” [20th Century Interpretations of the Qur'an on the Family Life (Bakuvi, Shekevi and Tabatabaîi)] (unpublished master's thesis, Necmettin Erbakan Üniversitesi, 2020), 20.

²⁷ For most of the quotations, the modern edition is used: MİR MUHƏMMƏD KƏRİM ƏL-BAKUVİ, *Kəşfül-Həqayiq (ayələrin məna və incəlikləriylə həqiqətlərinin açılması): Azərbaycan türkcəsində Qurani-Şərifin təfsiri* [Explaining the Truth with the Meaning and Subtleties of the Verses: Interpretation of the Holy Quran in Azerbaijani Turkish], trans. Ə. Fərhadov (Baku: İpək yolu, 2014).

²⁸ Ibid., vol. 1, 29.

²⁹ Ibid.

editor of *Majallat al-Azhar*, Muḥammad Farīd Wajdī (1875–1954), authored a treatise on the permissibility of translation in response to the claims of his opponents, which was published in 1936 as a supplement to the journal. Among other arguments, he clearly states that more than 300 million Muslims were excluded from reading the Qur’ān in its original Arabic and translation was the only way that its “holy light” (*anwārahu al-qudusiyyah*) could reach them.³⁰ In his introduction, al-Bākuwī also refers to the historical precedent that *tafsir* already existed in Turkic languages, but points out these were mostly unavailable to Azerbaijani readers.³¹ In fact, he goes so far as to say “*Türk dilində danışan müsəlmanların Qurani-Şərifin ehkamlarını, öyüd-nəsihətlərini mümkün olan qədər öz dillərində öyrənməsi fərzdır*” (It is obligatory for Turkic-speaking Muslims to learn the doctrines and teachings of the Qur’ān in their own language as much as possible), an argument that reveals the scope of his ambitions for his project. Although he does not mention anything related to Qur’ānic inimitability (*i’jāz al-Qur’ān*), he clearly believed another language than the original Arabic can reflect the true meaning of the Qur’ān, making it “obligatory” for Muslims to follow (*fərz*) its precepts. Among the list of sources he mentions in the introduction, he includes various *tafsir* including popular Persian and Ottoman classical works by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1143), al-Ṭabarsī (d. 1153), al-Rāzī (d. 1209), al-Nasafī (d. 1310), al-Baydāwī (d. after 1319) and al-Khāzin (d. 1341). Among the later Ottoman works he mentions, we find the popular commentaries of Abu al-Su‘ūd (d. 1574) and Isma‘īl al-Buruşawī (d. 1724). In addition, he refers to various books of *ḥadīth* (Shii and Sunni). Nevertheless, for him, the Qur’ān is not only the source of traditional religious knowledge but also a source for the natural sciences: “*Məsələn, tarix, həndəsə, coğrafiya, riyaziyyat, astronomiya elmləri. Qurani-Şərifdə bu elmlərin hamısının öyrənilməsi üçün açıq-aşkar ayələr mövcuddur*” (For example, history, geometry, geography, mathematics, astronomy. There are clear verses in the Qur’ān for the study of all these sciences).³² Thus, the introduction to *al-Kashf al-Ḥaqā’iq* outlines two main approaches to the Qur’ān: the first is the paradigm of Islamic enlightenment, and the second is the demand for reconciliation between the Qur’ān and natural sciences – both trends were becoming mainstream in 20th century Qur’ānic exegesis.³³ Introductions to the second and third volumes are written in the same context, mostly concentrating on the topics of knowledge, ignorance and education in its reformist context.

In just two years (by 1908) another Azerbaijani interpretation of the Qur’ān appeared, *al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, by Shaykh al-Islām Muḥammad Mawlā Zādah al-Shakawī. Born to a family of predominantly Sunni clerics in 1853, al-Shakawī came from the city of Sheki, located in the Sunni part of Azerbaijan and close to present-day Dagestan in Russia. After graduating from the religious *medrese* in Ganja, al-Shakawī continued his education in Ottoman Baghdad, like many of his counterparts (including al-Bākuwī). After his return to his

³⁰ Muḥammad Farīd Wajdī, *al-Adillah al-‘ilmīyah ‘alā jawāz tarjamah ma’ānī al-Qur’ān ilā al-lughāt al-‘ajnabīyah* [Scientific Proofs on the Permissibility of the Translations of the Qur’an into Foreign Languages] (Cairo: Maṭba‘ah al-Mu‘āhid al-Dinīyah, 1936), 78.

³¹ al-Bākuwī, *Kəşf ul-Həqayiq*, vol. 1, 17.

³² *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 20.

³³ See Zafar Ishaq Ansari, “Scientific Exegesis of the Qur’ān,” *Journal of Qur’ānic Studies* 3, no. 1 (2001).

homeland, al-Shakawī had a notable career in the Islamic religious network, starting as a *medrese* teacher in Tiflis (Tbilisi) in 1893 and ending up as Shaykh al-Islām of the Caucasus in 1907/1908, since 1823 the highest religious position in existence.³⁴ However, his tenure did not last long and he was dismissed from his office in 1909 (probably due to his disagreement with Russian authorities and more conservative circles). Suffering continued with repression from the authorities after 1920 and he spent his last years in Tbilisi until his death in 1932. In addition to his commentary on the Qur’ān, al-Shakawī’s interest in the history of Islam led him to write several books on the prophets and other historical figures.³⁵

The first volume of his *al-Bayān fī Tafṣīr al-Qur’ān* appeared in 1908 and was published by the Ghayrat printing house in Tiflis. According to some, al-Shakawī did not use al-Bākuwī’s then recently published *tafsir* as a source, despite receiving funding from al-Bākuwī’s donor, Taḡıyev.³⁶ From the first page onwards, there are significant differences between al-Shakawī’s *al-Bayān* and al-Bākuwī’s *Kashf al-Ḥaḡā’iq*. First, in contrast to his forerunner, al-Shakawī directly references the notion of *Guran Şarīfī tərçümə* (translation of the noble Qur’ān) in his short introduction, so the work can be regarded as a new step towards a translation of the Qur’ān in its modern sense.³⁷ Moreover, he calls himself *mütərcim* (the translator) and divides the text of his work into two parts: *əslī tərjüməni* (the translation of the original), which is located between brackets, and *təfsiri ixtisar* (shortened interpretation), which is inserted as an addition.³⁸ Al-Shakawī also believed that translation of the Qur’ān could provide “clear meanings” (*zəhir mənəsi*) as a basis for worship and the avoidance of sin.³⁹ In his list of sources (written on the title page and serving as an additional sign of authority for the whole work), he mentions the typical canon of Qur’ānic interpretation in the Turkic world: works by al-Ṭabarsī, al-Rāzī, al-Bayḡāwī and Abu al-Su‘ūd. In addition, the commentary known as *al-Jalālayn* (the *tafsir* of al-Maḡallī (d. 1459) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505)) is listed, as are two other popular works, *Şāfī* (*al-Şāfī fī tafsir kalām Allāh al-wāfī* by al-Kashshānī (d. 1670)) and a text called *Masālik* (most likely *Masālik al-ıfḡām ilā ayāt al-aḡkām* by Jawwād Kāzım (d. 1640)). Despite the clear Sunni background of the translator (demonstrated by his reference to the four rightly guided caliphs, *al-khulafā’ al-rāshidūn*, in the introduction), his use of Shii and Sunni sources seems to reflect a newly evolving modern perspective, which saw the development of an integrated view of Islam, especially in areas with mixed Sunni and Shii populations.

Thus, it is clear that both commentaries reveal the reformist backgrounds of their authors, in that they propose the “rewording” of the Qur’ān in a domestic language, in the form of commentary or even translation, is a valid source for Islamic enlightenment. These features are even more evident when one looks at specific instances of interpretation in their respective

³⁴ Fuad Nurullayev, *Şeyxulislamlıq zirvəsi: Hacı Allahşükür Paşazadə* [Seal of Sheikh-al-Islams: Hajji Allashshukur Pashazaden] (Baku: Nurlar, 2014), 272.

³⁵ Şarifov, *Məhəmmədhasən Mövlazadə Şəkəvi*, 29-35.

³⁶ Nurullayev, *Şeyxulislamlıq zirvəsi*, 67-68.

³⁷ Muḡammad Ḥasan Mawlā Zādah al-Shakawī, *al-Bayān fī tafsir al-Qur’ān* [The Commentary of the Qur’ān] (Tbilisi: Gayrat, 1907–1908), vol. 1–2. If not stated otherwise, all quotations are given in accordance with modern Azerbaijani transcription.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 1.

commentaries. It should also be noted, probably as a reflection of the fact they were writing during the early period of the development of the Azerbaijani language, both authors used much of the original Arabic vocabulary in their writings, so many Qur'ānic key concepts were transliterated rather than translated.⁴⁰ For instance, in al-Bākuwī's *tafsir*, in his interpretation of the first ten verses of *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, a large proportion of terms appear in a Türki variant of the Arabic: *kitab* (in Arabic, *kitāb*), *müttəqilər* (*muttaqīn*), *qəib* (*ghayb*), *nəzil* (*unzilu*), *hidayət* (*hūdā*), *qəlblər* (*qulūb*), etc.⁴¹ Al-Shakawī, however, depended less on Arabic vocabulary and mainly used more vernacular forms of Turkic languages, probably because he intended his work to be a translation rather than an interpretation: thus, though *kitāb* remains *kitāb*, *muttaqīn* becomes *Allahdan qorxun adamləri* (God-fearing people), *ghayb* is translated as *görünməz* (unseen), the verb *nəzala* is converted to *göndər* (to send), *hūdā* became *doğru yol* (the right way) and *qulūb* appears as *qəlb* and *ürek* (heart). So, as we can see, when it comes to al-Shakawī's work, he faces the well-known problem of how to translate or transliterate basic cross-cultural concepts.⁴²

INTRODUCING A TRADITIONAL AND REFORMIST UNDERSTANDING OF THE QUR'ĀNIC VERSES

Al-Bākuwī's *tafsir* has a simple structure: it contains the Arabic text of the Qur'ān, accompanied by a paraphrase of the meaning with some explanation added (usually on grammatical, historical or juridical issues), and more detailed commentary under the subheading *Qeyd* (Note). As a rule, the detailed commentary is appended to the verses that had special significance for the author and often contains references (mostly to *hadīth* from Sunni and Shii collections) and/or medieval poetry written by Persian and Azerbaijani poets such as Nizāmī (d. 1209) or Sa'dī (d. 1292). Sometimes al-Bākuwī also mentions works of European literature, such as the English poem "What is Prayer?" by James Montgomery (1771–1854), which was available to the author in translation.⁴³

As might be expected, al-Bākuwī's main aim was to interpret the Qur'ān as a book of religious and "secular" (rational) knowledge. Some of the starting points of his *tafsir* became obvious when reading his commentary on the verses in which human reasoning is mentioned. For example, the first four verses of *Sūrat al-Rahmān* (Q. 55:1-4 – "It is the Lord of Mercy, who taught the Qur'ān, He created man, and taught him to communicate")⁴⁴ are followed by a long commentary (*qeyd*) where al-Bākuwī explains:

⁴⁰ The authors of the first contemporary Qur'ān translation into Azerbaijani (Ziya Bünyadov and Vasim Məmmədəliyev) have pointed out that al-Bākuwī's and al-Shakawī's works contain many Arabic and Persian words. This is especially true of in the case of al-Bākuwī's work. See *Qurāni-Kərim* [The Noble Qur'an], trans. Z. Bunyadov and V. Mammadaliyev (Baku: Azərənəşr, 1992), xxviii.

⁴¹ al-Shakawī, *Al-Bayān fī tafsir al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, 30-32.

⁴² For further discussion, see Ali Yunis Aldahesh, *al-Tarjamātu al-İngilīziyyatu li-ma'ānī al-Qur'ān al-karīm: dirāsa fī madāhiri al-ikhtilāf* [English Translation of the Meanings of the Qur'an: Study of the Variations] (Cairo: Hala Publishing Company, 2020).

⁴³ al-Bākuwī, *Kəşfül-Həqayiq*, vol. 1, 102.

⁴⁴ M. A. S. Abdel-Haleem, trans., *The Qur'ān: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

In this surah, Allah Almighty begins to count His blessings, first of all mentioning the knowledge that is the first and most virtuous of blessings, and then revealing that a person needs [the power of] speech to express that knowledge ... However, the Qur'ān covers so many directions (*işlārinə*) in earthly life and religion, that it guides the ummah to the path of progress (*ümmətin tərəqqisi yoluna*), and therefore the Qur'ān is a miracle, unlike other books.⁴⁵

Here one may find the notion of “progress” that had existed in Turkic literature since the middle of the 19th century. As Nile Green notes, the rhetorical deployment of this concept occurred from the 1860s onwards in such journals as the eponymous Turkish imprint *Terakki*, whose influence points to the impact of the Ottomans and their westward journeys to the Middle East to disseminate originally European ideas among the populations there.⁴⁶ Following that line, al-Bākuwī links a kind of traditional Muslim anthropology to early 20th century humanism. For example, in his commentary on the expression *laqad khalaqna 'l-insāna fī aḥsani taqwīm* (“We created man in the finest state”) from *Sūrat al-Tīn* (Q. 95:4), al-Bākuwī paraphrases and expands on the original Arabic: “Indeed, by Our perfect power, We created man in a beautiful shape and in a pleasant manner, and distinguished him from other living beings by his knowledge, perfection, understanding, consciousness, intellect, intelligence, speech, and understanding” (*elm, kamal, fəhm, şüür, ağıl, fərasət, nitq və idrak*).⁴⁷ Almost all the human qualities he lists conform to an epistemological perspective, while most of the *tafsir* used by al-Bākuwī tends instead to interpret the meaning of the phrase *aḥsani taqwīm* as referring to the physical appearance of a human being – homo erectus or ‘upright man’ (“All living beings are walking with their faces down except human”).⁴⁸ Al-Bākuwī, in contrast, concludes that only through the virtues he lists does a human become a real human (*həqiqi insan olsun*).⁴⁹

The same approach is obvious in al-Bākuwī's comments on several verses in which cosmology is mentioned. For instance, commenting on a verse from *Sūrat al-An'ām* (Q. 6:97 – *wa-huwa 'lladhī ja 'ala lakumu 'l-nujūma*, “It is He who made the stars for you”), al-Bākuwī writes in his *qeyd* that someone having knowledge of *astronomiya* (orig. *astrūnūmiyā*, Russian variant for “astronomy”) helps them not only to find the right direction on the sea and land, but also to confess the unity of God (*alim peyda olub Allahın vəhdaniyyətini*).⁵⁰ This and many other arguments concerning the relationship between the Qur'ān and science were related not to some special kind of popular Islamic epistemology, but to a strong demand for change in the Muslim mind. Thus, in his commentary on the phrase *wa-qalīlun mina 'l-akhirīn* (“and a few from later generations”) in *Sūrat al-Wāqī'ah* (Q. 56:14), to answer the question of why the Qur'ān says in this surah that most of Paradise's inhabitants are from the past and not the

⁴⁵ al-Shakawī, *Al-Bayān fī tafsir al-Qur'ān*, vol. 2, 400.

⁴⁶ Nile Green, “Spacetime and the Muslim Journey West: Industrial Communications in the Making of the ‘Muslim World,’” *The American Historical Review* 118, no. 2 (2013): 420.

⁴⁷ al-Bākuwī, *Kəşfül-Həqayiq*, vol. 3, 367.

⁴⁸ For example, al-Bayḍāwī speaks of *intişāb al-qāmah* (‘the upright position’). al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-tā'wīl* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), vol. 5, 323.

⁴⁹ al-Bākuwī, *Kəşfül-Həqayiq*, vol. 3, 637.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 390.

present, al-Bākuwī says “We have left the Qur’ān and become divided.” What seems to be significant here is that al-Bākuwī uses the term for ignorance (*cahiliyyāt*) when describing contemporary times: “Zeal for religion and Ummah has vanished, unawareness has spread, and our time deserves to be called a time of ignorance (*cahiliyyāt*).”⁵¹ Criticising those “students of *fiqh*” who make *takfīr* (accusations of unbelief) against the scholars of other sciences, he takes the Shii exegete al-Faḍl b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsī as an example of the renewed scholar, known for his achievements in sciences such as maths and astronomy on one hand, and in *tafsir* on the other. Criticising present day Islamic scholars (“How can someone who knows only five issues of *fiqh* be leader of the Islamic Ummah?”), al-Bākuwī also raises the question of formal religious authority using radical rhetoric: “Some hands are more worthy of being cut than being kissed.”⁵² This is reminiscent of the reformist critiques of the Islamic religious establishment of such Azerbaijani scholars as the aforementioned Gasān-Bek Zardābī, who revealed stories of the corruption, adultery and other negative behaviours of some local shaykhs.⁵³

Continuing this line of scientism in his apprehension of the Qur’ān, al-Bākuwī opts for the minor interpretation for Q. 3:7 on the issue of *mutashābihāt* (clear) verses. This is a well-known exegetical issue of Qur’ānic hermeneutics, as to whether the interpretation of some verses is known “only to God” or to some people “who firm in the knowledge” as well. The phrase *wa-mā ya’lamu tā’wīlahu illā’l-lāhu wa’l-rāsikhūna fī’l-’ilm* in Q. 3:7 can be read either with a pause after *Allāhu* as “No one knows the real meaning but God. And those firm in knowledge...” or without a pause as “No one knows the real meaning but God and those firm in knowledge.” For al-Bākuwī, it should be interpreted with a continuous reading after “God”: “*mütəşabih ayələrin haqq olan yozumunu ancaq Allah-Təala, bir də elmdə qüvvətli olanlardan başqası bilməz*” (only Allah the Almighty knows the true interpretation of *mütəşabih*, except for those who are strong in knowledge). Equating the *mütəşabih* (“clear” verses) with the *məcazidir* (“metaphorical” verses), it seems al-Bākuwī reduces those verses to the attributes of God, commenting that people who are not “in possession of knowledge” can imagine that God has a body (*cism*), but the scholar knows He does not.⁵⁴ Most classical medieval Sunni exegetes (except al-Zamakhsharī) prefer the alternative interpretation, reading a pause (*waqf*) just after the word *Allāh*, thus restricting knowledge of the *mutashābihāt* to God alone.⁵⁵ Al-Bākuwī bases his argument for his reading on his opinion that, according to the rules of *waqf*, when reading the Qur’ān in Arabic, the reader should make a stop after *al-rāsikhūna fī’l-’ilm*; thus, he suggests, the phrase must be continued from *wa-mā ya’lamu tā’wīlahu illā’l-lāhu*. Of course, he does not go far beyond the tradition in this reading of the verse, since some authorities do support this reading (usually reading it as a “voluntary” but not “obligatory” pause),⁵⁶ but this case shows a singularity of approach.

⁵¹ Ibid., vol. 3, 412.

⁵² Ibid., vol. 3, 102.

⁵³ Gasan Zardabi, “Perezhitoje” [Experience], *Izbrannyje statji i pisma* (Baku: AN AzASSR, 1962): 68.

⁵⁴ al-Bākuwī, *Kəşfül-Həqayiq*, vol. 1, 102.

⁵⁵ On that commentary, see Mykhaylo Yakubovych, “Ottoman Qur’ānic Studies: Case of Tafsīr Glosses,” *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 73, no. 1 (2020).

⁵⁶ Muḥammad Mundakar and Nur Allah Kurt, “al-Waqafāt al-Mukhallah bi’l-mā’ nī athnā’ qirā’at al-Qur’ān” [Waqf Signs in the Readings of the Qur’an], *Bingöl Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 6 (2015).

The same could be said for al-Bākuwī's interpretation of Q. 5:6 on the performance of ablutions before prayer, on the issue of whether the phrase *arjulakum ilā 'l-ka 'bayn* (your feet up to the ankles) is related to the preceding Qur'ānic injunction *fā-ghsilū* (then wash) or *wamsahū* (and wipe). Sunni commentators usually support the first reading, while Shii exegetes prefer the second. Al-Bākuwī tends to support the Shii interpretation, commenting “*ayaqlarınızı da oynağa kimi məsh edin*” (and wipe your feet up to the ankles).⁵⁷ Thus, according to his reading, the whole verse should be understood as follows: “O those who believe! When you rise up for the ritual prayer, wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows, wipe your heads, then wipe your feet to the ankles,” while according to the normal Sunni reading, the last “wipe” would be changed to “wash.”⁵⁸

Despite being more reformist in its style (since his work is a translation in a modern sense rather than an interpretation), from the perspective of Qur'ānic hermeneutics al-Shakawī's *tafsir* opts for a more conservative approach. Nevertheless, this approach is far from simplification: whereas, for example, al-Bākuwī simply confirms al-Zamakhsharī's opinion that the *hurūf muqatta'āt* are merely the names of the surahs, al-Shakawī makes more effort to provide the actual meaning of these letters. For instance, in his rendition of the letters *alif-lām-mīm* that preface *Sūrat al-Baqara*, he provides the translation as “*Mənim o Allah ki bilirəm*” (I am God who knows), following some of the classical *mufasssir*, such as al-Ṭabarsī.⁵⁹ Some of the *hurūf muqatta'āt* are discussed even further, from Sunni and Shii perspectives: for *kāf-hā-yā-ayn-ṣād* (Q. 19:1), he quotes Ibn 'Abbās as cited in al-Rāzī's *al-Tafsir al-Kabīr*, deciphering the letters as the attributes of God then pointing to another interpretation:

In accordance with some from the Shii *madhhab*, *kāf* means the city of Karbala, where Imām Ḥusayn lies buried, killed (*halākātī – hā*) by the injustice of Yazīd (*yā*), the thirst of his fellows (*'aṭashī – ayn*) and their patience (*ṣabr – ṣād*).⁶⁰

Such an interpretation is mentioned in some Shii sources, such as *Bihār al-anwār* by al-Majlisī (d. 1700).⁶¹

Al-Shakawī pays more attention to certain theological issues than al-Bākuwī does. Although it is hard to believe that discussion on the literal or metaphorical readings of the attributes of God made any sense to Azerbaijani readers of those times (in contrast to present-day polemics between traditional Sunni and Sunni-Salafī Muslims), al-Shakawī mentions the well-known controversy over Q. 7:54, the verse of *istawā*, God's “establishment” on the Throne. For him, God's *istawā* ultimately refers to His creation of all things and His governance over them rather than any kind of materiality (*cəsd*).⁶² When it comes to the aforementioned issue of who has knowledge of the *mutashabihāt* (Q. 3:7), al-Shakawī mostly follows al-Ṭabarsī's interpretation – from not only his *tafsir* but also his *Kitāb al-Ihtijāj* (Book of Polemics) citing many traditions

⁵⁷ al-Bākuwī, *Kəşfül-Həqqayiq*, vol. 1, 307.

⁵⁸ Translation is mine.

⁵⁹ Al-Ṭabarsī. *Majma' al-bayān fī tafsir al-Qur'ān* [Explanation in the Interpretation of the Qur'an] (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1997).

⁶⁰ al-Shakawī, *Al-Bayān fī tafsir al-Qur'ān*, vol. 2, 31.

⁶¹ Al-Majlisī, *Bihār al-Anwār* [Oceans of Lights] (Beirut: Dār al-Wafā', 1983), vol. 14, 178.

⁶² al-Shakawī, *Al-Bayān fī tafsir al-Qur'ān*, vol. 2, 270.

that are traced back to the Prophet and early Shii authorities. In one of these *ḥadīth*, Imam ‘Alī is reported as saying that knowledge has different levels, starting from that possessed only by God and finishing “where both intelligent and ignorant people are equal.”⁶³ This kind of traditional epistemology provides a compromise on the final meaning of the verse, since when it comes to the question of who knows the *tā’wīl* (i.e. whether it refers to “God alone” or “those firm in knowledge” as well), the answer will depend on which kind of interpretation is meant.⁶⁴ The same broad approach can be found in al-Shakawī’s reading of Q. 5:6, on the issue of whether feet should be washed or wiped: he points to the *ihtilāf* (difference) between scholars on this issue and advises that one should consult other books of *tafsir* to understand more on both readings.⁶⁵

When it comes to verses on interreligious relations, however, al-Shakawī apparently has another perspective than al-Bākuwī. Since the target audience of both *tafsir* was solely Muslim, in-depth discussions on the topics of interfaith dialogue, polemics and violence might not be expected, but still al-Bākuwī approaches the “No compulsion in religion” verse (Q. 2:256) by arguing that all the Prophet’s wars were defensive only (*mūdafi‘a maqsadi*).⁶⁶ This may be a kind of response to Western Orientalist perspectives of Islam and al-Bākuwī’s translation of the verse can be read as supporting this context as well, as he renders the phrase *lā ikrāha fī’l-dīn* as: “*islama daxil olmaqda məcburiyyət və zülm yoxdur*” (There is no compulsion or oppression in converting to Islam). Consider as well his statement “*Əksinə islama daxil olmağın əsası sərbəst iradədir*” (On the contrary, the basis of conversion to Islam is free will). Al-Shakawī follows this line, making a more traditional statement on the verse as referring to *İxtiyar* (voluntary choice), on the repetition of this word three times as a necessary prerequisite to converting to Islam (*shahādah*), and mentions the well-known story of the “forced conversion” of some Christian children of the Prophet’s Companions in Medina. This story is mentioned in many *tafsir*; however, the most similar wording seems to be that of al-Zamakhsharī, who talks about the *ikhtiyār* from the same perspective, expressing his Mu‘tazili creed (i.e. the idea that human deeds are a result of a person’s choice and not predestined by God). Al-Shakawī’s translation, therefore, may be a kind of reformist or modernist reading, but nevertheless uses the most liberal of all the classical commentaries on this verse.⁶⁷

Al-Shakawī’s personal contribution to Qur’ānic hermeneutics seems to be most obvious in his interpretations of some of the verses of the Qur’ān that mention history, such as those mentioning Dhū al-Qarnayn in *Sūrat al-Kahf*. Equating Dhū al-Qarnayn with Alexander the Great, al-Shakawī cites his own (apparently lost) work *Kitāb al-‘Almās fī tārikh al-Qāfkāz* (The Book of the Diamond on the History of the Caucasus), in which he described the essence of Yājūj and Mājūj (Gog and Magog). In this connection, he mentions contemporary (as of 1907/1908) geographical names like Turkestan, Armenia and Derbent (also known as Bāb al-

⁶³ Al-Ṭabarsī, *Kitāb al-Ihtijāj* [Book of Disputes] (Najaf: Al-Maṭba‘ah al-Murtādiyyah, 1931), vol. 1, 376.

⁶⁴ al-Shakawī, *Al-Bayān fī tafsir al-Qur’ān*, vol. 1, 99.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 195.

⁶⁶ al-Bākuwī, *Kāṣṣūl-Həqayiq*, vol. 1, 147.

⁶⁷ al-Shakawī, *Al-Bayān fī tafsir al-Qur’ān*, vol. 1, 85-86.

Abwāb).⁶⁸ Al-Bākuwī was also interested in the possible parallels between Qur’ānic historical places and the South Caucasus, as can be seen in his comment that the “people of al-Rass” mentioned in Q. 25:38 are none other than those living close to the river of Araz (which now divides Azerbaijan and Iran).⁶⁹ Thus, we can see that both commentators opt for some level of domestication strategy in their interpretation of the Qur’ānic text. This seems to be an innovative trend, in which use of local historical material reflects the introduction of new nationalistic and rationalistic ideas at the same time. At one level, this is a step towards the creation of a new, symbolic and recognisable space inhabited by the Qur’ān and local readers; at another level, this is about entering new material into the exegetical method that is not directly related to or drawn from the established classical tradition of *tafsir*.

THE LATER RECEPTION OF THE AZERBAIJANI *TAFSIR*

During the Soviet era (Azerbaijan as AzSSR was part of the USSR from 1922 to 1991) and the propagation of state-supported atheism, almost all opportunities of developing any kind of Islamic learning ceased to exist and attempts to publish translations of the Qur’ān into the modern Azerbaijani language were unsuccessful. For example, a translation undertaken by Ahmet Haşımzade (1896–1979) was presented by its author to the Academy of Sciences of Soviet Azerbaijan in the early 60s, but it had no prospect of ever being published.⁷⁰ The author, Ahmet Haşımzade, received some basic religious education before the advent of the Soviet era and was affiliated with the Ministry of Public Education of AzSSR for almost all his life.⁷¹ Among the list of *tafsir* mentioned in the four-volume manuscript copy of his work, preserved in the Məhəmməd Füzuli adına Əlyazmalar İnstitutu (Muhammad Fuzuli Institute of Manuscripts) in Baku, there is no mention of the *tafsir* authored by al-Bākuwī or al-Shakawī, but this may reflect the fact that Haşımzade relied mainly on classical sources. Moreover, although Haşımzade’s translation is enriched by numerous commentaries, the wording of his text is reminiscent of a modern grammatical (and thus literal) rendition of the Qur’ān, in contrast to the approach taken in our two early Azerbaijani *tafsir*.⁷² The translation remains in manuscript form and has not yet been edited, thus it is not completely clear whether either of our early *tafsir* had any impact on it, but we do at least know that neither work is mentioned nor are the names of their authors.

In contrast, there is evidence that both *tafsir*, however, have continued to be of scholarly interest in neighbouring Iran. Due to the efforts of ‘Abd al-Majīd Şādiq Nubrī, a Persian

⁶⁸ al-Bākuwī, *Kəşfül-Həqayiq*, vol. 2, 16-17.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 428.

⁷⁰ Fethi Ahmet Polat, “Yirminci Yüz Yıl Sonrasında Azerbaycan’da Yapılan Kur’an Tercümeleeri” [Qur’anic Translations in 20th Century Azerbaijan], *Necmettin Erbakan Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 16 (2003).

⁷¹ Rahman Nuruyev, “Ahmet Haşımzâde’nin hayatı ve “Tefsîru’l-Kur’ani’l-Azîm” adlı eserinin tanıtımı” [Ahmet Hashimzade’s Life and his Commentary Tefsîru’l-Kur’ani’l-Azîm] (unpublished master’s thesis, Marmara Üniversitesi, 2005), 18.

⁷² Davut Ayduz, “Sovyet Döneminde Azerbaycan Türkçesi ve Arap Harfleriyle Yazılan Bir Tefsir” [Azerbaijani Turkish Tafsir in Arabic Script during the Soviet Times], *Akademik Araştırmalar Dergisi* 5, no. 17 (2003).

translation of al-Bākuwī's commentary was published in 1960 in Tebriz.⁷³ The translation is located as a kind of gloss attached to the original Azerbaijani text; hence, this is effectively a trilingual edition (in Arabic, Azerbaijani and Persian). As has been noted by Ismā'īl Zāde Dūzāl, who also authored his own translation of the Qur'ān into Azerbaijani in 1995,⁷⁴ the translation gained much popularity and in the following years it was reprinted in Tehran.⁷⁵ The introductory statement in Nubrī's edition describes the work as being written in "Istanbul Turkish" (meaning modern Turkish) and claims it is a "translation of the Qur'ān," despite also saying "reading and studying any translation and interpretation will not be rewarded as it would be by reading the Arabic text, but this translation makes it easy to understand the contents of the Qur'ān and its precious meanings."⁷⁶ In his introduction, the translator describes the work as a tool of guidance for students of the Qur'ān.⁷⁷ When looking at the approach of the translator, the Persian translation seems to be a faithful reproduction of al-Bākuwī's original interpretation. For instance, the first verse of *Sūrat al- 'Aşr*:

And olsun bu əsrə (bu zəmanəyə) ki, (Məhəmməd ibn Abdullahın) zühur etməyi ilə elm və mərifətin günəşi Məhəmməd həqiqətinin üfüqündən doğub, zəlalət və cəhalətin qaranlıqlarını məhv edib, geri çəkməyə başladı.

(By *aşr* [this time]! This is the advent of [Muḥammad b. 'Abdullāh], the sun of knowledge and enlightenment rose from the horizon of Muḥammad's truth, and thus destroyed the darkness of misguidance and ignorance, and began to retreat.)

is rendered as:

*qasama bi- ayn 'aşr (rūzgār) keh bā zuhūr 'Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd Allah' āftāb 'ilmi va ma'rifət az afaq həqiqət Muḥammadiyə tülū'a karde zulumāt jahl wa zalālat monhadam shidde shurūa be sīr qaharqara namūde ast.*⁷⁸

(He swears by *aşr* (this time), that this is the appearance of Muḥammad b. 'Abdullāh, the sun of knowledge and enlightenment rose from the horizon of Muḥammad's reality, and thus destroyed the darkness of ignorance and error, and finally began to retreat.)

As this example shows, Nubrī preserves all the core Arabic vocabulary used for religious terms by al-Bākuwī, although the interpretation al-Bākuwī uses is less popular (most commentators understand *al-aşr* as "a time" or especially "afternoon prayer time"), which is used mainly by Sufis, such as the Ottoman commentator Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī Burusāwī.⁷⁹ Due

⁷³ Abd al-Majīd Šādiq Nubrī, *Kashf al-ḥaqā'iq 'an nukat al-ayāt wa'l-daqā'iq Terjume Fārisī* [Exploration of the Realities of the Meanings of the Verses: Translation into Persian] (Tebriz: n.p., 1960), vol. 1-3.

⁷⁴ Ismā'īl-Zāde Dūzāl, "Negāhī be tarjama hāi Azerbāyjānī Qurāni Karīm" [Translation of the Qur'an into Azerbaijani], *Tarjūmān e-Wahī* 1 (1997).

⁷⁵ *Qur'ān majīd bi-tafsīr Kashf al-ḥaqā'iq* [Glorious Qur'an and its Tafsir] (Tehran: Intishārāt Iqbāl, 1963), vol. 1-3. Some contemporary editions are available as well and under the same title, for example, *Qur'ān majīd bi-tafsīr Kashf al-ḥaqā'iq* [Glorious Qur'an and its Tafsir] (Tehran: Maṭba'ah al-Mūsawī, 2000), vol. 1-3.

⁷⁶ *Qur'ān majīd*, vol. 1, 2.

⁷⁷ Ibid., vol. 1, 3.

⁷⁸ Ibid., vol. 3, 546.

⁷⁹ Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī Burusāwī, *Rūḥ al-bayān* [Spirit of the Commentaries] (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2018), vol. 10, 590.

to the boost to its accessibility provided by Nubrī's Persian translation and its consequent extensive use as a source of Qur'ānic interpretation in modern Iranian scholarship, al-Bākuwī's *tafsir* is listed among the most important contributions to 20th century Shii *tafsir*, as M. Alawī points out in his bio-bibliographical dictionary.⁸⁰ Some Shii scholars even argue that al-Bākuwī was a progressive scholar with a vision of Shii–Sunni unity.⁸¹ Even more strange is the fact the newest edition of the work to be published in Turkey (with an accompanying translation into modern Turkish) is presented as an Alevi interpretation of the Qur'ān first published in 2000.⁸² Having said that, the use of the term “Alevi” in the subtitle (used in this edition as a synonym to “Shii”) has been already criticised by some reviewers on the basis that, first, directly associating Turkish Alevis with the Shia is seen to be controversial and, second, al-Bākuwī drew on Shii and Sunni sources in his original text.⁸³ However, despite this, a second edition was printed in 2012 with the same title.⁸⁴

Al-Shakawī's *tafsir* has not been forgotten either. During the first year of the Islamic revolution (1979), some religious establishments in Qum produced a new edition based on the 1907–1908 offprints,⁸⁵ and in 1990, another reprint was issued by a publishing house in Tehran.⁸⁶ Despite his Sunni background, al-Shakawī's considerable use of Shii sources has not gone unnoticed in Iran,⁸⁷ and it seems both editions were designed to be popularised among Azerbaijani-speaking Iranians (as is also the case with the multilingual translations of al-Bākuwī's work). Finally, with the help of an Azerbaijani scholar of Oriental studies, Vasim Memmedaliyev (1942–2019), al-Shakawī's interpretation was republished in the final year of Soviet Azerbaijan (1990).⁸⁸ This 1990 edition was no more than a phototype of the first one, while in 2001, Ali Nurmemmedov and Intigam Rustemov made a translation into modern Azerbaijani (with Cyrillic script).⁸⁹ Since the very short introductory statement to this work does not provide any detail on the approach, it looks like the commentary has been thoroughly edited but with no references to the changes made. Thus, the new edition is a paraphrase. For instance, while the original edition provides “*zıkr olan kəsler doğri yoldadırlar Allah Təala tərəfindən və onlar nəcət tapmışlardır*” for Q. 2:5, this translation into modern Azerbaijani converts this to “*Onlar Allah tərəfindən doğru yoldadırlar. Onlar nəcət tapmışlardır*” (They

⁸⁰ Mahr Hüsayn Alawī, *al-Madkhal ilā tāriḫ al-tafsīr wa'l-mufasssīrīn* [An Introduction to the History of the Commentary and the Commentators] (Qum: Markaz al-Muṣṭafā al-Ālamī li'l-Tarjamah wa'l-Nashr, 2013), 398.

⁸¹ Düzäl, “Negāhī be tarjama hāi Azerbāyjānī Qurānī Karīm,” 43.

⁸² Ahmet Dolunay, trans., *Mir Muhammed Kerim Bakivî, Gerçeğin Doğuşu – Alevî Kur'an Tefsiri* [Mir Muhammed Kerim Bakivi, The Birth of Truth – Alevi Qur'anic tafsir] (Istanbul: Merkür Yayınları, 2000): vol. 1-2.

⁸³ İsmail Çalışkan, “Türkçe’de İlk Şii Tefsir” [Old Turkic Shia Tafsir], *Cumhuriyet Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 1, no. 5 (2001): 221.

⁸⁴ Dolunay, *Mir Muhammed Kerim Bakivî*.

⁸⁵ Mutarjım Muḥammad Ḥasan Mawlā Zādah Shakawī, *Al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān* [Explanation in the Commentary of the Qur’an] (Qum: Maktabah Dār al-Turāth, 1979), vol. 1-2.

⁸⁶ Mutarjım Muḥammad Ḥasan Mawlā Zādah Shakawī, *Al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān* [Explanation in the Commentary of the Qur’an] (Tehran: Sāzomān-e Tebligāt-e Islāmī, 1990), vol. 1-2.

⁸⁷ Düzäl, “Negāhī be tarjama hāi Azerbāyjānī Qurānī Karīm,” 62.

⁸⁸ *Kitab əl-bəyan fī təfsir əl-Quran* (Baku: Azərneşr, 1990), vol. 1–2.

⁸⁹ *Kitabul-Bəyan fī Təfsiril-Quran (Kiril əlifbasına çevirənlər və üzərində işləyənlər*. Ə. N. Nurməmmədov, İ. V. Rüstəmov) [Book of Explanation in the Commentary to the Qur’an] (Baku: Minarə, 2001), vol. 1-2.

are on guidance from their Lord, and it is those who gain success), omitting “*zīkr olan kəsler*” (Mention of those who are...). In addition, several Arabic and Persian religious terms are rendered into Azerbaijani. For example, *khalaqa* is translated as *jerdə* (to create, Q. 2:29), *Khodavand* (“God” in Persian) is changed to the more popular *Pərvərdikar* (Q. 2:30) and so on.

In contrast, a new edition of al-Bākuwī’s *Kashf al-Ḥaqā’iq*, which appeared in 2014 with the promotion of the Qafqaz Müsəlmanları İdarəsi (Directorate of Caucasian Muslims), looks more like a transliteration than a translation, with much more subtle intervention from its translators and editors.⁹⁰ Printed in Latin script with some editorial commentary, it makes some of the words less “Arabic” (e.g. converting *maqşūd* to *məqsəd*) and changes the order of the words to accord with contemporary Azerbaijani grammar. Thus, “*doğru yolu göstərəndir bu Quran müttəqilərdən ötrü*” (for Q. 2:2) appears as “*bu Quran müttəqilərdən ötrü doğru yolu göstərəndir,*” meaning the wording of the edited variant becomes closer to that of the original Arabic, starting from *bu Quran (dhālika ’l-kitāb; This is the book)*.

With the help of new editions, both commentaries have therefore made their mark on the historiography of *tafsir* in Azerbaijan. In a recent study by Ramiz Mammadov and Abdurrahman Nuri, the legacies of al-Bākuwī and al-Shakawī are highlighted as a starting point for *tafsir* studies in the South Caucasus.⁹¹ Moreover, the legacies of al-Bākuwī and al-Shakawī have been addressed by Vasim Memmedaliyev in his translation of the Qur’ān, which was co-authored with Ziya Bunyadov (1921–1997) and first published in 1991. Mentioning both commentaries in their introduction, the translators note the works are still popular in “Southern Azerbaijan” (meaning the part of Iran with a predominantly Azerbaijani population), although, they point out, the large amount of foreign vocabulary (Persian and Arabic) makes them difficult for contemporary Azerbaijani readers to understand.⁹² Beyond this, the question remains as to the extent to which either of these *tafsir* have had any impact on the translation produced by Memmedaliyev and Bunyadov, in which it is mentioned alongside other, mostly classical, *tafsir*. The same is true of the Azerbaijani translation by Ahmed Kaviyanpur, which was first published in Iran in 1992.⁹³ For example, in Kaviyanpur’s translation we find a similar rendition of Q. 1:7, where *şirāṭa ’lladhīna an ’amta ’alayhim* is translated as *o kəsralin yoluna ki onlara nemət veribsən* (the way of those to whom You have given Your blessing). Likewise, the translation of Q. 55:21, *fā-bi-ayyi alā ’i rabbikumā tukadhhibāni* (Which, then, of your Lord’s blessings do you both deny?) is almost the same in al-Shakawī’s *tafsir* and Kaviyanpur’s reading (*hənsı nimətlərini təkzib*). As expected, later renditions (made in the late 1990s and 2000s) depend less on the early Azerbaijani *tafsir*, due first to a more literal approach to translation (as in the rendition by Alikhan Musayev, published in 2008 by the King Fahd

⁹⁰ al-Bākuwī, *Kəşfül-Həqayiq*.

⁹¹ Ramiz Məmmədov and Abdurrahman Nuri, *Təfsir* (Baku: İpəkyolu, 2016), 100-105.

⁹² *Qurani-Kərim*, xxvii, xxviii.

⁹³ *Al-Qur’ān al-karīm* [The Holy Qur’an], trans. Ahmad Kaviyanpur (Tehran: Intishārāt Iqbāl, 1992).

Qur'ān Printing Complex)⁹⁴ and, second, to a greater dependence on foreign Qur'ān scholarship. For instance, the recent Azerbaijani translation by Kovser Tagiev (Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, 2019) was based on Halil Altuntaş and Muzaffer Şahin's translation into Turkish.⁹⁵ However, even this diversification of Islamic discourse in present-day Islamic texts written in Azerbaijani does not challenge the status of al-Bākūwī's and al-Shakawī's *tafsir* as formative texts for domestic Qur'ānic studies.

CONCLUSIONS

When analysing the legacy of the first two commentaries on the Qur'ān written in the Azerbaijani language, an additional question could be asked as to whether these commentaries were merely a reflection of post-classical Arabic scholarship in foreign language or if the *tafsir* were already commentaries of a modernist kind. If one was to juxtapose *Kashf al-Ḥaqā'iq* and *al-Bayān* within the categories of modern *tafsir* listed by Johanna Pink,⁹⁶ they could be placed within different types. If al-Bākūwī's work is obviously characterised by “a distinct interest in scholarly disciplines outside the field of *tafsir* or even of Islamic theology (such as philosophy or science) and an occasional tendency towards historical contextualisation of the Qur'ānic message” (as Pink describes the “reformative” *tafsir*), al-Shakawī's commentary represents instead a rather conservative trend. The aim of both commentaries, however, seems to be a “guidance” of the readership towards “the real meaning of the Qur'ān,” and in both cases the translator's use of vernacular language is the first proof of that. In both commentaries, the meanings of the Qur'ānic text are presented in ways that are mostly simple and unambiguous, especially when one takes into consideration those parts of the work that paraphrase the meanings in a form of translation (*tarjamah*).

For al-Bākūwī's commentary, at least three main features can be observed: there is an idea of reform (as a return to the “real Qur'ānic knowledge”); a strong demand for Muslim unity, crossing the boundaries between Shii and Sunni Muslims; and the use of modern science as a hermeneutical tool. All these dimensions of *Kashf al-Ḥaqā'iq* seem to be strongly related to the personal experience of the author. Coming from a traditional Shia background, his connection to the domestic (and mostly urban) discourses of enlightenment made it possible for him to propose a wide paradigm of Islamic reform. This modernist approach infuses the strongly confessional narrative of *Kashf al-Ḥaqā'iq*, resulting in ongoing interest in this work not only in a Shii context (due to the Persian translation of this work) but also in the field of contemporary “multicultural” Islamic studies in Azerbaijan and Turkey.

⁹⁴ Əlixan Musayev, trans., *Qurani-kərim və Azərbaycan dilinə mənaca tərcüməsi* [The Holy Qur'an and Translation of its Meanings into Azerbaijani Language] (Madinah: Muamma' al-Malik Fahad li'l-Tiba'ah al-Muşhaf al-Sharīf, 2008).

⁹⁵ *Qurani kərim və məali* [The Glorious Qur'an and its Translation] (Ankara: Türkiyə Diyanət İşləri Başqanlığı, 2019).

⁹⁶ See Johanna Pink, “Tradition, Authority and Innovation in Contemporary Sunnī *Tafsīr*: Towards a Typology of Qur'ān Commentaries from the Arab World, Indonesia, and Turkey,” *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies* 12 (2010).

Al-Shakawī's interpretation presents an even more illustrative case. On one hand, this is a more conservative kind of *tafsir* than its counterpart; on the other hand, it also has aspects that are obviously innovative. Like al-Bākūwī, al-Shakawī was working on his commentary with the active usage of Shii sources (despite his Sunni background), but his work looks more like a translation in the modern sense than merely an interpretation. In addition, while al-Bākūwī's vocabulary mostly remains within the confines of its Ottoman milieu (with plenty of Arabic and Persian words), al-Shakawī uses more vernacular Azerbaijani Türkic, which makes his work more accessible to the general public. It is because of this that his work has been widely used in the Azerbaijani areas of Iran and even some of the later translations produced in the early 1990s show a trace of its influence. Remaining symbolically and scholarly important texts (especially due to their later transliteration into Cyrillic and Latin alphabets), these commentaries can be regarded as two of the most important modernist developments in 20th century non-Arabic exegesis of the Qur'ān.

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