



Australian Journal of Islamic Studies

<https://ajis.com.au>

ISSN (online): 2207-4414
Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation
Charles Sturt University CRICOS 00005F
Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia

A Brief Review of Classical and Modern *Tafsir* Trends and the Role of Modern *Tafsir* in Contemporary Islamic Thought

Amer Ali

To cite this article:

Ali, Amer. "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): 39-52.



Published online: 19 November 2018



Submit your article to this journal



View related and/or other articles in this issue

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
<https://ajis.com.au/index.php/ajis/tncs>

A BRIEF REVIEW OF CLASSICAL AND MODERN *TAFSIR* TRENDS AND THE ROLE OF MODERN *TAFASIR* IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Amer Ali*

Abstract: This article briefly reviews traditional and modern *tafsir* (interpretation) trends and how modern *tafasir* have shaped contemporary Islamic thought. Classical *tafsir* trends, *tafsir bi al-ma'thur* (tradition-based interpretation) and *tafsir bi al-ra'y* (reason-based interpretation) are well-documented in historical norms of Qur'ānic exegesis. However, modernity, with its complex socioeconomic, religious, political and cultural developments, presents unique challenges to *muffassirun* (authors of Qur'ānic interpretations) to contextualise the Qur'ānic message and provide guidance to modern-day Muslims and their worldview. Complex modern Islamic thought is a selection of ideologies and philosophies that resulted from the prevailing diverse geopolitical, sociocultural and economic environment. These dynamic elements of modernity have conceptualised *tafsir* trends into the textualist, contextualist, modernist, socio-political, scientific, thematic and feminist approaches. These trends have not only transformed contemporary Islamic thought, and vice versa, but also continue to collectively evolve to meet the challenges of modernity.

Keywords: *Contemporary Islamic thought, modern trends in Qur'anic exegesis, classical tafsir trends, modernity, Qur'ān*

The Qur'ān, the literal word of Allah (swt), presents a timeless spiritual inspiration to Muslim scholarship to educe and contextualise its message for every Muslim, if not every human, throughout Islamic history. Not long after the death of the Prophet (pbuh), Islamic scholarship focused on the preservation of Qur'ānic spiritual teachings, its wisdom and its *corpus juris*. A particular focus was to understand and contextualise the teachings of the Qur'ān to draw wisdom in resolving various daily challenges of the time. As the Muslim empire reached a monumental geographical and social scale, it presented its own social and cultural challenges and linguistic diversities. The Arabic language was not the only widely spoken language of the time. These distinctive civilities pursued a circumstantial understanding of the Qur'ānic message. Furthermore, the expansion of Muslim lands and various governance arrangements with non-Muslim territories encouraged opportunities for Muslims to travel and trade, resulting in the resettlement of many Muslims to foreign lands and cultures. A dire need

* Amer Ali is a student of the Master of Islamic Studies at Charles Sturt University. This article was originally written as fulfilment of assessment criterion for the subject Methodology of Qur'anic Exegesis (*usul al-tafsir*).

for meticulous understanding of the Qur'ān surfaced for guiding the lives of these Muslims living in non-Muslim territories. *Muffassirun* (authors of the Qur'ānic interpretations) diligently engaged themselves to effectively present the Qur'ānic narrative through prophetic and traditional narrations to these dynamic societal norms. That resulted in *tafasir bi al-ma'thur* (tradition-based interpretations). Moreover, scientific, technological, industrial and socio-cultural advancements opened new doors to *tafsir* of the Qur'ān. Reasoning played a central role in interpreting certain *tafasir* (plural of *tafsir*) to respond to these astute civilisations. Consequently, reason-based *tafasir* (*tafasir bi al-ra'y*) became populous. However, in the present time, all these factors have merged to produce a complex sociocultural framework.

Information technology, scientific advancements, specialised fields of knowledge and aviation developments have turned the world into a globalised village. This intricate environment has reshaped the methodology of human understanding and Islamic thought. Century old traditions and rationality alone may not be sufficient to respond to the challenges encountered by modernity. A meaningful Muslim life, once again, requires contextualised understanding of the Qur'ānic message to approach the challenges of this dynamically evolving epoch. On one hand, modern Islamic thought is influencing the manner in which Qur'ānic interpretations are evolving; simultaneously, various modernistic reason and tradition-based Qur'ānic *tafasir* are profoundly transforming the views and philosophies of present-day Muslims. This article, after discussing early *tafasir* norms, will provide historical background and an understanding of *tafsir* and its impact, followed by modern trends in *tafsir*. The discussion will continue through exploring the concept of Islamic thought and observations will be made regarding the impact of modern *tafsir* on contemporary Islamic thought.

EARLY TAFASIR AND THEIR HISTORICAL ELEMENTS

Though the Qur'ān was revealed in the native language of an Arab audience, its remedial challenge to atrocious social norms forced its primary audience to seek an exegetic comprehension of its directives. Unfortunately, soon after the death of the Prophet (pbuh) and expansion of the Muslim empire, a diverse religious, theological and political ambience evolved. Further, the continued development of the Arabic language compelled scholarship, Muslim or otherwise, to contextualise the words and expressions of the Qur'ān¹ through every era of Muslim history. To contextualise the Qur'ān, an understanding of its structural elements is essential. Notably, the Qur'ān primarily contains two types of *ayat* (verses): *muhkamat* and *mutashabihat*.²

Muhkam (singular form of *muhkamat*) *ayat* are clear in meaning and require no interpretation or further explanation. *Mutashabihat*, on the other hand, require interpretation as they carry two meanings: resembling (referring to similarity to objects, events or phenomenon

¹ Recep Dogan, *Usul Al-Tafsir: The Sciences and Methodology of Qur'ān* (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2014), 121.

² Ahmad Von Denffer, *Ulum al-Qur'ān: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'ān* (Nigeria: The Islamic Foundation, 2011), 58-60, 63.

that were experienced at the time of the verse's revelation) and ambiguous (which means these *ayat* may not clearly be related to an object, event or phenomenon or contain metaphor).³ Furthermore, Qadhi discusses these various groups of the Qur'ānic *ayat* to expound the linguistic complexities of the Qur'ān that *muffassirun* had to confront and consequentially led to the various genres of *tafsir*.⁴ For example, the Qur'ānic words/ expressions/*ayah* can be *haqeeqee* (used in their literal and intended sense) or *majaazee* (used in metaphorical sense), *aam* (general in application) or *khaas* (used in specific context), *mutlaq* (lit. unconditional) or *muqayyad* (lit. qualified), *mantooq* (apparent meaning is obvious) or *mafhoom* (cannot be understood explicitly), and *nasikh* (contains abrogating rulings) or *manssokh* (carries rules that are abrogated).

In addition to linguistic nuances, knowledge of various Qur'ānic sciences is necessary for scrupulous *tafsir* work. Demonstratively, knowledge of the Makkān and Madinan phases of the Prophetic (pbuh) life and revelation of *surahs* (chapters) in each phase, termed Makkān and Madinan *surahs*,⁵ is fundamental to any *tafsir* work. Though some Qur'ānic revelation, in Makkah or Madina, is not related to any particular event or reason, knowledge of the context, called *asbab ul-nuzul* (reasons for revelation),⁶ is indispensable for those *ayat* that are. Furthermore, the influence of foreign elements (*isra'iliyyat*) in explaining stories of previous prophets is an important consideration for many Qur'ānic exegetes.⁷ These are only a few examples of the Qur'ānic sciences that are required for any authentic exegesis of the Qur'ān.

Classically, Qur'ānic exegesis is divided into two major trends, as mentioned earlier, *tafsir bi al-math'ur* and *tafsir bi al-ra'y*.⁸ One of the Prophetic missions was to explain the Qur'ānic message⁹ and he did so through his words and practice.¹⁰ After the Prophet (pbuh), the first four Rashidun caliphs (632–660 CE) (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali) and a number of Companions (such as Abd Allah b. Mas'ud, Ubay b. Ka'b, Abd Allah b. Abbas and Zayd b. Thabit) contributed significantly in explaining and interpreting the Qur'ān.¹¹ Within the first 150 years of the Prophet's (pbuh) death, especially towards the era marking the end of the Umayyad dynasty, scholars started to compile complete *tafasir* based on prophetic narrations and traditions. Not long after, by the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a number of scholars also developed *tafasir* entrenched in their personal opinion and rationale reflecting various trends

³ A. A. Yasir Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'aan* (Birmingham: Al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, 1999), 208, 221-231, <https://www.kalamullah.com/Books/Introduction-to-Sciences-of-theQuran.pdf>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Von Denffer, *Ulum al-Qur'an*, 63.

⁶ Jalaluddin Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fi ulum al-Qur'an*, trans. Darul Isha'at (Karachi: Darul Isha'at, 2008), 85-96, <https://archive.org/details/AlItqanFiUloomIlQuran>.

⁷ Ismail Albayrak, "Qur'ānic Narrative and Isra'iliyyat in Western Scholarship and in Classical Exegesis" (PhD diss., The University of Leeds, 2000), http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/507/1/uk_bl_ethos_365456.pdf.

⁸ Abdullah Saeed, *The Qur'an: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 178, http://mrofiq.staff.umsu.ac.id/files/2013/09/Abdullah_Saeed_Introduction_to_the_Quran.pdf.

⁹ Qur'an 16:14.

¹⁰ Hakan Çoruh, "Tradition, Reason, and Qur'ānic Exegesis in the Modern Period: The Hermeneutics of Said Nursi." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 28, no. 1 (2017): 87, doi: 10.1080/09596410.2017.1280915.

¹¹ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Quran: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9, https://www.humanrights.ch/upload/pdf/151105_Interpreting_the_Quran.pdf.

in Muslim thought.¹² These emerging Islamic thoughts, stemming from multiple orientations, led to sectarian, theological, legal, mystical and philosophical *tafsir* of the Qur'ān.¹³ This produced works such as *Jami' al-bayan 'an ta'wil ay alQur'ān* (The Commentary on the Qur'ān) by al-Tabari (d. 923 CE) a tradition-based *tafsir*; *Al-kashshaf 'an haqa'iq ghawamid al-tanzil* (The Unveiler of the Realities of the Sciences of the Revelation) by the Mu'tazilite grammarian and philologist al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144 CE); *Mafatih al-ghayb* (The Keys to Unseen) by the Ash'arite theologian al-Razi (d. 1209 CE), a voluminous and famous reason-based *tafsir* work; *Al-jami' li-ahkam al-Qur'ān* (The Collection of Qur'anic Injunctions) by al-Qurtubi (d. 1272 CE); *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* (The Commentary of the Two Jalāls) by al-Mahalli (d. 1459 CE) and his student al-Suyuti (d. 1505 CE); and *Tafsir al-Qur'ān al-'azim* (The Ibn Kathir Interpretation) by ibn Kathir (d. 1373 CE).¹⁴ These acclaimed *tafasir*, along with development in Qur'ānic sciences (ulum al-Qur'ān), became treasured and foundational sources for modern *tafsir* work.

MODERN TRENDS IN TAFSIR

Since the revelation of the Qur'ān 1,400 years ago, the intricate sociocultural and religious environment of modernity once again demands contextualised understanding of the Qur'ānic message. A modern *tafsir* only becomes modern when its explanation (*ta'wil*) addresses the social, cultural and political realities of the current era.¹⁵ A number of trends exist in modern scholarship for contextualising the Qur'ānic message. The more prominent modernistic methodologies of Qur'ānic exegesis comprise textualist, contextualist, modernist, socio-political, scientific, thematic and feminist approaches.¹⁶ To comprehend how these philosophies are reshaping modern Islamic thought and vice versa, a comprehensive understanding of these trends is desirable, but is beyond the scope of this article. However, these exegetical trends are briefly examined here.

Textualist Exegesis

Exegetical work that is primarily based on evaluating and interpreting Qur'ānic text is referred to as textualist exegesis. Saeed defines the term textualist exegesis as Qur'ānic *tafsir* work relying on text and tradition, which approaches interpretation of the Qur'ān strictly from a linguistic perspective.¹⁷ Most modern *tafasir*, as expressed by Saeed,¹⁸ are written with a

¹² Abu Ameenah Philips, *Usool at-Tafseer: The Methodology of Qur'ānic Interpretation* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, n.d.), 12, <http://kalamullah.com/Books/Usool%20at-Tafseer.pdf>.

¹³ Saeed, *The Qur'ān*, 15.

¹⁴ Aysha Hidayatullah, "History of Tafsir," in *Feminist Edges of the Qu'ran*, by Aysha Hidayatullah (USA: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), 3-4, accessed November 2, 2017, doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199359561.003.0002.

¹⁵ Mun'im Sirry, "The Qur'ān and Modern *Tafsīr*," in *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur'ān and Other Religions*, by Mun'im Sirry (USA: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014), 2, accessed November 2, 2017, doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199359363.003.0002.

¹⁶ Saeed, *The Qur'ān*, 208-214.

¹⁷ Saeed, *Interpreting the Quran*, 50.

¹⁸ Saeed, *The Qur'ān*, 220.

view that interpretation of a Qur'ānic verse, word or expression conveys its original meaning to scholars who adhere to the conventions governing a textualist approach. Development of the linguistic sciences of *nawh* (grammar) and *balagha* (rhetoric) profoundly refined this *tafsir* trend from a lexical explanation alone to a literary stylistic of comprehension and clarification.¹⁹ A few textualist works, such as those by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144 CE)²⁰ and more modern scholar Amin al-Khuli (d. 1967),²¹ adopt a linguistic perspective as the foundation for their *tafsir* rather than contemporary context, which demands Muslims to adopt historic sociocultural connotations.

Contextualist Exegesis

Another modern trend in *tafsir* is to let the Qur'ān speak for itself. It is argued by some that the Qur'ān should be understood in a similar manner as the Arabs of Hijaz did at the time of its revelation.²² To clarify such philosophy, it is further argued that traditional reports on the occasions of revelation are not unanimously agreed upon and should only be considered when contextual circumstances are favourable.²³ Furthermore, contextualists, such as Algerian scholar Muhammad Arkoun (d. 2010), Egyptian Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010) and Kuwaiti born scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl (b. 1963), reject the imitation of earlier modes of thinking in Qur'ānic exegesis,²⁴ like their modernist counterparts. These notions have led to contemporary philosophies in interpretation and contextualising the Qur'ānic message.

Modernist Exegesis

Qur'ānic *tafsir* exclusively based on and addressing challenges presented by modernity, and more specifically by the Western worldview, is said to reflect modernist or reformist exegetical work. A number of Muslim scholars with this mindset, such as Shah Waliullah (d. 1762) quoted by Saeed,²⁵ refute *taqlid* (blind imitation of early scholars) and favour *ijtihad* (independent judgement) to apply contemporary thought in interpreting the Qur'ān. Commenting on the philosophy of one modern scholar, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), Saeed writes:

In his view, the gulf between Western and Islamic modes of thought was vast, and Muslims who had been educated in the West or influenced by Western education were no longer able

¹⁹ Kate Zebiri, "The Emergence of Modern Tafsīr," in *Maḥmūd Shalt'ut and Islamic Modernism*, by Kate Zebiri (USA: Oxford Scholarship Online, 1993), 3, accessed November 12, 2017, doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198263302.003.0007.

²⁰ Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'aan*, 343-4.

²¹ Rotraud Wielandt, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Early Modern and Contemporary," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Washington DC: Georgetown University, 2008), 8, accessed February 11, 2008, http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=q3_COM-00059.

²² Issa Boullata, "Modern Qur'ān Exegesis: A Study of Bint al-Shati's Method," *The Muslim World* 64, no. 2 (1974), 107, accessed December 30, 2017, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=b56887b8-45f3-4ede-a3e8-fd10106859ec%40sessionmgr4006..>

²³ Ibid., 106.

²⁴ Saeed, *The Qur'ān*, 214.

²⁵ Saeed, *Interpreting the Quran*, 10.

to comprehend the religious discourse of the ulama of the time. This widening gap threatened the very relevance of Islam as a religion for many Muslims.²⁶

Furthermore, issues such as gender inequality, attitudes towards non-Muslims, philosophy, science²⁷ and notions of the relevance of Islam in modern times forced modernists to traverse beyond the grammatical and rhetorical usage, theological controversies and jurisprudential approaches in the *tafsir* tradition.²⁸ This has resulted in a *tafsir* dimension that resonates more with Muslims of the twenty-first century. Muhammad Abduh's (d. 1905) work, which was later published by his student Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935) as *Tafsir al-Manar* (Interpretation of Beacon), is one example of such a trend.²⁹

Socio-Political Exegesis

Tafasir that relate Qur'ānic interpretation particularly to social, economic and political aspects of modernity can be categorised as socio-political exegesis. One such acclaimed work is by well-known Egyptian scholar Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966). His life's mission of advocating social, political and religious reforms can be clearly seen in his *tafsir* work,³⁰ *Fi zīlal al-Qur'ān* (In the Shade of the *Qur'ān*). Though Qutb's approach to *tafsir* of the Qur'ān was highly political,³¹ it contributed to a new genre of socio-political interpretation and understanding of the Qur'ānic message. Similar views were expressed by Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988),³² reiterating how understanding the social and political environment plays a foundational role in understanding the Qur'ānic message.

Scientific Exegesis

In modern Western societies, scientific education and development overwhelmingly hold a central role.³³ Hence, scientific exegesis of the Qur'ān, expounding on verses dealing with scientific facts, is a re-emerging phenomenon. Though scientific Qur'ānic exegesis has a long history, originating from within the writings of al-Ghazali (d. 1111), its popularity in present time has reached unprecedented levels.³⁴ The most prominent work in this field is by Egyptian scholar Shaykh Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī (d. 1940), author of *al-Jawāhir fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm*.³⁵

²⁶ Ibid., 11.

²⁷ Johanna Pink, "Tradition, Authority and Innovation in Contemporary Sunnī Tafsir: Towards a Typology of Qur'ān Commentaries from the Arab World, Indonesia and Turkey," *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies* 12, no. 1-2 (2010), 74, doi: 10.3366/jqs.2010.0105.

²⁸ Zebiri, "The Emergence of Modern Tafsīr," 5.

²⁹ Ibid., 4-5.

³⁰ Mohummad Syahnan, "A Study of Syyyid Qutb's Quran Exegesis in Earlier and Later Editions of his *Fi Zīlal Al-Quran* with Specific Reference to Selected Themes" (PhD diss., McGill University, 1997), 70, http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/R/?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=27972&local_base=GEN01-MCG02.

³¹ Saeed, *The Qur'ān*, 212.

³² Ibid., 224.

³³ Bustami Khir, "The Qur'ān and Science: The Debate on the Validity of Scientific Interpretations," *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2000): 20, www.jstor.org/stable/25727996.

³⁴ Kurt Wood, "The Scientific Exegesis of the Qur'ān: A Systematic Look," *MAAS Journal of Islamic Science* 5, no. 2 (1989), 8.

³⁵ Wielandt, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān," 7.

Though other comparable work in scientific exegesis by French surgeon Maurice Bucaille³⁶ has raised much debate regarding the scientific inimitability of the Qur'ān,³⁷ this revived modern trend in Qur'ānic *tafsir* will most likely further expand as the Western influence on Muslim societies continues.

Thematic Exegesis

This modern genre of *tafsir* advocates Qur'ānic exegesis in the forms of various themes and topics that are central to the Qur'ān. Egyptian scholar Amin al-Khuli (d. 1967), well-known for his *tajdid* (renaissance) methodology in Qur'ānic interpretation,³⁸ though he did not write *tafsir*, is a strong proponent of exegetic work based on thematic interpretation (*tafsir mawdu'i*) of the Qur'ānic message.³⁹ Iranian Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari (d. 1979), Egyptian writer Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad (d. 1964) and Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman have written extensively on the various themes in the Qur'ān, such as society, history, women's rights and fundamental liberties.⁴⁰ Though this trend in explaining the Qur'ān can be traced back to the Companions,⁴¹ its application in modern *tafsir* work is unrivalled.

Feminist Exegesis

Since the second half of the last century, feminist exegetes have emerged to challenge patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'ān. Female scholars, such as Moroccan writer and sociologist Fatima Mernissi (d. 2015), American Muslim scholar Amina Wadud (b. 1952) and Pakistani-American writer and academic Asma Barlas (b. 1950), have produced major works in feminist exegesis using the conventional principles of *tafsir*, such as *tafsir* of the Qur'ānic verses in light of other Qur'ānic verses and the *sunna* of the Prophet (pbuh).⁴² One of the earliest and perhaps most challenging works, arguing against segregation of the sexes and notions of women's inferiority to men, is by Lebanese scholar Nazira Zain al-Din (d. 1976), who published *Al-sufur wa-l-hijab* (Unveiling and Veiling) in Beirut in 1928.⁴³ These modern female scholars have not only pointed out the patriarchal nature of traditional exegetic work, but have contributed feminine perspectives to *tafsir* tradition.

When examined superficially, these modern *tafsir* trends appear to be diverse and, at times, opposing in nature. However, on analysis, a significant synergy of ideologies and philosophies is strongly palpable. From textualism to contextualism, modernism to feminism, scientism to socio-political and thematic interpretations, the underpinning of these modern *tafsir* trends is

³⁶ Wood, "The Scientific Exegesis of the Qur'ān," 7.

³⁷ Mustansir Mir, "Scientific Exegesis of the Qur'ān – A Viable Project?" *Islam & Science* 2, no. 1 (2004), 33, accessed October 30, 2017, http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/ps/i.do?p=EAIM&sw=w&u=csu_au&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA119627485&asid=0096a7a8058640263d478eb201919bfa.

³⁸ Nasr Abu-Zayd, "The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an," *Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 23 (2003), doi:10.2307/1350075.

³⁹ Zebiri, "The Emergence of Modern Tafsir," 9.

⁴⁰ Saeed, *The Qur'ān*, 213.

⁴¹ Zebiri, "The Emergence of Modern Tafsir," 9.

⁴² Saeed, *The Qur'ān*, 213.

⁴³ Hidayatullah, "History of Tafsir," 14.

how to appropriately respond to prevailing diverse geopolitical, sociocultural and technological issues in this advancing world. It is the result of such contributions to modern thought by contemporary scholarship in these various *tafsir* genres that Muslims are able to navigate their responsibilities under the luminous guidance of the Qur'ān.

CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Contemporary Islamic thought is a complex assortment of ideologies and philosophies. It is a result of a diverse regional, social, cultural and political ambience facing modernity.⁴⁴ Traditionally, Islamic philosophies can be divided into three broad categories according to Muslims' responses to these challenges.⁴⁵ According to Saeed,⁴⁶ these categories are:

1. Muslims who see no real need to change 1,400 years of Islamic tradition.
2. Muslims who view any resistance to modernisation as unwise and counterproductive.
3. Muslims who question key aspects of tradition by ignoring what is irrelevant to modern times but emphasising what is relevant, in order to remain loyal to the Qur'ānic ethos and values.

Regardless of one's view, the challenges of modernity demand revitalised thinking of traditional Islamic worldview,⁴⁷ accepted traditionally or not, for resolving issues such as gender inequality, sexual orientation, environmental degradation, social and political organisation, secularism and the rise of atheism.⁴⁸ Therefore, any reformation of Islamic thought has to be multifaceted due to the evolving intricate modern realities surrounding the issues of democracy, human rights, religious freedom, secular states and individualism. These challenges of modernity demand more than just translating Qur'ānic verses or traditions.⁴⁹

Ibrahim⁵⁰ elaborates five strands of Islamic thought in light of these modern challenges:

1. Neo-modernist reformism – a way of critically challenging the idealistic societal development based on the Western model.
2. Neo-traditionalism and scripturalism – a tendency to hold on to the old ways of life and fear innovation.
3. Socio-political and cultural Islamism – a need by Muslims to embrace the 'authenticity' of the Prophetic time.
4. Liberal humanism that enjoins rationalism, cosmopolitanism and pluralism – advocates humanistic appreciation rather than traditional dogmatism.

⁴⁴ Azhar Ibrahim, "Contemporary Islamic Thought: A Critical Perspective," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 3 (2012), 279, doi: 10.1080/09596410.2012.676781.

⁴⁵ Saeed, *Interpreting the Quran*, 8.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Justine Howe, "Interpreting the Qur'ān in the US: Religious Pluralism, Tradition, and Context," *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies* 18, no. 3 (2016), 37, doi: 10.3366/jqs.2016.0249.

⁴⁸ "Policies and Guidelines for Research Application," International Institute of Islamic Thought.

⁴⁹ Massimo Campanini, "Qur'ānic Hermeneutics and Political Hegemony: Reformation of Islamic Thought," *The Muslim World* 99 (2009), 130, doi:10.1111/j.1478-1913.2009.01257.x.

⁵⁰ Ibrahim, "Contemporary Islamic Thought," 279.

5. Spirituality of a Sufi type – representing a benign and impartial version of Islam.

Though this classification of Islamic thought provides insight into modern Islamic worldview, the dominance of traditionalism in the face of materialism and positivism, globalisation and scientific developments is still a reality.⁵¹ Such a reductionist dogmatic orthodoxy to contemporary realities is not only harmful, but is toxic to the cause of contemporary Islam and Muslim societies. Therefore, revitalised modernistic Qur'anic guidance founded in spiritualism, religious tolerance, pluralism and liberal humanism is required from modern *muffassirun*.

ROLE OF MODERN *TAFASIR* IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Since the advent of Islam, Muslims have conformed their lives to the commands of Allah (swt),⁵² primarily through understanding the message of the Qur'ān and traditions of the Prophet (pbuh), and the present time is no exception. However, modern interpretations of the Qur'ān, keeping *tafsir* tradition and historical context in view, must address the needs of the contemporary Muslims.⁵³ The Qur'ān's focus is to create a viable society that is dynamic and able to adapt itself to the requirements of the time.⁵⁴

Modern Qur'ān scholarship needs to rise above traditional orthodoxy, surpassing essential textualistic interpretations of Qur'ān, to meet the challenges of modernity head on. Recognisably, many efforts have been made to reshape Islamic thought through contemporary Qur'ānic interpretive and exegetic works. One such example is Said Nursi (d. 1960), a Muslim thinker and Turkish scholar, whose acclaimed work in contemporary Islamic thought and spirituality is published in the form of *Risale-i Nur*.⁵⁵ Though Nursi emphasises Qur'ānic interpretation by the Qur'ān (contextualism), the Prophet (pbuh) and Companions, he was not a proponent of reading straight from the text and was against narrow literalism.⁵⁶

Though the socio-political and feminist Qur'ānic *tafsir* genre is a relatively a new phenomenon, at times traversing the normative interpretive Qur'ānic boundaries, these *tafasir* trends have significantly contributed to reshaping Muslim worldview. Traditional and cardinal patriarch social, political and religious values require modernistic transformational reforms. The works of Sayyid Qutb, Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas have arguably provided this much needed socio-political restructuring of contemporary Islamic thought.

By contrast, scientific exegesis already carries a profound societal impact on modern Islamic thought. Examples of this effect are television programs, such as the satellite television channel

⁵¹ Çoruh, "Tradition, Reason, and Qur'ānic Exegesis," 101.

⁵² *Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala* means "the Most Exalted and the Most High."

⁵³ Saeed, *Interpreting the Quran*, 1-2.

⁵⁴ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Minneapolis, MN: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), 25

⁵⁵ Serdar Dogan, "The Influence of Modern Science on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Thinking," *Islamic Sciences* 12, no. 1 (2014): 4, accessed October 30, 2017. <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=118d4dc5-7f88-4067-8b3c-651d91fb70d5%40sessionmgr4010>.

⁵⁶ Çoruh, "Tradition, Reason, and Qur'ānic Exegesis," 86.

Iqra that deliberates on scientific *tafsir* of Qur'ānic passages to provide to the needs of its audience.⁵⁷ Thematic Qur'ānic work by Fazlur Rahman, another well-known scholar, has similarly played a significant role in reshaping Islamic thought through contributions in Qur'ānic contextualisation. In addition, his work in *hādith* criticism, Islamic intellectual traditions and reformation in the fields of Islamic law and ethics is well-known to academic circles.⁵⁸ Other works, such as the *Al-Manar* journal, influenced by Muhammad Abduh's ideas, play a pivotal role in the Muslim world through propagating other reformist views of *Al-Imam* and *al-Munir* in Indonesia, advocating a need for reinterpretation of the Qur'ān and *sunna* in favour of abandoning *taqlid* and purifying Islam.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, many modern *tafsir* scholars, such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Abdul-Kalam Azad (d. 1958), Syed Qutb, Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida, and their modern *tafsir* works have their firm critics.⁶⁰ However, regardless of one's ideological inclinations, the scholastic exegetical work of these modern Muslim scholars must be appreciated as they have certainly left an indelible mark on the reformation and development of contemporary Islamic thought.

CONCLUSION

In essence, Qur'ānic teachings and wisdom have guided Muslim lives over 1,400 years. Muslim scholars throughout history have contextualised the Qur'ānic message to assist Muslims face the challenges of their times. Since modernity has nurtured a unique cultural, political, religious, scientific and technologically advanced social construct, the need for Qur'ānic guidance is now more pressing than ever. The exegetic work from the past based on tradition and reason has a significant role in the formulation of modern trends in *tafsir*; however, the rapid evolution in complex modern Islamic thought requires intricate yet fast-paced Qur'ānic scholarship. Though the Qur'ān has complex Arabic vocabulary and structures, and *ayat* that are both clear and ambiguous, this is only befitting of a Divine revelation that is everlasting. It is fundamental to comprehension of the Qur'ān that one clearly understands the historical background of its revelation.

Modern trends in *tafsir*, from textualist to contextualist, modernist to scientific, socio-political to feminist or simply expounding themes of Qur'ān, address the societal evolution, cultural development and political realities of this modern era, which are based on various categories of Islamic worldview. Despite embracing the traditionalism and scripturalism of last 14 centuries, the *tafsir* work of modern *muffassirin* will have to adapt to the rapidly changing values of socio-religious tolerance, scientific and technological advancements, and rationalistic

⁵⁷ Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'ānic Exegesis: Genesis and Development* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 30.

⁵⁸ Saeed, *The Qur'ān*, 222.

⁵⁹ Campanini, "Qur'ānic Hermetics and Political Hegemony," 125.

⁶⁰ Muzaffar Iqbal, "Muslims and Western Studies of the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in the Contemporary World," *Islam and Science* 8, no. 2 (2010): 120, accessed December 30, 2017, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=bba08f9b-4c7e-4f99-9755-a9afd4e9e740%40sessionmgr4006>.

pluralism. Since contemporary Islamic thought is constantly evolving with these modern worldviews, it is essential for modern Muslim scholarship to continue to contextualise the message of the Qur'ān based on centuries old classical scholarship of Qur'ānic exegetic work. Regardless of strong opposition to its philosophies, it is this intellectual yet modern Islamic discourse that will equip modern Muslims with the necessary tools to embrace and propagate contemporary Islam.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abdul-Raof, Hussein. *Schools of Qur'ānic Exegesis: Genesis and Development*. New York: Routledge, 2010. http://www.centuryassociation.org/download/quranic_course_2016/SCHOOLS%20OF%20QURANIC%20EXEGESIS-RAOF.pdf.
- Abu-Zayd, Nasr. "The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an." *Journal of Comparative Poetics* 23 (2003): 8-47. doi:10.2307/1350075.
- Albayrak, Ismail. "Qur'ānic Narrative and Isra'iliyyat in Western Scholarship and in Classical Exegesis." PhD diss., The University of Leeds, 2000. http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/507/1/uk_bl_ethos_365456.pdf.
- Boullata, Issa J. "Modern Qur'ān Exegesis: A Study of Bint al-Shati's Method." *The Muslim World* 64, no. 2 (1974): 103-113. Accessed December 30, 2017. <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=b56887b8-45f3-4ede-a3e8-fd10106859ec%40sessionmgr4006>.
- Campanini, Massimo. "Qur'ānic Hermeneutics and Political Hegemony: Reformation of Islamic Thought." *The Muslim World* 99 (2009): 124-133. doi:10.1111/j.1478-1913.2009.01257.x.
- Çoruh, Hakan. "Tradition, Reason, and Qur'ānic Exegesis in the Modern Period: The Hermeneutics of Said Nursi." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 28, no. 1 (2007): 85-104. doi: 10.1080/09596410.2017.1280915.
- Dogan, Recep. *Usul al-Tafsir: The Sciences and Methodology of the Qur'ān*. New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2014.
- Dogan, Serdar. "The Influence of Modern Science on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's thinking." *Islamic Sciences* 12, no. 1 (2014): 3-42. Accessed October 30, 2017. <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=118d4dc5-7f88-4067-8b3c-651d91fb70d5%40sessionmgr4010>.
- Hidayatullah, Aysha. "History of Tafsir." In *Feminist Edges of the Qu'ran*, by Aysha Hidayatullah, 1-20. USA: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014. Accessed November 2, 2017. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199359561.003.0002.
- Howe, Justine. "Interpreting the Qur'ān in the US: Religious Pluralism, Tradition, and Context." *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies* 18, no. 3 (2016): 34-69. doi: 10.3366/jqs.2016.0249.
- Ibrahim, Azhar. "Contemporary Islamic Thought: A Critical Perspective." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 3 (2012): 279-294. doi: 10.1080/09596410.2012.676781.
- International Institute of Islamic Thought. "Policies and Guidelines for Research Application." <http://www.iiit.org/policies--guidelines.html>.

- Iqbal, Muzaffar. "Muslims and Western Studies of the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in the Contemporary World." *Islam and Science* 8, no. 2 (2010): 111-128. Accessed December 30, 2017. <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=bba08f9b-4c7e-4f99-9755-a9afd4e9e740%40sessionmgr4006>.
- Khir, Bustami M. "The Qur'ān and Science: The Debate on the Validity of Scientific Interpretations." *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2000): 19–35. www.jstor.org/stable/25727996.
- Mir, Mustansir. "Scientific Exegesis of the Qur'ān – A Viable Project?" *Islam & Science* 2, no. 1 (2004): 1-5. Accessed October 30, 2017. http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/ps/i.do?p=EAIM&sw=w&u=csu_au&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA119627485&asid=0096a7a8058640263d478eb201919bfa.
- Philips, Abu Ameenah. *Usool at-Tafseer: The Methodology of Qur'ānic Interpretation*. Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, n.d. <http://kalamullah.com/Books/Usool%20at-Tafseer.pdf>.
- Pink, Johanna. "Tradition, Authority and Innovation in Contemporary Sunnī Tafsir: Towards a Typology of Qur'ān Commentaries from the Arab World, Indonesia and Turkey." *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies* 12, no. 1-2 (2010): 56-82, doi: 10.3366/jqs.2010.0105.
- Qadhi, A. A. Yasir. *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'aan*. Birmingham: Al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, 1999. <https://www.kalamullah.com/Books/Introduction-to-Sciences-of-theQuran.pdf>.
- Rahman, Fazlur. *Major Themes of the Qur'an*. Minneapolis, MN: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980.
- Saeed, Abdullah. *The Qur'ān: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2008. http://mrofiq.staff.uy.ac.id/files/2013/09/Abdullah_Saeed_Introduction_to_the_Quran.pdf.
- Saeed, Abdullah. *Interpreting the Quran: Towards a Contemporary Approach*. New York: Routledge, 2006. https://www.humanrights.ch/upload/pdf/151105_Interpreting_the_Quran.pdf.
- Sirry, Mun'im. "The Qur'ān and Modern Tafsīr." In *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur'ān and Other Religions*, by Mun'im Sirry, 1-36. USA: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2014. Accessed November 2, 2017. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199359363.003.0002.
- Suyuti, Jalaluddin D. *Al-Itqan fi ulum al-Qur'ān*. Translated by Darul Isha'at. Karachi: Darul Isha'at, 2008. <https://archive.org/details/AlItqanFiUloomIlQuran>.
- Syahnan.Mohammad. "A Study of Syyyid Qutb's Quran Exegesis in Earlier and Later Editions of his *Fi Zilal Al-Quran* with Specific Reference to Selected Themes." PhD diss., McGill University, 1997. http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/R/?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=27972&local_base=GEN01-MCG02.
- Von Denffer, Ahmad. *Ulum al-Qur'ān: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'ān*. Nigeria: The Islamic Foundation, 2011.

- Wielandt, Rotraud. "Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Early Modern and Contemporary." In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, page range. Washington DC: Georgetown University, 2008. Accessed February 11, 2008. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=q3_COM-00059.
- Wood, Kurt. "The Scientific Exegesis of the Qur'ān: A Systematic Look." *MAAS Journal of Islamic Science* 5, no. 2 (1989): 7-22.
- Zebiri, Kate. "The Emergence of Modern Tafsīr." In *Maḥmūd Shalt'ut and Islamic Modernism*, by Kate Zebiri, 1-18. USA: Oxford Scholarship Online, 1993. Accessed November 12, 2017. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198263302.003.0007.