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Tradition, Modernity, and Qur'anic Hermeneutics: Rethinking Tafsir in the Contemporary World

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Abstract

The issue of understanding and interpreting the Qur'an has remained one of the central challenges in Islamic thought throughout history. Classical exegesis generally sought to harmonize the Qur'an with the Sunnah and the inherited scholarly tradition, offering a framework that emphasized continuity and doctrinal stability. In contrast, modern approaches, emerging particularly since the nineteenth century, have increasingly employed reason, contextual interpretation, and contemporary scientific insights in their attempt to render the Qur'an more relevant to present-day concerns. The purpose of this article is to explore the dialectic between tradition and modernity in Qur'anic hermeneutics, with a focus on how interpretative trends have responded to shifting intellectual, social, and political conditions. Methodologically, the study adopts a comparative and analytical approach, combining close textual analysis of representative exegetical works with a historical-contextual reading that situates these innovations within broader cultural transformations. The article examines trends such as Quranism, historicism, scientific exegesis, thematic interpretation, semantics, hermeneutics, and demythologization, highlighting their principal representatives and methodological assumptions. By analyzing these trends, the study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the intellectual claims of modernist tafsir and to assess their epistemological contributions, limitations, and potential for renewing Islamic thought. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to broader debates on authority, authenticity, and the role of scripture in the contemporary Muslim world.

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Introduction

The modern period, spanning from the advent of modernization to the present, is characterized by both positive and negative developments. This era, often defined by transformative societal and intellectual shifts, has evoked mixed reactions, especially in relation to the Qur'an. With the rise of modernization in the Western world, numerous scientific and intellectual disciplines underwent significant changes, a phenomenon that inevitably influenced Islamic sciences as well. Among the Islamic sciences impacted by these shifts is Quranic exegesis (tafsir). In contemporary times, diverse interpretations of the Qur'an have emerged, driven by various factors, often sparking debates and controversies. One central issue in the modern perception and interpretation of the Qur'an is the role of traditional approaches, which historically relied on interpreting the Qur'an alongside the Sunnah. However, the modern era has seen a growing trend of questioning the Sunnah and adopting the principle of "The Qur'an is sufficient for itself."

This approach, often regarded as modernist and at times fundamentalist, challenges the broader Islamic intellectual tradition, including the Sunnah, Hadith, and centuries of scholarly heritage. Advocates of this perspective argue for a direct, independent understanding of the Qur'an, often rejecting traditional frameworks. Although not universally accepted, this method has gained traction among certain segments of the Islamic world, appealing to those seeking an alternative means of engaging with the Qur'an in light of modern realities.

Consequently, this study aims to explore the concept of the modern period, its impact on Islamic thought, and its influence on the perception and interpretation of the Qur'an. Specifically, it examines the Quranic trends that have emerged in the contemporary era, analyzing their underlying principles and implications.

To achieve this, the research is structured into four main sections. The first section briefly discusses the nature of the modern period and the concepts of "modernization" and

"modernism." The second explores the effects of modernization on the Islamic world and the responses of Muslim scholars. The third focuses on the evolution of Quranic interpretation during the modern period, identifying key trends in modern Quranic thought. Finally, the fourth section examines the prominent issues of the modern era, presenting the perspectives of notable Islamic modernist scholars. The originality of this article lies in synthesizing classical and modern perspectives on Qur'anic interpretation, while engaging recent scholarship to show its continued relevance. The study bridges tradition and modernity by analyzing how reformist and contemporary exegetes respond to modern challenges.

The modern era has produced both opportunities and challenges for religious interpretation. In the Islamic world, the Qur'an—the primary source of revelation—has been re-examined in light of shifting intellectual, political, and cultural landscapes. From the Renaissance and Enlightenment in Europe to the colonial and postcolonial encounters in Muslim societies, Qur'anic interpretation has been profoundly shaped by the dynamics of modernity. This section introduces the scope of the study, situates its relevance, and highlights the importance of analyzing modern exegetical movements.

Literature Review

Recent contributions include studies on rhetorical and literary exegesis,¹ contextual interpretation in theological and Sufi traditions,² reflections on reinterpretation of the Qur'an in the 21st century,³ and challenges of translatability.⁴ These highlight the

¹ Abdul-Samad Abdullah, "Fādīl Al-Samarra'ī's Contribution to Literary and Rhetorical Exegesis of the Qur'an", Melbourne: Asia Institute, Arabic and Islamic Studies, The University of Melbourne, VIC 3010, (2022).

² Halim Calis, "The Theoretical Foundations of Contextual Interpretation of the Qur'an in Islamic Theological Schools and Philosophical Sufism", USA: Respect Graduate School, Bethlehem, PA 18017, (2022).

³ Roberto Tottoli, "Re-Interpreting the Qur'an in the 21st Century", Italy: Università di Napoli L'Orientale, 80121 Napoli, (2021).

⁴ Ahd Othman, "Narratives of (un)translatability: the recurrent case of the Qur'an", Academic Journal of Nawroz University (AJNU), Vol.10, No.3, (2021).

multidimensional nature of contemporary Qur'anic scholarship and demonstrate continuity with earlier reformist trends.

A considerable body of scholarship has explored modern Qur'anic interpretation. Scholars such as Ismail Albayrak, Daniel Brown, Mustafa Öztürk, and Mehmet Paçacı have documented how modernist thinkers—ranging from Sayyid Ahmad Khan in India to Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Ridā in Egypt—redefined exegesis in ways that both engaged and challenged Western intellectual currents. The literature also examines critiques by traditionalists, responses to Orientalism, and the broader reformist discourse in the Islamic world. Collectively, this scholarship underscores that the modern engagement with the Qur'an is not monolithic but marked by diverse methodological frameworks.

Discussion/ Findings

Recent scholarship also reveals how modern exegesis extends into rhetoric, hermeneutics, and translation studies. Rhetorical approaches stress the Qur'an's stylistic eloquence,¹ contextual readings frame it within theology and Sufism,² while translation debates foreground the challenges of conveying its meaning across languages.³ These confirm the Qur'an's continued relevance as a site of negotiation between tradition and modernity.

1. The Scope of the Modern Period

The terms “modern” or “contemporary” have long been laden with “exclusive and negative” connotations, as inferred from their usage by the media and intellectual circles. Etymologically, the word “modern” is derived from the old Latin word “modernus”, which, in turn, comes from “modo”, meaning “just now” and therefore these terms signify “the current age in which we live”⁴. However, by the media and intellectual circles, these

¹ Abdullah, “Fādīl Al-Samarra’ī’s Contribution to Literary” 6.

² Calis, “The Theoretical Foundations of Contextual Interpretation of the Qur'an”, 20.

³ Othman, “Narratives of (un)translatability: the recurrent case of the Qur'an”, 27.

⁴ Ahmet Cevizci, *Felsefe Sözlüğü*, (Istanbul: Paradigma, 2002), 715.

terms are continuously used in a manner that elevates the objects or concepts they are associated with, while also denigrating and disregarding those outside of them. Indeed, within the media world, when "modern thought" is mentioned, it is understood to mean "the sole valid and correct thought."

From a linguistic perspective, the term "modern", which means "new" as opposed to the old, originated, developed, and attained its unique characteristics in the West.¹ Accordingly, the "modern period" encompasses the time from the onset of modernization to the present day. The roots of the "modern period", which began in the Western world, extend back to the Renaissance and Reformation movements and have had social, political, and economic impacts on various societies. Initially emerging in the fields of literature and art during the 15th and 16th centuries, the Renaissance and Reformation movements are known as a process of returning to the origins of Christianity (Christian Salafism) and fundamentally questioning religion to establish a new understanding of faith.² This understanding was advanced to a further stage with the contributions of 18th-century Enlightenment philosophers and scientists.

While the renewal initiated by various processes such as the scientific revolution and industrialization in the European world is introduced as modernity,³ the process of spreading Europe-centered knowledge, production, technology, culture, and lifestyle across the world is called "modernization"⁴. Modernization, which takes on different perceptions and emphases in various societies, reflects the desired social levels and statuses.⁵ Modernization consists of three fundamental elements: humanism, secularism, and democracy.⁶ The first of these, humanism, while expressing the perception of human

¹ Inger Furseth, *Modern Sociologists on Society and Religion* (London: 2021) 45.

² Şehmus Demir, *Kur'ân'ın Yeniden Yorumlanması* (İstanbul: İnsan, 2021) 15.

³ Mehmet Akgül, *Modernlik-Modernleşme, Postmodernlik, Sekülerleşme ve Din* (Ankara: Grafiker Press, 2012) 183.

⁴ Akgül, *Modernlik-Modernleşme*, 183.

⁵ Akgül, *Modernlik-Modernleşme*, 184.

⁶ İsmail Albayrak, *Klasik Modernizmde Kur'ân'a Yaklaşımlar* (İstanbul: Ensar, 2010) 18.

beings and their place in life, the second, the relationship between state and religion, and the third, the style of governance, is observed to have shaken and changed social and individual life in every aspect. The most prominent characteristic of this period centered on reason is its abandonment of any transcendent value or sacred principle in favor of what human intellect alone produces.¹ During this period, experimental knowledge, critical approach, and fluency are emphasized, leading to the era of systematic production of science, which in turn fosters industrialization and keeps their social transformations vibrant in different societies.² In short, known as modernization, this era is seen to impact society in every aspect—social, political, and economic. Modernization brings about secularization by prioritizing human reason and experience. Secularization means that life involves not only political and social activities but also encompasses its cultural aspects; it signifies the end of religious determination of symbols and cultural integrity. Accordingly, the process of secularization results in outcomes such as invalidating the order of nature, separating politics from sacredness, and stripping values from their sacred status.³

Among the most prominent characteristics of secularism are the separation of religion and state, preservation of individual autonomy, prioritization of science and rationality, support for cultural and artistic diversity, limitation of influence of religious institutions, enforcement of social and societal laws based on secular principles, removal of religious influence on economy and politics, and upholding⁴ the rule of law. In sociology of religion, secularism is used to indicate that the role and influence of religion in society have weakened or been limited.⁵ This concept describes the diminishing influence of religion on societal institutions, public policies, and individual lives, and the withdrawal of

¹ Furseth, *Modern Sociologists*, 144.

² Nakib Attas, *İslâmî Dünya Görüşü: Genel Bir Çerçeve, İslâm Ve Modernizm* (İstanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Press, 1997) 31.

³ Attas, *İslâmî Dünya Görüşü*, 31.

⁴ İhsan Çapcıoğlu, *Ana Başlıklarıyla Din Sosyolojisi*, ed. Niyasi Akyüz and İhsan Çapcıoğlu. (Ankara: Grafikler Press) 405.

⁵ Furseth, *Modern Sociologists on Society and Religion*, 156.

religious thought and practice into the private sphere. Secularism is often associated with processes of modernization and manifests in various forms across different societies. It has led to profound changes in all religious traditions globally. This situation also applies to the Islamic tradition in the modern era.¹

During this time, it is possible to mention the significant contribution of orientalist, which has particularly influenced the perception of the Qur'an in the Islamic world. The studies conducted by orientalist, alongside their scholarly aims, also reflect religious and political objectives.² These studies are seen to have influenced the emergence of hermeneutics and historicism within Quranic exegesis (Tafsir).

2. The Impact of the Modern Era on the Islamic World

The changes that emerged in the West during the modern period have impacted not only the Islamic world but also every part of the globe. For example, the modern outlook that influenced Christianity has also had an impact on other religions like Judaism. The process of modern thought began to influence Muslim countries around the mid-19th century,³ with its effects being powerful, extensive, and profound across the Islamic world. However, this thought did not occur suddenly but rather gradually. This influence has led to significant changes in political, economic, social, cultural, and religious domains.

This period is considered a critical juncture for Islamic countries in every respect. It is possible to consider the second half of the nineteenth century as the lowest period for the Islamic world. Indeed, the Islamic world began to witness the influence of the West everywhere, and this influence has deeply impacted the social, cultural, political, economic, technological, and religious aspects of Islamic societies.⁴ Therefore, the Islamic world of the nineteenth century entered a historical period shaped by the West,⁵ and recent

¹ Mehmet Paçacı, *Din Bilimleri ve Çağdaş Sorunları Üzerine* (İstanbul: ISAM, 2007) 271.

² Mustafâ Al-Sibâ'î, *Al-Istishrak wa al-Mustashriqin*, (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Islami, 2012) 25-30.

³ Fazlurrahman, *İslâmî Yenilenme Makaleler I*, 72.

⁴ Mehmet Paçacı, "Çağdaş Dönemde Kur'an'a ve Tefsire Ne Oldu", 85-104.

⁵ Mümtaz'er Türköne, *İslâcılığın Doğuşu*, 30, 53.

developments continue to show that this process persists in various fields such as political, cultural, and religious arenas.¹ Therefore, the modern process has created many challenges in the Islamic world and triggered profound transformations in various fields.

Responding to this structure of Western thought has been a significant struggle for the Islamic world. Moreover, it has been a considerable challenge for Muslims to face the debate surrounding their religion, Islam, and the changes imposed on its institutions and internal dynamics. Therefore, there is a close relationship between the foundational models of modern Quranic interpretation and perception, and the perspectives of Muslims who have confronted the journey of modernization in social, political, scientific, and economic aspects.² These modern approaches,³ which directly influence religious sciences, have led to various reactions in the Islamic world in response to the influences of Western thought. Based on the prominent characteristics of the approach developed in opposition to Western culture regarding the perception and interpretation of the Qur'an, it can be said that three groups have emerged:

- The approach of rigid traditionalists, who argue that there is no need for anything that comes from the Western world, views every Western-originated idea as a dangerous and destructive deviation for the Muslim community. When we look at their activities in this group, they have shown no attitude against change in worldly matters, but they have also not given up their rigid traditionalist stance in religious matters.⁴
- The Westernizing/secular reformists, who attribute the backwardness of the Islamic world to religion, and therefore see embracing Western values as the only way to

¹ Albayrak, *Klasik Modernizmde*, 23.

² Albayrak, *Klasik Modernizmde*, 29.

³ Sadık Kılıç, "Mehmet Paçacı'nın tebliğ Müzakeresi", 299-300.

⁴ Cağfer Karadaş, *Çağdaş İslâm Düşünürleri*, p. 31; Muhammad Zahid al-Kawthari (1879–1952), Mustafa Sabri Efendi (d. 1954), along with some members of Al-Azhar in Egypt and a group from the Nadwatul Ulama and the Deobandis in the Indian subcontinent, can also be mentioned in this category.

reach the level of contemporary civilization and progress, aiming to completely abandon religious values.¹ This movement was represented in the Ottoman Empire by Abdullah Cevdet (1869-1932), through his publication of the *İctihad* magazine, and by Kılıçzade Hakkı (1872-1960) with his publications *Hürriyet-i Fikriyye* and *Uhuvvet-i Fikriyye*. In Egypt, it was represented by Shibli Shumayyil (1850-1917) and Farah Antun (d. 1922). These individuals were influenced by movements such as Positivism, Darwinism, Materialism, and Freudism that emerged in the West.²

- Those who believe it is necessary to accept and benefit from the scientific and technical superiority of the Western world. Individuals in this group are partially traditionalist in their adherence³ but forward-looking in their outlook; they are Islamic modernists who believe that pulling the Islamic world out of its current crisis and progressing to the level of civilized nations can only be achieved by freeing themselves from unnecessary, erroneous perceptions, practices, and interpretations in tradition, encompassing a wide geographic spread and varying tones of Islamic reformism, revivalism, renewal, and modernization. These can be classified as Classical Modernists and Contemporary Modernists based on their approaches to the Qur'an and exegesis.⁴

Those in the first group seem to adopt a traditional perspective on approaching the Qur'an. Conservatives prioritize the literal interpretation of the Qur'an, believing it to be the direct revelation of Allah with each word carrying a divine meaning. Therefore, they prefer to interpret verses while preserving their literal meanings. At the same time, they demonstrate adherence to the traditional literature of exegesis, emphasize the central role of hadiths and the Sunnah as the secondary sources for understanding the Qur'an, and show

¹ Karadaş, *Çağdaş İslâm Düşünürleri*, 31.

² Mahmut Kaya, "Felsefe", *DİA*, 2: 319-322.

³ Karadaş, *Çağdaş İslâm Düşünürleri*, 31.

⁴ Fazlurrahman, *İslâmî Yenilenme*, trans. Adil Çiftçi (Ankara: Ankara University Faculty of Theology Press, 2000) 73.

a critical view towards modernist interpretive approaches. However, based on their core beliefs and interpretations, they have not shown a willingness to adopt a stance of change in worldly developments and affairs; yet, they have not abandoned their rigid traditionalist attitudes regarding religious matters. Prominent figures in this group Muhammad Zāhid Hasan al-Kawtharī (d. 1952), along with some members of Al-Azhar in Egypt, and certain scholarly individuals among the Nadwatul Ulama in the Indian subcontinent, as well as some from the Deobandi group.¹

The second group, Westernizing/secular reformists, aim to approach and interpret the Qur'an, as well as other texts, in a manner suitable for the modern world, develop an Islam compatible with reason and science, and emphasize universal moral principles. They advocate for a reinterpretation of religion within the scope of individual freedoms and social justice. This movement has not solidified a secular-based perspective in Islamic countries; instead, they have pursued a nationalist development approach rooted in Western culture.² The reason for this stems from their current condition of being under occupation.³

In the third group, they advocate for renewal and reform movements in Islam, aiming to approach the Qur'an while attempting to balance both traditional teachings and the challenges posed by the modern era. While attempts have been made to associate proponents of modern thought with revivalist efforts in history such as Ibn Taymiyya and Wahhabism,⁴ this movement actually began with the classical modern Islamic approach that emerged in the nineteenth century in response to cultural, economic, digital, and religious developments in the West.⁵ Classical modernism began with Sayyid Ahmad Khan

¹ Abdülhamit Birişik, *Hint Altkutası Düşünce ve Tefsir Ekolleri* (Istanbul: İnsan Press, 2001) 170-177; Mustafa Öztürk, *Çağdaş İslâm Düşüncesi ve Kur'ancılık*, (Ankara: Ankara University Faculty of Theology Press, 2013) 16.

² Mohammed 'Abed Al Jabri, *Reconstruction in Contemporary Arab-Islamic Thought*, trans., Ali Ihsan Pala and Mehmet Şirin Çakır (Istanbul: Düşün Press, 2011) 49.

³ Fazlurrahman, *İslâmî Yenilenme*, 80-84.

⁴ Fazlurrahman, *İslâmî Yenilenme*, 85.

⁵ Öztürk, *Çağdaş İslâm Düşüncesi*, 72.

from India and, around the same time, emerged and continued in the Middle East (Egypt, Türkiye, and Syria) under the leadership of Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1839-1897), Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), and Rashīd Ridā (1865-1935). Prominent figures of contemporary modernism include Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988), Hassan Hanafi (1935-2001), Roger Garaudy (1913-2012), Mohammed Arkoun (1928-2010), and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943-2010).¹

According to this movement, the social, economic, and political backwardness of Muslim societies stems partly from straying away from true Islam and allowing traditions to become the religion, and partly from not living and applying Islam as it should be. Similar to earlier reform movements, they advocate for a return to a purified Islamic essence, free from innovations and erroneous views. This structure, which attempts to create a new system, actually exhibits a selective approach.² Therefore, according to this approach, Islam needs to be comprehensively reformed. Consequently, they strive to address contemporary issues prevalent in the West—such as democracy, secularism, the status of women, tolerance, and pluralism—in a selective or fragmented manner³ Proponents of the modernist approach, on one hand, strive to identify the factors that hinder the development of Islam, while on the other hand, they see it as a potential driving force for progress.

3. Understanding and Interpretation of the Qur`an in the Modern Era

It is evident that there is a close relationship between the perception and interpretation of the Qur`an in the modern era and the journey of modernization. Based on this, it can be stated that the understanding and interpretation of the Qur`an in the modern period have developed around elements such as the foundational role of the Qur`an, the unwavering belief in its truth, and the search for solutions to Western advancements within

¹ Fazlurrahman, *İslâmî Yenilenme*, 80-84.

² Ali Murat İrat, *Modernizmin Erittikleri Sünniler Şiiler ve Aleviler* (Istanbul: Kırmızı Press, 2009) 20-23.

³ Fazlurrahman, *İslâmî Yenilenme*, 91.

the Qur'an. According to Öztürk, the modernist Islamic approach emerged during a time when the Islamic world had collectively fallen into a state of defeat in the face of Western thoughts. This approach has the noble aim of swiftly overcoming various destructions and disintegrations, thereby enabling the Islamic community to regain stability and progress.¹ Based on these thoughts, it is possible to categorize the movements that emerged and acted into two groups: 1. Quranists, 2. Those who take the Qur'an as the primary source but also prefer to benefit from authentic Sunnah and solid data from tradition as additional sources.

According to these movements, Islam has departed from its purity since its revelation and has been invaded by false and erroneous doctrinal thoughts. Returning Islam to its former purity and liberating the Muslim world from its heavy conditions can only be achieved through reason. Salvation will come by applying Islam to the conditions of the modern world and reforming Islamic practice rather than Islamic doctrine. Therefore, in the modern world, the understanding and interpretation of the Qur'an begin with a revival movement, but eventually this movement transforms into a Reform Movement in religion, placing reason above both the Qur'an and the Sunnah, able to critically evaluate them.

This movement, which claims that Islam is only based on the Qur'an, has gained some degree of fame under various names in the contemporary Islamic world. It adopts an approach that emphasizes the accountability of Islamic beliefs and practices transmitted from the past to the present, alongside Islamic sciences and cultural traditions, primarily including the Sunnah. However, this movement can also be characterized as a modernist and at the same time fundamentalist (rooted) tendency that adheres more to marginal behaviors, such as advocating for dissenting views and considering opposition to tradition and consensus as qualities of a valid religious understanding. Furthermore, it appears that they believe in their competence to interpret the Qur'an as they wish and produce the desired interpretations and knowledge from it, based on the perception that the Qur'an can

¹ Öztürk, *Çağdaş İslâm Düşüncesi*, 81.

be understood by every individual without the need for any particular method.¹ Indeed, Sayyid Ahmed Khan, who claimed to introduce a new methodology in the field of Quranic exegesis with his two works titled “Tahhrīr fī usūl al-tafsīr”, which do not encompass the entire Qurʾan in his scientific and intellectual activities, expressed that the Qurʾan is the word of God and contains the most perfect principles, but he also indicated that not all of its contents are religious. His approach, which can be summarized as stating, “There are approximately five hundred verses in the Qurʾan about worldly matters. However, the inclusion of these verses in the Qurʾan does not require their content to be religious”, is heavily influenced by naturalist and positivist thought, and he argued that there is no evidence in the Qurʾan that contradicts natural laws.² In general, Sayyid Ahmed Khan’s approach to the Qurʾan comprises rational and scientific thought, historical and social contexts, ijtihad (independent reasoning) and innovation, the distinction between the Qurʾan and Hadith, educational reform, and a modernist interpretation. His approach has influenced the development of modernization and reform movements in the Islamic world and has made significant contributions to shaping modern Islamic thought.

Sayyid Ahmed Khan seriously questions traditional acceptances regarding Hadith. He argues that due to factors such as the writing down of Hadith two centuries after the death of Prophet Muhammad, their transmission primarily through oral means, especially in terms of their meaning, and significant alterations made by narrators, there should be serious doubt about the authenticity of Hadith. According to Seyyid Ahmed Khan, apart from spiritual Hadiths, there is no Hadith that obligates Muslims. Furthermore, he asserts that the narratives in Hadith, particularly those related to Prophet Muhammad, are highly exaggerated and therefore do not align with the truth of Islam. Furthermore, each sect in Islamic history has fabricated Hadiths to defend and support their own doctrines in connection with the conflicts that have arisen. Therefore, accepting Hadiths as authentic

¹ Suat Mertoğlu, “Doğrudan Doğruya Kurʾan’dan Alıp İlhamı”, *Dîvân Disiplinler Arası Çalışmalar Dergisi* 15:28 (2010): 69-85.

² Öztürk, *Çağdaş İslâm*, 187.

without filtering and questioning them through the lens of the Qur'an and reason is a grave mistake. Even if they are proven to be authentic, many Hadiths are not related to the prophetic mission of Prophet Muhammad. In reality, there is no single authentic and reliable source for the Islamic community other than the Qur'an. Therefore, Muslims must directly understand and interpret the Qur'an themselves. Indeed, it is possible to comprehend and interpret the Qur'an through an open and advanced mind and the tools of linguistics. To bring its timeless messages to light, it is necessary to avoid the exegesis literature based on Hadith and narrations. This is because relying on Hadith and narrations for understanding and interpreting the Qur'an leads to the perception that its timeless messages are confined to a specific and limited historical context.¹ Accordingly, Sayyid Ahmed Khan demonstrates that he rejects the authority of the Sunnah and Hadith by advocating that the Qur'an is the sole source in the field of Islam. The outcome of all these approaches is the assertion that "The Qur'an is sufficient and complete in every aspect". This movement presents the Qur'an as an encyclopedia containing knowledge about all matters, both religious and worldly.

Arkoun critiques the traditional Quranic sciences that are essential for correctly understanding and interpreting the Qur'an,² while Abu Zayd classifies the Qur'an as a cultural product and emphasizes the necessity of forming a new culture.³ Although the representatives of this school agree that the Qur'an is a complete book in every aspect, they differ in their opinions on whether the limited number of verses in the Qur'an can serve as a source for all subsidiary rulings and address the many problems that arise from new developments in practical life. In this regard, Abdullah Chakralawi (d. 1914) states that the Qur'an is capable of addressing every need, both general and specific. Chakralawi, who asserts that "Every matter, whether obligatory, supererogatory, or permitted, is mentioned

¹ Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 44.

² Öztürk, *Çağdaş İslâm*, 187.

³ Fethi Ahmet Polat, *Kur'an'a Yaklaşımlar*, (İstanbul: İz, 2018)146-147.

in the Qur'an", argues that the traditional view of "The Qur'an is concise, and the Hadiths are detailed" is incorrect, as it contradicts the Qur'an's clarity. He supports his argument,¹ with the verse, *"O Prophet! We have sent down to you the Book as a clarification for everything."*²

This movement³ which considers recognizing any source outside the Qur'an in religious matters as shirk (associating partners with God), bases this view on verses such as (ini'l-hukmü illâ lillâh) *"The judgment is only Allah's"*. Starting from the presumption that there is no need for classical exegesis methods, this movement almost entirely disregards these traditional methods. According to the Ahl-i Qur'an, who believe that the Qur'an explains and interprets itself without the need for any other sources, a high degree of knowledge of Arabic is sufficient to correctly understand and interpret the Qur'an. Ghulam Ahmed Pervez (d. 1985), who is considered the most successful figure of the Ahl-i Qur'an school and has conducted numerous studies in the fields of Tafsir and Quranic sciences, states that Prophet Muhammad is the most competent authority in explaining the Qur'an. However, he asserts that the Tafsir narrations attributed to him have lost their authenticity over time. According to him, the hadiths and collections of hadiths that have come down to the present day are not reliable. Additionally, according to Pervez, this approach does not signify "hadith denial: but rather a "purification movement."⁴

In the Indian subcontinent, this movement emerged through the intellectual contributions of **Sayyid Ahmad Khan** (1817-1898) and his "Aligarh" school. It was formalized in 1902 by Abdullah Chakralawi (d. 1914) under the name "Ehlu'z-Zikr ve'l-Kur'an" (People of Remembrance and the Qur'an). In Egypt, one of its prominent representatives, Muhammad Tawfîq Sidqî (d. 1920), personally used the term "Nahnu'l-

¹ Hadim Husayn Ilahibakhsh, *Al-Qur'aniyyun wa Shubuhathuhum Hawla al-Sunnah* (Taif: Dar al-Fikr, 1989) 265-270.

² Qur'an, 16:89.

³ Birişik, *Hint Alkıtası*, 322.

⁴ Birişik, *Hint Alkıtası*, 387.

Kuraniyyun (We are Quranists)”. Ahmed Subhy Mansour, who is still alive, advocates for this school more extremely with the statement “Islam al-Qur`an” (Islam is solely based on the Qur`an).¹

Muhammad Tawfīq Sidqī, in his article titled “el-Islam Huwa al-Qur`an Wahdahu” (Islam is solely based on the Qur`an), published in the Menar magazine and which sparked a debate lasting for four years, argues that there is no other source besides the Qur`an in religious matters. In this regard, he and other Quranists substantiate their views with the verse *"We have neglected nothing in the Book"* (Al-Anam, 6:38).² Muhammad Tawfīq Sidqī argues that mujtahids who claim there isn't sufficient evidence in the Qur`an for religious rulings, and thus struggle with determining judgments through authentic, weak, or fabricated narrations, have made the greatest mistake by neglecting the Qur`an. According to him, these scholars have burdened themselves with additional obligations in matters like prayer, pilgrimage, fasting, and others, even though there is no Quranic equivalent for such mandates. In reality, Allah's religion is exceedingly easy, and these extra burdens lead to unnecessary complexities in religion.³ If Muslims were obligated to act upon the rulings mentioned in the hadiths, then every responsible person would have to abandon everything and spend their days discerning the authenticity of narrations in voluminous hadith collections from morning till evening.⁴ Those who accept the Sunnah as the second source of religion cite the verse *"O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you"*⁵ as evidence regarding obedience to Prophet Muhammad.

According to Daniel W. Brown, the approach towards the Sunnah by Muhammad Tawfīq Sidqī and Muhammad Rashīd Ridā (d. 1935) fundamentally aligns and in some

¹ Öztürk, *Çağdaş İslâm*, 134-137.

² Muhammad Tawfīq Sidqī, *al-Islām huwa al-Qur`ān wahdahu*, (Bayrut: Jadāwil, 2011) 180

³ Sidqī, *El-Islam*, 181.

⁴ Sidqī, *El-Islam*, 183.

⁵ Qur`an, 4:59.

respects even mirrors each other. In his view, these two scholars aim to remove blind imitation, return to original sources, and revive authentic Islam.¹ Additionally, it is known that Muhammad ‘Abduh was reserved about relying on hadiths, particularly showing great caution towards ahad narrations.² One of the main reasons for these views is the concern that narrations (hadiths) limit the timeless messages of the Qur’an to a specific historical context. To correctly grasp and interpret the guidance of the Qur’an, every believer should read the divine word as if it were revealed directly to them. Accordingly, in interpretation (tafsir), there should be minimal reliance on sources other than the Quranic text itself, especially disregarding the linguistic, grammatical, and rhetorical explanations found in classical commentaries which carry legal (fiqh) content. Because the information available in classical literature poses an obstacle to correctly understanding and grasping the Qur’an.³ Therefore, some researchers identify a tendency towards Quranism to a certain extent in the school of thought of Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashīd Ridā.⁴

Based on this, it is possible to outline the fundamental characteristics of the Quranism movement as follows:

1. The belief that the Qur’an is the sole source of Islam, and therefore nothing else outside of it can serve as religious evidence or source;
2. That Sunnah is not a source in religion;
3. They emphasize the necessity of escaping from the accumulated errors in traditional Islamic understanding and grasping Islam in its pure form.⁵

The approach of Quranism has been vehemently defended and promoted by Ahmed Subhy Mansour in Egypt. Having taught at Al-Azhar University in Cairo but later

¹ Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 41.

² Mehmet Zeki İşcan, *Muhammed Abduh’un Dinî ve Siyasî Görüşleri* (İstanbul: Dergah Press, 1998) 261-266.

³ Muhammad Rashīd Ridā, *Tafsir al-Manar*, (Beirut, 2011) 1:12-15.

⁴ İşcan, *Muhammed Abduh*, 42.

⁵ Mehmet Görmez, *Kur’ân İslâmî ve Kitâbü’s-Sünne* (Ankara: Ankara University Faculty of Theology Press, 1998) 11.

dismissed in the 1980s due to his controversial ideas, Mansour relocated to the United States where he established connections with Rashad Khalifa. Today, Ahmed Subhy Mansour is known as one of the prominent figures advocating Quranism. Mansour states on his website, known as ahl-alquran.com, that the concept of 'Ehl-i Qur'an' refers to an approach that attempts to unite everyone under its umbrella. According to him, this approach emphasizes that the Qur'an is the only fundamental source of Islam and that hadiths do not play a role in religious guidance. Since the Qur'an was revealed to explain everything, it encompasses everything that believers need or will need. Indeed, the Qur'an is the divine law by which the last prophet, Muhammad, was entrusted to follow.¹ According to this approach, which resembles a modern version of the early "Kharijites" in interpreting the religious rulings in the light of the Quranic text, many rules and beliefs such as combining prayers with a valid excuse, making up missed prayers, shortening prayers during travel, prohibiting women from leading prayers, reciting the Tashahhud (a specific part of the prayer) and addressing the Prophet in the second person in this supplication, etc., are innovations introduced after the death of Prophet Muhammad through Hadiths, Sunnah, and schools of thought.²

In Islamic culture, it is acknowledged that many unhealthy pieces of information have been passed down from the past to the present. It is believed that for the Islamic world to rise again and awaken society, it must rid itself of this accumulation of knowledge. Therefore, it is necessary to return directly to the Qur'an, which is the main source of Islamic culture, and to try to understand and interpret it using only authentic Hadiths. Scholars known for their 'return to the Qur'an' approach include Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897), Muhammad 'Abduh, and Rashīd Ridā (1865-1935). These individuals' main characteristics include basing their principles on revelation, evaluating other reliable sources and experiences if available, striving to combat Western approaches with a

¹ موقع اهل القرآن | Ahl Alquran (ahl-alquran.com) (10.11.2024)

² Hüseyin Atay, *İslam'ı Yeniden Anlama* (Ankara: Ankara University Faculty of Theology Press, 2001) 56.

rational-based thinking rooted in the principle that revelation does not contradict reason, and attempting to internalize their preferred approaches and data into an Islamic identity. Therefore, this understanding does not aim for a wholesale reform of religion, and while it does not outright reject sources outside the Qur'an, particularly the Sunnah and other evidence, it tends to accept them after evaluating them in the light of the Qur'an. It is possible to trace the origins of these renewal movements to our own cultural heritage¹ but they are largely influenced by Western thought and developed in response to it.²

According to Mağribî, al-Afghānî drew inspiration for the “return to the Qur'an” from Martin Luther, the founder of the Protestant denomination. Luther, who advocated “Sola Scriptura” (Scripture alone), aimed to establish the authority of the Bible directly over the intermediary role of the Church and clergy between believers and God. Additionally, Luther sought to wrest the interpretive authority of the Holy Scriptures from the papacy and distribute this authority to all Christians. Therefore, similar slogans are seen as foregrounding the rejection of the authority of prophets, caliphs, and scholars functioning as leaders in religion, as well as rejecting the authority of the Sunnah and other sources.³

In conclusion, the main claims of these movements, which appear as a phenomenon of the modern era in terms of their complexity, can be summarized as follows:

- (1) The Qur'an is the sole source of religion and religious rulings, and it is sufficient in every respect.
- (2) The Qur'an contains all details, it is a clear and understandable book.

¹ Öztürk, *Çağdaş İslâm*, 19.

² Charles J. Adams, “Fazlurrahman ve Klasik Modernizm”. *İslâm Ve Modernizm: Fazlurrahman Tecrübesi* 13:7 (1997): 86.

³ Bedri Gencer, *İslam'da Modernleşme 1839-1939* (Ankara: Doğu Batı Press, 2008) 615-616.

- (3) Caution should be exercised towards the Sunnah and other accumulated knowledge transmitted from culture. Quranists believe that the Sunnah is not a source of religion.
- (4) They adopt a rational approach towards the Qur'an.
- (5) They emphasize opposition to innovation (bid'ah) and blind imitation.
- (6) The inadequacy of Quranic Sciences and Principles of Tafsir (Uloom al-Qur'an and Usul al-Tafsir) is also among the main topics of modern thinkers.
- (7) They approach topics like abrogation (naskh) in the Qur'an, Quranic stories, the inimitability of the Qur'an (i'jaz al-Qur'an), and Isra'iliyyat with a perspective different from the classical understanding. For instance, after literary analysis, it has been suggested that some Quranic stories have mythological characteristics, differing from classical interpretations.¹
- (8) Sufi/exegetical interpretation has been seriously criticized.
- (9) It is understood that they place importance on verses addressing social, political, and current issues. Their evaluations often focus on topics that are popular in the West, such as equality, freedom, democracy, jihad, polygamy, inheritance, the testimony of women, interest, and certain punishments in the Qur'an.
- (10) A dominant tone of political, ideological, and political background is evident.²

Besides these representatives, other Qur'an researchers in the modern world focus on understanding the Qur'an from scientific and social justice perspectives without completely rejecting the role of hadiths. Among these figures are Muhammad ibn al-Kāsim al-Nuwayrī al-Iskandarānī (d. 1889), Muhammad Mustafa al-Maraghi (d. 1945), Tantāwī Jawharī (d. 1940), Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır (d. 1942), Maurice Bucaille, Farid Esack, and Amina Wadud. In this context, the primary aim of scientific exegesis can be defined as

¹ Öztürk, *Çağdaş İslâm*, 78.

² M. Said Şimşek, *Günümüz Tefsir Problemleri*, (Istanbul: Hikmetevi, 2022) 199-257.

“Demonstrating the inimitability of the Qur`an and proving that it is a book revealed by Allah in the field of ever-advancing positive sciences”.¹ Indeed, M. Bucaille asserts that the religion of Islam is compatible with science and that the Qur`an contains scientific miracles.² However, it is evident that Bucaille`s work is aimed more at demonstrating the scientific accuracy of the Qur`an rather than rejecting hadiths. Esack, on the other hand, advocates for understanding and interpreting the Qur`an in a way that addresses the problems of the modern world. Esack also does not entirely reject hadiths; however, he emphasizes that the Qur`an should be taken as the primary source, and interpretations should be based on principles of social justice and equality.³

3.1. Contemporary Issues and the Interpretation of the Qur`an Gender Equality

In Islam, the issue of gender equality is reflected in the Quranic verses that express all human beings are equal as individuals, regardless of gender and lineage, and that they are valued and rewarded according to their deeds. For this reason, equality has been expressed since early periods of Islam more in the context of being equal before Allah (swt), in responsibility and accountability.

As the interpretation of the Qur`an regarding gender equality in contemporary times involves a deep analysis of the sacred text and its historical and cultural context in which it was revealed. This process involves several important aspects such as: the fundamental principles of gender equality mentioned in the Qur`an,⁴ the role and responsibility of

¹ Abu Hajar Ahmad Umar, *Al-Tafsir al-Ilmi lil-Qur'an fi al-Mizan*, (Beirut: Dar al Madar al Islami, 2000) 64.

² Maurice Bucaille, *La Bible, le Coran et la Science -The Holy Scripture Examined In The Light Of Modern Knowledge*, trans: Alastair D. Pannell. (Paris: Seghers, 1988) 13.

³ Farid Esack, *Qur`an, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective Of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression* (England: Oxford, 1997) 8.

⁴ Qur`an, 49:13.

women in society and in the family,¹ gender equality and justice in marriage and family,² encouragement for education and engagement in various social activities.

Contemporary Islamic scholars have employed various methods to balance the historical context of scriptures with universal principles of justice and equality in modern society. For example, in the classical interpretation of the Quranic verse concerning inheritance, "*Allah instructs you concerning your children: for the male, what is equal to the share of two females.*"³ it is argued that giving a larger portion of inheritance to males is considered fair and reasonable. This is because men bear the financial responsibility for the family's welfare and is seen as a means to ensure and maintain the economic stability of the family, as men are tasked with caring for all members of the family.⁴

Contemporary Islamic scholars in their interpretation of this Quranic verse strive to find a balance between gender equality and justice, arguing that Islamic principles of justice should be adapted to contemporary realities. They emphasize that this rule should be evaluated in the historical and social context of pre-Islamic Arabia, where women were often economically dependent on men. Thus, this provision aimed to ensure that women had sustainable financial support. They suggest that the context may have changed, and therefore, this provision should be reconsidered in light of current social and economic conditions. They argue that the general purpose of the verses is justice and well-being, and that the methods to achieve these goals may change over time.⁵

In this context, Rashīd Ridā emphasizes that the interpretation of some commentators who claim that half of a man's inheritance should be given to a woman as an explanation of their weakness and their exploitation in unprofitable work is a wrong and ugly interpretation. The weakness of women does not require their inheritance share to be

¹ Qur'an, 4:32.

² Qur'an, 4:19.

³ Qur'an, 4:11.

⁴ Abū Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarīr ibn Yazīd al-Tabarī, *Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil Ay al-Qur'an*, 7:459.

⁵ Rashīd Ridā, Muhammad, *Tafsīr al-Manar*, I:480.

reduced; on the contrary, their situation, such as physical weakness, lack of opportunities to earn money, and inability to exploit many opportunities, requires their share to be increased. Therefore, the law of inheritance is not brought according to a fundamental rule and a basis that is rationally understandable.¹ The Holy Qur'an, in many verses, whether for men or women, reminds us that Allah makes distinctions only between those who do good and those who do evil. According to this, the important thing is to establish the fundamental principles within the entirety of the Qur'an, without being confined to words, and to make it universal. Here, the fundamental principle in question is justice and well-being.² According to this, it can be said that the provisions mentioned for women are entirely local elements related to the time and place.

3.2. Scientific and Technological Development

Scientific and technological developments undoubtedly played an existential role in the understanding and interpretation of the Qur'an. With the advancement of science and technology, a broader use of scientific methods in the study of the Qur'an has developed. This includes the use of modern hermeneutics, the study of the historical context and language of the Qur'an, as well as the analysis of the social and cultural context in which the Qur'an was revealed. These methods have enabled contemporary interpreters to highlight new nuances in the understanding of Quranic verses, determine meanings, and apply them in modern times.

They integrate modern sciences such as astronomy, biology, physics, etc., with Quranic landscapes, facilitate the rapid sharing and dissemination of information, and stimulate open discussion regarding the understanding and interpretation of Quranic verses. Indeed, the verse from Surah Al-Anfal states: *"Prepare against them whatever you can of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy and others besides them whom you do not know [but] whom Allah knows. And whatever*

¹ Ridā, *al-Manar*, 1:482.

² Garaudy, R., *Biographie du XX. e e Siecle* (Paris: n.p., 1985) 334-335.

you spend in the cause of Allah will be fully repaid to you, and you will not be wronged in the least”¹ In the explanation of the word "power" in the verse from Surah Al-Anfal, Tantāwī (d. 1940) states that it does not solely refer to material and military strength, but also encompasses intellectual and scientific power that precedes it. According to him, wars that were once fought with stones, iron, or lead are now fought with intellect and ideas. Indeed, Europeans, despite being physically weaker than Asians and Africans, have dominated and subjugated other peoples by advancing in intellectual and scientific knowledge. Therefore, the Almighty Allah, with the phrase *“Prepare against them whatever you can of power”*, commands believers to pay attention to intellectual power in addition to physical strength. Thus, all industrial sciences are made obligatory for believers. In other words, believers are obliged to study all the amazing and wonderful creations of Allah both beneath and above the earth.²

Maurice Bucaille, a French doctor and scientist known for his book “The Bible, the Qur’an and Science” (La Bible, le Coran et la Science), argued that many of the Quranic descriptions align with modern scientific discoveries, especially in fields such as embryology, astronomy, and geology. For example, Maurice Bucaille, in relation to the Quranic verse that speaks about the stages of creation and development of the embryo: *“Then We made the drop of fluid into a clinging clot, then We made the clot into a lump, then We made the lump into bones, then We clothed the bones with flesh; and then We brought it into being as another creation. So blessed be Allah, the best of creators.”³* adds: “This distinction needs to be stressed. The embryo is initially a small mass. At a certain stage in its development, it looks to the naked eye like chewed flesh. The bone structure develops inside this mass in what is called the mesenchyma. The bones that are formed are covered in muscle; the word lahm applies to them. Another verse which requires extremely

¹ Qur’an, 8:60.

² Tantāwī Jawharī, *Al-Jawahir fi Tafsir al-Qur’an*, (Egypt: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi Press, 1928) 5: 66-67.

³ Qur’an, 23:14.

delicate interpretation is the following: Sura 39, verse 6: “(God) fashions you inside the bodies of your mothers, formation after formation, in three (veils of) darkness.” (Zulumat) Modern interpreters of the Qur’an see in this verse the three anatomical layers that protect the infant during gestation: the abdominal wall, the uterus itself and the surrounding of the fetus (placenta, embryonic membranes, amniotic fluid).”¹

Critics of this approach express that the close connection between Quranic verses and modern science could be risky, as scientific discoveries change over time. Furthermore, some argue that this kind of interpretation might mistakenly force the Quranic text to fit scientific discoveries instead of respecting the original meaning and historical context of the verses.² However, for many believers, this interpretation provides a way to understand and strengthen their worthy faith in the Qur’an as a divine book containing valuable knowledge for all times.

Conclusion

The contribution of this study is twofold: first, it consolidates classical and modern perspectives on Qur’anic interpretation into a coherent analysis; second, it incorporates the most recent scholarship (2019–2023) to demonstrate how Qur’anic hermeneutics remain central to addressing current intellectual, social, and ethical issues. The modern period, known for its emergence in Western society and its impact on other societies including the Islamic world, has manifested social, political, and economic influences. These influences can also be observed in the understanding and interpretation of the Qur’an within the Islamic world.

During the turbulent period of the Islamic world in the 19th century, prominent Islamic thinkers from schools aiming to renew and develop Islamic thought had significant impacts on intellectual life, particularly in places like Egypt, Syria, and the Indian subcontinent. These thinkers articulated ideas that aimed to modernize and advance

¹ Bucaille, *La Bible, le Coran et la Science*, 136.

² Muhsin Demirci, *Tefsir Tarihi* (Istanbul: M.Ü. İlahiyat Fakültesi Press, 2014) 284.

Islamic thought. Moreover, the challenges faced by Muslim societies were not limited to military, political, and economic dimensions; they also encompassed cultural and religious aspects. Due to the challenges posed by the West to Muslims in every field, Islamic thinkers have adopted different approaches to enlighten and awaken Muslims. In this regard, various ideas have emerged in the Islamic world, labeled as reformist, revivalist (ihya), renewalist (tecdid), and modernist, aiming to address these challenges. They are seeking solutions to the societal problems brought about by the modern world in the light of the Qur'an. In doing so, they have taken a critical approach to the Sunnah and tradition. From here, the meaning and interpretation of the Qur'an began as an evolution within the Islamic world over time, evolving into an effort to understand and apply the Quranic messages in a manner suitable for the modern context, taking into account social, cultural, scientific, and political developments. From all this, it can be said that the modern interpretation and understanding of the Qur'an is diverse and multidimensional, encompassing approaches that emphasize historical contextualization, universal principles of justice and mercy, reformism, gender equality, and social justice.

During the period of modernization in the Islamic world, especially in the Indian subcontinent and Egypt, there has been a dynamic and systematic emergence of movements that claim Islam is solely based on the Qur'an. The influence of Orientalism undoubtedly played a role in the recent emergence of such trends and discourse. Additionally, there is a tendency that does not completely reject Hadith but advocates for questioning and scrutinizing it. These trends are significant in revitalizing religion and establishing a consistent understanding of the Qur'an. However, it is crucial to acknowledge objections as much as proposals put forward, considering the nature of processes and the emergence of diverse ideas during this period.

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