

TOWARD A HERMENEUTICS OF THE QUR'ÂN¹
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*The Qur'ân is in the Mushaf. It does not speak
by itself; people (humans) speak it out.
'Alî Ibn Abî Tâlib, the fourth Caliph*

This lecture does not claim to present all the aspects of the issue of hermeneutics. It aims only to present a very broad perspective on the possibility of creating a paradigm for understanding and explaining Islam through an interpretative framework of its foundational text, the Qur'ân. My point of departure is the phenomenon that has recently dominated contemporary Islamic discourse, which is the political manipulation of the meaning of Islam. Because the Qur'ân is the foundational text of Islam and considered the only source of knowledge, my lecture will focus on the role of the Qur'ân by reexamining the basic doctrines related to its being conceived of as a divine text. The various dimensions of its definition will be historically and semantically analyzed with reference to classical theological dispute about them. Then the question of how to develop some hermeneutical principles based on its textual boundaries will be raised and some suggestions will be introduced.

Qur'anic Exegeses from Manipulation to Hermeneutics

As an Egyptian Muslim citizen, I have witnessed with great concern and anxiety how the meaning of Islam in contemporary religious discourse has been subject to manipulation. My experience of life encompasses divergent interpretations of Islam from the 1960s and '70s. In the '60s, the dominant religious discourse was that Islam is the religion of social justice; a huge body of literature was produced by the eminent scholars who belong to the official Islamic institution in Egypt, the al-Azhar University, dealing with two major

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topics: Islam and Socialism and Islam and Arab nationalism. Besides propagating the social and the national aspects of Islam, the concept of *jihād* was also propagated, urging us to fight against the threat of imperialism and Zionism. In the '70s, with the adoption of the "open-door economic policy", Islam became the religion that guarded private property. This new trend of discourse went so far that the "law of land reform" (1954), which had been highly esteemed as very Islamic, was reinterpreted as anti-Islamic. The millions of Egyptian farmers who had become owners of the land they cultivate were forced to return the land to the original owners. More than that, the law of inheritance tax was also reinterpreted as violating the norms of *shari'a* and, therefore, was abolished. With the initiation of the peace process with Israel in 1978, Islam became the religion of peace.

The question that started to worry me from the very beginning of my academic career was: Is it possible to escape the impact of the pragmatic exegesis of the Qur'ân, and if so, how? In my first book (1982)², I started to examine the different methods of interpretation applied to the text of Qur'ân in traditional Islamic theology. I investigated the emergent concept of "metaphor" that the rationalist school of theology, known as the Mu'tazilites, introduced to Arabic rhetoric at the beginning of the 9th century in their effort to explain the anthropomorphic images of God in the Qur'ân, on the one hand, and the verses that seem to support a doctrine of "predestination", on the other. The Mu'tazilites employed the concept of "metaphor" as a linguistic tool to interpret those types of verses of the Qur'ân that they considered "ambiguous". This forged a powerful instrument to interpret the Qur'anic text in accordance with the Mu'tazilites' transcendentalist standards: where it suited their ideas, the Qur'anic text was labeled "clear" and, therefore, not in need of metaphorical interpretation; where it did not, it was considered "ambiguous" and interpreted metaphorically. The main conclusion reached after comparing both the Mu'tazilites' and the anti-Mu'tazilites' discourses was that the Qur'ân was the site of a fierce intellectual and political battle. That battle was sited at one of the most important junctures of the structure of the Qur'anic text (Qur'ân, 3:7). Both the Mu'tazilites and their opponents agree on the principle that the Qur'ân includes ambiguous verses as well as clear verses, and that the "clear" should furnish the norms for reducing the ambiguity of the ambiguous. However, they disagree when it comes to practical implementation; thus, the controversy not only

² *Al-Ittijâh al-'aqlî fî al-tafsîr: dirâsah fî qadiyat al-majâz fî al-Qur'ân 'inda al-mu'tazila*. Beirut: Dâr âl-tanwîr li al-tibâ'a wa al-nashr, 1982.

revolves around the meaning of the Qur'ân, it also involves its structure. What the Mu'tazilites considered "clear", their opponents considered "ambiguous" and *vice versa*.

Such intellectual disputes about the structure and the meaning of the Qur'ân constituted the first hermeneutical principle as the dichotomy between clarity and ambiguity. It is important to mention that Mu'tazilism did not start as an intellectual exercise, but rather evolved out of the socio-political as well as theological struggle between the modern and the traditional powers. The idea of divine predetermination (*jabr* or *qadar*), for example, was the theological expression of *Ummayyad* absolute political rule. The Mu'tazilites' insistence on human free will – or at least on the illegitimacy of making God responsible for human sin – was a means of combating the *Ummayyads*. Another reason for the Mu'tazilites' strong rationalistic stance was that they were forced to defend Islam against other religions, against Christian polemicists in particular. Their argument had to be rationally sound to be accepted.

The intellectual opponents of the Mu'tazilites were the traditionalists, who upheld the literal interpretation of all Qur'anic verses, to the extent that they affirmed the existential reality of all divine attributes, all eschatological images, and even the idea that God can be seen by human eyes. The Mu'tazilites objected to their idea that the literal interpretation of the holy text was a religious duty, regarding this as an obstacle to the fulfillment of mankind's destiny. They believed that God Himself imposed on mankind the duty to acquire real knowledge by using his rational faculties.

Ibn Rushd (Averroes), a great Muslim philosopher who contributed to Western enlightenment through his Arabic works as well as through his translations of and commentaries on Aristotle, further developed the Mu'tazilite system in order to open up the meaning of the Text to the findings of philosophy. According to Averroes, the Qur'ân includes three modes of semantic expression. The first, and most common, is the outward poetic (*khâtâbi*) form addressing the masses; the second is the argumentative (*jadali*) form intended to address the theologians; the third and most refined is the philosophical (*burhânî*) form intended for the philosophers. This theory was further developed by Muhyî-Al-Dîn Ibn 'Arabî, which development was the topic of my second book (1983)³. In this book I embarked on investigating the hermeneutics of the Qur'ân within the context of Sufism (mysticism), which is supposedly void of political interests. Muhyî al-Dîn Ibn 'Arabî, the great Andalu-

³ *Falsafat al-ta'wil: dirasah fi ta'wil al-Qur'ân 'inda muhyî al-dîn ibn 'arabi*. Beirut: Dâr âl-tanwîr li al-tibâ'a wa al-nashr, 1983.

sian Sufi who was born in Spain, wrote his greatest treatise in Mecca (The Meccan Revelation – al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya) and died in Syria (638 /1279). Ibn 'Arabî's hermeneutical project constituted an attempt to integrate all knowledge existing up to his time (from Plato to Averroes) in the Qur'ân; he wanted to turn Islam into an open-ended project, one that could reconcile itself with, and indeed include, Christianity, Judaism, and all other religions. Islam has to be a religion of comprehensive love, as Ibn 'Arabî terms it in his poetry. The hermeneutics of the Sufi depends basically on the notion of four semantic levels applicable to every verse: the outward (*zâhir*), the inward (*bâtin*), the limitation (*hadd*), and the upward (*matla'*). This multi-semantic structure of the Qur'ân enabled the Sufis to avoid the dichotomy of clarity and ambiguity employed by the theologians, because every level leads to the upper and contains the lower with no contradiction or dichotomy. It also keeps the Qur'ân accessible to all the believers, regardless of their education or their intellectual capacity.

Nevertheless, Ibn 'Arabî's project was very much a product of Andalusian society, based on linguistic, cultural, and ethnic pluralism – with Provençal spoken in the streets, Latin in the Church, classical Arabic in the divans, and a multitude of local dialects elsewhere. It was a project of reconciliation between all these elements and groups. Needless to say that, in the end, Ibn 'Arabî attempted to formulate a utopia of his own, a formula that gained impetus from the increasing tension and conflict within his own society, on the one hand, and in the socio-political historical context of the Muslim world during his lifetime, on the other.

I thus became aware that the interpretation of the Qur'ân was not and has never been an innocent maneuver void of socio-political and cultural impact. More than that, it sometimes exceeds that impact to become a deliberate political manipulation of the meaning of the religious text. I therefore felt it was necessary to investigate the very concept of the "text". The result of this investigation was my third book (1990). It was my intention that, before dealing with the questions of interpretation, one must first define the nature of the text to be interpreted and must examine the laws that govern the study of that text. If religious texts, which profoundly influence social and cultural life, are placed at the mercy of the ideology of the interpreter without defining the extent to which the text lends itself to exegesis and the limits of meaning it offers, the text could be forced to speak any ideology whatsoever. What I am going to discuss in the following parts of my lecture is my recent progress in research on the basic ideas I started to develop in the aforementioned book.

What is the Qur'ân?

The Qur'ân is the word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in plain Arabic language over the span of 23 years. This is the undisputed definition accepted by all Muslims through the history of Islamic thought, regardless of their theological and cultural differences. In this definition we can distinguish three aspects, the word of God *kalâm Allâh*, the Qur'ân, and revelation or inspiration *wahy*. Are these three concepts lexically and semantically identical? Do they denote or connote the same meaning? It seems that they have been dealt with as synonyms in modern Islamic discourse, while in classical theology there was a certain awareness of the different meaning of each, which is also reflected in the qur'anic usage.

What is the Word of God?

Is it the content of the message expressed in human language? Or does it include language as an essential component? The most obvious qur'anic expression is in chapter 18:109 and 31:27, where it is emphasized that the Words of Allah are infinite and inexhaustible. Even if all the trees on earth were pens, all the oceans ink, with seven oceans behind them to add to its supply, the Word of God could not possibly be exhausted. Therefore, if the Word of God is impossible to confine, whereas the Qur'ân as a text is limited in extent, the Qur'ân should represent only one specific manifestation of the Word of God.

Although the Qur'ân refers to itself in many passages as the speech of God *kalâm Allâh*, which seems to confirm the identification of the Word of God with the Qur'ân, perceiving God as a speaker creates many complicated theological difficulties, which were in fact vibrantly discussed as early as the 8th century, the second century in the history of Islam. The issue was discussed and debated extensively by Muslim theologians and led to what is known as “the inquisition of the creation of the Qur'ân”, *mihnat khalq al-Qur'ân*. The discussion centered on the question whether the Qur'ân was eternal or created. The Mu'tazilites in general insisted on the createdness of the Qur'ân in order to save the eternal unity of God from having a second eternal existence beside it. But the Hanbalites refused to ascribe the attribute “createdness” to the Word of God. The political authority initially favored the doctrine of the “created Qur'ân”. So the followers of the “eternal Qur'ân” doctrine were persecuted. When the ideology of the Caliph changed and favored the Hanbalite

trend, the adherents of the Created Qur'ân had to suffer. The dispute was politically dissolved in favor of the "Orthodoxy" against the "Heterodoxy".

The Ash'arites later developed a theory that differentiated between the eternal Word of God, on the one hand, and its manifestation in human recitation, on the other hand, between the verbal "recitation" and the "recited" content. They ascribed eternity to the Word of God itself, whereas createdness was ascribed to its human verbal vocalization. But the doctrine of the "eternity of the Qur'ân" has been the dominant doctrine in Islamic theology. The parallel issue in the history of Christian theology took another direction. The reason for this, according to Van Ess, is that the notion of eternal speech was an extremist doctrine in Christianity, "where theology worked on the basis of four translated Gospels".

What is Revelation, *Wahy*?

It is the process of communication, the channel through which the Word of God was revealed to Muhammad. Etymologically, the linguistic root of the Arabic word means "mysterious non-verbal communication". Its usage in pre-Islamic literature, as well as in the Qur'ân, demonstrates this. It refers to a form of communication involving two beings of different grades of existence.⁴ In the process of revealing the Qur'ân, however, three are involved, i.e., God, the Archangel as mediator, and the Prophet as recipient. Although the connotation of "mysterious non-verbal communication" is not absolutely removed, the existence of a mediator put the concept of non-verbal communication under theological challenge.

The Qur'ân always indicates that *wahy* has been the channel through which previous scriptures were revealed. *Wahy*, therefore, cannot be considered identical to the Qur'ân, as is claimed by Muslim as well as non-Muslim scholars;⁵ it is the channel through which the Word of God in general is revealed to humans. The Qur'ân clearly indicates that there are only three possible channels of communication between God and man: either "by inspiration, or from behind a veil or by sending a messenger to reveal (by inspiration) by God's permission what He wills" (42:51).

⁴ Cf. Izutsu, Toshihiko. "Revelation as a Linguistic Concept in Islam." *In Studies in Medieval Thought*, vol. V. Tokyo: The Japanese Society of Medieval Philosophy, 1962, 122–167.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 138. He starts by identifying "revelation" with concrete speech behavior (*kalâm*) as an essential condition for his analysis, thus confusing different qur'anic terms.

The first channel, inspiration, is obviously a qur'anic form of non-verbal communication. The second channel, from behind a veil, is the channel through which God spoke to Moses from behind the burning bush and/or behind the mountain. But again, the question about "how" God spoke to Moses raised similar difficulties and was present at the heart of the discussion about the Qur'ân, already referred to. The third channel is believed to be the channel of the qur'anic revelation, where the mission of the mediator, Gabriel, was to communicate God's speech, *kalâm Allâh*, to Muhammad by *wahy*, non-verbal communication. The conclusion then should be that, in the qur'anic usage, *wahy* is not semantically synonymous with God's speech.

Does God Speak Arabic?

Third, what does it signify when the Qur'ân repeatedly emphasizes that it is revealed in plain Arabic, *bi-lisânin 'arabiyyin mubîn*? According to the Qur'ân, God has chosen Prophet Muhammad to be His messenger in order to convey His message to the people, which introduces the concept of *risâla*, message, obviously denoting the "content" of the Qur'ân as separate from its linguistic expression. As a message, Islam, according to the Qur'ân, is not a new religion brought down to Muhammad to preach to the Arabs, but essentially the same message preached by all the prophets since the creation of the world. (Qur'ân, 42:13 and 4:163–164.) It is, therefore, inferred that all the prophets are considered Muslims in the Qur'ân. (Qur'ân, 6:163; 7:143; 10:72, 84, 90; 27:31, 38, 42, 91; 39:12; 46:15, etc.) In accordance with the lexical meaning of the word, Islam is absolute self-submission to God, the Lord of the universe (2:112).

Though universal and for all humans, as it is claimed, the qur'anic message is expressed in plain Arabic language, simply because God always considers the language of the people to whom a messenger is sent. "We never sent a messenger but with the language of his people, that he might make it clear for them." (14:4) It is then not likely that the Qur'ân presents literally and exclusively the Word of God. According to this assumption, the Word of God would be limited to the Qur'ân only, thus excluding previous scriptures from the same right of presenting the Word of God in their own original languages. This will automatically lead one to hold Arabic to be a sacred language, as has been in fact been done, at least by the Arab Muslims, a development in Islamic thought that Izutsu was unable to understand or to explain.

The Qur'ân is then one manifestation of the Word of God given through inspiration to the Prophet Muhammad through the mediation of the archangel Gabriel. Thus, we can safely distinguish between three aspects of the Qur'ân, namely its content, its language, and its structure. There should not be any disagreement that the divinity of the Qur'ân is confined to its source. The content, however, is strongly correlated with the linguistic structure, which is culturally and historically determined. In other words, if the divine content of God's Word has been expressed in human language, it is the domain of language that represents the essential human dimension of all scriptures in general and the Qur'ân in particular.

From Orality to Textuality: Canonization

It should be obvious by now that the Qur'ân was originally orally transmitted. It is explained everywhere in Islamic literature that the Holy Spirit first used to convey or inspire some verses to the Prophet during each session of revelation and that the Prophet used to recite them afterwards to his companions.

These verses, or passages, were integrated in chapters and were partially committed to some sort of written form, according to Islamic sources. It was after the Prophet's death that these chapters were collected, then arranged, and finally written down in a book, *al-mushaf*.

But in spite of being committed to written form, the Qur'ân was never dealt with as a written text in the daily life of the early Muslim community. It had to wait till the age of printing to be considered as such. Even now, with the Qur'ân being a printed text, what is more important for every Muslim is the memorization of the Qur'ân by heart and the capability to recite it according to the classical principles of recitation, *tajwîd*.

The human dimension is more obvious when we take into consideration these two facts: first, that the Qur'ân was revealed in installments, *munajjam*, and, second, that the process of canonization depended on human maneuver. Being revealed portion by portion, the Qur'ân responded to community needs and demands. Providing answers to community questions, much of the legal aspect of the Qur'ân was gradually articulated, thus reflecting the dialectical relationship between God's Word and human interest.

The other aspect of the human impact on God's Word can be seen in the process of canonization, which was not limited to the application of the diacritical points and the vowel signs to the originally unreadable text produced during the time of the third caliph and

known as the Uthmanic *mushaf*. The canonization of the Qur'ân also included the rearrangement of the qur'anic verses and chapters in their present order, which is not the same as chronological order. Since the Qur'ân represents a sphere of communication between God and man, the two dimensions of divinity and humanity were the working dynamics in the process of canonizing the Qur'ân. Rearranging the verses and chapters of the Qur'ân in a non-chronological order could be re-examined in the light of this presupposition. It was, after all, a process of integrating texts, which were revealed on different historical occasions, in one text. It was, in other words, a process of transforming the recited Qur'ân into a readable book, *ḳitâb*, following the development expressed in the Qur'ân itself.

It is important here to refer to the impact of such rearrangement in partially demolishing the historical and occasional context of every portion of revelation, thus elevating its semantic structure above the original reality from which it emerged. Nevertheless, the original content of the Word of God in its unknown absoluteness – I mean before it became expressed in Arabic – is divine and sacred, while its manifested expression is neither sacred nor divine. Whether one follows the Mu'tazilite doctrine of the "creation of the Qur'ân" or prefers the Ash'arite doctrine, the conclusion is the same: the Qur'ân we read and interpret is by no means identical with the eternal Word of God.

Toward Qur'anic Hermeneutics

The Qur'ân is a "message" revealed by God to man through the Prophet Muhammad, who is the Messenger of God and who is human himself. The Qur'ân is very clear about this. A message represents a communicative link between a sender and a receiver through a code or linguistic system. Because the sender of the Qur'ân cannot be the object of scientific inquiry, the analysis of the contextual reality and culture of the qur'anic text is the only avenue to detect the message. Reality is the socio-political conditions of the actions of those who were addressed by the text and of the first receiver of the text, the Prophet and Messenger of God. Culture, on the other hand, is the world of conceptions, which are embodied in the language, the same language in which the Qur'ân is also embodied. In this sense, to begin with the contextual cultural reality in analyzing the qur'anic text is in fact to start with empirical facts.

The analysis of such facts can lead to a scientific understanding of the Qur'ân. It should be very obvious and clearly understood and needs no further proof to say that the Qur'ân is a cultural product. However, the matter is more complicated, because being a cultural

product is only one side of the text, the side of its emergence as a text. The other side is that the Qur'ân has become a producer of a new culture. In other words, the Qur'ân first emerged as a text from within a specific socio-cultural reality embodied in a specific linguistic system, Arabic, and, second, a new culture gradually emerged out of it. The fact that the qur'ânic text was understood and taken to heart has had irreversible consequences for its culture. Speaking about the Qur'ân as a message means that, although embodied in the Arabic linguistic system, the qur'anic text has its own peculiarities. As a unique text, it employed some special linguistic encoding dynamics to convey its specific message.

It will always be necessary, however, to analyze and interpret the Qur'ân within the contextual background in which it originated. In other words, the message of Islam could not have had any effect if the people who first received it could not have understood it; they must have understood it within their socio-cultural context; and by their understanding and application of it, their society changed. The understanding of the first Muslim generation and the generations to follow should not be considered by any means final or absolute. The specific linguistic encoding dynamics of the qur'ânic text always allow an endless process of decoding. In this process, the contextual socio-cultural meaning should not be ignored or simplified, because this "meaning" is so vital in indicating the direction of the "new" message of the text. Having the direction will facilitate moving from the "meaning" to its "significance" in the present socio-cultural context. It will also enable the interpreter to correctly and efficiently extract the "historical" and "temporal", which carry no significance in the present context. Since interpretation is the other inseparable side of the text, the Qur'ân, being decoded in the light of its historical, cultural, and linguistic context, has to be re-coded into the code of the cultural and linguistic context of the interpreter. In other words, the deep structure of the Qur'ân must be reconstructed from the surface structure. Subsequently, the deep structure must be rewritten in another surface structure, which is that of today.

This entails an interpretive diversity, because the endless process of interpretation and re-interpretation cannot but differ in time. This is necessary, because otherwise the message degenerates and the Qur'ân will be always subject to political and pragmatic manipulation. Since the message of Islam is believed to be valid for all humankind, regardless of time and space, diversity of interpretation is inevitable. The validity or the invalidity of a specific interpretation is to be judged according to certain norms. The first is the awareness of the difference between the original contextual "meaning", which is almost fixed because of its historicity, and the "significance", which is changeable. The second norm is the

necessity for the significance to be strongly related and rationally connected to the meaning. A valid interpretation is only possible as long as it does not violate these two methodological norms in order to jump to some “desired” ideological conclusions. If the text is historical though originally divine, its interpretation is absolutely human.