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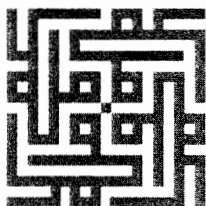
OF THE

Modern Islamic World

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TAFSĪR. Exegesis of the Qur'ān is known as *tafsīr*. The focus in this article will be on Sunnī *tafsīr*, but Shī'ī *tafsīr* will also be discussed.

The Qur'ān, regarded as the word of God, needed

tafsīr—elucidation, explanation, interpretation, or commentary—for an obvious reason: it had to be understood clearly and fully so that its commandments could be carried out with the conviction that the will of God had been done. Equally, however, as God's word the Qur'ān seemed to discourage attempts at *tafsīr,* for two different but complementary reasons. First, coming as it did from God, the Qur'ān must be assumed to be clear in its import, thus obviating the need for exposition. Second, how could finite human intelligence claim to be able to discover the true meanings of the texts of a book that emanated from the possessor of infinite wisdom? The case of the prophet Muḥammad was different: he had brought the Qur'ān, and, having been appointed by God as prophet, he could explain the sacred text authoritatively. For these reasons there was in the very early years of Islam a reluctance on the part of Muslims to interpret the Qur'ān but at the same time an eagerness to know and transmit the interpretations attributed to the Prophet in the first instance and to his companions in the second—the assumption being that these latter interpretations too went back directly or indirectly to the Prophet himself.

Only a very small amount of *tafsīr* is ascribed to the Prophet and his companions, and that usually in the form of brief explanations in response to questions asked. But this was hardly sufficient to satisfy the needs of a community that was not only growing apace in numbers but also was coming into contact with culture and traditions very different from those of Arabia. A host of new problems, both conceptual and practical, were arising and calling for solution. Since the Qur'ān was the fundamental text of Islam, it was natural for Muslims to look in it for answers to new problems; thus a need for more comprehensive *tafsīr* was felt.

Soon after the age of the companions, in the age of the successors (those who are said to have met the companions), the so-called schools—Meccan, Medinan, and Iraqi—of *tafsīr* came into existence. As in jurisprudence, so in *tafsīr* Iraq, as against Mecca and Medina, came to be known for a *ra'y*-based approach, that is, an approach that relied on considered personal judgment and not simply on reports transmitted from the Prophet and his companions through dependable channels. The spread of Jewish apocryphal reports was distinctive of the age of the successors. Until then, *tafsīr* on the whole had been transmitted orally and had not been compiled and written down. Furthermore, the discipline of *tafsīr* was not yet clearly distinguishable from that of *ḥadīth*

(prophetic tradition) but was rather a special domain within *ḥadīth*. In fact, it was the *muḥaddithūn* ("scholars of *ḥadīth*"; sg., *muḥaddith*) whose collections of *aḥādīth* (pl. of *ḥadīth,* "report"), which included *tafsīr* reports, paved the way for the development of an independent discipline of *tafsīr.* This development led to the emergence of major *mufassirūn* (pl. of *mufassir,* "*tafsīr* scholar") and their works, a topic we shall take up later. The scope of *tafsīr* meanwhile continued to widen as new problems and issues arose. At this point it will be useful to take a synoptic view of the issues and problems that have arisen in the history of *tafsīr.*

Typology of Issues. Three broad areas can be distinguished: linguistic, juristic, and theological. A few points should be noted before going into detail. First, the following typology does not imply that the different categories are historically sequential. Second, not all the problems within any single category arose at one time, although the questions become noticeably more complex over time. Third, several issues fall into more than one category.

In the beginning, questions of vocabulary and syntax are raised: What is the meaning of a given Qur'ānic word? Which of the several possible meanings of a word is intended in a given context? What is the case-ending of a word? Is there any preposing *(taqdīm)* or postposing *(ta'khīr)* in a sentence? Then questions involving rhetoric are asked: Does the imperative always signify a command or does it sometimes signify permission or option as well? How is repetition to be explained in a perfect book from a perfect God? The issue of literal and nonliteral meanings also receives attention.

The law early acquired a prominent position in the hierarchy of Islamic sciences, and the preoccupation of scholars with legal issues had its impact on *tafsīr.* Among the first issues to be raised was that of abrogation *(naskh).* Since the Qur'ān is made up of revelations that came to Muḥammad over a period of about twenty-three years, certain injunctions were understandably meant to be temporary and were repealed by subsequent ones. The abrogated *(mansūkh)* and the abrogating *(nā-sikh)* verses thus had to be identified. Then a distinction was made between the general *('āmm)* and the specific *khāṣṣ)* application of an injunction or command. For example, surah 3.97 says that it is incumbent on "people" to perform the pilgrimage to the Ka'bah. While "people" is general, obviously Muslims are meant; more specifically, only those adult Muslims are meant who are physically able to perform the pilgrimage and have the

financial means to undertake the journey. A sophisticated basis for interpreting the Qur'ān from a legal viewpoint was laid down through a fourfold division of the meanings of the text into significative ('ibārah), implicative (ishārah), analogical (dalālah), and assumptive (iqtiḍā'), discussed below.

Several Qur'ānic verses speak of God's hand and face and of his being seated on his throne. Interpreting these verses literally smacked of anthropomorphism, but interpreting them nonliterally seemed to constitute a departure from the Qur'ānic text. A solution considered plausible by many was to interpret the verses literally but with the addition of the rider, "it is not known precisely in what manner." Another issue dealt with was that of the sinlessness or infallibility ('iṣmah) of the prophets; verses involving certain acts of some prophets were explained with reference to this notion. One such instance is Joseph's relations with Potiphar's wife, for surah 12.24 seems to indicate that Joseph and Potiphar's wife both "made for each other," but that Joseph, upon seeing a sign from God, stopped short of committing adultery. A fundamental issue was that of free will and determinism: different verses seemed to support either the predestinarian or the libertarian view, and reconciling the two possible interpretations was a major preoccupation of the mufassirūn.

Principles. The multiplicity and diversity of issues, and the variety of perspectives and approaches brought to bear on them, led to the systematization of the discipline of tafsīr. Again it must be emphasized that the systematization did not wait until after all issues had arisen but occurred over a period of time, beginning quite early and leading to the formulation of the principles of tafsīr among other developments. A convenient way to cover this subject is by glancing at the medieval scholar Ibn Taymīyah's Muqaddimah fī uṣūl al-tafsīr (Introduction to the Principles of Tafsīr). Ibn Taymīyah (d. 1328) lists the following as the uṣūl ("sources" or "principles," translated here by the latter):

tafsīr of the Qur'ān by the Qur'ān
tafsīr of the Qur'ān by the sunnah of Muḥammad
tafsīr of the Qur'ān by reports from the companions
   of Muḥammad
tafsīr of the Qur'ān by the successors

It is obvious that Ibn Taymīyah puts a high premium on tafsīr that is provided by the Prophet himself or in some sense goes back to him, for tafsīr by the companions (the "occasions of revelation," asbāb al-nuzūl, are apparently subsumed by Ibn Taymīyah under tafsīr by the companions) or the successors acquires its authority through its putative connection with the Prophet. Knowledge of the Arabic language—including grammar, rhetoric, and the literary (especially pre-Islamic) tradition—is assumed by Ibn Taymīyah. This approach is heavily weighted in favor of what is known as tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr ("received tafsīr," transmitted from the early times of Islam, beginning with the Prophet's age). It evinces a profound distrust of tafsīr bi-al-ra'y ("tafsīr by opinion," arrived at through personal reflection or independent rational thinking), and a number of reports attributed to the Prophet or other early authorities condemn the latter. Ibn Taymīyah too rejects tafsīr bi-al-ra'y out of hand.

We shall have more to say about tafsīr bi-al-ra'y later. Here it should be pointed out that although the traditionally listed principles of tafsīr appear to be rather simplistic, the application of these principles in practice not infrequently takes a sophisticated form. Two examples, one from the theological realm and the other (in fact a set of examples) from the juristic, are helpful. In both examples (more exclusively in the first) the principle of interpretation of the Qur'ān by the Qur'ān is employed.

Surah 12.24, as noted above, speaks of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in a certain situation. The text seems to suggest that, like Potiphar's wife, Joseph too was sexually aroused. Coming to the defense of the notion of prophetic 'iṣmah, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1150–1210) constructs an elaborate argument to prove that this is impossible, basing it on an analysis of all those Qur'ānic texts that, in his view, are relevant to the issue. He shows that not only does Joseph claim his innocence (12.26) and prefer to go to prison rather than succumb to temptation (12.33), but Potiphar's wife admits in front of other Egyptian noblewomen (12.32) and then in front of the king (12.51) that Joseph refused to comply with her demands; Potiphar himself accuses his wife, exonerating Joseph (28); an independent witness supports Joseph (2.26); God himself declares that Joseph was one of his chosen men and that he warded off evil from Joseph (24); and Iblīs (Satan) admits that he has no control over the chosen men of God (15.40). In view of such overwhelming evidence from within the Qur'ān, Rāzī concludes, it is impossible to interpret the words, "and he [Joseph], too, made for her" (12.24), to mean that Joseph too had become sexually excited.

The conceptual apparatus developed by Muslim legal

scholars for the interpretation of Islamic texts included the fourfold division of meanings mentioned above. The purpose of this division, which was made by the Ḥanafī school and to which there is a Shāfiʿī counterpart, was to extend the application of the texts through logical deduction. The significative meaning of a Qurʾānic verse is the obvious and primarily intended meaning. The implicative meaning is that which may not be primarily intended but which, reflection will show, is implied by the text. For example, surah 46.15 says that the combined period of pregnancy and weaning is thirty months. Since surah 31.14 says that the period of weaning is two years, it follows, as Ibn ʿAbbās is said to have argued, that the minimum period of pregnancy (determination of which would have a bearing on issues of legitimacy and paternity) is six months. In analogical meaning, the obvious meaning can be extended to cover cases that are either similar or admit of a readier application of the rule. Surah 17.22 forbids one to say *uff* (an Arabic interjection signifying impatience or anger) to one's parents; it follows quite obviously that they may not be manhandled or killed. The assumptive meaning is that which, in order to be complete, requires the assumption of certain words. For example, surah 5.4 says that certain things are forbidden, the meaning being that it is forbidden to eat them, "eating" being assumed to be the act forbidden.

Because of its relative paucity, *tafsīr bi-al-maʾthūr* could not become the basis for interpreting the Qurʾān in its entirety. The attempts to widen the scope of such *tafsīr* necessarily resulted in the inclusion in works on the subject of many reports of doubtful authenticity. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī's (1445–1505) *Al-durr al-manthūr*, a major source of *tafsīr bi-al-maʾthūr*, testifies to this. Not only was there a practical necessity to augment *tafsīr* material through independent study of the Qurʾānic text, there was also sanction for such activity in the Qurʾān itself. Surah 38.29 reads, "A Blessed Book which We have revealed to you so that they may reflect (*li-yatadabbarū*) on its verses, and so that intelligent people may take remembrance." Surah 47.2 asks curtly, "Don't they reflect on the Qurʾān (*a-fa-lā yatadabbarūna al-Qurʾān*)?" The fact that *tafsīr bi-al-raʾy* was given a bad name does not mean that the essential activity it represented lacked warrant or justification. What deserved censure was irresponsible interpretation by unqualified people. Responsible interpretation by competent scholars could not be impugned through an indiscriminate use of the label of *tafsīr bi-al-raʾy*. That

is why *tafsīr bi-al-raʾy*, despite opposition, earned itself a respectable place in the tradition, and the advocates of *tafsīr bi-al-maʾthūr* were forced to concede ground in that they came to distinguish between *tafsīr bi-al-raʾy* that was desirable and acceptable (*maḥmūd*) and *tafsīr bi-al-raʾy* that was condemnable (*madhmūm*). Eventually a middle ground between *tafsīr bi-al-raʾy* and *tafsīr bi-al-maʾthur* was reached, the rather pointless semantic quarrel giving way to a sound, practical compromise.

Major *Mufassirūn*. We have seen that only a small amount of *tafsīr* was transmitted from the Prophet and his companions. Perhaps the two distinguishing features of that *tafsīr* are selectiveness and brevity: as a rule, only certain words or phrases in certain verses are explained, and that through citation of synonymous words or phrases. This is the method used in the *tafsīr* attributed to the companion Ibn ʿAbbās, who was Muḥammad's cousin and is known as the "interpreter of the Qurʾān." The same method is used by the successor Sufyān al-Thawrī.

The first activities of compilers of *tafsīr* consisted of attempts to collect reports that were supposed to have originated with the Prophet and his companions or the successors. Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (839–923) is generally regarded as the most important figure in the formally established classical tradition of *tafsīr*. His *Jāmiʿ al-bayān* is an encyclopedia of *tafsīr* comments and opinions that had come into existence up to his time. As such, it is an indispensable source of traditionist *tafsīr*, which is made up of reports transmitted from early authorities. Ibn Jarīr aims at being comprehensive rather than selective, which makes his book a treasure-house of information, enabling later *mufassirūn* to select data on their own principles. He provides the names of authorities for the reports he cites but generally does not evaluate the chains of transmission, although he does often give his opinion on the reports themselves, without putting any constraints on the reader. In this too he helps later scholars to form their own judgment. These features give Ibn Jarīr's book an objectivity that has earned it deserved distinction.

Ibn Jarīr's work is typical of *tafsīr bi-al-maʾthūr*. Several *mufassirūn* with different points of emphasis compiled works in this category. Suyūṭī's *Al-durr al-manthūr* has already been mentioned. Abū Muḥammad al-Baghawī's (d. 1122) *Maʿālim al-tanzīl*, an abridgement of Abū Isḥāq al-Thaʿlabī's (d. 1035) *Al-kashf wa al-bayān ʿan tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, is unlike the latter in that it excludes Jewish apocrypha and fabricated *ḥadīth*s. The

tafsīr of Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) may be called an abridgement of Ibn Jarīr's work; it is much more selective, evaluates the chains of transmission, and pronounces on the authenticity of reports. Ibn Kathīr is essentially a *muḥaddith,* however, and his approach to the subject reflects the viewpoint of one, much more geared to advancing the established orthodox viewpoint.

Alongside traditionist *tafsīr* there developed what may be called literary *tafsīr*. At a basic level this consisted in citing Arabic poetry to support an interpretation of a Qur'ānic word or expression, and at an advanced level in making a rigorous analysis of the language of the Qur'ān. Literary *tafsīr* begins quite early. ʿUmar is reported to have enjoined Muslims to stick to the works of Arabic poetry *(dīwān al-ʿArab)* because it contained *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān. A similar statement is attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās, who may be called the progenitor of this *tafsīr*. According to a report, in a dialogue between Ibn ʿAbbās and the Khārijī Nāfiʿ ibn al-Azraq, the latter put about two hundred questions to Ibn ʿAbbās about the meanings of certain Qur'ānic words, and Ibn ʿAbbās in each case supported his answer by citing Arabic poetry. Whatever authenticity such reports may have, they definitely indicate the crystallization of the general view of the exegetes regarding the usefulness of Arabic poetry in expounding the Qur'ān. Literary *tafsīr* reaches its zenith in Maḥmūd ibn ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī (1075–1144). Despite his nonorthodox views in theology, Zamakhsharī's *Al-kashshāf* is regarded by all as an invaluable source of linguistic and literary insights. Bayḍāwī's (d. 1286) *Anwār al-tanzīl* is more or less an "expurgated" edition of Zamakhsharī's work, for Bayḍāwī seeks to purge the latter work of theological views considered objectionable by the Sunnīs. Abū al-Barakāt al-Nasafī's (d. 1310) *Madārik al-taʾwīl* is an abridgement of the works of Zamakhsharī and Bayḍāwī taken together, although he also deals with legal issues. Another *tafsīr* with emphasis on language and literature, and one that is important in its own rights, is Abū Ḥayyān's (1256–1344) *Al-baḥr al-muḥīṭ*.

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *Al-tafsīr al-kabīr* represents the dialectical and theological type of *tafsīr*. Study of this commentary provides a full view of the range of Muslim theological debates and differences, especially those between the traditional Ashʿarīs and the so-called rationalist Muʿtazilīs. While Rāzī defends the Ashʿarī doctrine, al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 1025) in his *Tanzīh al-Qurʾān ʿan al-maṭāʿin* argues for the Muʿtazilī viewpoint.

Juristic *tafsīr* is represented by the *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān* of the Ḥanafī Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ (917–981) and *Al-jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān* of the Mālikī Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273). Ibn al-Jawzī's (d. 1200) *Zād al-masīr,* although it casts its net much wider, may be regarded as representing the Ḥanbalī viewpoint in this field.

It should be noted that many of these *tafsīr* works would fit into more than one category. Zamakhsharī's *Al-kashshāf,* for example, deals not only with the rhetorical aspects of the Qur'ān but also with theological issues, and Qurṭubī's *Al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān* is not only juristic *tafsīr* but also discusses linguistic and literary issues. A number of *tafsīr* works were in fact expressly meant to be composite in nature, a good example being the nineteenth-century *tafsīr, Rūḥ al-maʿānī,* by Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī (1802–1854).

Ṣūfī *Tafsīr*. Establishing a close personal relationship with God is, generally speaking, the principal aim of Ṣūfīs or Muslim mystics. The focus of their attention is those Qur'ānic verses that speak of God's magnificent attributes and exhort believers to love and fear God. "Acquire the qualities of God" is a well-known Ṣūfī motto, interpreted mainly in ethical and behavioral terms.

Ṣūfī *tafsīr* is notable first for the near absence in it of grammatical, rhetorical, legal, and theological discussions, and second for its attempt to go beyond the apparent meaning of the Qur'ānic text in order to derive deeper, hidden meanings through intuitive perception. Although it is possible to speak of major themes and preoccupations of Ṣūfī *tafsīr,* it would be difficult to say that the Ṣūfī *mufassirūn* employ a certain method of interpretation. The interpretations offered do not always challenge those reached through the use of orthodox methods. Not infrequently, however, the Qur'ānic text is used as a springboard for presenting views that have a very tenuous basis in the text and may even be irrelevant in the context or incompatible with the text. Among the well-known Ṣūfī *mufassirūn* are Sahl ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Tustarī (d. 986; *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*), Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (936–1021; *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*), and Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1072; *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt*).

Shīʿī *Tafsīr*. Imāmī Shīʿī *tafsīr* differs from Sunnī not so much in methodology as in respect of its assumptions, sources, and motifs. The distinctive concept of a divinely ordained imamate is expounded and defended, and the verses believed to establish the successorship to Muhammad within the Prophet's family (beginning with ʿAlī, the first in a series of twelve infallible imams)

are treated at length, often polemically. Because the interpretations attributed to the twelve imams are regarded as authoritative beyond question, the traditions reporting these interpretations carry the greatest weight. A distinction is made between the exoteric and the esoteric meanings of the Qur'ānic texts, with the esoteric meaning that goes back to an imam (and believed to have reached the imam from the Prophet through the chain of imams) taking precedence over the exoteric meaning.

On several theological issues—such as the possibility of the beatific vision, guidance and misguidance by God, and the reality of magic—Shīʿī tafsīr reflects the influence of Muʿtazilī thought. In the legal sphere, Shīʿī tafsīr, besides expounding Shīʿī law, dwells on issues on which basic disagreements with the Sunnīs exist. Among the major Imāmī mufassirūn are Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭūsī (d. 1067; Al-tibyān), Abū al-Faḍl al-Ṭabarsī (d. 1153; Majmaʿ al-bayān), and Mullā Muḥsin Fayḍ al-Kāshānī (d. 1777; Al-ṣāfī). Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī (1903–1981; Al-mīzān) is a distinguished modern Imāmī exegete.

Zaydī tafsīr, judged from the work of Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī al-Shawkānī, a nineteenth-century Yemenite scholar, is not very different from Sunnī. His tafsīr, Fatḥ al-Qadīr, is in fact very popular with Sunnīs. As is well known, of all the Shīʿī sects the Zaydīs are the closest to the Sunnīs in respect of doctrine and interpretation of the crucial period of early Islamic history.

Modern Tafsīr. For our purposes modern tafsīr is chiefly, though not exclusively, that of the twentieth century. Modern tafsīr seeks to address a much wider audience—not only the scholars, but the common people as well. The spread of education and the rise of such political institutions as democracy have led to a heightened awareness of the importance of the man in the street, which has in turn led to the use of an idiom comprehensible to the common people. The need to address the populace in various parts of the Muslim world has also led to the writing of tafsīr works in regions other than the central lands of Islam. Particularly important in this respect is the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, where a number of major works in Urdu have been produced. Some tafsīr work has also been produced in the Maghrib and in Southeast Asia.

A change in points of emphasis is notable in modern tafsīr. There is in some cases diminished emphasis and in others an almost total neglect with regard to such aspects of classical tafsīr as grammar, rhetoric, and theology. By contrast, there is an increased emphasis on the discussion of problems faced by society at large; the mufassirūn dwell on verses that bear on issues in the economic, social, moral, and political spheres. In fact, tafsīr today has become an important vehicle for advancing ideas in these spheres, and quite a few mufassirūn have used it for purposes of reform and revival. The tafsīr works of Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā of Syria (Al-manār), Sayyid Quṭb of Egypt (Fī ẓilāl al-Qur'ān), Abū al-Aʿlā Mawdūdī of Pakistan (Tafhīm al-Qur'ān), and Ibn Bādīs of Algeria (Tafsīr al-shihāb, so called because it was published in the journal Al-shihāb), are cases in point. Shawkānī uses the medium of tafsīr to make a severe criticism of taqlīd (unquestioning acceptance of authority). Tafsīr remains an important avenue for expressing dissident opinion in closed or repressive societies, and Muslim scholars are not afraid to exploit its potential.

A notable feature of modern tafsīr is the assumption it makes of the Qur'ānic surahs as unities. The surahs in their received arrangement are believed to possess naẓm (order, coherence, or unity), and this naẓm is regarded as hermeneutically significant. Thus in many cases a naẓm-based interpretation overrides an interpretation based on a certain "occasion of revelation." Perhaps the most successful attempt made in this area is that by Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī of Pakistan in his multi-volume Urdu work Tadabbur-i Qur'ān.

A word may be said about scientific tafsīr. The need to demonstrate the harmony between science and Islamic religion has led certain Muslim writers to argue that all scientific and technological developments were foretold or alluded to in the Qur'ān fourteen centuries ago. The Egyptian scholar ʿAlī Jawharī al-Ṭanṭāwī, in the several volumes of his Jawāhir al-Qur'ān, takes this approach to extreme lengths; needless to say, whole sciences are made to hang on tiny pegs.

The differences between classical and modern tafsīr are certainly important; still, it is a moot question whether modern tafsīr, taken as a whole, is radically different from classical. The declared aims of the modern exegetes are not very different from those of the classical—to make the divine word accessible to believers in a manner that is authentic and also faithful to the tradition of pristine Islam. Moreover, most of the modern mufassirūn are by training not very different from the classical. As such, it may be asked whether the break between classical and modern tafsīr is fundamental and will become permanent. Here it may not be out of place to look at the views of the late Fazlur Rahman.

Although he was not a *mufassir* as such, Fazlur Rahman was deeply interested in Qur'ānic studies, as shown by his several publications on the subject. He was convinced of the need to develop a new approach to Qur'ānic interpretation, and in his *Islam and Modernity* he proposed what he regarded as the *tafsīr* methodology suitable for modern times. Although he stated the methodology briefly and in general terms and did not expound or support it with actual examples, it nevertheless deserves to be considered. After criticizing the hitherto popular piecemeal approach to the Qur'ān, he stated his premises: the Qur'ān was revealed against a specific sociohistorical background and embedded in its specific pronouncements are *rationes legis* that may or may not be explicit. In order to interpret the Qur'ān meaningfully for present times, therefore, a double movement of thought is needed (pp. 5–7):

> The process of interpretation proposed here consists of a double movement, from the present situation to Qur'ānic times, then back to the present. The Qur'ān is the divine response, through the Prophet's mind, to the moral-social situation of the Prophet's Arabia, particularly to the problems of the commercial Meccan society of his day. . . . The first step of the first movement, then, consists of understanding the meaning of the Qur'ān as a whole as well as in terms of the specific tenets that constitute responses to specific situations. The second step is to generalize those specific answers and enunciate them as statements of general moral-social objectives that can be "distilled" from specific texts of the sociohistorical background and the often-quoted *rationes legis*. . . . [T]he second [movement] is to be from this general view to the specific view that is to be formulated and realized *now*. That is, the general has to be embodied in the present concrete sociohistorical context. This once again requires the careful study of the present situation and the analysis of its various component elements so we can assess the current situation and change the present to whatever extent necessary, and so we can determine priorities afresh in order to implement the Qur'ānic values afresh.

On this view, as Fazlur Rahman himself notes, the historical tradition of *tafsīr*, instead of serving as a criterion of the validity of, or even as an aid to, "the new understanding," will itself become subject to scrutiny and "an object of judgment" (pp. 6–7).

Fazlur Rahman's approach, though challenging, is unlikely to find ready acceptance among the religious scholars of the Muslim world, for two reasons. First, it calls into question in a fundamental way the value of the historical tradition of *tafsīr;* and modern *tafsīr*, for all its distinctive features, is in respect of ethos, inspiration, and structure still dependent on the latter and perhaps not ready to strike out on a totally new path. Second, as Fazlur Rahman himself observes, in order to be successful this approach requires the concerted efforts of the historian, the social scientist, and the ethicist. Modern *mufassirūn*, in spite of their acute consciousness of the changed needs of present-day Muslim societies, continue to be—by training and orientation as well as in their tastes and predilections—theologians and legists in the classical tradition. The role of the social scientist is one that they are particularly ill-equipped to play. [*See the biography of Rahman.*]

Conclusion. The primacy of the Qur'ān in Muslim religious life has always been accepted. In modern times, renewed emphasis has been placed by Muslim scholars on the Qur'ān as a source of guidance. Often implicit in this emphasis is a challenge to many facets of the accepted tradition, in the theological, legal, or other spheres. This being the case, it is likely that *tafsīr* will gain in importance not only as a discipline of Islamic learning but also as a carrier of new ideas and as a medium scholars can use to initiate change or reform. This is borne out by the ever-growing number of *tafsīr* works (sometimes translations or abridgements of existing works) in the Muslim world, not only in Arabic but also in many regional and local languages. The ultimate test of the efficacy of this literature will of course be whether it succeeds in providing satisfactory solutions to the questions it claims to be able to answer.

[*See also* Qur'ān, *article on* The Qur'ān as Scripture.]

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