

Opinion

# Reflections on Certain Principles That May Guide a New Commentary (*Tafsir*) of the Qur'an

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**Abstract:** The author starts from his experience as a translator of the Qur'an to argue on the need for a new commentary. The aim of such a new approach would be to convey a vision of Islam more in tune with Islamic history. Further, this is also needed in relation to the substantial Muslim communities living outside of the Muslim world. Antecedents are important in this and especially those coming from the so-called literary moment in the 20th-century Qur'an commentary tradition. A new commentary should be conducted by a committee. Additionally, the second part of the paper explores this possibility and what this committee should take care of in this direction, such as gender-consciousness or environment questions.

**Keywords:** Qur'an interpretation; *tafsir*; modernism; religious reform

In reflecting on the need for a new Qur'an commentary, or *Tafsir*, I claim no expertise other than having translated the Qur'an into English. However, to translate the Qur'an is to acquire some understanding of its speech rhythms, its register of moods, and its rhetoric, even if what the great Fazlur Rahman called its "major themes" remain indistinct. A translator of the Qur'an cannot dispense with classical and modern Qur'anic commentaries if he/she wishes to convey to the reader how Muslims down the ages have held what the Qur'anic text actually meant. However, when one is asked to *reflect* on the Qur'an, one is not obligated to convey the consensual opinions of earlier commentaries, as a translator might, but rather to reflect *alongside* them. Thus, now the question becomes: Do we need a new Qur'an commentary for our current century? If so, how should we go about it?

A new Qur'anic *Tafsir* or Commentary seems to me to be an urgent necessity, and for the following reasons. First, all three "Abrahamic" religions are nowadays spawning groups, sometimes with long historical roots, that seem addicted to a literalist, violent, and exclusivist interpretation of their religious traditions. I have in mind groups such as the Christian Evangelicals in the USA and elsewhere, Jewish settlers in Israel/Palestine, and Da'ish and its spawns in the Muslim world. However, while all three groups resort to criminality, only one of them, the Muslim, basks in the full glare of the world's media and earns such epithets for itself as "Islamofascism", "Islamist terror", and so forth because of its "dramatic" and criminal violence, even when similar groups from the other religions are equally violent. A new Qur'anic commentary is not going to make much of a dent in the thinking of that group, but it could bear witness to a vision of Islam more in tune with Islamic history and with its extraordinary record of tolerance and inclusion—a vision that needs to be stressed and one that is almost wholly obscured by a rising tide of rightist, fundamentalist, neoliberal, and Islam-bashing regimes in both east and west.

Secondly, a new Commentary must address the now substantial Muslim communities living outside the Muslim world. The Muslim youth in these communities urgently needs to know how their scripture stands vis-à-vis other revelations and how it might help them in adapting to life among non-Muslims. Thus, a new Commentary should, in my view, speak to this issue and that audience as among its priorities.



**Citation:** Khalidi, Tarif. 2022.

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(*Tafsir*) of the Qur'an. *Religions* 13: 32. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13010032>

Academic Editor: Roberto Tottoli

Received: 18 October 2021

Accepted: 24 December 2021

Published: 30 December 2021

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Thirdly, just as every new age needs its new Qur'an translation, so also every new age needs its Qur'anic commentary. As I shall argue below, while the Qur'an clearly asserts the perfected and completed fulfilment of its message, its *deus locutus* finality, yet it is also a text which, in formulating its "major themes", drew upon much of what it encountered in its own age. To keep that text relevant and vivid, every new age should attempt to punctuate it, unravel its grammar of ideas and feelings and employ the relevant literary and analytic tools that new ages bring to light. The very existence of a vast corpus of commentaries attests to this continuous preoccupation with the Qur'anic text. Accordingly, every age should analyze anew the relationship of the text to both its own cultural moment as well as to its resonance in its own time.

A *Tafsir*, such as the one contemplated here, must, of course, build upon antecedents. Where our own age is concerned, the most fruitful, the most intellectually exciting, and the most relevant of these antecedents is the one which, in my view, began in the first half of the 20th century and which one might describe as the literary moment. This had to do with the increasing attention paid to canons of literary judgment, derived partly from France, which found a congenial home among certain reformist thinkers of Egypt in the early part of that century. Dissatisfied with the traditional science of *Tafsir* and its overly philological, atomistic, verse-by-verse analysis of the sacred text, these thinkers proposed to highlight the artistic character of the text as its truest claim to inimitability. Their rallying cry is best captured in the words of their leader, Amin al-Khuli (1895–1966): "The literary interpretation (*tafsir adabi*) of the Qur'an must precede any attempt to understand its legal, ethical or theological content."

The three most influential modernist interpreters of the Qur'an, who, I argue, are Fazlur Rahman, Muhammad Arkoun and Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, were all and to varying degrees heirs of that literary moment. If the Qur'an was, above all, a literary text, a new hermeneutics was being heralded, one that eventually encouraged a transition from literary criticism to theology. Fazlur Rahman on the nature of divine inspiration, Arkoun on the contribution of semiotics, and Abu Zaid's humanistic preoccupations carried that literary moment into new horizons. Fazlur Rahman argued that the Qur'an must be understood as "God's response through Muhammad's mind to a historic situation" and went on to draw a sharp distinction between the ideal and the contingent in Qur'anic ethics. Arkoun's project, which he called "Applied Islamology", called for a comparative approach to Islamic studies and the application of a whole gamut of literary and social science theories to the Qur'an. Abu Zaid, in his various Qur'anic studies, stressed the Qur'an's human dimensions rather than its divine fixity. The ideas advanced by these three thinkers and their disciples seem to me to be particularly relevant to any new Qur'anic *Tafsir*. All three courageously defended what they believed in and would, to varying degrees, suffer the consequences.

Let me now move on to suggesting how such a commentary might be undertaken. It might be conducted best by a small committee of Muslim scholars of diverse regions, genders, and views but who all believe in the common pursuit and not in authoritative pronouncements. That common pursuit was the distinctive hallmark of pre-modern Islamic scholarship, now regrettably overrun by self-appointed "authorities" who pronounce decisively that "the position of Islam" on this or that issue is X or Y. Hardly any pre-modern thinker would have made such a sweeping claim nor would ever have used such a peremptory phrase as the "position of Islam" on this or that is such and such. Instead, and right until early modern times, the usual approach of any Islamic scholar would be to say, concerning any controversial issue: "Scholar A says this, scholar B says that and I say the other, and God knows best". In other words, Muslim scholars, until quite recently, had always operated within a network of other scholars and held that arrival at truth is often the result of *shura* or, what I have called here, the common pursuit. A committee of scholars that draws up a new commentary might, therefore, best reflect the ancient collaborative traditions of scholarship and correct the current tendency towards individualism and the appropriation of dubious authority.

How would one proceed? The Qur'an might, by common consent of the committee's members, be divided into what they determine to be coherent, short or long, segments of the text. Each member would then advance his/her interpretation of these, and a redactor might then be appointed to try to bring these views into some conformity. If no conformity is achieved, then the opinion of each member of that committee would stand *alongside* the opinion of others. Each opinion, I fondly hope, would end with the phrase *Allah A'lam*, God knows best.

Additionally, this *Tafsir* should be premised on the fact that the Qur'an is an invitation to knowledge and not the end of knowledge. The frequent injunctions of the Qur'an to look, to examine, to ponder, and to reflect suggest that the Qur'an regards knowledge as a vast and still to-be-explored field, an exhortation to knowledge. In point of fact, Muslim thinkers down the ages can roughly be divided into two groups: those who thought the Qur'an consummated all knowledge and those who viewed it as an open invitation to knowledge.

The belief that the Qur'an consummates knowledge is absurd, and its absurdity needs hardly any demonstration. Thus, there continues to exist in the contemporary Muslim world simple-minded attempts to argue that Einstein is in the Qur'an, Darwin is in the Qur'an, nuclear power is in the Qur'an, embryology is in the Qur'an, and so forth. This is sometimes accompanied by arcane numerological calculations having to do with the number of its chapters, verses or words, and revealing some startling mathematical truths. In other words, in this view, the Qur'an prefigures and coopts every advance in modern science.

One is tempted to ask these naïve commentators: Why is God obsessed only with modern science? What if Einstein's Theory of Relativity or current theories of evolution or embryology are overturned by some future scientific discoveries, rendering them obsolete? Additionally, if the Qur'an consummates all knowledge, why is Shakespeare not in the Qur'an? Or Karl Marx? Or Freud? Or Ludwig Wittgenstein?

Then again, Qur'anic language should be treated as "fluid, passing and literary, not rigid, fixed and scientific" (*pace* Matthew Arnold on the Bible). The language of the Qur'an is frequently and deliberately mystifying in order to urge reflection on its listeners or readers. One must accept, it seems to me, that its meaning is constantly shifting under one's gaze, that language itself constantly baffles us with uncertainties, and that to regard Qur'anic language as fixed for all time by some divine fiat is to grievously restrict its semantic field. One might, in fact, argue that the very malleability of the Qur'anic text, indeed its ambiguity, is one reason for its success in adapting itself to changing times, its ability to speak to very diverse ages. In tackling the language of the Qur'an, my hope is that the committee would use the widest possible spectrum of literary, cultural, and historical analysis, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Again, the committee might well draw upon the rich tradition of both classical Qur'an commentary as well the rich tradition of commentaries on similar scriptures in other religious traditions.

With regard to Qur'anic inspiration, even some distinguished classical commentators admitted that its inspiration was not solely what one might call "vertical" (God to Muhammad) but "horizontal" (community to Muhammad) as well. In other words, the first Muslim community addressed in the Qur'an took an active part in formulating its message and sometimes even in coining the ipsissima verba of the Qur'an. Accordingly, in forging a new commentary, the committee should assert its total freedom in interrogating the Qur'anic text while maintaining respect for its axial place in Muslim devotions. It should feel free, for instance, to demythologize its stories, or to revisit the old debate as to whether certain portions of the text are more "eloquent" or "inimitable" than others, or to re-examine the question of *wahy* or inspiration.

One or two urgent ethical issues would, I argue, impose themselves on any new *Tafsir*. First and foremost is the issue of Feminism. As I have argued elsewhere, perhaps the most startling aspect of Qur'anic rhetoric is the deliberate address to women alongside men, rendering the Qur'an to be arguably the most gender-conscious of all sacred scriptures. It

is both men *and* women who are repeatedly addressed in admonition or praise and made to be equally responsible moral agents. As equal moral agents, it becomes essential to draw the necessary conclusion that their social, legal and economic equality must override all other considerations and all other traditional practices that constrain that equality. At least half the members of the committee must therefore be women.

A host of other issues would, no doubt, face the committee while drawing up its new *Tafsir*. The world of Islam has always displayed a wide variety of adaptations to its diverse habitats, captured well it seems to me in the title of an important work by a contemporary Muslim thinker: *Islams and Modernities*. Should one, by extension, speak of one single Islamic *Shari'a* or of several *shari'as*? Additionally, to those groups who insist on applying *the* *Shari'a* in their Muslim or non-Muslim countries, should one not ask them: Exactly *which* *shari'a* do they have in mind? In this context, the question of the absolute (e.g., justice and equality) and the contingent (e.g., slavery and polygamy) in Qur'anic ethics, the issue raised by Fazlur Rahman, should I believe be a central concern of that committee.

I must stress here that the issues proposed above for intensive discussion by the committee are mere suggestions that any committee member might put forward and not an agenda dropped from on high. If this is clearly understood, I might then suggest that the committee may consider other issues that the Qur'an, in my view, forces upon its 21st-century followers. Islam and other religions, terrorism and war, the problem of refugees, freedom of thought, political tyranny, the political regime, economic justice and the attitude towards the natural environment and stewardship of the planet come to mind, almost spontaneously, as issues worthy of consideration as this committee reflects on the Qur'an.

Taking these issues one by one and attempting very briefly to describe their contemporary relevance, one might argue, first, that with respect to other religions, Islam's record of toleration towards these religions, enshrined in the Qur'an and in Muslim practice, is second to none among the great world religions. Acts of violence committed by Muslims against civilians of other religions are not simply criminal but a cultural and historical travesty, which does brutal violence to a long and admirable record of coexistence, though not unblemished. Where war is concerned, the committee might well reflect on just and unjust wars through the prism of the Qur'an. As for refugees, the frequent Qur'anic condemnations of people unjustly driven from their homeland might constitute the basis of discussion, with particular reference to Palestine and its seventy-two years of exile. As for freedom of thought and expression, the Qur'an's express sanctioning of the freedom both to believe and not to believe in God might constitute the nodal point of reflection. Tyranny, on the other hand, and the Qur'anic suspicion of "kings" could well be fruitful avenues of discussion, while as regards the political regime, it appears to me to be important to revive the old controversy initiated about a hundred years ago by 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq in his seminal work *Islam and the Principles of Government*, which argues that there is no sanction in the Qur'an for any particular form of government and that Muslims are entirely at liberty to choose any form of government that best suits their interests. Where the economic regime is concerned, economic experts might well debate the implications for today of what the Qur'an has to say on income equality and inequality. Finally, where the environment is concerned, the frequent and almost loving attention devoted to the natural world in the Qur'an, to animals of all kinds, to ants, bees, spiders, and insects, to atmospheric phenomena, such as thunder and gales, to the constellations, to trees, such as the fig and the olive, are constant reminders of mankind's natural surroundings, and all of them serve to remind mankind of their creator's concern for his creation, human or otherwise.

However, these are merely a few of the many issues that such a committee might reflect upon. Entrusting such a *Tafsir* to a committee rather than to an individual ensures the revival of scholarly collaboration and the representation of the widest possible gamut of modern Muslim views. *And God knows best.*

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.