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The Concept of God in Shaping the Use of Maqasid by Historicist Thought in Turkey: The Case of İlhami Güler and Mustafa Öztürk

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Abstract: In the modern era, the importance of Fazlur Rahman’s method of interpreting the Qur’an, which considers the historical dimension of revelation, is significant. Fazlur Rahman advocated renewal, emphasizing the maqasid in response to the new conditions and circumstances introduced by the modern era. Many theologians and thinkers in Turkey have taken note of and reinterpreted this method. In this study, I examine the perspectives of İlhami Güler and Mustafa Öztürk, who adopt a historicist approach to understanding and interpreting the Qur’an. I explore the particular conceptions of God and humans, on which they base their historicist perspective, according to the maqasid concept. I determine that their views on God’s attribute of speech (Kalam) and God’s relationship with time/history significantly shape their conception of God. I attempt to identify the relationship between their drawing of a distinction between word and meaning in the revelation of the Qur’an (lafdh and ma’na), and their efforts to renew Sharia law. Although both thinkers adopt a historicist approach, I highlight how they differ on some issues, especially on the word–meaning issue. Nevertheless, they converge on the idea that revelations are influenced by the human conditions prevailing at their time of emergence. Moving from that proposition, they argue that, today, while preserving the fixed structure of religion, Sharia should be updated in the light of current conditions. I demonstrate how they believe in the idea, especially in the case of Güler, that while God previously changed Sharia, humans should now initiate this change. In this updating activity, maqasid serves as a link binding religion and Sharia together. I suggest that they treat maqasid as a reference point representing the essence of religion (ad-Din) for the renewal of Islamic thought today.

Keywords: maqasid; Sharia; historical approach; Qur’an; God



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1. Introduction

In the modern era, scholars have increasingly placed greater emphasis on the concept of *maqasid*, in a remarkably different context than in the classical period. In the classical era, discussions about *maqasid* primarily emerged within the scope of Islamic jurisprudence. However, in modern times, scholars increasingly adopt *maqasid* as a method to interpret the Qur’an, broadening its application to a philosophical and theological dimension.

One reason for this shift in the use of *maqasid* is the ongoing debate about how Islam should respond to modern Western thought, which has been around for more than a century. Thinkers engaging with this question often turn to the concept of *maqasid al-shariah*, due to its potential to offer a methodology. The term *maqasid al-shariah* is rooted in the claim that the divine law which God sent has a purpose or objective. This concept of a “purpose-driven God” suggests a connection with the discipline of Kalam (Islamic theology), since the idea of a “purposeful God” holds a strong position in classical Kalam literature. From the creation of the universe to the sending of prophets, God’s actions are seen as a result of His will, solidifying the conception of a purposeful God.

Examining the concept of God in the classical Kalam literature, especially within the Maturidi and Mu’tazili perspectives, reveals the central role of purposefulness. In

Mu'tazili thought, considered as the foundational school of Kalam, the conception of God revolves around one of His names, justice. According to Mu'tazili thinking, describing God as just and sovereign assumes that He never engages in evil acts, prefers not to perpetrate wicked deeds, does not neglect His obligations, and that all His actions are good (Qadi Abduljabbar 1996, pp. 131–34). For Mu'tazilis, any act by God which lacks purpose would mean engaging in absurdity. Since engaging with absurdity is an evil act (*kabih*), not having a purpose cannot be attributed to God. From the Mu'tazili perspective, the purpose of Sharia should be the realization of the best possible outcome for human beings.

In Maturidi thought, God's purposefulness, or *maqasid*, is based on His wisdom (*hikmah*). Imam Maturidi claims, similar to the Mu'tazilis but in a more moderate interpretation, that God would not act without purpose. He emphasizes that God had a purpose when creating the universe. Engaging in absurdity, or purposelessness, is not conceivable for God (Maturidi 2001, pp. 163–67). The Ash'ari school has a different position on the argument advocated by both the Maturidi and Mu'tazili schools, that God cannot act aimlessly. The Ash'ari emphasis on God's sovereignty and omnipotence (*malikul mulk*) does not allow Him to be bound by anything outside of His existence. The Ash'ari conception of God's boundlessness influences many of their views on theological issues, such as arguing that classifying an act as good or evil can be based solely on God's commands, that God can overburden a person if He wishes to, and that He is not obliged to send revelation for the betterment of His servants if He does not wish to (Ashari 1953, pp. 97–104). However, it is essential to remember that these Ash'ari arguments were formed in opposition to the Mu'tazili conception of God. Interestingly, when we look at the history of the concept of *maqasid al-shariah*, we find that Ash'ari scholars, like al-Juwayni and al-Ghazalimade use of this concept in their Islamic legal theories (Auda 2008, pp. 2–3). Obviously, there seems to be a contradiction between the Ash'ari school's defense of God's omnipotence and unboundedness in the field of Kalam, and its effort to determine the rationale behind the Sharia rulings in the realm of Islamic jurisprudence.

In the classical era, discussions on purposefulness were mostly related to God's essence. His qualities of being just and wise were seen as results of His transcendence and absolute goodness. According to classical thinkers, God's consideration for human welfare stems from the excellence of His essence. However, in the modern era, discussions about God's purposefulness have been influenced not by the issue of God's perfection but by the circumstances in which a person (a Muslim individual) finds himself or herself. This modern approach emerged not as a theological interpretation but for a practical purpose. Therefore, some thinkers who believed that Islamic thought needed renewal (*tajdid*) saw this concept as a key to reform. According to this line of reasoning, if God is purposeful, then the task is to discover this purpose or rationale, so as to renew Sharia and solve the problems Muslims experience in the face of modernity. Such efforts for renewal are influenced by a conception of God that sometimes deviates from that of the classical era.

In her book *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong states that the idea of God carries different meanings for various groups in every era (Armstrong 2011). A conception of God formed by a certain belief group in one generation loses its meaning in another generation. Sometimes, even a generational change is not necessary for this difference to emerge. For example, the conceptions of God in the classical era as seen by Ash'ari, Maturidi, or Mu'tazili were different from one another. However, no matter how different they were, these conceptions emerged within a period dominated by the God-centered worldview of the Middle Ages. Today, we live in a "humanistic and secular age" where the human is at the center. It is evident that the attitude toward God has changed in this era. As Charles Taylor puts it, "belief in God isn't quite the same thing in 1500 and 2000" (Taylor 2007, p. 13). He continues, "we moved from a condition in 1500 in which it was hard not to believe in God, to our present situation just after 2000, where this has become quite easy for many" (Taylor 2007, p. 143). Consequently, almost every topic and concept related to God and religion has been revisited and reinterpreted.

The changing conceptions of God and religion have undoubtedly given way to new interpretations of *maqasid*. In particular, the use of *maqasid* in the modern era has been affected by the emergence of new approaches and methods of interpretation in Qur'anic studies. Several contemporary scholars, such as Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Mohammed Âbed al-Jâbiri, and Hassan Hanafi, who are considered as “modernist interpreters of the Quran,” have advanced the argument that the Qur'an was affected by the prevailing historical, social, and intellectual conditions of the era when it was revealed. They believe that we can uncover the universal message of the Qur'an by differentiating it from those historical elements and influences. Therefore, they have strived to maintain a distinction between the ethical and legal principles introduced by Islam. This approach, which is sometimes described as contextualism, came to be known as “historicism” in Turkish literature.

As the leading intellectual of historicism, many of Fazlur Rahman's foundational ideas affected the Turkish thinkers as well. Fazlur Rahman believes that historically there were unsatisfactory attempts to understand the Qur'an in a holistic manner. He suggests a dual approach for a holistic reading of the Qur'an. The first step involves moving from particular to general, so that the principles, values, and long-term purposes of the Qur'an could be identified and systematized through the study of certain verses in the Qur'an. The second step is about moving from the general to the particular, namely applying general principles to the contemporary period, and our time. In other words, the general principles of the Qur'an identified in the first step need to be adapted to the objective social-historical conditions at the present time (Rahman 1999, pp. 58–59). Rahman further argues that the legislative rulings in the Qur'an had to acknowledge the society of the time as a partial reference point. By highlighting how the Qur'an reflected the reality of the society to which it was revealed, Rahman substantiates his claim that the wording of legislative and legal rulings does not have an eternal quality. According to Rahman, Islamic jurists and Kalam scholars confused this matter, and came to assume that the legal commands of the Qur'an were to be implemented in any society, irrespective of its conditions or structure (Rahman 2000, pp. 88–89).

Fazlur Rahman's emphasis on contemporary times sets him apart from the classical approaches to jurisprudence (*ijtihad*). Through this new approach, Rahman underscores the historical dimension of the Qur'anic rulings, and puts forward the historical conditions in which people live. As such, he has moved away from the classical interpretation of the Qur'an as transcendental and absolute. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd also advocates similar views. Abu Zayd claims that in order to understand the Qur'an's relations to the historical conditions of the revelation, one must see it as an address rather than as a text. As the Qur'an was traditionally treated as a fixed text, it came to be viewed as static and transcendental, which effectively forestalled Muslims' understanding of its dynamic nature. According to Abu Zayd, underneath the classical scholars' treatment of the Qur'an as an unchanging text lies their tendency to see the words as eternal. Therefore, he raises an objection against the classical distinction between *kalam al-nafsi* and *kalam al-lafdhi* (Abu Zayd 2001, pp. 126–48), and moving on from his criticisms, he proposes a humanistic hermeneutic method to revitalize the Qur'an in the modern era (Abu Zayd 2005). By communicating through a humanistic approach, rather than a transcendental one, it would be possible to develop answers to historical questions of Muslims, in line with the spirit of the Qur'an. Through this humanistic hermeneutic approach, Abu Zayd 2015, pp. 280–92 restates the purposes of Sharia as reason, freedom, and justice.

Various scholars who have called for consideration of the context and historicity of the Qur'an's revelation are driven by a concern to develop a humanistic theology (see, for instance, Al-Jabirî (2010)). Similarly, Hassan Hanafi (1978) argues in detail that theology needs to be turned into something akin to archeology. Seen from the concept of *maqasid*, the arguments advocated by the historicists open up the possibilities for Muslims to respond to modern historical conditions by fulfilling the purposes of Sharia. In this study, I will

look at the Turkish context, and examine in detail two scholars who have advocated the humanization and naturalization of Sharia.

2. Historicist Thought in Turkey

On 29 April 2017, a symposium titled “Modern Dünyada Kur’an’ın Yeri: Makâsidi Tefsire Doğru (*The Place of the Qur’an in the Modern World: Towards Maqasidic Exegesis*)” was organized in Turkey by KURAMER (Qur’an Research Center). It is noteworthy that participants from Turkey addressed the topic of *maqasid* from the perspective of juxtaposing the “universalistic reading of the Qur’an” with a “historicist reading” (Özsoy 2018, pp. 47–56; Yaman 2018, pp. 129–63). This juxtaposition largely arose due to the influence on Turkish thought of Fazlur Rahman, who was a pivotal figure in introducing the *maqasid* discourse in the modern era. Since the early 1990s, Fazlur Rahman has been closely followed by the Turkish theological community. His works were swiftly translated into Turkish, and his methodology was applied to the Qur’an in a broader and more widespread manner than Rahman himself had proposed. Over the intervening period, various symposiums¹ focusing on historicism were held, and Rahman’s methodology gained a notable and authoritative standing within Turkish theological circles.

Leading scholars in Turkey who have most emphatically articulated the historicist viewpoint, inspired by Fazlur Rahman’s ideas, include İlhami Güler, Ömer Özsoy, Mehmet Paçacı, and Mustafa Öztürk. Under their leadership, the journal *İslâmiyât (Islamic Studies)* became an academic hub for historicist thinkers. Moreover, the publication of works by Fazlur Rahman and those who followed his ideas by a publishing house named *Ankara School*, led to this school of thought being recognized as the Ankara School in Turkey.² This school is among the most renowned groups in Turkey, advocating for the renewal of Islamic thought. However, the leading figures of this school have often emphasized that this renewal does not merely mean adapting to modernity.

This study will explore the views of two scholars whose names are synonymous with historicism. The first is İlhami Güler, a Kalam professor at Ankara University’s Faculty of Theology, who has been assessing Fazlur Rahman’s views from a theological perspective since the 1990s.³ Güler firmly believes that historicism is the most fundamental method for understanding the Qur’an, and has produced his works on theology from this perspective. He has also been critical of Sunni theology and its theological understanding. Meanwhile, Güler is known for his critical stance on secularism. He posits that the primary issue for the Muslim world today is its inability to truly grasp the essence of secularism. Under the pressure of capitalism and technology, religion is losing ground, making it increasingly difficult for people to truly understand and live according to universal principles and God’s law. He believes that Islam has lost its value-generating aspect for Muslims, and now remains as a mere formality structured around some rigid rituals. Güler contends that unless humanity turns back to God, the world will increasingly become desolate, potentially ushering in its end (Güler 2014, pp. 23–32).

Due to Güler’s prominence in historicism, his comments on these issues are noteworthy. In Turkey, historicism is often seen as the replacement of Islamic values with prevailing modern-secular values. However, from Güler’s remarks, we understand that he is not looking for such a replacement or importation. Hence, it can be said that Güler views historicism primarily as a method to revive contemporary Islamic thought.

The other scholar this study will examine is Mustafa Öztürk, a professor of exegesis. Like Güler, Öztürk adopted historicism early in his academic career. However, in recent years, he has made historicism once again a focal point of intense public debate, especially due to his views on the nature of revelation. His appearances on media platforms to discuss such issues have made him a public figure.

It is evident that the historicist school in Turkey has been significantly influenced by the intellectual contributions of thinkers like Fazlur Rahman, Hasan Hanafi, Muhammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamed Abu Zayd, and Mohammed Abid al-Jabiri. Alongside this influence, it is also noticeable that Turkish historicist thinkers have incorporated their own interpre-

tations and evaluations in the methodologies which they have developed. For instance, Öztürk frequently bases his views on those of classical-era scholars and traditions.

This article will examine how the Turkish historicists formulate their “conceptions of God” in such a way as to allow for a modern re-evaluation of *maqasid*. However, before delving into this examination, the perspectives of Güler and Öztürk on religion, Sharia, and *maqasid* will be presented briefly.⁴ Subsequently, their explanations of God’s relationship with history/time will be explored. The article will conclude by highlighting the fact that the most tangible instruments they use to explain this relationship are the approaches they develop regarding God’s attributes, in particular that of speech (*al-Kalam*).

3. İlhami Güler: “Unchanging Religion, Dynamic Sharia”

The historicists view the Qur’an not as a book, but as an address (*khitab*), a distinction directly related to their approach to God’s attribute of speech. An address inherently requires an audience that is present. Accordingly, the historicists believe that the true audience of the Qur’an was the Arab society that lived in Mecca and Medina in the 7th century. Therefore, the historicists argue that the Qur’an conveyed its messages based on the perspectives of that Arab society on matters of faith, culture, morality, and law. The Qur’an’s concept of God, its depictions of heaven and hell, and its legal rulings, in their opinion, reflect the views of the 7th century. What the humanity of today has to do is to study the background conditions for the verses revealed in those years, identify the purpose behind them, and work to achieve the same purpose in line with contemporary realities.

Underpinning this approach is the distinction between *al-Din* and Sharia. Güler asserts that one must discover the purpose of Sharia and differentiate it from the universal *al-Din*. He holds that *al-Din* is the common essence of the revelations sent to all prophets, and is meant for the entire human species. For him, religion is a dialectical relationship in which God commands and dominates humans, and in return, humans show respect to, submit to, and worship God. He contends that Islam represents this specific dialectical relationship, rather than being the name of an institutional religion. In his interpretation, religion remains unchanged over time and across individuals, being stripped of its institutional attributes and defined as abstract universal truths (Güler 1999, p. 13).

The historicists view Sharia as the historical and social embodiment of *al-Dîn* and describe it as “a divine interpretation of *al-Din*” (Güler 1999, p. 25). Thus, while they see religion as possessing immutable and universal characteristics, they consider Sharia as dynamic and historical. Worshiping God, in their view, pertains to religion, but the specific forms this worship takes belong to Sharia. Similarly, while ensuring a fair distribution of inheritance is a religious command, the specifics of this distribution, which can change, are determined by Sharia. Güler believes that rejecting the understanding and practices of Sharia established as dynamic by Caliph Omar,⁵ Islamic scholars have mistakenly considered Sharia as static, transcendent, and universal. However, he argues that every era requires an updated Sharia, which cannot be formulated independently of religion (Güler 1999, p. 25). At this point, the historicists regard *maqasid* as a bridge connecting religion and Sharia. They see *maqasid* as representing *al-Din*, and as the reference point for any quest to renew Islamic thought today. While they consider Sharia as historical and dynamic, they view *maqasid*, like religion, as universal and unchanging.

It becomes evident that the historicists’ perspective on renewal, centered on *maqasid*, derives not from their conception of God but their conceptualization of humans. They believe that humans can discover the underlying purpose behind God’s verses through a specific methodology. The critical point, however, is not this discovery but the human capacity to formulate new rulings or a new Sharia based on this discovery. The reason why they argue as such is due to the fact that the historicists assume that the revelations sent by God were formed in line with the inherent moral judgments of human beings. For instance, they took some pre-Islamic practices, which inspired the rulings in the Qur’an, as an indication that God took human judgments into account. Building on this, Güler boldly states that humans “can replace certain divine and prophetic rulings that

have become outdated with their own truth based on justification." According to this perspective, the Qur'an serves as a source of inspiration rather than a rigid text or measure to be transmitted literally or implemented unconditionally. Güler emphasizes that humans should be confident in themselves, and in their ability to establish rulings akin to those of God (Güler 2019a, p. 70).

The approach of the historicist school emphasizes the idea that when God decrees, He also considers the truths held by humans, and even derives some of His rulings from these truths. What underpins this claim is the argument regarding the "objectivity of moral values" found in Mu'tazilite thought. The idea that some rulings brought to bear by the Qur'an originate from practices already present among people serves as a foundation for the belief that modern individuals, when formulating rulings, should act based on their present realities and the current circumstances. The historicists' claim that people of every era can establish new Sharia or enact new rulings highlights the extensive authority that they say is granted to human beings. We encounter an interpretation here which accentuates human agency. Setting out to establish a dialectical relationship between God and humans, this approach arrives at a conclusion emphasizing the broad scope of human expression. Indeed, they frequently emphasize the idea that humans have now reached a certain maturity, and they should trust themselves and take responsibility (Güler 2019a, p. 70; 1999, p. 33). It is no longer a divine agent that derives Sharia from *al-Din*; it is a human one. Underlying this perspective is the assumption that humans have transitioned from childhood to adulthood and thus, as adults, have the right to make decisions and establish new rulings.

Mustafa Öztürk touches upon this topic, when criticizing those scholars and groups in Turkey who argue that only the Qur'an is sufficient for making decisions, and who reject *Hadith* and *Sunnah*. Öztürk claims that those who say, "The Qur'an is enough for us" think in a parallel way to the Kharijites' approach of "The judgment belongs to God." He underscores the role of the *Sunnah* and *Hadith*, or the role of Prophet Muhammad, in the formation of Islamic rulings. However, what he particularly draws attention to is the relationship between the rulings in the Qur'an and the customs and traditions of 7th-century Arab society. According to Öztürk, many rulings related to worship, transactions, and penalties existed even before Islam. The Qur'an has abolished some of these rulings, but more often, it has reformed and updated them. In other words, the Qur'an, "when establishing rulings, took societal customs into account and attributed value to them." (Öztürk 2010, pp. 64–65). Therefore, seeing humans as lawgivers in the formation of rulings is not an extraordinary or unprecedented situation, when viewed from the perspective of historicist thought.

Based on the foregoing, on the question of "What is the purpose of Sharia?", the answer from the historicist point of view is undoubtedly to establish morality. *Al-Din* represents universal moral values valid for all humanity. The universality of these values stems from their innate presence in human nature (Özsoy 2018, p. 47). Sharia denotes legal rulings. The distinction between the static nature of religion and the dynamic nature of Sharia indicates their different attributes, despite their interconnection. Theologically speaking, morality (religion) is distinct from law (Sharia). According to the argumentation of historicist thought, today's Muslim can establish new rulings by referencing the universal *al-Din*. Because the Sharia rulings are limited by their historical context, they cannot adequately serve as references. In other words, the rulings in the Qur'an are not ultimate laws to be fulfilled; they serve as foundational ideas. This perspective is undergirded by a distinction between morality and law.

4. Historicist School's Conceptualization of God

Since they conceptualize a deity that sends revelations, responds to human prayers, and is perceived in relation to history, it is appropriate to evaluate the concept of God within the historicist school in the context of theism. The school's view that the Qur'an is influenced by history has led them to believe that the Qur'an's portrayal of God is also historical. On this matter, Mustafa Öztürk believes that the historical influence on

the rulings in the Qur'an is marginal compared to the historical influence on topics such as God, prophecy, and the afterlife. He suggests that even the original meanings of the words describing God in the Qur'an exhibit a distinct historicity, locality, and contextuality. He presents the characterization of God as "Lord" (*Rab*) and humans as "servants" as an example of this historical influence (Öztürk 2017, p. 252). İlhami Güler displays a similar approach, and suggests that the Qur'an's portrayal of God resembles the concept of a "wise king," which is in line with the political reality of that era. In the context of today's understanding of legitimate authority, portraying Him as a "just judge" would be more appropriate (Güler 2019a, pp. 50, 105).

From the perspective of the historicist school, which believes that the moral perspective in the Qur'an is also shaped by historical influences, it is natural to discuss the historicity of the concept of God. However, the most significant critique made by the historicist school regarding the concept of God is the claim of absolutizing God's attributes of knowledge (*al-Ilm*), will (*al-Irâdah*), and power (*al-Qudrah*). Güler argues that absolutizing these attributes results in a conceptualization of God that renders Him inactive and restricts His freedom. According to him, the emphasis on the "absoluteness" of God's will, knowledge, and power lies behind the sanctification of the Qur'an, and the resulting inability to produce a dynamic Sharia. But for Güler, the emphasis on the attributes of knowledge, power, and will is heavily influenced by Sunni theology. However, the Qur'an states that God is every day "bringing about a matter (55:29)" (Güler 2019a, p. 33).

Güler examines God's relationship with time/history from a *Kalam* perspective. In this study, focusing particularly on God's attribute of knowledge, he attempts to provide an interpretation that neither restricts God's will and power nor negates human agency. He contends that Sunni theology considers God's attribute of knowledge as an eternal characteristic, like His essence, reaching the conclusion that everything corresponding to this attribute must also be considered eternal. In that case, everything that occurs in time/history would be considered as inevitable. Güler calls this situation "treating a possible historical trajectory as though it was an inevitable one" (Güler 1999, p. 141).

According to Güler, the Mu'tazilites' treatment of God's attribute of knowledge as identical to Him does not yield the same conclusion. This means: God did not become knowledgeable (*Alîm*) by searching for some needed information; He is knowledgeable as a direct result of His existence. For Güler, God's knowledge is not about knowing everything that exists or will exist at once: "The divine destiny in coming into existence does not necessarily denote things that have been predetermined from outside and must inevitably come to pass. Coming into existence is not like sand grains falling one by one in an hourglass. On the contrary, each movement and second brings about original, new, and unforeseen situations for both the absolute being and the coming into existence" (Güler 1999, p. 139).

Güler's main argument is that God, transcending time, self-restricts His inherent attributes when interacting and communicating with temporal beings. In other words, when God communicates with humans, He sets aside His divine qualities. God does not constrain the flow of time/history with His eternal knowledge and power. The moment He starts conversing with humans, He speaks and acts humanly. Güler believes that Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's description of revelation as "God's Human Word" is the most apt description of the Qur'an, sharing the same opinion as him: "Mu'tazilites define revelation, in contrast to Sunni's "eternal word" (*kalam-ı kadîm*) theory, as the meaning God created in Prophet Muhammad's heart through Gabriel. I describe the Qur'an as God's address to humans (Arabs) using human intellect, human language (Arabic), and human mediation (Prophet Muhammad)" (Güler 2019a, pp. 9–11).

So, what implications does this notion of God thinking and speaking like humans have on our understanding and conceptualization of Him?

As humans are temporal beings, they undergo changes influenced by time. Similarly, from the perspective of the historicist school, the same can be said of God as well. In other words, God too changes as humans do. The quality of immutability should not be

attributed to Him. Because the change under discussion is an essential indicator of His freedom and possession of will. Historicists do not suggest that change occurs in God's essence or nature. They mostly talk about a change in the way God communicates and connects with humans. Therefore, Güler sees it as possible that a Sharia sent by God for a specific period might differ from a Sharia sent in another period. Since the Qur'an is the final revelation, it is now up to humans to modify the Sharia, as humanity has matured from childhood to adulthood. This maturity demonstrates that modern humans are now capable of making decisions on their own. From this perspective, historicism can be considered as an effort to reconstruct our concept of God.

According to Güler, the rulings God enacts are the most accurate and just concerning a specific phenomenon, as long as the phenomenon remains unchanged. However, if God reveals knowledge from His endless wisdom about a phenomenon at any point in history, it does not necessarily render that phenomenon immutable. The reason, according to Güler, is that God adheres to His law of change (*sunnatullah*) (Güler 1999, p. 97).

Güler suggests that the unfamiliarity or skepticism regarding the perspective of change in God's relationship with history primarily stems from the image of God based on extreme transcendence (*tanzih*) created by Kalam (Islamic theology), especially by the Ash'ari theologians. Güler points out that even the Mu'tazilites, emphasizing God's attribute of justice, acted based on a motive of transcendence, which means they could not attribute any unjust action to God. However, for Güler, the prevailing paradigm in Islamic thought relies on the image of God based on the concept of "power and ownership of the dominion" (*al-Qudrah and malik ul-mulk*) promoted by Ash'arism. Ash'arism has so vehemently defended an image of God based on extreme transcendence that it has left no room to incorporate human influence and elements in the revelation. Ash'ari's approach, which does not allow for the possibility of God undertaking actions based on purpose, is a result of prioritizing these attributes. Güler, in contrast, argues that if we read the Qur'an attentively, we will see that when God communicates with humans, He does not act "divinely" but "humanly." Citing Hasan Hanafi, he claims that God's purpose in sending the message of revelation was not to conduct theology but anthropology (Güler 1999, pp. 97–99).

The discussions covered so far reveal the historicists' efforts to reconstruct the concept of God. As seen in the example of Güler, the argumentation that religion is static and Sharia is dynamic is based on the idea that God is also a changing and moving being. Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out here that they do not argue that the change takes place in the nature of God. For the historicist school, the change manifests itself in the relationship that God has built with humans over time. In other words, for the historicist school, discussions about God's relationship to humans, and its practical implications, are more relevant than the philosophical debates about His nature. Therefore, the scholars in this school approach God's attributes as pertaining to his nature, from a humanistic perspective, with a concern to expand humanity's scope of freedom. The historicists' interpretation of God's attribute of speech formed the main theological foundations of their methodology. Therefore, the following section will study how Güler and Öztürk conceptualized the attribute of speech.

5. God and the Attribute of Kalam

A significant element that has shaped the methods of the historicist school is their perspective on God's attribute of speech (*Kalam*). It is this very perspective on the attribute of speech that allows them to view the Qur'an not just as a book, a text,⁶ but as an address, thus enabling them to assess the Qur'an from a historical viewpoint.

Debates concerning the attribute of speech have brought about results that have substantively transformed not only Islamic thought but also its political history. Known by the term "*Khalq al-Qur'an*" (creation of the Qur'an), these debates first emerged in the field of Kalam, and later made their way into political discussions. Due to these debates, initially the Ahl-e-Hadith and later the Mu'tazilite scholars were subjected to pressures and marginalization. Various claims have been made about how this debate emerged in the history of Islamic thought. According to Frank Griffel, this debate was

introduced into Islamic thought by Mu'tazilite theologians, after their encounters with Christian theologians. Another interpretation suggests that it is an extension of the early theological debates about whether humans are the creators of their actions. The primary reason why these debates were so intensely discussed and why they left significant impacts on the history of Islamic thought is that one's perspective on the attribute of speech directly shapes how he/she conceptualizes God, religion, and the Qur'an.

The Mu'tazilites view God's active attributes (like hearing (*as-sam'*), sight (*Al-Basar*), providing sustenance (*Al-Razzaq*), and speech (*Al-Kalam*)) as created (*muhdas*) and not eternal. This is because, in their opinion, considering these attributes as eternal would necessitate the existence of other eternal entities apart from God's essence, which is entirely contradictory to the principle of monotheism (*tawhid*). Since the attribute of speech was created, the Qur'an, which corresponds to this attribute, was also created. It is not something that existed eternally. For the Mu'tazilites, speech (*kalam*) does not consist of words and meaning. They believe that words are separate from meaning and are not a means of conveying meaning. Meaning is not just a voice settled in the soul (*nefs*) before turning into words. Meaning is formed through the rules of language and societal consensus. What makes linguistic expression meaningful, transforming it into elements of communication, is its agreed-upon social usage as corresponding to certain meanings. Meaning becomes evident when it is verbalized. Thus, the claim that meaning exists in the soul before turning into words is contradictory. As an offspring of this argument, they believe that meaning is "objective" (Bor 2011, pp. 25–26).

Against the Mu'tazilites' claim that the Qur'an was created stands the belief, championed by Ahmed b. Hanbel, that the Qur'an is eternal. Since he considers God's attribute of speech as eternal, Ahmad b. Hanbel also views the Qur'an as eternal. This claim was later revisited by the Ash'ari and Maturidi theological schools. According to these two representatives of Sunni Islam, the attribute of speech is among God's eternal attributes. The Qur'an has two characteristics, *kalam al-nafsi* and *kalam al-lafdhi*: (i) The eternal speech (*kalam al-nafsi*) is independent of history and time, and has not been verbalized; (ii) The verbalized, linguistic, created speech that emerges within history/time is (*kalam al-lafdhi*). The primary differences between the Mu'tazilites and the representatives of the Sunni school lie in whether they accept the inner speech (*kalam al-nafsi*). While the Mu'tazilites do not acknowledge speech that is un verbalized and that lacks reality, based solely on meaning, Sunnis accept it (Taftazani 2010, p. 140). For Sunnis, words and meaning can be separate. Meaning does not always have to have a linguistic counterpart. The inner speech embodies the speaker's intentions, desires, and requests, which have not been verbalized. Verbalized speech reflects created features of the Qur'an like words and sounds (Taftazani 2010, pp. 137–38; Bor 2011, pp. 18–19).

The Mu'tazilites' emphasis on the objectivity of meaning, while predicating the Qur'an's created nature, stems from their efforts to establish a connection between the revelation on the one hand, and humans and history, on the other. Sunni Islam, however, emphasizes the timelessness of inner speech, highlighting the Qur'an's connection with God and its transcendence beyond time. Viewing verses directly as corresponding to God's attributes results in considering the verses as transcending history.

In the Khalq al-Qur'an debates, the Mu'tazilites' thesis that the Qur'an was created plays a crucial role in laying the groundwork for Güler's historicist methodology. Güler argues that the understanding of "inner speech [*kalam al-nafsi*]" results in the conceptualization of the Qur'an as eternal (*qadim*), and thus the Qur'an is given absolute authority. As a result, traditional approaches have limited the human role in understanding and interpreting the Qur'an. The Qur'an has been sanctified and deified, akin to the idols worshipped by pagans (Güler 2019a, pp. 65, 85, 98). However, in its inception, it is merely a word (an address). The nature of this address allows for a dynamic, living, and flexible relationship, established with the revelation.

According to Güler, the created nature of the Qur'an provides a scope of freedom for humans in interpreting the revelation because its created nature indicates its connection

with history and humanity. He argues that “when the Absolute God interacts with the relative entity, the resulting product is relative, not absolute. This is because the constituents of the Qur’an—the language (Arabic), Prophet Muhammad (human), and the Arab society—are relative” (Güler 2019a, p. 15). Güler suggests that as a result of the permutations of events in history, hundreds of different Qur’ans, all conveying the same core message, could emerge. This is so because each of God’s interventions in history through revelation is a free, unplanned, dynamic intervention (Güler 1999, p. 140). Güler argues that since they have not adopted this interpretation, others view history as “mandatory” rather than as “possible,” hindering the dynamic establishment of the connection between human beings and the verses. Although the Sharia should actually be renewed in every era, many practices that existed as examples in history have become stagnant, but come to be treated as sacred. Practices like slavery, concubinage, or giving women half the inheritance share compared to men have been viewed as the very essence of the “religion.” Güler argues that this attitude is the primary reason for the inability of Islamic thought to respond to modern-day realities (Güler 1999, p. 142).

It appears that the historicists support their primary thesis, i.e., a call for humans to have the courage to enact new rulings, by drawing on the idea that the revelation has been created. In this regard, it is possible to interpret the approach of historicism as a modern-day update on the Khalq al-Qur’an thesis.

6. Güler and Öztürk’s Views on the Qur’an

While Güler adopts Mu’tazila’s approach on the created nature of the Qur’an, Öztürk operates from the Sunni theology’s distinction between “*kalam al-nafsi*” (inner speech) and “*kalam al-lafdhi*” (verbalized speech). However, it is essential to note that while Öztürk adopts this stance, he offers a different assessment than classical Sunni theology, and arrives at different conclusions. His distinction between word and meaning is based on an approach he himself has termed as “exceptional” or “unique.” In Islamic thought and Sunni Kalam, the prevailing view is that both the words and the meaning of the Qur’an are from Allah; the Angel Gabriel took the revelation from the Preserved Tablet (*Lawh al-Mahfouz*) in its entirety of word and meaning and delivered it to Prophet Muhammad, without any alterations. Öztürk’s adopted view is that Gabriel brought the revelation in meaning, and Prophet Muhammad verbalized this meaning or concept. Öztürk mentions that this view was attributed to the *Batiniyya* (an esoteric sect) by Maturidi. According to Öztürk, Maturidi’s labeling of “Batini” covers both Ismaili scholars and *Messai* philosophers like Ibn Sina and Farabi. Öztürk believes that the underlying reason for this rejection is the belief in the miraculous nature (*i’jāz*) of the Qur’an’s composition, because the miracle can only be justified if the composer is solely Allah. However, Öztürk does not believe in the miraculous nature of the Qur’an’s composition; after all, narratives related to its miraculous nature can only be traced back to the 3rd century of the *Hijri* calendar. The thesis of the Qur’an’s miraculousness emerged later, as a result of debates with different cultures, in an effort to substantiate the truth of Islamic faith (Öztürk 2018, p. 199).

Öztürk supports his views on the distinction between word and meaning with *hadiths* mentioning the Qur’an being revealed in seven *ahruf* (modes or readings—*ahruf-i seb’a*).⁷ He notes that there are over thirty opinions about what the term “seven *ahruf*” means. He provides examples indicating that during the period of revelation, the words of the Qur’an were read in different forms and with alternative words. For instance, the Prophet Muhammad allowed the reading of “*alimun hakeem*” as “*ghafurun raheem*” (Öztürk 2018, p. 206). Öztürk also argues that the existence of variations in reading—recitation (*qirat*), which could be related to the concept of “*ahruf-i seb’a*”—demonstrates the distinction between word and meaning. Some believe in seven, while others believe in ten different readings. According to Öztürk, this demonstrates that the Qur’an has always been read in various and multiple forms. He believes that these narratives highlight the fact that in reading the Qur’an, meaning is more important than the exact words (Öztürk 2018, p. 215).

Furthermore, Öztürk interprets anthropomorphic expressions related to God's names and actions in the Qur'an as evidence that the words come from the Prophet Muhammad. He argues that words in the Qur'an that praise God, such as "tabaraka," "taala," "kibriya," "mutakabbir," and "a'la," cannot be attributed to God, because they would not be compatible with his nature, as God would not be praising Himself. To him, these expressions are the result of the Prophet Muhammad verbalizing the revealed concepts: "They are a reaction against polytheistic mentalities in light of the monotheistic principle in the revelation received by Prophet Muhammad in meaning and concept" (Öztürk 2018, p. 226).⁸ Öztürk does not find it appropriate to attribute human-like qualities to God, because he perceives Him as a transcendent entity. Therefore, he believes that the anthropomorphic elements found in verses could only have been articulated by a human being. Öztürk offers an interpretation that emphasizes the human aspect, devoid of sanctity, and attributes this human aspect to the human side of the Prophet Muhammad. For Öztürk, this approach does not diminish the value or divine nature of the revelation.

Öztürk believes that treating the Qur'an as divine and absolute results in overlooking the dynamic nature of Sharia. By emphasizing the human dimension of the revelation, he aims to assert that the revelation can be interpreted in ways that address the needs of modern times.

Öztürk's stance on the word–meaning distinction sets him apart from Fazlur Rahman, from whom he drew inspiration for his historicist interpretation. Öztürk describes Fazlur Rahman's claim that the Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad in both word and meaning as contradictory. If one adopts this view, he even believes that it would not be consistent to speak of the historical nature of Qur'anic rulings, or to prioritize intent over literal instructions: "If indeed the revelation comes from Allah in both meaning and word, then one must accept the revelation in word-meaning as an eternal speech. Moreover, evaluating the decrees in a word that linguistically belongs to Allah from a purposeful perspective aligns not with a historicist interpretation but rather with a supra-historical approach" (Öztürk 2018, p. 138).

Güler critiques Öztürk's stance on word and meaning. Güler states that Öztürk's views are related to the nature of the revelation, but have no connection with historicism. Yet Güler claims that the issue of the nature of the revelation is inherently metaphysical. Güler believes that most positions on this topic are the result of being lured into the "disease of making metaphysics." He points to various verses indicating that the nature of the revelation cannot be truly known.⁹ Güler also feels that Öztürk's approach provides ammunition to those opposing historicism, and jeopardizes its future in Turkey (Güler 2019b, pp. 89–94). Nonetheless, it is possible to question the strength of Güler's criticism. While Güler defines the revelation as "God's human word," what Öztürk does is to concretize and personify this "human" as the Prophet Muhammad. At this point, although Güler claims the nature of revelation is unrelated to historicism, one should not overlook that he too suggests that when God communicates with human beings, He descends to the human level. Such a stance undeniably has a metaphysical dimension, suggesting that, contrary to his claims, Güler too takes a position on a metaphysical issue.

7. Conclusions

Today, the concept of "*maqasid al-Sharia*" (objectives of the Sharia) is increasingly seen as a tool for the renewal of Islamic thought. In Turkey, a prominent school within the *maqasid*-centered interpretation (*tafsir*) studies adopts a historicist approach, following in the footsteps of Fazlur Rahman and others. This historicist method emphasizes the importance of grasping the context in which events, ideas, and texts develop. In this study, I have analyzed the views of two important representatives of the Turkish historicist school, from the perspective of the question of *maqasid*. My purpose in this examination was to uncover the theological argumentation behind their call for the renewal of Sharia. The first component of their argumentation was their insistence on drawing a distinction between religion and Sharia. I have underlined how their categorization of religion as universal and

Sharia as historical paves the way for changes to Sharia-related matters. The treatment of Sharia as a historical phenomenon presents a major psychological and theological postulate, which empowers contemporary Muslims to experience their own historical situation and act accordingly. Moreover, they believe that acknowledgment of the historicism of Sharia is possible through a major change in the conceptualization of God. Therefore, they also strive to make a strong case for God to be seen as a temporal and changing being, rather than absolute, transcendental, and static. At this point, for instance, Güler goes as far as claiming that humans can create a new Sharia, which undoubtedly places enormous value and responsibility on humanity.

Next, I have shown that their position on the debate over whether the Qur'an was created plays a major role in building the theological foundations in support of their case for a human-centered perspective on the renewal of *maqasid*. I have underlined the fact that they highlight the created nature of the Qur'an as an example of the relationship which God establishes with time. Through this analogy, they reason that if God's relationship with time is changing, it would be appropriate to treat the Sharia-related rulings of the Qur'an as subject to change.

Güler's approach, grounded in this method, sees the Qur'an not as a fixed text but as a dynamic message, which is not only shaped by but also is shaping historical realities. Key to his methodology are his views about the dynamic relationship between God and history and His active agency. Believing that God is always in a state of creation provides a basis for the idea that His commands can evolve with the passage of time/history. Since the Qur'an is the final revelation, it then falls upon modern humans to change judgments today. Thus, Güler suggests that the legal rules set by Sharia can be changed by humans themselves, in line with the requirements of the historical context in which they live.

This argumentation presents yet another indication that historicism is not just a method related to interpreting the Qur'an, but also provides insight into conceptualizing the relationship between God, humanity, and the revelation. In order to underline God's dynamic relations with time and human agency, Güler argues that the Qur'an came into being within a specific temporality, and can adapt to changing circumstances, as long as core universal principles remain intact. The change in Sharia throughout the history of revelation serves as evidence that change is not just possible, but sometimes necessary.

Meanwhile, there are areas where the historicists appear to be in disagreement. Like the Mu'tazilites, Güler opposes drawing a distinction between word and meaning in the revelation of the Qur'an. Öztürk parts company with Güler and defends the Ehl-i Sunnah's distinction between word and meaning. Nonetheless, as I have underlined, Öztürk revises the classical view of Ehl-i Sunnah, as he seeks to accentuate that the wording of the revelation was undertaken by a human being. Moving from conceptualization of Qur'an as being articulated by the Prophet Muhammad, Öztürk argues that the judgments (*hukm*) as well as the conceptualization of God, prophethood, and the afterlife can also change. This notion highlights the human element within the Qur'an's nature, through its relationship with the personhood of the Prophet. Through this analytical move, Öztürk sought to bolster the historicists' case for assigning a broader role for human beings, by grounding it within the authority of the Prophet Muhammad. This human dimension encourages today's individuals to devise solutions that align with their unique historical contexts. Therefore, it would be correct to conclude that historicist thought substantiates its quest for naturalizing *maqasid*, based on historicism.

Consequently, within the historicist conceptualization of God and the Qur'an, the attributes of absoluteness and sacredness seem to recede. A sacred-centric perspective is being replaced by a more human-focused perspective. For human beings, the essence of being is intertwined with their history. Hence, in this school of thought, "change" becomes a central theme. Such change is grounded in universal principles, according to a historicist framework. Yet historicists may encounter difficulties when it comes to reconciling a dynamic understanding of change with constants (*thabitah*, or the unchanging values and principles). Addressing issues like inheritance, slavery, and concubinage from a

historicist perspective may be easier. However, today's contemporary challenges like LGBT rights, transhumanism, and euthanasia may prove to be harder to deal with. The historicist framework advocated by these scholars posits that since humanity is advancing and has matured beyond where we stood in the original period when the Qur'an was revealed, the historical context in which we live must be taken into account. Yet a likely response to these contemporary challenges within a historicist framework may not necessarily be compatible with the purposes intended in the revelation. Therefore, it is no surprise to see that historicist approaches often come under fire on the grounds that they undermine the enduring authority of the revelation.

In response, the historicists seek to preserve the authority of the revelation by arguing that while the Qur'an's address is historical, its message is universal. Nonetheless, it should not be overlooked that as they seek to apply universal ethical values in their daily lives, the interpretations developed by human beings run the risk of falling into relativism, due to the historicism of humans. The historicist approach maintains its faith in humans' ability to translate the revelation into their lives, despite the risk of relativism. It would not be altogether wrong to argue that underlying the historicist school's efforts is their belief in the potential of Islam to respond to the realities of a secular country in the modern age.

As we find ourselves in an era of rapid change and global interconnectedness, these discussions hold even more significance. They challenge the Islamic world to introspect, to question, and to evolve without losing its essence. The debate undertaken by scholars like Güler and Öztürk is not just about interpreting a sacred text, but is reflective of larger questions about identity, modernity, and the role of religion in contemporary society.

In closing, the Qur'an, as the central text of Islam, will always be at the heart of Muslim thought, belief, and practice. How it is understood, interpreted, and implemented will invariably shape the trajectory of the Muslim world. The discussions and debates highlighted in this article are testament to the dynamism and diversity of Islamic thought. They remind us of the importance of continuous dialogue, reflection, and adaptability, in ensuring that faith remains a guiding light in an ever-changing world.

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- ¹ Important symposiums on historicism can be listed as follows: 1. Kur'an Sempozyumu. 1994. Ankara: Bilgi Vakfı Yayınları; Kur'an'ı Anlamada Tarihsellik Sorunu Sempozyumu, 8–10 November 1996. İstanbul: Kur'an Araştırmaları Vakfı Yayınları. Kur'an ve Dil Dilbilim ve Hermenötik Sempozyumu. 17–18 May 2001. Erzurum Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Yayınları.
- ² The most comprehensive study on the Ankara School/Historicist School is by Felix Körner (2005). Körner meticulously examines the hermeneutic and historicist method of the Ankara School in interpreting the Holy Scriptures. However, his categorization of this school as Islamic modernists is debatable. Firstly, the school is not a homogenous structure. Additionally, as will be seen in the example of Güler, which will be examined in this study, modernity is a phenomenon criticized by many names associated with historicism. Moreover, when examining the arguments of the school, one often encounters his attempt to ground its existence within the Islamic tradition by frequently tracing the historicist method back to the practices of Caliph Omar. Another study examining the theological community in Turkey is by Philip Dorroll. Dorroll (2014) sees the "Ankara Paradigm" as an outcome of the revitalization of the Maturidi–Hanafi tradition. However, one should not conflate the "Ankara Paradigm" with the "Ankara School/Historicist School." Dorroll investigates the origins of the cumulative knowledge and positions produced specifically by the Faculty of Theology in Ankara under the rubric "Ankara Paradigm." Therefore, there is no direct relationship between Dorroll's studies and those of the school advocating the historicity of the Qur'an, which will be examined.
- ³ For Güler's biography and works, see <https://www.ilhamiyyat.com/biyografi/> (accessed on 29 August 2023).
- ⁴ Aydoğan Kars (2014) categorizes four distinct approaches to Sharia in Turkey: (i) 'Renewal and Legal Traditionalism' represents those theologians and academics advocating for a flexible and self-renewing ethical and legal interpretation, rooted in maqāşid al-sharī'a; (ii) A scholarly group avoids commentary but aligns with the classical maqāşid discourse; (iii) 'Revisionist' academics

- aim for a comprehensive reinterpretation of Islamic norms, influenced by post-Enlightenment Western hermeneutics; (iv) A final, diverse group views Sharia solely in legal or ethical terms, advocating for a secular separation of religion and politics.
- 5 Caliph Omar is the figure most frequently referred to in grounding the views of the historicist school. During his time, he chose not to implement certain rulings provided by the Qur'an and instead established new ones. This is associated with his understanding of the purpose of the divine revelation. In a way, what contemporary Muslims need to do is to act like Caliph Omar, according to the historicists. Due to his understanding of the purpose of the revelation, Güler (1999) frequently expresses his admiration for Caliph Omar by often describing himself as an "Omarist." On the same point, see also Öztürk (2017, p. 257).
- 6 Öztürk does not interpret the Qur'an's reference to itself as "al-Kitab" (the Book) in the sense of a written text. He conducts a linguistic analysis of the word "kitab" (book) and argues that this word is used synonymously with the term for revelation in the Qur'an. He particularly references the 52nd verse of the Chapter of Ash-Shura. Regarding the verse, which states, "And thus We have revealed to you a spirit of Our command. You did not know what the Book or [what] faith [was]," he contends that associating the word "book" with reading and writing would result in a misinterpretation of the verse. The use of the term "Ahl al-Kitab" (People of the Book) for Jews and Christians indicates that the followers of these religions are informed about the revelation and know what it entails. Similarly, he states that the term "unmi" means being unaware of the revelation or being unfamiliar with it, rather than being illiterate (Öztürk 2018, pp. 41–42).
- 7 Öztürk points out that these traditions have been passed on by many companions of the Prophet including Caliph Omar, Caliph Uthman, Ubay bin Ka'b, Abdullah bin Mas'oud, Abd al-Rahman bin Awf, Anas bin Malik, Hudhayfah bin al-Yaman, Zayd bin Arqam, and Abdullah bin Abbas.
- 8 Öztürk illustrated his views on the subject in a speech he gave in 2019 with the following words: "I wonder whether it is about his wrath, self-praise, or curses, could the Prophet be like Hermes. . . You know Hermes from mythology; he undertakes the translation and transmission of God's message into human language, as it cannot be grasped by human comprehension. He plays sort of a messenger role. Could the Prophet also be transmitting Allah's abstract messages to his audience through his own cognitive filter?" Source: <https://tr.euronews.com/2020/12/06/mustafa-ozturk-u-istifaya-goturen-kur-an-yorumu-ve-turkiye-de-sekulerlesme-gerilimi> (accessed on 10 September 2023).
- 9 Al al-Imran, 7 and Isra, 85 are among the verses Güler cites on this issue.

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