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Contemporary attempts at overcoming decadence and revitalizing Qur'anic thought

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ARTICLE

Contemporary Attempts at Overcoming Decadence and Revitalizing Qur'anic Thought

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Mistaken indeed is the one who thinks that the modern problem of understanding and realizing the Qur'anic ideal is an outcome of recent events. The roots of the problem go far deeper into history. It is one of the peculiarities of understanding that if a misunderstanding passes uncorrected, it results in more misunderstandings and barriers. Misunderstandings quickly generate more misunderstandings and the more they accumulate, the more remote the object of understanding becomes. This is exactly what happened between the Muslims' mind and the Qur'an.

After the Prophet's death, difficult internal problems arose and they needed quick answers. Muslims were killing one another in the struggle for the Caliphate between 'Ali and Mu'awiyah, then between the Umawis and the 'Abbasis, the death of Hasan and Husayn, the massacre of the umawis, the withdrawal of the Khawarji from a community which they regarded as hopelessly involved in sin, the breach between *Sunnis and Shi'is* were all crises which vigorously tested the Muslims' understanding of the word of God. They gave birth to sharp theological and juridical questions to which the text does not give direct answers. Also, after the victories of Islam and the establishment of the Muslim Empire, new needs arose, new problems called for solution, fresh administrative measures forced themselves upon the attention of the expanding community. All had to be faced and met. Meanwhile, sectarian interpretations, theological and philosophical disputes dominated the Muslim world and laid the first barriers to understanding. They also led to that pessimistic phenomenon which had really cut at the roots of genuine Qur'anic understanding viz., the fabrication of reports and falsely attributing them to the Prophet or his famous companions in order to give them a cover of Islamic respectability, having in mind that the way to do that with the Qur'an is totally and forever closed. (1)

At any rate, the time came when the Islamic atmosphere of thoughts was charged with philosophical ideas, techniques of logic and certain concepts of natural theology, political and partisan interpretations of the Qur'an. Neglecting Islam's emphasis on inner devotion, sincerity of intention and correctness of act, as well as upon cultivation of this world and the social life of *ummah*, Sufism deviated into asceticism and renunciation of the world as well as into theories that are foreign to the essence of Islam, thus gravely adding to the developing barriers of understanding. The gap had much widened. Barriers and veils between the Muslim's mind and the purity of the Qur'an assumed ominous proportions.

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The Muslims felt that somewhere something wrong had happened and things were not going as they should. The response came but, unfortunately, with what is worse viz., closing tight the door of *ijtihad*. The conditions put forward, made *ijtihad* or *ijma* absolutely impossible. The two dynamic forces of progress were badly impeded and the mistaken concept of *bid'ah* (undesirable innovation) reigned supreme as a formidable obstacle to creative thinking. The four schools were formulated and every one took sides with the *madhhab* (school of thought) of his fathers or land. Loyalty to one's *madhhab* became as essential point of *jihad* not against the non-believers, but the adherents of other *madhahib*. Everything was said to have been accomplished in the past so much so that any attempt to open the door of *ijtihad*, to think fresh, was condemned as *bid'ah*. Education became strictly a matter of reproduction of what was written before. The art of *hawashi* (explaining and re-explaining what was written before) became the dominant trait of scholarship. The great endeavors for learning and creativity which distinguished the Muslim fathers completely waned down and its lights were fully dimmed. The Qur'an whose mission in this world is to offer man the most authentic existence in a most virtuous civilization was reduced by the masses to some ritualistic hymns and charms to be knitted and worn as protection from evil. Muslims seemed to have lost sight of the face that "the Qur'anic condemnation of *taqlid* touches all kinds of conservatism – including Muslim conservatism; the desideratum being that every faith, and preeminently Islam, should be held by conviction and not by convention, that conviction is always personal and requires constant renewal." (2) The same author says:

They and not the Qur'an, are the strongholds of *taqlid* in the realm of knowledge. Despite all the honor in which their works are held, there were doomed to have no value but that of historical relevance. A great part of them is valuable only to the historian of the period in which they were written, who wishes to consult them as mirrors of the thinking of their day. Fortunately, such works in Islam are not holy, and their refutation by liberal and scientific thoughts has been in progress for over a century and a half. There is hardly a college graduate throughout the Muslim world who does not wish for the hold of these authorities on Muslim minds to break away and disappear. Indeed, each Muslim is enjoined to search his scripture and understand it for himself as Islam has no church and no *magisterium* to pronounce, ex cathedra! on the meaning of scripture. (3)

The author then continues to show how the grip of *taqlid* affected all aspects of the Islamic life. He shows how it extended to the Muslim's understanding of nature; how the nature of saints and miracles inherited from a 1000-year old legacy of Sufism and the instruments of magic from the tradition of essotericism and alchemy which came into Islam in its contact with Near Eastern Traditions, have caused the Muslim to understand the world of nature as a mixture of the workings of nature and super-nature. This, the author concludes, obviates the Muslim's method of research by injecting a non-scientific element into it and makes the scientific basis of research unstable if not impossible. *Taqlid* also extended to the realm of human action and productivity. The notion of *qadar* (predetermined destiny) which is intended to be a dynamic force for action and to counteract hesitation, was misunderstood as passive acquiescence and surrender to the flow of events which is neither knowable nor-predictable. The author then concludes his analysis of *taqlid* by this incisive statement:

Thus, the attitude requisite for technology – that is, for making use of scientific knowledge for subjugating and mastering nature, if such existed or were presented as a gift from the outside – is absent in popular Islam. Instead of the will to translate scientific knowledge into technology and production of goods and services, there is a blind rush to the shortcuts of magical manipulation. In popular Islam, therefore, nothing is remembered of the Islamic ethos, of man voluntarily *assuming* the *amanah* or divine trust first offered by God to heaven and angels and from which they shied away panic and terror; of his surpassing the angels by his involvement in this *amanah* to transform the world within and without into the likeness of the divine *sunnah* or pattern revealed for this purpose; of his inevitable responsibility as a Muslim for Islamic history which began as a will to space-time kneaded and cut after the divine pattern. Nothing has become through the centuries, a truer opposite of Islamic ethics than the practical ethic of the common Muslim. (4)

Ibn Taymiyyah tried his best to open the door of *ijtihad*. He encouraged pure and genuine understanding of the Qur'an by introducing his *fi Usul al Tafsir* (on the fundamentals of interpretation) which is a concise embodiment of the simple rules that are needed for such understanding. He was innovative in his attempt to hierarchize the *sunnah* of the Prophet and to emphasize the hermeneutical importance of certain attributes of the divine. But Ibn Taymiyyah was engulfed by Sufism which he could not fight single handed; and he did not achieve much in actual practice. He died in prison.

After Ibn Taymiyyah and inspired by his teachings, the Wahabiyyah movement was launched in central Arabia. This movement vehemently sought a return to the clarity and purity of religion. One of the basics they raised and which had a strong hermeneutical bearing on their understanding of the Qur'an was the concept of *tawhid* (unization of God). Holding fast to this concept and without the least equivocation, they sought to refashion Muslim life on its basis, and called for a radical and violent overthrow of Sufi institutions. Their staunch conviction and defense of *tawhid* acted like a perfect strainer that refused the least doubt as to the viability or the absolute supremacy of the Qur'an. They combated Sufism. On the theoretical level, they repudiated or re-interpreted every reference on which they relied for the propagation of their teachings. They demolished the Sufi tombs and shrines and anything that bore their philosophy, knowing that nothing is more repugnant to Islam than the worship of graves, tombs and the deification of saintly elders, whether living or dead.

Following in their footsteps, were different movements such as the Sanusiyyah and the Mahdiyyah, all enjoying but limited success. Characteristic of all these movements was their call for a pure and genuine understanding of the Qur'an and the *sunnah*. They denounced *taqlid* and blind attachment to the practices of the forefathers. Their famous motto was "They (forefathers) were men and we are men."

Modern European secularism (5) is not the first major impact on Islam. Before it, there were almost greater impact such as when Islam in its original purity confronted Greek Sciences in Syria and Egypt. Yet, Islam did not receive a rude shock as happened this

time. In the earlier impact, the total vision of the Qur'anic ideal was still there. Coupled with it were the commitment to and practice of the moral and spiritual guidance which the Qur'an provided. For that reason, the Muslims received and assimilated with towering intellectual readiness the giant foreign civilizations and cultures that came their way. They continued the process of consolidation, enlargement, and fruition of the resultant mixed heritage for centuries to come. Had their attitude to those foreign civilizations been one of rejection and hostility, as the Jews did towards Greek culture, the result would have been an exclusive one-sided development, or no development at all. It was their broad-minded understanding of the Qur'an which enabled them to confidently face that critical confrontation and subjecting its outcome to the general good and welfare of humanity.

In the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, the attitude was basically a defeatist one. The religious sentiment was in its lowest ebb. The Muslims were no longer the beacons of guidance and justice in the world. The whole empire, due to the long intellectual stagnation that stifled its life, was deteriorating and falling from within. Rulers were not dedicated to the extent of self-denial as the first rulers were brought up by the Qur'an. Nor were they faithful and confident in their confrontation of Western penetration. Moreover, Sufi interpretations and attitudes towards the temporal life had already succeeded in uprooting the necessary incentives for economical welfare and social justice. The agony of this sorry decline in the Muslim world is typical of a sigh given by Muslim Shaykh, Muhammad al Attar who says in a small booklet entitled *Where is Islam?*:

I searched for Islam in Makkah, the most honorable city, where some of the verses of the Qur'an came down as a revelation to men and a clear guidance. But I saw nothing there save corruption and error and shame and woe.

I searched for Islam in Madinah, the illustrious, but found only miserable people complaining of nakedness and hunger.

I searched for Islam under the government of the Sublime Porte and the Ottoman race, and I found only divisions and parties with names and degrees without number, and no doubt, the names and the degrees are only degrees of vanity and lying. Nor is the Lord ignorant of what they do. By God, if I were not an Arab. I would flee away from your religion to escape from the people whose souls have become inhumane and whose faces have become ugly and knavish.

I sought for Islam in the Azhar University. They make a great show of Islam before the common people, and God knows how much hypocrisy there is in many of them.

I sought of Islam in the mosques, and I saw that most of those who prayed stole the sandals of their co-worshippers, and I said in my heart, where are the Muslims today? Yea, where is Islam? (6)

With such a state of affairs which pleases no human being, the modern Muslims confronted an attractive material civilization which touched their very existence in its advances in medicine, transportation, education etc. and complicated by the unreadiness of the Muslim to resurrect his mind-blinded by centuries of erroneous misconceptions. The way in which those sciences were introduced contribute to further weaken the Muslim's religious sentiment, the essential factor for any hermeneutical regeneration of his understanding of the Qur'an.

As much as the Muslims were existentially glad to receive those sciences, they were told that such an achievement could have never been made were it not for the tremendous victory won over religion and its domain. Curricula of the new sciences took precedence in public schools, while religious teachings were relegated to the background. Even the curriculum of the great Azhar University was impoverished and restricted to the narrower theological interests which it retained during the Nineteenth Century. Without doubt, it was precisely this attitude which proved to be most destructive to the Islamic religious sentiment, and most hindering to an authentic Islamic openness to modernity.

Religious sentiment among the Muslim masses today is stronger and far more intense than among those educated in modern science. It will be a mistake to infer from this that modern science and education are in themselves deadening to the Islamic religious sentiment. Only the point of view from which these subjects were taught is guilty. The medieval Muslim schools taught mathematics, the natural sciences, jurisprudence, philosophy, languages etc., but modern sciences of the same nature are not a continuation to that education. This situation is best expressed by Sayyid Husayn Nasr:

It is true that the modern sciences have borrowed many techniques and ideas from the ancient and medieval sciences, but the point of view in the two cases is completely different. The Muslim sciences breathed in a universe in which God was everywhere. They were based upon certainty and searched after the principle of unity in things which is reached through synthesis and integration. The modern sciences, on the contrary, live in a world in which God is nowhere or, even if there, He is ignored as far as the sciences are concerned. They are based on doubt and having turned their back on the unifying principle of things, seek to analyze and divide the contents of nature in an ever greater degree, moving towards multiplicity and away from unity. That is why studying them causes a dislocation with respect to the Islamic tradition for the majority of Muslim students. Unfortunately, not everyone is able to see the heavens as both the Pedestal of God's Throne and incandescent matter whirling through space. Therefore, the curriculum of the schools and universities in the Muslim countries, by teaching the various modern European arts and sciences which are far the most part alien to the Islamic perspective, has to a large degree injected an element of secularism into the mind of fairly sizeable segment of Islamic society. (7)

Even within the educated class, it resulted in two kinds of men: One possessing much book learning but knowing almost nothing of the very religion they professed for the most part. Such men are alienated from their own people, the Muslim masses. The

second class of men produced by modern education consists of the religiously educated whose training has rendered them increasingly incompetent custodians of Islam and confused them as to the intellectual springs of modern life. Despite their extreme importance for the spiritual and religious enlightenment of their people, this class of men enjoy little respect from the masses and none from their learned colleagues of the first kind.

Both classes as well as all attempts at religious revival in general were tactfully combated by the invader and his internal accomplices. They knew that the unity and strength of the Muslims lie in the Qur'an and the spirit which its authentic understanding generates. Besides these internal and external historical reasons for Muslim stagnation, other factors, hardly ever noticed as potential detractors of religious sentiment went into play with full force. Indeed, every effort was exerted and every subtle ploy resorted to by the enemy of Islam to further weaken and deteriorate the Muslim's religious sentiment, until large numbers among the educated became convinced that it is the necessity to renounce religion in order to regain political independence, pride and honor. Movie houses, magazines, books, etc. with potentially destructive material were encouraged and made easily accessible.

Another detrimental effect of this unguided adoption of Western education and indiscriminating acculturation into secularism and materialism is the large-scale attention to foreign languages and relegation of Arabic to second class status. This was indeed a staggering blow to the attempts at recapturing the pure understanding of the Qur'an. English and French became the symbol of advancement and Arabic the symbol of backwardness.

But no careful scholar can fail to see how genuine and intuitive understanding of the Qur'an by the gifted Muslim forefathers was the root of the glorious state of the *ummah* in the first centuries of Islam. None can miss the fact that Muslim backwardness, weakness, stagnation and deterioration are due to their loss of that intuitive capability. In fact, diligence, vigilance and striving to preserve the strength and purity of the Arabic language throughout the history of Islam, were no less heroic than those spent to preserve and defend the religion itself. Muslims have actually believed that the Arabic language of the Qur'an is a part of its essence. Thus the eternity of the Qur'an conferred eternity on the Arabic language. Henceforth, Islamic culture in the past had always been based on two foundations: the religion and its various sciences; and language with its different branches. The relation between these two pillars has been mutual and interacting even in times of highest pressure, in the sense that the Qur'an without the Arabic language is opaque, dull and obscure, while Arabic without Qur'an shrinks and dies away. For this reason the Islamic tradition always maintained that the Qur'an is not actually the Qur'an unless it is recited in Arabic and Salat is not Salat, unless recited in Arabic. Therefore, excellence in understanding and performance is interdependent with excellence and mastery of the Arabic language. Gigantic efforts were made to write down its different sciences such as grammar, *balaghah*, *bayan*, etc., so as to preserve its original authenticity from change and guard it against the colloquialisms of daily use. In brief, people hastened to study it, to speak it, to defend

it, to be enthusiastic about it and to publish books in and on it, until it had replaced the Persian Language in Iraq, the Greek and Syriac in Syria, the Coptic in Egypt and the Barbarian in North Africa. During the 'Abbasi Period, the golden age of the Arabic language, it became the undisputed language of literature, science, politics administration and civilization. There came the time when the Muslim could travel throughout the vast Islamic Empire without facing any difficulty of communication. There is no equivocation that the Arabic language and its sciences are in the position of the heart with respect to the whole body of religion. Nothing is more true here than the truism that if Arabic is debased, Islam is debased.

Jar Allah Al Zamakhshari in his *Al mufasal*, relentlessly criticized those who ignore or seek to lessen the importance of the Arabic language, or assign to it anything but the primary place. That would be a great sin, he says, towards God and His word. To do that is to hold the people back from the Qur'an. 'Abd al Qadir al jurjani in *Dala'il al I'jaz*, viewed such attempts as rebuffing people from religion, as endeavor to extinguish the light of God (the Qur'an), to put formidable obstacles in fronts of the recapturing of the original and genuine understanding of the text. One may wonder what would such great thinkers in response to the loud cry and the open call of latter day advocates of colloquial Arabic, or of change of the Arabic alphabet. (8)

That call was originally planned by the imperialist and missionary powers. The reason is that the colloquial dialects vary from place to place in the Arab lands to such an extent that each that each dialect could be considered an indigenous and independent language. Therefore, if the classical language, which is the common language, is defeated by any dialect, understanding would be difficult and impossible, the faith would weaken, relationships would be severed, unity would be dissipated and strength would vanish. It would thus make it easy for the imperialists to devour the Muslim lands one by one, without resistance or struggle.

From all these tribulations, the Arabic language, mainly because of its eternal relation to the Qur'an, has emerged safe and unharmed as it did in the face of the most bitter and lethal trial of the Moghul invasion in the second half of the seventh Century A.H.

Muslims can never become Occidentals. In the words of Marshall C. Hogdson, they will never "adopt the Latin masters for their classics, to accept West-European history as their history, to identify with Caesar and Cicero, Charlemagne and Columbus and Leonardo da Vinci as their heroes – still less to become Christians, Catholic or Protestant". (9) Winking an eye at this historically proved fact, some Muslim thinkers wanted to fully affiliate with the West and to relegate Islam to the same position in culture as Christianity occupies in the West. In order to urge his countrymen to modernism, Taha Husayn took an extreme and rather dubious stand. He claimed that the native Egyptian mind is totally Hellenic – and ergo Western – in its orientation; (10) a claim which is openly contested by historical fact. (11) Similar to Taha Husayn is 'Ali 'Abd al Raziq who claimed that Islam has nothing to do with *hukm* (government) and called for separation of Islam from the state. (12) Still, these two men are to be credited for one thing. They vigorously raised the question as to the extent to which

the Muslims are willing to apply the rules of modern historical and rational criticism to their tradition.

Another destructive influence of European origin, has been the wide spread of nationalistic philosophy, as an attempt to meet modern challenges. Arab nationalists sought unity on the basis of race, thus reviving a stand which is severely condemned by the Qur'an as a trait of *Jahiliyyah*, an outcome of ignorance.

On the other extreme were Muslims who rejected all scientific discoveries and methods as the work of the devil. They outrageously condemned such discoveries as anti-religion and a herald of destruction and infatuation. But the successive triumphs of science in the world rendered such a voice weak, remote and now it seems out to existence in the Muslim world. (13)

Even the master guardians of taqlid, namely, the Azhar hierarchy in Cairo, had but to lay their eyes on the libraries, laboratories, chemical and military factories, and workshops which the Napoleonic expedition had brought to Egypt, to desire science in good Islamic conscience – indeed, wishfully to predict that its very success will soon be the Muslims' own, changing the very face of Egypt. (14)

Along these lines are the creditable efforts of Muslims thinkers who while fully realizing the depth of their plight, sought to face the problem most probingly but on no other basis than Islam itself. They sought to revivify the authentic understanding of religion which, they unanimously maintain, is never repugnant to reason or science or limiting to man's material and spiritual advancement. Religious revival is to be achieved without severance of the basic cultural roots of Islam as laid in the Qur'an. They underline the need to reassert and to reinterpret in modern terms the message of the Qur'an as a means of present self-identification without which they can not creatively build the future. They fully realized the most important fact that a strong and sound religious sentiment is an indispensable element for a dynamic and genuine understanding of the Qur'an.

The predominant response in this regard has been a recast of Islam as a philosophy containing, beside its own, all the springs of Western thought which harmonize with itself. Unfortunately, such writings have offered only superficial resistance to Western influence. So far, the mere claim that the religion, properly interpreted and understood, allows for all exigencies of change has proven insufficient stimulation for improvement on the mass level. For it is necessary to get people thinking in terms of this viability as a matter of course.

A modernist calls this trend the "One-Book School" which seeks to assert that;

Islam, and hence the Qur'an, is the fountainhead of all knowledge, human or divine, scientific or religious, of this world or of the next. The scientific knowledge of the world as well as the achievements of technology are all there, in the Qur'an, if not directly expressed, then indirectly through its figures of speech and other

allusions. Whether in his laboratory, in the sky, or under the earth, the scientist, with all his discoveries, is only footnotes to the Holy Book; and the relation of such footnets to the principal text is that of an instance to the general scientific principle in the case of theoretical discovery, and that of a concretization an idea in the case of technological invention. Thus by all kinds of exegetical – nay, esigetial – acrobatics, the followers of the One-Book theory found in the Qur'an the theories of heliocentricity, circulation of the blood, evolution, aviation, microbes, submarine vessels, space travel, and will probably find all the science and technology of the future. (15)

The above statement has beautifully summed up the hermeneutical principle behind this modern attitude to understand the Qur'an and to resent it to the Muslims as inclusive of all scientific discoveries. This is called al tafsir al 'ilmi. It to the sincere attempt to assure the Muslims, contrary to the allegation of Europeans and their Muslim followers that it is not the Qur'an that kept them lagging behind the advanced West. They wanted to show its miraculousness, its divine authenticity, and its viability for modern life. (16) The first such modern treatment of the Qur'an was by Muhammad Ahmad al Iskandarani, followed by 'Abd al Rahman al Kawakibi whose book *Tabai' al Istibdad wa Masari' al Isti'* bad strongly advocated a new kind of hermeneutical approach to the Qur'an in order to bridge the gap between the Muslim and his Scripture. He explained the scientific implications of:

Neither it is for the sun to overtake the moon, nor can the night outstrip the day.
And all float on in orbit. (17)

By emphasizing the conformity of the Qur'an to the modern scientific principle all celestial bodies are moving in specific orbits. From the verses:

Do not those who disbelieve see that the heavens and the earth were fused together,
so we rent them apart. And we made from water everything living. Will they not
then believe: (18)

He deduced the theory that the sun and the earth were one piece before and then separated. And from another verse, (19) he proves that the moon was part of the earth and the separated. Numerous other verses were so analyzed as to show the compatibility of the Qur'an with modern science.

Following in their footsteps was Mustafa Sadiq al Rafi' in his book *Ijaz al Qur'an* where he adopts the same method. There was also Abd al 'Aziz Isma'il who went to the extent to making a numerical charter of the percentage of proteins in meat, milk, potatoes, etc., in his explanation of the Qur'anic verse:

. . . and sends down rain to bring forth with it fruits for your sustenance; so do not set
up rivals to God while you Know. (20)

The most famous and elaborate exegetical commentary of this kind is Tantawi Jawhari's *Al Jwahir* (The diamonds) which consists of twenty five thick volumes. The author makes it clear that his intention is to prove the scientific originality and orientation of the Qur'an, to stimulate Muslims to achieve leadership in the fields of sciences. He goes through the Qur'an verse by verse explaining them like old commentaries did, but he embarked on about 700 verses which he vastly elaborated as containing valuable scientific theories. With regard to the verse:

And when you said: O Moses. We can not endure one food, so pray to your Lord to bring forth for us out of what the earth grows, of its herbs and its lentils and its onions. He said: Would you exchange that which is better for that which is worse? (21)

He embarked on lengthy discussion of theories of modern medicine, and their encouragement of simple diet, The part of the verse "Would you exchange that which is better for that which is worse?" shows for him the same medically proved scientific views. He wrote long passages on the "chemical secrets" of the opening letters of the chapters. In brief, he left no stone unturned in his attempt to associate the Qur'an with all modern scientific discoveries.

But that hermeneutical approach to the understanding of the Qur'an has been widely denounced as forcing upon the Qur'an meanings never originally intended, and carrying its word far from their natural contexts. This, they rightly argue, jeopardizes faith in the veracity of the Qur'an, for scientific theories are never finished and what is proved true today could turn out to be false tomorrow. To associate the Qur'an with such unstable theories is to pave the way for bigger gaps and crisis of understanding. (22) The best statement in this criticism is that of Mustafa al Maraghi, Shaykh of al Azhar University. He approves of such interpretation only where the verse in question directly communicates or points to an established truth about nature, but not to subject Qur'anic verses or the scientific theories to each other. This is to introduce foreign elements to the essentially religious content of the Qur'an. (23)

A very respectable approach and one more oriented to practicality is Muhammad 'Abduh's solution to the problem. Within the framework of orthodoxy, he tried to bring about acceptance of modern research methods and of their outcomes in the scientific disciplines. The claim is based on the vision of all these as supportive of the Islamic faith. His theory is that without the least harm, Islam should be purged of the misinterpretations that adhered to it throughout the centuries; that any inconsistency between the Qur'an and the modern mind should be rightly removed. It is this sensitive understanding on 'Abduh's part of the importance of religious reinterpretations in any cultural renaissance which gives his approach its strong attractiveness as progress concordant with the Islamic framework; a point frequently overlooked or discarded by many modernists. He firmly believed that the return to the true and unclouded understanding of the Qur'an is the only exit out of stagnation and decay. Any solution which does not give this fact its full consideration is doomed eventually to fail whatever success it might achieve in its early rise.

‘Abduh condemned glorification of the past, any glossing over traditional work or conservatism in the *status quo*. God is to be presented as the most dynamic force in the Muslim’s life. This would make the Muslims religious experience the strongest existential incentive to achieve the best. The highest ideals of the Qur’an are to be exposed clearly and communicated to the masses with all their moving appeal in new forms of religious teaching. (24)

As a hermeneutician, Muhammad ‘Abduh never underestimated the hermeneutical importance of a strong and healthy religious sentiment. He took practical steps towards that goal. He wrote books and articles, introduced new curricula in schools and al Azhar University. He emphasized the dangers of such dichotomy as existed between the intelligentsia and the masses, and he aimed at an indigenous value system in which all could participate. Of all his attempts, what concerns us more is his hermeneutical method.

Muhammad ‘Abduh believed that it is not the Qur’an that presents the problem but the rigidity imposed by the superstitions of *taqlid*, and their resultant apathy. The hermeneutical task is that of stripping away these superstitious accretions through a more rigorous criticism *hadith*. The Qur’an should be interpreted in a way less subservient to the commentaries and more self-reliant. He called for a clearer rationalism giving freer hand in dealing with social questions. He warned against exploiting reason as a mere tool or hand-maid of desire and insisted that harmony with sound constructive reasoning and general coherence of all human knowledge as of the essence of the Qur’an. (25)

With this understanding, he launched a devastating attack on *taqlid*. He described the *muqalid* (imitator) as one who does not listen to the given evidence, who is oblivious to the higher interests of his vocation. He is blind, deaf and his mind is blocked. (26) He makes it his main endeavor to expose all kinds of unfounded understandings and to demolish every barrier or evil that accrued to the Muslim’s minds as a result of barren theological dialectics. (27) He lays the blame on the *ulama* (scholars) who winked their eyes at such obstacles and accepted to live with them. He described them as the *zalimun* (wrong-doers) whom the Muslim is cautioned not to follow. (28) The Sufis, of course, did not escape his attack. He exposed them as concerned with appearances and formalities rather than with the essence of things. They, for example, would exaggerate; in celebrating *mawlid al Nabi* (the birthday of the Prophet) which has no origin in the religion and they would spend a lot of money in that. But if you ask them to donate that money for a humane cause or a very urgent matter, they would be the last to do so. (29)

Muhammad ‘Abduh is famous for his daring reconciliation of Islam with certain tenets of Westerns civilization. One of the striking attempts was his making interest permissible. His method was to argue for that within the Qur’an itself. (30) Noting that the verse in question had prohibited only multiplied interest (*ad’adan muda’fah*), ‘Abduh argued that where such is not the evidence, normal interest would be legitimate. He taught that if some one lends money to a person in need or to start or carry business, he could

rightly ask for a reasonable interest. This opinion triggered a sharp controversy and subjected him to chastisement and denunciation by the conservatives.

Another daring stand is his rejection of polygamy as an established right for every man. Characteristic to Muhammad ‘Abduh is his constant recourse to the Qur’anic text for support for his views. (31) In this case, he argued that God permitted polygamy only in cases of dire necessity. Even so, he made it conditional to the individual’s capacity to deal between the wives with absolute justice; a matter which the verse itself rules out as hardly ever possible, thus showing that it is the divine will to discourage polygamy. Equally, his modernist spirit caused him to deny sorcery unconditionally including the hadith on which sorcerers usually base their authority. (32)

But Muhammad ‘Abduh seems to violate his own rule against speculation about the transcendent realm and in which faith “without how” is a requisite. Hence, angels are interpreted by him as the powers of nature and the intrinsic inclinations of man. He allegorically interprets away the story of Adam, the prostration of the angels etc. (33) Needless to say that in his exegesis, he completely avoided the Israelitisms and Christianisms of his predecessors, and strictly rejected and detail that is of no avail in Qur’anic understanding.

Although there was an intensive resistance to Muhammad ‘Abduh’s hermeneutical approach, yet, fundamentally, his method came to dominate all hermeneutical approaches in our present time. He was followed by Rahid Rida who adhered to the same method but with noticeable recourse to previous commentaries. Among others who followed in his course are Muhammad Abu Zayd who tries to interpret away all miracles in the Qur’an, Muhammad Qasimi, ‘Abd al Karim al Khatib, Mustafa al Maraghi and Muhammad al Mubarak. (34)

A pioneer endowed with total vision of the ideals of the Qur’an and a Muslim who had taken practical steps towards their realization was Hasan al Banna (d’1949), the Supreme Guide to the Muslim Brotherhood Organization. The Qur’an, for him, is not only a spiritual enrichment to the soul but a constitution of life extending to commerce, politics, education – nay, even to health and physical education. His organization entered into politics, gymnastics, business companies, the army, and almost all other departments of human activity in Egypt, with unsurpassed vision of the Qur’anic ideal. He was as opposed to *taqlid* as ‘Abduh, and sought reformation with a more enlightened attachment to the sources than ‘Abduh. He was consistent in his refusal to be dragged into discussion of the transcendent realm and condemned such discussion as irrational. Besides total vision of Islam and practical bent of mind towards the viability of the Qur’anic message, he was a staunch supporter of the purity of classical Arabic and directed his followers to stick to it in their daily life. His *Risalatan fi al Tafsir*; (35) can be considered as simple but scholarly directions in the process of understanding. In a most valuable advice to one of his followers, he directed that the faithful’s heart is the best interpreter of the Qur’an, the faithful, he wrote, should approach the Qur’an humbly and with piety; he should remain continuously in touch with it, understand

its admonitions and act accordingly. He must also study the sunnah as an indispensable aid to understanding and never to resort to the commentaries expect when a certain word is beyond his linguistic comprehension. (36)

The most reputed hermeneutical of our days is 'Aishah 'Abd al Rahman, widely known by her pseudonym Bint al Shati. (37) She has two volumes on Qur'anic interpretation entitled *Al Tasdir al Bayani Lil Qur'an al Karim* which discusses her method and its application on parts of the Qur'an. (38)

Contrary to the dominant seriatim treatment of the Qur'an verse by verse, 'Aishah sought an objective treatment in which all the chapters and verses dealing with a common topic were collected together. Then she put them in the chronological order of their revelation, accepting traditional reports only in so far as they threw light on the contextual circumstances surrounding the historical *sitzim-leben* of the verse in question. Consistently, she held that the situational contexts, though specific in nature, do not affect the general applicability of the words. The emphasis is on God's intention above and beyond the historical date.

Her method is basically concerned with the literary and stylistic characteristics of the Qur'an. Hence, she strictly concentrates on the given and avoids speculation. The original linguistic meaning of the Arabic word under investigation is to be sought, then the Qur'anic meaning is noted by collecting all forms of the word in the Qur'an and studying their particular usage in the verse or the chapter and their general usage in the whole Qur'an.

Bint al Shati, like all modern expositors of the Qur'an sought to eliminate all extraneous elements from her understanding of the Qur'an. Biblical narratives, unfounded Arab or no-Arab accounts, were totally avoided. The Qur'an, in her opinion, was never intended to give detailed history but refers to great historical events in a usually summary fashion aiming mainly at the moral examples and spiritual lessons derivable therefrom. She opposes the scientific interpretation approach and views it as an extraneous element. Even if the verse deals with a scientific theory, its main intention is the religious lesson which is always clear if the verse is taken in its context. The opinions of past *exegetics* are to be taken only in the manner that assist in that approach and sometimes their opinions are subjected to vigorous analysis and criticism in the light of her findings.

One of the important findings that came out of this method is her dynamic understanding of free will and human responsibility. In her analysis of the word *kabad* (39) which is rendered by all *exegetics* as affliction, she arrives at the understanding that the word refers to man's natural quality for bearing responsibility and the freedom given to him to choose between good and evil. For this reason man is in affliction, i.e. in an everlasting struggle to choose what is best for him. In fact, the immediate verses after the word bear out this understanding. "Have we not assigned unto him two eyes, and a tongue and two lips and clearly demarcated for him the *najdayn* (the two highways of good and evil)" it is, therefore, man's *kabad* or the tribulation of his innate power

of perception to choose one or the other, having seen with his own eyes and thus bearing the full responsibility for his choice. With this basic approach, she throws light on one of the most striking verses of the Qur'an in which the *amanah* (trust) is said to have been offered to the heavens and the earth but they refused to accept it and were afraid of it, but man did. (40) She utilizes that method to analyze the basic words in the verse, *amanah* (trust) and *hamalaha* (carry it), to find out that it is not the material, the religious or even the intellectual that are entrusted to man but it is his free will, his responsibility of choice and accountability which is the main fulfillment of his humanity and what really distinguishes him from all other creatures sublimely expresses in the words "heaven and earth". This free will, the innate power of choice is man's distinction, his superiority to the angels, who do only as they are commanded. (41), She goes on to corroborate her finding by analyzing other frequent Qur'anic words such as *arada* (to will) which occurs in the Qur'an 140 times and in all of them it never appears as an abstract verbal noun, but either as a presents future tense, or the imperative or the past tenses or in any derivative form. Explaining this phenomenon, she says the Qur'an recognizes will only as an act, not as an intellectual abstraction or an attribute, and that the act of willing itself can not be forced on the subject without ceasing to be itself.

Further, she explains that the words *azama* (to resolve) and *raghiba* (to desire) are never predicated to God but no man; thus showing that man's willing is an outcome of prior desire and forethoughts and hence, of his accountability. God's willing is otherwise because He wills by Himself.

Recently, she engaged in a dialogue with Mustafa Mahmud regarding his *Tafsir*' *Asri* (42) (modern interpretation). She questioned his very knowledge of Arabic and the different sciences requisite for a public comment on the Qur'an. She called for the observation of a very important Islamic hermeneutical principle that while it is everyone's privilege to understand the Qur'an according to his own mental capacity and knowledge, it is only for those who are well founded in the requisite of knowledge to offer interpretation to the public. Her critics replied that Ibn-i-Abbas, the most reputed expositor of the Qur'an, was not a specialist, his only qualification being a sound natural common sense which Dr. Mustafa Mahmud had. She replied that Ibn and others possessed a sound knowledge of Arabic and were educated in what she calls "the school of prophecy". She staunchly rejected any attempt to make commenting on the Qur'an as a common right while upholding everybody's absolute right to understand the Qur'an according to his own experience.

In addition, her method has been criticized as ignoring or belittling the fact that the Qur'an was revealed in more than twenty years and that its diction and style in the earlier revelations may not necessarily be the same as in later ones. Bint al Shati replied by asserting the unity and consistence of the Arabic language throughout the Qur'an as an evident fact in the Qur'an with which most learned Muslims agree. Therefore, the outcome of her deductive method is trustworthy, especially as it relies on the unity and consistency of the Qur'anic language.

Another attempt to disprove the consistency of the outcome of her method was by arguing that classical authorities did not always agree on the situational contexts of the revelation and that such doubt vitiated her results. She countered that such disagreement is true but would have no effect on her method because she does not consider anyone of them as the cause of the revelation but mostly the external circumstance of it. For as long as the emphasis is on the universality of the meaning and not on the specificity of the circumstance, argument of “variant meanings” falls down.

Another fine point of criticism levelled against her method was that since there are Arabic forms and usage that do not appear in the Qur’an, or which are different from those of the Qur’an, to depend on the sense of feeling for different usages in which the word is used is to introduce extraneous elements in the understanding of the Qur’an. Bint al Shati conceded this but retorted that the difference in usage could be well minded and, in fact, may turn to be very helpful in showing the Qur’anic excellence or its particular usage which may have definite overtone on our understanding. But in all cases of grammar, rhetoric and style particularly the ones developed by later productions, the Qur’an is the adjudicate.

To recapitulate: The process of understanding the Qur’an witnessed its major failures in sectarian understanding as well as in the commentators who sought to embellish their commentaries with Israelitisms and Christianisms but without the least criticality. By the time the claim was made for a deeper meaning that is at variance with the apparent meaning of the Qur’an and ‘when Arabic words were completely taken out of their conventional meanings as well as when the foreign doctrines were adopted and Qur’anic passages were twisted to support them, the hermeneutical problem of understanding reached crisis proportion, and the Muslim understanding of the Qur’an suffered serious damage.

These failures had their repercussions on the life of the *ummah* in all its aspects, particularly the notion of *taqlid* which stifled its life. In other words, the religious sentiment which is essential for any authentic understanding of the Qur’an became much weaker and actually impotent.

Being in such unpreparedness, the Muslims recently received a rude shock at the hands of European technology and science. Their response to it varied. The most important of these responses was to seek revival of the *ummah* and to recapture the ideal of the Qur’an. The dominant attitude among modernists is that it is not the Qur’an that presents the problem, but the rigidity imposed by *taqlid*, and their resentment apathy. Consequently, the hermeneutical task is conceived to be one of stripping away these superstitious accretions through a more rigorous criticism of the *hadith*. The highest ideals of the Qur’an are to be exposed clearly and communicated to the masses with all their moving appeal in new forms of religious teaching. In other words, a clearly defined world-view derived from the Qur’an is to be evolved within the context of modern problems and needs. This is the hermeneutical need of the hour for the overwhelming majority of Muslims around the world.

REFERENCES

1. The response to this phenomenon by criticizing circulating reports and codifying the authentic among them in canonical books of *hadith*, is highly praised by some and some are loud in condemning it as a direct cause of stagnation and loss of creativity which characterized the long coming centuries.

Fazlur Rehman is critical of that, particularly of al Shafii's momentous efforts in rejecting *ijma'* after the cannonization of *hadith*. Before al Shafi'i, the living *sunnah* was treated as a general directive in the process of *ijtihad* (free decision) which leads to a wide consensus among the people (*ijma'*). The order was, therefore, the living *sunnah*, the *ijtihad* and the *ijma'*.

For them *ijma'* was not an imposed or manufactured static fact but an ongoing democratic process; it was not a formal state but an informal, natural growth which at each step tolerates and, indeed, demands fresh and new thought and, therefore, must live not only with but also upon a certain amount of disagreement. We must exercise *ijtihad*, they contended and progressively the area of agreement will widen; the remaining questions must be turned over to fresh *ijtihad* or *Qiyas* so that a new *ijma'* can be arrived at. But it is precisely this living and organic relationship between *ijtihad* and *ijma'* that was severed in the successful formulation of al Shafi'i. The place of the living *sunnah-ijtihad-ijma'* he gives to the Prophetic *sunnah* which, for him, does not serve as a general directive but as something absolutely literal and specific and whose only vehicle is the transmission of the *hadith*. The next place he assigns to the *sunnah* of the companions, especially for the first four Caliphs. In the third place he puts *ijma'* and, lastly, he accepts *ijtihad*. Thus by reversing the natural order: *ijtihad-ijma'* into *ijma' - ijtihad*, their organic relationship was severed. *Ijma'*, instead of being a process and something forward-looking-coming at the end of free *ijtihad* - came to be something static and black-ward-looking. It is that which, instead of having to be accomplished, is already accomplished in the past. Al Shafi'i's genius provided a mechanism that gave stability to our medieval socio-religious fabric but at the cost, in the long run, of creativity and originality. There is no doubt that even in later times, Islam did assimilate new currents of spiritual and intellectual life - for, a living society can never stand quite still, but this Islam did not do so much as an active force, master of itself, but rather as a passive entity with whom these currents of life played. An important instance in point is Sufism.

2. Isma'il R. al Faruqi, "Science and Traditional Values in Islamic Society", Vol. II, No. 3, September 1976.
3. *Ibid.*, P. 233 ff.
The terms "doomed" and "refutation" are unfortunate terms, notwithstanding the detriments of *taqlid*. The original works of the imams of thought as well as the *hawashi* that were made on them in the *taqlid* period remain of paramount

importance in the understanding of the Islamic history of thought, in the understanding of the process of understanding itself--nay, in the very understanding of the Qur'an itself. For if we do not mind the success of the past and its pitfalls, progress would be blind. There is no dooming or refutation, therefore, but evaluation and study to find out the points of strength, enhance them and make them more viable to our time; to find out weaknesses in our historical responses to different problems so as to avoid them in our endeavours to hit a successful and happy medium in this world.

4. *Ibid.*, P. 235-36
See Ibn Taymiyyah, *fi Usul al Tafsir*, (Al Qalam Press, Cairo, 1971).
5. The term "Secular" does not have an equivalent in Islamic vocabulary. There are no distinctions in Islam such as religious and secular or sacred and profane as in Christianity. The confession of faith in Islam, *lailaha' illa Allah*, means that there is no reality or existent that enjoys a different order of being than all creatures, except God.

If we may momentarily and for the sake of clarity employ the term "secular" in regard to Islam, religion means the truths revealed in the Qur'an and interpreted by the Prophet Muhammad. This extends to teachings and institutions of divine origin that were taught before Islam. Likewise, secularism implies ideas and institutions that do not descend from an inspired source no matter what that source is. As such we should not view anything that falls within the teachings of Islam as secular nor anything practiced by those who professed Islam as secular nor anything practiced by those who professed Islam as necessarily religious.

The Pythagorean-Platonic wisdom derived from the Orphic mysteries and inherited later by the Muslims can not be called secular and some of the apologetic writings of the Muslim modernists can not be considered as religious although they may be dressed in Islamic terms. (Sayyid Husayn Nasr, "Religion and secularism, their Meaning and Manifestation in Islamic History". *The Islamic Quarterly*, V-VI, No. 3, 4 - July and October 1961, P. 119.) Sir Muhammad Iqbal in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, (Lahore: Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1958, P. 154) expresses the same viewpoint saying:

In Islam, the spiritual and the temporal are not two distinct domains... In Islam it is the same reality which appears as the Church looked at from one point of view and the state from another... Islam is a single unanalyzable reality which is one or the other as your point of view varies... This ancient mistake arose out of the bifurcation of the unity of man into two distinct and separate realities which somehow have a point of contact, but which are in essence opposed to each other. The truth, however, is that matter is spirit in space-time reference. The unity called man is body when you look at it as acting in regard to what we call the external world; it is mind or soul when you look at it as acting.

6. Translated in *The Muslim World*, Vol. IV, January 1941, No.1, P. 64ff by S.M. Zwemer.
7. Syyid Husayn Nasr, "Religion and Secularism", *The Islamic Quarterly Review*. *The Islamic Quarterly*, V-VI No. 3, 4 - July and October 1961, P. 124-25.
8. As late as 1960, Taha Husayn was writing essays in *Al Risalat* (literary monthly published in Cairo), in which he called for the simplification of the written Arabic language as the only means of combating illiteracy on a mass scale. He proposed mainly phonetic orthography; a radical deviation from classical orthographic rules of grammar and syntax. As a result, a controversy broke wide open in *Al Ahram* and *Al Jamhuriyyah*, both dailies, published in Cairo, between the mouthpieces of the Husayn view on the one hand, and upholders of the classicist view, on the other.
9. Marshall C. Gogdson, "Modernity and Islamic Heritage", *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, June 1962, P. 116.
10. See his *Mustaqbal al Thaqafah Fi Misr* (Cairo, 1939).
11. See for example I.C. Bell, *Egypt* (Oxford Press, 1948). And Mahaffy, *Progress of Hellenism in Alexander's Empire*, (Chicago, 1905).
12. Ali 'Abd al Raziq, *Al Islam Wa Usul Al Hukm* (Islam and the fundamentals of government).
13. The climax of the death of this attitude is to be seen in the strong desire of the Su'udi kind for modern armaments, hospitals, universities; a matter which was not so popular with his father.
14. Isma'il R. al Faruqi, "Science and Traditional Values in Islamic Society", P. 236.
15. *Ibid.*, P. 238.
16. Muhammad Husayn al Dhahabi, *Al Tafsir wa al Mufasirun*, Vol. 3, P. 163.
17. Qur'an 36: 40.
18. *Ibid.*, 21: 30.
19. *Ibid.*, 54: 1.
20. *Ibid.*, 2: 22.
See Muhammad Husayn al Dhahabi, *Al Tafsir wa al Mufasirun*, Vol. 3, P. 163.
21. Qur'an 2: 61.

22. Muhammad Husayn al Dhahabi mentions the famous modernists who denounced this hermeneutical approach. They are Muhammad Rashid Rida, Mahmoud Shaltout, Mustafa al Maraghi, Muhammad 'Izzat Darwazah and Amin al Khuli. Al Dhahabi does not mention any works of these modernists.
23. Mustafa al Maraghi in his introduction to *Al Islam wa la Tib al Hadith* by Muhammad Isam'il. See Al Dhahabi, *Al Tafsir wa al Mufasirun*, Vol. II, P. 185.
24. See Abduh's introduction in *Tafsir Juzu 'Umma*. (Al Amiriah Press, Cairo, 1965).
25. M..al Dhahabi, *Al Tafsir wa al Mufarirun*, Vol, III, PP. 214 - 242.
26. *Tafsir al Manar*, Vol. II, P. 17.
27. *Ibid.*, P. 70ff.
28. Qur'an 2: 145.
29. *Tafsir al Manar*, Vol. II, P. 74ff.
30. Quran 2: 275 - 81.
31. *Tafsir al Manar*, Vol. IV, P. 34ff.
32. See his comment in Chapter 113.
33. *Tafsir al Manar*, Vol. 1. P. 281.
34. Abd al Majid al Muhtasib, *Itijibat al Tafsir*, (Cairo: Dar al Fikr, 1973), PP. 213ff.
35. Haasan al Bana, *Risalatan fi al Tafsir*, (Beirut, Manshurat al 'Asr al Hadith, 1972).
36. *Ibid.*, P. 36ff.
37. Bint al Shati was born in Dumyat, Egypt, and was educated at Fuad 1 University in Cairo. She was professor of Arabic language and literature at the University of 'Ayn Shamo in Egypt and presently as visiting professor to many Arab Centers of learning.
38. She dutifully confessed that she acquired her method from her professor of Fuad 1 University in Cairo (later her husband), the late Amin al Khuli as it appears also in his book, *Manabij al Tajidid* (Methods of Revival).
39. Qur'an 90:4.

40. *Ibid.*, 33: 72.

41. Qur'an 66:6.

42. This work does not follow a unique hermeneutical method and did not bring any extraordinary findings. Its author allows himself the liberty to pull some words completely out of their linguistic context, and thus denying his interpretation any weight in the Islamic world of thought. "Shoes" in (20:12), for example are interpreted by him as meaning "spirit and body". Mustafa Mahmud, *Al Qur'an: Muhawalah li Fahm 'Asri*, (Cairo, Rose al Yusif Press, 1070), P. 104.

Cogito, ergo sum.
(I think, therefore I am.)

Descartes

Most men would rather die than think. Many do.

Bertrand Russell

I cannot teach anybody, anything.
But I can make them think.

Socrates