THE POSSIBILITY OF UNDERSTANDING A TEXT: THE UNIVERSALISM - RELATIVISM DEBATE IN THE WESTERN AND MUSLIM HERMENEUTICAL TRADITIONS

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Abstract

This study purposes to compare hermeneutical efforts within the Western and Muslim worlds and it focuses on the universalism and relativism problem discussed in these traditions. The first section makes a general overview of classical and modern approaches in Western hermeneutics. The second section looks at the emergence of hermeneutical discussions in the Muslim world in approaching basic sources of Islam, such as the Qur’an. This discussion will be dealt with in reference to political controversies which emerged during the last two caliphates of Islam. Thirdly, it will compare and evaluate two hermeneutical traditions and attempts to reach a conclusion regarding the general problem and method of hermeneutics.

Key Words: Hermeneutics, relativism, universalism, Sunni Islam, Shi’ism, Qur’an, Bible.

Bir Metnin Anlaşılmasının İmkânı
Batılı ve İslami Yorumsama Geleneklerinde Evrenselcilik-Görecelilik Tartışması

Özet

Bu çalışma Batı ve İslam dünyalarındaki yorumsayıcı çabaları karşılaştırmayı hedeflemektedir ve bu geleneklerde tartışlan evrenselcilik ve görecelilik sorununa odaklanmaktadır. Birinci kısım Batı yorumsamacılığındaki klasik ve modern yaklaşımların genel bir özetini yapmaktadır. İkinci kısım Kuran gibi temel İslami kaynaklara yaklaşımda İslâm dünyasındaki yorumsayıcı tartışmaların ortaya çıkışınu değerlendirmektedir. Bu tartışma İslamiyet’in son iki halifeliği sırasında ortaya çıkan siyasi gerilimler bağlamında ele alınacaktır. Üçüncü olarak, bu çalışma iki yorumsayıcı geleneği karşılaştıracak, değerlendirerek ve yorumsamacılığın genel sorunu ve yöntemi bağlamında bir sonuca ulaşmaya çalışacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yorumsamacılık, görecelilik, evrenselcilik, Sünni İslam, Şiiilik, Kuran, Kitab-ı Mukaddes.

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Introduction

This study, firstly, deals with the problem of the reading of a text as the subject of hermeneutics and its emergence in the West as a scientific-methodological issue as well as a religious-theological problem. After dealing with Western hermeneutics developed in the classical and modern eras, it will, secondly, tackle how Muslim scholars have discussed the possible approaches to the Qur'an—the holy book of Muslims—within the historical context of these discussions. Thirdly, this study tries to make a general evaluation and reach a conclusion regarding the Western and Islamic hermeneutical trends.

I. The Historical Roots of Hermeneutics

The word “hermeneutics” originates with the Greek word hermeneia. Ancient Greek philosophers including Aristotle, Plato, and Xenophon used this word in the context of “interpretation.” An Ancient Greek myth refers to the Greek god Hermes as charged “with the function of transmuting what is beyond human understanding into a form that human intelligence can grasp” (Palmer, 1969: 13). Ancient Greeks used hermeneuein and hermeneia in the context of (1) “to express” some issue by words, (2) “to explain” something with a reason, (3) “to translate” from a foreign language. However, the meaning of “interpretation” is preserved in all of these three meanings (Palmer, 1969: 13-4)

II. Hermeneutics in Modern Studies

The word hermeneutics, however, is used in modern times to denote the meaning of both the understanding of the original meaning of a text and its interpretation within a spectrum of its meanings. In this context, the former meaning implies the possibility of the comprehension of the original meaning, while emphasizing its universality and objectivity. The latter meaning, on the other hand, refers to the impossibility of the comprehension of its original meaning and points out the role of a subjective approach. Therefore, it implies an infinite horizon in interpreting a text. Referring to the problem of universality and relativity in approaching a text, hermeneutics has been used “as [a] technology... to assist discussions about the language of the text (i.e. the vocabulary and grammar), giving rise, eventually, to philology; two, to facilitate the exegesis of biblical literature; three, to guide jurisdiction” (Bleicher, 1980: 11).

III. Six Hermeneutical Trends in the Modern Era

Palmer categorizes six different routes in hermeneutical studies referring to “biblical, philological, scientific, cultural scientific, existential, and cultural emphasis” (Palmer, 1969: 33). The first one, for Palmer, (Palmer, 1969: 34-5) began with Biblical discussions around the possibility of recovering the original (i.e. the true meaning of) Gospel. The second one, as it emerged in the eighteenth century, was the application of the exegetical method which had been used before for the interpretation of the Bible to secular works. Through the third trend, beginning with Schleiermacher, these hermeneutical studies turned from “an aggregate of rules” into “a systematically coherent...science which describes the conditions for understanding in all dialogue” (Palmer, 1969: 40). This was the first attempt for a general and systematic approach to hermeneutics in the West. The
fourth one, for Palmer, (Palmer, 1969: 41) is Wilhelm Dilthey’s study on understanding human life through what he calls Geisteswissenschaften-cultural sciences. For Palmer, the fifth approach is what Martin Heidegger started as a new way of looking at the problem of interpretation as an ontological problem. In this approach, hermeneutics becomes a ‘phenomenological’ explication of human existence itself. Because all human understanding refers to a mode of existence in the world, for Heidegger, every understanding is, in fact, a type of interpretation corresponding to this mode of existence (Palmer, 1969: 42 and see: Heidegger, 1977: 127-36). Therefore, he rendered hermeneutics as an ontological problem, rather than as an epistemological one. In the sixth route, Palmer implies that Ricoeur considers the understanding of a text as the deciphering of symbols embedded in a text (Palmer, 1969: 43).

IV. A Different Taxonomy

Instead of these six routes explicated by Palmer according to their historical development, we prefer to classify hermeneutical studies in regard to their methodological tendency (universalistic or relativistic approaches) and whether the subject concerned becomes theological or scientific-secular:

1) Universalistic trend; the problem of hermeneutics as understanding:
   a) Christian Theological Trend
   d) Anglo-Saxon Literary Critique

2) Relativist Trend
   a) German Hermeneutics Tradition as Interpretation: Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Hans George Gadamer (1900-2002)

1.) The Universalistic Trend in Contemporary Hermeneutics
   a) The Christian Theological Trend

   During the 16th century, opposing the Catholic Church’s doctrines, Protestantism emerged with the thesis that each individual could understand the Bible by one’s self without any need for a priest or any other religious person or institution. In this context, Protestantism emphasized the possibility of understanding the Bible’s original meaning for everyone. It was opposed to the authority of the Catholic Church and its monopolistic adherence to the interpretation of the Bible (See: Cross and Livingstone, 1983: 1135). Therefore, hermeneutics “came into modern use precisely as the need arose for books setting forth the rules for proper exegesis of Scripture” (Palmer, 1969: 34). Because
of the very nature of religious doctrines, all theological motivations come to deal with universalistic hermeneutical themes, as they look for the true meaning in sacred texts. In this regard, Protestant-Hermeneutics is an attempt to interpret the Bible in a valid and universal way by pointing out “the possibility of universally valid interpretation through hermeneutics” (Bleicher, 1980: 12). This theological hermeneutical effort, then, can be categorized within the universalistic trend in hermeneutical discussions.

b) Academic-Methodological Trend

In order to handle academic-methodological hermeneutics, we have to begin with Immanuel Kant’s (1724-1804) studies on philosophy in general, since it can be argued that Kant constructed the main intellectual background of modern science in terms of the philosophical sense in his studies (Bleicher, 1980: 19).

Kant mainly dealt with the nature of the knowing process as well as the ethical aspect of the human being. He started inquiries on the human subject as the basis of epistemological issues. Kant essentially asserted in his philosophy that there is an external world existing as an independent ontological reality as the source of our perceptions and then our knowledge. On the other hand, he argued that although our perception depends on this external world, a priori concepts and forms of space and time in our mind construct the form of this perception. Kant states that:

All sorts of ideas come to us by the senses, and are organized spatially and temporarily, the mind being equipped to receive them in those forms... But neither the senses nor their forms can assemble a variety: that takes an act of the mind, called “synthesis.” (Kant, 1983: 30)

In other words, Kant accepted the existence of things in themselves as the external world beyond our knowledge, supplying perceptions to our knowledge. However, he also asserted that we could not know this real world because of mind-dependent a priori concepts and mental categories. For him, the source of knowledge should not be investigated in the real-external world, but in the unchangeability of mental capabilities of the human mind. In this context, Divver states that, “a rationalist philosophy holds that human reason is unchangeable and universal, a standard whose operations guarantee that knowledge will also be universal and immutable” (Divver, 1987: 60).

Following Kant’s subject-object duality in regard to the understanding of the real world, some German philosophers like Dilthey and Rickert constituted a Neo-Kantian path of thinking (Freund, 1968: 37-38). However, before their neo-Kantian studies, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) had tried to systematize the “general theory” of hermeneutical methodology which had been in an undisciplined condition (Schleiermacher, 1994: 72). Schleiermacher was the first author who improved systematical hermeneutics (Bleicher, 1980: 13). Despite their literary interests, intellectual figures like Ast and Wolf before him could not develop a systematical-methodological approach to hermeneutics (Palmer, 1969: 84-85).
Inspired by Kant’s and Schleiermacher’s studies on methodological and epistemological problems, Dilthey applied Kantian philosophy to the fields of human history and social life. Dilthey (1833–1911) argued that because of human existential and historical conditions, we cannot understand history in its totality—unlike in the natural sciences which investigate their subjects through universal laws (Dilthey, 1988: 41). In this regard, he departed from the Kantian idea of the possibility of universal knowledge through unchangeable human mental categories (Remmling, 1975: 28). Therefore, Dilthey differentiated Geisteswissenschaften-cultural sciences from Naturwissenschaften-physical sciences in his studies. For Dilthey, in the field of cultural sciences, there is no determinacy as they are concerned with meanings in the socio-historical sphere, in contrast to the physical sciences, which essentially deal with the determinate field of natural laws (Dilthey, 1976: 173–9). In addition, the emphatically living experience of the subject-reader that provides common life experience with people living with social facts enables him to understand the meaningful world of the social-historical cultural sphere. However, this experience does not mean to him the experience of facts or senses as it is understood in the Anglo-Saxon world, but life experience in general. According to Divver “the German word, Erleben, which Dilthey uses, has an active sense much stronger than the English ‘experience.’ It connotes lived experience; not merely experience as a series of facts for analysis of commentary” (1987: 65).

c) French-Structuralist Tradition

Bleicher refers to Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology as the beginning of structuralist analysis. Since, for him, Husserl’s “early work attempted to establish the preconditions for ‘philosophy as a strict sense’ by analyzing the givenness of objects of knowledge in consciousness” (Bleicher, 1980: 222). However, here, we prefer to begin our structuralist analysis with the studies of the French thinker, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913).

Structure means a system which is independent of human consciousness and agency in the epistemological as well as ontological sphere and this is opposed to Husserl’s emphasis on human consciousness and the problem of man in his philosophy. In Saussurian linguistic analysis, parole (speech) refers to language that is spoken in everyday life, “while langue represents the constitutive rules of the code which enables the free combination of linguistic elements” (Bleicher, 1980: 223) His linguistic orientation can be seen as a type of structuralism as, for Saussure, the arena of langue which is the most abstract sphere of language, implies the universal sphere of language and independent of individual initiative (Saussure, 1985: 21-23). This idea eventually brings the thesis that there is one set of universal principles in human life that is associated with the universal logic of human language.

The application of this point of view to the human sciences was investigated by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908– ) in an exciting way. For him, there was a correspondence between the human mind and its products like culture, society, myths, etc. (Lévi-Strauss, 2002: 88-89). In other words, social-cultural systems from kinship to cooking patterns are structured according to the structure of the human mind—that is,
language. Then, we can investigate cultural-social spheres by analyzing the main structure of human language within Lévi-Strauss's anthropological and linguistics analyses.

d) Anglo-Saxon Literary Criticism

As American and British Literary Criticism have never attempted to question the possibility of comprehending the original meaning in a text (Palmer, 1969: 5), their literary orientation can be seen as a type of the universalistic trend. Authors who are engaged in this trend do not address the problem of personal interference with the text. In this regard, their literary theory studies are vulnerable to theoretical and methodological criticisms of overlooking the problem of subjectivity and the subject-object relationship in approaching a text.

2. Relativist Trend

a) German Hermeneutic Tradition

Opposed to the former authors, the scholars in this group emphasize that understanding in the sense of the apprehension of original meaning is never possible because of reading conditions. All we apprehend from the text is an interpretation, namely the reading of a text through a specific approach, and textual meaning is comprehended according to a reader's particular existential-historical conditions. In fact, the relativist trend in Western thought has evolved within the very heart of Universalist thinking.

Inspired from the Kantian idea of the construction of knowledge by the synthesis of a priori human mental categories and senses coming from the external world, Husserl (1859-1938) developed a phenomenological method. For Husserl, ontological facticity can be comprehended by bracketing all presumptions of human consciousness (Husserl, 1982: 61). For him, anything that mediates between man and the external world like Kantian mental categories becomes an obstacle to recognize what reality is in an ontological sense.

Following his tutor Husserl, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) tried to develop a philosophy searching for existential conditions, or in his terminology, 'ek-sistential' conditions in the world in his early study Being and Time (1962). Inspired by Kant and Husserl's focus on human subjectivity, Heidegger tried to understand how human beings stay, or in his words, “dwell” in the world through an ontological inquiry. Unlike Kantian and Husserlian philosophies, Heidegger's inquiry on human ontological capacity brought him to a relativist standing. Since there is no universal criterion defining human ontological and epistemological capacity, all knowledge or interpretation is dependent on a human subject's circumstances. In Heidegger's terms, “an interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us” (Heidegger, 1962: 192).

Hans-George Gadamer (1900-2002) attempted to apply his tutor Martin Heidegger's philosophy to a hermeneutical method in his Truth and Method (1975). In this study, Gadamer, basically tries to evaluate how existential conditions in which human beings find themselves bringing forward horizons for understanding. Inspired by Heidegger,
Gadamer proposes that "all understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language that allows the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter’s own language" (Gadamer, 1975: 389). In this horizontal interpretation, a subject approaches a text in an infinite spectrum of meanings without referring to any original meaning. In *Truth and Method*, the hermeneutical question of Heidegger as a search for the historical-existential conditions of a human being remains as a basic problem. From Gadamer’s point of view, the hermeneutical task illustrates the historical conditions coming from a tradition "in which past and present are constantly fused" (Gadamer, 1975: 258).

b) French Post-Structuralism

Beginning with Saussure’s studies on language, linguistic studies developed as a universalistic trend in France. As a response to this trend, French post-structuralism, including authors like Derrida and Barthes, emerged as a synthesis of German hermeneutical thinking and French structuralism. In this regard, Roland Barthes’s later studies can be seen as a critique of Saussure’s universalistic linguistic studies (Barthes, 2005: 180-181). For Barthes (1915-1980), unlike Saussure’s linguistics, the process of reading a text is not a stable-linear issue and does not give us any universal meaning (Barthes, 2005: 173-174). Nonetheless, its “vanishing point is... ceaselessly pushed back, mysteriously opened” (Jefferson, 1982: 101).

Another contemporary French philosopher, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), put forward the concept of *differance* which in English “means both ‘to defer, postpone, delay’ and ‘to differ, be different from’” (Jefferson, 1982: 105). Derrida defines *Differance* as “it is the non-full non-unitary origin; it is the structured and differing/deferring [differante] origin of differences” (Derrida, 1973: 141). Opposed to the term “structure,” this term brings us an open-ended interpretation and sense of the text through a chain of signification and deconstruction of meanings embedded in it.

Finally, we can locate Paul Ricœur’s (1913–2005) studies on hermeneutics in the Post-Structuralist camp as he mainly focuses on concepts like symbols, myths and linguistic expressions with an emphasis on pluralistic interpretation. He proposed a scholar as a hermeneutical subject that searches for both “the clarity of the concept” at the metaphorical level and “the dynamism of meaning” at the speculative level (Ricœur, 1986: 303). In this manner, Ricœur, in his philosophy, appeals for a relative pluralism that merges these two levels (Ricœur, 1986: 303-05).

V. A General Evaluation: Understanding or Interpretation: Betti vs. Gadamer or Schleiermacher vs. Heidegger

As can be seen throughout all these schools, there is a polarization between these schools or scholars from Schleiermacher to Heidegger or from Lacan to Gadamer with respect to whether or not we are able to apprehend the original meaning of a text. For the universalistic school (e.g. Schleiermacher), we can approach our text by universal methods and then apprehend the original meaning of a text in a universalistic sense. These
types of scholars argued that because of the universal conditions of human life, we can understand or apprehend original meaning created by a universal mind or life sphere that is the same for us as for the reading subjects.

On the other hand, authors like Heidegger and Gadamer who have a relativistic tendency, mainly argue that we cannot apprehend the original meaning of a text and we cannot use universalistic methods in approaching any text. What we understand from a text is dependent on our existential-historical situation and it is not the original meaning intended by its author. Therefore, understanding is not possible in its universalistic sense. Approaching a text is always associated with an interpretation dependent on our existing position.

While rejecting any universal meaning, this relativist tendency paves the way for the idea that any interpretation of a text is valid or there is no one valid interpretation of a text. In this regard, "from Betti's standpoint Heidegger and Gadamer are the destructive critiques of objectivity who wish to plunge hermeneutics into a standardless morass of relativity" (Palmer, 1969: 48). In terms of how to approach a text, Betti accuses Gadamer's hermeneutics of not directing "us to historical truth; on the contrary, they open the door to subjective arbitrariness and threaten to cover up or misrepresent historical truth and to distort it" (Betti, 1990: 186).

Thus, Emilio Betti (1890-1968), in his approach to the problem of hermeneutics, recognizes the vulnerable consequences of the relativistic tendency which has no criterion of truth in understanding texts. He is also opposed to Schleiermacher's trend for which objective norms are more important than the problem of whether or not we can apprehend any original meaning in a text (Betti, 1990: 165-7). Rather, Betti searches for the possibility of objective "criteria and guidelines" or, with his own term, "hermeneutical canons" (Betti, 1990: 164). These canons, for him, enable "the interpreter... to recognize and reconstruct within himself with the help of his subtle intuition" (Betti, 1990: 168). Thus, Betti attempts to construct his universalistic hermeneutical method not as a directed from text to reader process, but rather as a continuing process between a reader and his oriented text.

So far, we have made a short assessment of Western hermeneutics. Western hermeneutics, as we have seen, have focused on the possibility of the apprehension of the original meaning in a text and regarding this, the universalism and relativism debate. In the next section, we will have a look at how the problem of hermeneutics in the Muslim world arose.

VI. The Emergence of the Problem of Hermeneutics in Islam

Hermeneutical discussions were brought about by Muslims in approaching the Qur'an and other early sources, like the sayings of the Prophet Mohamed and imams. Since Western scholars discussed hermeneutical problems according to conceptions arising out of the Western historical context, hermeneutics as it emerged in the West stands apart from the social, political, and intellectual experiences of the Muslim world. Therefore, as
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Palmer states, “the implicit interpretative system in every commentary on a text (legal, literary, religious) in Western thought—indeed, why not includes Oriental systems, too?” (Palmer, 1969: 37).

It will be seen that problems encountered by Muslims has led them to ask questions concerning justice, legitimacy, the ideal state and the possibility of the comprehension of true meaning in their religious texts. Then, it can be rightfully thought that these experiences can provide significant contributions to modern hermeneutic discussions.

VII. The Historical Background of Early Islam’s Legitimacy Problem

The discussions and controversies among early Muslims are critical to understanding the Muslim sects and the emergence of different approaches to Islamic sources. Muslim theology, law, jurisprudence and Islamic tradition have developed according to these discussions and controversies.

Although there was no major discussion or controversy among Muslims about the legitimacy of authority under the leadership of the Prophet Mohamed and the first two caliphs; Abu Bakr and ‘Umar, some rebellious soldiers killed the third caliph, Uthman, accusing him of being unjust. ‘Ali, the cousin of the Prophet, was elected as the fourth caliph and his caliphate was recognized by most Muslims. However, some dissenters, including Talha, Zubayr and a widow of the Prophet (‘A’ishah), attacked ‘Ali. They were proposing the application of the principle of reprisal—kisas, against the killers of Uthman. Though ‘Ali defeated them in the Battle of the Camel, near Basrah, Mu’awiyah, the former governor of Uthman in Syria, denied the caliphate of ‘Ali. He insisted on kisas for the killers of Uthman, his cousin, and his army challenged that of ‘Ali’s, in Siffin in 657. ‘Ali accepted coming to an agreement with Mu’awiyah. However, some groups who were mostly rebellious soldiers of Uthman, departed from ‘Ali’s army. They argued that the ultimate criterion for justice was the Qur’an. In their opinion, when ‘Ali accepted an agreement with soldiers who were rebellious against the caliph, he turned aside from justice, which was for them the only criterion for a legitimate caliph. This group, which came to be known as Kharijites, regarded his caliphate as invalid. Others, who were later called the Shi‘ah, supported ‘Ali, recognizing his caliphate in opposition to the rebellious Mu’awiyah and the divergent Khariji’ites (Fiğlali, 1989: 372-4 and Hodgson, 1974: 330-5).

After ‘Ali was assassinated in 661, Mu’awiyah, who controlled a large part of the Muslim army, declared himself caliph based upon his military strength (de facto) not on the legitimacy of any election (de jure) (Fiğlali, 1989: 374). Most Muslims unwillingly accepted his caliphate for the sake of the unity of the Muslim community (ummah). They became neutral with respect to these wars and fragmentation among Muslims referring to these events as the wars of fitnah (controversy among the Muslim community).

While the Kharijites saw the Qur’an as the only source of justice, the Shi‘ah, the supporters of ‘Ali, proposed the descendants of the Prophet for the fulfillment of this important responsibility (Inayet, 1988: 20-21). Meanwhile, neutral Muslims dealt with
the problem of justice at the level of abstract law -shari'ah derived from the Qur’an and the Sunnah, the sayings and examples of the Prophet. These people were called the “Sunnis” as they recognized the Sunnah as a complimentary authority along with the Qur’an in the constitution of general principles of Islamic law.

Thus far, we have tried to evaluate early historical developments and discussions which occurred among Muslims, pointing out how they differed from each other on basic issues like the primary role of the Qur’an, prophethood, justice, etc. In the next section, we will attempt to handle how different Muslim groups approached the Qur’an and other sources in establishing their ethical and legal systems.

1. The Methodological Approach: Jama‘i Sunni or Sunni Islam

Sunnis accepted the Qur’an and Sunnah as the nass, i.e., the main authorities for the Shari’ah-Islamic law. In this regard, they maintained their neutral position to the fitnah wars in regard to the collection of hadiths. They accepted all hadiths reported from all associate-transmitters (Gibb, 1962: 88-91; Rahman, 1993: 95-98) as far as these hadiths were in accordance with the standards of ‘ilm al-hadith, the science of hadith (Kamali, 1997: 68-80).

In order to derive laws and regulations from the Qur’an and the Sunnah, juridical scholars improved upon some techniques leading them to the foundation of the different schools of law (Kamali, 1997, Chs. 4 and 5). In this context, “the fiqh was based on four ‘roots’ (usul al-fiqh): the Qur’an, the hadith, ijma‘, qiyas; among them these four ‘sources’ were supposed to be exhaustive” (Hodgson, 1974: 333). Since all of these schools recognized the Qur’an and hadith as basic authorities, they were known as Sunnis, the followers of the Sunnah. Then, without any need for political involvement, Sunni schools legitimized themselves as the followers of two basic authorities in contrast to how Christian orthodoxy developed, being established as an institutionalized doctrine.

In terms of evaluating the nass, two different approaches or schools emerged among Sunnis. The Medina school, the leader of which was Imam Malik (715-795), approached the nass, i.e. the Qur’an and Sunnah, through their literal meaning (i.e. what their exoteric meaning was without any interpretation). On the other hand, the Kufan school under the leadership of Abu Hanifah (d. 767) tended to understand the nass contextually by using criteria such as when it was said, where, to whom, etc. (Uludağ, 1999: 87). In this sense, “Hanafis defended the use of what others called ra‘y -personal judgment by their early masters on the basis of appeal to a supplementary principle” (Hodgson, 1974: 333).

2) Semi-Methodological Approach

Twelve Imam Shi’ism

As noted earlier, the Shi’a movement emerged as a response to early political discussions and phenomena. They also divided into different groups in later years. We will emphasize one of them in this section, calling it the semi-methodological approach to the Qur’an, as this Twelve Imam Shi’a movement developed a jurisprudence based on the
loyalty to the Prophet's descendants through his daughter, Fatimah and son-in-law, 'Ali. Apart from the Twelver or Imami Shi'a, the other branches of the Shi'a school developed a type of *batini*, esoteric, approach without an exoteric method available to everyone. We will address this in the esotericism section.

Shiite Muslims developed their doctrine and law (Shari'ah) according to their view of the legitimacy of authority or leadership -imamate. For them, the true meaning of the Qur'an, namely *ilm*, was transmitted from the Prophet to his descendants through his daughter Fatimah and his son-in-law 'Ali. They argued that the true meaning of the Qur'an could be known only by the Prophet and imams from his generation. 'Ali, the Prophet's cousin was the first of them. In addition, they also accepted the Sunnah and *hadiths*, but only if they were transmitted through the associates who supported 'Ali in the *fitnah* wars against those rebellious to him (Hodgson, 1974: 335).

While Shi'ite scholars were developing their jurisprudence, they ignored the *hadiths* reported by those whom they claimed they "had betrayed Islam" (Hodgson, 1974: 326). Therefore, Shi'ite jurisprudence and systematic knowledge was founded on "a strong 'Alid loyalism" (Hodgson, 1974: 372). In later years, this 'Alid loyalty of the Shi'a movement brought about the doctrinization of personalism or a sort of elitism in terms of access to Truth, *al-Haqq*. To know true knowledge is not available to everyone, but only to a select few. The Shi'a doctrine, then, was founded on a strong emphasis on esotericism and was the specialization of privileged people. As it was reported from the sixth Imam, Ja'far al Sadiq:

> Our cause is the truth and the truth of truth (*haqq al-haqq*); it is the exoteric aspect, and the esoteric aspect of the exoteric aspect, and the esoteric aspect of the esoteric aspect. It is the secret, and the secret of something which remains hidden, a secret which is supported by a secret. (Corbin, 1993: 37 Italics are in the original text)

Therefore, the basic features of Shi'a doctrine can be described as first "' divine science' is incommunicable; it is not a science in the ordinary sense of the word, and only a prophet can communicate it" (Corbin, 1993: 39). That is to say that this knowledge can be known and communicated by elected or privileged not by ordinary people. Second, we are exposed to the thesis that "sacred *ilm* continued from generation to generation" (Hodgson, 1974: 372). The hiddenness of the *ilm* and its transmission through blood relation to the Prophet was the basic tenet for the Shi'a scholars and this made their improved jurisprudence a somewhat partial system that was not open to everybody in terms of jurisdiction.

3) Non-methodological Approach

a) Kharijites: Communalistic Relativism in Approaching the Qur'an

As mentioned earlier, the Kharijites came into view as a political response to the controversies which emerged during the reign of the fourth caliph, 'Ali, in the name of
justice. At that time, their main motivation was political rather than doctrinal in the first years of the movement, whereas “they saw the possibility of a Qur’anic polity being whittled away by the actions of those in authority” (Watt, 1973: 35). Along with their political arguments, they put forward a tradition -hadith reported from the Prophet that the Muslim “community will be divided into seventy-three sects, of which only one will be saved.” They saw themselves as “the people of Paradise (ahl al-janna)” and considered other groups “the people of Hell, as enemies or potential enemies” (Watt, 1973: 31). From this view, it can be proposed that “Kharijite views belong to a communalistic and not individualistic way of thinking. [Then] they discussed most matters in terms of groups, or communities (Watt, 1973: 35). Opposed to charismatic privilege given to leaders by the Shi’ites, Kharijites emphasized that a leader can be chosen from any tribe, including from among the non-Arabs, without giving any privilege to the Qurayshite tribe or its Hashimite clan (Watt, 1973: 37). Kharijites accepted the Qur’an as the only authority. Since the Qur’an does not give juridical details, they could not develop an Islamic jurisprudence and remained limited to a political movement at that point (See: Inayat, 1988: 23-24; Watt, 1973: Ch. 1).

b) Mu’tazilites: Individualistic Relativism in Approaching the Qur’an

In addition to the main differences among Sunni, Kharijite and Shi’a groups, another group emerged among the Sunnis, called the Mu’tazilites. The Mu’tazilites, who were founded in Basrah in the eighth century, included “a considerable proportion of the cultured Muslim elite” (Corbin, 1993: 106). This movement, according to many sources, emerged from a discussion between Wasil ibn ‘Ata (d. 131-748) and his tutor, Hasan al-Basri (d. 110-728), one of the founders of the Sunni school, “on the question of grave sins” (Corbin, 1993: 106). After Wasil ibn ‘Ata’s separation from his tutor, the group he founded was called the Mu’tazilites -which means “the people who separated.” However, “the heart of their doctrine” was, for Corbin “with regard to God, the principle of transcendence and of absolute Unity; with regard to man, the principle of individual liberty involving direct responsibility for our actions” (Corbin, 1993: 107).

These ideas of individual responsibility and the transcendence of God led Mu’tazilites into the idea of the responsibility of every individual for his or her actions. As they saw the creation of sin as contradictory to the idea of an absolutely just God, they were committed to the idea that individual actions are created by individuals themselves. In this regard, “they stressed the responsibility of free men before a just God: humans’ evil deeds must not be ascribed to God” (Hodgson, 1974: 384). On the other hand, from the Sunni point of

1) Although this movement emerged as a political movement and a rebellious force insisting on the Qur’an and leadership of Muslims based on justice, it eventually tended towards some kind of moderate views like Basran Kharijites that took a doctrinal shape rather than a purely political movement in later years. Even though they did not totally affirm the political authority they were living under, they did not oppose it but were “trying to make them more Islamic” (Watt, 1973: 29). This Basran community was very close to the major community “despite theological differences” (Watt, 1973: 30).
view, whereas individuals have intentions, their actions are created by God (Yasin, 1997: 158 and Watt, 1973: 102).

Whereas Muʿtazilites were deeply concerned with the "law, they supplemented it with a strongly intellectual concern with ultimate questions" (Hodgson, 1974: 384). Therefore, they extensively indulged in the problem of the creation of the Qurʾan in addition to grave sins. Their insistence on the notion of God’s transcendence led them to the idea that the Qurʾan was a created entity:

> According to them, to say that the Qurʾan is the divine uncreated Word which manifest itself in time in the form of Arabic speech, is equivalent to saying what Christians say about the Incarnation: that Christ is the divine uncreated Word, who manifest himself in time in the form of a human being (Corbin, 1993: 109, italics in the original text).

Meanwhile, their emphasis on the Qurʾan’s createdness inspired them with the idea that the Qurʾan is a part of the Universal word-Logos. This idea was primarily proposed by ancient Greek philosophers to refer to the Universal Idea that covers everything belonging to speech. Applying this idea to their philosophy, Muʿtazilites argued that the Qurʾan does not have a significant place since all rational statements and speech which were all generated from the divine word-Logos are equal to each other.2 As they denied the Qurʾan and any other source as a special reference basis for a juridical system, Muʿtazilites could not construct a law system (Corbin, 1993: 112). Whereas Sunni scholars found this source in the authority of the Qurʾan and Sunnah, Shiʿa scholars put forward the Qurʾan, hadiths from trustworthy authorities, and the authority of imams in formulating their law systems.

The Sunni response to Muʿtazilites and their interpretative relativism most notably came from scholars like al-Ashʿarī and al-Gazzali. Both applied atomism as a tool to oppose the Muʿtazilite’s concept of Logos -the permeating language as a source of truth. In the atomistic understanding of the Universe, as atomistic facts are distinct from each other and interact with each other in uncertain, identifiable relations, we can reach certain universal truths not through reason and rational argumentation but only by means of Nass -the Qurʾan and hadiths-Prophetic sayings (Peters: 1968: 289).

Following the al-Ghazali era, certain interpreters-Mufasseers such as Fahrudin ar-Radi in his exegesis Tafseer al-Kabeer (1988) applied this method. Following al-Ashʿarī, al-Ghazali and their atomistic approach, er-Razi and similar post-Ghazali scholars attempted to construct their interpretative-tafseer understanding. For this approach, as there is no certain universal truth which can be deduced out of reason and nature, all rational arguments can be used in the service and for the sake of Nass and religious truths

2) This idea helped them to receive support from the early Abbasid caliphs in arranging Abbasid juridical laws pragmatically, namely independent of the Qurʾanic restrictions (Hodgson, 1974, 388-9).
(Mahdi, 1957: 142). However, this post-Ghazalian approach brought its disadvantages, too: relativism in terms of rational arguments. As there was no universal truth depending on logic and nature, all arguments can be used for certain ends. Especially in social matters, if there is no any regulation or pattern to follow, this matter of relativism leads to a type of fatalism: whatever is right and wrong, is ultimately created by the will of God. Then, anyone who can follow these arguments can believe that the Mongol and Crusader attacks and invasions happened not because of Muslim fault but because of the will of God and unavoidable destiny. Then, what Maturidi did to oppose al-Ashari atomism and its consequential relativism by limiting atomistic understanding and proposing that relations between atomistic facts are principal truths and can be broken by the will of God, Ibn Khaldun proposed this against post-Ghazalian thinkers. Ibn Khaldun tried to find these types of regulations in society and history and according to which rules the destinies of states are dependent on in his *Mukaddime* (Ibni Haldun, 1970). Ibn Khaldun explained social and historical facts by applying two terms: *müلك*, ownership of state property and *asabiyya*, tribal cohesiveness, and attempted to explain the rise and fall of kingdoms through the contradictory relations between these two facts (Ibni Haldun, 1970: 68-71).

c) **Esoterism-Batiniyye Movement**

The term *Batiniyye*, here, is used to refer to all schools rejecting or refusing exoteric limitations in understanding the Qur’an. These groups approached the Qur’an through an esoteric perspective. One of these groups, the Isma’ilis (adherents of Ja’far’s son Ismail) emerged as an esoteric Shi’ah sect “who gave primacy to an ‘inner meaning’, a *batin*, in all religious words and formulations” (Hodgson, 1974: 379). In this regard, Ismailism accepted esoteric notions more intensely than Twelve Imam Shi’ism (Hodgson, 1974: 393).

Their main tendency was to emphasize an esoteric approach to the Qur’an, and “their piety was built on a sense of the esoteric hiddenness of truth and holiness...[which was] concealed from the masses” (Hodgson, 1974: 379). We, here, refer to Isma’ili Shi’ism as a non-methodological approach as it rejects any exoteric (open-literal) meaning. On the contrary, Twelve Imam Shi’ism attempted to build a type of exotericism by applying the *hadiths* reported by some specific sources and on the authority of the twelve imams. Isma’ili Shi’ism’s rejection or overlooking of the exoteric side, the *zahir*, introduces a relativism of ideas without objective principles. Which idea is true or valid depends on uncertain-personal interpretations. As Corbin states:

*Batīn* is not dissociated from the *zahir*, what emerges is the form of Twelver Shiism...If the *batīn* is carried to the point where it obliterate the *zahir*, and as a result of the Imamate takes precedence over prophecy, we get the reformed Ismailism of Alamud. (Corbin 1993: 27, italics are in the original text)

This kind of esoterism rejecting any exoteric restriction sometimes led them to the refusal of any political authority through a type of anarchism. For instance, Alamud
Isma'ilism as an expression of an esoteric -batiniyye movement, terrorized Muslim territories in the twelfth and the first half of the thirteenth centuries.

VIII. Modern Muslim Approaches to the Qur'an

The most important phenomenon for the Muslim world in modern times has been the extensive influence of modernization over Muslim countries. It began with the dynamic social economic and political changes in the West in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This modernization effect essentially influenced the old type of political structures in the Muslim countries and it brought about their military defeat to Western forces. One of them, the Ottoman Empire, fell at the end of the First World War (1918), whose boundaries had contained many modern Muslim countries until the beginning of the twentieth century.

The impact of modernization on the Muslim world also appeared in intellectual life as well as in understanding the Qur'an. Compared to the classical interpretation methods mentioned above, new exegetical techniques regarding the Qur'an were brought into discussion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and Jamal ad-Din Afghani (1838-1897) attempted to produce a modern exegesis-tafsir, by applying rational methods to the understanding of the Qur'an. For them, many foreign cultures and thought like Hindu spiritual practices had been mixed with the 'essence' of Islam throughout its history. In order to 'return' to this essence, the Qur'an -the primary source for Muslims -should be re-understood apart from these historical blurs in our present age. Their main instrument to evaluate the Qur'an in its original sense was rationalism (See: Gibb, 1975: 40-45). One intellectual impact of their attempt was their emphasis on the re-opening of the gates of ijtihad -making new juridical judgments.

Similar efforts can be seen in other contemporary Muslim thinkers like Fazlur Rahman (1919-1986) and Syed Abul Ala Maudoodi (1903-1979). Rahman essentially tried to discover the basic purposes of the Qur'an in order to apply Qur'anic principles to the modern era. Finding the essential purposes of the Qur'an, for him, would also allow Muslims to make new juridical regulations (ijtihad) according to the necessities of the modern world (Rahman, 1993: Ch. 14).

On the other hand, some European Muslim scholars like René Guénon (1886-1951), Fritjof Schuon (1907-1998), Martin Lings (1909-2005) and their disciple Seyyed Hossain Nasr (1933- ) have represented an oppositional view. From this point of view, what should be questioned is not the Islamic tradition itself, which has been accused of corruption by modernist Muslim scholars, but modernity itself. Modernity, for these scholars, represents a departure from the living organism of the Islamic tradition. According to this "traditionalist" perspective, modernity with its culture, civilization and science cannot be taken as granted as an ultimate point to judge the traditional history Islam has left us. Thus, Muslim tradition can not be thrown aside for the sake of this "digressed" modernity (Nasr, 1981: Chs. 1 and 2).

In addition, Mohammad Arkoun (1928- ) in France tries to apply modern French-poststructuralist ideas to the interpretation of the Qur'an. For him, meaning in the Qur'an are
open to interpretation in an infinite horizon without a specific meaning. These meanings cannot be restricted to some kind of ‘legally accepted’ interpretations (Arkoun, 1994: Chs. 7 and 8).

Also in Turkey, Said Nursi (1873-1960) purposed to apply modern scientific and intellectual tools to the understanding of the Qur’an (Mardin, 1989: 34-39). He tried to render the Qur’an more understandable for average people living in modern times rather than formulate a new approach to elicit legal judgments. He evaluated the re-opening of the door of *ijtihad* as dangerous for *Shari’ah* which had been, for him, formulated according to the Qur’an and *hadith*. He considered the contemporary age (*zaman-ı asri*) as a departure from the spirit of the Qur’an, namely the obedience to God, which was prominent in the traditional period of Islam (Nursi, 1992: Ch. 27). Instead of interfering with the Sunni juridical tradition, he emphasized the re-interpretation of the Qur’an according to modern scientific and cultural developments.

**Conclusion**

In this study, we have tried to make a general evaluation in regard to the problem of hermeneutics as it has developed in Western countries as well as in the Muslim world. In the West, inspired by its ancient Greek roots, the word “hermeneutics” began to be used with the emergence of Protestantism as an assertion that everyone could understand the Bible without reference to Church authority. This daring thesis of Protestantism stimulated hermeneutical efforts to understand the Bible as well as secular texts.

In addition, here, we tended to classify hermeneutical studies into two categories: first the universalistic approach, which basically argues that we can approach a text through methodologically objective methods to comprehend the original meaning embedded in it. The second trend in Western hermeneutical studies is the relativist-interpretative trend. This view argues that since the process of understanding and interpretation depends on the reader’s existing and historical conditions, understanding a text in a universalistic sense is not possible. As mentioned above, the universalistic trend accuses scholars of relativist hermeneutics of departing from any standard or criterion for objectivity in approaching a text and bringing forth uncertainties. As a response, the relativist interpretation trend charges universalistic hermeneutics scholars with interfering in the hermeneutics process and distorting the meaning of texts with their own norms and criteria.

In the Muslim world, on the other hand, hermeneutical or interpretation studies in a general sense began after the Prophet and first two caliphs. When Muslims encountered the legitimacy problem of succeeding political authorities, they felt that they needed to understand the Qur’an and other sources and apprehend their valid meaning. They even sometimes faced military strife from different parties for the sake of concepts like the ideal state, authority, justice, etc. The understanding of the Qur’an acquired more importance for them in regard to these problems.

In this study, three main trends in approaching the Qur’an have been mentioned. The first is the Sunni methodological view. Sunni scholars developed methodological principles to evade careless and vague interpretations of the Qur’an by depending on
the Sunnah - the sayings and actions of the Prophet - as its complimentary authority. This approach which led them to be called "Sunnis" paved the way for the differences among some Sunni juridical schools according to their literal or interpretative approaches to these sources.

The second trend is Twelve Imam Shi’ism, which we have described here as using a semi-methodological approach. Although they developed a legal system, this juridical system was not founded on objective rules which are open to all Muslim. The Shi’ites, unlike the Sunnis, accepted the idea of loyalty to ‘Ali and the authority of the imams who were proposed to have true knowledge of the Qur’an. For Shi’ites, the esoteric knowledge of these imams is not available to ordinary people.

Thirdly, we dealt with what we have called here the non-methodological approach. In this section, we addressed the views of the Khariji’ites, Mu’tazilites, and Isma’ilis. These groups embraced either charismatic communalistic ideas (the Khariji’ites), or a rationalistic approach to the Qur’an treating it like any other rationalistic source (the Mu’tazilites), or esoteric indeterminacies (Isma’ili esotericism). These groups, therefore, could not develop any systematic legal approach.

It seems that in both the Western and Islamic worlds, and in both classical and modern times, hermeneutical discussions revolve around the universalism and relativism debate. Whereas the Universalist perspective attempts to reach the original meaning intended by the author through applying universal methods, relativism puts forward relative existential and historical conditions for any reader and charges universalism with bringing its own norms and standards in the name of objectivity and universality. On the other hand, universalism accuses relativism of uncertainty, arbitrariness and personalism by bringing in a standard-less interpretation according to one’s own wishes. This personalism, at the same time, leads to authoritarianism by attributing some privileged people hierarchical upper status and hidden knowledge that is not accessible to ordinary people. In addition, refusing any type of universal truth, relativism may bring about the principle of “might is power,” by rejecting the legitimacy of any authority with anarchistic results.

The hermeneutical relativism of Derrida and Gadamer in Western hermeneutics and Mohammad Arkoun’s post-structuralist approach to the Qur’an may result in the same kind of arbitrariness in understanding texts as they do not bring any objective criteria in their hermeneutical efforts. The Tradionalist School’s emphasis on esoteric meaning also has the same problem: if these esoteric rules are not objective and are not open to all people, who knows and according to which criteria are the true and valid interpretations of the Qur’an? Meanwhile, Fazlur Rahman and Muhammad Abduh modernist-rationalist school’s search for the original meaning of the Qur’an to make new regulations can not avoid the problems of the universalism-relativism debate. The Qur’an itself yields so many meanings for every reader. The original meaning cannot be attributed to some definite meanings to elicit juridical regulations.

The vulnerable position of the universalistic trend in both Western and Muslim hermeneutics seems to be that these scholars insist on the possibility of apprehending the
original meaning in a text in order to evade relativistic-arbitrary interpretations. However, in order to prevent such arbitrary interpretations, the search for an original meaning does not suffice the critique of relativism concerning the universalistic trend: how do we know it is the original meaning intended by the author without the author’s confirmation.

Regarding the debate concerning relativism and universalism in hermeneutics, from the Muslim world, the Sunni point of view offers us an interesting alternative in reading a text by insisting on a methodological approach, not the original meaning in the Qur’an. In constituting this methodological approach, in addition to the first reading (in the Sunni case, it is the Qur’an), Sunnis brought forth a second reading, the Sunnah (the sayings and actions of the Prophet) as the complimentary criterion. Then, they have read the Qur’an through the latter. In approaching both sources, throughout the spectrum from the most literalist to the most contextualist readings, all types of approaches were regarded as valid as far as they recognized both major sources.

In Western hermeneutics, Betti also proposed methodological universalism instead of the universalism of original meaning. Therefore, what we have tried to emphasize in this study is that the methodological approach instead of the universalistic search for original meaning is able to break the universalism and relativism circle. The methodological approach (looking for certainty and universality, not in an original meaning, but in methodological principles and giving freedom to interpretative efforts in so far as they accept these certain principles) may provide a general (not universal) sense of understanding of a text and avoid uncertain arbitrary interpretations and cataclysmic results.

References


THE POSSIBILITY OF UNDERSTANDING A TEXT: THE UNIVERSALISM-RELATIVISM DEBATE IN THE WESTERN AND MUSLIM HERMENEUTICAL TRADITIONS


