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Western Impact on Contemporary Qur'anic Studies: The Application of Literary Criticism

Necmettin GÖKKİR*

Çağdaş Kur'an Araştırmalarına Batının bir Etkisi: Edebiyat Eleştirisinin Kullanılması

Bu çalışmamızda, batı etkisinde kalan çağdaş dönem Kur'an araştırmalarını ele aldık. Söz konusu etkiye bir örnek olarak, Kur'an yorumlarında edebiyat eleştirisinin kullanılması alınmıştır. Çalışmada öncelikle Batı edebiyatında kullanılan bu eleştiri metodlarının Kur'an'a niçin ve nasıl uygulandığı, özel olarak da ilk uygulayıcılarının kimler olduğu ele alınmıştır. Farklı bir yapıya sahip Batı edebiyat eleştirilerinin, Kur'an araştırmalarında kullanılması neticesinde ne gibi bilimsel sonuçlar doğurduğu ve uygulama sürecinde karşılaşılan problemler de çalışmamızda ele alınan konular arasındadır.

Key Words: Qur'anic Studies, Literary Criticism, Historical Criticism, Fazlur Rahman, Muhammed Arkoun, Farid Esack, Structural Linguistics.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kur'an araştırmaları, Edebiyat Eleştirisi, Tarihsel eleştiri, Fazlurrahman, Muhammed Arkoun, Farid Esack, Yapısal dilbilim.

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INTRODUCTION

A- The Purpose of the Study and Theoretical Underpinning

This study aims to expose the application of contemporary Western critical methods to the study of the Qur'an. It attempts to evaluate the subject for two different purposes. One is to explore the contemporary Qur'anic studies in the context of application of western literary theories and the second purpose is to investigate contemporary pioneer Muslim applicants¹ of these twentieth century western literary criticism, like historical criticism, structuralism, liberation theology so on in Qur'anic studies.

* Dr., Istanbul University Faculty of Theology, ngokkir@hotmail.com

¹ The term "*applicant*" in this study is used for who apply literary criticism.

In this kind of study it will be vital to critically review and apply the “cultural borrowing” theory which one-dimensionally stresses the aspect of the “Western impact on *Islamic* culture”. It will be examined whether such a theory is still a valuable tool for researchers of the Middle East in their assessment of current trends. This approach has been criticized because it neglects the intellectual roots of Islamic thought as well as the role of internal debates in Muslim societies. The issue of *cultural borrowing* seems to be one of the most critical of modernisation and Westernisation theories because, as the name implies, it is a basis for the analysis of the modern period of Islam. Modernisation and Westernisation have led to fundamental changes in belief and practices in Muslim countries. Grunebaum, for instance, claims that the main objective of modernisation and Westernisation during the last century was to deal with the inferiority of the Islamic world, rather than to be completely Westernised or secularised. This theory, as useful as it is for the theoretical discussion of cultural change in the 19th century, can be criticized for not being applicable to phenomena of transformations that occurred in the second half of the 20th century. The issue of cultural borrowing should also be related to global developments which took place due to advancements in communication, transport and information technology, which bring the remotest parts of the world within easy reach, enabling exchange of information, methodology and culture between different parts of the world. It is not just technologies, which carry culture throughout the world, but also people. The 20th century witnessed the immigration of Muslims to Western countries, Great Britain, France, Germany and North America. One can even suggest that Muslim societies today are part of the West. Among others, doctoral degrees in the field of Islamic and Qur’anic studies in major European universities, as well as in the United States, Canada and elsewhere, are increasingly subscribed to by second or third generations of immigrants. Consequently, most of these students enter graduate programmes with a Western educational background and a set of academic assumptions that are almost the same as those of non-Muslims. This certainly has given them a Western perspective in their studies of Islam and, more drastically, of the Qur’an.

The advancements in mass education and mass communication in the last two decades, as another fact of the modern Muslim world, also brought

a dramatic change in the social and religious structure of the Muslim world. Greater number of individuals attend higher educational institutions. This produced a new mass media audience for intellectual products. Until the 1970s, almost all of the literature in arts, philosophy and history were either translations of Western originals or they were deeply influenced by a pro-Western model. Consequently, educated Muslims had direct access only to Western intellectual and cultural fashions.

The tremendous expansion of the mass media and publishing, additionally, extended Qur'anic teachings to countless individuals, and this consequently broke the mediation of the "ulama", classical religious scholars. Modern Muslims started to raise questions as to the essence of Islam and its application to contemporary lifestyle. Finally these developments have created the "New Muslim Intellectuals"² who challenged the religious authority of *ulama*. Muhammad Shahrour in Syria,³ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd⁴ in Egypt can be named among such Muslim intellectuals. The common aim of these scholars is a re-interpretation of the Qur'an as well as the redefinition and reorganization of traditional concepts in the light of their experiences of modern societies.⁵

² The term was coined by Michael E. Meeker to describe a new kind of intellectual in the Middle East. For further information see: Michael E. Meeker, (1991) "The New Muslim Intellectuals in the Republic of Turkey" in *Islam in Modern Turkey*, ed. by Richard Tapper, London: I. B. Tauris, pp. 189-219.

³ For further information see: Andreas Christmann, (2004) "The Form is Permanent, but the Content Moves: the Qur'anic Text and its Interpretation(s) in Mohammad Shahrour's al-Kitab wal-Qur'an" in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. by Suha Taji-Farouki, London: Oxford University Press ; The Institute of Ismaili Studies, pp. 263-295.

⁴ For further information see: Navid Kermani, (2004) "From revelation to Interpretation; Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the Literary Study of the Qur'an" in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. by Suha Taji-Farouki, pp. 169-192.

⁵ For further information see: Eickelman, D. F and James Piscatori (1998) *Muslim Politics*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. 3-79; Dale F. Eickelman, (2000) "Islam and the Languages of Modernity", *Daedalus*, v. 229, pp. 119-135; Michael E. Meeker, (1994) "The Muslim Intellectual and his Audience: A New Configuration of Writer and Reader among Believers in the Re-

The last two decades of the 20th century observed a definite break in the traditional style of interpretation in Qur'anic studies. These new perspectives have mostly been inspired by Western intellectual developments. A number of scholars in the Muslim world began to interpret and read the Qur'an through Western perspectives and methodologies. Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Muhammad Arkoun, Farid Esack are significant figures in the Muslim world who played a pioneering role in applying this modern perspective in their studies. In addition to being influenced by the intellectual and the cultural impact of the West, Muslim scholars like Fazlur Rahman and Arkoun, on the one hand, emphasise, what they called, an "objective" and "scientific" framework for the analysis and interpretation of the Qur'an. On the other hand, Farid Esack highlights the readers' contextual approach to the Qur'an. Abu Zayd, moreover, attempts a predominantly secular reading of the Qur'an which he regards primarily as a literary text.

B- Background of the Study

There has been a pronounced need to re-interpret the Qur'an in the Modern period. A crisis descended upon Islam in the encounter with the enlightened and more or less secularized Europe of the 19th century. The Islamic world faced both a physical and an ideological challenge. During that period Muslims no longer ruled their lands; European colonialism encroached progressively on the Islamic world. The modern exegesis of the Qur'an began, not due to academic problems, but to contemporary world affairs. It is notable that modern interpretation of the Qur'an since the beginning of the nineteenth century has been under the influence of Western thought. The impact of Western science has been, Rippin maintains,⁶ "the major factor in creating new demands and also the element of contemporary life to which much early modern *tafsîr* made its response." The Qur'an has always been regarded as one of the sources of Islam. But in the modern period of Islamic intellectualism that promotes the notion of the

public of Turkey." in *Cultural Transitions in the Middle East* ed. Şerif Mardin, Leiden, New York & Koeln: E.J. Brill, pp. 153-155 and Duygu Köksal, (1996) *The Politics of Cultural Identity in Turkey*, PhD thesis, The University of Texas.

⁶ Rippin, A, (1987) "Tafsir", *ER*, p. 242

reinterpretation of Islam as the result of Western influences, the Qur'an is the only source in reference to the new development.⁷ Muhammad Abduh, for instance, presents the Qur'an in a practical manner to a wide public, wider than the professional Islamic theologians, to show that the Qur'an has solutions for the urgent problems of the day.

Because of the influence of Western technology and culture, 19th and 20th century Muslim exegetes were forced to focus, as Jansen points out, on three aspects of interpretation, *Scientific exegesis (tafsīr 'ilmī)* seeks to draw all possible fields of human knowledge into the interpretation of the Qur'an; to find in the Qur'an that which has been discovered by the sciences of the 19th and 20th centuries. They looked for scientific evidence within the Qur'an, and sought to find parallels within contemporary Western sciences. *Philological exegesis* is the science of discovering what words in the Qur'an meant in the past, and what the author/God intended them to mean. In the philological genre, the *author intention* principle (maqāsid) was only used by Muslims when trying to derive what those in Meccan and the Medinan period had meant. Amīn al-Khūlī got around the grammatical problems by maintaining that the Qur'an came to humanity in an Arab costume, and therefore in order to understand it we should know as much as possible about the Arabs of that time. He advocated a historical-critical study of the Qur'an; suggesting one should first study the history, society, and language of the people to whom it was addressed, and only then interpret the Qur'anic verses in the light of these studies.⁸ *Practical exegesis* deals with seeking to implement the Qur'an in everyday life. Practical exegesis became an exercise in explaining to what degree one should tolerate Western influence on secular and religious life. Muhammad 'Abduh was a good example of how one could apply a practical interpretation of the Qur'an in the world of his day. He believed that Islam not only had all the answers for humanity, but could also adopt, through *reason* and *Ijtihad*, those discoveries which were being evidenced within European and Western culture, providing a proper set of laws were enforced by a just

⁷ See further information about western impact on modern Muslim interpretation: Rippin, A., "Tafsir", pp. 242-243.

⁸ Jansen, J. J. G., (1980) *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt*, Leiden: E.J.Brill, p. 66.

Islamic power. There will always be a need to interpret the Qur'an for today, to explain how and where we can take its precepts and apply them to our lives.

In parallel to modern developments in Muslim countries, Islamic intellectualism had continued systematic attempts to reinterpret the Qur'an in the twentieth century in ways which reflect the realities of modern Muslim intellectualism and politics. In this period Muslim societies have experienced significant transformations. Under Western influence Muslim countries followed a path of Westernisation and secularisation as they increasingly adapted Western norms and models in politics, law and education. In the light of Western values e.g. democracy, social justice, freedom, gender and race equality, tolerance, human rights etc, the political and social spheres need re-interpretation. Since 1980, new paradigms have been intensively debated throughout the Islamic world. As a part of the academic and intellectual interaction with the West a new kind of intellectual group has emerged. These scholars are similar to and probably inspired by their Western counterparts. These scholars have adapted *critical theories* and *methods* as new hermeneutical models of understanding the Qur'an. Their aim is to re-read the Qur'an in the light of modern textual and philosophical disciplines, such as literary criticism, epistemology, hermeneutics, structuralism and post-structuralism and to re-read the Qur'an asking the question, not what, but how do we interpret.

Here, we introduce Fazlur Rahman, Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and Farid Esack, their bibliography, relevant works, and how they apply western literary criticism in their study of the Qur'an. We will investigate their position as pioneer applicants and the mediators of Western literary criticism to Islamic academia.

1- FAZLUR RAHMAN AND THE APPLICATION OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Fazlur Rahman always argues that the imperfection and imprecision of traditional Islamic methodology cannot help us understand the Qur'an today. These approaches, according to Fazlur Rahman, are indeed essential for an understanding of the text of the Qur'an. Nevertheless we need a hermeneutical theory that will help us to understand the meaning of the

Qur'an *as a whole* so that the theological sections of the Qur'an and the ethical parts become a unified whole.⁹

The theory of understanding the Qur'an *as a whole* is not a new issue of Islamic intellectualism. Since the fourteenth century there has been an influential theory, *ʿIlm al-Munāsabāt* (the science of intratextuality) that views each surah as a unified discourse. Badr al-Din al-Zarkashī in his *Burhān*, and Jalāl al-Din al-Suyūṭī in his *Itqān* mention the idea of the surah as unities.¹⁰ Until the twentieth century, however, this theory was rarely used. Recently, Western attacks on the coherence of the Qur'an have led to an apologetic defence. ʿIzzat Darwaza, Sayyid Qutb, Mohammed Husayn al-Tabatabai, and Elmalılı Muhammad Hamdi Yazir are the most important scholars in regard to the Qur'an as unity. Darwaza in his *al-Tafsīr al-Hadīth*, for example, tries to clarify how the Qur'anic chapters, verses even passages are interconnected with each others. More clearly, Sayyid Qutb discusses what he calls the *mihwār* (central thesis) of each surah. For him, every chapter has a central idea and is to be understood with reference to it. Tabataba'i coined the term *gharad* (objective, purpose, intent) to explain the central idea of the surah. More radically, Elmalılı, a Turkish scholar, claims that not only the suras but also the whole Qur'an has unity; the chapters have not been put next to one another arbitrarily, on the contrary, the ideas continue in the next chapter. Abdel Haleem's article¹¹, "Context and Internal Relationships" is a most recent example. The above scholars, however, failed to provide a systematic, comprehensive application of the theory of intra-textuality to the Qur'an, which gives rise to discussion on new methods for the study of the Qur'an.

The modern application of the theory of the unity of the Qur'an and of its chapters, although it is claimed that it originally belonged to Muslim

⁹ Fazlur Rahman, (1986) "Interpreting the Qur'an", *Inquiry*, May, p. 45.

¹⁰ For further information on historical development of the Science of Intratextuality, *ʿIlm al-Munāsabāt* in Muslim Tafsir tradition see: Mustansir Mir (1993) "The Sura as a Unity", *Approaches to the Qur'an* ed. by G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef London: Routledge, pp. 211-224.

¹¹ Abdel Haleem, M.A.S., (1993) "Context and Internal relationships: keys to Qur'anic Exegesis" in *Approaches to the Qur'an*, ed. by G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef London: Routledge pp. 71-92.

intellectual tradition, has however been indirectly under the influence of the West. Muslim scholars who encounter the attack of Christian missionaries or criticism of Western orientalism are trying to maintain a defence against the notion that the Qur'an is discontinuous.¹² Consequently the twentieth century in particular witnessed the publication of commentaries which classified key passages of the Qur'anic text according to their main subject and treated verses related to the same subject synoptically. In this method, the exegesis of the Qur'an is not done verse by verse. On the contrary, it seeks to study the Qur'an by taking up a particular theme from among the various doctrinal, social and cosmological themes dealt with by the Qur'an.

Indeed, the modern application of the theory of unity to the Qur'an has another cause in the twentieth century. It is notable that modern interpretation of the Qur'an since the beginning of the nineteenth century has been under the influence of Western thought. The impact of Western science has been, Rippin maintains,¹³ "the major factor in creating new demands and also the element of contemporary life to which much early modern *tafsir* made its response." The Qur'an has always been regarded as the primary source of Islam. But in the modern period of Islamic intellectualism that promotes the notion of the reinterpretation of Islam as a result of Western influences, the Qur'an is the only source in reference to the new development.¹⁴

As part of understanding the Qur'an as a unity, for Fazlur Rahman, it becomes essential to understand the "*urf*" (customs), institutions and the general way of life of the Arabs; in particular, the situation in Mecca immediately before Islam. We must try not only to understand pre-Islamic Arab religion but also their social institutions, economic life and political relationships. The prominent role of the Quraish and its religious and economic superiority among Arabs must be understood. The Qur'an has therefore to be understood in its proper context.

¹² Mir, Mustansir, *ibid*: 218.

¹³ Rippin, A., "Tafsir", p. 242.

¹⁴ For further information about western impact on modern Muslim interpretation see: Rippin, A., "Tafsir", pp. 242-3.

During his PhD, Fazlur Rahman had noted the lack of historical thinking among Muslim intellectuals. Fazlur Rahman maintained that the Qur'an should be studied in historical order to appreciate the development of its themes and ideas; otherwise one is apt to be misled on certain important points. One should then study it in its socio-historical background - this applies not only to individual passages, for which there were what the Qur'an commentators call 'occasions of revelation', but also to the Qur'an as a whole, for which there was a background in pagan Mecca that can be called 'the occasion of the Qur'an'.¹⁵

The formulation of Fazlur Rahman's system of hermeneutics, according to his Turkish student, Alpaslan Açıkgenç, falls into three periods.¹⁶ First is the crisis period, which covers the time of his education until his early teaching career at Durham. Second is the synthesis period, beginning in 1958 when he began teaching at McGill and lasting until his resignation in 1968 from the directorship of the Central Institute at Lahore. And third is the resolution period, which covers his teaching career at the University of Chicago (1969-1988).

By the crisis period, Acikgenc means Fazlur Rahman's becoming aware of conflict between his early traditional education and the modern one. In order to solve this conflict, Fazlur Rahman had suggested reform and revival in Islam. He would later try to find out how Islamic tradition could be reformed. In the second stage (1958-1968), he aimed to concentrate on solutions rather than developing a theoretical formulation of his method. The first theoretical formulations of his methodology were to come during his directorship of the Central Institute of Islamic Research, Karachi (1962-1968). These methodological considerations first appeared as a series of articles, which were collected later in a book entitled *Islamic Methodology in History*.¹⁷

¹⁵ Fazlur Rahman, (1976) *Islam*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press p. 261.

¹⁶ Acikgenc, Alpaslan, (1990) "The Thinker of Islamic Revival and Reform: Fazlur Rahman's Life and Thought (1919-1988)" *İslami Araştırmalar: Fazlurrahman Özel Sayısı (Journal Of Islamic research: Fazlur Rahman Specific Issue.)*, VI/1990, p. 239.

¹⁷ Fazlur Rahman, (1965) *Islamic Methodology in History*, Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute.

Fazlur Rahman developed his methodology in the last period (1969-1988) with the publication of his *Major Themes of the Qur'an*¹⁸ while teaching at the University of Chicago. In a later work entitled *Islam and Modernity*,¹⁹ Fazlur Rahman theoretically formulated his method. He suggests two main steps in the interpretation of the Qur'an using historical methods. The first step is to understand the meaning of a given statement by studying historical situations. The second step is to generalize those specific answers and pronounce them as statements of general moral-social objectives that can be 'distilled' from specific texts in light of the socio-historical background and the often-stated *ratio legis*.²⁰

Fazlur Rahman's methodology, at the start, seems to fit into a category of modern trend called "*historical criticism*" in Western literary criticism. Historical criticism tends to place the documents in their historical context and examines them in the light of their contemporary environment. This is necessary for understanding, whether they are historical in character or belong to another literary genre. The historical critical method is based on the assumption that literature can only be understood through the objective study and reconstruction of the original context.

Fazlur Rahman suggests this approach in order to generalize the Qur'anic response to socio-historical situations and to apply them to contemporary situations. This is, for him, technically called "*ijtihad*".²¹ Yet Fazlur Rahman believes that *ijtihad* is an essential element in Islamic methodology and that its definition clearly demonstrates that Islamic historicism predates the West's development of the methodology. At the same time, he expresses agreement with Western thinkers.²²

Fazlur Rahman's methodology, as he claims, is based on E. Betti's hermeneutical theory, which insists on objective study of historical/Qur'anic

¹⁸ Fazlur Rahman, (1980) *Major Themes of the Qur'an* Chicago, Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica.

¹⁹ Fazlur Rahman, (1982) *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²⁰ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 5-6.

²¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 7-8.

²² Ibid: 8-9.

materials.²³ This school was already under criticism by Gadamer's school. While an objective approach seeks the original mind in order to understand the truth, a subjective reading suggests that all experience of understanding presupposes a precondition. Thus, for Gadamer, there is no *objective* understanding at all.²⁴ For Betti, the meaning of a historical text or precedent, the present situation, and the intervening tradition can be sufficiently and objectively known and the tradition can be fairly objectively brought under the judgment of the normative meaning of the past, under whose impact the tradition arose. Thus, the tradition can be studied with adequate historical objectivity. It is obviously seen that Fazlur Rahman is familiar with the debate between Betti and Gadamer. However, Gadamer in fact does not offer any methods to find out the truth; he simply wants to illustrate a fact during the reading process.²⁵ How does Fazlur Rahman stand against this argument? Without thinking of Gadamer's caution about 'historical consciousness', Fazlur Rahman formulates so-called objective general principles and then applies them to contemporary issues. Making general principles seems impossible because one is reading the historical text from a different historical point of view. Although the main aim is to re-interpret the text according to the challenges of our times, how is it possible to carry these so-called "objective" interpretations to the next generations' challenges? When he reinterprets the Qur'anic verses touching upon interest, women, etc, Fazlur Rahman is very much driven by his own "effective history" that led him to produce some projects in harmony with his history.

Besides, does Fazlur Rahman really make objective historical inquiry into the Qur'anic materials? He is not using secular historical materials, like archaeological evidence or numismatics etc. to discover "what really happened" and the ultimate true meaning in the Qur'an. In fact very little and limited material is available for the study of early Islam and also they are all of questionable historical authenticity. Instead, his theories have more in common with text-centred literary theories rather than historical criticism. A suitable term to describe his approach is *canon criticism* or *new*

²³ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 8.

²⁴ Ibid: 8.

²⁵ Gadamer, H., (1979) *Truth and Method*, London: Sheed and Ward, p. 465.

criticism, which relies on the final corpus of the text not the historical sources. Historical attention to the Qur'an in his writings is there to demonstrate the fact that there is a contextual gap between the contemporary context and the historical context.

2- MOHAMMAD ARKOUN AND HIS STRUCTURAL READING OF THE QUR'AN

Mohammad Arkoun, an Algerian Muslim scholar and intellectual, was born in 1928 in Taourirt-Mimoun of Kabylia. He began Arabic studies in his own country.²⁶ In 1956, he completed his M.A. thesis in Paris. He taught in Strasbourg and in Paris both in the Voltaire high school and in the Faculty of Arts from 1956 to 1959. He joined the Sorbonne University as a research assistant in 1960. He completed his PhD thesis about the Muslim philosopher, Ibn Miskawayh²⁷. He was Director of the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies and is presently emeritus professor of the History of Islamic Thought in the Sorbonne.

Despite his Arabic cultural background in Algeria he seems to prefer French and English to write his works. Almost all his works have been translated into Arabic by other scholars; mostly by his pupil, Hashim Salih. The reason for preferring French, as he pointed out, is the lack of philosophical expressions in Arabic. *Lectures du Coran*²⁸, *Rethinking Islam*²⁹ and *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*³⁰ are his best-known and most crucial works on reading the Qur'an. *Rethinking Islam*, as one of his projects, re-evaluates Islamic culture from a new perspective. The goal of

²⁶ Douglas, Fatma Malti, (1995) "Arkoun, Mohammed", *The Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World*. ed. by John L. Esposito New York and London: Oxford University Press, I/1995, p. 139.

²⁷ This thesis published in 1970 in Paris under the title of L'humanisme arabe au IV^e IX^e siècle: Miskawayh philosophe et historien.

²⁸ Arkoun, Mohammed, (1982) *Lectures du Coran*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose; (1991) 2nd ed. Tunis: Alif.

²⁹ Arkoun, (1994) *Rethinking Islam*, Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press.

³⁰ Arkoun, (2002) *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, London: Saqi books.

the project is to develop a new strategy for the study of cultures. Arkoun insists on a historical, sociological, and anthropological approach, not to deny the importance of the theological and philosophical perspectives, but to enrich them by the inclusion of the concrete historical and social conditions in which Islam has always been practised.³¹

Arkoun started the “rethinking Islam” project with an article³² in 1970 in which he asked “how to read the Qur’an?” He recommends the reading of the texts according to the new epistemology introduced by modern linguistics and semiotics. That is not to mean we can interpret religion merely as positivist historicism and secularism. The project of rethinking Islam is basically a response to two major needs:

1- The particular need of Muslim societies to think about their own problems, which had been made unthinkable by orthodox scholastic, thought.

2- The need of contemporary thought in general to open new fields and discover new horizons of knowledge.³³

Following the examples set by anthropologists who started the practice of “*applied anthropology*”, Arkoun called another project “*applied islamology*” to suggest new dimensions i.e. religious, social, political, anthropological, psychological and cultural trends in Islamic studies. It is briefly a critical re-reading of the comprehensive Muslim tradition, free from the dogmatic definitions of the existing literature on sects, leading to a new mode of religious analysis and thinking that will integrate all modern knowledge and science.

Arkoun theoretically explains his applications in *Lectures du Coran*. He explicitly offers Semiotics and Saussurean linguistics, i.e. Structuralism, as a method applicable to the Qur’an. Surat al-Fatiha and Surat al-Kahf are his case studies for applying Western literary criticism. Whereas classical scholars bring forward a particular reason or occasion, Arkoun advocates

³¹ Arkoun, M., (1997) “Rethinking Islam Today”, *Mapping Islamic Studies* edited by Azim Nanji, pp. 221-2.

³² The first chapter of *Lectures du Coran*, which was published firstly in *Le Coran* by Kasimirski, Paris: Flammarion 1970.

³³ Arkoun, M., “Rethinking Islam Today”, p. 237.

each verse as a part of the official closed corpus, the final form of revelation, of the Qur'an. Unlike classical scholars, he does not seem to give any credit to etymology and literary beauty; on the contrary, he regards them as apologetic. Arkoun also sees that classical tafsir books are greatly involved with ritual and theological context rather than with the meaning and structure of the surah itself.

Arkoun's methodology is considerably different from classical exegesis. He suggests the application of structural reading to the surah, and to the whole Qur'an. Arkoun does not find other methodologies as reliable as linguistics since it is not under the control of 'explicit and implicit presuppositions'. For him this point has already been proved by the experience of Biblical scholarship.³⁴

Arkoun suggests, as mentioned above, Saussurean linguistics i.e. *Structuralism* as a method that is applicable to the Qur'an, instead of philology as used by the classicists. He gives Izutsu as an example who has already applied a part of structural reading: semantics.³⁵ According to structuralism, Arkoun asserts that meaning in the Qur'an is not in the sentences or verbs but in the system of relationships in the Qur'an.³⁶ This would enable the reader, according to Arkoun, to see that the Qur'an is a whole. This, in turn, will open the way for new readings.³⁷

Arkoun starts his reading with the linguistics elements, the verbal system, and, finally the syntagmatic structures. For Arkoun, the construction known as *Idāfa* in Arabic grammar makes it possible to underline a close relationship between the syntax and the meaning. He believes that classical scholars, such as Fakhraddin al-Rādī, did not really appreciate the philological value of *'ālamīn*. To him this word is Syriac and Aramaic in origin. This explanation, as he admits, belongs to his friend, G. Troupeau. This etymological approach is quite typical of traditional orientalism and as a matter of fact it contradicts Arkoun's structuralist approach. Here Arkoun

³⁴ Arkoun, M., *Lectures du Coran*, p. 41.

³⁵ Izutsu, Toshihiko, (1964) *God and Man in the Koran: A Semantical Analysis of the Koranic Weltanschauung*, Tokyo: The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies.

³⁶ Arkoun, M, "Rethinking Islam Today" p. 5.

³⁷ Ibid: 44.

charges classical scholars with giving too much credit to the etymological approach and forgetting the whole structure of the Qur'an. He too knowingly or unknowingly does the same.

His analysis of the Surat al-Fatiha, however, remains more theoretical, as he does not provide us with a satisfactory analysis but rather theoretical suggestions. Arkoun continues to suggest his own methodology in the Surat al-Kahf.³⁸ *Surat al-Kahf*, the 18th surah of the Qur'an, means "The Cave". Typically, Muslim scholars give some information on the virtue and occasions of the revelation. According to the classicists, the surah belongs to the Meccan period but also contains some Medinan verses.³⁹ The Surah is identified by a story, which gives the name to the surah, "Companions of the Cave"⁴⁰. In the Qur'an, the "Companions" refer to a group of youths whose story is described as being among God's 'signs'. Some orientalist⁴¹ believe that the Qur'anic narrative has its roots in a story of Christian origins known as the story of "The Seven Sleepers". Making use of much material from the Christian oriental tradition about the story, early Muslim commentators have attempted to fill the gaps in the Qur'anic narrative. Tabari, for instance, gives considerable details.⁴² According to Rudi Paret, the extra-Qur'anic variations, which fit Qur'anic exegesis, are significant for the history of the transmission of the legend in pre-Islamic times.⁴³

According to John Wansbrough, this kind of story provides a narrative framework for lengthy commentary on the Surah.⁴⁴ Rippin notes that such accounts "are adducted, and thus recorded and transmitted, in order to provide a narrative situation in which an interpretation of the Qur'an can

³⁸ Ibid: 69-86.

³⁹ Qurtubi, (1994) *al-Jāmi` li Ahkām al-Qur'an*, v.10, p. 346

⁴⁰ This story is well known by the western people by the name of "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus".

⁴¹ Paret, Rudi, "Ashab al-Kahf", *EI2*, p. 691; A. J. Wensick, "Ashab al-Kahf", *EI1*, p. 478

⁴² Tabari, Ibid: v. 15, pp. 219-220.

⁴³ Paret, Rudi, Ibid: 691.

⁴⁴ Wansbrough, J. *Qur'anic Studies*, p. 123.

be alive. The material has been recorded not for its historical value but for its exegetical value...”⁴⁵

In the context of the Surah, Arkoun attempts to demonstrate the deficiency of classical commentary and suggests an alternative methodology. According to Arkoun, the classicists implicitly affirm the primacy of standards in rhetoric, logic and textual composition in the tradition of writing of the Arab Muslims. Traditional commentators have employed the linguistic, literary, historical, hagiographic, and mythical data gathered through intense multi-field activity (regional grammar, philology, lexicography, biographies, stories, anthologies...) and have fixed the framework and the principal explanations of all interpretative activity up to the present day. Even the orientalist have been dependent on the data which has been developed under the pressure of Muslim orthodoxy.⁴⁶ Inspired presumably by Wansbrough, Arkoun asserts that all the classics rely on a narrative framework which Muqatil b. Sulayman records in his *Tafsîr*.⁴⁷ Arkoun says all these collections represent the process of organizing the *thinkable* under the pressure and consensus of the orthodox discourse. Anything outside of orthodoxy is rejected and cast into the field of the *unthinkable*.⁴⁸ Finally, we can say that Arkoun wants to shake the theological foundations of Islamic orthodoxy, in order to introduce an *unthinkable* field to Islamic intellectualism and academia. Thus, he suggests a critical re-reading of Qur’anic verses free from the definitions of the existing classical literature.

3- NASR HAMID ABU ZAYD AND THE TEXTUALITY OF THE QUR’AN

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was born in 1943 in the village of Quhafa, which is near the city of Tanta in Egypt. Abu Zayd started his early education by memorising the entire Qur’an in his eighth year. He took Islamic Studies at

⁴⁵ Rippin, Andrew, (2001) “Literary Analysis of Qur’an, Tafsir and Sira: the Methodologies of John Wansbrough”, *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* ed. by Richard C. Martin, Oxford: Oneworld, p. 153.

⁴⁶ Arkoun, *Lectures du Coran*, pp. 69-86

⁴⁷ See for further information: Wansbrough, *Qur’anic Studies*, p. 122.

⁴⁸ Arkoun, *Ibid*: 79.

Cairo University and in 1976, he took his MA degree in Arabic Studies. He then studied at the American University in Cairo and at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1981, he completed his PhD at the University of Cairo. From 1985 to 1989 he was a lecturer at Osaka University in Japan and thereafter, in Cairo University as an assistant professor for Islamic and Rhetorical studies.⁴⁹ Abu Zayd has published several works on the methodology of interpretation (*Usūl al-Tafsīr*) in Arabic. *Al-Ittijah al-Aqlī fi't-Tafsīr*⁵⁰ is his MA thesis and his first book dealing with the way of reading the Qur'an. *Falsafa al-Ta'wil*⁵¹ is his PhD thesis and about Ibn Arabi's reading methodology. *Mafhūm al-Nass*⁵² is his most famous and seminal book. Because he used the word *text* in reference to the Qur'an in this book, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd has had unpleasant reactions from the authorities in his country. He was accused of heresy, dismissed from his post at the University, forced to divorce, and deported from Egypt. The Court gave as the reason for its verdict that he made fun of the Qur'anic verses. The Court⁵³ seems to regard as heresy his suggestion in *Mafhūm al-Nass* that the Qur'an is a text and should be read as a literary text like any other. Abu Zayd and his wife have had to live outside his country in the Netherlands since 1995. He has been professor of Islamic Studies at Leiden University.

According to Abu Zayd, rejecting the textuality of the Qur'an, the Muslim scholars in al-Azhar University want to be the authority on Islam and manipulate the meaning for political ends. Through such identification

⁴⁹ For further information about Abu Zayd's biography see: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (2000) "Hayātī" in *Abvāb* v. 25, pp. 233-259; information also available online: <http://msanews.mynet.net/Scholars/NasrAbu>

⁵⁰ Abū Zayd, N. H., (1996) *Al-Ittijah al-Aqlī fi't-Tafsīr: Dirasāh fi-Qadiyyā al-Majāz fi'l-Qur'ān 'inda al'Mu'tazila* (the Rational exegesis of the Qur'an) Beirut: Markaz al-Sakafi al-Arabi, fourth edition.

⁵¹ Abū Zayd, N. H., (1983) *Falsafa al-Ta'wil: Dirasāt fi-Ta'wil al-Qur'ān 'inda Muhyiddin b. 'Arabī* (Philosophy Of Hermeneutics: A Study Of Muhiyi Al-Din Ibn 'Arabi's Hermeneutics Of The Qur'an) Beirut: Markaz al-Sakafi al-Arabi.

⁵² Abū Zayd, N. H., (1990) *Mafhūm al-Nas: Dirasāt fi-Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (The Concept of the Text: A Study in the Qur'anic Sciences) Cairo.

⁵³ The official court document was published in Abu Zayd's web page in <http://geocities.com/~Irrc/Zaid>.

between political authority and the meaning of the Qur'an, he claims, Islam becomes politicised. Scholars in al-Azhar University were saying that "in all the history of Islam, no one uses in reference to the Qur'an words other than what God himself used in the Qur'an. No one of the 'ulamā has ever dealt with the Qur'an as text". They meant that Abu Zayd neglects the holiness of the Qur'anic verses whereas he uses the term *nas* (text) in the meaning of the whole text of the Qur'an, which has been entirely recognised in classical Qur'anic studies and modern Islamic thought.

According to Abu Zayd, 'the Qur'an is the word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in plain Arabic language in the span of 23 years'⁵⁴. What does he mean by the term of *word of God*? Is it limited to the Qur'an? Instead, words of God, he asserts, are infinite and non-exhaustible. Therefore, 'if the word of god is impossible to be confined whereas the Qur'an as a text is limited in space, the Qur'an should only represent a specific manifestation of the word of God'. The word of God was revealed to Muhammad through non-verbal communication, *wahy* in a plain *Arabic* language simply because God always considers the language of the people to whom a messenger is sent. (The Qur'an 14/4). Abu Zayd, then, concludes that the word of God cannot be limited to the Qur'an. In other words, Abu Zayd seems to disagree with the assumption that the Qur'an presents literally and exclusively the word of God. The Qur'an is then 'one manifestation of the word of God inspired to Prophet Muhammad through the mediation of the archangel Gabriel'.⁵⁵

On the other hand, the textuality of the Qur'an, Abu Zayd claims, does not mean that it is a human text. However, as the Qur'an is one of the revelations and manifestations of God's words at a specific time and place, it should follow as contextual that what was revealed to Muhammad in Arabic in the 7th century is a historical text. Therefore, socio-historical and modern linguistic analyses, for him, are needed for understanding the Qur'an. In fact Abu Zayd promotes the historicity of the Qur'an not in order to apply author-intentional or contextual approaches, despite his

⁵⁴ Abū Zayd, N. H., (2000) "The Qur'an: God and Man in Communication", p. 2. Paper delivered in a lecture in Leiden, downloaded from Abu Zayd's web page: <http://geocities.com/~Irrc/Zaid>.

⁵⁵ Ibid: 2-4.

assertion,⁵⁶ but in order to prove that the Qur'an is not eternal, but was created in a certain context. By doing so, Abu Zayd eventually says that the Qur'an is a text of a certain historical culture. It is implicitly said that the textuality of the Qur'an is endorsed by the historicity of the text. He says:⁵⁷

Certainly it is a message from Heaven to the earth, but it is no message independent of the rules of reality, with all the structures in which this reality is embedded, and the most important of these is the cultural framework. The absolute reveals itself to humans by means of its speech, "it lowers itself to them" (*yatanazzal ilayhim*) by employing their cultural and linguistic system of meaning.

After humanizing the language of the Qur'an by insisting on its textuality and historicity, Abu Zayd focuses on the other human dimensions in the content and the structure of the Qur'an:⁵⁸

The human dimension is more obvious when we take into consideration two facts. First, the Qur'an was revealed in instalments, *munajjam*, and, second, the process of the canonisation of the Qur'an depended on human manoeuvre. Being revealed portion by portion, *munajjam*, the Qur'an corresponded to the community needs and demands. Demands of Muslims are reflected in the Qur'an by the frequent occurrence of the phrase, "they ask you" (Muhammad), *yas'alūnaka* (15 times)... Providing answers to such questions, much of the legal aspect of the Qur'an was gradually articulated, thus reflecting the dialectical relationship between God's word and human interest

Abu Zayd, above, maintains that the dialectical relationship between the Qur'an and the reality of the early Muslim community has formulated the Qur'anic contents. Another aspect of the human impact on God's word is the process of canonisation:⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Abū Zayd, N. H., "The Textuality of the Qur'an", pp. 4-5 downloaded from: <http://geocities.com/~Irrc/Zaid>. The reason of his support of historical critical reading would be against traditional scholars in al-Azhar University.

⁵⁷ Abū Zayd, N. H., *Mafhūm al-Nass*, Cairo, p. 64 (The English translation is quoted from "From Revelation to Interpretation", p. 176.

⁵⁸ Abū Zayd, N. H., "The Qur'an: God and Man in Communication", p. 5.

⁵⁹ Ibid: 5.

Canonisation of the Qur'an included also the rearrangement of the Qur'anic verses and chapters in their present order, which is not the same as chronological order. The present order is called *tartīb al-tilāwa* (order of recitation), while the chronological order is called *tartīb al-nuzûl*. It is important here to refer to the impact of such rearrangement in partially demolishing the historical and occasional context of every portion of revelation, thus elevating the semantic structure of it above the original reality from which it emerged. Nevertheless, the original content of the Word of God in its unknown absoluteness, ...

What is the methodology of understanding the Qur'an as a text? Abu Zayd advocates literary studies, arguing that if the Qur'an is a text it should be read as a literary text like any other text. Navid Kermani⁶⁰ claim that Abu Zayd's literary study of the Qur'an refers to a tradition of Muslim scholars like 'Abd al-Jabbār, 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī and the recent scholar Amīn al-Khūlī. Apparently, he was also influenced by Western critics and thinkers. Toshihiko Izutsu, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Russian formalist, Jurist M Lotman⁶¹ are documented and discussed in the book, *Ishkālīyyāt al-Qirā'a wa-'Aliyyāt at-Ta'wīl*⁶², which is a compilation of his relevant articles.

Abu Zayd bases his attempt on traditional religious literary science and on modern Western literary and hermeneutical theories. By doing so, Abu Zayd has continued a promising project on literary exegesis initiated by Amīn al-Khūlī. He, like al-Khūlī and his school, advocates the Qur'an as a poetically structured text, a literary monument and not just a list of Judgments or mere legal text.⁶³

⁶⁰ Kermānī, Nāvid, (2004) "From Revelation to Interpretation", pp. 9-10.

⁶¹ Abū Zayd translated two of his works into Arabic: *Nazariyyāt hawla al-Dirāsah al-Simiyutiqiyya li't-Thakāfah* and *Mushkil al Luqta* both published in Nasr Hāmid Abū Zayd and Sizā Qāsim (Eds), *Al-Zimāt al-Alāmāt: Madkhal ilā-Simiyutiqa*, Cairo, 1986.

⁶² Abū Zayd, N. H., (1994) *Ishkālīyyat al-Qirā'a wa-'Aliyyāt at-Ta'wīl* (The Problematics of Reading and the Mechanisms of Interpretation) Cairo.

⁶³ For further information about his methodology and adaptation of western literary criticism and hermeneutics see: Kermani, Nabid "From Revelation to

5- FARID ESACK AND READING THE QUR'AN IN THE CONTEXT OF SOUTH-AFRICA

Farid Esack is a South African Muslim scholar. He was born in the Cape Town suburb of Wynberg in 1959. In 1990, Esack left South Africa for a doctorate in Qur'anic interpretation, spending five years in Britain and Germany, conducting doctoral and post-doctoral research. Farid Esack completed a doctoral degree in Qur'anic Hermeneutics at University of Birmingham (UK) in 1996, with his thesis, *Side-by-side with the other: towards a Qur'anic hermeneutic of religious pluralism for liberation*.⁶⁴

In his thesis, Esack examines the question of religious pluralism and liberation in the Qur'an as it emerged in South Africa during the 1980's through Muslim participation in the struggle against apartheid.⁶⁵ He is strongly influenced by Christian liberation theology. In 1994-95 he was a Research Fellow in Biblical Hermeneutics at the Philosophische Theologische Hochschule, Sankt Georgen, Frankfurt. In 1984-89 he was the National Coordinator of Call of Islam. As a person committed to inter-religious solidarity for justice and peace and the struggle against apartheid, he played a leading role in the United Democratic Front, The Call of Islam, the Organisation of People Against Sexism, the Cape Against Racism and the World Conference on Religion & Peace.

In addition to a number of articles published in different parts of the world, he is the author a major work on Islamic Liberation theology, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism* (1996). He has also written *On Being a Muslim: Finding a Religious Path in the World Today* (1999) and *An Introduction to the Qur'an* (2002). Farid Esack proposes a methodology which sets out the process of interpreting how different individuals and groups have appropriated the text, and he explains this through his insights into reception hermeneutics. Reception hermeneutics, contrary to historical

Interpretation" in *Modern Intellectuals and the Qur'an* Suha Taji-Faruki (ed.) Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004, pp. 1-16.

⁶⁴ This thesis was published in 1997 in Oxford under the title of *Qur'an Liberation and Pluralism*.

⁶⁵ Esack, Farid, (1997) *Qur'an Liberation and Pluralism*, Oxford: Oneworld, p. 83.

positivism, which accepts fixed and objective meaning, sees different receptions of the text, including present popular understanding of the text.⁶⁶

Esack signifies his methodology by the term *regressive-progressive*. This means “to discover the historical mechanisms and factors, which produced these texts and assigned them such functions (= regressive procedure).” The process of revelation of the Qur'an within a social context has to be examined and its meaning within that particular (past) context comprehended. The principles of progressive revelation (*tadrīj*), meccan and medinan revelations, occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), and abrogation (*naskh*) are the tool of regressive procedure.⁶⁷

This process of understanding, however, operates within a (present) personal and social context. Because these texts are an inseparable part of the interpreter's identity and active in his ideological system, we have to rework them in order to assign a contemporary and contextual meaning to them (= progressive procedure). According to Esack, this dual process of *regression-progression* between the Qur'an with its socio-historico-religious context and the community with its current socio-political context is necessary for contemporary contextual understanding and meaning to emerge.⁶⁸

Esack's dual process of a regression-progression system and Fazlur Rahman's double-movement approach at first sound similar. But if we focus more deeply on the two processes, the differences will emerge. Objective reading of the historical text and its adaptation to present issues is the main character of the Fazlur Rahman's methodology, Esack on the contrary suggests understanding the Qur'an in its historical context, not in order to confine its message to that historical context but rather in order to understand its revealed meaning in a specific past context and then to be able to contextualize it in terms of contemporary reality.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ For further information see: Esack, F., *Qur'an Liberation and Pluralism*, p. 51.

⁶⁷ Ibid: 60.

⁶⁸ Esack, F., (1991) “Contemporary Religious Thought in South Africa and the Emergence of Qur'anic Hermeneutical Notions”, *ICMR*, v. 2, pp. 218-9.

⁶⁹ Esack, F., *Qur'an*, p. 68.

From this point of view his hermeneutical task derives also from Arkoun's methodology. According to Esack, "Arkoun's ideas imply that there can be a class of super readers, expert historians or linguists who will be able to access the true meaning of a text".⁷⁰ As reception hermeneutics asserts, Esack claims, interpretation and meaning are always partial, and every interpreter enters the process of interpretation with some pre-understanding of the questions addressed by the text, and brings with him certain conceptions as presuppositions of his exegesis. However, Arkoun's methodology, in contrast to that of Fazlur Rahman, is rooted in a pluralistic base.⁷¹

The contexts of South Africa which engaged Esack, such as liberation injustice, division and exploitation, are employed in his approaches to the Qur'an. According to Esack, in South Africa liberation means liberation from all forms of exploitation, including those of race, gender, class and religion. Esack defines a number of hermeneutical keys and their employment within a context of oppression in South Africa. Esack re-interprets them as the basis of a Qur'anic theology of religious pluralism.

CONCLUSION

Modern Qur'anic studies since the beginning of nineteenth century has been under the influence of Western thought. In the light of the new Western perspective, extra-Qur'anic materials, primitive ideas, stories, magic, fables and superstition should be removed and the Qur'an must be understood using Western scientific tools. Modern Qur'anic studies can be understood as a sharp break in the traditional history of Muslim interpretation.

This fracture has been intensively scrutinised throughout the Islamic world during the 20th century. As a result of the academic and intellectual interaction with the West, a new form of intellectual impact has been triggered in Islamic academia. Especially since the 1980s, as the second crucial break in the history of Qur'anic studies, there has been methodological influence from the West. Scholars have adapted *critical theories* as

⁷⁰ Ibid: 73.

⁷¹ Ibid: 78.

new hermeneutical models of understanding the Qur'an. Their aim is to re-read the Qur'an in the light of modern textual and philosophical disciplines, such as literary criticism, epistemology, hermeneutics, deconstruction, structuralism and post-structuralism and to re-read the Qur'an under the question of not what, but how do we interpret. Muslim intellectuals namely, Fazlur Rahman, Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Farid Esack, are pioneering researchers in this process. They begin with an acceptance of the authority of Western models. Their ambition is to adapt forms of literary criticism and Biblical experience to the case of the Qur'an.

It has been seen in this article that the historical critical method is the most admired approach in contemporary Qur'anic studies. Fazlur Rahman, Abu Zayd and Farid Esack pay more attention to the historical development of interpretation of the Qur'an and to the process which serves to establish how the Qur'an takes meanings in the Islamic context. This then leads to contemporary context. That is to say historical focus on the Qur'an and the history of Qur'anic interpretation in contemporary times is in order to demonstrate the fact that there is a contextual gap between the contemporary reader and the historical context. According to them, Muslims should read the Qur'an in the light of today's necessities with today's categories. In the case of Arkoun, the necessities and categories are composed of the totality of the human sciences, namely anthropology, history of religions, semiotics in contemporary philosophy and epistemology. In the case of Farid Esack, today's necessities address more specifically South African readers.