

Historicity, Normativity, and the Double-Movement: Evaluation of Fazlur Raḥmān Contextual Qur'anic Hermeneutics

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Abstract

Contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics has undergone a significant paradigmatic transition, shifting from classical atomistic exegesis toward historically grounded, reader-inclusive interpretive frameworks. This article critically examines the rise of the "contextual approach," particularly as articulated by Fazlur Rahman, whose double-movement theory positions the Qur'ān as a historically embedded text requiring reciprocal movement between its original socio-moral milieu and contemporary ethical challenges. Contextualists argue that traditional tafsīr, rooted in taqlid, linguistic literalism, and decontextualised legalism, impedes the Qur'ān's transformative moral intent – especially regarding social justice, legal reform, and universal ethical principles. Through a critical analysis of Rahman's theories of prophecy, revelation, Sunnah, and historicity, this study assesses how contextualism reframes the Qur'ān as a dynamic moral discourse rather than a fixed legal code. The article further interrogates the consequences of subjectivist and reader-response trends within modern Qur'anic interpretation – especially the tension between universal norms and historically contingent rulings, the challenge of distinguishing normative from accidental teachings, and the risk of relativism inherent in postmodern hermeneutics. By analysing the epistemological, methodological, and theological claims of contextualist scholars, this study demonstrates how modern hermeneutical models simultaneously expand interpretive possibilities while destabilising long-established exegetical boundaries. Ultimately, the article argues that contextual hermeneutics provides important tools for engaging contemporary socio-ethical questions but also raises unresolved concerns regarding textual authority, interpretive limits, and the preservation of normative religious meaning within Islamic thought.

Keywords: Contextual Hermeneutics, Qur'anic Interpretation, Fazlur Rahman, Double-Movement Theory, Historicity of Revelation, Islamic Modernism, Ethical Exegesis, Tafsīr Methodology.

Introduction

Qur'ānic hermeneutics has undergone a substantial paradigm shift, both in its substantive concerns and in the interpretive methodologies employed, from the classical period to the modern age. In contemporary scholarship, tafsīr has increasingly become a site for re-evaluating Qur'ānic meaning in light of the intellectual, social, and ethical demands of modernity. Consequently, exegetical activity now functions as a key conduit for introducing innovative conceptual frameworks into Islamic thought. Through these evolving hermeneutical practices, contemporary scholars seek to render a range of new ideas relevant to present-day Muslim communities by re-situating them within the discursive and textual landscape of the Qur'ānic revelation.¹ According to Muhammad Khaleel, the concerns identified by Fazlur Rahman – particularly the lack of a genuine intellectual commitment to relating Qur'ānic teachings to contemporary realities, and the pervasive fear that such efforts may depart from traditionally sanctioned beliefs – are deeply interrelated. Khaleel argues that these tensions can be more effectively understood, and potentially resolved, by employing analytical lenses developed within Western religious studies. Within this modernist trajectory, scholars contend that meaningful Muslim engagement with modernity necessitates a reconfiguration of the foundational ethical and legal frameworks of Islamic life, aligning them with interpretive principles informed by contemporary Western thought.²

These scholars further contend that certain aspects of the Qur'ānic message may require postponement or substantial reassessment to remain relevant within contemporary socio-historical contexts. Farid Esack similarly maintains that no single interpretation of the Qur'ānic text can be universally applicable across all societies and circumstances³. Modernist thinkers therefore interpret the present condition of Muslims through the lens of modernity's challenges and argue that, by giving due attention to the humanistic dimension of the Qur'ān, Muslim societies may attain forms of modernization without forfeiting their essential religious commitments.

To respond to these emerging intellectual and practical needs, modernity has produced a new interpretive trajectory commonly termed the "Contextual Approach." This methodology has gained considerable traction among those Muslims identified as progressives and *Ijtihādīs*⁴, as well as among modernists and, more generally, liberal interpreters. Contextualists advocate replacing the long-standing exegetical tradition with interpretive models that foreground human reason, socio-historical analysis, and contemporary ethical imperatives.⁵ The contextualists seek to replace the long tradition of exegesis with human reason.

The contextual approach implies "the insertion of the interpreter's context and his perspective of understanding to establish the fundamental philosophy of the text and the background of the text itself."⁶ The contextualists stress upon considering the social and historical circumstances

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when the Qur'ān was revealed in Arab in the seventh century, the purpose of revelation as well as the needs and concerns of the present Muslims⁷, so that the Qur'ānic message can be made functional in the contemporary dynamic life at the universal level.

The contextualists are more concerned with the factors like social, cultural, financial, political, legal, and historical contexts, when the verses were descended, understood, interpreted, and put into practice, to better understand the Qur'ānic content⁸, especially related to the matters involving social justice, like, the *Hudūd* punishments. They are sure that the moral, social, and legal dictates of Islamic law are reliant upon time and place, hence, could be employed differently, according to the varying requirements and circumstances of today's Muslims, as no particular and comprehensive solution can be drawn from Islam's prime sources⁹.

For the Contextualists, the traditional commentators work as historians, for the Qur'ān, like former manuscripts, is a historical document¹⁰, while the contextualists, on the other hand, persist that the Qur'ānic exegesis should not only be confined to give details of the historical meaning of the text through theoretical and linguistic inquiry. Instead, the exegete must contemplate its verses in a broader context, apply their meanings to modernist situations, and reply to the major emerging issues¹¹. In this way, they assert that they can use innovative techniques to approach the Qur'ān without losing connection with history¹².

Many argue that various Islamic practices, mostly believed to be permanent and significant areas of Islamic culture, had been framed when many of the existing problems and issues did not occur. The contextualists maintain that such activities must be reexamined in the light of modernist conditions if they have to be made appropriate to the current Muslims¹³. The contextual interpretations tend to be different from those of the preceding ones in reaction to the massive global advancements. According to the contextualists, the changed perceptions and structures of several institutes, like, ethics, politics, and overall scenario, need to be considered to understand the Qur'ān, to pursue compatibility of the Qur'ānic teachings in daily life, and the ideals of modernity¹⁴. Contemporary contextual methodology, the contextualists insist, reveals the action-oriented spirit of the Qur'ān, and is more scholarly, critical, and non-sectarian¹⁵.

The contextualists also narrate that meanings are interactive, in which the readers are not just passive receivers but have a definite role in constructing the meaning of the text. It helps the readers understand the text within their context and then interpret it more effectively¹⁶.

Literature Review:

This study seeks to develop an in-depth and systematic understanding of contextualist discourse in Qur'ānic interpretation and to evaluate its methodological divergence from what may broadly be termed textualist

exegesis. By mapping these two trajectories, the chapter aims to present an integrated account of the principal methods used for understanding the Qur'ān and to identify the most coherent principles for engaging its meanings and teachings in the face of contemporary intellectual and social challenges, while remaining anchored in the most reliable and authoritative Islamic sources of interpretation.¹⁷

The term *tafsīr* is the most common Arabic designation for Qur'ānic exegesis and is regarded as one of the most foundational disciplines in the Islamic intellectual tradition, since virtually all aspects of Islamic life ultimately depend on a correct understanding of divine guidance.¹⁸ Without *tafsīr*, a precise apprehension of the will of God and the implications of His commandments remains unattainable. Classical lexicographers differ on the etymology of the term, but many trace it to the verb *fassara*, meaning elucidation, clarification, or explanation, while Ibn Manẓūr derives it from *al-fasr*, “to uncover what is concealed” or “to reveal the intended meaning of an obscure expression so that it becomes manifest.”¹⁹

On the technical level, *tafsīr* has been defined in various ways. Al-Zarkashī describes it as the science by which the exegete (*mufasssir*) comes to understand the Book of God, explains its meanings, and derives rulings and wisdom from its verses²⁰. Abū Ḥayyān similarly presents *tafsīr* as a discipline concerned with the recitation of Qur'ānic words and their semantic range, both in isolation and in specific syntactic or situational contexts²¹. Manna' al-Qaṭṭān defines *tafsīr* as the act of expounding, disclosing, and rendering the rational meaning of the text apparent,²² while Mustansir Mir characterizes it as the effort to provide description, clarification, commentary, or elaboration for a fuller understanding of the Qur'ān and the judgments of the divine will²³. These definitions collectively indicate that *tafsīr* encompasses morphology, rhetoric, narrative, clarification of obscure or unusual vocabulary, reconciliation of apparently conflicting verses, derivation of legal rulings and their underlying rationale, and the elucidation of metaphors, figurative usages, and parables.²⁴

Bilal Philips adds that *tafsīr* involves the precise interpretation of the text through mastery of Arabic grammar and syntax, familiarity with Arabic literature, and competence in the sciences of the Qur'ān (*'ulūm al-Qur'ān*)²⁵. He further notes that acquaintance with contemporary disciplines—both natural and social sciences—can assist the exegete in articulating interpretations that speak meaningfully to the conditions of modern human societies²⁶. According to al-Zurqānī, an accomplished *mufasssir* must be well-versed in *'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, including exegesis, legal theory, the variant readings (*qirā'āt*), the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān (*i'jāz*), occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), abrogation (*al-nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh*), rare vocabulary (*gharā'ib al-Qur'ān*), grammatical analysis (*i'rāb al-Qur'ān*), as well as Arabic language and literature²⁷. Qaṭṭān emphasizes that sound *tafsīr* requires correct creed, proficiency in Arabic, and a comprehensive grasp of

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Qur'ānic sciences so that personal whims do not distort interpretation.

Classical Methods of Tafsīr

Following the Prophet's death, Muslim scholars quickly recognized the need to develop principled methods for Qur'ānic interpretation in order to safeguard the integrity of its meaning and to prevent misinterpretation²⁸. This task allowed for a measure of interpretive plurality while also setting boundaries to exclude readings judged to fall outside the scope of legitimate exegesis. Over the centuries, Muslims evolved a complex body of interpretive principles (*uṣūl al-tafsīr*) designed to ensure that exegetical claims remain anchored in authoritative sources and coherent methodologies. Classical Muslim scholarship generally grounds *tafsīr* in what is known as *tafsīr bi-l-ma'thūr* (report-based exegesis), which draws on a hierarchy of authoritative sources. Foremost is the Qur'ān itself, since many verses clarify, qualify, or elaborate others, making intra-Qur'ānic explanation the most reliable form of interpretation. Next come the explanations of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ—both his verbal statements and embodied *sunnah*—through which ambiguous expressions, abrogating and abrogated verses, and the purposes of revelation are clarified. A third layer consists of the interpretations of the Companions (*ṣaḥābah*), whose direct training by the Prophet and intimate knowledge of the context of revelation rendered their *ijtihād* especially authoritative, followed—where these are absent—by the views of the Successors (*tābi'ūn*), particularly where they agree. Underpinning all of this is a precise command of classical Arabic, since the Qur'ān's linguistic, rhetorical, and semantic features in seventh-century usage are indispensable for determining meaning, with translations and later language shifts treated as secondary.

Alongside *ma'thūr* exegesis, classical scholars acknowledged *tafsīr bi-l-ra'y* or *tafsīr bi-l-dirāyah*—interpretation based on *ijtihād*, deductive reasoning, and analytical judgment—provided it operates within the constraints of the established sources²⁹. Such *ijtihādī* *tafsīr*, termed *tafsīr bi-l-ra'y al-maḥmūd* (approved opinion-based exegesis), is commendable so long as it respects Arabic linguistic norms, does not contradict explicit Qur'ānic verses, sound ḥadīth, the consensus of the Companions, or settled principles of *sharī'ah*³⁰. By contrast, interpretations driven by sectarian, philosophical, or speculative agendas—without grounding in the recognized sources—are condemned as *tafsīr bi-l-ra'y al-madhmun* (blameworthy opinion-based exegesis). Ibn Taymiyyah labeled such readings *tafsīr bi-l-mujarrad al-ra'y* (interpretation based purely on opinion) and deemed them prohibited, because they are not built upon sound knowledge³¹. Shāfi'ī, al-Suyūṭī, and al-Zarkashī likewise criticized exegetical practices that subordinated the text to preconceived ideas³².

Qaṭṭān observes that *tafsīr bi-l-ra'y* in its censured form is typically practiced by innovators (*ahl al-bid'ah*) who instrumentalize the Qur'ān to legitimize sectarian doctrines, distorting the meanings of verses, especially

where multiple interpretive possibilities exist³³. Several ḥadīth warn against interpretation based solely on conjecture or unqualified personal opinion, highlighting the risk of compromising the Qur'ān's role as the epistemic foundation of Islam if everyone is allowed to impose subjective readings upon it.³⁴

Textual and Contextual Approaches in Tafsīr

Within this broader interpretive history, two broad approaches have crystallized in modern scholarship: the textual and the contextual. Classical *uṣūl al-tafsīr* generally favored a linear, verse-by-verse (*musalsal*), and often atomistic method that focuses on the wording of the text, a style that continues in many traditional commentaries³⁵. Textualists typically prioritize the literal sense of the Qur'ān, interpret it through the *sunnah* and early authorities, and emphasize grammatical, rhetorical, legal, and theological dimensions. They hold that the meanings of the Qur'ān are permanent and that its normative implications are universal, even if their applications require *ijtihād* in new circumstances. Saeed characterizes textual tafsīr as that which relies primarily on the text and transmitted tradition and approaches interpretation from a strongly linguistic vantage point. Qaṭṭān defends³⁶ this text-based approach as a safeguard against error and deviation by keeping exegesis anchored to authoritative knowledge rather than subjective speculation.

By contrast, the contextual approach has emerged largely in response to modernity. Contemporary Muslim thinkers influenced by Western intellectual developments argue that Islam must be rearticulated in light of new epistemic and social conditions. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, for instance, contends – albeit from outside the Islamic tradition – that Islam must undergo reform to develop a viable relationship with the modern world and escape the constraints of seventh-century Arabian social structures.³⁷ Tariq Ramadan, working within an Islamic framework, similarly calls for a renewed understanding of the foundational sources that demonstrates how universal Islamic principles can be interpreted so that Muslims may fully participate in Western secular societies while remaining faithful to their core beliefs.³⁸

In this context, Qur'ānic studies have undergone what Thomas Kuhn terms a “paradigm shift” in both substantive focus and method, moving from predominantly text-centered approaches to models that foreground socio-historical and ethical concerns³⁹. Tafsīr increasingly serves as a vehicle for modern reformist and liberal ideas, as exegetes seek to relate the Qur'ān to contemporary Muslim realities⁴⁰. Muhammad Khaleel notes that Fazlur Rahman identified two interrelated obstacles: an absence of genuine effort to relate Qur'ānic teachings to the present age, and a pervasive fear that doing so might conflict with long-held beliefs⁴¹. Modernist thinkers propose that these tensions can be addressed by employing analytical tools derived from Western religious studies and by reconfiguring Islamic norms to align with

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the ethical and epistemic demands of modernity.

Farid Esack argues that no single interpretation of the Qur'ān can be universally applicable across all times and places, insisting on historically and socially situated readings of the text.⁴² Modernists maintain that, by attending to the human dimension of the Qur'ān—its concern with justice, dignity, and liberation—Muslims can modernize their societies without abandoning their religious identity. This has given rise to the so-called “contextual approach,” increasingly adopted by progressives, *ijtihādī* scholars, and liberal Muslims⁴³. Contextualists advocate interpretive models that foreground human reason, socio-historical analysis, and contemporary ethical commitments, sometimes explicitly positioning themselves against traditional, text-centered tafsīr.

The contextual approach has been succinctly described as “the insertion of the interpreter’s context and perspective of understanding to establish the fundamental philosophy of the text and the background of the text itself.”⁴⁴ Contextualists insist on analyzing the Qur'ān in relation to the social and historical circumstances of seventh-century Arabia, the purposes of revelation, and the needs and concerns of contemporary Muslims, so that the Qur'ānic message may be rendered operative in today’s dynamic and globalized environment.⁴⁵ They focus particularly on social, cultural, economic, political, legal, and historical factors that shaped both the original reception of the text and its subsequent interpretive history.⁴⁶

In matters involving social justice—such as *ḥudūd* punishments—contextualists argue that moral, social, and legal prescriptions are intertwined with time and place, and therefore their applications must be revisited in light of changing realities⁴⁷. They regard traditional commentators largely as historians, since they treat the Qur'ān as a historical document embedded in specific contexts, whereas contextualists push for exegesis that not only reconstructs historical meaning but also addresses modern issues, applying Qur'ānic principles to contemporary social problems.⁴⁸

From this vantage point, many practices long assumed to be permanent features of Islamic culture are understood as historical constructions formed under conditions markedly different from those of the present. Contextualists thus call for a systematic re-examination of such practices to assess their suitability for contemporary Muslim societies.⁴⁹ They contend that shifts in ethical sensibilities, political structures, and global socio-economic conditions must be factored into any serious attempt to understand and apply the Qur'ān today.⁵⁰ Proponents argue that contextual methodologies reveal the action-oriented spirit of the Qur'ān and offer more critical, scholarly, and non-sectarian readings than many traditional commentaries.⁵¹ Moreover, they emphasize the interactive nature of meaning, in which readers are not passive recipients but active participants in constructing the significance of the text within their own socio-historical locations.

Later Contextualists: Fazlur Rahman, Abū Zayd, Wadud, Barlas

Among contemporary contextualists, Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988) occupies a pivotal position. A Pakistani-American philosopher and Islamic thinker, Rahman systematized contextualist hermeneutics into a comprehensive methodological program⁵². In *Islam and Modernity*, he argues that classical jurists and *mufasssīrūn* often read the Qur'ān in a fragmentary, decontextualized manner that obscures its overarching moral vision. He attributes this to a methodology grounded in *taqlīd* (uncritical imitation) and an overreliance on later consensus (*ijmā'*), which, in his view, marginalize reason and *ijtihād*⁵³. Traditional scholarship, he contends, has buried the Qur'ān's dynamic and revolutionary character beneath layers of grammatical and rhetorical minutiae.

Rahman's hermeneutic rests on two key pillars: a historical understanding of the Qur'ān and a distinctive theory of prophecy and revelation. He maintains that the Qur'ān must be read as a historically situated discourse responding to the moral and social conditions of seventh-century Arabia, and that prophecy involves a complex interaction between divine initiative and the Prophet's consciousness⁵⁴. This framework underlies his famous "double-movement theory," whereby interpretation moves from the present to the past—examining the historical context of revelation—and then back to the present, extracting general moral principles that can be re-applied in contemporary circumstances.⁵⁵

Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd further radicalized aspects of this contextualist trajectory by treating the Qur'ān primarily as a "text" produced within a specific linguistic and cultural milieu, thereby subject to the same tools of literary and historical criticism applied to other texts.⁵⁶ Abū Zayd emphasizes the discursive and communicative character of revelation, arguing that meaning emerges from the interaction between text and reader within particular socio-historical contexts.⁵⁷ His work provoked intense controversy, including charges of apostasy, yet it significantly influenced later scholars concerned with the historicity of scriptural interpretation.

Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas extend contextualist hermeneutics into the field of gender justice, explicitly engaging Rahman's methodology⁵⁸. Both argue that patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'ān are historically conditioned and not intrinsic to the text itself. Wadud develops a "tawhīd-centered" hermeneutic that emphasizes ethical principles of justice, reciprocity, and human dignity, while Barlas argues for a "gender-egalitarian" reading that resists androcentric and authoritarian constructions of divine speech.⁵⁹ Scholars have noted that their feminist tafsīr presupposes Rahman's insistence on extracting universal moral values from historically specific legal rulings, thereby demonstrating the wide-ranging influence of his contextualist approach.⁶⁰

Discussion and Analysis:

Fazlur Rahman, a prominent twentieth-century Pakistani-American

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intellectual and philosopher, stands as the most distinguished proponent of the contextualist approach to Qur'anic interpretation. He systematically developed this hermeneutic framework into a coherent and comprehensive methodology. The historical-contextual paradigm articulated by Rahman and further advanced by his followers has introduced fresh interpretive horizons to both the Qur'ān and contemporary Muslim thought. Rahman's scholarly interventions—most notably in *Islam and Modernity*—foreground his critique of traditional exegetical paradigms. He challenged conventional interpretive methods on the grounds that orthodox jurists and *mufasssīrūn*, in his view, typically approached the Qur'ān in a fragmentary and decontextualized manner, thereby failing to apprehend its thematic unity and the coherent moral vision embodied in the message of the Prophet ﷺ. According to Rahman, this shortcoming stems from an entrenched methodological dependence on *taqlīd* of earlier authorities and an unquestioned adherence to established *ijmā'*, which together marginalize rational inquiry and *ijtihād*. Traditional scholars, according to him, have suppressed the vivacious and revolutionary nature of the religious manuscript of the Qur'ān beneath the debris of grammar and rhetoric⁶¹. So, a rift has been established between the Muslims and the basic *élan* (message) of the Qur'ān. Rahman maintained that the inherited Islamic methodological apparatus was no longer adequate for enabling Muslims to confront the intellectual and sociocultural demands of modernity or to integrate Islamic thought meaningfully within the contemporary intellectual landscape. He therefore asserted that the traditional atomistic approach must be replaced with a new, holistic hermeneutical model—one capable of bridging the widening gap between Muslims and the Qur'ān and of elucidating how its guidance may be applied in the present age⁶², and carrying the Muslim thought into the intellectual framework of the modern era.⁶³ He, henceforth, contended that the traditional atomistic approach must be substituted with a new hermeneutical model to cognize the Qur'ān holistically⁶⁴, to fill the gap between the Muslims and the Qur'ān and to understand how its insight could be implemented in the current age⁶⁵.

Consistent with this vision, his interpretive approach rejected “rigorous literalism” in favor of “rational reconstruction,” echoing earlier calls for a “reconstruction of religious thought” by figures such as Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938).⁶⁶

He confirmed that the formulation of a correct hermeneutical method is vital and afterward put forth his own hermeneutic: “The Qur'ān was revealed by God, in response to the moral and social conditions of Arabia, through the Prophet's mind.”⁶⁷ Rahman emphasized that the development of a sound hermeneutical framework is indispensable for any meaningful engagement with the Qur'ān. He subsequently articulated his own method, asserting that: “The Qur'ān was revealed by God, in response to the moral and social conditions of Arabia, through the Prophet's mind.” This formulation situates his hermeneutic around two foundational axes: (1) a

philosophical understanding of history, and (2) his theory of prophecy and the nature of revelation. For Rahman, history functions as the generative matrix of Qur'ānic meaning, while prophecy involves the psychological participation of the Prophet ﷺ in the revelatory process, shaping the form and articulation of the Qur'ān. Moreover, his hermeneutic suggests the use of the historical-critical method in understanding the Qur'ān, *Sunnah*, *Hadith*, and legal precepts based on them.

Contextualizing Revelation

Fazlur Rahman accords central importance to the *historical dimension* of the Qur'ān, arguing that a substantive conceptual and temporal gap separates the milieu of revelation from the conditions of the present age. For Rahman, the *historicization* of the Qur'ān constitutes an indispensable precondition for any meaningful reformulation of Islam capable of addressing the intellectual and socio-political realities of the modern and Western worlds. He contends that, if the Qur'ān is to remain a viable and authoritative source for Muslims in the twentieth century and beyond, its nature, context, and overarching message must be understood with methodological rigor. In contrast, traditional Muslim scholars maintain that God possesses absolute knowledge of the past, present, and future, and that, as the Qur'ān is the direct word of God, its guidance is inherently valid for all times, places, and circumstances. They further affirm the *transcendent* character of revelation, holding that the Qur'ān pre-exists eternally in the *al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz* (the Preserved Tablet). Rahman, however, challenges this view by asserting that the Qur'ān was revealed in response to the concrete socio-historical conditions of the community to whom it was first addressed. Both the emergence of the Qur'ān and the formation of the earliest Muslim society, he argues, unfolded within the specific historical and cultural landscape of seventh-century Arabia. Accordingly, each Qur'ānic pronouncement constitutes a response to particular situations encountered by the early Muslim community. A significant portion of the text, Rahman maintains, deals with social, moral, and religious issues arising from real historical circumstances, and its verses were revealed gradually over time. Thus, every sūrah and āyah carries a distinct historical meaning embedded within its original context. Here, the Mu'tazilites' idea of the "Qur'ān as created" returns to pervade Rahman's vision on the revelation of the Qur'ān, who actualized this theology⁶⁸. Following the rationalist debates of the Mu'tazilī tradition, Rahman adopts the view that the Qur'ān may be understood as *created*, a position that implies its teachings are not inherently operative across all eras or geographical contexts and thus cannot be considered eternally fixed. Like any created entity, the Qur'ān, in this conception, possesses a historically delimited horizon of meaning. By contrast, orthodox scholars maintain the classical doctrine that the Qur'ān—*kalām Allāh* (the Word of God)—is uncreated and therefore eternal. Rahman's alignment with the Mu'tazilī position situates his

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work within the broader framework of modern hermeneutical philosophy, emphasizing the interpretive distinction between text and context, and between the ideal and pragmatic dimensions of Qur'ānic legislation. On this basis, both the Mu'tazilites and Rahman effectively construe the Qur'ān as a historical document whose revelatory discourse is embedded in specific temporal and spatial conditions, thereby attenuating—at least conceptually—its universal and transhistorical significance.

Rahman further argues that it is intellectually untenable to speak meaningfully about the Qur'ān without giving due consideration to its historical situatedness. Yet, he insists that to acknowledge the Qur'ān's historicity is not to question its divine origin; rather, it is an attempt to discern the divine intent *through* the concrete circumstances in which revelation unfolded. The Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ himself, Rahman contends, exemplifies this mode of contextual engagement.⁶⁹ Accordingly, a sound understanding of the Qur'ān requires familiarity with the conditions that shaped its revelation, including “the strife of the Prophet ﷺ and the background of that struggle.” Recognizing this background becomes a fundamental interpretive prerequisite for uncovering the Qur'ān's normative message.⁷⁰

Rahman maintains that a rigorous engagement with the Qur'ān necessitates reading it within its full socio-historical milieu. This requirement, he argues, extends not only to those verses explicitly associated with identifiable *asbāb al-nuzūl* (“circumstances of revelation”) but to the Qur'ān as a whole, which emerged against the broader civilizational and religious backdrop of pagan Makkah—what he terms “the occasion of the Qur'ān.”⁷¹ Accordingly, Rahman repudiates any strictly literalist interpretive method that seeks to apply the Qur'ān solely on the basis of its verbatim wording. For him, the sacred text must instead be understood through the prism of the concrete historical conditions in which its pronouncements were articulated. In practical terms, this hermeneutic entails that Qur'ānic legal injunctions—especially those addressing social and communal problems—require ongoing reinterpretation to remain meaningful in radically altered contemporary contexts. Such reinterpretation does not, for Rahman, diminish the authority of revelation; rather, it allows the exegete to uncover the universal values embedded *behind* the text's immediate formulations. The enduring message of the Qur'ān, he argues, lies not in the literal prescriptions shaped by seventh-century Arabian society, but in the moral and ethical principles that transcend the specific historical moment of revelation.

By examining the sociological dimensions embedded in the *asbāb al-nuzūl* and the biographical trajectory of the Prophet ﷺ, Rahman argues that the Qur'ān's underlying moral ideal can be recovered and subsequently reformulated to address contemporary social transformations. This approach implies that the exegete must critically survey both the *longue durée* of Islamic history and the evolutionary development of Qur'ānic doctrines in

order to construct a renewed interpretive horizon capable of engaging modern realities. Such an intellectual undertaking, however, is met with strong resistance from traditionalist scholars, who view this methodological openness as a departure from established hermeneutical boundaries and a threat to the continuity of inherited religious authority.

Fazlur Rahman's new methodology, like Sayyid Ahmad Khan, strived to clearly differentiate "historical Islam from normative Islam"⁷² and the "historically accidental from the essentially Islamic"⁷³ demonstrations of Islamic instructions. Rahman reiterated in this connection that understanding the historical development in the social and political environment plays a foundational role in understanding the Qur'ānic message⁷⁴. In this connection, Rahman also considered that historical study (of the Qur'ān) could even be conducted by non-Muslims, as long as they had the necessary preparation for such an undertaking.⁷⁵

Rahman maintains that a thorough engagement with Qur'ānic legislation and the historical evolution of Islamic institutions enables a clearer distinction between Islam's universal, normative principles and their contingent, context-bound manifestations in earlier periods. On this basis, he contends that Muslims can liberate themselves from the weight of historical accretions by critically examining the past and discerning the essential elements of the faith from those ancillary practices that developed over time. Yet, this methodological stance inevitably introduces a significant degree of ambiguity, particularly regarding the criteria by which one differentiates what is normatively binding from what is merely historically incidental within the Islamic tradition.

Revelation and Prophetic Agency

Rahman admired the Mu'tazilite theory of the prophecy and the nature of revelation that, after history, formulated the most leading constituent of his general Qur'ānic hermeneutic⁷⁶. His method is wholly related to the cognitive feature of the revelation and not with emotive faith. Pure Cognition and Emotive Faith, according to him, should be practically separated. He believed that "Pure Cognition" is concerned with the cognition of the historical facts with all moral values, meanings, and interpretations, without necessarily involving in the dogmatic faith. The presence of moral values in the past does not diminish their pragmatic influence or their significance.⁷⁷

The fundamental to the appropriate explanation of the Qur'ān, according to Rahman, is the bond between revelation and prophecy. The idea is not to deal the Qur'ān as only a text but rather recognize "the role of the Prophet ﷺ as a recipient and an intermediary of the revelation."⁷⁸ Rahman viewed the revelation as a process, in which the Prophet ﷺ and the early Muslim community took part. It was not, then, merely a dictation of the text but a joint discussion between God and His followers. In contrast to the

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traditional understanding that considers the Qur'ān as God's Words revealed to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, Rahman argued that the Qur'ān expresses the Divine vision and is of a transcendent origin, but at the same time, had been actualized in the mind and the heart of the Prophet ﷺ. It gives *Wahy* a more practical message to the Muslims. Hence not only the utterances of the Prophet ﷺ and his Successors were acknowledged but also the universality of their message transported via their precedent. Rahman was not the first to articulate such an alternative conception of prophecy. Jesse has demonstrated that Rahman's theory of revelation closely parallels Avicenna's philosophical account of prophetic experience⁷⁹.

The primary notion behind Rahman's theory of prophecy, therefore, is the mutuality with which the universal application of the Qur'ānic message relates to the contingency of the revelation. It implies that it is the psychology of the Prophet ﷺ that intervenes in shaping the universal message. This approach of viewing revelation also contributes to a diverse meaning to the science of *Asbābun-Nuzūl*.⁸⁰

Furthermore, Rahman propounded that the revelatory process of the Qur'ān was experienced by the Prophet ﷺ as "idea-words." This conceptualization diverges fundamentally from orthodox medieval scholarship. Rahman posits that while traditional views maintain that linguistic forms were mentally perceived during revelation, his own thesis suggests that these internal ideas were articulated into verbal form only when "the Prophet ﷺ transmitted the message of the Qur'ān in his language with his own ordinary human volition⁸¹." Consequently, the practical application of these Qur'ānic principles within the social sphere facilitated the simultaneous crystallization of the Prophetic Sunnah (as distinct from Ahādīth).

Consequently, the revelatory process was not concluded merely through the Divine transmission to Muhammad ﷺ; rather, it reached fruition as it transitioned from the Prophetic consciousness into its ultimate manifestation as the Qur'ān. In this transformative act, the Prophet's ﷺ internal psychology and *Sitz im Leben*⁸² functioned as foundational determinants. From this perspective, the Qur'ānic revelations may be categorized simultaneously as the Word of God and, in their entirety, the words of Muhammad ﷺ⁸³. Rahman posits that revelation constitutes a synthesis of both Divine and human agency. Accordingly, he contests the traditional orthodoxy which maintains that the Qur'ān is exclusively Divine in its verbal form. He argues that by permeating the Prophet's ﷺ heart, the revelation became internalized, subsequently finding expression through his own speech; thus, the linguistic formulation is attributed to Muhammad ﷺ himself⁸⁴.

Classical Qur'ānic exegesis preserves a strict ontological distinction between the "otherness of revelation" and the subjective personality of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, including his idiosyncratic experiences, emotions,

and reflections. Conversely, Rahman contends that orthodox scholarship faltered by insisting upon the absolute externality of the Qur'ān relative to the Prophet and by reducing *Tafsīr* to mere philological analysis. This approach, he argues, precluded a profound engagement with the Qur'ān's internal nuances and obscured the genuine teleological intentions underlying the revelation⁸⁵. Consequently, Rahman posits that the traditional *Ulamā* are guilty of an extreme "injustice to the Qur'ān and the Prophet"⁸⁶.

Rahman interprets the term *Wahy* as "inspiration," asserting that the Qur'ānic text does not explicitly necessitate angelic mediation in every instance, as the revelation emerged directly within the Prophetic consciousness⁸⁷. Aligning with the perspectives of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Rahman acknowledges that the revelations were facilitated by an agent designated in the Qur'ān as *Rūḥ al-Quds* (The Holy Spirit). However, he rejects the traditional identification of this Spirit as the Archangel Gabriel delivering a verbal narration to the Prophet⁸⁸. Rather than an external mediator with a physical essence, Rahman conceptualizes the Spirit as an internal faculty or agency situated within the Prophet's ﷺ psyche—a phenomenon that was fundamentally "spiritual and internal" to Muhammad ﷺ.⁸⁹

Rahman further asserts that the Prophet ﷺ maintained an intense preoccupation with the ethical dilemmas of his society, a concern that prompted profound contemplation⁹⁰. This implies that while he did not consciously seek the mantle of Prophethood, he nonetheless underwent a process of internal preparation for such a monumental responsibility⁹¹. To many critics, such an interpretation represents a heterodox or even sacrilegious departure from traditional tenets regarding the Prophet ﷺ and the institution of Prophethood.

Notwithstanding the foundational Islamic conviction that the Qur'ān constitutes the unadulterated Word of God—precluding any linguistic or conceptual contribution from the Prophet—other thinkers throughout Islamic history have joined Rahman in positing a dual Divine-human dimension to the revelatory process. For example, Shah Waliullah and the peripatetic Neo-Platonist philosophers of the medieval era—most notably Al-Fārābī (d. 950) and Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037)—articulated a role for the Prophet within revelation. They conceptualized Prophethood as a latent capacity actualized through the Prophet's ﷺ exceptional intellectual and imaginative faculties⁹².

Double Movement Theory

Rahman's methodological framework is fundamentally anchored in the derivation of universal ethical imperatives through his "double movement" theory. This hermeneutical procedure necessitates a bidirectional trajectory: moving from contemporary exigencies back to the Prophetic era, and subsequently returning to the modern age. This dialectic is designed to ensure the perennial applicability of Qur'ānic guidance. *The first movement* demands a rigorous socio-historical reconstruction of the revelatory context. The

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interpreter must identify the specific cultural milieu and the concrete problems a verse addressed, situating it within the Qur'ān's comprehensive moral-theological paradigm. *The second movement* entails the abstraction of these historically situated responses into broader moral principles or long-range objectives—such as justice or equity—discerned via socio-historical analysis⁹³. These transcendent principles are then utilized to formulate legal and ethical norms relevant to the present day, based on an objective assessment of contemporary challenges⁹⁴.

The double movement theory thus entails a twofold process: first, the modification of earlier legal rules in accordance with the transformed circumstances of the contemporary age—provided that such modification does not violate the enduring moral principles derived from the historical context—and second, the reorientation of present conditions as necessary by establishing new priorities through which Qur'ānic teachings may be reapplied. This undertaking requires *jihād* in its intellectual sense, more precisely *ijtihād*, which Rahman defines as “*the struggle to comprehend the connotation of the related verse or historical practice, comprising a rule, and change that rule by stretching or limiting or else adapting it in such a way that a novel situation can be incorporated into it by a new solution.*” In practical terms, this process represents an attempt to reformulate Qur'ānic legal directives—especially those pertaining to social issues—in order to address contemporary challenges. To the degree that these two movements are executed effectively, Rahman argues, the essential Qur'ānic rulings regain their vitality and become operative and meaningful once again⁹⁵.

In essence, Rahman's objective is to articulate foundational perspectives that respond to contemporary realities by generating what he calls “modern formulas”—constructs derived not directly from the Qur'ānic text, but from the broader moral principles he extracts from it. These principles, grounded in a robust philosophical framework, shift the interpretive center of gravity away from the historical legal compendia of classical jurists toward a renewed, modern comprehension of the Qur'ān and its contextual horizons. Such an enterprise, he contends, ensures that Qur'ānic interpretation remains attuned to the ongoing development of human reason, scientific advancement, and sociological inquiry.

Rahman's two-step, or double movement, theory emerges from a desire to restore what he views as the original moral *élan* of the Qur'ān as Dr Asia explained⁹⁶. In his conception, this method enables the Qur'ān and its universal ethical message to speak meaningfully to virtually every domain of human life. Accordingly, future generations of Muslims would be able to address emerging challenges by returning to the Qur'ān, not for static, literal rulings, but for adaptable principles capable of guiding contemporary decision-making. The purpose of this interpretive strategy is not to replicate identical legal meanings across time, but to allow each generation to reformulate the Qur'ān's primary moral insights in ways appropriate to its

own circumstances. Rahman anticipates that this process will preserve the integrity of the Qur'ān's message while ensuring its continual relevance.⁹⁷ In this sense, he assumes a pioneering role within the broader discourse of Islamic liberation theology, approaching the Qur'ān through the lens of a transformative and "liberating praxis."⁹⁸

The Implications of Contextualism for Qur'ānic Hermeneutics

The primary implication of contextualism is the transition from an atomistic reading of the text to a holistic and teleological one. Contextualists argue that traditional *Tafsīr* often focused excessively on individual verses in isolation, leading to a fragmented legalism. By contrast, a rational contextualist approach seeks the *Maqāṣid* (higher objectives) of the Shari'ah, asserting that the Divine intent is a trajectory toward universal justice rather than a static adherence to 7th-century forms⁹⁹. However, traditionalists counter that this "objective-oriented" reading risks extreme subjectivism. They argue that the *Maqāṣid* cannot be accurately discerned except through the literal forms prescribed by God, and that bypassing the literal text for a perceived "spirit" opens the door to human whim (*hawā*) over Divine decree.¹⁰⁰

Secondly, contextualism implies a fundamental re-evaluation of the nature of revelation itself, moving from a model of "dictation" to one of "dialogue." Contextualists posit that because the Qur'ān was a response to the specific socio-political challenges of the Hijaz, certain rulings—such as those regarding slavery or corporal punishment—are contingent upon that historical milieu¹⁰¹. Traditional scholarship, particularly the Ash'arite and Maturidite schools, vehemently rejects this, maintaining that the Qur'ān is the *Kalām Allāh* (Uncreated Word of God). From their perspective, viewing the text as a "historical product" undermines its ontological status as an eternal, extra-temporal truth that is applicable in every age without the need for fundamental structural modification¹⁰².

Thirdly, the contextualist approach necessitates a redefinition of *Ijtihād* as a tool for systematic reform rather than merely filling gaps in existing law. In this framework, the scholar acts as a "sociological historian" who must understand the complexities of modern economics and politics to apply the Qur'ān effectively¹⁰³. Traditionalist critics, however, view this as an encroachment of secular social sciences into the sacred domain. They argue that the qualifications for *Ijtihād* are strictly rooted in linguistic and jurisprudential mastery (*usul al-fiqh*), and that allowing external "realities" to dictate the meaning of scripture essentially subordinates the Divine to the human¹⁰⁴.

Furthermore, the implications for social and gender ethics are profound. Contextualism allows for a "progressive revelation" theory, where the Qur'ān's initial improvements to women's rights are seen as a starting point toward full egalitarianism¹⁰⁵. Traditionalists respond by asserting that

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the Qur'ān established a perfect and final social balance. They contend that the contextualist attempt to "evolve" these laws based on modern Western notions of equality is a form of intellectual colonization that ignores the intrinsic wisdom (*hikmah*) found in the specific gender roles and legal limits (*hudud*) defined by the text¹⁰⁶.

Finally, contextualism implies a democratization of interpretation, where the "spirit" of the text is accessible to any intellectually rigorous seeker, rather than being the sole province of the *Ulamā*. This challenges the centuries-old authority of traditional institutions¹⁰⁷. In response, traditionalists emphasize the necessity of *Isnād* (chains of transmission) and the consensus of the community (*ijmā*). They argue that without the "guardrails" of classical methodology and the cumulative wisdom of the ancestors (*salaf*), the Qur'ān becomes a mirror for the interpreter's own biases, leading to a fragmented religious tradition¹⁰⁸.

Conclusion:

In light of the preceding analysis, it is evident that the transition toward a contextualist hermeneutic, spearheaded by Fazlur Rahman's double-movement theory, represents one of the most significant epistemological shifts in modern Islamic thought. By deconstructing the classical atomistic approach and replacing it with a bidirectional trajectory between the 7th-century socio-moral milieu and contemporary exigencies, Rahman successfully reframes the Qur'ān as a vibrant, action-oriented discourse rather than a static legal compendium. This methodology underscores the necessity of distinguishing between the historical "accidental" rulings and the eternal "normative" ethical principles – such as justice, equality, and human dignity – thereby providing a robust intellectual framework for Islamic. The rational implication of this shift is the revitalization of *Ijtihād* as a systematic tool for socio-legal reform, allowing the Qur'ān to address novel complexities in human rights, gender parity, and pluralism that were not present during the classical period of juristic formulation.

However, the adoption of contextualism is not without profound challenges and unresolved tensions regarding the preservation of textual authority and religious normativity. Traditional scholarship, rooted in the ontological permanence of the *Kalām Allāh*, offers a critical counter-narrative, warning that the "historically embedded" view of revelation risks subordinating the Divine will to human reason and socio-political. As the interpretive center of gravity shifts toward a reader-inclusive and teleological framework, the risk of extreme subjectivism and "intellectual colonization" becomes a central concern for the *Ulamā*, who fear that bypassing literal forms for a perceived "spirit" may lead to a fragmented religious tradition stripped of its traditional guardrails. Ultimately, while contextual hermeneutics provides an essential apparatus for navigating the demands of modernity, the future of Islamic scholarship depends on its ability to balance this dynamic

moral élan with a respect for the structural integrity and historical continuity of the Islamic tradition.



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⁸⁹ Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, 97.

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⁹⁷ Filiberto Rodano, "The hermeneutic of Fazlur Rahman in the feminist *tafsīr* of Amina Wadūd and Asma Barlas" (Master diss., Leiden University, 2020), 27.

⁹⁸ See Esack, *Qur'ān, Liberation and Pluralism*, 203.

⁹⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982], 14-16

¹⁰⁰ Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharī'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009], 501-503

¹⁰¹ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'ān: Towards a Contemporary Approach* [London: Routledge, 2006], 112-115

¹⁰² Muhammad Mustafa Al-Azami, *The History of the Qur'anic Text: From Revelation to Compilation* [Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003], 302-305

¹⁰³ Suha Taji-Farouki, ed., *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'ān* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 22-25

¹⁰⁴ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* [Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2003], 468-470

¹⁰⁵ Amina Wadud, *Qur'ān and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 95-98

¹⁰⁶ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* [Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993], 114-117

¹⁰⁷ Farid Esack, *Qur'ān, Liberation and Pluralism* [Oxford: Oneworld, 1997], 102-105

¹⁰⁸ Timothy Winter [Abdal Hakim Murad], *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009], 18-21