

Philosophical hermeneutics and contemporary Muslim scholars' approaches to interpreting scripture

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journals.sagepub.com/home/psc**Ali Akbar** *University of Melbourne, Australia*

Abstract

Although the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer was not a religious thinker or theologian, his work and approach have influenced thinkers in the field of theology. This article explores some 'overlaps' between Gadamerian hermeneutics and the ideas of some contemporary Muslim scholars such as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Abdolkarim Soroush, Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari and Hassan Hanafi regarding issues of textual interpretation and understanding. In particular, the article seeks to understand how such ideas have appeared in these Muslim scholars' approaches to interpreting the Qur'an. It also explores some of the implications that follow from incorporating Gadamer's ideas into Islamic theological and political discourses. The article argues that the application of Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy to the realm of Qur'anic studies is not only fruitful insofar as it provides new insights into the interpretation of the Qur'an, but also has important consequences for Islamic theological and political discourses more broadly.

Keywords

exegesis, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Qur'an, revelation, Western hermeneutics

Introduction

Muslim scholars who criticize the application of contemporary hermeneutic approaches to the realm of Qur'anic interpretation often argue that, since the Qur'an represents the verbatim word of God revealed to Muhammad through the angel

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Gabriel, certain hermeneutical principles developed in the West for the interpretation of the Bible or non-religious texts cannot be employed to understand the Qur'an.¹ For these scholars, the Qur'an is thought to contain certain objective intentions, and it is the interpreter's task to discover them. For example, Managheb and Mehrabi assert that the Qur'an is the word of God and consists of 'real and objective meanings'.² With respect to the task of interpretation, Managheb and Mehrabi state that the interpreter should discover 'the intention of the text' since the teachings of the Qur'an, or what they refer to as the Qur'an's 'realities', 'are not subject to the author's mental conditions and presuppositions but... have their meaning independent of the interpreter and his conditions'.³ Along similar lines, Muhammad Jafar Elmi argues that the interpreter has to discover the objective meaning of the Qur'an by putting 'all his or her own ideas and views aside'.⁴ Likewise, Murad states, 'Read the Qur'an with a mind free from bias and preconceived ideas, as otherwise you will read your own notions into the book'.⁵

Central to the ideas of the above-mentioned scholars, then, is the view that God had certain intentions and objectives when He revealed the verses of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad, and that it is the interpreter's job to discover them. This approach was dominant in classical interpretations of the Qur'an. As Farid Esack notes, 'Traditional exegetical scholarship, while rejecting any ideas that an interpreter can get into the "mind" of God, nevertheless, implicitly bases many of its arguments on the assumption that its interpretation is the meaning intended by God'.⁶ Some contemporary Muslim scholars criticize this approach to interpreting the Qur'an given its failure to acknowledge that interpreters may bring a *pretext* to the task of exegesis – one that is conditioned by a number of factors, including class, religion, gender and ethnicity, as well as the general intellectual conditions of the time and place in which the interpreter is working.⁷ In particular, according to Ingrid Mattson, literalist scholars⁸ who seek to distance themselves from their current worldview in order to discover objective meanings of the Qur'an, 'seem unaware of their own roles as human interpreters when they select particular passages to justify their positions'.⁹ Along similar lines, Abdullah Saeed argues that 'any scholarly work on Islam... reflect[s] the cultural understandings, subjectivities and prejudices' of interpreters, whether they are Muslim or non-Muslim.¹⁰

Despite these critiques, the idea (which is central to Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, as I explain later) that interpreters inevitably bring their own biases to the task of interpreting religious scripture has been largely ignored by today's traditionalist exegetes.¹¹ Mohsen Kadivar states that one major issue with traditional methods of interpretation that are still prevalent among Muslim scholars is that 'the role of the scholar in understanding the texts is often ignored'.¹² Compared to the large number of Jewish and Christian scholars that have incorporated this understanding – and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics in general – into their Biblical hermeneutics, only a few Muslim scholars have done so in their own approaches to interpreting the Qur'an. As Victoria Harrison has observed, this fact is not well known in Western academia.¹³ This article seeks to elucidate how the exegetical approaches of some contemporary Muslim scholars such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Hassan Hanafi reflect some of the same philosophical concerns

as those found in the writings of hermeneutic philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer. Specifically, the main questions that this article seeks to address are the following: What are some of the main ‘overlaps’ between Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics and the ideas of Muslim scholars such as Soroush, Shabestari, Abu Zayd and Hanafi, specifically regarding issues of textual interpretation and understanding? How have these ideas been employed when it comes to interpreting the Qur’an? What are some of the implications that follow from incorporating ‘Gadamerian’ ideas into Islamic theological and political discourses?

In this article, I first provide a brief history of hermeneutics in the West, focusing on the founding work and ideas of Hans-Georg Gadamer in the field of philosophical hermeneutics. The second part then examines how some of the same concerns that Gadamer discusses are also found in the works of Muslim scholars such as Abu Zayd, Soroush, Shabestari and Hanafi – specifically in their approaches to interpreting the Qur’an – whether or not they have been directly influenced by Gadamer. Finally, I explore some of the sociopolitical implications that follow from these scholars’ application of such Gadamerian ideas to the domain of scripture exegesis.

Hermeneutics before the rise of philosophical hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, which is often understood to mean the theory, practice or art of interpretation, has a long history in the Western tradition, having roots in both Greek philosophy and Christian theology. In the Middle Ages, religious thinkers made hermeneutics a central theme in theology and the interpretation of sacred scriptures. At this time, hermeneutics was also a specialized art or method employed in the fields of jurisprudence and classical philology.¹⁴ During the Romantic Era, the hermeneutical tradition began to ‘move from textual interpretation to the more general question of the nature of understanding’.¹⁵ This major change occurred especially in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. The art of understanding, according to Schleiermacher, ‘is in its essence the same, whether the text be legal document, a religious scripture, or a work of literature’.¹⁶

Schleiermacher developed the notion of the ‘hermeneutical circle’ – an idea that refers to the process through which an interpreter comes to understand a text. According to Schleiermacher, the first step of interpretation involves acquiring a preliminary understanding of the individual parts of a text, after which the interpreter progresses to understand the text as a whole and in the light of his or her preliminary understanding. In the next step, the interpreter should reassess his or her understanding of the parts of the text which he or she has arrived at through this newly acquired holistic understanding of the text. In each cycle of understanding, then, the reader acquires a more refined understanding of the part and the whole.¹⁷ As such, the ‘hermeneutical circle’ is not vicious, Schleiermacher argues, but instead can lead us to reconstruct the meaning intended by the author of the text.¹⁸

Hans-Georg Gadamer, who later provided a detailed account of hermeneutics, noted that the task of hermeneutics is, in Schleiermacher’s view, to discover the author’s mind. According to Gadamer, the hermeneutic theory of the 19th century emphasizes that ‘the circular movement of understanding runs backwards and forwards along the text and

disappears when it is perfectly understood'.¹⁹ This view of 'understanding' which surfaces in Schleiermacher's theory, then, involves a situation in which one 'places oneself entirely within the writer's mind and from there resolves all that is strange and unusual about the text'.²⁰ In this way, Schleiermacher treated hermeneutics or understanding as a methodological concept whose key purpose was to aid the interpreter in discovering an author's mind and aims. As will be discussed below, this approach to hermeneutics was criticized by Gadamer himself.

Philosophical hermeneutics: Heidegger and Gadamer

Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer made hermeneutical philosophy an important discipline in the 20th century. In this philosophical school, hermeneutics is given prominence as a way of understanding the philosophical problems of today, and so becomes inseparable from ontological questions. What is central to Heidegger's project is the transformation of hermeneutics from a methodology tailored for academic disciplines into a phenomenological explication of human existence itself. This means that *being* itself is interpretation. For Heidegger, understanding and interpretation are foundational modes of man's being; that is, meaning is not merely an epistemological category, but rather is part of the ontological structure of *Dasein* (existence).²¹ It follows from this that life includes constant interaction with changing situations and contexts. Life is a ceaseless understanding achieved in the light of these changing situations and contexts – an understanding that primarily involves practical abilities, more *know-how* than *know-that*, or an understanding that involves less a cognitive and methodological process than an ability or possibility of our existence.

According to Heidegger, every human being is 'thrown' into his own world (*Welt*), meaning that *Dasein* finds itself already in a specific historical, social and cultural environment. Therefore, we understand things in our world in terms of our own involvement with our sociocultural norms. Based on this approach, Heidegger argues that understanding takes place only when there is a pre-understanding. This pre-understanding is referred to as 'fore-structure' in Heidegger's *Being and Time*.²² Heidegger subdivides fore-structure into three interrelated aspects: fore-having (*Vorhabe*), fore-sight (*Vorsicht*) and fore-conception (*Vorgriff*). Fore-having includes our prior understanding of the 'totality' of our involvements with the object that we seek to understand. Fore-sight refers to the idea that directs one's attention, before interpreting a thing, to its appropriateness. It 'situates the meaning of an entity in terms of a specific form of usefulness'.²³ Fore-conception concerns the conceptual reservoir that we hold before interpreting an object. For example, before interpreting a hammer, we have the conception of the hammer as a tool and the conception of our need to build, for instance, a shed in our backyard. Fore-conception enables us to make a link between the tool and the project as a whole.²⁴

The importance of situating hermeneutics within ontology rather than within epistemology was also recognized by Heidegger's student, Gadamer, who extended the Heideggerian project into the realm of linguistic understanding. In Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy, any act of understanding or interpretation takes place in the context of pre-understandings, or what the interpreter has already understood. According to Harrison,

'Prior to the development of hermeneutical philosophy in the twentieth century, such "pre-understandings" had been portrayed derogatively as prejudices . . . [which] play no role in acquiring knowledge'.²⁵ In contrast to this approach to 'pre-understandings', Gadamer argues that our pre-understanding makes an essential contribution to our understanding: 'The first of all hermeneutic requirements remains one's own fore-understanding, which proceeds from being concerned with the same subject'.²⁶ Therefore, the receptors of a given text are preconditioned by the sociopolitical and cultural milieus that create a 'horizon' of understanding, and thus no interpretation is void of prejudice: 'The history of hermeneutics shows how the examination of the texts is determined by a very precise fore-understanding'.²⁷ Accordingly, 'our horizon does not necessarily hinder but is the indispensable means for grasping the claim to truth in a text . . . no reading rises above time and history but rather always originates from a particular place and time'.²⁸ Hermeneutics therefore should not be bound to discovering the intended meaning that the author of a text had in mind. Rather than being a passive agent who only seeks to discover the original authorial intent, the interpreter plays a key role in creating meaning. As Gadamer states:

The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and whom he originally wrote for . . . [I]t is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history.²⁹

It is useful at this stage to place Gadamerian hermeneutics within the context of the 20th century 'objectivity school' of hermeneutics. Unlike Gadamer, who believes that 'hermeneutics must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something' has a close relation to the object of interpretation,³⁰ Emilio Betti places some distance between the subject and object of interpretation. This is because, for Betti, a given text retains its intimate relation with its author's intentions. Betti's objectivist hermeneutic is based on the idea that one should seek to identify the stable meaning of the text and discover the original intent of its author. Pursuing this line of thinking, Betti criticizes Gadamer because the latter's approach 'inevitably leads to both subjectivism and relativism, with the consequence that hermeneutics is unable to adjudicate between correct and incorrect interpretations'.³¹ Betti does not ignore the possibility that any interpreter may understand the text from his/her own perspective; rather, he believes that every text has a determinate meaning that is potentially retrievable using certain appropriate canons – a meaning that exists independently of the interpreter and his/her worldview. For Betti, while it is important to recognize that the interpreter understands things 'in terms of his or her own experiences, every effort must be made to control one's "prejudices" and to subordinate one's experiences to the meaningfulness that the interpreted object seeks to communicate'.³²

Gadamer's views have had wide ranging impacts outside of philosophical debates about interpretive methods. For example, although Gadamer was not a religious thinker or a theologian, his ideas and approach influenced thinkers in the fields of theology and biblical hermeneutics, in a way that many Biblicists made his hermeneutics a central theme for the interpretation of the bible.³³ The remainder of this article explores how

Gadamer's approach has been applied by some contemporary Muslim thinkers in their discussions of revelation and Qur'anic exegesis, and how this in turn has had significant sociopolitical implications.

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: Revelation as a linguistic event

Gadamer argues that we should not distinguish understanding from interpretation, for when we attempt to understand a text, we are indeed interpreting it. Moreover, according to Gadamer, understanding is itself a matter of interpretation; the former does not precede the latter, as most hermeneutists before him believed. For Gadamer, 'understanding and interpretation are ultimately the same thing', meaning that 'all understanding is interpretation'.³⁴ He adds that all human thought is preconditioned by language: 'Linguistic interpretation is the form of all interpretation, even when what is to be interpreted is not linguistic in nature, i.e. is not a text, but is a statue or a musical composition'.³⁵

Heidegger dissociates understanding from any possible contribution of language. As noted by Jean Grondin, the 'linguisticity of understanding was not crucial to Heidegger's practical understanding in *Being and Time*'.³⁶ By contrast, Gadamer places 'the nature of language at the center of' his philosophical hermeneutics.³⁷ For Gadamer, language is not only a means of communication or a way by which one expresses oneself; every form of understanding takes place through the medium of language: 'Being that can be understood is language'.³⁸ Indeed, 'language is the universal medium in which understanding itself is realized'.³⁹ Even the act of thinking about language transpires in language. Gadamer writes:

Language is by no means simply an instrument, a tool. For it is in the nature of the tool that we master its use, which is to say we take it in hand and lay it aside when it has done its service. That is not the same as when we take the worlds of a language, lying ready in the mouth, and with their use let them sink back into the general store of words over which we dispose.⁴⁰

Accordingly, for Gadamer, language is not only 'one of man's possessions in the world'; rather, the 'world is linguistic in nature'.⁴¹ That is, 'in all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own'.⁴² In our interpretation and understanding of the world, we are always tied to a linguistic tradition. As such, as one interpreter of Gadamer's work noted, 'There are no contexts of human understanding that are not constituted in terms of some linguistic framework and when we understand the world, ourselves, or others, we do so in terms of that framework'.⁴³ In this way, language has two main characteristics: Firstly, it is essentially a human construction; and secondly, it shapes all our understandings, meaning that thinking is only possible in language, and that language mirrors our world-view and thought.

This approach to language has been adopted by the Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. Abu Zayd was a scholar of Islamic thought at the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at Cairo University. In 1995, the Egyptian Court of Appeal declared him an apostate because of his ideas about revelation and the nature of the Qur'an, and as a

result Abu Zayd, together with his wife, migrated to the Netherlands where he was appointed a Professor of Islamic Studies at Leiden University, and stayed there until his death in 2010.

Abu Zayd approaches the revelation that Prophet Muhammad received as a 'happening' with a linguistic form, meaning that the revelation, he thinks, was linguistic in structure by its very nature. For Abu Zayd, it would be inconceivable to imagine human beings receiving revelation from God in any form except through their particular linguistic system. For Abu Zayd, 'revelation took place through the use of language (Arabic)'.⁴⁴ In other words, 'When He [God] revealed the Qur'an to the Messenger, God, the Elevated and Praised, chose the specific linguistic system of the first recipient'.⁴⁵ Indeed, when revelation enters the realm of humans, it should take a human linguistic form which is understandable to the first human addressee (the Prophet Muhammad) as well as the immediate human audiences of the revelation (the residents of Mecca and Medina). In this sense, Abu Zayd considers the Qur'an, the product of revelation, a 'linguistic text' (*nass lughawi*).⁴⁶

For Abu Zayd, then, religious texts are essentially linguistic texts.⁴⁷ Moreover, language is synonymous with a cognitive understanding which, Abu Zayd argues, precedes feeling in the event of revelation. Here, Abu Zayd is indebted to Gadamer's idea that every form of understanding and knowledge shares a certain linguistic nature. Extending this notion to the realm of revelation, Abu Zayd opposes some scholars' idea that the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad not in certain phrases of words, but rather in the form of ideas and feelings which the Prophet then poured out in his native Arabic tongue. From Abu Zayd's perspective, the Qur'an was not revealed to the Prophet's heart, and then expressed through his own words; rather, it was revealed through the medium of language itself.

Like Gadamer, Abu Zayd holds that language reflects 'the way human beings conceive, conceptualize and symbolize reality'.⁴⁸ Abu Zayd uses this approach to argue that language is essentially a human product, meaning that language does not emerge in a vacuum, but instead reflects the sociocultural framework of any given society: 'Language has a cultural, social and political context . . . Human beings, living throughout the world in specific places at specific times, leave their mark on language'.⁴⁹ Therefore, 'it is impossible to speak of a language apart from its [associated] culture'.⁵⁰ This means all languages are socioculturally produced, and there is an organic link between language, culture and history.

Based on his assumption that language is a human product and that the Qur'an is a 'linguistic text', Abu Zayd attributes a human character to the Qur'an. Indeed, the human aspect of the Qur'an is reflected in the fact that it was revealed in human language. Abu Zayd insists that the linguistic structure of revelation is 'culturally and historically determined'.⁵¹ To put it differently, God had to speak to humans in their own language, which was itself limited by their cultural values and standards. Although Abu Zayd does not go so far as to assert that Muhammad himself worded the text, nevertheless, he imputes a strongly human character to revelation: The language of revelation is essentially human, and it is linked to the socio-historical elements of the society in which revelation takes place. In this respect, Abu Zayd's view of language sharply contrasts with that of most classical Muslim scholars who considered the sanctity of the Arabic

language an essential feature of religion because they regarded it as a God-given language.⁵² Abu Zayd believes in the human createdness of all languages, including the languages of the sacred scriptures. As Sfeir points out, Abu Zayd's idea that the Qur'an is a linguistic text was one of the reasons why Egyptian judges in the court deemed him an apostate.⁵³

The role of pre-understanding in understanding

Abu Zayd also adopts Gadamer's idea that an interpreter's pre-understanding determines the meaning that can be realized in the act of interpretation. For Abu Zayd, when a person speaks of Islam, he should be aware that he speaks of his own understanding of Islam or its texts.⁵⁴ He stressed that 'each interpretation is the result of a relationship between the text and its interpreter and reflects the uniqueness of this relationship'.⁵⁵ Therefore, according to Abu Zayd, we should never claim that we have arrived at an absolute truth in the act of interpretation: 'We should be conscious of the fact, that we are in a dispute with the present and the past, and whatever the kind of reception we agree upon looks like, it is not the absolute truth. I think, we all have to understand this lesson of Gadamer'.⁵⁶

The Iranian scholar Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari is another example of a contemporary Muslim thinker who has applied this aspect of Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy to the field of Qur'anic studies. He is the only Muslim scholar among those discussed in this article who received a traditional seminary education. In the 1970s, Shabestari was the director of the Shi'i Islamic centre in Berlin, where he became familiar with German philosophy, liberal Protestant theology and philosophical hermeneutics. During the 1990s, Shabestari became part of a group of intellectuals in Iran who published reformist articles in the monthly journal *Kiyan*. As Katajun Amirpur has noted, Shabestari introduced the term *hermeneutic* to Iranian academic centres in the fields of the humanities in the 1990s and 2000s to the extent that this term was even used by clerics.⁵⁷ Shabestari seems to have been aware of Gadamer's ideas even in his early academic career. As noted by Wielandt, in the years 1970–1978, Shabestari 'acquired deep familiarity with modern Western, in particular German, philosophy, studying, for instance, Kant's epistemology and Gadamer's hermeneutics'.⁵⁸ Throughout his later works, Shabestari refers directly to Gadamer's ideas.⁵⁹

In Shabestari's approach to the interpretation of the Qur'an, one's pre-understanding plays a key role in one's understanding of the Qur'an. Shabestari states that the aim of his book *Hermeneutics, Book and Sunna* is to demonstrate that 'the discourse of *tafsir* produced by religious scholars and the *ijtihad* exercised by *ulema* are based on the general rule of hermeneutics that understanding texts is grounded in the interpreter's pre-understandings, interests and expectations'.⁶⁰ Shabestari laments, 'the idea that interpreters can or even should approach the interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunna without any pre-understanding, interests or expectations is still prevalent in our religious scientific circles'.⁶¹ Leaning on Gadamer's hermeneutics, which is oriented around the idea that interpretation has no beginning and must 'start somewhere',⁶² Shabestari argues that no interpretation of the Qur'an is possible without pre-understandings and prejudices: 'Understanding the meaning [of a Qur'anic passage or chapter] is only

possible when there is pre-understanding, i.e. we have some prior knowledge about it, and when we are aware that we do not know everything about it'.⁶³

Shabestari argues that all approaches to interpreting the Qur'an followed in the course of Islamic history have been based on certain pre-understandings. For him, even the classical method of 'interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an', which is still prevalent in traditionalist circles, is based on the assumption that the Qur'an reflects a coherent and unified scheme, and that some parts of the text can be sources of interpretation for other parts.⁶⁴ Moreover, the permissibility of exegesis based on opinion or reason (*tafsir bil ray*) and exercising *ijtihad* is grounded in the assumption that the Qur'an is a book for all humans in all eras and contexts.⁶⁵ Furthermore, those scholars who seek to understand the Qur'an's position on matters such as history, society and justice have certain pre-understandings and presumptions in their approaches to the Qur'an.⁶⁶ Shabestari concludes that 'no interpreter can claim that he has moved away from every possible presumption, and that whatever he achieves [in the realm of Qur'anic interpretation] has not been influenced by the conditions of life in his era'.⁶⁷

Shabestari relies on Gadamer's account of the historicity of human beings, referring to the connection between one's historical situation and understanding. Like Gadamer, who argues that in the task of interpretation or understanding there is no 'value-free, context-independent ground on which to stand',⁶⁸ Shabestari argues that the interpretation of the Qur'an has always been grounded in the kinds of knowledge that were prevalent in each age and society.⁶⁹ He argues that the task of Qur'anic hermeneutics includes fundamental questions concerning 'who I am', 'where I have come from', 'what I should do' and 'what I should hope for'.⁷⁰ For Shabestari, an interpreter's understanding of himself and the world around him play a significant role in his understanding of religious texts.⁷¹ This is reminiscent of Gadamer's idea that in the process of understanding we never begin as blank slates. Rather, we begin with certain understandings of ourselves and the world surrounding us, which creates a 'horizon' of understanding for us. Applying this approach to the realm of Qur'anic interpretation, Shabestari characterizes the task of interpretation of the Qur'an as a 'fusion of horizons', meaning that we should not limit ourselves to identifying the historical and cultural contexts in which the Qur'an appeared, but also ask how they can be combined with our current understanding.⁷² That is, we should seek to identify how the Qur'an can be understood anew.

Another scholar who has adopted this aspect of Gadamer's hermeneutic thought in his approach to interpreting the Qur'an is the Iranian scholar Abdolkarim Soroush. In the post-revolutionary environment in Iran, Soroush gradually gained popularity among university students and educated Iranians, becoming an influential religious reformist by the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁷³ Soroush has been living in exile for the past decade or so and has been highly critical of the Islamic Republic. During his time in exile, Soroush has been employed as a visiting scholar in the area of Islamic studies – first at Harvard University, then later at Princeton University.⁷⁴ He often travels within the United States and Europe to deliver lectures on subjects related to Islam, Iran and the modern world. Although there is no unequivocal evidence showing that Soroush has been directly influenced by Gadamer's philosophy, at least at the time of writing his

Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge,⁷⁵ there are great similarities between Soroush's and Gadamer's hermeneutic thought, as will be discussed below.

Like Gadamer, Soroush argues that no one can approach sacred scriptures including the Qur'an with an empty mind (*zahn-e khali*) and without pre-conceptions or pre-assumptions.⁷⁶ Understanding the Qur'an takes place based on pre-understanding. According to Soroush, 'all assumptions and anthropological, epistemological, methodological and linguistic preconceptions play a significant role in one's understanding of the Book [Qur'an] and the Sunna'.⁷⁷ Indeed, reflecting Gadamer's emphasis on the important role of pre-understandings and prejudices, Soroush argues that presuppositions and prior knowledge are inevitable elements in every type of interpretation.

According to Soroush, even great interpreters brought certain preconceived ideas into their interpretation of the Qur'an. For example, the late Shi'i scholar Allameh Tabatabai's defence of the philosophical concept of causality and his philosophical orientation played an important role in his interpretive method.⁷⁸ A philosopher follows a different approach to reading the Qur'an compared to a jurist or a mystic because their understanding is based on different pre-conceptions and pre-understandings. Soroush explains that 'Tabatabai's interpretation points to a rational Islam which values reason, while Majlesi's interpretation indicates a hadith-oriented Islam... Here, we encounter two understandings which are based on two different pre-understandings'.⁷⁹ Soroush demonstrates that the differences between two interpretive discourses – in this case Majlesi's and Tabatabai's – are not only the result of the two different contexts in which they appeared, but also the different (and prior) interests that the two interpreters possessed. Majlesi and Tabatabai had different expectations of religion; neither approached the Qur'an with an empty mind.⁸⁰ In another example, Rumi's mystic pre-understandings, Soroush argues, led him to approach the Qur'an in a way that rejects causality.⁸¹ As Rumi writes, 'All of the Qur'an is a lesson that rejects causality/from start to finish, the Qur'an says no to causality'.⁸²

Therefore, all interpretations of the Qur'an reflect human knowledge and are shaped by interpreters' different pre-understandings. Religious knowledge is not only influenced by the surrounding cultural context and other modes of human knowledge, but also marked by people's personal interests, prior knowledge and predilections. According to Soroush, 'humans' understanding of religion is compatible with their understanding of other principles and values... No religious understanding (*fahm-e dini*) can be separated from its philosophical and scientific pre-understandings'.⁸³ This means that the discipline of interpretation is not void of interpreters' prior human knowledge, which in turn is inevitably influenced by other branches of knowledge.

Interpretation as a dialogue: Interpretation beyond author's intention

As already noted, Gadamer argues that the starting point of an interpretation of a given text is the interpreter's preconceptions, and thus interpretation does not take place in a vacuum. Another feature of Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy is that interpretation is viewed as essentially a dialogue between an interpreter and the text. Understanding is linguistic and dialogical. For Gadamer, the relationship between a text and its interpreter

is always a 'conversation' and involves the logic of question and answer: 'That a historical text is made the object of interpretation means that it puts a question to the interpreter. Thus interpretation always involves a relation to the question that is asked of the interpreter'.⁸⁴ Hence, the process of interpretation includes a series of questions posed by an interpreter to the text. Indeed, we understand the meaning of a text 'only by acquiring the horizon of the question that, as such, necessarily includes other possible answers'.⁸⁵ For Gadamer, in this dialectic of question and answer, the question refers to the possible answers, and the answer refers back to the question posed to the text.

Therefore, Gadamer distinguishes between a text and its interpretation; for him, the task of interpreting a text is a creative activity – one that involves giving the text a particular meaning: 'Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. This is why understanding is... always a productive activity as well'.⁸⁶ We read philosophical, historical and literary texts and we engage with works of art not simply to understand the intention of their authors or producers, but to understand how they might be useful in dealing with problems or issues confronting us in the situation in which we find ourselves. Interpretation therefore involves productive understanding rather than the mere reproduction of authorial intentions.

These features of Gadamer's hermeneutics also appear in the writings of contemporary Muslim scholars, including those discussed above. For example, according to Shabestari, understanding a text 'begins with questioning, and questioning is not possible without pre-knowledge. The person who intends to understand a text is indeed looking for "something"; the person who looks for something indeed poses a question'.⁸⁷ The same process takes place in the interpretation of the Qur'an: 'The verses [of the Qur'an] do not speak for themselves. It is the interpreter who first poses a question and then looks for its answer by interpreting different verses'.⁸⁸ In the questions we pose to a text we are already encompassed by language; that is, we are always bound to a linguistic tradition: 'Questions have a specific linguistic structure'.⁸⁹ These questions, Shabestari adds, 'do not take shape in a vacuum'.⁹⁰ Shabestari states that some of the questions that an interpreter poses to the Qur'an are not derived from the Qur'an itself, but originate in various sciences and other fields of knowledge. For example, if an interpreter asks whether the Qur'an supports a democratic political system or the concept of Human Rights, he has not derived this question from the Qur'an itself, but rather from concepts that emerged during the modern period.⁹¹

Therefore, Shabestari draws on a hermeneutical approach that 'postulates a dialogue between the two sides of a message'.⁹² Like Gadamer's, Shabestari's hermeneutic approach, which is reader-oriented rather than author-oriented, emphasizes that the interpreters of the Qur'an play a role in the creation of meaning by bringing to the task of interpretation their own interests, assumptions and preconceived ideas, rather than being passive agents that merely attempt to extrapolate God's intent. A further question that arises here is as follows: Given that all understandings are based on certain pre-understandings, and that we are biased in our thinking, since we are always limited by history, language and society, as Shabestari argues,⁹³ can we state that all interpretive discourses are valid? Here, it is important to understand how Shabestari approaches the problem of the 'hermeneutical circle'. Shabestari states:

No text can be understood at once, without any prelude, without passing from one stage to another, without reaching understanding of the previous stage, without understanding the next stage and without moving between these various stages. There exists pre-understanding and pre-knowledge [in every stage of understanding], and these become loftier and constitute the prelude for later understandings.⁹⁴

The last sentence of this quote is worthy of some explanation. Shabestari introduces the notion of *tanqih* in his writings. It is true that our prior knowledge has a significant influence on our approach to reading the Qur'an; but, Shabestari warns, we should always be aware of the questions we pose to the text and ask whether or not such questions are valid. In other words, although there is no systematic way of putting aside our own ideas and views, we may consider refining and purifying (*tanqih*) our presumptions, interests and expectations in each stage of the 'circle' of interpretation, subjecting them to thorough analysis. Posing an inappropriate question when approaching a text will certainly result in interpretative errors. It is hermeneutically naïve to pose a question to a text that was written for a different purpose: 'If one's purpose in interpreting a philosophical text is to achieve a historical response, this purpose is incorrect... in a similar vein, [it is erroneous when] one's purpose in reading a historical text is to gain a philosophical answer'.⁹⁵

This approach has its roots partly in Gadamerian hermeneutics. Gadamer is often accused of being a relativist thinker. Although Gadamer attacks the reliance on methodology in his hermeneutic, he never challenges the idea that interpreters should distinguish 'the true prejudices, by which we understand, from the false ones by which we misunderstand'.⁹⁶ For the purpose of distinguishing between true and false prejudices, Gadamer alludes to the importance of dialogue and temporal distance. As Grondin has aptly noted, for Gadamer, 'it is through experience and time that we come to recognize what is [an] appropriate [prejudice] and what is not'.⁹⁷ It follows from this that 'our understanding is always subject to revision when confronted with more convincing evidence and interpretations'.⁹⁸ In the act of interpretation, we begin with anticipations of the whole, which can later be revised. Indeed, the more we engage with a text and its subject matter, the better we are able to reach an understanding of it. In this way, we may evaluate and revise our pre-understandings in order to fulfil the 'criterion of correct understanding', which includes establishing a coherence or harmony between the whole and the parts.⁹⁹ Gadamer emphasizes that '[t]he failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed'.¹⁰⁰

One last point should be emphasized here in connection with Shabestari's ideas about the Qur'an and revelation. For Shabestari, the revelation that Muhammad experienced in his prophetic mission was itself a hermeneutic matter. In explaining the event of revelation, Shabestari established a fundamental link between understanding, interpretation and language. If we consider the world surrounding Muhammad as a 'text' that the Prophet interpreted through the revelation, we are able to come up with a new understanding of the nature of the Qur'an. In this way, the Qur'an can be seen as an interpretive understanding (*fahm-e tafsiri*) of the world by the Prophet in the light of God's will. Shabestari states that 'for the person [Muhammad] who experiences events as signs of God, his understanding [of the world] is similar to his interpretation of it... This

religious interpretation of the world is a result of a particular experience of the world'.¹⁰¹ For Shabestari:

The Qur'an shows that the Prophet experienced a subjective understanding of the world around him . . . It conveys how the Prophet saw the world, not how the world actually is. In the Qur'an, the Prophet reveals his own perspectives (*binesh*) of the world and his world-view (*jahan-bini*). The Qur'an is thus a prophetic reading [interpretive understanding] of the world. This reading was achieved by means of the Arabic language.¹⁰²

The dialogical nature of interpretation found in Gadamer's work is also emphasized in Soroush's hermeneutic. According to Soroush, when we interpret a text such as the Qur'an, we pose a question to it, and then seek to find an answer from it. These questions are related to our prior knowledge and assumptions: '[W]hen it comes to understanding religious texts and interpreting them – whether we are looking at jurisprudence [*fiqh*], the sayings of the Prophet or Qur'anic exegesis – we invariably draw on our own expectations, questions and assumptions'.¹⁰³ For Soroush, 'Religion is sitting silently, waiting for us to question it. And we will become familiar with it in connection with the answers it gives us'.¹⁰⁴ The Qur'an is silent, but its interpreters make it speak through the questions they pose to it.¹⁰⁵ Much like Shabestari, Soroush emphasizes that the questions posed to the Qur'an are not necessarily derived from the Qur'an itself; the development of the natural sciences, for example, inevitably gives rise to new questions, which in turn leads to new readings of the text.¹⁰⁶

The theme of understanding the meaning of a text beyond its author's intent is also emphasized by Soroush: 'In the realm of texts, there is no such thing as "truth" in the sense of correspondence with the author's intention'.¹⁰⁷ For Soroush, this implies that 'when an author uses a phrase to convey a meaning, he has understood one of its meanings and chosen it on that basis. Nonetheless, that phrase can have other meanings', which is to say that 'a text can have meanings independent of the author's intention'.¹⁰⁸ When applying this approach to interpreting the Qur'an, Soroush argues that it is not possible to arrive at the intended meaning of the Revealer: 'To capture the true intention of the Revelator is an ideal toward which all of us approach . . . but in the end we may discover that the true intention of the Revelator was nothing but the collective endeavor of mankind itself'.¹⁰⁹ Soroush argues that the Qur'an is *hungry for* rather than *impregnated with* meaning, and thus concludes that meaning is *given* to the Qur'an rather than simply extracted from it.¹¹⁰

It is worth noting here that Soroush has recently developed a new theory of revelation entitled Prophetic Dreams. Here, Soroush argues that revelation is a type of prophetic dreaming. For Soroush, Prophet Muhammad experienced revelation (*wahy*) in the form of visions and images, and thus *wahy* did not only include an auditory dimension but also a significant visual one. Accordingly, the Qur'an is a report of the dreams of the Prophet and is thus a 'dream-letter' (*khab-nameh*).¹¹¹ Therefore, in order to interpret the Qur'an, we should assume that the language in which it is written is the language of dreams. In the theory of Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge (in which many aspects of Gadamer's ideas are found), Soroush argues that a person who believes that religious language is symbolic interprets the text in a different way from one who

believes that religious language is factual. Choosing one approach to religious language directly affects the views of a scholar concerning the meaning of the Qur'an.¹¹² Along similar lines, in this new theory, Soroush states that no interpretation of the Qur'an is possible without a pre-supposition – that is, specific understanding of revelation. Therefore, although there are some differences between the theory of Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge and that of Prophetic Dreams, both theories emphasize that understanding the Qur'an is not possible without certain presuppositions.¹¹³

One final scholar whose hermeneutic I shall explore here is the Egyptian scholar Hassan Hanafi, who launched his Heritage and Renewal Project (HRP) in 1980 with the aim of reinterpreting Islamic disciplines in the light of the present condition of Arab societies. In his 'Reading the Text', Hanafi made clear that his project, which he began at Sorbonne University, was aimed at showing that the incorporation of new hermeneutical theories developed in the West into the realm of Islamic studies was crucial to the transition of Muslim societies from traditionalism to modernism.¹¹⁴ In the same article, Hanafi demonstrates his deep familiarity with modern German philosophy. Following Gadamer, Hanafi emphasizes that pre-understanding is an essential element in the act of interpretation. Our presuppositions liberate the text from its own historical context, thus giving rise to a new context – that of the interpreter – and one that enables the interpreter to 'recreate' meanings: 'The interpreter, reading the text, recreates it by accommodating it to his own use. He may create new meaning; the present may be seen in the past; the past may be constructed in light of the present'.¹¹⁵ For Hanafi, 'the text does not have an objective meaning that could be uncovered through historical knowledge or linguistic rules'.¹¹⁶ Meaning therefore is not inherent in a text itself, Hanafi argues, but is rather the product of a specific relation between the text and the interpreter. Interpreters of the Qur'an can never escape from their pre-understandings, and thus their interpretive discourses demonstrate their interests and expectations: 'Every interpretation expresses the psychological and socio-political position of the interpreter'.¹¹⁷

It is worth pointing out that Hanafi's views about tradition are close to Gadamer's. The Arabic word *turath* (heritage), which is used by Hanafi, refers to tradition and inherited knowledge – the knowledge that comes down to us both orally and as written texts. Hanafi treated *turath* as a living presence that is required to be re-evaluated or reinterpreted. Thus, Hanafi's approach to *turath* lies on a continuum between two positions in the Arab world: that of the Islamists who attempted to revive *turath*, and that of secular thinkers who believed that tradition should be heavily criticized, in a way that a new culture emerges beyond 'layers of the old culture'.¹¹⁸ The latter group, in particular, rejected *turath* on the grounds that they believed it was an obstacle to the project of modernization in Islamic societies. Hanafi argues that the past is embodied in the present, and that it defines who we are. Any attempt to deny one's own tradition is to deny one's own present.¹¹⁹ Hanafi criticized secular thinkers for their failure to recognize that any interpretive discourse that seeks to cut itself off from the past (tradition) inevitably involves viewing tradition from an (ostensibly) objective point of view. This is the very idea Hanafi criticizes since, as discussed, he believes that we can never escape our pre-understandings in interpreting any text, including the Qur'an, which is itself a significant element of *turath*. Hanafi's view of *turath*, then, is oriented around the idea that a corpus of inherited texts should be continuously interpreted in accordance with the needs and

concerns of the present. We can never step outside tradition. The marks of tradition may still be felt, but tradition should be continuously reinterpreted to guide us towards a new present.¹²⁰

Hanafi's approach to tradition is reminiscent of Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment tradition, which sought to establish a rupture with the past. For Gadamer, it is neither possible nor ideal for the interpreter to cut himself off from a tradition entirely (as we recall understanding is possible only by the fusion of two horizons – past and present). This is very similar to Hanafi's critique of secular Arab thinkers. Gadamer argues that any attempt to liberate oneself from one's own prejudices involves an attempt to liberate oneself from the burden of the past, which in turn leads one to deny one's own present. Tradition has already shaped our own identity, whether or not we are aware of it.¹²¹ Therefore, instead of considering tradition a body of texts, creeds and doctrines which have been passed down from generation to generation, tradition should be treated as a 'dynamic force in which the old and new are always recombining in the present into something new, which is of living value'.¹²² Like Hanafi, Gadamer had not intended simply to preserve or revive tradition, or to privilege tradition over reason, but rather to emphasize the role of tradition in our present. This means that the effect of tradition should neither be overlooked nor uncritically accepted.

Consequences of the entry of Gadamer's hermeneutic into interpreting Islamic sources

This section explores five consequences of incorporating Gadamer's hermeneutic into the realm of Islamic and Qur'anic studies. It demonstrates that interpretation of scripture is not only limited to bringing about new concepts, norms, values and even methods to the realm of exegesis, but also has consequences for social practice and politics of meaning.

Religious knowledge: Sacred or human?

As discussed, for Gadamer and the scholars whose ideas were discussed above, a text should be distinguished from its interpretation. A given interpretation of a text does not necessarily reflect the intention of its author, and it is not possible for the interpreter to put aside all presumptions and pre-understandings when interpreting a text. These pre-understandings can either derive from tradition or from our contextual norms and values. This has an important consequence for Islamic theological discourse: It historicizes all areas of religious knowledge, including the interpretive corpus (*tafsir* literature), and refuses to attribute any divine characteristics to them. Applying Gadamerian hermeneutics to the realm of Islamic studies, we can conclude that the interpretive corpus is nothing more than a human interpretation of the Qur'an.

According to Soroush, 'religious knowledge [*ma' refat-e dini*] is human knowledge in the sense that it has been subjected to human norms', such as human desires, pre-understandings and prejudices, which is to say that 'many elements found in the human realm have entered religious knowledge'.¹²³ Religious knowledge – including all areas

of religious science, such as *tafsir*, *kalam*, *tasawuf* (mysticism) and *fiqh* – should be open to criticism and reconsideration. Indeed, Soroush places various fields of religious studies, including *tafsir*, on the same epistemological level as other modes of human knowledge and scientific enquiry: ‘The disciplines of *fiqh* and *tafsir* fall into the category of human sciences, and they are subject to a human mindset... they require continued revival and reconstruction’.¹²⁴ Therefore, in the realm of *tafsir* and *fiqh*, no particular conception is sacred and beyond question or criticism.

Along similar lines, Shabestari states that every form of religious thought and knowledge – including interpretive discourse – is subject to change, and that there is nothing sacred in it, since each discourse is shaped based on the prior knowledge and preconceived ideas of its constituter. This has led him to argue that the knowledge presented by the *ulema* is not error-free or beyond criticism. That is to say, ‘what *ulema* present in society in the name of religion is a [type of] human knowledge, because *ulema* are human and read the mission of prophets and revelation within human constraints’.¹²⁵ These constraints include human pre-understandings and prejudices. For Shabestari, a believer approaches the event of revelation with certain questions in mind and experiences behind him, and thus arrives at an understanding of revelation based on the answers he finds; if his questions and experiences change, his understanding of revelation changes as well.¹²⁶ Therefore, no scholarly theory of revelation is supra-human.

This humanistic approach to the discourse of theology is also supported by Hanafi, who advocated the ‘anthropologization of theology’ – a term used by Campanini.¹²⁷ Since the ‘conflict of interpretation is a conflict of interests’,¹²⁸ theology as a whole, Hanafi states, ‘is not a sacred science but a humanly constructed social science. It reflects sociopolitical conflicts’, that is, ‘every social group in a believing society has its own interests and defends them in its belief-system’.¹²⁹

In sum, for scholars such as Soroush, Shabestari and Hanafi, all areas of religious knowledge are essentially human-constructed, and thus should be subject to criticism, revision and reconsideration. This means that while there is an element of sacredness in the Qur’an, there is nothing sacred in interpretive discourse, because there is always a human element – that is, pre-understandings and prejudices – present in it.

Is an absolute or final interpretation possible?

From Gadamer’s perspective, the fusion of the present and past horizons of text is not a once-off or immediate event for any given scholar. Rather, the human imagination repeats the process of interpretation again and again, and this exposes the reader to new questions. Therefore, interpretation is an ongoing process, and one that moves in different directions as the interpreter reads the same text at different times.¹³⁰ Along similar lines, this fusion of horizons can take place during the course of history, meaning that as long as history continues, new interpretations will emerge. That is, interpretation is inherently an open-ended process, and one form of interpretation can never be considered final or absolute.

This idea has been also adopted by scholars such as Abu Zayd, Shabestari and Soroush. Applying it to the realm of Islamic studies, Shabestari argues that the

‘interpretation of the Qur’an is an endless task’,¹³¹ meaning that ‘understanding the Word of God is not something that takes place once and for all. Its understanding is tantamount to its continuity’ since we always encounter new pre-understandings and prejudices.¹³² For Shabestari, ‘We can never claim that the specific understandings and interpretations of the Book and Tradition that have been presented so far are final, or that particular interpretations are the only possible interpretations, such that no one should ever come up with new understandings and interpretations’.¹³³ Along similar lines, Abu Zayd warns against any attempt to emphasize finality of interpretation. No interpretation of the Qur’an should be thought to reflect an ultimate understanding of its message, and therefore a path towards new interpretations should always remain open. Abu Zayd argues that understanding of the Qur’an by the Prophet himself and the first generations of Muslims should not be considered final.¹³⁴

Similarly, Soroush argues that since interpreters of the Qur’an pose new questions, the discourse of interpretation is not immune to change and transformation, meaning that no interpretation of the Qur’an is ever final or everlasting: ‘The last religion is already here, but the last understanding of religion has not yet arrived’.¹³⁵ For Soroush, religious knowledge in general is ‘always enriched by newer . . . works and the arrival of competing views and historical developments’, and thus we can never claim that we have reached a final discourse in the discipline of theology.¹³⁶

Pluralistic readings of the text: Democratization of interpretation

If we accept that no interpretation of a given text, including the Qur’an, is final or free from reconsideration, then we must also inevitably accept that different interpretations of the Qur’an will emerge in different times and places. Each interpretative discourse represents the unique assumptions, experiences and interests of the interpreter. According to Soroush, since interpretations of sacred scriptures take place according to the context in which interpreters live and the pre-understandings they possess, it is natural that countless interpretive texts that differ from each other come into existence: ‘[R]eligious texts and experiences naturally admit of a multitude of interpretations’.¹³⁷ Accordingly, ‘our understanding of religious texts is per force pluralistic and diverse’.¹³⁸ Soroush goes on to state that ‘there is no such thing as “the true meaning”’. There can be a number of correct meanings’.¹³⁹ Indeed, ‘We are immersed in an ocean of interpretations and conceptions, and this follows, on the one hand, from the nature of texts and, on the other, from the nature of ourselves as human beings and the way we understand things’.¹⁴⁰ Interpretations of the Qur’an are naturally pluralistic, not only because exegetes interpret texts in different contexts, but also because they have different prejudices, pre-understandings and desires. Soroush writes:

Texts are actually and intrinsically ambiguous. They are laden with different meanings. Take for example the Qur’anic verse “They followed what the evil ones gave out (falsely) against the power of Solomon . . .” (2: 102) The late scholar Tabataba’i has written under this verse that there are one million two hundred and sixty thousand different interpretations of it.¹⁴¹

Shabestari raises a similar point. For him, when one recognizes that those engaging in the act of interpretation of the Qur'an carry naturally within themselves a variety of assumptions, then one inevitably concludes that there exist many types of Qur'anic interpretation. This approach, as Foody has noted, 'provides ground for recognition of inter-religious difference'.¹⁴² This means that instead of speaking of one *religious truth*, we should speak of *religious truths*. Shabestari argues that when there are various interpretations of the Qur'an in a Muslim country, equal rights should be given to each, and 'even if the majority, in a democratic sense, follows a particular interpretation, the rights of other interpretations [...] should remain protected'.¹⁴³

Along these same lines of thinking, Hanafi privileges the notion of multiplicity of interpretation over one correct interpretation, since each interpretation reflects its interpreter's pretext: 'There is no single interpretation of a text, but there are many interpretations given the differences in understanding between different interpreters. An interpretation of a text is essentially pluralistic'.¹⁴⁴ Hanafi even argues that '[t]here is no true or false interpretation, right or wrong understanding. There are only different efforts to approach the text from different angles with different motivations'.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, one of the most important results of Hanafi's hermeneutic is the democratization of the interpretive process. It is hermeneutically naïve to assume that there is only one valid interpretation of the text. In this way, Hanafi aimed to liberate the act of interpretation from the self-centred and autocratic claims of those thinkers – especially Islamists and traditionalist scholars in Egypt – who only accepted their own account of religious scriptures. Interpretation of the Qur'an is an ongoing task and can never be restricted.

It should be noted that none of these Muslim scholars believes that all types of interpretation are valid; instead, they argue that religious texts such as the Qur'an are naturally subject to many interpretations, meaning that we should never confirm the validity of one interpretive discourse for all times and places, and render other interpretations invalid.

Tafsir beyond fuqaha

The shared view held by the aforementioned Muslim scholars concerning the plurality of possible interpretations of the Qur'an can be seen as a response to those who attempt to set up their own interpretation of Islam as the only authorized and acceptable one. As noted by Johanna Pink, one reason why traditionalist scholars of religion, clerics and *fuqaha* often criticize applying the discourse of philosophical hermeneutics to the realm of Qur'anic studies is that they understand the plea for the adoption of philosophical hermeneutics and plurality in the interpretation of the Qur'an as an attack on their monopoly on religious legitimacy.¹⁴⁶ The entry of Gadamerian hermeneutics into this domain destabilizes some clerical claims to ultimate authority, because it has often led to the idea that, like other individuals who interpret the Qur'an, clerical authorities approach the text with their own preferences and pre-suppositions.

In the context of Iran, Soroush criticizes the *ulema* because, as he claims, they do not often consider the fact that their interpretive discourse or fatwas are based on certain pre-

understandings and interests.¹⁴⁷ The *fuqaha*, according to Soroush, are also influenced by their own interests, preconceptions and understandings when approaching the Qur'an: 'No *faqih* can approach religious texts with an empty mind and without preconceptions and presumptions . . . The interpretation and understanding of texts is not possible without prior knowledge and assumption'.¹⁴⁸ Along similar lines, Shabestari argues that the *fuqaha*'s interests and presuppositions are a significant factor in the interpretive corpus they produce.¹⁴⁹ For Shabestari, 'evaluation of divine values and principles is not the exclusive right of a few people . . . *Ijtihad* is open to everyone; every fatwa is a personal opinion given by a religious expert. A fatwa is not a sacred opinion'.¹⁵⁰ For both Soroush and Shabestari, *ijtihad* and exegesis are activities that do not exclusively belong to clerics and *fuqaha*.

A similar critique of conservative *ulema* has been raised in Egypt by Abu Zayd. Based on the idea that everyone should be aware of his limits in approaching God's message, Abu Zayd states that no individual can claim a monopoly on understanding the messages of God. He argues that the underlying presumption in the dominant religious discourse in Egypt is that only the elite can really understand God's message – a claim which Abu Zayd strongly refutes. Abu Zayd gives the example of Qaradawi, who insists that only specialized contemporary *ulema* have the authority to determine matters of interpretation and Islamic opinions.¹⁵¹ Abu Zayd argues that the *ulema* should free themselves of such arrogance, since their approach to interpreting holy texts inevitably involves natural human biases.¹⁵² Abu Zayd strongly rejects the creation of a form of priesthood or a sacred power which claims to understand the true nature of Islam. He rejects any kind of religious exclusivity, refuting claims by *ulema* to know the absolute truth.¹⁵³

Political implications

Finally, the hermeneutic approaches of Muslim scholars have some consequences in the political arena. Based on their view of the pluralistic nature of interpretation, including the interpretation of the Qur'an, the scholars in question argue that there can be no single official interpretation of religion, and thus there should be no officially designated interpreter and authority in this domain. They often dismiss the policy of giving priority to a particular group of people in a country to dictate their ideas and interpretive discourse to the entire population. According to Soroush, 'in religious knowledge, as in any other field of human knowledge, no one's word is compulsorily binding on anyone else'.¹⁵⁴ Soroush claims that any government established on religious principles acts according to a particular understanding or interpretation of religion, not the religion itself. Accordingly, no government can claim to rule the governed based on divine legitimacy; rather, it rules based on its human interpretation of the divine, which itself is limited, and thus is fallible and subject to criticism.¹⁵⁵ Ruling on behalf of God, Soroush warns, will change religion into an ideological device that propagates a particular interpretation of it. Based on this idea, Soroush argues that freedom is necessary in society: 'Only the free exposition and exchange of rational arguments allows the discovery of truth. Those . . . who believe that they possess the absolute truth do not need and do not want freedom'.¹⁵⁶

Like Soroush, Shabestari applies his hermeneutics in the political realm. Shabestari has warned against the promotion of a particular interpretation of the Qur'an by the state. He argues that it is hermeneutically naïve for the state to pour religion into a uniform cast, presenting an official reading of the religion – a reading that he considers to be a source of crisis in today's Iranian society. For Shabestari, if the political authorities stifle the path of exegesis that brings about new interpretations of the Qur'an, then the very channel of communication between God and humans itself becomes stifled.¹⁵⁷

Building on these ideas, both Soroush and Shabestari have criticized the theory of *velayat-e faqih* – a theory which considers the *fuqaha* most qualified to rule. The *fuqaha*, in this theory, are described as the heirs of the Prophet and of the Shi'i imams in matters of governance.¹⁵⁸ Soroush, in particular, argues that, since religious knowledge is entirely human, no political party is authorized to speak or legislate on behalf of the Divine Will, the Qur'an or the Prophet. Accordingly, *fuqaha* should not be given any special rights in the political sphere, and the state should place them on equal footing with all other citizens when it comes to any competition for political leadership.¹⁵⁹ Soroush further challenges the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* on the grounds that it prioritizes one particular interpretation of Islamic sources over others. For Soroush, the legitimacy of a political system should not be based on any particular type of religion; rather, it comes directly from people's acceptance: 'The implementation of justice in society is possible only through a democratic way, neither through an autocratic approach nor an approach based on *wilaya*'.¹⁶⁰

Conclusion

The application of Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy to the domain of interpreting religious texts has not necessarily resulted in the creation of an objective methodology for interpreting the Qur'an. The Muslim scholars whose ideas have been discussed in this article agree that the Qur'an retains a close relationship with interpreters' interests and presumptions. That is, commentators on the Qur'an enter into a dynamic process of interpretation and engage in a dialogue with the text – one that is shaped by their prior knowledge and pre-understanding. Whether these scholars have been influenced by Gadamer, or whether their own ideas have happened to reflect Gadamer's hermeneutics, it can be stated that the application of Gadamerian principles of interpretation have brought about certain consequences in the realm of Islamic studies. First, all areas of religious knowledge, including exegesis, are essentially human-constructed and are as such unsacred. Thus, they are subject to criticism and revision. Second, there is no absolute or final interpretive discourse. Interpretation is an ongoing task and new meanings of the Qur'an can always be discovered by new interpreters. Third, we should protect the natural plurality of human understanding and interpretation of scripture. Fourth, the realm and activity of exegesis should not be seen as exclusive to a specific group of people – namely the *ulema*; rather, everyone, to some degree, can interpret scripture, though with his/her prejudices. Finally, there can be no official form of scriptural exegesis, and thus no official interpreter whose interpretive discourse is binding for everyone.

Not surprisingly, the ideas of Muslim scholars such as Abu Zayd, Hanafi, Soroush and Shabestari have been subject to strong criticism from many other Muslim scholars who have attacked them for considering the Qur'an a historically contingent text. In particular, Abu Zayd has been attacked for holding the view that the Qur'an 'acquired a human existence separate from its divine nature' from the moment it was revealed.¹⁶¹ Conservative theologians in Iran proclaimed that Soroush's and Shabestari's ideas create religious doubts among Iranians,¹⁶² and they have been described as thinkers whose approaches inevitably lead to relativism.¹⁶³ Despite the opposition they have faced, it can be stated that Abu Zayd, Hanafi, Soroush, and Shabestari have opened up a new horizon in contemporary Islamic discourse. Their interpretive discourses which significantly reflect Gadamerian hermeneutics may continue to provide a fertile space for further debates and may serve as an inspiration for a younger generation of Muslim scholars.

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Notes

1. al-Sid (1975); Nasr (2004, 23).
2. Managheb and Mehrabi (2013, 239).
3. Managheb and Mehrabi (2013, 239).
4. Elmi (2004, 287).
5. Cited in Denffer (2007, 180).
6. Esack (2002, 74).
7. Shahrur (2009, 2); Kadivar (2015, xxiv); Rahemtulla (2017, 19).
8. Literalism in general refers to the privileging of the literal meaning of a text over other forms of meaning in the process of interpretation.
9. Mattson (2008, 212).
10. Saeed (2008a, 107).
11. For this observation, see Saeed (2008b, 224); Rahemtulla (2017, 19).
12. Kadivar (2015, xxiv).
13. Harrison (2010, 208).
14. Dallmayr (2010, 105).
15. Lawn (2006, 46).
16. Palmer (1969, 84).
17. Harrison (2010, 209); Palmer (1969, 87).
18. Palmer (1969, 89).
19. Gadamer (1975, 261).
20. Gadamer (1975, 261).
21. Palmer (1969, 42).
22. Heidegger (1962, 190–91).
23. Mclean (2012, 114).
24. Mclean (2012, 114).
25. Harrison (2010, 210).
26. Gadamer (1975, 262).
27. Gadamer (1975, 296).

28. Stiver (2003, 179).
29. Gadamer (1975, 263).
30. Gadamer (1975, 262).
31. Ormiston and Schrift (1990, 19).
32. Ormiston and Schrift (1990, 19); see also Betti (1990).
33. See Dostal (2002, 6).
34. Gadamer (1975, 350).
35. Gadamer (1975, 360).
36. Grondin (2002, 41).
37. Gadamer (1977, 60).
38. Gadamer (1975, 432).
39. Gadamer (1975, 350).
40. Gadamer (1977, 62).
41. Gadamer (1975, 401).
42. Gadamer (1977, 62).
43. Wachterhauser (2002, 66).
44. Abu Zayd (2004, 57).
45. Abu Zayd (1998, 24).
46. Abu Zayd (1998, 9).
47. Abu Zayd (1992, 63).
48. Abu Zayd (2004, 98).
49. Abu Zayd (2004, 96).
50. Abu Zayd (1998, 24).
51. Abu Zayd (2000).
52. For the sanctity of Arabic language among some medieval Muslim scholars, see Chejne (1965, 452–55).
53. Sfeir (1998, 412).
54. Abu Zayd (1992, 29).
55. Cited in Kermani (2006, 181).
56. Cited in Völker (2017, 164).
57. Amirpur (2015, 175).
58. Wielandt (2016, 741).
59. Shabestari (2004, 11, 15, 19–20); Shabestari (2007).
60. Shabestari (2000, 8–9).
61. Shabestari (2000, 7–8).
62. Gadamer (1975, 472).
63. Shabestari (2000, 17).
64. Shabestari (2000, 36).
65. Shabestari (2000, 36).
66. Shabestari (2000, 37).
67. Shabestari (2000, 38).
68. Wachterhauser (2002, 53).
69. Shabestari (2000, 34).
70. Shabestari (2000, 23).
71. Shabestari (2000, 161).

72. Shabestari (2000, 29).
73. Schwerin (2015, 142).
74. Tavassoli (2011, 136).
75. Soroush (1995); as Soroush stated in an interview, 'up to the time that I composed the thesis of contraction and expansion I had not studied the hermeneutical theories of scholars such as Hans-Georg Gadamer. Indeed, I was struck by the affinity of my positions and those of Gadamer' (Soroush 2000, 7). In his *Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge*, Soroush acknowledged that he was inspired by philosophers such as Quine and Thomas Kuhn.
76. Soroush (1995, 487).
77. Soroush (1995, 357).
78. Soroush (1995, 359).
79. Soroush (1995, 239–40).
80. Soroush (1995, 241).
81. Soroush (1995, 359).
82. Masnavi, III, verse 2535.
83. Soroush (1995, 369).
84. Gadamer (1975, 333).
85. Gadamer (1975, 333).
86. Gadamer (1975, 296).
87. Shabestari (2000, 22).
88. Shabestari (2000, 37).
89. Shabestari (2000, 22).
90. Shabestari (2000, 22).
91. Shabestari (2000, 37).
92. See Vahdat (2006, 204).
93. Shabestari (1997, 120).
94. Shabestari (2000, 21–22).
95. Shabestari (2000, 24).
96. Gadamer (1975, 266).
97. Grondin (2002, 45).
98. Grondin (2002, 44).
99. Gadamer (1975, 259).
100. Gadamer (1975, 259).
101. Shabestari (2008).
102. Shabestari (2008); for an analysis of his theory of revelation, see Akbar (2016a).
103. Soroush (2009a, 120).
104. Soroush (1995, 264).
105. Soroush (1995, 270).
106. Soroush (1995, 264).
107. Soroush (2009a, 177).
108. Soroush (2009a, 177).
109. Soroush (1998, 251).
110. Soroush (1995, 271); for discussions about this aspect of Soroush's idea see: Akbar (2020, 79–82).

111. Soroush (2018).
112. Soroush (1995, 164–70).
113. See Soroush (2018, 283).
114. Hanafi (1988, 10–11).
115. Hanafi (1988, 6).
116. Hanafi (1988, 6).
117. Hanafi (1988, 6); see also Hanafi (1996, 202–203).
118. Hanafi (1992, 27–29); see also Mansour (2000, 121).
119. Mansour (2000, 121).
120. For a recent study on Hanafi's approach to *turath*, see Daifallah (2018).
121. Gadamer (1990, 150).
122. Mclean (2012, 183).
123. Soroush (1995, 106).
124. Soroush (1995, 249).
125. Shabestari (1994, 20).
126. Shabestari (2000, 162–63).
127. Campanini (2011, 73).
128. Hanafi (1996, 203).
129. Hanafi (1995, Vol. 2: 110–111); For similar ideas in Abu Zayd's writings see Abu Zayd (2004, 203).
130. See Mclean (2012, 193).
131. Shabestari (2009).
132. Shabestari (2000, 260).
133. Shabestari (2000, 286); see also Shabestari (2000, 298).
134. See Oweidat (2013, 90); Akbar (2020, 143–144).
135. Soroush (2000, 37).
136. See Vahdat (2003, 615).
137. Soroush (2009a, 137).
138. Soroush (2009a, 120).
139. Soroush (2009a, 176).
140. Soroush (2009a, 121).
141. Soroush (2009a, 176).
142. Foody (2015, 613).
143. Shabestari (2005, 78).
144. Hanafi (1996, 203).
145. Hanafi (1996, 203).
146. Pink (2016, 788).
147. Soroush (1995, 192).
148. Soroush (1995, 487).
149. Shabestari (2000, 39).
150. Shabestari (2000, 97–98).
151. See Oweidat (2013, 97).
152. Abu Zayd (1992, 30).
153. For similar ideas among other Muslim scholars, see Campanini (2011, 113); Rahemtulla (2017, 18–19).

154. Soroush (2009a, 123).
155. Soroush (2000, 61).
156. Cited in Schwerin (2015, 412).
157. Shabestari (2000, 302). For similar discussion raised by Abu Zayd see Akbar (2020, 150–51, 154–55).
158. See Khomeini (1981, 79).
159. See Akbar (2016b).
160. Soroush (2009b); for further analysis, see Badamchi (2017).
161. See Najjar (2000, 180, 196–97).
162. See Foody (2016).
163. For example, see Khosrowpanah (2010).

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