

CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN SOUTH AFRICA AND THE EMERGENCE OF QUR'ĀNIC HERMENEUTICAL NOTIONS

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The struggle by non-clerics for the right to understand the Qur'ān within a context of oppression and a liberation struggle and theological developments connected to it are discussed in this article. The theological developments from traditionalism to modernism to resurgent Islam and the role of the Qur'ān in this trajectory have their roots in the South African crucible as much as in normative Islam. From this engagement between Islam and oppression/liberation some key hermeneutical notions have emerged. The Qur'ān thus becomes a tool and a source of inspiration for liberative praxis in South Africa.

'Everyone is gone. Even God has left. No one cares anymore.'

— dispossessed elderly woman in Botshabelo

'Unless we act, we have no way of knowing what we are.'

— Thomas Merton

Introduction

The movement towards re-interpretative Islamic thought in South Africa is closely linked to the struggle for the Qur'ān undertaken in the northern provinces, i.e. Natal and Transvaal. Because the Western Cape has been the focus of religio-political re-interpretative activity the theological developments in the northern provinces — especially Natal — have been largely ignored.¹

This struggle — for that is what it was — has essentially been between traditionalism and modernism. The limited victory of modernism laid the theological basis for the use of the Qur'ān as an ideological weapon by Islamists.² The development from traditionalism to modernism to

resurgent Islam and the role of the Qur'ān seeking expression within the South African context in this trajectory is traced and discussed.

Traditionalism

Contemporary Muslim religious thought in South Africa has for the past two centuries largely been shaped by the traditionalist clerics.³ This continues to be the case, although a definite trend of re-interpretative Islamic thought has developed over the last two decades.

Traditionalism can be defined as 'the will to freeze society according to the memory of a past one, where religion and custom are fused, and society's historicity is obliterated in favour of an imaginary timeless society under attack by a pernicious modernity'.⁴ In South Africa, the Indo-Pak schooled clerics and individuals among those schooled in the Middle East are the standard-bearers of Muslim traditionalism.

Schooled in the traditional materials as they are purported to have developed from the Prophet through the medieval centuries, the clerics display varying degrees of competence. They are '*ulamā*' (scholars) only in the sense that they are the carriers of this tradition. To the extent that the syllabi in which they are schooled at *madrasas* (seminaries) are overwhelmingly *fiqh* (jurisprudence) - oriented, a more correct appellation would be *fuqahā*' (jurists).

The estimated one and a half thousand or more⁵ of such clerics in South Africa are formally represented in four major organizations: the Jamiatul Ulama⁶ of the Transvaal, Jamiatul Ulama of Natal, the Muslim Judicial Council of the Cape (MJC) and the Sunni Jamiatul Ulama. Two smaller cleric bodies are the judiciary of the Majlis al-Shura al-Islami and the Majlisul Ulama of the Eastern Cape.

The division between the Jamiatul Ulama of Natal and Transvaal and the Majlisul Ulama of the Eastern Cape are essentially geographic. The latter, however, represents an inflexible and vociferously dogmatic perspective of their common Deobandi⁷ theological heritage while the Sunni Jamiatul Ulama represents Barelvi thought.⁸ The MJC is composed of a varied group of clerics from a multitude of theological backgrounds and includes ordinary community religious figures with little or no formal juristic or theological credentials.

With varying degrees of intensity all these bodies regard the pursuit of understanding the Qur'ān to be the function of the '*ulamā*' exclusively. Few, if any, among them, however, would claim for themselves any

kind of thorough understanding of the Qur'ān, nor would they be engaged in a systematic and ongoing study of it. Classes in *tafsīr* (exegesis) are conducted by a few clerics, and lectures are frequently held on various Qur'ānic themes during the month of Ramadan. These lectures, however, are based on a classic orthodox *mufasssīr's* (exegete) work such as that of Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), or a compilation of orthodox *tafsīr* works, such as that of Muftī Muḥammad Shafī' (d. 1976),⁹ rather than on the cleric's own reflections or research involving a range of interpretations. Some of the clerics have even suggested that the orthodox classical *mufasssīrūn* 'were specifically created'¹⁰ for the task of explaining the Qur'ān. Ignoring these early *mufasssīrūn*, they argue, is 'the path to dalāl (confusion) and batil (falsehood), leading to ultimate destruction of imān (faith)'.¹¹

This system of teaching runs true to the traditionalist clerics' own culture and didactic methods, which rotate around legal or exegetical commentaries, super-commentaries and supra-commentaries. In this tradition the Qur'ān *qua* Qur'ān had gradually been eroded as a serious subject of study at *madrasas*. The Qur'ān has consequently acquired a reverential distance which has made it cognitively unapproachable by even graduates from these institutions.

Fazlur Rahman contextualizes and describes *madrasa* learning in the following manner:

With the decline in intellectual creativity and the onset of ever-deepening conservatism, the curricula of education . . . shrank and the intellectual and scientific disciplines were expurgated, yielding the entire space to purely religious disciplines in the narrowest sense of the word. Mechanical learning largely took the place of original thought. With the thirteenth century, the age of commentaries begins and it is not rare to find an author who wrote a highly terse text in a certain field, in order to be memorized by students and, then, in order to explain the enigmatic text, himself authored both a commentary and a super commentary!¹²

Until fairly recently, *madrasa* education has been viewed in South Africa as an inferior alternative to secular education. Consequently, sons¹³ who displayed the least visible scholarly potential were sent off at an early age to pursue religious learning. Students would spend anything from six to twelve years in the Middle East or on the Indo-Pak sub-continent immersed in the classical sciences of the world of Islam. Divorced from their environment and ignorant of contemporary issues, they were hardly able to interpret Islam in a manner that would make sense to those

who remained in South Africa to pursue 'secular learning'. Many Western-educated Muslims who sought religiously based contemporary answers to the issues facing a divided society thus felt that the traditionalist clerics failed to be of any relevance to their quest.

This inability to interpret the qur'ānic message creatively in 'contemporary terms' blended well with the centrality of the qur'ānic oral tradition in Muslim society. This combination resulted in the neglect of the Qur'ān as the active Speech of Allah addressing itself to every age.

The Oral Tradition

The oral tradition is at the heart of the traditionalist relationship with the Qur'ān. The traditionalist control of the religious educational infrastructures of the community ensures that years are spent attending *madrasas* in the afternoon to learn to read or memorize the Qur'ān.

In South Africa the oral dimension of Muslim commitment to the Qur'ān has received its finest expression in the Western Cape. Its *qāri's* (reciters) are among the best in the southern hemisphere and some of them have successfully competed against the most acclaimed in the world.

In summary, it may be said that average South African Muslims — not unlike those elsewhere — in their daily lives, do not interact with the word of Allah in any kind of cerebrally meaningful manner. Its significance to ordinary Muslims has invariably been limited to the oral form; memorized in small parts, recited in the daily prayers, or rehearsed at a funeral or memorial ritual. To employ it on occasions of bereavement, joy, a birthday, the golden jubilee of the local rugby club, is to invoke the presence of Allah. In the words of Martin, 'the words of the Qur'ān are evocative and only incidentally informative'.¹⁴

The message of the Qur'ān is comprehended by listening to the perceived authentic messengers of His Messenger — the clerics. While the symbolic or spiritual value of such interaction may be considerable, it is not difficult to appreciate the equally considerable frustration that this causes lay Muslims who desire a more intellectual or socially relevant appreciation of the Qur'ān.

Their attitude is summed up in a somewhat mocking question posed in '*Inqilaab*', a student magazine: What would you say if someone got a doctor's prescription and hung it around his neck after wrapping it in a piece of cloth, or washed it in water and drank it?¹⁵

Modernism: 'New Horizons and Fresh Vistas'

The emotional/spiritual ties to Islam of many young professionals and intellectuals caused them to turn elsewhere for answers to sustain their religious commitment and to nurture their spiritual lives. They resolved to discover the message of the Qur'ān directly.

The movement to engage the Qur'ān creatively in social affairs and to approach it without recourse to the clerics emerged from a disillusionment with traditional Islam and a commitment to transform the world of Islam and that around Muslims on the basis of Qurān and Sunna (the Prophetic precedent). These professionals and intellectuals challenged the centuries-old oral tradition whereby Muslims read and listen to the Qur'ān without necessarily attempting to understand its contents. The struggle by non-clerics to 'come to grips with the Qur'ān was — and continues to be — waged in the face of immense opposition from the traditional clerics.

The earliest group to grapple with the Qur'ān in a socially relevant and intellectually creative manner in South Africa was the Durban-based Arabic Study Circle (est. 1950). We were, says Daud Mall, 'disillusioned by the relegation of Arabic as a minor subject in *Madrasa* syllabi, the absence of dedication to the understanding of the Qur'an as a message and prescription.'¹⁶ 'As for the clerics', says Mall, 'they were bogged down by tradition and were producing an encapsulated form of a Muslim.'¹⁷ For more than twenty years this group became the quiet and gentle alternative to the dominant traditionalist trend in Natal and in some parts of the Transvaal.¹⁸

The group studied the Qur'ān within the 'framework of the Arabic language and a commitment to an enlightened Islam'.¹⁹ They sought to promote the study of Islam, 'to make Arabic the *lingua franca* of the Muslims of Southern Africa and to make the Holy Qur'ān a living, meaningful and dynamic message in every Muslim home in the Republic of South Africa'.²⁰ In pursuance of their objectives they arranged lectures by visiting Muslim scholars, founded a library for books on Islam and organized annual speech contests. They also initiated a bursary fund for those desiring to pursue Arabic and Islamic studies and they campaigned tirelessly for the introduction of Arabic in schools and universities.²¹

Their commitment to understanding the Qur'ān provoked the ire of the clerics who warned that they would 'get lost'. These clerics argued that 'it is not possible for a layman to study the Qur'ān Majeed without

the guidance of a qualified Ustaaz (teacher)'²² and that 'such study . . . paves the path to jahannam (hell)'.²³

Many in the group responded that it was precisely because they were already lost that they wanted to gain access to the Qur'ān. Instead of 'getting lost and confused', as the clerics warned, the participants in the weekly qur'ānic classes claim that they found themselves being exposed 'to new horizons and fresh vistas'. They 'were ashamed' says Mall, 'that for years they had also regarded the Qur'ān as a closed stricture'.²⁴ They now found themselves 'fortified' in their 'intellectual perceptions and spiritual lives'.²⁵

Virtually all members of the group were educated businessmen or professionals who were schooled in Western institutions — if not in the West itself. Being emotionally committed to Islam, they experienced what Rahman describes as 'the ferment that resulted from the impact of certain important modern western ideas on the Islamic tradition'.²⁶ They connected to the world of Islam through its primary source, the Qur'ān and did so in intellectual fellowship with the classical Muslim modernists such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), Jamal al-Din Afghani (d. 1897) and Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905). They also drew upon certain phenomena in medieval Islam, such as the flowering of Islamic science and philosophy, as sources of inspiration because they 'saw the frequent qur'ānic injunctions to man to think, to reflect, to use reason, . . .'²⁷

They shared the classic modernist relegation of *ḥadīth* to a distant secondary source of the Islamic worldview and insistence on *ijtihād* (scholarly discretion). *Ḥadīth* was rejected as authoritative and definitive of Islam and was only considered if it corroborated what the group perceived to be the meaning of a qur'ānic text.²⁸

The Arabic Study Circle represented Islamic liberalism in Natal and Transvaal and focused on individual thought and action. Their liberalism precluded them from paying any serious attention to social transformation, nor were they inclined towards becoming a popular movement. There is little to suggest that the Qur'ān was viewed by the Circle as a vehicle for comprehensive socio-political transformation; their political concerns did not transcend vague moralizations about social equality.²⁹

However, their commitment to the understanding of the Qur'ān — given the prevailing socio-religious conditions and the open hostility of the clerics — was truly trailblazing and their work paved the way for those with the broader objective of utilizing the Qur'ān as a text for social transformation and political liberation.

Resurgent Islam

The Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) (est. 1970) continued and enhanced the modernism of the Arabic Study Circle from which a number of its founding members came. Considerable interaction with Islamic movements such as the Jamati Islami, the Muslim Brotherhood and the then Muslim Students Association (USA) at international gatherings led to the MYM adopting the programme of what is commonly referred to as 'the Islamic movement'. The MYM's modernism consequently fused with what is commonly described as Islamic fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism

The term 'fundamentalism' ought to be treated with considerable circumspection. In the Western context, fundamentalism refers to a position within Christianity which postulates the literal inerrancy of scripture without any role for human reason in interpreting it. This position is, historically, a reaction against modernity in the West. Islamic fundamentalism is historically a reaction against obscurantism and superstitious accretions.³⁰ The convergence between modernism and Islamic fundamentalism is thus not untenable, although it is invariably accompanied by considerable tensions. We employ the term 'resurgent Islam' to refer to both phenomena.

A detailed discussion on a definition for and the nature of Islamic fundamentalism is clearly outside the ambit of our present discussion. I agree with the view of Abdur Rahman Momin that the term 'Islamic fundamentalism as popularized by the Western media essentially represents a stereotype, with perjorative and disparaging connotations.'³¹ This, however, does not mean that Islamic fundamentalism does not exist; there is such a phenomenon which we regard as a combination of the following positions:

- i) A rejection of the potential or reality of virtue in non-Islam.
- ii) A belief in the necessity of the enactment/enforcement of Shari'a — as the traditionalists assert it was practised during the Prophetic era in Medina.
- iii) A commitment to the establishment of an Islamic State wherein the Sovereignty of Allah — juxtaposed against that of the people — would be supreme.

The MYM — The Standard Bearers of Resurgent Islam

How did the MYM continue and enhance the work of the Arabic Study Circle?

'The MYM', says a Call of Islam intertrial document, 'is solely responsible for the flood of Islamic literature during the last ten years and for the access that lay Muslims have to (understanding) the Qur'ān'.³² They propagated the idea of *ḥalaqāt* (study-cum-formation circles) where Muslims meet on a weekly basis to study translations of the Qur'ān and engage in what Sugirtharaja calls 'communitarian exegesis'.³³ These *ḥalaqāt* were part of the *tarbiya* (formation) programme inherited from the Islamic movement, an important stream of contemporary Islamic fundamentalism. Their qur'ānic studies were complemented by group readings from the works of other luminaries of the Islamic Movement such as Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb and Abu al-Ala Maududi.³⁴ The modernist/progressive - fundamentalist tensions were mirrored in the fact that the works of Ali Shariati, the Iranian revolutionary, were equally popular in these *ḥalaqāt*.

The seventies were a period of considerable anguish for socially and politically aware South Africans. This period saw the 1976 uprisings in Soweto and elsewhere. The Muslim community had earlier also suffered the death of Abdullah Harun in detention. The resulting heightened awareness of the injustices of apartheid society led numerous young Muslims to search for new responses to the challenges of living in a divided society. The MYM spearheaded this search. The tentativeness and essentially intellectual nature of their engagement against apartheid ensured that their ideological horizons were not shaped by active involvement in concrete socio-political struggles. Rather, the MYM approach to the Qur'ān was informed by the ideological orientation of the Islamic movement.

The MYM had a large number of *ḥalaqāt* operating in various parts of the country. Most — if not all — of the Muslims who later employed the Qur'ān as the basis of their commitment to the struggle against apartheid belonged to one of these MYM *ḥalaqāt* at some point or other.

The individual remained the primary object of this stream of resurgent Islam although the MYM did represent a significant progression of the narrowly based liberalism of the Arabic Study Circle. Society, the MYM believed, was going to be transformed by a core group of key individuals. Quoting Maududi approvingly, their then National Co-ordinator suggested that 'the objective of the global Islamic movement is a revolution in

leadership'.³⁵ The *ḥalaqāt* were going to be the vehicle for the creation of such 'leadership individuals'.

What were the key ideas which enabled this *tarbiya* programme to be connected, albeit belatedly, to the South African socio-political reality?

I would suggest that three key ideas formed the ideological basis for resurgent Islam in South Africa. These ideas were of particular significance in the transformation of the face of South African Muslims:

- i) the idea of Islam being a religion and a state (*dīn wa-dawla*),
- ii) the continuity of *jihād* and
- iii) the Qur'ān as the comprehensive basis for everyday personal and socio-economic guidance.

The first two ideas, applied in an apartheid society, implied the linking one's Islam with a religio-political struggle to eliminate oppression (even if, for some, only as a prelude to establishing an Islamic state). The third meant a bypassing of the traditional clerics for interpretative guidance and a reassertion of the right to search for direct qur'ānic guidance.

The Call of Islam: A Search for a South African Islam

South African Muslims experienced the impact of these ideas in the form of what is variously referred to as 'contextual', 'relevant' or 'revolutionary' Islam. Publications such as *Al Qalam* and *Muslim News* and organizations such as the MYM and Al Jihad (est. 1963) adopted a decidedly more political and anti-apartheid attitude in their pronouncements. The period immediately following upon the June uprisings against apartheid education in 1976 saw a definite pattern emerging whereby the qur'ānic exhortations regarding *jihād* (struggle) and *qisṭ* (justice) were interpreted by these entities in a politically meaningful manner. This interpretation supported fundamental socio-political change and justified anti-state insurrection to achieve the same.³⁶

This movement for a contextual Islam was born from a deep sense of frustration at the political quietism of the clerics which at times verged on open collaboration with apartheid³⁷ and from a determination to ensure a place for Islam amidst contending ideologies within the struggle for justice. A number of verses from the Qur'ān were 'summoned' so frequently that they were often — in the minds of observers — reduced to the slogans peculiar to a particular tendency. Interpretations of Islam and

the Qur'ān often ranged from the calculatingly vague³⁸ to the very transparently elastic to suit *a priori* socio-political assumptions³⁹ — the sincerity of the Islamist/activist never being in dispute.

It was a period of considerable religious ferment and the Church increasingly identified with the struggle against apartheid, later becoming the voice of the marginalized and oppressed. All religious communities saw the birth of organizations with a specifically religiously-inspired socio-political agenda directed against racialism and economic exploitation. Among the latter was the Call of Islam (est. 1984), a group which splintered from the MYM.

If the MYM in its initial stages represented liberalism in resurgent Islam, then the Call shifted its focus to those whom Chopp describes as 'the non-subjects of history, those who have been denied any voice or identity by their fellow humans'.⁴⁰

The Call spoke about 'a search for a South African Islam'.⁴¹ By this they meant 'an Islam which grows from and inspires the South African crucible of oppression and liberation',⁴² 'an Islam which flows from and relates to direct involvement'⁴³ in the liberation struggle. This theology would be 'the synthesis of action (for justice) and the theological reflection on that action'.⁴⁴ They furthermore argue that it is 'unethical and strategically unwise' to work out models of Islamization in 'the comfort of drawing rooms because people are dying for hunger now and others are engaged in a struggle for liberation now';⁴⁵ 'a new order (in South Africa) can only accommodate elements that had grown alongside it'.⁴⁶

Their 'action — theological reflection — action' paradigm bears a close resemblance to that of Christian liberation theology, a resemblance which they have openly acknowledged.⁴⁷

The Call was born together with a plethora of youth, religious and community organizations which operate within the political spectrum of National Democracy — the ideology of the African National Congress and of the South African Community Party. The leadership of the Call played an important role in the establishment of the United Democratic Front, the internal standard bearer of National Democracy, which is essentially the creation of secular — even atheistic — forces in South Africa. The Call had largely retained the commitment to search for answers in the Qur'ān which was an intrinsic part of their MYM heritage. This search, though, was now being shaped, not just by challenging injustice, but by a specific form of challenging it. This 'theology being informed by non-Islam' raises profound questions about the nature and origins of any contextual appreciation of Islam and the Qur'ān:

What is an 'authentic' appreciation of the qur'ānic message today?

What constitutes and informs 'authenticity'?

What makes one particular approach to understanding the Qur'ān more legitimate than another?

How legitimate is it to produce meaning — as distinct from extracting meaning — from qur'ānic texts?

Is eisegesis in fact the 'obverse of exegesis rather than a distortion'⁴⁸ of it?

These were some of the key questions related to hermeneutics which were now being rather haphazardly probed, initially by the Call, and subsequently by the MYM. (The word 'hermeneutics' began to enter Islamic theological discourse in South Africa.) The Call outlined its basic position towards these questions in the following manner:

The Qur'ān is addressed to *al-nās* (the people) and the social reality of 'the people' is the most important factor in our hermeneutic. If that social reality is essentially one of hunger, humiliation and deprivation on the one hand, and activation to remove these yokes on the other, then that forms the basis of our hermeneutical epistemology.⁴⁹

Here we witness how the discourse on the right to approach the Qur'ān bypassing the clergy was now shifting to one dealing with various approaches to its interpretation. The scholars/activists engaged in this discourse all emerge from the ranks of the MYM, Call and Qiblah.⁵⁰ Though they may be few in number, the impact of their previous contribution to Islamic scholarship has been significant, and we may yet be witnessing a new phase in South African approaches to the Qur'ān. The discourse of qur'ānic hermeneutics will be central to this phase.

Qur'ānic Hermeneutics: An Overview

The term 'hermeneutics' refers principally to textual interpretation and the problems surrounding it. The problem of hermeneutics emerges from the fact that human expressions — or divine expressions in a human language — (texts in particular) are simultaneously familiar and alien to the reader. Taking into account this seeming paradox, the reader — if the text is to be understandable — has the task of transposing the meaning of the text into his/her own system of values and meanings.⁵¹

Derived from the Greek verb *hermeneuein* ('to interpret') hermeneutics is defined as the 'intellectual discipline concerned with the nature and presuppositions of the interpretation of expressions'.⁵² As an interpretative activity its essential concern is the written text and it can be described as 'the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of written texts'.⁵³ Hermeneutics deals with three major conceptual issues: (i) the nature of a text; (ii) what it means to understand a text; and (iii) how understanding and interpretation are determined by the presuppositions and assumptions (the horizon) of both the interpreter and the audience to which the text is being interpreted.⁵⁴

We are yet to come across the term 'hermeneutics' employed in the Arabic language. The compound '*fiqh al-tafsir wa al-ta'wil*' — 'the understanding of exegesis and interpretation', however, does appeal to us. The absence of a definitive term for hermeneutics in the classical Islamic disciplines or its non-employment on a significant scale in contemporary qur'anic literature does not imply the absence of definite hermeneutical notions or operations in '*ulūm al-qur'ān* (qur'anic studies).

While the term hermeneutics itself dates only from the seventeenth century, the operations of textual exegesis and theories of interpretation — religious, literary, legal — date back to antiquity.

A detailed discussion on the relationship between '*ulūm al-qur'ān* and qur'anic hermeneutics is clearly outside the ambit of this paper. Traditional *tafsir* activity has, however always been categorized and these categories, Shi'i, Mu'tazili, 'Abbāsi, etc. are acknowledged to say something about the affiliations, ideology, period and social horizons of the *mufasssir*. Connections between the subject of interpretation, the interpreter and the audience are rarely made. When these connections are made it is usually done with the intention of disparaging the work or the author, or to underline the theological prejudices of the author.

To date though, little has been written about these connections in a historico- or literary critical manner, or about the explicit or implicit socio-political assumptions underlying their theological orientations, the central concern of contemporary hermeneutics. Jane McAuliffe's *Qur'anic Hermeneutics: The views of al-Tabari and the Ibn Kathir*,⁵⁵ despite its emphasis on exegetical methodology rather than the social horizons which informed it, is a significant contribution in this regard. Kenneth Cragg's *The Pen and Faith*⁵⁶ is an excellent study of the relationship between eight Muslim writers, their social horizons, their approaches to the Qur'ān and the insights emerging therefrom. Cragg's *Event of the Qur'ān*⁵⁷ remains the most profound and moving account of the Qur'ān's engagement with

a living and dynamic context. The ideas in *Event of the Qur'ān* will probably be central to any attempt at evolving a qur'ānic discipline of hermeneutics.

Among the contemporary Muslim scholars Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) and Muhammad Arkoun are among the rare exceptions who deal with hermeneutics. Rahman insists that 'the Qur'ān is the divine response . . . to the moral and social situation of the Prophet's Arabia'.⁵⁸ He thus pleads for a 'hermeneutical theory that will help us understand the meaning of the Qur'ān as a whole so that both the theological sections of the Qur'ān and its ethico-legal parts become a unified whole'.⁵⁹ Arkoun emphasises the need 'to reconstruct the historical background of each (qur'ānic) text or period'⁶⁰ and for greater consideration to be given to 'the aesthetics of reception: how a discourse is received by its listeners and readers'.⁶¹ He suggests a critical re-evaluation of the interpretative methodology 'elaborated by jurists-theologians based on rationality as founding the true knowledge and excluding the constructions of imagination'.⁶² In its place he offers the 'hope that semiotics and linguistics can create the possibility of reading religious texts . . . in a new way'.⁶³

We have in these writings the beginnings of the emergence of hermeneutics as a discipline in qur'ānic studies. If previous patterns in Islamic scholarship are anything to go by, it will be a considerable while before its direction and nature become evident. Clearly though, it is in societies where Muslims are desperate to make contemporaneous sense of the speech of Allah in the midst of active struggles for justice that a significant contribution to this discipline will emerge.

Towards Some Tentative Hermeneutical Notions in Resurgent Islam in South Africa

We want to summarize briefly the way we and others in the stream of resurgent Islam to which we belong⁶⁴ have employed certain hermeneutical notions.⁶⁵ The extent to which these notions contribute significantly to developments in South African Islamic theology in the long-term remains to be seen.

The methodology employed by us is one which Arkoun describes as 'regressive-progressive'.⁶⁶ This means a continuous reversion to the past 'not to (just) project on fundamental texts the demands and needs of the present, but (also) to discover the historical mechanisms and factors which

produced these texts and assigned them such functions (= regressive procedure)'.⁶⁷ The process of revelation of the Qur'ān within a societal context has to be examined and its meaning within that particular (past) context comprehended. This process of understanding, however, operates within a (present) personal and social context which is one of oppression and struggle.

Because these texts are an inseparable part of our identity and active in our ideological system, we have to rework them in order to assign a contemporary and contextual meaning to them. We had to, as Arkoun says, 'examine the process of transformation of initial contents and functions into new ones (= progressive procedure)'.⁶⁸

This dual process of regression-progression between Qur'ān and socio-historico-religious context to *umma* (community) and current socio-political context is necessary for contemporary contextual *verstehen* (understanding) and meaning to emerge.

Out of this regression-progression process we have extracted six hermeneutical principles for *verstehen*. Before proceeding to outline them, two issues need to be addressed:

1. *How does one 'know' that certain methodological principles are more correct than others?*

We never know. There are no guarantees that one 'knows'. We may however, succeed in reducing the possibilities of 'erroneous' interpretation and enhancing the possibilities of an interpretation which supports the basic *élan* of Islam.

What we are assured of is that this 'tentativeness' will deprive us of a revolutionary or religious arrogance and place us firmly at the mercy of Allah's grace.

2. *How does one acquire the right to determine and define hermeneutical keys or methodological principles for 'verstehen'?*

The Islamist activist in the midst of a struggle for survival in the hell of apartheid has had to make sense of diverse interpretations of the Qur'ān, or rather he/she has had to make sense of the lack of any interpretation of its meaning in a divided society. These methodological principles have opened avenues of understanding for us in our struggle for integrity as human beings, coherence as Muslims and holism as Islamists. They are presented here for perusal, reflection and possible acceptance by others in similar situations.

- i. *Taqwā (Consciousness).*⁶⁹ *Taqwā* is the protective measure against the random appropriation of qur'ānic texts for legitimating ideology which may be inconsistent with the Islamic worldview. A qur'ānic hermeneutic of liberation is one which is not only liberated from theological obscurantism and political reaction. It is also one which is free from the purely subjective conjecture of individuals — even if those individuals come from the ranks of the oppressed and marginalized.
- ii. *Tawhīd (Divine Unity).*⁷⁰ Existentially, this implies a rejection of the dualistic conception of human experience. Humankind and human concerns are thus regarded as sacred. Socio-politically, *tawhīd* operates as the antithesis of a society which absolutizes race (divisions) and, hermeneutically, it implies a search for an holistic understanding of the Qur'ān. Such understanding will guard against the selective and arbitrary choosing of some texts above others.
- iii. *Al-nās (The people).* The family of Allāh are pivotal in the divine scheme. The interpreters and the addressees of the Qur'ān are *al-nās*. Given the stewardship of *al-nās* on the earth, the Qur'ān has to be approached in a manner which gives particular support to the interest of *al-nās* as a whole. *Verstehen*, furthermore, has to be informed by the experience and aspirations of *al-nās*.
- iv. *The mustaḍ'afūn fil-ard, (The oppressed and the marginalized)*⁷¹ It is within a socio-political context of oppression that the Qur'ān is being comprehended with the object of transforming society. This reality of oppression must inform *verstehen*. Inherent in the Divine instruction to the Prophet to remain close to the marginalized, in his prophetic option and in the Divine option for the oppressed and marginalized,⁷² is the exhortation to adopt their hermeneutical perspectives.
- v. *ʿAdl wa qisṭ (Justice and equity).* In a context of injustice the Qur'ān — by its own admission — is compelled to be the ideological tool for holistic insurrection against *ẓulm* and *ʿudwān* (oppression and transgression) in all its manifestations. This perception of the Qur'ān excludes any 'objective', 'scholarly' or entirely didactic approach to it. Any attempt at such an approach in conditions of *ẓulm* and *ʿudwān* is cowardice or, at best, escapism. To attempt neutrality or objective exegesis amidst *ẓulm* and *ʿudwān* is, we believe, to

comprise one's integrity as a believer in the Qur'ān and to destroy its basic *élan*.

- vi. *Jihād wa 'amal (Struggle and praxis)*. 'Those who struggle in Our way,' says the Qur'ān, 'to them we shall show our ways'⁷³. This verse implies a dialectical process whereby struggle informs guidance as much as guidance informs struggle.

These principles, operating within the hermeneutical circle of qur'ānic reflections and praxis, mean a permanent relationship with the Qur'ān as a book of inspiration, guidance and broad understanding.

As an interesting aside, I believe that these hermeneutical keys have a direct bearing not only on inter-faith relations but also on a theology of religions.

If South African socio-economic reality has been characterized by cross-faith suffering then the struggle against apartheid has also been characterized by inter-faith solidarity. Within the South African context this interaction between Qur'ān and reality thus involves a hermeneutical framework that results in a double hermeneutical switch that operates on the level of religious pluralism and the more 'secular' level of the social reality of the *mustaq'afūn fil-ard*.

This double hermeneutical switch in turn leads to a fusion between an Islamic theology of liberation with one of religions, i.e. a theology that accepts the legitimacy of other religions.

All of this admittedly looks terribly South African; it is. Does the Qur'ān guide in an exclusively ahistorical and universal manner or is it — interpretations and approaches to it, at least — also informed by, amongst other things, socio-economic reality?⁷⁴

Shah Wali Allah Dehlawi has ably demonstrated the relationship between revelation and the existential mores and predilections of a recipient community. His demonstration of this, we believe, in some ways supports the regression-progression process in our methodology.

According to Dehlawi:

the sciences, beliefs, dogma and practices which have deep roots in a society rise to the *Hazirat al Quds* (Sacred Realm) wherein the problems of humanity are considered. The Grace of God assimilates these with His Will and they become *namus* (*nomos*, divine law) and form the source of inspiration for the Prophets who guide people accordingly. This process is analogous to the process of precipitation. By the heat of the sun water evaporates and becomes water-laden cloud after rising into the atmosphere. There the cold air turns into rain. Now the self-same water comes down again to the earth

and flows into streams to irrigate fields and produce vegetation.⁷⁵

We would not suggest that the nature of a contemporary interaction with the Qur'ān is comparable to the process of revelation in so far as we believe that the Qur'ān is the final culmination of a long process of revelation and that Muhammad is the seal of the Prophets. The process of understanding the Qur'ān is, however, not entirely unlike that of revelation in so far as it must be informed by existential reality and praxis. The Qur'ān is not the 'holy book' of a small religious community. The universality of the Qur'ān and belief in the finality of Muhammad's Prophethood compel believers in the Qur'ān to engage in an ongoing search for contemporary and contextual meaning.

Conclusion

The early struggle for the right to approach the Qur'ān directly is gradually giving way to discussion on ways of understanding it. The introduction of the discourse of qur'ānic hermeneutics in South Africa is directly related to socio-political developments there.

There is increasing evidence of the emergence of serious re-interpretative Islamic legal and social thought in South Africa. It is no coincidence that the seat for this re-interpretative activity is Cape Town — the heart of Muslim involvement in anti-state uprisings during the period 1982-85; nor is it a coincidence that these developments in Islamic thought follow a period of intense and dynamic interaction between Muslims and 'the struggle'. Praxis, evidently, is giving birth to theory, or is, at least, nurturing it. The following are some of our tentative conclusions reached in the nascent discourse on methodology of qur'ānic interpretation and hermeneutics:

- i. A commonly assumed presuppositionless approach to understanding the Qur'ān has no basis in the history of *tafsīr* or *'ulūm al-qur'ān*.
- ii. All of non-Prophetic human experience is essentially interpretative and mediated by culture and personality which cannot be transcended. (The personal experience of 'seekers of the Divine' may prove otherwise, but the results of that must remain confined to the individual and cannot be of social import.) This has, furthermore, been acknowledged to be so — even if not always explicitly — by most of the orthodox *mufasssirūn* and *fuqahā'*.

- iii. All interpretative activity and conclusions are located in a particular context. It is therefore impossible to speak of a universal interpretation of a qur'ānic text. All interpretative activity and 'meaning' are thus, of necessity, also tentative.
- iv. No *tafsīr* or *ta'wīl* is value free. All interpretative activity is biased. Any reading of the Qur'ān is eisegetical before it is exegetical. 'Eisegesis is the obverse of exegesis, not a distortion thereof'.⁷⁶
- v. There is a need for a closer study of scholarly and political presuppositions in traditional interpretative activity and a re-assessment of it.
- vi. Debate in contemporary Islamic thought must shift to a clearer understanding of the mediating cultures which inform it so that it is no longer confined to conflicting epistemologies which result from these often conflicting cultures.

NOTES

Studies on Muslims in the northern provinces are largely confined to the historical-descriptive and are very limited. These include C. du P. le Roux, 'Die Ulama — Hulle Rol in Suid Afrikaanse Konteks' (MA thesis, Rand Afrikaans University) and G.C. Oosthuizen, *The Muslim Zanzibaris of South Africa* (Durban: University of Durban Westville, 1983). Fatima Meer's *Portrait of Indian South Africans* (Durban: Avon House, 1969) contains several chapters dealing with Muslims in Natal.

- 2. We use the word 'Islamist' to denote a person committed to an understanding of Islam as a comprehensive worldview and its establishment as an integral system of moral, social and political life.
- 3. It is generally agreed that normative Islam does not have a priesthood. At an historico-empirical level Muslim society does, however, have a group of male individuals who perform all the functions of a priesthood. The word '*ulamā*', which is normally used for this class, denotes mastery over a particular body of religious knowledge. To the extent that entry into this class is determined by an individual's ability to perform 'priestly functions' rather than possession of that religious knowledge, we prefer the term 'clerics'.
- 4. Oliver Roy, 'Fundamentalism, Traditionalism, and Islam', *Telos* 65 (Fall 1985), 122.
- 5. This is a personal estimate.
- 6. I have retained the spellings employed by the respective organizations.
- 7. The Deobandi school represents the latter-day puritans of Sunnī Islam on the Indo Pak sub-continent. This school is characterized by a rigid adherence to the letter of the law, obedience to a definite legal school (*taqlīd*) and unrelenting opposition to religious innovation which it denounces as *bida'*.
- 8. The Bareilvis represent popular religion on the Indo-Pak sub-continent and uphold the doctrine of salvation through attachment to the Prophet. They furthermore maintain that some forms of innovation are permissible, even laudatory.
- 9. Mufti Muhammad Shafi, *Ma'ārif al-Qur'ān* (Karachi: Dar al-Maarif, 1970).

10. *The Majlis*, vol.7, no.8, n.d., p.10.
11. Ibid.
12. F. Rahman, 'Islam: Legacy and Contemporary Challenge', *Islamic Studies* 19 (1980), 239-240.
13. A madrasa for the exclusive use of females is now operative in the town of Azaadville in the Transvaal.
14. R.C. Martin, 'Understanding the Qur'an in Text and Context', *History of Religions* 21 (4 May 1982), 368.
15. *Inqilaab* (Ramadan 1987).
16. Personal interview with Dr. Daud Mall, Founder President of the Arabic Study Circle, on 12th January 1990.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. *Al Qalam* 6 & 7 (1975).
21. At present Arabic is taught at most of South African universities and at a large number of high schools in the northern provinces.
22. *The Majlis*, vol.7, no.8, n.d.
23. Ibid.
24. Interview with Dr. Daud Mall.
25. Ibid.
26. F. Rahman, 'Islamic Neo-fundamentalism' in *Change in the Muslim World*, ed. P.H. Soddard, D.C. Cuthell and M.W. Sullivan (New York: 1981), 28.
27. Ibid., 28.
28. Interview with Dr. Daud Mall.
29. The list of topics for their annual speech contests are a fairly objective barometer of the group's interests and concerns.
30. The history of the Wahhabi movement (c.1780) in Hijaz and Najd — the forerunner of contemporary Islamic fundamentalism — is a good example of this.
31. A.R. Momin, 'On Islamic Fundamentalism: The Genealogy of a Stereotype', *Hamdard Islamicus*, vol.X, no.4 (Winter, 1987), 26.
32. Call of Islam internal position paper, 'On Relationships with other Organizations' (Call of Islam records).
33. R.S. Sugirtharaja, 'Inter-Faith Hermeneutics: An Example and Some Implications', *Mission Studies*, vol.VII, no.1 (1990).
34. Some of these works are Syed Qutb, *Milestones* (Lahore: Kazi Publications) 1981, *In The Shadow of the Qur'an* (trans. & eds.) M.A. Salahi & A.A. Shamis, (London: MWH Publishers) 1979, and Abu al-Al'la al-Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding Islam* (trans. & ed.) K. Ahmad, (Lahore: Islamic Publications) 1966.
35. E. Musa, 'Religion & Politics: The MYM and the Search for an Islamic Response to the South African Crisis', paper delivered at Muslim Student Association Annual National Convention 1987.
36. Some of the most frequently cited verses were 4:1, 75, 84, 85 and 135, 5:3 and 9, 8:39, 17:81, 28:3-6, 39:33, 42:38, 39, 47:35 and 49:13. See further all Call of Islam, MYM and *Qibla* publications of this period.
37. Cf. E. Musa, 'Muslim Conservatism in South Africa', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (Dec. 1969).
38. The *āya* (verse), 'And fight them until there is no more *fitna* (tumult) and the *dīn* (religion) is for Allah' (Q. 2:193) was interpreted to mean that Muslims must initially struggle against apartheid and then for the establishment of an Islamic state. See further F. Esack, 'Martyrs for Islam', *Financial Mail* (November 15, 1984).

39. The literal text referred to in the previous footnote exhorts a struggle against '*fitna*' (loosely translated as 'tumult') and for the establishment of Allah's '*dīn*' (loosely translated as 'religion'). '*Fitna*', though, was invariably translated as 'tumult and oppression' while '*dīn*' was translated as 'justice and faith'. See further Call of Islam, *Qibla* and MYM literature of this period.
40. R.S. Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 3.
41. F. Esack, 'Three Islamic Strands in the South African Struggle for Justice', *Third World Quarterly*, vol.10, no.2, 492.
42. F. Esack, *The Struggle* (Johannesburgh: Call of Islam, 1988), 67.
43. *The Call of Islam — Introduction Brochure* (Johannesburg: Taj Printers, n.d.), 4.
44. F. Esack, *The Struggle*, op.cit., 37.
45. Ibid., 38.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., Introduction.
48. J.S. Croatto, 'The Socio-historical and Hermeneutical Relevance of the Exodus', *Concilium*, vol.189, no.1 (1987), 131.
49. F. Esack, 'Side by Side with Non-Muslims: Towards a South African Hermeneutic', (unpublished).
50. The current doctoral studies into contextualizing Sharī'a by Ali Musagie, Muslim Personal law in South Africa by Ibrahim Musa, notions of *Tahriḥ* by Abd al-Rashid Umar (all at the University of Cape Town) are reflective of this. Directly dealing with-qur'ānic hermeneutics are the current studies by the present author at CSIC and Yusuf Dadoo at the University of South Africa. In addition to these efforts, we also regard the ongoing informal process of re-thinking Islam by various groups committed to its contextual relevance as extremely significant.
51. Van A. Harvey, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 279-281.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. Jane McAuliffe, 'Qur'ānic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir' in A. Rippin, *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Quran* Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 46-62.
56. Kenneth Cragg, *The Pen and Faith* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985).
57. Kenneth Cragg, *The Event of The Quran* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971).
58. F. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
59. F. Rahman, 'Interpreting the Quran', *Inquiry* (May, 1986).
60. Muhammad Arkoun, 'The Concept of Authority in Islamic Thought', in *Islam: State and Society*, ed. Klaus Ferdinand and M. Muzaffar (London: (Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies, Curzon Press, 1988), 56.
61. Ibid., 58.
62. Muhammad Arkoun, 'Rethinking Islam', Occasional Papers Series (Washington D.C.: Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1987) 17.
63. Ibid., 23.
64. I left the Call of Islam towards the end of 1989. The organization, however, does represent a particular stream in contemporary Muslim thought in South Africa. I (along with many others who do not belong to the organization) continue to regard myself as being a part of that stream.
65. C. du P. le Roux has dealt in detail with the way I have employed hermeneutical notions in my unpublished essay 'Side by Side with Non-Muslims . . .' See further his article 'Hermeneutics — Islam and the South African Context', *Journal for Islamic Studies* 8 (1988) and 9 (1989).

66. Muhammad Arkoun, 'Rethinking Islam', op.cit.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
69. The literal meaning of *taqwā*, from the root *wqy* is to 'ward off', 'to heed' or 'to preserve'. It is usually employed to mean the 'fear of Allah'. I prefer to render the term '*taqwā*' as 'consciousness', i.e. consciousness of the presence of Allah and the ultimate accountability to Him. Rahman refers to it as 'an inner torch'. (See further F. Rahman, 'The Prophet's Society', *Journal for Islamic Studies* 6 (1986), 50.
70. See further Ali Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam* (trans.) H. Algar, (Berkeley: Mizan Press) 1979, 83-87 for the sociological implications of *tawhīd*.
71. This expression appears twice in the Qur'ān (8:26 & 4:97) and with some variations in several other places. It literally means 'those who had been made weak or disempowered'. From the qur'ānic references and a perusal of the *Sitz im Leben* of the texts wherein these expressions appear we would regard the corresponding social class in South Africa as the oppressed and politically marginalized majority. (See further R.B. Serjeant, 'The *Da'īf* and the *Mustaḍ'af* and the Status Accorded them in the Qur'ān' in *Hamdard Islamicus*, vol.X, no.3 (Autumn 1987)).
72. Q. 28:4-8. This text is undoubtedly the *locus classicus* of a South African hermeneutic of liberation.
73. Ibid.
74. Q. 29:69, 74. There are, of course, a number of other factors such as language, geography, faith, psychology, gnosis, etc., which also mediate and inform *verstehen*. Our present discourse, however, is confined to the understanding of the Qur'ān within the 'mediating culture' of racialism and oppression.
75. Miraj Muhammad, 'Shah Wali Allah's Concept of the Shariah', in K. Ahmad & Z.I. Ansari (eds.), *Islamic Perspectives — Studies in Honour of Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi*, (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1980), 346.
76. J.S. Croatto, op.cit., 131.