Toward a Philosophical Approach of the Hermeneutics of the Qur'an

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Abstract

Although claims questioning whether religious sacred books can be "translated" or not have been heard for quite some time, they have increased with the emergence of globalization and the increasing openness and flow of information due to modern technology. In the context of the relationship between hermeneutics and communication, one could argue that interpreting the Qur'an is an interesting case study for many reasons. Among them is the number of debates and discourses that have been raised both for and against its translation. Another reason, perhaps one of the largest barriers according to some religious Muslim groups, is that the Qur'an is fundamentally revealed and written in Arabic, and, therefore, its true meaning cannot be translated into another language. Certain verses, such as "It is a Qur'an in Arabic, without any crookedness (therein): in order that they may guard against evil" (28:39), have been presented to support this argument.[1]

Introduction

What is hermeneutics? Etymologically, the term *hermeneutics* comes from the Latin *hermeneuin* or *hermeneutica*, which mean the "process of mediating meaning that proceeds from the outside to the inside of the meaning."[2] Along these lines, one could see hermeneutics as not simply translating or

uttering a meaning, but rather as explicating and interpreting a given text's spirit and inner meaning. I will begin to illustrate this study's importance by pointing out the amount of controversy surrounding the issue of interpreting the Qur'an. Following that, I will propose a possible philosophical foundation for a hermeneutics of the Qur'an through synthesizing two different streams of the approaches to the philosophy of hermeneutics. The first one will be the Muslims' collective appropriation and understanding, as seen through two exegeses: those of al-Ghazali (1058-1111) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). The second will be the western perspective through the standing points of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Jürgen Habermas (1929-). The study will conclude by discussing a possible position that one can adopt when dealing with the issue of interpreting a sacred text, in general, given their "sensitivity," especially for its followers and believers.

The Problematic

This study's problem is represented in the following two passages. The first, by Kenneth Cragg, says that

> [The] Qur'an is an ancient document, remote and uncongenial, suited only to sheikhs and specialists. Even the sympathetic reader, who is external to its people, will perhaps be dubious. It could be that he has already found his interest baffled and frustrated for lack of the necessary clues.[3]

> On the other hand, Sayyed Hosein Nasr, argues that

> [The Qur'an] is the tissue out of which the life of a Muslim is woven; its sentences are like threads from which the substance of his soul is knit.[4]

Indeed, these claims are important signals, as they highlight the boundaries of language and the importance of not approaching a given language (even a sacred one) only from a single approach, such as the literal, philosophical, or linguistic approach. Instead, one must possess the Heideggerrian *fore-understanding* before starting to interpret a text, especially a sacred text that occupies a unique position, as the Qur'an does for Muslims. The non-being (i.e., unfamiliarity) with the Arabic language, its style, and the Islamic faith may be one of the barriers to a true interpretation of the Qur'an. In his book *The Sublime Qur'an and Orientalism*, Mohammad Khalifa explains some of the reasons behind this. For example, he says that Orientalists may see the Qur'an's literary style as

> … mechanically repetitious, of limited lexical range, filled with clumsy syntax, unjustifiable pleonasm and rhetoric embellishment in many parts and with ellipsis and hysteron proteron in many others.[5]

He adds that others found that the Qur'an contains "'many literary defects'; filled with 'obscure sentences and strange words' ... 'faults of grammar and style' ... 'wearisome jumble, crude, and incondite.'"[6] Among the reasons for this lack of understanding, as Khalifa explains, are the differences between how Arabic sentences, and their counterparts in English and other languages, are constructed. Thus, an English reader can easily find the Qur'anic text "clumsy" if it has not been interpreted and understood clearly, or find it repetitive and full of rhetoric, whereas an Arab reader would find the text uniquely constructed and beautiful. According to Khalifa, al-Baqillany says, in his *Miracle of the Qur'an*, that "no one could appreciate its miracle like the well-versed Arabic linguists."[7]

Another interesting point raised by Khalifa is that a particular text's beauty and perfection is not totally up to the reader, especially if he or she is not familiar with its type, language, and genres. He says that it is not appropriate or fair to compare the Qur'an with other works, such as Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* or those of Shakespeare, for he believes that these works, although unique pieces of poetry and drama, were aimed at entertaining readers. Contrary to this, the Qur'an is not "intended to entertain or amuse. It was revealed as a guide for worship, a code for behavior, good tidings for the believers who do benevolent work."[8] Besides, he adds, the Qur'an is also a source of joy, happiness, and satisfaction for Muslims who lived centuries ago as well as for those who live today. Clearly, the Qur'an is a special book for its people.

The Relevance of the Qur'anic Text for Muslims

In order to have a clear view of the importance of approaching the hermeneutics of the Qur'an, one should first draw a picture of this text's centrality from a Muslim perspective and belief. For example, Muslims see the following verse as an example of the Qur'an's linguistic uniqueness:

> Verily, were humanity and jinn assembled to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce its like, though the one should help the other. (17:88)

However, secular claims have been raised asking that the Qur'an be "opened" to both history and literature. For example, Cragg argues: "If the

ultimate is reserved from access, how can its ultimacy be known?"[9] What does this mean? Could this, according to Muslims, be possible or acceptable? In fact, Muslims view the Qur'an as the spoken scripture that is powerfully applied and practiced in their societies through recitation (*qira'ah*). William Graham, in his book *Beyond the Written Word*, argues that what makes a book "sacred" is its people's belief and conception of it as such; interestingly, this is exactly how Muslims perceive the Qur'an, as a work of literary "matchlessness" (*i`jaz*).[10]

One part of its *i`jaz*, according to this viewpoint, is that the literal meaning is incapable of clarifying and representing the Qur'an's unique and ultimate meaning: "Every word carries a world of meaning within itself, and there is never a complete 'horizontal' and didactic explanation of its content."[11] Moreover, even if the literal written meaning is not obvious (i.e., for those who cannot read or write), the sounds' presence and the essence of God's words will exist through their ears and hearts. Graham[12] explains that Muslims possess this "sense of sacrality, or *baraka* ('blessing'), of the very sounds of the holy text as something that seems to penetrate into every corner of the Islamic world."[13] Plainly, the concept of *barakah* is difficult to explain logically and literally.

In general, the Qur'an's content may be classified into three main themes: the "doctrinal message," which sets up the ethical and moral boundaries of the human relationship. This theme has been interpreted as the Shari`ah (Islamic law); the "historical narrations," which refer to the stories of different prophets, people, places, and similar material; and "divine magic," which is hardly interpreted and literally understood in our modern age. The only possible way to do so is through a metaphysical understanding.[14]

This issue is far more complex than can be stated within the limitations of this article. However, one must mention here that even those Muslim philosophers' interpretations of the Qu'ran that are accepted within the western spectrum are viewed with doubt by some traditional Muslim commentators who claim they are significantly less involved in the Qur'anic text than the theologians and shaykhs. For example, Hamdi Zakzouk accuses Ibn Khaldun of misinterpreting the core point of the hermeneutics of the Qur'an when, at one point in one of his commentaries, he says that "all Arabs can interpret the Qur'an."[15] Zakzouk adds that Ibn Khaldon oversimplifies the duty of interpreting the Qur'an. Such criticism truly indicates how important the Qur'an is to Muslim believers.

A Look from the Inside: Patterns of Muslim Interpretations of the Qur'an

The uniqueness of Muslim interpretations and the complete rejection of the Orientalists' approaches to the Qur'an is most apparent in Khalifa, who clearly outlines the prerequisites for its interpretation and explanation (*tafsir*). He argues that al-Tabari (c. 839-923), a founding father of Qur'anic *tafsir*, maintains that the "true belief of the interpreter is the basis of any possible and acceptable interpretation."[16] Ironically, he adds that if the person is not honest with himself/herself in life and does not believe in God, how can we possibly trust him/her in interpreting God's word and secrets? Another interesting perspective raised in this book is that the author takes the "other" perspective by studying the Qur'an in both its historical and literal perspectives. He says clearly: "Those Orientalists' main aims are to prove evidently that the Qur'an is not the word of God."[17]

Finally, Khalifa argues that according to the consensus of Muslim theologians and jurisprudents, fifteen different conditions must be met before interpreting the Qur'an. The most important conditions that might be relevant to this study are knowledge of Arabic (*lughah*); grammar (*nahw*); and meanings, denotation, and allegory (*ma`ani* and *rumuz*); and Qur'anic recitation (*qira'ah*).

Now, I will look at two different interpretations[18] of the Qur'an to demonstrate the range of interpretations that is possible even by those who fufill the traditional Muslim understandings of the above prerequisites: a metaphysical pattern as seen in al-Ghazali's hermeneutics, and a rational pattern as found in Abduh's hermeneutics. Of course, these patterns do not represent the entirety of Muslim approaches to the Qur'an. However, I have chosen to focus on them because I think they represent, to a great extent, a model of unresearchable Muslim intellectual effort to read, think, and reflect the Qur'an's true meaning and *i`jaz*.

Looking at the possible variety within Muslim spheres of interpretation enhances my arguement that non-Muslims, under the right conditions (explained below), may also contribute to Qur'anic interpretation in ways that a Muslim audience would accept.

A Metaphysical Hermeneutic: Al-Ghazali

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, known among Arabs as *Hujjat al-Islam*[19] and *Zayd al-Din*,[20] is a founder of the metaphysical approach to the hermeneutics of the Qur'an. If one could summarize this approach in one word, it would be

"love." Al-Ghazali is in love with his God and believes that this true love will direct him to knowledge of God and the hidden and mysterious signs in His word: the Qur'an. In his landmark *Al-Munqidh mi al-Dalal* (The Deliverer from Error), he states: "I truly believe, as if I have seen, that there is no power unless He, The Higher, The Greater Giver, gives."[21]

Zakzouk describes his approach as saving the readers and believers from falling into the Homeric Skylla monster. Al-Ghazali experienced two major crises of skepticism that ended, according to him, when he came to know the "truth": Islam.[22] Furthermore, Abul-Quasem underlies the bottom line in al-Ghazali's theory of interpretation: In general, the theme of

> … all revealed religions is that man is incapable of solving all the prob-
> lems of his life through his reason (`aql) alone and therefore needs guid-
> ance from God on both the theoretical and practical levels.[23]

Consequently, al-Ghazali questions how a human being can understand the Qur'an's true meaning when he or she is not a fully capable creature. Hence, he adopts a metaphysical approach coupled with questions of rationality and the boundaries of human reason to know God through His word. Thus, al-Ghazali opposes rhetoric and its philosophers, especially Muslims, for "its [philosophy's] deficiencies are more than its benefits."[24] According to him, Sufism cannot, on its own, understand and know God unless it combines theory and practice. In addition, Sufism is superior to many philosophical approaches, because that which cannot be reached by human reason and its scientific capabilities can be reached and totally understood by Sufism's feeling, taste, and love.[25]

Here, it is important to mention that al-Ghazali also opposes what he calls "the expounded" philosophy, such as that of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina'. He argues that they were very certain about the world's eternity and, moreover, that they have not properly conceived and completely understood the Prophet's physical resurrection during his *isra'* and *mi`raj*. Rahman explains this point:

> Al-Ghazali also asserts, rightly, that metaphysical speculation does not
> possess the certainty or demonstrative force of mathematical proposi-
> tions. But he goes on to say, wrongly, that since the philosophy of these
> men is harmful to faith so must their scientific works also be shunned –
> since the latter tend to create goodwill in the students toward the philoso-
> phers (who were, of course, scientists too) and predisposes them to accept
> their philosophy![26]

Al-Ghazali approaches the Qur'an by admitting that there are several levels of literal meaning associated with its words, sounds, and letters. He adds that some of those meanings are clear while others are not. Moreover, God's speech has four different levels of meaning: inward (*batin*), outward (*zahir*), ending (*hadd*), and beginning (*matla`ah*). An example of his interpretations would be useful in this context:

> Tell [people]: If the ocean became ink for [transcribing] the words of my Lord, surely the ocean would be exhausted before the words of my Lord came to an end, even though We augmented it with the like of it. (18:109)

He explains that if an ordinary non-believer and a non-lover of God were to read this verse, he or she would be incapable of understanding the kind of heavenly "measurement" indicated. Mental capacities are limited and cannot explain all that His words mean, even the "smallest" one, such as "He." He adds that the Qur'an's ultimate meaning is certainly within the invisible world (*malakut*) only. In addition, since this example is beyond our human sensorial and mental systems, the only way to understand it is through "spiritual insight" (*nur al-basirah*). In his *Mishkat al-Anwar* (The Niche for Lights), al-Ghazali explains that:

> Nature is a dark one, for it has no knowledge, nor perception, nor self-consciousness, nor consciousness, nor light perceived through the medium of physical sight ... this veil is, as it were, [the] self-centered ego, and [the] lusts of darkness; for there is no darkness so intense as slavery to self-impulse and self-love.[27]

As part of his esoteric exegesis, al-Ghazali doubts the translation's ability to channel the meaning. He says that "the translation (*tarjamah*) of its words … is not sufficient for an understanding of the realities of its meanings (*haqa'iq al-ma`ani*)."[28] Al-Ghazali summarizes his method of exegesis by setting some prerequisites. For instance, he believes that four "veils" inhibit a true understanding of the meaning of God's word: the pronunciation of the letter (using the mouth and the tongue); *taqlid* (blind following), or merely following a school of thought while not sincerely committing to its doctrines; darkness and rust (*sada*) of the heart, defined as when people insist upon committing sin despite knowing that it is not right, a state that prevents one's heart and mind from opening up to a true Qur'anic interpretation; and when a man [or a woman] has read the outward exegesis of the Qur'an and has formed the belief that Qur'anic sentences have only those meanings which have come down by tradition [of] other exegetes.[29]

In his *Kitab Jawahir al-Qur'an* (Jewels of the Qur'an), al-Ghazali sum-
marizes his doctrine of interpretation after being asked about the benefit of
employing allegories in the Qur'an, since they embody, to some extent, clear
indications of what is true and correct:

> Know that every benefit lies beyond these indications, for these are a sam-
> ple presented here in order that you may know by them the definition of the
> road to spiritual meanings of the invisible world through the traditional
> words, so that the doors of the unveiling of the meaning of the Qur'an may
> be opened [to you] and the methods of diving in their seas may be known.[30]

Rational and Modern Hermeneutics:
Muhammad Abduh[31]

Another important example of the Muslim interpretation of the Qur'an is
that of Muhammad Abduh. His way of thinking and method of exegesis
were affected mainly by his experience as a political activist. He was intro-
duced to modern and progressive thoughts primarily by Jamal al-Din al-
Afghani (1838-97), a political leader and activist:

> Through al-Afghani Abduh was introduced to the outlook of Europe and
> awakened to an interest in the situation of Islam in the contemporary
> world.[32]

Accordingly, Abduh supported the struggle against the British occupiers of
Egypt. For him, religion was not just a matter of worship; in addition, it was
a way of life. Therefore, he reads and interprets the Qur'an in a different way
than his predecessors did.

Another important characteristic of his approach is to achieve reform
and progress in religion, especially in two realms: al-Azhar University[33] and
in the exegesis of the Qur'an. Before him, most Qur'anic commentaries
were centered mainly on the grammatical structure, the tradition of Prophet
Mohammed (hadith), and Arabic. Abduh rejects most of these "given" and
"unquestioned" *tafsirs*. The Qur'an was not only representing the literal
aspect, he believes, for:

> On the Last Day God will not question us on the commentators on how
> they understood the Koran, but he will question us on his Book which he
> sent down to guide and instruct us.[34]

Here, one can suggest that Abduh's approach, to a great extent, refutes
the claims that Islam (and the Qur'an) contradicts the progressive and mod-

ern method of interpretations. The modernity project, which began in eighteenth-century Europe, has attacked society's existing sociopolitical and epistemological forms in the name of the superiority of human reason. Interestingly, its impact on the Arab world assumed two different forms: adopting the project's core beliefs through social reform,[35] and completely rejecting it (the *asalah* [authenticity] trend) and asserting the authenticity of Muslim culture. Among those who defended and adopted those parts of the project that seemed to be convenient were al-Afghani and Abduh. While Abduh accepted Mohamed Ali's (1805-49) reform project, he rejected the British-promoted secularization on the ground that it was a real threat to Islam and national identity:

> … Islam should be the moral basis of a modern and progressive society, but that it could not approve everything done in the name of moderniza-tion ... A Muslim society could adopt European ideas and sciences with-out abandoning Islam itself.[36]

In fact, Islam is not against modernity and its claim that human reason must be used. Thoroughout its text, the Qur'an calls for and supports many of the very aspects that the modernity project rejected and fought, such as mass deception, magic, and myths. It also asserts the importance of using human reason and knowledge as a way to know God and be a good Muslim.[37]

Hence, using one's practical sense when interpreting is also a core characteristic of Abduh's exegesis. In other words, he wrote his exegesis in a way designed to simplify and interpret God's word for ordinary peo-ple, for at that time Egypt's literacy rate was very low. The traditional *tafsir*[38] did not have useful answers to many of the contemporary questions being asked by ordinary people and the intellectuals who had made contact with the "West" through public missionary schools in France, England, and other European countries. Abduh wanted religion to be involved in their life, instead of remaining an abstraction and existing only in the mosques' sphere.

In general, one could say that "rationality" is the main theme of Abduh's interpretation. Arguably, this inference may be derived from the previous discussion on the relationship between Islam and modernity, for he uses his reason and injects it into his exegesis of the Qur'an, especially when dealing with the "given" *tafsirs*.[39] One thing that should be clarified here is that Abduh confirms and asserts the use of reason when interpreting the Qur'an. However, this does not mean that he disregards the importance

and significance of revelation in his exegesis. In fact, he uniquely combines both the revelation and the use of reason as the Muslim source of *hidayah* (guidance), an example of which can be seen in the following verse:

> There is no God but He, the Living, the Eternal; He has sent down to you the Book (Qur'an) with Truth, confirming what was before it, and He sent down the Torah and the Evangel aforetime as a guidance for the people, and He sent down the Furqan. (3:1-4)

The traditional and most widely known interpretation of *furqan* is that of being a synonym for the Qur'an,[40] or that the Qur'an distinguishes between truth and falsity. Such classical commentators as al-Zammakhshari, al-Razi, and al-Tabari have slightly different viewpoints. Abduh interprets *furqan* as "reason." From a western perspective, representing a clear-cut modern version, Jansen argues that "Abduh seems to have replaced revelation by reason."[41] This is refuted by Abd Allah Shehata, a famous Egyptian commentator, who says that Abduh's viewpoint regarding the relationship among reason, revelation, and *hidayah* is clear: Both human reason and revelation are important sources, but they should "intertwine" (*yatawafaka*).[42]

Another important rule in Abduh's exegesis, one that Jansen and others have criticized, is his admission and acceptance of some "hidden" and "un-explained" meanings of the Qur'anic text. Abduh says that we should not attempt to interpret an unknown meaning (*mubham*) in the Qur'an. Some of his followers even wrote a book called *Manhaj al-Imam fi al-Mubham* (Muhammad Abduh's Doctrine in the Unknown Meaning). Therefore, here one could find a position on the interpretation of the Qur'an, as presented by Abduh and others, that suggests that even with a rational exegesis of the Qur'an, one should not stick to the very obvious meaning due to the possibility of an internal or hidden one left by God for them to ponder.[43]

In the end, one could summarize Abduh's approach to interpreting the Qur'an as rational. In fact, he even says that we have to use the Qur'an to interpret its meaning: *tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an*.[44] Another assertion describes the preconditions of a true interpretation:

> The true Muslim in the judgment of the Qur'an is he [she] who is unblemished [*khalisan*] by the defects of associating others with God, sincere [*mukhlisan*] in his [her] actions and having faith, of whatever religious community [*millah*] he [she] might be, and in whatever time and place he [she] might be found.[45]

Western Hermeneutical Examples:
Is There a Possibility?

In this part, a very complex and challenging analysis will be introduced as a possible philosophical approach to the hermeneutics of the Qur'an by taking a non-Muslim theory of interpretation through a discussion of approaches from two western hermenenutical philosophers: Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Jürgen Habermas (1929-). This will be followed by synthesizing elements of their philosophies that might be useful for producing a "true" interpretation of the Qur'an. One advantage of presenting these two examples is to prove that ethical conduct, even if articulated by a non-Muslim interpreter, would be accepted in interpreting the Qur'an. Al-Ghazali and Abduh advocated the same ideas in their own approaches.

Martin Heidegger's Dasein *(Being-in)*

Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher and phenomenologist, can be seen as an important contributor to modern hermeneutical thought. Many scholars argue that he is responsible for the shift in thinking regarding hermeneutics as a philosophical discipline. Before him, hermeneutics sought to achieve either an epistemological goal (discovering the foundation of human knowledge) or a methodological goal (searching for tools that lead to objective knowledge). In fact, Heidegger was more interested in answering the question of "Being," since he wanted to explain the "ontological" conditions and status of human knowledge: "Heidegger turns hermeneutics analysis toward the question of Being."[46]

Heidegger's general philosophical view of hermeneutic's role can be applied in our discussion of a non-Muslim interpreter of the Qur'an. Jean Grondin states:

> I believe it can be shown that Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity is intended to be [a] hermeneutics of everything that is at work behind statements.[47]

Hence, the Heideggerrian perspective does not just look at the exact words, statements, or texts; rather, it is arguably meant to describe the process of understanding "before" interpreting, a matter that is not contrary to the Muslims' high esteem and respect for the Qur'an. According to Heidegger, the western interpreter would understand the "Being" of the Qur'anic text before he or she attempted to explain or interpret it.

Grondin emphasizes this point, as he explains that *fore-understanding* is a deeper concept than a causal, superficial type of understanding. For Heidegger, it is equal to the mastery of understanding:

> Thus we might say that an athlete "understands" or knows how to play soccer. By this we do not mean some knowledge, of course, but a largely unexpressed capacity, a mastery, indeed an "art."[48]

Another important feature of Heidegger's hermeneutics is his focus on transparency. This issue is far more important in interpreting a sacred text in general, and more particularly in the case of the Qur'an:

> It is necessary to make our own situation transparent so that we can appreciate precisely the otherness and alterity of the text – that is, without allowing our unelucidated prejudices to dominate the text unwittingly and so conceal what is proper to it.[49]

This idea has always occupied a primary place in the Muslim perspective on the interpretation of "others," such as the case with the Orientalists, whom Muslims attack for not understanding the Qur'anic text and accuse of not "Being" transparent enough to interpret it correctly and acceptably. Heidegger explains that this concept of transparency in his "Being and Time":

> We choose this term [*transparency*] to designate "knowledge of the Self" in a sense which is well understood, so as to indicate that here it is not a matter of perceptually tracking down and inspecting a point called the "Self," but rather one of seizing upon the full disclosedness of Being-in-the-world throughout all the constitutive terms which are essential to it, and doing so with understanding.[50]

Another important attribute of Heidegger's hermeneutics that is relevant to the topic of this study is the concept of meaning. For him, meaning is not prior to understanding; rather, it follows understanding. Hence, he describes three types of understanding: *fore-having*, *fore-sight*, and *fore-conception*. *Fore-having* (*Vorhabe*) is the degree of involvement with the "Being" itself. For example, if we take the Qur'an, *fore-having* would be one's knowledge of Arabic, as it brings understanding. So, how can a person who wants to interpret an Arabic text, while he or she does not know Arabic, possibly achieve an accurate understanding? *Fore-sight* (*Vorsicht*), defined as the different opinions and attitudes that we already have "before" our exposure to the text, can be seen in one's knowledge of Arabic grammar and linguistics.

Interestingly, these states of understanding are similar to al-Ghazali's pre-requisites, as he describes how much the pre-understanding of Arabic and linguistics are necessary to interpret the Qur'an. The third stage of hermeneutics is *fore-conception* (*Vorgriff*). He argues that knowledge and pre-understanding of the text-content is contingent upon our own familiarity with the type of text.

> Meaning is the "upon which" of a projection in terms of which something becomes intelligible as something; it gets its structure from a fore-having, a fore-sight, and a fore-conception.[51]

Finally, Heidegger writes that when interpreting a text (or a message in general), one should always look to the "other" side, for meaning is not uni-directional; rather, it runs in a "shared" direction:

> ... any answering counter-discourse arises proximally and directly from understanding what the discourse is about, which is already "shared" in Being-with.[52]

Heidegger was accused of representing an "elitist" perspective in hermeneutics,[53] of only focusing on the "Being" and thus not being concerned with the social context. I agree with this viewpoint, but at the same time acknowledge that he is certainly adding to hermeneutics. If he has concentrated on the ontological "Being" in his philosophy, he also has high-lighted the importance of fore-understanding," which is very important for an interpreter of a sacred text to understand the other peoples and their cultures.

Jürgen Habermas' Hermeneutics and Action

Our final stop is Jürgen Habermas, the German critical theorist and philosopher. One should shed some light on his thought and philosophy before discussing his contribution to hermeneutics in general, and the use of his Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) to solve part of the debate concerning a possible approach to the hermeneutics of the Qur'an. Primarily, one can see the influence of Kantian philosophy as one of the essential parts of Habermas' tendency toward moral assertion in the realms of truth, beauty, and justice – the main areas of debate in the modernity project.

In the beginning, one should start by illustrating how Habermas understands hermeneutics. He opines that hermeneutics is related not only to a written text, but that it consists of

> … any meaningful expression – be it an utterance, verbal or nonverbal, or
> an artefact of any kind, such as a tool, an institution, or a written docu-
> ment – can be identified from a double perspective, both as an observable
> event and as understandable objectification of meaning.[54]

For Habermas, using hermeneutics to serve the methodology of the
social sciences is a core interest. This idea is very consistent with his affil-
iation to the Frankfurt School and critical theory, the main aim of which is
to research and critically study social sciences.

Consequently, Habermas has a different view of how language is used
than, for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer, who sees it only as a medium. He
says that "language is not only an object in our hands, it is the reservoir of
tradition and the medium in and through which we exist and perceive our
world."[55] On the contrary, Habermas views it as an integral part of the social
world. Therefore, his project can be summarized by the close relationship
that he proposes between "language" and "action" in order to enable her-
meneutics to move to what he calls the "unfinished project of the enlighten-
ment." Hence, understanding a given language, as John Thompson explain-
ing Habermas' notion of "action" by saying that it "implies being able to act,
and be involved in it in order to master it."[56] In other words, he wants to run
philosophy and the social sciences through his TCA:

> From the vantage point of my own research interests, I see such a coop-
> eration taking shape between [the] philosophy of science and [the] history
> of science, between speech act theory and empirical approaches to prag-
> matics of language.[57]

Habermas questions how we can possibly interpret a text in order to
understand it while the understanding itself embodies a "distorted" com-
munication. From the term *distorted*, one can infer that the message com-
municated between a sender and a receiver is not interpreted correctly, or,
in other words, that the meaning intended to reach the receiver is not the
same one that the receiver receives from a message. Therefore, Habermas
says that one can see how the issue of "truth" is crucial in interpretation.
It is clear that I am using Habermas' notion of "validity claims" as his pre-
conditions for a non-distorted communication in order to interpret a sacred
text. In his TCA, Habermas specifies that in order to communicate a mes-
sage, one should meet the following conditions of purity, sincerity, and
truthfulness:

> I shall develop a thesis that anyone acting communicatively must, in per-
> forming any speech action, raise universal validity claims ... insofar as he
> wants to participate in a process of reaching understanding, he cannot
> avoid raising the following ... validity claims. He claims to be
> a. Uttering something understandably.
> b. Giving [the hearer] something to understand;
> c. Making himself thereby understandable; and
> d. Coming to an understanding with another person.[58]

Hence, in our discussion of interpreting a sacred text such as the Qur'an, the interpreter should, according to Habermas, understand it first in order to interpret it correctly, and, at the same time, have the hearer "accept" the interpretation. This issue is very important as, practically speaking, hermeneutics is not just the interpretation of a meaning, but rather the interpretation of an "acceptable" meaning for the respondent. More importantly, if the interpreted text is the word of God, it would be highly important to accept and understand this interpretation. Habermas clarifies:

> The speaker must choose a comprehensible expression so that [the]
> speaker and [the] hearer can understand one another, the speaker must
> have the intention of communicating a true proposition content ... so that
> the hearer can share the knowledge of the speaker. The speaker must want
> to express his intentions truthfully so that the hearer can believe.[59]

In summary, the Habermassian preconditions for a non-distorted communication that has been articulated according to his TCA is very important when interpreting a sacred text, even though he has been accused of being Eurocentric, something which I do not deny, as he himself said:

> I do not believe that we, as Europeans, can seriously understand concepts
> like morality and ethical life, person and individuality, or freedom and
> emancipation, without appropriating the substance of the Judeo-Christian
> understanding in terms of salvation.[60]

Nevertheless, at the same time, what he is really after is certainly what we, as communication and social scholars, are seeking to find in different communication media interpretations, especially from the "other" perspective: Can we see purity, sincerity, or truth in interpreting news stories? Ergo, if the West cannot interpret news with fairness and transparency, how can Muslims or other non-western peoples possibly "accept" western interpretations of their sacred book, a book that is their soul and life? In my opinion, Habermas' Ideal Speech Situation, the utopian component that he believes

is embodied in all human lingusitic communication and that hopes to represent a model for freedom and equity in societies, is not found in many of our contemporary interpretations and, according to the Muslim perspective, also is missing from the interpretation of the Qur'an and of Muslim cultures and traditions.

In summary, one should mention that it is problematical to assume that western approaches are presumably acceptable to Muslims. Rather, assuming that these approaches to the hermeneutics of the Qur'an have their own ways of reading, thinking, understanding, and situating themselves, and that they reflect this understanding in purity and sincerity, it might encourage acceptance of the non-western viewpoint. This argument is summarized by Khaled Abou El Fadl, who says that if a "western" author wants to interpret and understand the Muslim's text, he or she

> … should resist the temptation to co-opt and essentialize the Muslim experience in order to service a debate ... one should start with the Muslim experience and then carefully consider the ways that [western intellectuals] might be utilized in the service of the Muslim experience.[61]

Conclusion

The preceding discussion suggests that the Qur'an can be interpreted accurately by a non-Muslim interpreter. However, many Muslim scholars and Muslims in general, given their high esteem for the Qur'an and its significant presence in their live, might totally reject this conclusion. However, the argument raised here does not contradict either the Muslim perspective and its respect for the Qur'an or the thirst for knowing what the Qur'an is saying from a non-Muslim standpoint.

It is not suggested here that Muslims should accept secular claims and open their holy book to history so that it can be analyzed and interpreted as any other book. In reality, what I am trying to do is to alter the "alien" image that Islam has acquired recently as a result of the West viewing it as "other" and vise versa, and the Muslim fear of allowing anyone other than themselves to read, understand, and interpret the Qur'an – provided, of course, that such people meet the religious prerequisites of interpretation discussed above. As Edward Said affirms:

> … almost without exception, no writer on Islam in the West today reckons explicitly with the fact that "Islam" is considered a hostile culture, or that anything said about Islam by a professional scholar is within the sphere of influence of corporations and the government.[62]

Therefore, Said asks western scholars and Orientalists for more "under-standing" and knowledge of both Islam and Islamic culture on the one hand, and the social world on the other, so that they can acquire a clear-cut picture of what Islam is, rather than depending on how the western media has inter-preted it, especially the stereotypes propagated since the era of colonization. He adds, and I (along with several Muslim perspectives) agree with him, that "motives" are the true determinants of a true interpretation: "For interpreta-tions depend very much on who the interpreter is, who he or she is address-ing, what his or her purpose is in interpreting."[63] Indeed, Said himself is an example of my argument, as he was a non-Muslim scholar whose work on Islam found a receptive audience in the Muslim world.

What I have argued and suggested in this article, academically at least, is a possible philosophical approach or guideline for interpreting the Qur'an. If the western interpreter is pure, sincere, and truthful (Habermas); transparent (Heidegger); knows the culture (Gadamer); and really wants to know and understand Islam, then his or her interpretation of the Qur'an will be accepted.

Endnotes

1. This meaning is repeated in different forms throughout the Qur'an. See, for example, 41:2-3, 20:111, 12:2, 43:3, and 39:28.
2. Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 21.
3. Kenneth Cragg, *The Mind of the Qur'an: Chapters in Reflection* (London: Ruskin House, 1970), 13.
4. Sayyed Hosein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 42.
5. Mohammad Kahlifa, *The Sublime Qur'an and Orientalism* (London: Longman, 1983), 20.
6. Ibid., 20.
7. Ibid., 21.
8. Ibid., 22-23.
9. Cragg, *Mind of the Qur'an*, 15.
10. Ibid., 13.
11. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities*, 48.
12. Here, it is interesting to note that Graham says that one his friends began each day by listening to the Qur'anic recitation on Radio Pakistan while liv-ing in East Africa. When Graham asked him why he did so, although he could not understand the complete Qur'anic recitation, his friend told him that the recitation's *barakah* would permeate his house. William A. Gra-

ham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 104. It is important to mention here that many mistakenly believe that Arabic is a "sacred" language because the Qu'ran was revealed in it. The fact is that the Arabic used in the Qur'an in particular is a sacred language, as Muslims believe, for they are the words of God. Nasr clarifies this point: "Arabic is sacred in the sense that it is an integral part of the Quranic revelation whose very sounds and utterances play a role in the ritual acts of Islam." Nasr, *Ideas and Realities*, 44.

13. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 104.
14. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities*, 50-51.
15. Hamdi Zakzouk, *Buhuth wa Dirasat fi Daw' al-Qur'an al-Karim* (Studies and Researches in the Light of the Glorious Qur'an) (Cairo: Al-Awkaf Ministry, 2002), 13.
16. Abdel Rahman Ibrahim Khalifa, *Dirasat fi Manhaj al-Mufassirin* (Studies in the Interpreters' Approaches) (Cairo: Al-Azhar University Press, 1997), 39.
17. Ibid., 68.
18. One should mention here that there are important interpretations of the Qur'an, such as the Sufi approach, in which the approach looks at the inner, mystical, or psycho-spiritual dimension of Islam and its holy text.
19. There is no accurate translation of this word. However, its meaning denotes a person's great involvement with and dedication to an issue, a thought, or a principle.
20. The ornament of religion.
21. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* (The Deliverer from Error) (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-`Almiyah, 1961), 77.
22. Zakzouk, *Buhuth wa Dirasat*, 200-01.
23. Mohammad Abul-Quasem, *The Recitation and Interpretation of the Qur'an: Al-Ghazali's Theory* (Malaysia: The University of Malaya Press, 1979), 9.
24. Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, 103.
25. Zakzouk, *Buhuth wa Dirasat*, 206-09.
26. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 34.
27. Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali, *Mishkat al-Anwar* (The Niche for Lights), trans. W. H. T. Gairdner (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1924), 159.
28. Nicholas Heer, "Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's Esoteric Exegesis of the Koran," in *The Heritage of Sufism: Classical Persian Sufism from Its Origins to Rumi (700-1300)*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 241.
29. Abul-Quasem, *The Recitation and Interpretation*, 72.
30. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Kitab Jawahir al-Qur'an* (Jewels of the Qur'an), trans. Muhammad Abul Quasem (Kuala Lumpur: The University of Malaya Press, 1977), 62.

31. Abduh, born in a small town northern Egypt, began his education with religious studies and continued it at al-Azhar University. He had several careers: a teacher, a journalist, a judge, and, finally, a mufti.

32. Jane Smith, *An Historical and Semantic Study of the Term "Islam" as Seen in a Sequence of Qur'an Commentaries* (Montana: Scholars Press, 1975), 185.

33. As a result of his efforts and thoughts, al-Azhar University was divided into three faculties: Islamic Law (Shari`ah), theology (*Usul al-Din*), and the Arabic language (*al-Lughah al-`Arabiyah*). J. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Qur'an in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: E. J. Briill, 1974), 77-78.

34. Ibid., 19.

35. This was the case in Egypt, when Khedive Muhammad Ali sought to reform education by sending various education missions to western countries and reformed different aspects of social life, such as industry and agriculture.

36. Derek Hopwood, "Introduction: The Culture of Modernity in Islam and the Middle East," in *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, eds. John Cooper, Ronald Nettler, and Mohamed Mahmoud (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 6.

37. In many verses, the Qur'an gives an indication of this issue, amng them 2:102 and 114:1-7. As for the importance and use of reason, see, for example, 79:26.

38. Abduh summarizes the crisis of the traditional interpretation of the Qur'an during his early education: "I spent a year and a half ... without understanding a single thing ... the teachers were accustomed to use technical terms of gramar or jurisprudence which we did not understand, nor did they take any pains to explain their meaning to those who did not know it." Jansen, *The Interpretation*, 29.

39. For example, consider his *tafsir* of "He frowned and turned away, because the blind man approached him. Yet for all you knew, [O Muhammad,] he might have grown in purity, or have been reminded [of the truth], and helped by this reminder" (80:1-5). The traditional interpretation is that the blind man needed to ask the Prophet something or wanted to confess a sin. Abduh maintains that the blind man was actually asking for knowledge. Ibid., 21.

40. The Arabic translation of *furqan* comes from the verb (or origin) *faraqa*, *yafruqu*, means "to distinguish" or "to differentiate."

41. Ibid., 22.

42. Ibid., 23, n. 20.

43. Here, an example would clarify the difference between Abduh and other commentators: "Whenever Zachariah entered the sanctuary to see her [Mary], he found beside her provisions. He asked: 'Oh Mary, how did you acquire this?' She replied: 'It is from Allah; Allah provides for whom He wills'" (3:1-4). Many commentators were intent on describing the miraculous things in Mary's sanctuary, while Abduh insists that this is not the real, rational meaning of this verse. Rather, he thinks that the important thing here is to realize

that God's power allows Him to do whatever He wills, regardless of any human or rational thought.

44. Ibid., 33.
45. Smith, *An Historical and Semantic Study*, 192.
46. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift, eds. *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 15.
47. Martin Heidegger, "Being and Time," in ibid., 90.
48. Grondin, *Introduction*, 93.
49. Heidegger, "Being and Time," 119.
50. Ibid., 124.
51. Ibid., 137.
52. This argument was related to the relation between hermeneutics and culture. For more information, see Rui Sampaio, www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Cult/Cult Samp.htm.
53. Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), 23.
54. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," in *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Brice Wachterhauser (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 286.
55. John B. Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics: A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 81.
56. Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 16.
57. Ibid., 2.
58. Ibid.
59. Gerard Delanty, "Habermas and Occidental Rationalism: The Politics of Identity, Social Learning, and the Cultural Limits of Moral Universalism," *Sociological Theory* 15, no. 1 (1997): 38.
60. Ibid., 38
61. Khaled Abou El Fadl, *And God Knows the Soldiers: The Authoritative and Authoritarian in Islamic Discourses* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 99.
62. Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 158.
63. Ibid., 154.