

General Introduction

The word *Tadabbur* dominates the short title of Islahi's commentary on the Qur'an, which he called *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*. The word conjures up the image of a person engaged in listening and reflecting, pondering and contemplating, weighing up and balancing the instructions and values of God's message communicated through the Qur'an, searching for the guidance that God intended, not only for the people who lived at the time of revelation but for all people. If this is the import of the word *Tadabbur* in Islahi's title, then its readers are being invited to participate in a process of interpretation that cannot be reduced to a single technique leading to preconceived conclusions, but rather to take part in a complex process that is sensitive to the different contributions the author and the reader have in discovering the wisdom of the Qur'an. The prospect of such a process captivates my interest and hopefully will sustain the interest of the readers of this dissertation as well.

The appeal of *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* is that its primary focus is on the text of the Qur'an itself rather than on the traditional commentaries and books of history that have dominated Qur'anic *tafsir* throughout the centuries. Another attractive aspect of Islahi's new approach is the encouragement he gives to the reader of the Qur'an to make use of reason (*'aql*) in the process of interpretation. Since Islahi gave such importance to the use of reason in *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*, my enquiry into his commentary will investigate the kind of logic that Islahi uses. In other words, my enquiry will examine the extent of Islahi's own consistency and the consequences to which Islahi's own way of thinking leads him. As far as possible, I will avoid the hermeneutics and epistemological theories that arose in a Western historical context. As Khaled Abou El Fadl rightly says, this kind of transplanting of theories from the West "runs the risk of imposing artificial categories upon Muslim historical and intellectual experience."¹ El Fadl, however, feels that "this does not mean that Muslim intellectuals should sanctify tradition or that they should refrain from introducing useful conceptual constructs into contemporary Muslim culture, even if these constructs originated with the West."² The point to remember is that "one should start with the Muslim

¹ Abou El Fadl (2003), p. 99.

² Op. cit.

experience” and then carefully consider how concepts from the West could be usefully employed.³ I will, therefore, always make an effort to approach *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* from the inside, as it were, and to understand Islahi's intended meaning.⁴

Islahi himself, in the *Preface* to his commentary, stresses the special difficulty a person living today has to interpret the Qur'an. Clearly, those who listened to the Qur'an at the time of revelation had no trouble understanding the language that was being used because they were well acquainted with the context about which the Qur'an was speaking. They were acquainted with the allusions and figures of speech that the Qur'an was using. The present day reader of the Qur'an, however, is living in conditions greatly removed from that context. Hence the work of interpretation will not be easy but will, on the contrary, demand much intellectual effort.⁵

Furthermore, to understand the Qur'an, it will not be satisfactory to find out simply how Qur'anic verses are interrelated, thereby deriving some practical rules for living. It will be much more important to discover the wisdom of the Qur'an, the original intention of its message and the fundamental purpose of religion (*din*) (cf. *ibid*). For example, Islahi refers to the essence and spirit of *din* (*maghaz-i-din aur ruh-i-din*, vol. 1, p. 428) and the original purpose of prayer (*namaz . . . ka asl maqsud*, *ibid*). He says that verse 177 of Surah *Al Baqarah* clarifies the original meaning of piety (*birr o taqwa ki asli haqiqat wazeh karne ke ba'd*, *ibid*, p. 430), the original purpose of the

³ Cf. *ibid*.

⁴ Farahi was writing just after the time of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who had responded to the challenge to Qur'anic studies presented by the new scientific methodologies coming from the West. It is arguable that Farahi and Islahi themselves were so concerned with the impact of Western thought patterns in the Muslim world that they were motivated to find an approach to Qur'anic exegesis that would enable Muslims to understand the Qur'an as an integrated whole rather than as the disjointed, fragmented book that some Westerners of that period considered it to be.

In his keynote address to a seminar, Mohd. Riaz Kirmani argued for a conditioned openness to knowledge obtained through modern science in order to understand the Qur'an. Cf. Kirmani (2003), p. 21 & p. 23. It seems to me that such an attitude would allow disciplines like modern hermeneutics and epistemological theory to make their specific contributions to the interpretation of the Qur'an.

Furthermore, in a paper entitled "Method of Thematic Interpretation of the Qur'an", Hassan Hanafi is of the opinion that "Since thematic interpretation uses a philosophical language and some technical vocabulary related to phenomenology, it could be quickly accused of being the victim of westernization. But do humanism, rationalism, criticism, activism really belong to the West . . . ? Western philosophical vocabulary in the last two centuries became commonplace in Arab and Muslim discourse. A similar thing happened when Greek terminology influenced the classical philosophical lexicon. But if the modern philosophical vocabulary including phenomenology is used here, it is used as a means of expression only. The content is endogenous. What Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were for the Ancients, Kant, Hegel, and Husserl may well be for the moderns." Hanafi in Wild (1996), p. 211.

⁵ Cf. Islahi (1985), p. 23. Henceforward, my references to *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* simply mention the volume.

pilgrimage (*hajj se asl maqsud*, ibid, p. 474, the prophetic intention of establishing the Inviolable House of Prayer (*bait allah . . . risalat muhammadi ka asli nasab al'ain*, ibid, p. 476) and the original purpose of establishing the laws (*asl maqsud in tamam ahkam se taqwa hai*, ibid, p. 484). Clearly, Islahi's aim in *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* is to determine the original intention and meaning of the Qur'an.

It is also clear that the reader is the central figure in Islahi's commentary. In fact, at many points in his commentary, Islahi draws a general conclusion only after inviting the reader to reflect (*tadabbur*) on the Qur'an (*quran ke tadabbur se ye haqiqat wazeh hoti hai*, ibid, 453). Again, the order in which the Surahs appear is not a matter of their length but of their *meaning* (*hamare nazdik is ka ta'lluq ma'ni o matalib se hai*, vol. 2, p. 13) - a meaning that the *reader* can discover. Moreover, the reader of the Qur'an cannot remain satisfied with the way others before him have interpreted the Qur'an but must make his own personal effort to understand. This is the reason why Islahi refers to earlier commentaries on the Qur'an only after the reader has made every effort to determine the meaning of the text⁶. *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* is the fruit of Islahi's own efforts to read and ponder over the Qur'an and he invites his readers to do likewise.

The reader must also be involved in the discovery of the central idea (*'umud*) of a Surah. Islahi formulates the central idea on the basis of a thematic reading of the text. However, the thematic reading that Islahi proposes will, in turn, be influenced by the assumptions and presuppositions of the reader of *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*. Even Farahi and Islahi came to different conclusions about the *'umud* of many Surahs.⁷ What will prevent a subsequent scholar from reaching his or her own conclusions about the central idea or theme of a Surah? It is true that Farahi and Islahi did not claim to provide the one and only correct version of the *'umud*. Perhaps they did not sufficiently appreciate the contribution of the reader to the understanding of the Qur'an. They may not have fully realized that every reader brings his or her own context (which is external to the Qur'an) into the process of interpretation and that the reader's beliefs, values, assumptions, choices, and insights must have an influence on the formulation of the *'umud*. In short, what kind of

⁶ Islahi says that, instead of following the usual procedures followed by interpreters of the Qur'an, namely, to refer to previous commentaries, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* will take a more direct approach by having recourse to the text itself (*barah-i-rast fahm-i-quran ke asli wasail o zari'e*, vol. 1, p. 42). Islahi hopes that the reader would examine the text according to its own fundamental logic (*log is ke asasi dalail ki kasuti par kas kar qabul karen ya rad karen*, ibid).

⁷ Mir (1983), p. 92

role does *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* give to its readers and to the reader of the Qur'an? I hope that my investigations will highlight the important role played by the author of *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* and the inevitable contribution of its readers.

Islahi holds that the three *internal* principles of interpretation (*jo khud quran ke andar maujud hain*, vol. 1, p. 13)⁸ are sufficient to establish that the Qur'an is coherent. In his study of Islahi's concept of coherence, Mustansir Mir has explained that the six *external* principles (*jo quran se bahir ke hain*, *ibid*) serve only to confirm the presence of the coherence of the Qur'an that has already been clearly demonstrated by the internal principles.⁹ This may be the reason why Mir did not consider it necessary to deal with the external principles in any detail. However, I am interested in these external principles because Islahi, by including these principles in his commentary, invites the reader to raise the important question as to how external factors also contribute to the process of understanding the Qur'an. How does Islahi use these external principles in his commentary and what kind of importance does he give them? In his discussion of Surah Group Four, Islahi seems to say that material from outside the Qur'an is not needed or at least should be used with great caution in the interpretation of the Qur'an.¹⁰

Islahi's approach to the Qur'an consists of applying certain guidelines, some of which he takes from the long tradition of *tafsir* in Islam and others that he develops from the insights of his teacher, Maulana Farahi. These "principles of interpretation" express the ideas and convictions that Islahi has found helpful and which he suggests may be useful for the reader or reciter of the Qur'an. In fact, the word that Mir translates as "principles" is not *usul* in Urdu, as one would have expected, but *was'il*. Mir explains his translation of the word as follows:

We will first state the exegetical principles of Farahi and Islahi, and then compare them with the exegetical principles Muslim scholars have generally held to. But first a note on the word 'principles'. One

⁸ The three *internal* principles are coherence (*nazm al quran*), language (*zaban*) and Qur'anic parallels (*nazair*). Cf. vol. 1, p. 13. The six *external* principles are: well-known and living tradition (*sunna*), recorded traditions of the Prophet and his Companions (*hadith*), occasions of revelation, previous commentaries on the Qur'an, former Scriptures and the history of Arabic peoples. Cf. *ibid*.

⁹ Discussing the internal and the external principles of interpretation, Mir writes: "The former are primary and irreducible, and suffice for the purpose of arriving at the basic Qur'anic interpretation. The latter are secondary in importance, are theoretically dispensable, and should be used only insofar as they are in concord with, or at least do not contradict, the former." Mir (1983), p. 44.

¹⁰ Cf. my discussion of this point in the last section of Surah *Al-Ahzab* in chapter four.

of the expressions Islahi uses for the 'principles' of exegesis is *wasa'il*, literally, 'means' or 'sources'. In the following pages, the word 'principles' is used as an equivalent of the word *wasa'il*.¹¹

This comment from Mir brings out a certain lack of clarity regarding the phrase "principles of interpretation", which Islahi considers to be based on the ideas of his teacher, Maulana Farahi. In fact, Islahi says that his ideas do not differ from those of his teacher, Farahi, but simply clarify and develop them (*mera fikr mere ustaz ke fikr se koi alag chiz nahin hai balke ustaz marhum hi ke fikr ki tawazeh o takmil hai*, vol. 9, p. 7). Has Islahi succeeded in clarifying the principles of interpretation he adopted from his teacher, Farahi?

Islahi says that he has presented a new approach to the Qur'an in his commentary (*is kitab mein quran par ghour karne ki rah mai ne khul di hai . . . mai ne quran ko samajhne ke liye sirf rah hamwar ki hai*, vol. 9, p. 12). According to Islahi, readers of his commentary considered his approach to be a scientific one (*yahi tariqa quran par ghour karne ka scientific tariqa hai*, *ibid*, p. 11) and that no other method of interpretation will appeal to modern people (*is ke siwa koi aur tariqa is zamane ke logon ko appeal nahin kar sakta*, *ibid*). In this study, I shall investigate whether Islahi's approach to the Qur'an can be considered scientific and whether or not it would appeal to modern readers.

Furthermore, Islahi expresses a wish that his commentary be analyzed and evaluated according to its merits (*mai chahta hun ke log kitab ko khud is ki salahiyaton ki raushni mein janchen aur parkhen*, *ibid*). Moreover, since the truth is not a monopoly of any particular person, anyone is able to analyze it (*haq ek mutai-i-mushtarik hai jis par kisi ka ajarah nahin*, *ibid*, p. 13). For this reason, I feel no hesitation in taking up Islahi's invitation to evaluate *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*.

The main aim of *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* is to clarify the original intention (*har ayat . . . ka asl mudd'a wazeh karne ke liye*, vol. 1, p. 41) of the Qur'an in order to obtain its correct meaning (*ayat ka sahih mahfum*, *ibid*). Islahi repeats the same intention in the preface to the last volume of his commentary (*dalail ki roshni mein har ayat ki ek ma'yyan tawil samne rakhi gayi hai*, vol. 9, p. 8). Once the correct meaning has been established, it is the task of the reader to transfer this one, correct meaning into the present

¹¹ Mir (1983), p. 42.

context (*ek zahin qari is ke muta'llaqat ko khud akhaz kar sakta hai*, *ibid*). I would like to question whether the Qur'an can have one correct meaning and whether it is possible to discover this one correct meaning of the Qur'an.¹²

Moreover, Islahi establishes the correct meaning by examining the addressees to whom the verses were directed. By focusing on the specific addressees in this way, however, Islahi seems to have lost the universal meaning of the Qur'an. How does one transfer the "correct meaning" derived from the specific context of certain addressees in the past to a completely different context in the present? Apart from a few remarks about the need to adapt to the changed conditions of the present world, Islahi does not pay much attention to this question.¹³

Take, for example, Islahi's analysis of Surah *Al Baqarah*, verse 143, which invites Muslims "to be a community of the middle way".¹⁴ Islahi begins by saying that the verse is limited to those Muslims who were living at the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and who were being led astray by the Jews and Christians of that time. Yet the verse could also be understood as addressing *all believers* who subsequently came to believe in the message of the Qur'an. For it is the responsibility of *all believers*, including those living after the time of the Prophet, as Islahi also says, to give witness to the *din* of God in all periods, to every people and in every language (*ab ye is ummat ki zimmadari hai ke wo har daur, har mulk aur har zaban mein logon par allah ke din ki gawahi de*, vol.1, p. 365). The verse cannot, therefore, be restricted to the Muslims living at the time of revelation.

Similarly, Islahi says that verse 148 of the same *Surah*, which discusses the direction of prayer (*qibla*), applies to specific groups of people, namely, the Jews and the Christians living in the past. Yet, in his general conclusion, Islahi says that the direction of prayer is a symbolic way of saying that people everywhere can turn in this direction and that God gathers all these people to himself (*har shakhs har jagah is se rabt qaim kar sakta hai aur allah ta'ala is se ta'lluq rakhne walon ko har jagah se jama' kar sakta hai*,

¹² Farahi says that the concept of coherence provides the Qur'anic text with its correct *direction* (*nazm kalam hi, kalam ke sahih samt ko muta'in karne wali wahid chiz ho sakti hai*). Farahi (1990), p. 31. This is rather different from saying, as Islahi does, that there is one correct meaning of the text.

¹³ Abdul Kabur Husain Solihu alludes to this problem as follows: "To single out the non-historical aspects of the Qur'an may be charged with attempting to portray the Qur'an as stagnant, lacking the sequential nature of history. On the other hand, reading the Qur'an from an historical perspective may be seen as an attempt to confine its universal message to a particular period in history." Solihu (2003), p. 399.

¹⁴ Throughout this study, I make use of the translation of the Qur'an provided by Muhammad Asad (1980).

ibid, p. 374). In this instance, Islahi moves beyond the specific context of the verses to provide a universal understanding for this passage. More often, however, Islahi is more concerned with the specific addressees of the past than with the universal meaning of the verses.

Another example can be taken from the instructions to implement *jihad* in verses 190 – 193 of Surah *Al Baqarah*. According to Islahi, these verses describe the specific context of the Quraysh, who were preventing the Muslims from entering the sacred precincts of the mosque that Abraham had built (*is ka ta'lluq khas kuffar quraysh se hai*, vol. 1, p. 476).¹⁵ Furthermore, Islahi does not consider the universal significance of verses 28-29 of Surah *Al Ahzab* concerning the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him).¹⁶ What is the universal meaning of verses such as these?

A further aspect of *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an* that emerges in the discussion of almost every Surah is that of the different kinds of language used in the Qur'an. Islahi recognizes the metaphorical and symbolic way that language is used in the Qur'an but attempts, nonetheless, to arrive at the single, objective and correct meaning of the text. However, the text of the Qur'an cannot escape the influence of the reader and of the context.¹⁷

As can readily be seen from the table of contents, I have made an analysis of each Surah from the first four Surah Groups of *Tadabbur-i-Qur'an*. I have presented my conclusions directly after the analysis of each Surah. Due to limited space, I have given only an overview of the remaining Surah Groups. However, the main lines of Islahi's approach to the Qur'an will have become clear in my discussion of the first four Surah Groups. Finally, I did not find it necessary to dedicate a separate chapter to Surah *Al Fatihah* because Islahi links Surah *Al Fatihah* with Surah *Al Baqarah*.

¹⁵ Javed Ahmad Ghamidi reaches similar conclusions after analyzing verse 9 of Surah 61. After translating the verse, he writes: "From this translation it is clear that 'prevail over all (false) religion' has no relationship with any person's contemporary struggle. The addressees of Surah *As-Saff* were the Companions of the Prophet and this verse was about inducing them to assist the Prophet in his struggle (*jihad*)". He concludes: "After the time of the Prophet until the Last Day, no one any longer has the right to apply the demands and implications of this verse to his own personal struggle (*jihad*)."¹⁵ Ghamidi (2001), pp. 138-139.

¹⁶ Moreover, Islahi does not raise the issue of the universal significance of verses 28-29 of Surah *Al Ahzab*, which are related to the Prophet's wives (*ham yahan is surah ki roshni mein waqt ke baz khas halat ki taraf isharah karenge jin se in ayat ka sahih mauqa' o mahal samajhne mein madad milegi*, vol. 6, p. 216).

¹⁷ Abdullah Saeed identifies three types of text used in the Qur'an: text related with the Unseen (*ghayb*), historical text and text that conveys parables (*mathal*). None of these types of text, according to Saeed, provides a simple path to the objective meaning of the Qur'an. Cf. Abdullah Saeed (2006), pp. 91-101.