

The Methodology of *al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍūʿī*: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract: The notion of thematic interpretation of the Qurʾān (*al-tafsīr al-mawḍūʿī*) has attained a remarkable degree of conceptual and methodological clarity in the works of Muḥammad ʿAbd Allah Drāz, Muḥammad Maḥmūd Ḥijāzī, Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr and Fazlur Rahman. They provide cases that allow testing of methodological feasibility and intellectual fecundity of this approach to Qurʾānic exegesis. A common and important aspect of their works, as the textual analysis shows, is the attempt to search for a Qurʾānic conceptual framework for social theorization informed and guided by the fundamental Islamic world-view.

A quick survey of the literature shows a general agreement on the basic meaning of the thematic study of the Qurʾān. That is, it consists of treating a specific topic as expounded by the Qurʾān so as to construct what can be considered as a/the Qurʾānic view of that topic. However, there is a major difference of opinion on the scope and the method(s) to be applied in conducting *tafsīr al-mawḍūʿī*.

The writers of this genre of Qurʾānic exegesis show a general dissatisfaction with the traditional, verse-by-verse approach to Qurʾān interpretation. Barring few exceptions, they seldom spell out the epistemological premises and methodological guidelines of their work. This study analyzes the ideas of four scholars whose works show striking methodological similarities despite the difference of their academic background and socio-cultural experience.¹ The selected scholars are: Muḥammad ʿAbd Allah Drāz of Egypt (1894-

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1958), Muḥammad Maḥmūd Ḥijāzī of Egypt (1914-1972), Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr of Iraq (1933-1980) and Fazlur Rahman of Pakistan/U.S.A. (1919-1988). Reference will in due course be made to other writers who offered pertinent insights on the subject.

Al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍūʿī: Its Meaning and Varieties

The idea of thematic or topical study of the Qurʾān is relatively new. Its origin is to be found in a doctoral dissertation dealing with thematic unity in the noble Qurʾān submitted to al-Azhar-Mosque University in 1967. Then, the theory of thematic unity sounded quite strange to some people who “rejected it and even tried to prevent its discussion at al-Azhar University.”² Nevertheless, it can be argued that that the concept of *al-tafsīr al-mawḍūʿī* had its birth in the 1960s.³ Prior to that a number of works dealt with the topical study of the Qurʾānic verses such as man in the Qurʾān, the Day of Judgement in the Qurʾān, and human society in the Qurʾān.⁴ These works were not considered as belonging to *al-tafsīr al-mawḍūʿī* simply because most traditional-minded students of *tafsīr* abhorred the idea of the topical study itself.

Though accepted as a specific genre of *tafsīr*, there exists a variety of opinion as to the definition and meaning of *al-tafsīr al-mawḍūʿī*. It has been defined, according to Mustafa Muslim, as the treatment of a specific subject or topic related to intellectual and social life or natural phenomena from a Qurʾānic perspective.⁵ According to another view, the term refers to the gathering of the verses scattered throughout the chapters (*sūrahs*) of the Qurʾān that deals with a specific subject whether explicitly or implicitly, with a view to interpreting them according to the objectives (*maqāsid*) of the Qurʾān. A more refined version of this view looks at *al-tafsīr al-mawḍūʿī* as a discipline that deals, in a specific way, with Qurʾānic themes, which are bound together whether in terms of the basic meaning or in terms of purpose, so as to identify their components and unveil the unifying bond that links them together. Yet another version defines *al-tafsīr al-mawḍūʿī* as a study which treats issues and subjects according to the Qurʾānic directives in one *sūrah* or more.⁶

Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī states that there are two approaches in thematic *tafsīr*. One approach treats each *sūrah* of the Qurʾān as

one whole unit. This approach consists of identifying the *sūrah*'s main theme or themes and the subtle meaning and ideas that link its subject matter. The second approach "is to identify the major themes of the Qur'ān as a whole and discuss the issues and subjects it covers in light of those themes."⁷ For al-Ghazālī, the thematic *tafsīr* stands opposed to what he calls "local" (*mawḍiʿī*) interpretation which "deals with one verse or a set of verses by explaining its vocabulary, [clarifying] its structure and [expounding] its rulings (*aḥkām*)."⁸ The latter approach, characteristics of the classical exegetic works, has failed to grasp the totality of the Qur'ān and the comprehensiveness and unity of its teachings.

From the above discussion, two essential features of *al-tafsīr al-mawḍiʿī* emerge. The first revolves around the idea of *theme* as the focal point in the exegetic enterprise. The second, which is closely related to the first, is the notion of *unity* according to which the verses of the Qur'ān are seen to constitute an integrated *coherent* whole. These two features suggest the existence of a certain affinity between *al-tafsīr al-mawḍiʿī* as a specific genre of interpretation and the theory of *naẓm* and its sister *munāsabah* developed by classical scholars in the context of their effort to establish the doctrine of the inimitability of the Qur'ān (*iʿjāz*).

The Syrian scholar Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqāʿī (d. 885 H.) has devoted, in the late medieval Islamic period, much attention and effort to this variety of thematic approach within the context of his quest for the *munāsabāt* (sing. *munāsabah*) or coherence between the verses and chapters of the Qur'ān based on their tradition-established arrangement.⁹ As we approach the contemporary period, the emphasis on theme(s) as the unifying element in the Qur'ānic verses becomes much stronger in exegetic works as evident in the works of scholars selected for this study.

The Theoretical and Methodological Foundations

In one of his earliest works, Muḥammad A. Drāz addresses the fundamental question concerning the divine or human *origin* of the Qur'ān.¹⁰ Though Drāz bases his arguments on philosophical, psychological, historical and linguistic (semantic and stylistic) aspects, the latter aspect of his argument is of great relevance to this study. Of significance to note is his idea of "linguistic miracle" as a

major feature of the Qurʾānic discourse.¹¹ This miracle is evident in the prominence of coherence and unity that characterize the relationships between the parts and components of that discourse. As he puts it, the Qurʾān's parts and components are "knit together in such a way as to yield an unbreakable, masterful, and firm unity."¹² This feature is noticeable in the shorter chapters (*sūrahs*), in the sets of limited number of its verses that deal with particular topics and, indeed more strikingly, in the longest chapters (*tiwāl*) of the Qurʾān. Although the constituent parts of the *sūrahs* were revealed intermittently over varying periods of time, each of these "constitutes a well-knit structure [consisting] of grand themes raised on firm foundations and principles. In each of those principles are grounded sub-principles from which spread out branches and ramifications...."¹³

To prove his point, he analyzes the longest chapter of the Qurʾān, *al-Baqarah*, because it "encompasses the widest variety of meanings. It comprises the largest number of installments (*nujūm*) as well as the longest time intervals separating its intermittent revelations."¹⁴ It is natural, therefore, that the *sūrah* deals with varying topics as required by different occasions and situations.¹⁵ Yet, "it is a cohesive discourse (*kalām wāhid*) whose beginning confirms its end and vice-versa, and which in its totality embraces one and the same purpose (*gharaḍ*), just as sentences hold together to express one single proposition."¹⁶

Guided by the assumption of coherence and unity, Drāz examines *sūrat al-Baqarah* by using the methodology previously applied by al-Shāḥibī to *sūrat al-Muʾminūn*. According to Drāz, four major themes, an introduction, and a conclusion make up the overall structure of *al-Baqarah*. In the introduction (verses 1-20), the first unit, a broad definition of the Qurʾān and a general description of its main features are provided. The second unit (verses 21-25) presents the first major theme of the *sūrah*. Here, the Qurʾān invites all mankind to embrace Islam. A flashback then follows, in the third unit (verses 26-39), which turns to the Qurʾān to describe its guidance and expound its approach in calling people to its eternal truths.

The second major theme, in the fourth unit (verses 40-162) deals with the people of earlier scriptures (*ahl al-kitāb*), especially the

Jews, calling them to shun falsehood and submit to the truth as revealed in the final revelation.

The third theme of the *sūrah*, the fifth unit (verses 178-283), concerns the detailed rules and laws of Islam meant to regulate human affairs. The preceding fourteen verses (163-177) serve as a prelude to this major theme. Then, the *sūrah*, in just one verse (284), moves on to present the fourth theme. It points to the religio-spiritual force (*wāziʿ*) that motivates man to comply with those rules and laws and restrains him from disobeying them. Finally, in the last two verses (285-86) constituting the conclusion, the *sūrah* provides a description of the qualities of those who have accepted the Divine message and complied with its teaching and to highlight the rewards awaiting them both in this life and in the hereafter.¹⁷

Evidently, *sūrat al-Baqarah* has a variety of themes in its various units. Yet, each of these units occupies its proper place linking it with what precedes and what follows it. This reveals, Drāz argues, the existence of an organic structure and basic unity of meaning that runs throughout the *sūrah* from beginning to end, thus making it stand as one integrated whole. Likewise, the introduction and conclusion are threaded together thus making the whole *sūrah* “one coherent compact structure.”¹⁸ The organic unity thus found is not unique to *sūrat al-Baqarah* but characterizes the entire Qurʾān and all its *sūrahs*. At the methodological level, this entails that in order to reach an accurate appreciation of the “local” interrelationships (*ṣilāt mawḍiʿiyyah*) between the constituent parts or units of the *sūrah*, one must first make sense of the major themes and organic structure running through it. This would serve, both theoretically and methodologically, as a springboard to the wider and more comprehensive conception of the thematic approach to the study of the Qurʾān.

Drāz subsequently developed his views and sharpened his arguments in this respect in his doctoral work submitted to the Sorbonne University in 1947. In it, he drew up a sort of methodological balance sheet of the works of classical Muslim scholars. For him, the early scholars took the first “step in the preparation of the material for construction” but did not follow it up by “the necessary elaboration to erect the edifice.”¹⁹ By grouping the relevant Qurʾānic passages according to the order of the *sūrahs*

as established by tradition, the early scholars, including people like al-Ghazālī, presented the readers with “a jumble of scattered materials with no family affinity (*esprit de famille*) to bind them together, and in which there appears no sequence of ideas.”²⁰ Put differently, after breaking up the original unity (*unitā primitive*) in each *sūrah*, they failed to provide “a logical unity” and a “methodical classification” that would present the principles and rules of Qur’ānic ethics in the form of a “coherent structure” distinguishing that ethics from other closely related disciplines.

It appears from Drāz’s critique of earlier works, none has attempted to work out a “unified system” that would link together the fundamental moral truths expounded by the Qur’ān. Curiously, Drāz argues, classical Muslim scholars addressed the moral doctrine in the Qur’ān according to a pre-existing, “Platonic or Peripatetic,” model. That is to say, in most cases, the Qur’ān was cited by theologians, moralists, mystics and others as a mere complementary element to just illustrate or support “one or another conception that has already been adopted.”²¹ In other words, their contributions consisted mostly of putting forth the results of their meditations and philosophical studies in such a way that the Qur’ān would only occupy a secondary place in their treatises. As Fazlur Rahman explains, many scholars who realized the unity of the Qur’ānic discourse often imposed that unity “upon the Qur’ān (and Islam in general) from without rather than” deriving it “from a study of the Qur’ān itself.”²²

From these considerations, Drāz felt the need for a more adequate and sound approach (*māthode plus saine*) to study the moral order of the Qur’ān in theory and practice.²³ This approach neither follows the sequence of the *sūrahs* as traditionally arranged such as al-Ghazālī did, nor adopts an alphabetical order of concepts as others tried to do, but it consists of following “a logical order.”

In practical terms, the suggested approach operates as follows. The Qur’ānic verses are classified according to the category of human relations that the general moral rule aims at organizing. Within every category a number of sub-categories are also identified and each of them is given a specific title summing up the particular moral teaching it conveys. The totality of the texts thus arranged provides a complete programme of practical life that the Qur’ān prescribes.

Likewise, Drāz sets out to construct the Islamic “moral system” through a conscious and systematic effort to discover its essential theoretical underpinnings and practical components as enunciated throughout the chapters of the Qurʾān. This exercise, as his book amply testifies, is informed with an adequate knowledge of both old and new moral theories that allows for intelligent and informative comparisons. Other advocates of thematic *tafsīr* are actually engaged in a systematic search of such a comprehensive system of thought and life, as can be derived from the verses of the Qurʾān, in order to face the challenges of the modern age.

Developing his thesis on Qurʾānic ethics at a time when mankind was suffering from the devastating consequences of two world wars, one of the major concerns of Drāz was to bring to the attention and conscience of humanity the Qurʾānic perspective from which “the history of moral doctrines will gain much in terms of range, profundity and harmony” and which will enable moral thought “to overcome its difficulties, both old and new.”²⁴ As he saw it, such an undertaking was necessary to attain a better understanding of the human condition and foster a broad humanism (*humanisme alargi*) in which all people of goodwill in every part of the world shall cooperate for the good of humanity.²⁵

For Drāz, the Qurʾān does not merely promulgate rules of conduct, it lays the solid foundations of theoretical knowledge on which the edifice of its moral values and rules stand. This theoretical knowledge is rooted in a very fundamental conception of human nature according to which “the distinction between good and evil is an inner revelation inscribed in the human soul, before being a Divine legislation.” Accordingly, reason and revelation are but a twofold light revealing the same object, a twofold expression of one and the same original reality, rooted in the essence of things.

Drāz’s formulation of the theoretical and methodological foundations for this genre of Qurʾānic exegesis has provided a basic framework that seems to have been adopted by subsequent authors, including al-Ghazālī and al-Ṣadr, in their treatment of the subject. The difference being in terms of further refining its theoretical arguments, elaborating its methodological rules and widening the scope of its application.

Ḥijāzī: From Discontent to Discovery

The Azhar Professor of *tafsīr* Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Ḥijāzī provided a much wider scope for the implementation of *al-tafsīr al-mawḍūʿī* and further theoretical and historical justification for it that consolidate Drāz's views outlined above. Ḥijāzī's contribution can best be appreciated in the light of his exegetic experience within the context of the classical approach to Qur'ān interpretation. While working on his three-volume commentary on the Qur'ān (*Al-Tafsīr al-Wāḍiḥ*) in the period 1951-55, Ḥijāzī recalls, some features of the Qur'ānic discourse and style struck his mind in a compelling manner.

One of those features consists of the repetition in more than one *sūrah* of one or more than one subject under different lights without this affecting the internal coherence and unity of the *sūrah* in which it occurs. This phenomenon required an explanation. However, when he turned to the classical commentators to seek their answer, he was quite frustrated with what they had to offer. In his view, instead of systematically and convincingly dealing with the question of repetition in the Qur'ān, those commentators rather evaded it by falling back upon the doctrine of *naskh* according to which later verses in the chronological order of revelation are said to have abrogated the preceding ones.²⁶ What exacerbated Ḥijāzī's dissatisfaction with this treatment of the problem was that some Orientalists and secular-minded Muslim writers took the issue of repetition as a pretext in their criticism and misrepresentation of the Qur'ān, thus describing it as inconsistent, redundant and lacking in literary merit.

This personal experience concerning the phenomenon of repetition in the Qur'ān prompted Ḥijāzī to think more seriously about the question of exegetic methodology. He got important clues to a better understanding of this phenomenon while he was working on his commentary. Observing that the Qur'ān treats differently the same subject in various places and contexts, he sets out to gather all the verses relating to man. This exercise made him realize one important thing about the Qur'ānic style in dealing with this subject. It draws a holistic picture of man including such aspects like his origin and creation, the diversity of his colours and dispositions, and his moral standing in the sight of God. Further reflection on the

problem guided him to realize the existence of thematic unity (*al-wiḥdah al-mawḍū'īyyah*) running in the different chapters of the Qur'ān and to develop it into a self-contained theory.

Besides gathering all relevant verses dealing with a specific subject, applying the notion of thematic unity involves three more methodological steps. The first step consists of rearranging the gathered verses according to their chronological order of revelation. The second step involves analyzing the verse (or set of verses) and understanding its import within the context of the *sūrah* to which it belongs. The last step looks into the unfolding and procession of the subject throughout the totality of the Qur'ān.²⁷

In Ḥijāzī's view, these steps are necessary to grasp the meaning and scope of thematic unity in the Qur'ān in terms of its logical structure and historical manifestation as well as the wisdom underlying the chronological sequence of revelation. Hence, the idea of thematic exegesis unfolded gradually in his mind. In contrast to what he calls *al-tafsīr al-aḥkām*, by which he refers to the traditional approach in Qur'ānic exegesis and which proved inadequate to meet the intellectual and methodological challenges posed by the modern age, thematic exegesis must prevail if a sound and viable understanding of the Qur'ān is to be achieved.²⁸ Subsequently, Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr and Fazlur Rahman developed a more sophisticated argument and elaborate theorizing on the necessity and implications of this genre of Qur'ānic exegesis.

Al-Ṣadr and Fazlur Rahman

It is a coincidence that the major works of al-Ṣadr and Fazlur Rahman on thematic exegesis appeared in the same year in 1980. Fazlur Rahman wrote his *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* in the calm academic atmosphere of the University of Chicago, U.S.A., al-Ṣadr delivered his fourteen-lectures on *al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī* between Jamādi al-awwal and Rajab, 1399 A.H./1978 C.E. in the then spiritually and politically tense environment of the Shī'ī Islamic seminary at Najaf, Iraq. However, al-Ṣadr's formulation of his method prefaces the actual exercise he undertook to study the Qur'ān thematically, thus constituting with it one single work,²⁹ Rahman's theorizing on the method of thematic exegesis appears separately as an introduction to his *Islam and Modernity* published two years later (1982), although

written at least five to six years earlier.³⁰ Notwithstanding the gulf separating them in terms of academic and social background and intellectual career, the two scholars tried to reconstruct Islamic thought and reformulate its fundamental concerns to face the challenges of the modern age they lived in.

Fazlur Rahman began with a critique of Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūn*) and classical thinkers who failed to “create a new philosophy on the basis of the Qur’ān...and instead substituted certain dogmatic propositions which, although superficially faithful to Islam, were, in fact, its caricature in many respects.”³¹ The Qur’ān, Fazlur Rahman argued, “not only has a great deal of definitive philosophic teaching, but also can be a powerful catalyst for the building up of a comprehensive world view consistent with that teaching.” This task “has never been systematically attempted in Islamic history.” However, he emphatically declares, “it can and must be done.”³² In fact, Fazlur Rahman did take up this responsibility in an earlier work published in 1965 that aimed at achieving a “genuine Islamic modernism...on the basis of the Qur’ān, rather than reconstructed from” the Islamic medieval heritage.³³

Al-Ṣadr’s concern to systematize and reformulate Islamic thought is seen in his attempt to “philosophize Islamic economics in terms of its outlook on economic life and the history of man and to expound its ideational content.”³⁴ In an earlier work, al-Ṣadr dealt with the central issues of epistemology and ontology, thus providing an Islamic philosophical framework for the analysis of man, economy and society.³⁵

Like many Islamic thinkers, al-Ṣadr understood and preached Islam as a complete and comprehensive way of life (*manhaj al-ḥayāt*). Accordingly, his efforts were geared towards building “an integrated Islamic system of thought.”³⁶ To his understanding, economic and other aspects of life constitute part of a larger, integral whole. Al-Ṣadr was unhappy that the writings on Islamic economics, at least until the time he produced his book, were superficial, dealing with Islamic injunctions and legal rules (*aḥkām*) concerning economic matters and did not go deeper to unveil the theoretical principles and fundamental ideas underlying them. He tried to fill this lacuna and explained the methodological approach needed to construct the Islamic economic system in his *Falsafatunā*.³⁷

To al-Ṣadr, an adequate understanding of the economics of Islam requires two essential steps. The first step is to identify and understand Islam's injunctions and legal rules concerning economic transactions as well as rights and obligations not as separate elements or isolated items but as an integrated whole. Thereafter, it would be necessary to transcend their immediate legal import "to [reach] what is deeper, to [unveil] the essential principles that constitute the economic system in Islam."³⁸

The second step consists of exploring the Islamic basic concepts (*mafāhīm*) bearing on economic life. *Mafāhīm*, to al-Ṣadr, refers to "every Islamic view or notion that explains a cosmic truth, a social reality or a legal fact."³⁹ This category of concepts constitutes, for him, a necessary theoretical framework within which "the legal texts [of Islam] can be properly and easily understood and their import fully realized."⁴⁰ In other words, the exercise of discovering the Islamic economic system must also take stock of those elements of the Islamic world-view that relate to the material and economic life of man, and not be confined to the direct injunctions and legal rules dealing with economic matters. For him, what characterizes the Islamic economic system thus formulated is that it is independent and distinctive vis-à-vis other systems in terms of "its philosophy and fundamental ideas as well as its characteristics and orientation."⁴¹

To solve the problems of mankind, al-Ṣadr asserts, Islam provides a spiritual and moral understanding of life to strike a fine balance between the individual and social life. Briefly described, Islam "is a spiritual and moral doctrine from which a complete system for mankind proceeds."⁴² Likewise, Fazlur Rahman maintains that the Qur'ān "is primarily a book of religious and moral principles and exhortations."⁴³ Its basic requirement therefore "is the establishment of a social order *on a moral foundation*, that would aim at the realization of egalitarian social and economic values."⁴⁴ For Fazlur Rahman, the apparent and certain theocentrism of the Qur'ān, which a secular-oriented mind infatuated with a "lawless modernity" would take as a major flaw and sufficient reason to reject its message, is rather "creatively and organically related to the founding of an ethical sociopolitical order in the world."⁴⁵

Al-Ṣadr and Fazlur Rahman seem to have given serious thought to evaluating the historical development of Qur'ānic exegesis with

special focus on method. While Fazlur Rahman's main finding is that Muslim scholars squarely addressed "the basic questions of method and hermeneutics,"⁴⁶ his Irāqī counterpart believes that, regardless of the different tools the commentators used to understand the import of the Qur'ānic verses, scholars have adopted two major approaches to the Islamic scripture, namely, the "atomistic" (*tajzī'ī*) and the "Unitarian" (*tawhīdī*) or "thematic" (*mawḍū'ī*) approaches.⁴⁷

The atomistic approach has practically dominated Muslim exegetic works throughout most of Muslim cultural history. According to this approach, the Qur'ān is treated in a "piecemeal, ad hoc" manner. The commentator would simply follow its verses one by one according to their order in the *Muṣḥaf*, applying to them whatever interpretative tools that are at his disposal. This atomistic approach has resulted, according to Fazlur Rahman, in "a general failure to understand the underlying unity of the Qur'ān" that provides a specific world-view or *weltanschauung*.⁴⁸ This failure has had the most disastrous consequences for Islamic thought in general and in the realm of *kalām*-philosophy in particular when foreign ideas were adopted and incorporated by the different schools.

Although, according to al-Ṣadr, the commentator might, in certain instances, have gone beyond the specific verse or set of verses he is explaining and looked into other verses with related import, this reference has helped no more than to clarify the literal meaning of the verse(s) at hand. At best, the outcome of the exegetic effort in the context of this approach is a mass of Qur'ānic notions and meanings that are scattered and split from each other. No unveiling of the "connections and organic structure" of this accumulated material is made that yields a comprehensive Qur'ānic view on this or that specific domain of life.

The negative effects of the atomistic approach to the Qur'ān, al-Ṣadr indicates, are most obvious in "the many doctrinal (*madhhabīyyah*) contradictions of Muslim life." It would only suffice for a commentator to just pick up any verse apparently supporting his own view and gather followers and supporters accordingly, such as can clearly be seen in the theological issues of predestination and free will.⁴⁹ This situation could have been avoided if the commentator, instead of merely amassing the meanings of the Qur'ānic verses in such an ad hoc, piecemeal way, has taken a further

step to approach the Qurʾān on the basis of specific themes and topics relating to different fields of life.⁵⁰

According to al-Ṣadr, one of the factors that contributed to the spread of the atomistic approach and its prevalence in Qurʾānic exegesis for so many centuries is the traditionalist tendency of the commentator to simply collect whatever reports from the Prophet (SAS) and the *Imāms* (or the *ṣaḥābah*, companions, in the case of the *Sunni* exegete) concerning the meaning of Qurʾānic verses taken separately, in addition to any other related material of historical, linguistic or literary nature. As a matter of fact, so he explains, Qurʾānic exegesis had its beginnings within the framework of the science of traditions (*ḥadīth*), which has so deeply affected it.⁵¹

In this connection, al-Ṣadr points out a curious phenomenon in Muslim intellectual history. While the science of *tafsīr* has been dominated by the atomistic approach, a thematic approach has been developed in juristic studies. In order to formulate the *sharīʿah* legal rules, the *faqīh* (jurist) would rather treat his relevant material according to the needs of the society and on the basis of topics such as sale, sharecropping, and marriage. Hence, Islamic jurisprudential works are always organized according to subject or theme. This aspect, he rightly observes, accounts for the body of Islamic jurisprudence being comparatively richer and noticeably more systematic than *tafsīr* literature, which is rather static and repetitive.⁵² The atomistic approach has resulted in, what Fazlur Rahman calls, “Islamic intellectualism” necessary to systematically present the Qurʾānic teachings as a whole and comprehensive programme for man’s life at the individual and collective levels, a programme “*for action in this world*.”⁵³

Given the above shortcomings, it is essential that a different method in the study and interpretation of the Qurʾān, the thematic approach, should, as Ḥijāzī insisted, prevail in Qurʾān interpretation. The thematic approach, according to Fazlur Rahman, is the only way to obtain “a genuine taste of the Qurʾān, the Command of God for man.”⁵⁴ The thematic approach should be taken seriously by Muslim scholars to save Muslim societies from “the bane of modernity,” that is, from “secularism [which] is necessarily atheistic.”⁵⁵ At a time when secularism progressively “destroys the sanctity and universality (transcendence) of all moral values” through

its systematic and well-thought out philosophic and scientific theories that are profoundly affecting Muslims, especially in institutions of higher learning, there is a pressing need for “a coherent elaboration of the moral, social, and legal message of the Qur’ān” with Qur’ānic metaphysics as its “necessary backdrop.”⁵⁶ To this end, they have elaborated the steps and procedures involved in the hermeneutics of the Qur’ān.⁵⁷

Hermeneutics of the Qur’ān: Steps and Procedures

One writer has recently observed, not unjustifiably, that the “effect of Fazlur Rahman’s hermeneutic serves to legitimize and delegitimize certain aspects of the past and present by presenting the totality of the Qur’ān-centered hermeneutic as the privileged source of Islamic teaching.”⁵⁸ This applies equally to other exponents of thematic *tafsīr* including Drāz, Ḥijāzī and al-Ṣadr. There are others who preceded them.

Long ago, in a search of the ultimate or grand objectives (*maqāṣid*) underlying Islamic teachings, the Andalusian Mālikī jurist Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388) had based his entire thesis on the primacy of the Qur’ān as “an integral whole.”⁵⁹ Arguing for his *maqāṣid* theory on the basis of what he called *thematic induction*, al-Shāṭibī energetically emphasized the centrality of the Qur’ān as “the essence of the *sharī‘ah*, the mainstay of the *millah*, the wellspring of wisdom, and the paradigm of the [divine] message.”⁶⁰ However, as stated, the thematic approach comes out clearly in the writings of the four selected scholars.

Rather than approaching it empty-minded, the commentator in the thematic approach, al-Sadr suggests, comes to the Qur’ān with his mind focused on a specific topic (*mawḍū‘*) concerning creedal/ideological (*‘aqā‘idiyyah*), social, or natural (*kawniyyah*) life. In fact, he does not and should not stop there. He must be aware of the problems and questions that human thought in its long journey has posed in respect of that subject. He is also required to have good knowledge of the solutions and answers which humanity has provided to those problems as well as of the lacunas and shortcomings therein. Thus familiarized with the human experience in terms of its problems and solutions, its achievements and setbacks, and its successes and failures, the commentator engages with the

Divine scripture in a sort of dialogue in which he assumes a rather positive attitude. He exposes all that to the light of the Qurʾān by interrogating the latter and seeking from it answers and solutions to those problems and preoccupations. This he does not do in an ad hoc, piecemeal fashion as his counterpart, the traditional exegete, does, but through a comprehensive reading and systematic analysis of all relevant verses.⁶¹

In terms of its character, this approach, al-Ṣadr argues, is both integrative (*tawḥīdī*) and thematic. It is integrative in that it does not sever the Qurʾān from the reality (in its socio-historical and natural aspects) and concerns of the human experience. Rather, it engages it as a source of guidance and inspiration for that experience. It is also integrative in the sense that it treats its teachings as a coherent unity and organic structure. It is thematic in the sense that it deals with it on the basis of specific topics and themes in order to unveil the Qurʾānic perspectives on them.⁶²

Moreover, the thematic exegesis is intellectually more rewarding and fruitful. It opens wider horizons for a more creative and penetrating thought. Contrary to the atomistic approach, which is mostly confined to the exhaustible level of literal and linguistic connotations of the Qurʾānic discourse, the thematic interpretation seeks to discover the inner meanings, deeper principles and fundamental values constituting what he considers the basic conceptions of Islam concerning the different aspects of life and existence.⁶³ In other words, the thematic approach enables the exegete to uncover the basic structure, or what al-Ṣadr would implicitly call the infrastructure, underlying the teachings of the Qurʾān. For him, this aspect of the content of the Qurʾān is inexhaustible and transcends the natural limitations of its linguistic and literal aspect. The more the commentator approaches that basic structure, the closer he advances to what is universal and enduring in the Qurʾānic message, thus embracing the universal and eternal truths underlying the natural and social reality that it expounds.⁶⁴

In al-Ṣadr's methodology, this movement from reality to the Qurʾān is paralleled by another movement from the Qurʾān back to reality. Since its message is meant to guide and inspire human life and experience, what has been discovered through the interrogative engagement mentioned above must be projected back onto that life

and experience so as to determine its course of development and provide it with direction in accordance with the divine values and ideals. This is because the Qur'ān is the “guardian” (*qayyim*) and “witness” (*shāhid*) onto mankind.⁶⁵ Expressed differently, it can be said that al-Ṣadr's thematic approach consists of an ascending and descending movement. That is, the exegete ascends from reality to the Qur'ān carrying with him his stock of knowledge of the human experience in terms of both problems and solutions to seek what the Book has to say about them. Enlightened with the divine message and wisdom, he then descends to evaluate, correct, reorient and guide that reality accordingly.

According to Ḥasan al-Turābī, in its integrative dimension, the thematic *tafsīr* does not only deal with the contents of the Qur'ān as a coherent unified whole or simply relate them to the needs of society, but it also integrates its revealed truths to the existential truths manifested in the realm of nature and the cosmos and standing as signs pointing to the divine creative power.⁶⁶ Thus, instead of the dichotomous attitude treating revealed knowledge and human discursive and scientific knowledge as two different if not mutually exclusive realms, the picture that emerges here is one of harmony and unity between them. For, in the final analysis, revelation, reason and nature (both within man and in the large cosmos) all emanate from one and the same source, i.e., God, the Creator and Commander.⁶⁷

Despite its undoubted and undeniable merits, the thematic exegesis does not, al-Ṣadr reminds us, abolish the traditional type of *tafsīr*.⁶⁸ The exegete will always need the analytic data and findings provided by the latter type. As his argument implies, thematic approach is an advanced step that rather complements the atomistic method and overcomes its shortcomings by transcending it towards a more profound and unified understanding of the Qur'ān.

However, al-Ṣadr anticipated that an objection might be raised as to the legitimacy of thematic interpretation of the Islamic scripture, especially since we know that neither the Prophet (SAS) nor his companions had ever thought of such an approach. The Prophet (SAS) simply gave the Qur'ānic verses in a specific order without any concern about themes or theoretical constructs. Yet, his companions could grasp the divine message in its totality and

implement it in their lives. To al-Ṣadr, this is an orthodox (*salafī*) objection that is always raised whenever attempts are made to reform and rejuvenate Islamic thought.⁶⁹

Rather than dismissing the objection as irrelevant, al-Ṣadr answers this objection properly. The Prophet (SAS), al-Ṣadr explains, as an embodiment-model of the divine message, actually created the psycho-spiritual conditions necessary for introducing his followers to the spiritual, intellectual and moral world of the Qur'ān. Given the personal and intimate bond that existed between the companions and the Prophet (SAS) as their spiritual guide, political leader and a perfect model for humanity, it was relatively easy for the Prophet (SAS) to imbue his companions with the Islamic values and develop in them a kind of intuitive (*irtikāzī*) power for understanding and comprehending the Qur'ānic concepts and theories, albeit in a general manner.

To make this point clearer, al-Ṣadr gives an example from human socio-historical experience. A person can learn a foreign language and become conversant in it in two possible ways. Firstly, he/she can mix with the native speakers of that language and integrate him/herself into its socio-cultural environment in such a way as to internalize its spirit and acquire the ability to communicate in it as easily and naturally as its native speakers would. The second alternative is to undergo a process of formal learning whereby he/she is systematically exposed to the vocabulary, grammar and semantics of that language.

The Prophet (SAS)'s companions were fortunate to have integrated themselves with the Prophet (SAS) and thus grasped the message of the Qur'ān and internalized its concepts and values in their totality. But that original psycho-spiritual atmosphere and the concomitant socio-cultural environment has radically changed, which make the formal and systematic solution the only way to entering the world of the Qur'ān. Since the traditional atomistic approach has proven inadequate to embrace its teachings as a totality and coherent unity, it follows by elimination that thematic exegesis is the only solution to attaining this noble goal.⁷⁰ Furthermore, in the modern age, Muslims' encounter with Western civilization has brought them face to face with a vast and multifaceted body of knowledge moulded in elaborate theoretical constructs and well-organized thought systems,

so that only a systematic and creative approach to the Qur'ān can stand to its challenge. These psycho-historical and intellectual considerations are, according to the Shī'ī scholar, sufficient reasons to establish the legitimacy of *al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī*.⁷¹

As al-Ṣadr argues in another context, the passage of time after the age of revelation (*ʿaṣr al-nuṣūṣ*) is a sufficient reason for the emergence of intellectual and methodological problems pertaining to the understanding of its import and content. Hence, a historical need arises for developing appropriate tools to overcome those problems.⁷² *Uṣūl al-fiqh* came into being to fulfill this need in the realm of Islamic jurisprudence. Only a historically-conscious and systematic approach can resolve the ensuing intellectual and methodological problems in such a way as to establish the relevance of its message to the current situation. Evidently, al-Ṣadr's hermeneutics of the Qur'ān does not break with the long and rich hermeneutic tradition of *uṣūl al-fiqh*. Rather, his work exhibits a concern to draw on the findings and theories of that discipline and transcend its narrow legalistic framework.

Like that of al-Ṣadr, Fazlur Rahman's hermeneutic consists of a double movement, though it operates differently. As mentioned above, one major criticism he raised concerning the way the Qur'ān has been treated consists of the failure to discover the basic unity underlying its teachings. To achieve this, he emphasizes that the Qur'ān has to be presented "on its own terms."⁷³ The method of Qur'ānic hermeneutics suggested by the Fazlur Rahman "is exclusively concerned with the cognitive aspect of revelation," without this implying any depreciation or underestimation of the importance of its "aesthetic-appreciative aspects."⁷⁴ Its primary objective is, therefore, to provide "an understanding of its message that will enable those who have faith in it and want to live by its guidance – in both their individual and collective lives – to do so coherently and meaningfully."⁷⁵

Thus, like Drāz, al-Ṣadr and others, Fazlur Rahman's major concern is with the programmatic character of the Qur'ān as a source for a complete and all-encompassing way of life. One major difference between Fazlur Rahman and others must, however, be pointed out. More than any other aspect of the Qur'ānic teachings, Fazlur Rahman is mainly concerned with discovering what he calls

the “properly moral” values that have “an extrahistorical, ‘transcendental’ being” and whose “location at a point in history does not exhaust their practical import or, one might even say, their meaning.”⁷⁶ In other words, it seems he is in search of that part of Qur’ānic message that is universal in the sense of being common to all traditions and civilizations. One can even see in Fazlur Rahman a longing for an “Islamic humanism” that might not be at ease with those aspects of the Islamic teachings setting up specific rules and determinate frames for human conduct and action.

Different from al-Ṣadr’s, Fazlur Rahman’s hermeneutic, including its basic methodological elements, is based upon modern, Western theory of hermeneutic. He discusses admiringly the views of the German Hans Gadamer and the Italian Emilio Betti. The double-movement theory, which constitutes the bedrock of his approach to understanding the Qur’ān, is mainly derived from the work of the Italian jurist-philosopher, thus subscribing to the “objectivity school” of which Betti is “a contemporary representative.”⁷⁷ He has adapted this “borrowing” to suit the purposes of a meaningful and fruitful treatment of the Qur’ān. For sure, a central metaphysical truth anchors Fazlur Rahman’s hermeneutics, “that of revelation in active collaboration with history.”⁷⁸

As stated earlier, Fazlur Rahman’s method of interpretation consists of a double movement. This movement is “from the present to Qur’ānic times, then back to the present.”⁷⁹ Based on a premise, universally accepted by Muslim scholars, that the message of the Qur’ān unfolded gradually in a specific socio-historical context, he argues that its “moral, religious, and social pronouncements” were a response “to specific problems in concrete historical situations.”⁸⁰ It follows from this that in order to understand properly the import of those pronouncements, one has to study “the background materials, which for the most part have been fairly intelligently presented by the commentators” and to grasp the *rationes legis* underlying the Qur’ānic statements in such a manner as to be able to deduce general principles from them.⁸¹

Fazlur Rahman’s suggested movement to the age of the *tanzīl* and his insistence on the importance of “the background materials” of revelation as well as the *rationes legis* underlying its teachings clearly cut across some aspects of the methodological thought of

both legal theorists (*uṣūliyyūn*) and traditional commentators. Legal theorists and commentators alike agree that knowledge of *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) is necessary for a sound understanding of many verses of the Qurʾān, especially those carrying a legal and historical meanings. On the other hand, identifying the *ratio legis* or ‘illah of an injunction is so central in mainstream legal theory that a major method of *ijtihād* cannot be conceived to operate without it. That is, the *ratio legis* constitutes the backbone of analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) in that theory.⁸²

However, Fazlur Rahman is not satisfied with the way these aspects have been dealt with by Muslim scholars. For him, the commentators and, for that matter, the jurists utterly failed to realize “the full import” of the occasions of revelation or “situational contexts,” despite their awareness of their “historical significance” or “their aid in understanding the point of certain injunctions.”⁸³ Accordingly, he does not take the famous principle they enunciated in this respect without reservation. He agrees with earlier scholars that “although an injunction might have been occasioned by a certain situation, it is nevertheless universal in its general application.” This principle is, in his view, “sound enough provided it means by an ‘injunction’ the value underlying that injunction and not merely its literal wording.”⁸⁴ As for the notion of *ratio legis*, the failure of the jurists to realize its full import seems to lie, according to Fazlur Rahman, in the fact that they fell short of deducing “*general principles*” on its basis. An oft-repeated premise on which he bases his argument is that “the Qurʾān always explicates the objectives or principles that are the essence of its laws.”⁸⁵

To overcome these and other related shortcomings, he offers a twofold movement method. The first of the two movements, from the present to the age of revelation, consists of two steps. First, understanding “the import or meaning of a given statement by studying the historical situation or problem to which it was an answer” is indeed necessary, but not sufficient. According to Fazlur Rahman, before attempting any micro study of “specific statements in the light of specific situations ... a general study of the macro situation in terms of society, religion, customs, and institutions, indeed, of life as a whole in Arabia on the eve of Islam and particularly in and around Mecca – not excluding the Perso-Byzantine Wars – will have

to be made.”⁸⁶ Thus, the first step of the first movement aims at achieving a macro and micro understanding of the meaning of the Qurʾān through treating it “as a whole as well as in terms of the specific tenets that constitute responses to specific situations.”⁸⁷ The second step that follows consists of generalizing “those specific answers and enunciate them as statements of *general moral-social objectives* that can be ‘distilled’ from the specific texts in light of the sociohistorical background and the often-stated *rationes legis*.”⁸⁸

Surprisingly, the end result of this process does not seem to add much to what Muslim legal theorists had long strived for. The only difference is perhaps his unfailing insistence on treating the Qurʾānic teachings as a united integral whole “so that each meaning understood, each law enunciated, and each objective formulated will cohere with the rest” so that we can grasp the Qurʾān’s “definite attitude toward life” and the world-view it presents.⁸⁹ But even this part of his argument can be found to have some precedent in classical Islamic scholarship as evidenced, for instance, in the works of two Mālikī jurists, Shihāb ad-Dīn al-Qarāfī (d. 684/1286) and Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388).⁹⁰

Once the first movement, suggested by Fazlur Rahman, “from the specifics of the Qurʾān to the eliciting and systematizing of its general principles, values, and long-range objectives” has been made, the second must follow. It proceeds “from the general view to the specific view that is to be formulated and realized *now*.” If the first movement required a serious study of the socio-historical situation at the time of revelation, the second “requires a careful study of the present situation and the analysis of its various component elements.”⁹¹ This is because the aim of this second movement is to embody the general “in the present concrete sociohistorical context.” This cannot be done unless a sound assessment of the present situation is made that will enable us to “determine priorities afresh in order to implement the Qurʾānic values afresh.”⁹²

Fazlur Rahman’s twofold movement hermeneutics is not without immediate consequences for Islamic traditional scholarship. He says it clearly that “the first task is primarily the work of the historian,” whereas the role of the “social scientist” is undoubtedly “indispensable” in the performance of the second task. Besides these

two types of scholars, the ethicist is assigned the responsibility for the actual “effective orientation” and “ethical engineering.”⁹³ Thus, the traditional commentator and jurist are intelligently, not to say systematically, removed from the seat of guardianship of the Qur’ān both in terms of interpretation and legislation.

Fazlur Rahman’s thematic exegesis, its method and some of its latent features, as outlined above, is only the prelude and *sine qua none* condition for a wider and more comprehensive project, which he was aspiring to carry out. This project consists mainly of reconstructing “the Islamic sciences” in terms of both content and method.

One recurrent theme that Fazlur Rahman seems to be very much concerned with is the realm of theological thought or *kalām*-philosophy in the Muslim intellectual legacy. “A historical critique of theological developments in Islam,” he insists, “is the first step toward a reconstruction of Islamic theology.” The main thrust of such a critique is to unveil the extent of discrepancy separating the various theological schools from the Qur’ānic world-view “and point the way to a new theology.”⁹⁴ This new theology will have to transcend the antinomies of historical theological thought and formulate a systematic Qur’ānic view of God, man and nature.

Another important aspect of Fazlur Rahman’s systematic reconstruction programme concerns the realm of “law and ethics.”⁹⁵ At the outset, he complains with certainty that “Muslim scholars have never attempted an ethics of the Qur’ān, systematically or otherwise.”⁹⁶ This sweeping generalization betrays his unawareness of Drāz’s work discussed earlier. Fazlur Rahman’s preoccupation with the relationship between law and morality stems from the fact that the Qur’ān does not divorce legal injunctions from moral teaching. He thus observes, “the Qur’ān tends to concretize the ethical, to clothe the general in a particular paradigm, and to translate the ethical into legal or quasi-legal commands.” More important than all this is the fact that the ethics of the Qur’ān constitutes “its essence” and “is also the necessary link between theology and law.”⁹⁷ For him, the interpenetration between law and morality “gave a certain character to Islamic law that is uniquely precious – namely, it kept the moral motivation, without which any law must become a plaything of legal tricksters and manipulators, alive within the law.”⁹⁸

Here again comes to the fore another convergence between him, Drāz and al-Ṣadr. As we have tried to show, the latter scholars, especially al-Ṣadr, speak about the ethical meaning and explanation that Islam gives to human life and existence. The historical divide in Islamic thought between the legalism of the *fuqahāʿ* and moralistic inclination of the *sūfis* is what Fazlur Rahman aims at overcoming.

But Fazlur Rahman is not merely concerned with the reconstruction of the Islamic sciences. The social science disciplines, which are “a modern phenomenon,” are also in need of reorientation. Not denying the fact that “they can tell us so much about how collectivities actually behave in various fields of belief and action,” he is not at ease with their *laissez-faire* attitude and indifference toward what ought to be done. In this connection, he speaks of a vicious circle that seems to have caught the proponents of Islamization of knowledge, especially the social sciences. This vicious circle “can be broken only at the level of an intellectual activity where works are produced not only to inform how societies actually behave but to show how they can be imbued with Islamic values conducive to the establishment of an ethical social order in the world.”⁹⁹

These sciences, so Fazlur Rahman’s argument runs, have to be freed from “cardinal deficiencies in basic insights into human nature” that modern civilization has developed despite its sophisticated “means and methods.” In this regard, he gives the utmost importance to history at its macro level or, as he calls it, “macrohistory.” In his confessedly and necessarily normative point of view, history is “the best of social sciences.” And it is not without reason that the Qur’ān invites us again and again “to travel on the earth and see the end of nations.”¹⁰⁰ Fazlur Rahman’s clear bias for history is premised on the fact that “the history of mankind, whether earlier societies were aware of this or not, is indivisible in the sense that the basic human forces – and it is the human forces that are basic to history – are the same all over the globe.”¹⁰¹ At the heart of those forces, he believes, lie “the basic laws of right and wrong” to which all societies, modern as well as ancient and medieval, are subject.

Fazlur Rahman’s thesis is thus anchored in the Qur’ānic view of human nature “which is singularly free of genetics and genes.” Therefore, he emphatically puts it that Muslim social scientists have

to take stock of this truth if they are serious about their involvement in social engineering. The Qur'ān will then come to their rescue with a considerable body of social thought that:

talks incessantly about the rise and fall of societies and civilizations, of the moral decrepitude of nations, of the succession of civilizations or 'the inheritance of the earth,' of the function of leadership, of prosperity and peace and their opposites, and especially of 'those who sow corruption on the earth but think they are reformers.'¹⁰²

Conclusion

Though of a recent origin, the idea of *al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī* has gained momentum among an increasing number of Muslim scholars and thinkers in the last few decades. The leading spokesmen of this approach to the Qur'ānic exegesis are Muḥammad 'Abd Allah Drāz, Muḥammad Maḥmūd Hijāzī, Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr and Fazlur Rahman. These scholars worked under different socio-cultural climate and intellectual developments taking place in Muslim societies. The different socio-cultural environments they worked in raised intellectual challenges that required these Muslim thinkers, believing in the authority and relevance of the message of the Qur'ān, to respond in a certain manner. They have not merely opted for the thematic interpretation of the Qur'ān but tried in their own way to clarify its meaning, operationalise the concept, and outline the steps involved in carrying out this approach.

In the works of these scholars, the notion of thematic interpretation has attained a remarkable degree of conceptual and methodological clarity. The four scholars compared in this study differed in terms of their methodological base. Fazlur Rahman's hermeneutics is largely based upon Western scholarship, others are mainly home-grown. A common and important aspect of the works examined in this study is the attempt of their authors to search for a Qur'ānic conceptual framework for social theorization, informed and guided by the fundamental Islamic world-view.

While this study has noted the intellectual and methodological convergence between the selected scholars, the intellectual and the methodological implications of the notion of thematic interpretation of the Qur'ān (*al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī*) remains unanalysed. How has

their suggested hermeneutics of *al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī* actually worked? What theoretical and practical results has it yielded or what type of problems has it faced or even caused? These questions have remained unanswered which calls for further serious research in the area of *al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī*.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of an article read at the “International Conference on the Qur’ān” organized by the Centre of Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, London, 15-18 October 2001. The author wishes to thank Dr. Ibrahim M. Zein for his pertinent observations on the manuscript.

2. Muḥammad Maḥmūd Ḥijāzī, *al-Wiḥdah al-Mawḍū'īyyah fī al-Qur’ān al-Karīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadīthah, 1370/1970), 6.

3. According to Mustafa Muslim, the term “*al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī*” came into existence only in the 14th century of the Hijrah, when a course under this title was introduced in the Department of *tafsīr* at the College of Uṣūl al-Dīn in al-Azhar.” Muṣṭafā Muslim, *Mabāḥith fī al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍū'ī* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1418/1997), 17.

4. See for example ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād, *Al-Insān fī al-Qur’ān* (Cairo: Nahḍat Miṣr, n.d.); Sayyid Quṭb, *Mashāhid al-Qiyāmah fī al-Qur’ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurāq, 1980); Muḥammad Quṭb, *Dirāsāt fī al-Nafs al-Insāniyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1980).

5. Muslim, *Mabāḥith fī al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍū'ī*, 16. This view is upheld by al-Ṣadr, although this writer does not refer to him anywhere in his book.

6. Ibid.

7. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *A Thematic Commentary on the Qur’ān*, trans. ‘Ashūr A. Shāmis, vol. 1, (Herndon VA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1418/1997), 9-10.

8. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Naḥwu Tafsīr Mawḍū'ī li Suwar al-Qur’ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1416/1995), 5. See also Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Kayfa Nata‘amal ma‘ al-Qur’ān* (Herndon VA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1411/1991), 70-72.

9. Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā‘ī, *Naẓm al-Durar fī Tanāsub al-Āyāt wa al-Suwar*, ed. ‘Abd al-Razzāq Ghālib al-Mahdī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1415/1995), 8 volumes. On the relationship between this genre of *tafsīr* and the concept of *munāsabah* (concordance and interrelatedness) see Muslim, *Mabāḥith fī al-Tafsīr*

al-Mawḍūʿī, 57-91; and for a brief, yet insightful, treatment of *munāsabah*, *naẓm* and *iʿjāz*, see Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Qurʾān* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1406/1986). An extensive analysis of the theory of *naẓm* is to be found in Margaret Larkin, *The Theology of Meaning: ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's Theory of Discourse* (New Haven, Connecticut: American Oriental Society, 1995).

10. Muḥammad A. Drāz, *Al-Nabaʿ al-ʿAzīm: Naẓarāt Jadīdah fī al-Qurʾān*, 7th edition (Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam, 1413/1993). In a note to the preface to the first edition of this book (dated Shaʿbān 1376/March 1957), the author mentions that he worked on it for over twenty years and that parts of it were given as lectures to students at al-Azhar University. This was before 1352/1933. He went to Europe in 1936 and spent twelve years (May 1936-March 1947) in France during which he learnt French, English and German. He joined the then prestigious Sorbonne University where he studied philosophy, the history of religions, psychology and ethics before embarking on the preparation and writing of two doctoral dissertations: a minor one under the title *Initiation au Koran*, and a major one entitled *La Morale Koran* which were both published by Presses Universitaires de France in 1951.

11. Drāz, *Al-Nabaʿ al-ʿAzīm: Naẓarāt Jadīdah fī al-Qurʾān*, 80. The philosophical, psychological and historical argument appear on pp. 20-79. This part of the argument was reproduced and expanded in the author's minor thesis, *Initiation au Koran*, which has recently been published by I.B. Tauris, London, 2000, under the title *Introduction to the Qurʾān*.

12. *Ibid.*, 142.

13. *Ibid.*, 155.

14. *Ibid.*, 157.

15. In this respect, he leans on what has already been asserted by earlier scholars such as Abū Bakr al-Nisābūrī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqāʿī and Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī.

16. *Ibid.*, 159. In this quotation, Drāz reproduces with acknowledgement, almost literally, Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī's argument in *al-Muwāfaqāt*, ed., ʿAbd Allah Drāz, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifah, 1416/1996), 375. There is a striking convergence between the purposes and approach of the advocates of thematic exegesis and what al-Shāṭibī did in his celebrated work in respect of Islamic jurisprudence.

17. Drāz, *Al-Nabaʿ al-ʿAzīm: Naẓarāt Jadīdah fī al-Qurʾān*, 164-209.

18. *Ibid.*, 210.

19. Dr. M.A Drāz, *La Morale du Coran* (Morocco: Le Ministère des Habous at des Affaires Islamiques, Rabat 1983), xv.

20. *Ibid.*, xv-xvi.

21. Ibid., xiv.

22. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 3.

23. Drāz, *La Morale du Coran*, xiii.

24. Ibid., xii.

25. Ibid., xxv.

26. Hījāzī, *Al-Wiḥdah al-Mawḏūʿiyyah fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*, 5-6.

27. Ibid., 29-31.

28. Ibid., 402-405.

29. Al-Ṣadr's lectures, delivered to a number of staff and advanced students at *al-Ḥawzah al-ʿIlmiyyah* of Najaf only a few months before his arrest by the Ba'ṯh authorities, were transcribed and first published by Dār al-Tawjīh al-Islāmī in Beirut and Kuwait, 1980, under the title *Muqaddimāt fī al-Tafsīr al-Mawḏūʿī* without any editing. Another edition by Dār al-Taʿāruf in Beirut appeared in the same year with a different title that reads as *al-Madrasah al-Qurʾāniyyah*. Later in 1990, the latter publisher came up with an edition of al-Ṣadr's complete works in fifteen volumes. His lectures on *al-tafsīr al-mawḏūʿī*, edited by Dr. Hasan ʿĀṣī, appear in volume 13 under *al-Sunan al-Tārīkhīyyah* as the main title and *al-Madrasah al-Qurʾāniyyah* as a subtitle. Reference hereinafter will be made to this edition.

30. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 256; also *Major Themes of the Qurʾān*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1994), xv.

31. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 256.

32. Ibid.

33. See Fazlur Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History* (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1984), 175-79; also *Islam*, 253, 257.

34. Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr, *Al-Majmūʿah al-Kāmilah*, vol. 10, *Iqtīṣādunā* (Beirut: Dār al-Taʿāruf, 1990), 33.

35. Ibid., vol. 2, *Falsafatunā*. English translation of the second volume by Shams C. Inati, *Our Philosophy*, (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1987).

36. Chibli Mallat: *The Renewal of Islamic Law* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 12.

37. See al-Ṣadr, *Iqtīṣādunā*, 374; *Falsafatunā*, 355-405. For a resume of al-Ṣadr's thesis in this respect see Mallat, *The Renewal of Islamic Law*, 113-157.

38. Al-Ṣadr, *Iqtīṣādunā*, 373.
39. Ibid., 374.
40. Ibid., 377.
41. Ibid., 32.
42. Al-Ṣadr, *Falsafatunā*, 44; Shams C. Inati, *Our Philosophy*, 31.
43. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 37.
44. Ibid., 258. (Italics in the original).
45. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 15.
46. Ibid., 2.
47. Al-Ṣadr, *Al-Sunan al-Tārīkhiyyah*, 27-28.
48. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 2, 15.
49. Al-Ṣadr, *Al-Sunan al-Tārīkhiyyah*, 30.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 31.
52. Ibid., 32-33, 38.
53. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 14 (Italics in the original).
54. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes in the Qur'ān*, xi.
55. Al-Ṣadr, *Al-Sunan al-Tārīkhiyyah*, 15.
56. Ibid., 143.
57. The terms *tafsīr* and hermeneutics, at least literally, have the same meaning. However, in this study, the term *tafsīr* is used to refer to the traditional approach to Qur'ānic exegesis. The term hermeneutics is used both in its general meaning as science of interpretation, especially of religious scriptures, and in its philosophical sense as the study and interpretation of human behaviour and social institutions. This aspect is most obvious in the works of al-Ṣadr and Fazlur Rahman.
58. Ebrahim Moosa, "introduction" to Fazlur Rahman's posthumous *Revival and Reform in Islam* (Oxford (UK): Oneworld, 2000), 10.
59. Wael B. Hallaq, "The Primacy of the Qur'ān in Shāṭībī's Legal Theory," in W.B. Hallaq and D.P. Little, eds., *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles Adams*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 60.
60. Al-Shāṭībī, *Al-Muwāfaqāt*, vol. 2, part 3, 309.

61. Al-Ṣadr, *Al-Sunan al-Tārīkhiyyah*, 34-35. It is worth noting here that the idea of “interrogating” the Qurʾān is already prominent in the work of Drāz, see for example *La Morale*, xxiv.
62. Ibid. 37; see also Osman, Fathi, *Concepts of the Qurʾān: A Topical Reading* (Kuala Lumpur: Muslim Youth of Malaysia (ABIM), 1997), 12.
63. Al-Ṣadr, *Al-Sunan al-Tārīkhiyyah*, 38.
64. Ibid., 35-36.
65. Ibid., 35.
66. Ḥasan al-Turābī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Tawḥīdī*, vol. 1, (Khartoum: Hayʾat al-Amal al-Fikriyyah, 1418/1998), 7.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid. 41. For a more elaborate exposition of this philosophically holistic and unifying view, see Ismāʿīl Rājī al-Fārūqī, *Tawḥīd: Its Implications for Thought and Life*, Herndon (Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought), 1412/1992.
69. Ṣāʾib ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, “Manhaj al-Imām al-Ṣadr fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān” in *Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr: Dirāsāt fī Ḥayātih wa Fikrih* (London: Dār al-Islām Foundation, 1416/1996), 422.
70. Al-Ṣadr, *Al-Sunan al-Tārīkhiyyah*, 39-40.
71. Ibid., 40-41.
72. Al-Ṣadr, *Al-Majmūʿah al-Kāmilah*, vol. 3: *Durūs fī ʿIlm al-Uṣūl*, part 1, 98-99.
73. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qurʾān*, xv.
74. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 4.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid., 5.
77. Ibid., 8. For a detailed analysis of Fazlur Rahman’s engagement with and use of modern hermeneutical theory, see Ebrahim Moosa, “introduction” to Fazlur Rahman’s *Revival and Reform in Islam*, 17-22.
78. Ebrahim Moosa, “introduction” to Fazlur Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam*, 23.
79. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 5.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid., 6.

82. For further detail, see Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 82-113.

83. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 17.

84. Ibid.

85. Ibid., 154.

86. Ibid., 6.

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid. Italics added.

89. Ibid.

90. In the introduction to *al-Furūq*, al-Qarāfī counsels scholars to comprehend “the universals” (*kullīyyāt*) to gain mastery over the “particulars” (*juzʿiyyāt*) and make sense of them, thus “reaching his goal in the shortest time.” See Shihāb al-Dīn Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn Idrīs al-Qarāfī, *Kitāb al-Furūq: Anwār al-Burūq fī Anwāʾ al-Furūq*, ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad Sarrāj et al, vol. 1 (Cairo: Dār al-Salām,) 71. Likewise, al-Shāṭibī emphasizes a holistic approach, based on what he calls thematic induction (*istiqrāʾ maʿnawī*), if we are to grasp the wholeness of the Qurʾānic and Prophetic teachings properly. See al-Shāṭibī, *Al-Muwāfaqāt*, vol. 1, 34-35. For a fair presentation of al-Shatibi’s argument, see Hallaq, “The Primacy of the Qurʾān in Shāṭibī’s Legal Theory”; also Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories*, 164-174.

91. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 7.

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid.

94. Ibid., 151-152.

95. Ibid., 154.

96. Ibid.

97. Ibid.

98. Ibid., 155.

99. Ibid., 159.

100. Ibid., 160.

101. Ibid., 161.

102. Ibid.