

ARABIC AND ISLAMIC HERMENEUTICS

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Introduction

Arabic and Islamic hermeneutics have an ancient and a more recent history. The hermeneutical enterprise in each epoch played very different roles and fulfilled discrete purposes. Yet, it is not easy to separate the ancient and the modern hermeneutical traditions because they share overlapping vocabularies. However, the meaning, purpose and intention of hermeneutics in each epoch has also undergone radical change.

Hermeneutics in the modern period is at the center of searing and often controversial debates advancing Islamic reform and reinterpreting tradition; newer forms of hermeneutics are resisted by varieties of Muslim orthodoxies among both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Why do such polarizing debates occur on the stage of hermeneutics in Islam? Part of the answer is that Islam has no church: the equivalent of a church is the elaborate discursive tradition constructed and curated by religious scholars (ulama) over the centuries. The religious scholars have cultivated distinctive hermeneutical methods in order to make alterations to the canonical tradition in the mainstream Sunni and Shi'a interpretations. The orthodox hermeneutical tradition in its Sunni guise takes the Prophet and the Companions as the central paradigm of righteousness whereas for the Shi'as it would be the Prophet and a select number of Companions, but most importantly the exemplary role of the descendants of the Prophet. These are the vital paradigms shaped by the politics at the beginning of Islam, which has also impacted the hermeneutical tradition. As an example, for an orthodox Sunni interpreter an authentic received opinion issued by a Companion or for a Shi'a by a member of the Prophet's household would have more weight, even if it contradicted reason. Of course, interpreters will often try to reconcile received opinion with reason, but if the two are not reconcilable, then received opinion will triumph. In most cases interpreters are adept at making even implausible received opinion look plausible. In addition orthodox interpretations either affirm patriarchal interpretations of religious texts or espouse reformed versions of patriarchy. The interpretations of texts are subject to canonical hermeneutical strictures. Only tolerable change within the broad parameters of their hermeneutical paradigm is

acceptable, although some orthodox scholars can on occasion issue surprisingly progressive interpretations. Yet, one has to note that the hermeneutical battle in modern Islam is waged against orthodox practitioners. Orthodoxy fiercely guards against all those who might violate their approved protocols of interpretation, ranging from wayward insiders to subversive outsiders.

Philosophical hermeneutics are intimately tied to debates on religion. From a historical perspective, philosophy in the Islamic tradition viewed itself as the cousin of religion. Philosophy took pride in its ability to articulate the purpose and values of religion in more universal terms. In the modern period, those Muslim thinkers who do engage with contemporary hermeneutical philosophy as constructionists still see their role as enhancing and evolving the discursive capacity of Islam as a religio-philosophical tradition in order to deal with the modern world and its challenges with greater integrity and efficiency. Needless to say, some, if not most, orthodox religious authorities see this offer from largely secular trained intellectuals to assist in the updating of tradition as a gratuitous, if not a malevolent gesture. Most orthodox religious thinkers view modern philosophy with suspicion; they see it as a subversive move to secularize Islam in a bid to undo its religious foundations. Therefore, the battle lines are explicitly drawn between religious scholars and more radical voices among academic philosophers. Yet the most dramatic developments in hermeneutics in modern Islam have occurred in the realm of Islamic political thought, feminism, gender and sexuality. Vigorous hermeneutical debates have opened up new horizons of possibility for Muslims of different stripes who prefer to explore alternative modes of thinking as opposed to orthodox traditions.

Hermeneutics in early Islam

Philosophical hermeneutics in Islam is organically connected to the questions of faith and doctrine. The hermeneutical template goes back to the need of early Muslim communities to understand the meaning and intentions of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and the scripture he brought in the form of the Qur'an. While he and his companions lived in the world, they were the living interpreters of the tradition; once they left the world, according to tradition, the need to follow in their footsteps and develop the interpretative tradition became a major preoccupation.

Instead of exclusively using the term hermeneutics, called *ta'wil* (pronounced *ta-weel*) in Arabic, Muslim jurist-theologians interpreted foundational texts in the light of reason and their social experiences using the rubric of "intellectual effort" or "independent thinking," called *ijtihad*. *Ijtihad* was possibly the most common generic term for a range of hermeneutical practices in the Islamic tradition. There are different modalities of *ijtihad*-type interpretations, ranging from those who stick closely to the literal meanings (*zahir*) of words to those who put the "text" (*nass*) in a larger conversation with the world (*ta'wil*), knowledge of the times and modalities of reasoning.

Scholars devised specialized vocabularies where semiotics blurred into their discrete hermeneutical strategies. Even when the primary teachings were in the form of oral traditions they required elaboration. Thus, whatever the Prophet said or any action he took, often needed some kind of "surface/superficial explanation" or

“gloss” (*sharh*) in order for the text to be understandable to multiple audiences. At times the coherence and reasoning of the teachings in the form of texts and reports required more “detailed explication” (*bayan*), which often was shorthand for a method of inter-textual explication. Sometimes, a reader might steer a set of passages in one of many possible interpretative directions in order for the material to make sense. Such an interpretation is called an “actively guided” or “steered interpretation” (*tawjih*). But when an interpreter moved away from the literal meaning of a text and attempted to connect the dots to other materials or other sources of information then it resulted in an “expansive interpretation” (*ta’wil*), what most people would regard today as hermeneutics proper.

Explication and expansive interpretation are the most common forms of Arabic–Islamic hermeneutics frequently deployed in discursive practices related to theology, law, Qur’an exegesis, studies of prophetic literary traditions, language and grammar. The gradual monopoly of the Muslim jurist-theologians over interpretative authority gave this emerging hermeneutics enduring power and naturalized it at different times as part of the specialized toolkit of an internally diverse Islamic orthodoxy and traditionalism. Over time orthodoxy constituted itself as a closed hermeneutical circle because it sought to only reinforce and justify the discursive authority of orthodoxy instead of being open to new interpretative horizons.

Sure, the hermeneutical traditions in both the Sunni and Shi’a traditions might represent different styles of reasoning, yet each discursive tradition neatly articulates the coherence of power and authority at a particular instant in history. In Islamic history institutional authority was robustly cultivated through a hermeneutical tradition sustained by a republic of letters. Islam’s consecrated hermeneutical tradition provides its authors and defenders a narrative to secure adherence to its orthodox authority and to defeat all competitors. To challenge the hermeneutical tradition and its authors, therefore, was tantamount to questioning Islam itself. Yet, over time, the critical interrogation of the hermeneutical tradition itself created an opportunity for orthodoxy to grow and become internally diversified.

The modern period

Muslim encounters with the West introduced non-indigenous knowledge traditions. This not only generated further epistemological diversity within Muslim societies but also created new ways of imagining life and existence. Competition between native and foreign knowledge systems generated a politics of knowledge and many a contestation as to who had the power to decide what is right and wrong, true and false, especially in matters of faith, values, ethics, law and cultural practices. In order to deal with new and altering political and social realities, the indigenous Muslim hermeneutical traditions also underwent change through alteration, borrowing and hybridity. Some actors firmly resisted and withstood the modern knowledge tradition by tenaciously holding on to tradition and promoted indigenous knowledge systems through religious institutions such as seminaries (*madradas*) and specially designated Islamic universities. Others, especially those at modern universities embraced the modern knowledge tradition and after some time attempted to

reconcile the multiple knowledge traditions at work in Muslim societies. The key question that stalked thinkers was this: how to deal with the past tradition (*turath*) and reconcile it with the renewal (*tajdid*) of knowledge traditions? Contemporary Arab and Islamic thinkers at modern universities largely pursued this endeavor.

Yet, it is important to note that in Muslim majority societies the hermeneutical debates occurred not in the realm of philosophy as much as it occurred in new readings of history, ethics/law theology and moral philosophy. Yes, Western philosophical influences were palpable through colonial educational systems in many countries but the manifestation of influence occurred not in the academic halls but in the lives of people, communities: they impacted religious institutions. Philosophical questions became manifest in debates centered on conceptions of gender, personhood, self and community, authority and tradition. Often Western influences were indirect, in so far as Muslim intelligentsia began to re-read and re-understand their tradition in an age of science, technology and the rise of the nation-state and which had very different outcomes than before. Because so much was at stake for lived communities, therefore the hermeneutical debates also became a highly combustible terrain of theological dispute where divisive charges of heresy and excommunication were traded between adversaries.

Hermeneutics in reformist religious thought

The late nineteenth century marked a great moment of hermeneutical fervor in the Muslim world, sparking a momentum that continued for most of the twentieth century (Johnston 2008: 168). An emergent Muslim reform movement, known as the *salafiyya*, based in Egypt under the auspices of Jamaluddin Afghani (d. 1897) and his disciple Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) along with others initiated a movement of re-reading the Muslim discursive tradition in order to find ways of upgrading their tradition to meet the demands of new contexts. 'Abduh and his colleagues specifically addressed questions of theology, moral thought and what is generally called Islamic law or *Shari'a* debates. Muslims were adopting European cultural practices around the world as a result of greater contact with Europe: was it advisable for Muslims to adopt new practices?

In terms of Qur'an exegesis, it was 'Abduh and his disciple Rashid Rida (d. 1935) who broached an intertextual hermeneutical approach. Rida echoed 'Abduh's views in a popular exegesis of the Qur'an where the notion of intertextuality meant that some parts of the Qur'an provided an exposition of other sections of the Qur'an in a more focused manner. The 'Abduh-Rida alliance of reformists differed from more canonical and traditionalist readings of the Qur'an in two fundamental ways. The reformists, firstly, no longer accepted some of the presuppositions adopted by early orthodox theologies that were foregrounded in exegesis; and secondly, they did not allow the prophetic tradition, the practice, the sunna derived from *hadith*, to fundamentally alter a Qur'anic teaching or value. Yes, they would adopt prophetic reports that were consistent with the teachings of the Qur'an or if prophetic report constructively elaborated a Qur'anic teaching. But the notion that a prophetic report could limit or abrogate a Qur'anic teaching was no longer acceptable.

This was a major hermeneutical shift in the hegemonic Sunni tradition. In traditional and canonical teachings the authority of the Qur'an and the authority of the prophetic tradition were derived from prophetic reports (*hadith* pl. *ahadith*). While the Qur'an was uncompromisingly viewed as revelation, orthodoxy treated the utterings and teachings of the Prophet also as revelation. The only difference was that the Qur'an was a liturgical revelation whereas the prophetic tradition did not qualify for liturgical purposes, but otherwise they were of equal knowledge-value (epistemological value). In modern Islam this changed. Self-educated Muslims as well as those who did not subscribe to canonical tradition re-contextualized and re-interpreted the Qur'an as exclusively God's word. They viewed the Prophet reverentially but only as a deliverer of God's message and a living exemplar.

But for Rida and 'Abduh the shift to the exclusive "authority of the Qur'an on the lives of those who understand it and its effect on the hearts of those who truly recite it" was a definitive move; in their words, "no other speech can share in that task" (Rida n.d.: 1, 19–20) And the Qur'an was viewed as the permanent authority (*hujja*) while "its wisdom and learning had yet to be unveiled" (Rida n.d.: 20). A saying attributed to the Prophet sealed the argument for Rida, for the Qur'an was "either a favorable authority or your adversary" (Rida n.d.: 20).

Canonical teachings argued that the teachings of especially the Qur'an could not be interpreted by way of personal opinion or without authorized scholarship that relied on the teachings of the early Muslim community who witnessed the Qur'an. Rida downplays that teaching arguing that the early Muslim community was not privileged because of their personal preeminence, but because they were "individual human beings" whom the Qur'an addressed thus: "Oh people show reverence for your Sustainer" (Qur'an 4:1; Rida n.d.: 1, 20). "Is it reasonable that we be asked to surrender to the claim that we should not seek to understand this speech of God, but that we rather agree with the opinion of someone else who made the inquiry and studied [the Qur'an]?" Rida asked rhetorically. The truth of the matter was that "no revelation mandated us to follow the Qur'an in summary form and in detail" (Rida n.d.: 1, 20). Rida staked his own position against the mainstream Sunni tradition and boldly claimed: "Never! It is mandatory for every human being that they understand the verses of the Book according to their capacity without discriminating between a learned and an unlearned person" (Rida n.d.: 20).

Each individual would understand the Qur'an according to their wits, he explained, even in their own language. He justified this position, for in his view each person will encounter the Qur'an to the extent that they are drawn to the notion of "the good." While to the more democratically minded this might sound like an innocuous statement, for a reform-minded traditionalist, Rida's push in the direction of individualism was quite courageous and unique. Rida pressed what Michael Fishbane would call the "deposit of tradition" (*traditium*) into the service of an ongoing and unfolding tradition. But Rida also torqued the tradition in order for it to be more responsive to the needs of the individual and lessened the communitarian control over the meaning of the Qur'an. The 'Abduh–Rida school's hermeneutics was to modernize Islamic theology by grounding it in rational and natural discourses.

'Abduh in particular drew on the work of the medieval Mu'tazilites, a theological tradition in early Islam that prized a rational discourse. For example, the Qur'an

attributes the defeat of Muslims in the Battle of Uhud in 625 between Muhammad and his Meccan foes to the fact that “Satan caused them to fail,” stating the reason as: “because of some evil they had done” (Qur’an 3:155). This refers to a group of archers who were given strict instructions by the Prophet Muhammad not to leave their positions in the battle. Traditional commentators explained that only “some” of the archers left their battlefield positions because they concluded that their enemies would not return and hence they went in pursuit of booty and treasure. How did Satan mislead them? The standard traditional explanation was that some of the fighters had committed sins in the past (Ibn Kathir and al-Sabuni 1402/1981: 1, 330). The traditional hermeneutic aimed at protecting the reputation of the Companions of Muhammad from any negative aspersion in keeping with Sunnism’s strictures.

While ‘Abduh and Rida did not deny the standard explanation they provided an additional interpretation consistent with their hermeneutical stress on reason and justice. They elucidated what could be called a golden rule of how God operated in the world with reference to the character of humans. Sin, they explained, had psychic consequences on people (Rida n.d.: 4, 192). The weakened mental attitudes of the people as a result of sin had social manifestations which became evident in the morale of the fighters at the Battle of Uhud, explained Muhammad Asad, who closely followed their reformist line of interpretation (Asad 2003: 107 n.117).

While the ‘Abduh–Rida hermeneutical toolkit focused on issues of theology and moral philosophy, there were others who were giving greater attention to history and literary criticism that would impact the religious imaginary of twentieth century Muslims. The pursuit of reasoned debate as a defense of Islamic theological teachings was the crowning achievement of Islam historically speaking, many traditional theologians and philosophers claimed. Any project in philosophical hermeneutics invariably began with the theological debates of the past. That was because theology did indeed borrow extensively from the playbook of philosophy. If Muslim theology represented a discourse of being (*wijdan*) in the world, then Muslim philosophy was an attempt to make that being relevant to the world in which Muslims live (Fayduh 2005: 199). Hermeneutics thus became the narrative and vehicle to reconcile “reason” and “received opinion.”

There were both positive and negative receptions of hermeneutics in modern Islam. The pre-partition Indian poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal had a good sense of the importance of hermeneutics. Iqbal showed an awareness of how religious consciousness differed from one era to another. He petitioned for an intellectual language that would be able to deal with multiple forms of human experience from the mystical to the empirical. But he was also aware that a new moment required a new metaphysics. Hence Iqbal explicitly stated that old Muslim theological systems draped in “dead metaphysics” could be of no help to modern Muslims whom he described as “possess[ing] a different intellectual background” (Iqbal 1960: 97). He was acutely aware of the need for a hermeneutics that would renew the reasoning of the past and empty it as a resource but not a solution into the present (Fayduh 2005: 43). In Iqbal’s words: “The task of the modern Muslim is therefore immense. He has to rethink the whole system of Islam without completely breaking with the past” (Iqbal 1960: 97). He also believed that intellectuals who had “deep insight into the inner meaning of the history of Muslim thought and life” who also engendered a

broad understanding of human experience were in the best position to accomplish the task of rethinking. “The only course open to us is to approach modern knowledge with a respectful but independent attitude and appreciate the teachings of Islam in the light of that knowledge,” Iqbal wrote, “even though we may be led to differ from those who have gone before us” (Iqbal 1960: 97).

Iqbal himself only alluded to the hermeneutical possibilities by gesturing to the fruitful possibilities of a re-engagement with Muslim thinkers of the past as well as with modern Western thinkers from Hegel and Nietzsche to Bergson. In fact, at times Iqbal’s cunning irony in a colonial milieu could give the superficial reader the impression that he was against hermeneutics and modernity if one were not aware that he was an ardent advocate for the reconstruction of religious thought in Islam. Yet, in a poem entitled “The Psychology of Slavery” he ends in a mocking tone:

Slaves are easily persuaded to accept their slavery
By making the interpretation of issues a pretext.

(Iqbal 2000: 773)

In another poem he praises innovation and extols how time honors those who innovate, but then darkly warns:

I fear this cry for modernism
Is but a ruse to make the East subservient to the West.

(Iqbal 2000: 798)

Iqbal’s clear-eyed assessment of the hermeneutical challenges Islamic thought faced on the one hand, if read together with his agnosticism towards Western political power and modernity on the other, neatly encapsulated the agonism (strenuous struggling) Muslim modernists experienced, desiring progress with authenticity. Painful ambivalence and searing self-criticism marked the philosophical hermeneutics of modern Arabic and Islamic thought and was perhaps the reason why present-day Muslim philosophy was a hobbled enterprise while less complex theologies triumphed.

Hermeneutical turn in literature

Contemporaneous to Iqbal in the first half of the twentieth century Egyptian intellectuals like Taha Husayn, Amin al-Khuli and ‘A’isha ‘Abd al-Rahman, better known as Bint al-Shati, shaped Arabic–Islamic philosophical hermeneutics via language debates. ‘Abd al-Rahman (d. 1998) was the first to take a complex Arabic poem of Abul ‘Ala al-Ma‘arri (d. 1057) called “The Epistle of Forgiveness” and read it not as a Dantesque journey into the afterworld, but rather as the blind poet experiencing another possible earthly world (‘Abd al-Rahman, 1970). Ma‘arri delved into literary and grammatical puzzles all the while talking to poets and grammarians of the past in an imagined world. ‘Abd al-Rahman read his poetry with empathy as re-living the other’s experience. While she thought of his poem as a potential play

she admitted that the historical reason embedded in Ma'arri's poem might not be fully captured by moderns.

Taha Husayn (d. 1973) was perhaps the most visible literary scholar who enjoyed both a traditional education in Egypt and also studied in France. In a controversial book Husayn unleashed his skepticism on aspects of the Arabic-Islamic literary tradition by drawing on the skepticism of his eleventh century hero, Ma'arri, coupled with a Cartesian strategy of interrogation. He breached the orthodox boundary placed around the discursive paradigm and the acceptable hermeneutical frame by asking the unthinkable. "I wish to create for literature the philosophical method innovated by Descartes in order to investigate the truth of things," he wrote (Husayn 1997: 23). This can only be understood in the context of the following back story. Northern Arabia, the region of Yemen was the place where the original Arabs and speakers of the language came from. But the area that became known as Islam's heartland, known as the Hijaz, only Arabized later. Scientific discoveries revealed that the northern dialects were much closer to Ethiopian languages; yet, the conventional history attributed to the northerners a dialect that was similar to the dialect of South Arabia. The archive of this early Northern dialect was the pre-Islamic poetry, known as the Jahiliyya period. Husayn questioned this conventional history amidst great controversy and proposed that the Jahiliyya poetry was an invention and a forgery of post-Islamic developments for ideological reasons linked to the work of grammarians, story-tellers or the invention of Qur'an commentators, reporters of prophetic teachings and theologians who wanted to create some seamless, less complex and authentic genealogy for Islam. Knowledge, especially theology, but also philosophy, Husayn argued, resonated with the material conditions of particular times and places. Egypt's orthodox Muslim circles, including a few philosophers, were scandalized by his claims, and it took a court case to vindicate Husayn from blasphemy charges and wrongdoing.

In Arabic thought the literary scholar was known as an *adib* (erudite person), a word that is a correlate to the term *adab*, "literature." Literary figures were well read in philosophy and erudite in questions of wisdom (*hikma*), an older term for philosophy (*falsafa*). Thus, Ahmad Muhammad Khalafallah (d. 1983), also an Egyptian literary scholar, caused an outcry with his dissertation on the "Art of Story-telling in the Noble Qur'an" that was later published. He argued that the multiple stories in the Qur'an performed an aesthetic function, while their more important goal was to articulate a moral narrative. The literalness of the stories, their historical accuracy and factual veracity, in his view, were less important concerns. Through his extensive reading of the classical sources, Khalafallah showed that some early Muslim scholars held similar views. The structured plot of the stories of the Qur'an were shaped by the goals of the telling. However, Khalafallah's non-literal hermeneutical readings of the Qur'anic stories caused an outrage. His advisor, an enlightened traditional scholar and legal authority Shaykh Amin al-Khuli (d. 1966) suffered blame and was marginalized by the Egyptian clerical establishment.

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010) was a professor of Arabic literature at Cairo University's Arabic Department. One of his earliest works was a *Critique of Religious Discourse*. In it he questioned the modes of religious discourse of political Islam that were prevalent in Egypt in the 1980s. Abu Zayd showed that Egyptian activists like Sayyid

Qutb, the revolutionary ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, executed in 1966, often turned the views of classical scholars and figures of the past into authoritative texts (*nass*) to which readers had to unhesitatingly submit (Abu Zayd 1992: 31). Abu Zayd indicted modern Islamic thought for refusing to concede that authoritative “texts” were human constructions. Most thinkers failed to appreciate that even the most divine of revelations had an earthly and human aspect, a feature that even classical authorities admitted; yet, modern authors resisted such acknowledgment.

Supporters of authentic and ahistorical religious discourses in contemporary Islam, he argued, often proclaimed the sovereignty of God in politics and with it the sovereignty of the text. They held up their political and hermeneutical models as antidotes to arbitrary governance, and condemned secular rule as the oppression of humans by fellow humans. Despite this claim, Abu Zayd showed that in practical terms political Islam was just another kind of tyranny. What was at stake, he pointed out, was that a certain class of humans, meaning the religious scholars and the ideologues of political Islam, monopolized “the right to understand, comment, do exegesis and interpretation, as if they alone could transmit from God” (Abu Zayd 1992: 56). This kind of hermeneutically informed meta-critical evaluation of analysis earned Abu Zayd the ire of political Islamists and the clergy. His more detailed and insightful analysis of Arabic-Islamic hermeneutics have yet to enjoy proper attention. His readings of the hermeneutics of premodern thinkers like Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240) as well as other prominent classical Islamic thinkers show that the mutation in language and embedded notions of ambivalence, multivocality in signification coupled with the politics of reading in the past were lessons that modern Islamic hermeneutics have ignored.

Not the Muslim clerics but ironically fellow religiously committed academics on a Cairo university committee denied him promotion. Critics claimed that he espoused a Marxist materialist hermeneutical analysis of Islam, a charge the left-aligned Abu Zayd would not deny. As the battles in the university hit the Egyptian public sphere a case of blasphemy and heresy was made against him. Abu Zayd was not as lucky as Taha Husayn or Khalafallah and Egypt’s courts declared him a non-Muslim for holding views that amounted to denying Islam’s *a priori* theological doctrines. In other words, he was tried for espousing positions arrived at by interpretation that challenged mainstream paradigms of Muslim orthodoxy and political Islam. Since a Muslim woman was not allowed to marry a non-Muslim man, his marriage to his wife was declared void. Abu Zayd went into self-imposed exile in the Netherlands.

Philosophical hermeneutics

The Cairo and French-trained Hasan Hanafi energetically took the hermeneutical project seriously as a philosopher. Like other philosophers and constructionists, Hanafi viewed the engagement with the past Muslim legacy of intellectual production and thought (*turath*) as an object of study. For him the need was to study the Islamic past in order to have a renewed engagement with it as a resource for the present. Hermeneutics, especially Husserlian phenomenology was Hanafi’s main ally (Hanafi 2004: 11). Hanafi’s elaborate and ambitious historical hermeneutical program in

multiple volumes involved designing an interpretative analysis of the multiple disciplines developed within Muslim civilization. He provided readings of legal theory, law, theology, exegesis, philosophy and mysticism. In each reading he tried to decipher the synthesis that occurred between the exogenous and the indigenous elements in thought and how new hybridities were established. His goal was to take a broad look at the translation of Greek and other currents of thought and the reception of these ideas into an Islamicate grammar.

Hanafi's project was to read the Muslim tradition in a transformative manner. If the emphasis in the past was placed on detailed discussions of dogma, then he believed the shift in the present should be in the direction of a revolution in thought. Instead of a preoccupation about debates dealing with the afterlife he argued for how religion could deal with reviving human life and conditions in the present. In other words, for him religion was about how to live in the world and had an instrumental function. Hermeneutics in Hanafi's view fulfilled an epistemological function: to find theoretical concord between the self and the world; a conjunction between a knowing subject and an object of knowing. Hence, hermeneutics built the "knowledge bridges" between subject and object in order for the world to be known and so that the subject could exist in the world and engage it. Since the "text" mediated between the subject and the world there was a necessity to engage the text in its two sided mirror: the text reflected the infinite desires of the subject and his or her mental conceptions just as it reflected the reality of the world, its limits and possibilities (Hanafi 2006: 298). For Hanafi hermeneutics became the vehicle for innovation in religious thought that would bring philosophy together with religion, just as hermeneutics attempted to bring sapience (*sapientia/hikma*) together with revealed norms (*Shari'a*). He proposed a hermeneutical method in order to "reconstruct a discipline in accordance with the conditions of the time, in its own terminology, language, instruments of analysis ... which is at the heart of *ijtihad*," he wrote (Hanafi 2006: 299).

'Ali Harb, a Lebanese philosopher also made a compelling case in favor of hermeneutics. The interpreter sought out an unknown dimension of a text in order to find what other readers missed, he wrote. For indeed, such a reader, Harb said, discovered the unknown from the known. To discover things from the already known, he pointed out, was not knowledge but was rather properly called pedagogy. When the interpreter read the text anew from the vantage point of his or her experience then a genuine hermeneutical enterprise was born (Harb 2007: 14). In modern Muslim discourses of hermeneutics the return to reason and the renewal of multiple forms of reason were important features of the hermeneutical revival point on which both Harb and Hanafi would agree.

One area where contemporary Muslim hermeneutics created a common discourse between orthodox traditionalists and non-traditionalist intellectuals was in their discovery of a fourteenth century thinker from Muslim Spain, Abu Ishaq al-Shatibi (d. 1388). Modern advocates of Shatibi's ideas included the previously mentioned Muhammad 'Abduh and his student Rashid Rida. 'Abduh found Tunisian scholars were teaching Shatibi's text *al-Muwafaqat* at the famous Zaytunah mosque-university during a visit there. Once Shatibi's text was published in Egypt it gained a significantly larger pan-Islamic audience. Shatibi advocated what could be called the

“big picture version of the Shari‘a.” The moral teachings of Islam, Shatibi argued, focused on preserving major values; they included the goal to preserve religion, life, reason, property and offspring.

History and the philosophy of ideas

Philosophers at Muhammad V University in the city of Rabat, Morocco have for nearly two decades pursued a spirited debate on the reconstruction of Muslim thought, especially the philosophical, historical and religious dimensions of a complex past Muslim intellectual legacy. Their efforts yielded uncanny insights and sparked earnest debates in scholarly circles around the Arab and Islamic worlds. Yet, Shatibi’s reception among contemporary Muslim philosophers and their analysis of Shatibi’s ideas were less well studied. Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabiri (1936–2010), trained at Muhammad V University, was a philosopher and critic whose writings have spawned a minor canon of literature. His influential books include titles such as the *Construction of the Arabic Reason* (*Binyat al-‘aql al-‘arabi*), *Critique of Arabic Reason* (*Naqd al-‘aql al-‘arabi*), *Arab Ethical Reasoning* (*al-‘Aql al-akhlaqi al-‘arabi*) among many others.

Jabiri was for a long time the premier pan-Arab intellectual interlocutor who relentlessly argued that the Arabs missed the opportunity to author their own enlightenment as a result of some unfortunate events that occurred in the twelfth century. What were those developments centuries ago? Arabic–Islamic thought was contaminated by a very bad strain of Persian gnosticism, Jabiri argued, that dampened and fatally wounded the rational content of Islamic thought. The man Jabiri incredulously blamed for undermining reason was the influential polymath Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). Instead of a serious analysis, Jabiri in my view, made Ghazali a scapegoat responsible for the crippling of Arabic–Islamic thought. Ghazali became Jabiri’s *bête noir* because the twelfth-century Persian thinker validated the authority of mystical intuition and defended orthodox Muslim theological propositions by launching a scathing critique of three philosophical propositions advanced by medieval Muslim philosophers. Ghazali in an unfortunate turn accused the philosophers of heresy when their views clashed with theology on three issues.

More deserving an exemplar in Jabiri’s view, was Abu al-Walid Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), better known in the West as Averroes. Ibn Rushd provided solid rational grounds for religious thought but his project was sidelined by mainstream Muslim thought, Jabiri argued. Despite his flawed historiography, Jabiri’s hermeneutical readings and writings about large issues in the tradition did indeed gain him many admirers.

The Andalusian polymath, noted for his writings on law and an exponent of the phenomenological or Zahiri school Abu Muhammad Ibn Hazm, in his view, was the protagonist of demonstrative reason (*burhan*).

It was the impact of Ibn Hazm and Ibn Rushd that produced jurists like Shatibi who effectively brought about a mini-revolution in modern Muslim ethical and moral hermeneutics. Taha ‘Abd al-Rahman, also a leading Moroccan philosopher of language and ethics had challenged some of Jabiri’s ideas. However, he too viewed

Shatibi as a vital ally and refined Shatibi's ideas in order to propose a paradigm of virtue ethics.

The Pakistani thinker Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) also derived inspiration from Shatibi for his double-movement hermeneutics. Fazlur Rahman found Gadamer's hermeneutics too subjective but found common cause with the Italian jurist, Emilio Betti. However, for Fazlur Rahman the Qur'an was the principle hermeneutical resource. His first step was to study the "meaning of the Qur'an as a whole," including its historical theater. From this body of learning he elicited general principles in order to construe a systematic framework of values and principles. His second step was to apply these principles and values to a new context in the present. Such a hermeneutics, he argued, required a careful study of the present in order to change the present to the extent that change was necessary (Rahman 1982: 6–7). It involved both the skills of an historian, the instrumentality of a social scientist and the engineering of an ethicist. For Fazlur Rahman "the process of questioning and changing a tradition – in the interests of preserving or restoring its normative quality in the case of its normative elements – can continue indefinitely and that there is no fixed or privileged point at which the predetermining effective history is immune from such questioning and then being consciously confirmed or consciously changed" (Rahman 1982: 11).

Gender debates

Islamic feminism clearly generated the most productive and far-reaching conversations in Islamic hermeneutics. A cross-section of scholars in Muslim majority countries, including those writing in European languages in minority contexts, did close readings of Muslim religious and historical documents in order to combat interpretations that cemented patriarchal practices in Islamic law, politics, theology and society reading. Suffice to mention prominent names like Qasim Amin (d. 1908), Tahir al-Haddad (d. 1935), Huda Sharaawi (d. 1947), Nazira Zeiniddine (d. 1976), Zaynab al-Ghazali (d. 2005) and Nawaal el-Saadaawi (b. 1931) among others, who actively petitioned for Muslim women's rights in the Middle East amidst polarizing controversy. Pioneering Muslim voices in the West included Amina Wadud who did a theological reading of certain Qur'anic passages against the grain of patriarchy in order to find a hermeneutic of justice and equality for women. Wadud sought a "female inclusive exegesis" (Wadud 1999: xii). To reach that goal she proposed "a hermeneutics of *tawhid* [unity]" in order to demonstrate how "the unity of the Qur'an permeates all its parts" (Wadud 1999). Moroccan sociologist, Fatima Mernissi interrogated the prophetic reports regarding women with a hermeneutic of suspicion. In her reading of the tradition she found that politics in early Islam generated certain misogynistic threads in a context that was saturated with patriarchy and resulted in the exclusion of women. In her view the main impetus for this was the resentment of the male elites towards influential and knowledgeable women at the very inception of Islam in Arabia (Mernissi 1991). A number of scholars have followed the legacies of Wadud and Mernissi and others in order to explore new possibilities in retrieving the feminine in Muslim history and Islamic texts or in order to critique the text.

Conclusion

Some of the most dynamic developments in Arabic and Islamic hermeneutics have occurred in the modern period. Orthodox traditionalists by definition subscribe to an ontology of community and assert an operation of hermeneutics from the word in the direction of the world. While this is not entirely true for even orthodoxy, most orthodox advocates will assert the proposition of the capacity of the text to change the world in its image, namely the image of the text. Reformists and those favoring the reconstruction of the tradition would say it is the state of affairs of the world that asserts itself with extraordinary force and thus determines the revealed and authoritative narrative of tradition in unforeseen ways. Both parties would see the hand of Providence as either operating through revelation and prophecy or reason and history or mixtures thereof as the ingredients that shape the world.

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