The Qur'an as an Open Text: The Plural Dimension of Meaning

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Abstract:
This study addresses the theme of "the Qur'an as an open text" from a contemporary hermeneutical perspective. It seeks to analyse the plural dimension of meaning within the Qur'anic text through an engagement with linguistic, philosophical, and hermeneutical approaches. The research proceeds from the Western concept of the open text as developed by Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, examining the possibility of applying this framework to the Qur'anic text without compromising its sacredness. The study further surveys the history of interpretation within the Islamic intellectual tradition, from the Muʿtazilites and philosophers to the Sufis and proponents of the maqāṣid approach, before advancing to a contemporary reading that engages with the challenges of modernity and questions of renewal. The paper concludes that, despite its textual fixity, the Qur'an remains open to a plurality of significations and that a renewed understanding of the text does not negate its sanctity but rather activates its enduring capacity to address humanity.
Keywords: open text; interpretation; plurality of meaning; Islamic intellectual tradition.

Introduction

The Noble Qur'an constitutes the foundational text of Islamic consciousness, not merely as a religious and legislative reference but also as a text open to limitless possibilities of interpretation and meaning. In light of the major intellectual transformations witnessed in the contemporary world, the need has emerged to reconsider the nature of the relationship between the Qur'anic text and the reader, as well as between textual fixity and semantic openness. Here, the concept of the "open text" serves as a philosophical and hermeneutical framework that repositions religious texts within new historical and cultural contexts.

This concept emerged in modern Western thought, particularly in the works of Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes, where certain texts are regarded as possessing a dynamic structure that permits multiple readings without foreclosing meaning. The concept subsequently extended into the religious sphere, rendering it possible to approach the Qur'anic text as a discourse whose meaning does not cease at the moment of revelation or at the interpretation of the first exegete; however, it continues to generate meaning as the reader and context change.

This study seeks to analyse the Qur'an as an open text by deconstructing traditional assumptions regarding the centrality of a single meaning and by investigating the hermeneutical structure that permits the emergence of multiple readings belonging to different schools, from the Muʿtazilites and the philosophers to the Sufis and the proponents of the

maqāṣid approach and extending to contemporary reformist thinkers such as Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd and Muḥammad Arkoun.

Can the Qur'an be read as a discourse rather than as a closed text? What are the limits of legitimate interpretation? How might one balance textual fixity and changing context?

First: The Concept of the "Open Text" from Literature to Religion

The concept of the "open text" is regarded as pivotal in contemporary literary and philosophical criticism, and it has gradually shifted from the domain of literary texts to that of religious texts, particularly in modern readings of the Noble Qur'an. The concept originated primarily in the works of Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco. Barthes maintained that the text does not carry a fixed meaning extracted through a traditional interpretative process; rather, it is an open linguistic entity that produces its significance through interaction with the reader, who surpasses the authority of the author in favour of the authority of interpretation, proclaiming what is known as the "death of the author": "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (Barthes, 1977, p. 148).

Eco advanced this further by distinguishing between the "closed text," which imposes a single interpretative trajectory, and the "open text," which produces multiple meanings without descending into chaos, provided that this occurs within the framework of what he terms the "model reader" (Eco, pp. 98–127).

This concept soon became a reference point for several contemporary Arab thinkers, who sought to employ it in reading the Qur'anic text as a religious text open to interpretation rather than closed within rigid exegesis. Among the most prominent of these was Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, who maintained that engagement with the Qur'an should proceed through understanding it as a "cultural text", that is, as a text produced within its historical and social context, generating meaning through interaction with the recipient rather than merely transmitting it from its source (Abū Zayd, 1990, pp. 21–36).

The transfer of the concept of the "open text" from the literature to religion was not merely formal. However, it was grounded in profound transformations in the structure of modern Arab thought, which began to recognise the necessity of liberating itself from literal readings of texts and of investigating their underlying cultural and historical dimensions. Within this hermeneutical horizon, the Qur'an becomes an ever-renewing text that does not exhaust itself, one that admits the plurality of meanings and allows the contemporary reader to participate in the production of its significations without compromising its doctrinal constants.

1.2 Open Text and Closed Text: Conceptual Comparison

The distinction between "open text" and "closed text" is a fundamental conceptual pillar of contemporary theories of reading. The closed text is defined as a text that restricts the recipient to a single imposed interpretation, wherein the authority of meaning is attributed either to the author or to its fixed verbal structure, rendering the reader subject to the will of the text rather than a partner in its formation (Gadamer, 2007, p. 55). In contrast, the open text, according to

Umberto Eco, is a text designed in such a manner as to permit multiple readings and to call forth an active reader capable of activating the text's hermeneutical structure without departing from its rational coherence, a reader whom he designates the "model reader" (Eco, 2003, pp. 101–104).

Roland Barthes further consolidated this understanding when he proclaimed the "death of the author", arguing that the authority of meaning shifts from the writer to the reader and that every reading constitutes a "new writing of the text" (Barthes, 2001, p. 34). In this context, the text becomes an open arena for dialogue rather than a site for the imposition of signification, as meaning interacts with the consciousness, culture, and context in which the text is read.

This distinction between the two models does not negate the existence of internal constraints within the open text; rather, it affirms that openness does not signify chaos but rather the dynamism of meaning. This theoretical foundation provides a basis for analysing religious texts, particularly when they are read in a renewed light, as will be subsequently seen in the approach to the Noble Qur'an.

1.3 From Literature to Religion: A Qur'anic Reading in Light of the Open Text

The concept of the "open text" did not remain confined to the literary field; rather, its influence extended to the domain of religious studies, particularly in contemporary readings of the Noble Qur'an. Thinkers such as Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd sought to employ this concept within a hermeneutical project aimed at liberating the Qur'anic text from closed traditional readings by understanding it as a historical and cultural discourse capable of renewal and interpretation. In his work, *The Concept of the Text: A Study in the Sciences of the Qur'an*, Abū Zayd clarifies that the Noble Qur'an is not a static text but a "linguistic discourse" that acquires its meaning through interaction with reality and the context of reception, affirming that "the text cannot be understood in isolation from the historical and social conditions of its production" (Abū Zayd, 1990, pp. 21–36).

Abū Zayd proceeds on the premise that the Qur'an, as a divine text, was revealed in human language and that its understanding is inseparable from the mechanisms of human interpretation. Therefore, the process of exegesis involves not only the transmission of a ready-made signification but also a new production of meaning, formed through the interaction between the text and the reader within a changing context (Abū Zayd, 1990, p. 44). Here, Abū Zayd employs the analytical tools of linguistics, structuralism, and literary criticism to reconnect the sciences of the Qur'an with modern methodologies, advocating a free and dynamic interpretation that does not confine the text to a single inherited understanding but places it within an ongoing dialogue with the age (Abū Zayd, 1990, pp. 52–54).

This approach provoked considerable controversy between those who perceived it as undermining the sanctity of the text and those who regarded it as a necessary opening towards a more vibrant religious understanding. Nevertheless, the essential value of this conception lies in restoring the reader's status, not as a passive recipient but as a hermeneutical agent who contributes to the renewal of meaning. This view fully accords with the conception of the

"open text" in contemporary hermeneutical theory. The Qur'an may be regarded as a text that transcends the limits of time and continues to generate its meaning as contemporary humanity's questions are renewed.

1.4 The Hermeneutical Value of the Concept of the Open Text in Qur'anic Studies
The concept of the "open text" offers a new horizon for reading religious texts, foremost the Noble Qur'an, by redefining the relationship between the text and the reader and shifting the meaning from a fixed truth to a renewable possibility. This hermeneutical vision reconstructs engagement with the Qur'anic text, not as a preserved material awaiting traditional explanation but as a living discourse continually formed over time. This is what Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd expressed when he emphasised that "the Qur'an is a linguistic text that carries semantic potentials which cannot be reduced to a single meaning" but rather "is renewed with every new reading", calling for moving beyond closed exegesis towards an interpretation that takes into account structure and historical context (Abū Zayd, 1990, pp. 58–60).

The multiplicity of interpretation within the Islamic tradition itself, from the Muʿtazilites to the Sufis, indicates that the Qur'anic text has never closed. Different schools have approached the text from rational, spiritual, or maqāṣid-oriented perspectives, thereby reinforcing the Qur'an's capacity for interpretation rather than confinement within a singular reading. However, the modern concept of the open text adds a new dimension, as it does not confine itself to the plurality of readings within the tradition but introduces modern hermeneutical tools drawn from linguistics, philosophy, and discourse theory to renew religious understanding and root it in the contemporary context (Arkoun, 1998, pp. 115–117).

From this perspective, the text shifts from being a "final epistemic authority" to being an "invitation to continuous reflection", and the reader moves from the position of reception to that of hermeneutical creativity. Herein lies the true value of this concept: it does not deconstruct the Qur'anic text from within but reopens it to time and expands its semantic scope so that it may address the human intellect at every age. Thus, the Qur'anic text becomes a perpetual dialogue with reality, not merely a repetition of tradition, while at the same time retaining its sanctity as a point of departure for reflection rather than its conclusion.

Second, the Qur'an between Fixity and Interpretation
In Islamic consciousness, the Noble Qur'an is a divine text that is fixed in structure yet open in meaning. The Qur'anic text has been preserved in its letters and expressions since the earliest period of codification, on the basis of the divine promise of preservation:

﴿إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ﴾ [الحجر: 9]

"Indeed, we have sent down the Reminder, and indeed, we shall be its guardian" (Qur'an 15:9). This conferred upon it formal and textual sanctity. However, this sanctity did not prevent the multiplicity of interpretations and meanings throughout the ages. In contrast, every stage of Islamic history involves the production of distinct exegetical works, confirming that the

Qur'anic text has never been closed to a single meaning but has remained open to understanding, ijtihād, and interpretation (Abū Zayd, 1990, pp. 61–63).

Early in the history of Islamic thought, attempts emerged to regulate engagement with this text through the establishment of the "science of exegesis", which aimed to discipline understanding in accordance with the principles of language and the Sharīʿah. Nevertheless, these controls did not succeed in eliminating interpretative plurality. In contrast, schools arose, such as the Muʿtazilites, who adopted rational interpretation; the philosophers, who sought to reconcile text and revelation; the Sufis, who opened an esoteric horizon of reading; and later, the proponents of the maqāṣid approach, who connected meaning to purpose and public interest. All these trends affirm that the "fixity of the text" does not signify the "fixity of meaning"; rather, meaning is the product of an ongoing interaction between text and reader within changing contexts (Naṣrī, 2004, pp. 110–114).

Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī indicated that the specificity of the Qur'anic text lies in its being a "living text", that is, one capable of being read in multiple ways according to the development of reason and reality, such that every interpretation represents a moment of understanding rather than the end of meaning (al-Jābirī, 2006, p. 89). On this basis, exegesis does not come to end. However, it is continually renewed, thereby establishing a dynamic understanding of the Qur'anic text that distances itself from rigidity and opens the field for a contemporary interpretation that proceeds from reality without neglecting the sanctity of the origin.

2.1 Fixity of the Qur'anic Text in Form and Content

In Islamic consciousness, the Noble Qur'an is characterised by a unique duality that combines fixity and renewal. On the one hand, it is a text preserved in its original verbal structure, not altered since its compilation during the caliphate of ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān. On the other hand, it has remained open to interpretation and responsive to different ages and cultures. Islamic doctrine firmly established the belief that the Qur'anic text is preserved in its wording, letter by letter and point by point, on the basis of the divine statement:

﴿إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ﴾ [الحجر: 9]

"Indeed, we have sent down the Reminder, and indeed, we shall be its guardian" (Qur'an 15:9). This led to its textual structure being treated as a "closed text" in terms of form and construction (Abū Zayd, 1990, pp. 18–21).

However, this formal fixity does not necessarily entail meaning fixity. Islamic experience from the earliest period has demonstrated a plurality in interpreting the text, confirming that the significance of the Qur is open and multiple. The various exegetical schools produced divergent readings of the same verses, indicating that meaning is derived not solely from the text itself but also from the interaction between the text and the reader within changing social and historical contexts (al-Jābirī, 2006, pp. 85–87).

Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd affirmed that this fixity in structure "should not be understood as fixity in signification"; rather, the Qur'anic text should be regarded as a linguistic discourse whose interpretation develops in accordance with the development of the conditions of understanding

and reception, which renders it essentially an "open text" despite its fixed textual form (Abū Zayd, 1990, p. 27).

Thus, the conjunction of the "fixity of the text" and the "change of meaning" constitutes one of the most prominent features of the Qur'an's vital strength, wherein sanctity does not conflict with dynamism, nor does rhetorical inimitability negate the possibility of renewed understanding.

2.2 Ijtihād and Interpretation in Islamic Thought

Ijtihād is regarded as one of the central concepts in Islamic thought and, since its inception, has been associated with the interpretation of texts, foremost the Qur'an. Ijtihād constitutes a mechanism for understanding the text in light of changing reality and is practised through rational and linguistic tools aimed at deriving meanings from texts rather than merely repeating them. Across the various legal schools, ijtihād assumed multiple forms, such as analogy (qiyās), juristic preference (istiḥsān), consideration of unrestricted public interest (al-maṣlaḥah al-mursalah), and most notably interpretation by reasoned opinion (tafsīr bi'l-raʾy), which relies upon the jurist's intellect, culture, and context (al-Jābirī, 2006, pp. 92–94).

Interpretation in the Islamic tradition was not a uniform process; rather, it followed diverse trajectories according to different intellectual schools. The Muʿtazilites, for example, linked text and reason, maintaining that any apparent conflict between the outwards meaning of the text and sound reason must be addressed through rational interpretation, proceeding from their view that "justice and divine unity" constitute two foundational principles prior to the text itself (Naṣrī, 2004, pp. 120–123). Hence, their interpretation does not weaken the text but rather activates its internal potential and rereads it in accordance with the principles of reason and logic.

In contrast, the Sufis adopted a spiritual interpretative path, holding that the inwards meanings of the Qur'an are not apprehended by reason alone but require spiritual "taste" and experiential insight. Thus, for them, the Qur'anic verse opens onto symbolic and spiritual levels that do not detach from the outwards structure but rather complement and enrich it. Al-Junayd expressed this as follows: "Every verse has an outwards and an inwards meaning, a limit and a point of ascent" (al-Suhrawardī, p. 77).

In addition to these two trends, the maqāṣid-oriented school represented by al-Shāfiʿī and later developed by al-Shāṭibī and Ibn ʿĀshūr focused on the higher objectives and overarching purposes of the Sharīʿah in understanding the text. In this view, interpretation does not halt at the literal wording. However, it extends to what serves the welfare of the community and social justice, leading them to broaden the scope of interpretation in accordance with developments in time and place (al-Shāṭibī, 1997, pp. 205, 209).

The diversity of methodologies of ijtihād and interpretation in the Islamic tradition reflects a profound awareness of the complex nature of the Qur'anic text and the necessity of invoking reason and context in every reading. This renders ijtihād a continuous mechanism in

understanding the text, not confined to a particular era but linked to the human capacity to pose questions in light of revelation.

2.3 The Multiplicity of Readings and the Impact of Cultural and Historical Contexts

One of the prominent features of the Qur'anic text is its capacity to generate multiple readings, as is clearly evident in the history of Islamic exegesis, which has diversified in accordance with doctrinal, linguistic, intellectual, and contextual reference points. Despite its textual fixity, the Qur'an has not been read in a single, unified manner; rather, numerous exegetical works have emerged, reflecting differences in cultural environments, transformations in reality, and variations in epistemological methodologies (al-Jābirī, 2006, pp. 91–93). This plurality gave rise to interpretative schools such as the traditionalist (salafī), the Muʿtazilite rationalist, the Sufi, and the maqāṣid-oriented approaches, as well as modern readings.

As Muḥammad Arkoun indicates, religious understanding of texts does not occur in isolation from the historical context but is formed within it and influenced by it. Interpretation, in essence, is a cultural activity that subjects the text to the logic of reality and reproduces its meaning in accordance with the requirements of age. For this reason, Arkoun called for the "deconstruction" of the historical structure of religious discourse and for understanding texts as discourses interacting with power, language, and society (Arkoun, 1998, pp. 115–117).

Modern reformist trends, particularly those of Muḥammad ʿAbduh and al-Ṭāhir ibn ʿāshūr, contributed to reviving this interaction, calling for moving beyond rigid literal exegesis and for invoking the spirit of the text and its higher objectives. Ibn ʿĀshūr, for example, affirmed in his exegesis that "the Qur'an was revealed for the guidance of people in every age" and that its interpretation should not be confined to the understanding of the early generations alone but must engage with the concerns of contemporary humanity (Ibn ʿĀshūr, 1997, p. 43).

This plurality does not constitute a deficiency in the text; rather, it is evidence of its richness and its capacity for continuity across time. The Qur'an does not cease to generate meaning because it continues to address humanity in its ever-renewed reality, thereby reinforcing the notion of the "open text" as a theoretical framework for understanding hermeneutical vitality.

Third, methodologies of interpretation in the Islamic tradition

The Islamic tradition constituted a rich arena of multiple approaches to interpreting the Qur'anic text. Interpretation has not been confined to a single school or era but has accumulated over centuries through interactions between reason and text, reality and revelation. The diversity of interpretative methodologies within this tradition reveals the vitality of Islamic thought and its capacity for renewal. Various interpretative orientations emerged, including rational interpretations among the Muʿtazilites; philosophical interpretations in the works of al-Fārābī and Ibn Rushd; Sufi interpretations among al-Junayd, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn ʿArabī; and maqāṣid-oriented interpretations in the works of al-Shāṭibī and Ibn ʿāshūr. This diversity does not represent fragmentation but rather methodological richness,

reflecting Muslims' continuous attempts to understand the sacred text within the changing conditions of knowledge and reality.

Each interpretative orientation was linked to its epistemological and contextual premises. The Muʿtazilites grounded their thought in the centrality of reason, affirming that texts must be understood in accordance with rational and logical principles. The philosophers employed the tools of logic and demonstration to produce a comprehensive rational reading of the text. The Sufis opened the text to contemplation and spiritual experience, moving beyond the outwards wording to inwards indications symbolising profound spiritual meanings. The maqāṣid-oriented scholars, meanwhile, focused on the overarching objectives of the Sharīʿah, seeking to interpret the text in a manner that serves human welfare within its social, political, and ethical context.

These diverse methodologies demonstrate that the Qur'anic text was not read as a rigid mould but as a discourse open to multiple levels of signification, which vary according to the tools of understanding and the positions of reading. This accords fully with the concept of the "open text", which grants the reader a vital space for producing meaning without undermining the authority of the text.

3.1 Interpretation among the Muʿtazilites and the Muslim philosophers

Classical Islamic thought was characterised by a plurality of interpretative methodologies reflecting the diversity of theological and intellectual backgrounds among exegetes. The rational method adopted by the Muʿtazilite school is regarded as one of the earliest models in this context. They maintained that the Qur'anic texts cannot be properly understood except in light of reason and logic. The Muʿtazilites believed that reason precedes transmitted authority and constitutes a necessary criterion for understanding texts, particularly when an apparent contradiction arises between the text and rational principles, such as issues concerning divine attributes, predestination, justice, and related matters (Naṣrī, 2004, pp. 108–112).

The interpretation of the Muʿtazilites is based on the principle that "what reason does not indicate cannot be indicated by revelation". On this basis, they interpreted numerous verses metaphorically, particularly anthropomorphic attributes, to remove any suspicion of resemblance or corporealism. They justified this interpretation by arguing that reason enables human beings to comprehend divine intent and must serve as the foundation for interpreting textual expressions in cases of ambiguity (Naṣrī, 2004, pp. 113–114).

On the other hand, Muslim philosophers such as al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and Ibn Rushd adopted an interpretative path grounded in reconciling religion and philosophy. They regarded the Qur'an as a text containing multiple levels of meaning: an outwards level accessible to the general public and an inwards level reserved for the intellectual elite. This distinction between levels of discourse enabled them to present a rational reading of the text without clashing with the community of believers; rather, they sought to demonstrate the unity of truth between revelation and reason (Ibn Rushd, 1986, pp. 22–25).

Ibn Rushd is among the most prominent defenders of the philosophical interpretation of religious texts. In his *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, he stated that "the Law calls for rational reflection and does not conflict with it", emphasising that interpretation becomes obligatory in cases of apparent contradiction between the text and conclusive rational demonstration (Ibn Rushd, 1986, p. 32). Thus, this interpretative methodology opens the way for a rational reading of the Qur'anic text that transcends literalism in favour of intelligibility.

3.2 Sufi Interpretation: The Text as a Space of Symbolism and Contemplation

Sufi interpretation is among the most prominent methodologies that approach the Qur'anic text as bearing inwards meanings apprehended only through spiritual experience and experiential insight. The Sufis did not confine themselves to the outwards understanding of the Qur'an. However, they went beyond it in search of indications and subtle significations that transcended the text towards the realm of illumination and manifestation. This vision was founded upon a firm belief that every verse of the Qur'an possesses an outwards and an inwards dimension, a limit and a point of ascent, as expressed by Imām al-Junayd: "The Qur'an has many facets, and its facets are not confined" (al-Suhrawardī, 2000, p. 77).

This Sufi hermeneutical perspective does not treat the text merely as a cognitive discourse but rather as a field of spiritual manifestation, in which the Qur'an is read as a discourse addressed to the heart rather than to the intellect. Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī further developed this approach, maintaining that Qur'anic meanings are disclosed only "to the extent that the human being is disclosed to himself and to God"; thus, in his view, the text is a mirror reflecting the depth of the recipient's inner experience (Ibn ʿArabī, 2004, pp. 25–28).

Some Sufis held that the Qur'an contains "secrets" that are revealed only to those of purity whose hearts have been cleansed of worldly impurities, referring to this as a "divine unveiling" in understanding. As a result, the Sufi interpretation combines the linguistic structure of the text with the experiential dimension of the reader, rendering the meaning renewable and inexhaustible and bringing interpretation close to the concept of the "open text", which does not conclude with a single explanation.

Although certain traditional trends criticised this form of interpretation for departing from the outwards constraints of the text, the Sufis consistently affirmed that their interpretation does not contradict the Sharīʿah but rather complements it in its inwards dimension. In this manner, they offered the Qur'anic text a symbolic and contemplative reading that adds new depths of meaning to its outwards levels.

3.3 Maqāṣid-Oriented Interpretation in al-Shāṭibī and Ibn ʿĀshūr

Maqāṣid-oriented interpretation represents one of the most significant juristic and intellectual methodologies in the Islamic tradition. It seeks to move beyond the literal exegesis of texts to uncover the higher objectives and intended functions of legislation. This methodology is founded upon the principle that Islamic law, including the Qur'anic text, cannot be properly understood unless its overarching objectives are taken into consideration, such as the

realisation of justice, the removal of hardship, and the preservation of the five necessities (religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property) (al-Shāṭibī, 1997, pp. 10–12).

Imām Abū Isḥāq al-Shāṭibī articulated this approach in his work *al-Muwāfaqāt*, where he presented a comprehensive conception of the Qur'an as a text oriented towards the public interest and maintained that words are not understood in isolation from their causes and purposes. He held that "the texts aim at securing the welfare of people in this world and the hereafter" and that meanings must be read in light of these objectives rather than apart from them (al-Shāṭibī, 1997, p. 35).

Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn ʿĀshūr further developed this trajectory in the modern era, affirming that maqāṣid-oriented interpretation is the only means of ensuring the continued relevance of Islamic law because it renders the Qur'anic text open to the development of reality. In his exegesis *al-Taḥrīr wa'l-Tanwīr*, Ibn ʿĀshūr emphasises that "the Qur'an was revealed for the guidance of humankind, not for the stagnation of minds", and he called for reading the verses within their temporal and social movement rather than outside it (Ibn ʿĀshūr, 1997, p. 50).

Maqāṣid-oriented interpretation reflects a development in the methodology of religious understanding, wherein the text is no longer viewed as a closed mould of meaning but rather as a living discourse that guides towards purpose rather than merely towards outwards rulings. In this sense, this methodology intersects with the concept of the "open text", as it prioritises objective over structure and renews meaning over rigid wording.

Fourth, the Qur'anic Text in Confrontation with Contemporary Challenges

With the advent of modernity and postmodernity in the Islamic world, unprecedented intellectual and cultural challenges emerged regarding religious texts, foremost the Qur'an. Rapid developments in the human sciences and the emergence of concepts such as human rights, religious freedom, the civil state, and modern rationality placed traditional exegesis under scrutiny. Readings grounded in fixity and closure were no longer sufficient to engage with the questions of the age, compelling Muslim thinkers to reconsider hermeneutical methodology and to pursue new readings that proceed from the text without remaining confined to its literalism.

In this context, reformist trends have emerged that seek to reconcile the constants of religion with the variables of reality by employing modern philosophical methodologies, hermeneutical interpretations, and discourse analysis. Thinkers such as Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, Muḥammad Arkoun, and Ḥasan Ḥanafī were at the forefront of these efforts, calling for moving beyond inherited exegesis towards an understanding that takes into account the symbolic structure of the text, recognises plurality of meaning, and appeals to the objectives of the Sharīʿah and the ethics of the modern age.

This chapter examines the dimensions of this confrontation between the Qur'anic text and contemporary challenges through an analysis of three axes: the relationship between the Qur'an

and modernity, the movement of religious renewal and its reading of texts, and, finally, the possibilities of dialogue between the Qur'anic text and Western philosophical thought.

4.1 Relationship between the Qur'anic Text and Modernity

Modernity, as a comprehensive intellectual and cultural project, raised a series of questions concerning the nature of religious texts and their capacity to engage with concepts such as rationality, freedom, individualism, and human rights. At the centre of this debate stands the Qur'anic text as a sacred text presumed to possess fixity, yet it also addresses humanity across changing ages. The relationship between the Qur'an and modernity thus raises the problem of reconciling the sanctity of the text with the demands of modern reason and the fixity of structure with openness of meaning (Arkoun, 1998, pp. 119–122).

Contemporary reformist readings have sought to overcome this tension by understanding the Qur'an as a historical and cultural discourse rather than as a closed system of immutable rulings. Within this framework, Muḥammad Arkoun called for reintegrating the Qur'anic text within "historical reason", arguing that engagement with the text should employ tools of the human sciences, such as linguistics, anthropology, and discourse theory, to understand how the text produces its meaning within social structures (Arkoun, 1998, p. 128).

Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd likewise maintained that the Qur'an, as a linguistic text, is subject to the laws of interpretation and history and cannot be isolated from the conditions of its production and the context of its reception. Accordingly, engagement with it must move beyond literal understanding towards a reading that activates its hermeneutical potential and reorients it to address the concerns of contemporary humanity without compromising its sacred status (Abū Zayd, 1990, pp. 58–62).

From this perspective, modernity does not signify a rupture with the text but rather its invocation to participate in the major debates that occupy modern societies, such as justice, equality, and human dignity. In this way, the Qur'anic text is reconsidered an "open text" that remains alive insofar as it interacts with the questions of its reality rather than when it is reread through the same inherited mechanisms.

4.2 Religious Renewal and the Rereading of Texts

The renewal of religious discourse constitutes one of the most prominent intellectual challenges facing Islamic societies in the modern era, particularly in light of growing questions about the legitimacy of interpretation, the limits of the text, and the flexibility of religious understanding. Calls for renewal emerged from an awareness of the gap between traditional exegesis and the needs of contemporary humanity, as well as the necessity of rereading the Qur'an in a manner compatible with the social, political, and rights-based transformations produced by the modern age (Ḥanafī, 1995, pp. 14–16).

In this context, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd proposed a methodological concept grounded in the principle that "religious texts are not a final given in understanding, but rather a starting point for a continuous process of interpretation". He rejected static readings of the Qur'anic text that reproduced the same meaning without awareness of history or the development of language

and thought (Abū Zayd, 1990, pp. 64–66). He called for grounding the concept of the "historical text", which requires rereading in accordance with the new cultural and historical horizon of the recipient.

Muḥammad Arkoun went beyond the limits of traditional ijtihād and proposed a radical project in the "critique of Islamic reason", affirming that renewal must not be confined to content. However, it should encompass the very epistemological and methodological structure that produced earlier understandings of the texts. He called for the "secularisation of textual interpretation", that is, removing it from the domain of closed juristic authority into the sphere of scientific analysis, where texts are read as part of a cultural production subject to understanding and critique (Arkoun, 1998, pp. 132–135).

This reformist orientation represents an attempt to revive the hermeneutical potential of the Qur'anic text without compromising its sanctity by moving beyond rigid textualist readings towards a dynamic reading centred upon the human being as an active agent in understanding rather than merely a transmitter of prior interpretations. In this way, religious renewal becomes not a departure from religion but a return to it in an enlightened critical spirit.

4.3 Dialogue between Religious Texts and Western Philosophical Thought

With the intensification of intercultural interaction, it has become necessary to reconsider the relationship between religious texts, foremost the Noble Qur'an and Western philosophical thought, not from the standpoint of confrontation or rejection but from that of dialogue and reciprocal engagement. Modern Western thought has generated profound philosophical conceptions of existence, meaning, freedom, the self, and related concepts that intersect deeply with the questions of the Qur'anic human being, thereby opening a rich horizon for epistemological and critical dialogue (Zaqzūq, 2003, pp. 17–21).

Muḥammad Arkoun observed that confinement within the traditional "juristic sphere" has prevented Islamic readings of texts from engaging with the achievements of modern philosophy, particularly hermeneutics, textual deconstruction, and the critique of ideology. He called for reading the Qur'anic text as a "dialogical text" nourished through interaction with the questions of modern philosophy rather than reducing it to closed juristic criteria (Arkoun, 1998, pp. 136–138).

Ḥasan Ḥanafī likewise called for the establishment of a "new theology" that would place the Qur'an at the heart of global debate by linking it to issues of humanity, justice, alienation, and existence and by deconstructing the relationship between text and authority. He maintained that restoring the Qur'an as a liberating force can be realised only by activating it within philosophical questions rather than confining it to a merely stabilising moral or legal function (Ḥanafī, 1995, pp. 40–44).

This dialogue does not aim to ideologise the Qur'an or to subject it to Western philosophical categories but rather to establish a humanistic interpretation that engages with the achievements of contemporary human thought and reconnects the Qur'an with the global human conscience. In this way, the Qur'anic text becomes an active participant in philosophical

debate rather than merely an object of external analysis, enriching global thought through its distinctive values regarding humanity, existence, and destiny.

Conclusion

This study has sought to explore the hermeneutical dimension of the Noble Qur'an through a contemporary approach grounded in the concept of the "open text", a concept that originated within the sphere of literary criticism and Western philosophy and subsequently found extension within contemporary Islamic studies. This concept has been analysed through a series of axes that demonstrate how the Qur'an, as a sacred text, can remain open to the plurality of signification and the diversity of understanding without forfeiting its textual fixity or sanctity within religious consciousness.

Across the four chapters, it has been shown that the Qur'an is fixed in its structure yet dynamic in its meaning. Islamic history itself bears witness to the multiplicity of exegetical schools, from literalist to rationalist, from Sufi-oriented to maqāṣid-oriented, all of which represent attempts to read the text in light of time and context. It has also been demonstrated that earlier hermeneutical methodologies, despite their differences, share with contemporary readings an awareness of the flexibility of the Qur'anic text and its openness to renewed understanding.

In confronting the challenges of the modern age, how reformist thinkers such as Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, Muḥammad Arkoun, and Ḥasan Ḥanafī sought to reconnect the text with reality and to employ modern analytical tools, such as linguistics and philosophical hermeneutics, to present an open humanistic understanding of the Qur'anic text without lapsing into arbitrariness or dilution has been illustrated. The necessity of openness to Western philosophical thought has likewise been emphasised, not as a threat but as an opportunity to create an epistemological dialogue that deepens the significance of the Qur'anic text within a global context.

This study concludes that regarding the Qur'an as an "open text" does not diminish its sanctity; rather, it activates its hermeneutical potential and reconnects it with time and humanity. This concept also restores the reader's status as a partner in the production of meaning and moves the text from stagnation to vitality and from passive consumption to creativity. Therefore, the future of Islamic exegesis depends upon its capacity to unite authenticity and renewal, fixity and flexibility, text and reason, tradition and reality.

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