The Qur'an in South Asia: Hermeneutics, Qur'an Projects, and Imaginings of Islamic Tradition in British India

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Kamran Bashir's *The Qur'an in South Asia* addresses the question of how Sunni Muslims in India dealt with their intellectual heritage and identified with their past tradition in the wake of European colonialism and missionary activism. He focuses mainly on the Muslim scholars Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d. 1898), Ashraf ʿAlī Thānawī (d. 1943) and Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī (d. 1930), who wrote extensively on approaches to understanding the Qur'an after the mutiny/uprising that occurred in 1857 and the partition of India in 1947.

The first chapter begins with a survey of pre-modern and early modern exegetical works that were composed in South Asia. Bashir illuminates what approaches Muslim scholars before the time of the famous Indian scholar Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1762) used to gain a better understanding of the Qur'an. According to him, commentators particularly relied on *isrā'īliyyāt* and *asbāb al-nuzūl* and inter-connectivity (*rabṭ-i āyāt*) of Qur'anic verses, based on which meanings of the Qur'an were derived. Furthermore, the chapter deals with the question of how Shah Walī Allāh

shaped the ideas of subsequent exegetes by dealing with already established concepts of Qur'anic exegesis. The Delhi scholar, who earned the epithet of both traditionalist and modernist, was particularly skeptical of the use of previous sources such as *isrā'īliyyāt* and *asbāb al-nuzūl*, According to Bashir, Walī Allāh's method to rethink former exegetical approaches permeated to scholarly works of the nineteenth and twentieth century. However, Muslim scholars in the post-Mutiny period regarded Walī Allāh's work as a continuation of classical exegetical works.

The second chapter deals with the European context. Bashir points out that the criticism of nineteenth-century Orientalists such as Muir and Nöldeke was particularly directed against the structure and composition of the Qur'an. This literature reached the Indian subcontinent in the wake of British colonialism, which led many Indian scholars to write an exegesis in the first place. In addition, Bashir points to inter-religious debates with Christians and Hindus, as well as intra-religious polemics between Sunni streams such as the Barelwīs, Deobandīs, and Aḥmadīs, which influenced the development of Qur'anic hermeneutics.

In the third chapter, Bashir discusses the exegetical tradition after 1857. He briefly introduces the Muslim institutions that emerged after the Mutiny and the scholars who shaped the thinking in each school. The author also sheds light on why he sees Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, Ashraf ʿAlī Thānawī, and Farāhī as representative samples and chose them for his analysis. One of the reasons Bashir selected the three scholars was that they were affiliated with educational institutions such as the Madrasa Dār al-ʿUlūm in Deoband, the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, and the Nadwat al-ʿUlamā' at Lucknow, which exerted great influence on Muslim intellectuals. Moreover, all three did not only write about exegetical methods, but also launched extensive Qur'an programs directed at a specific readership which had a lasting impact in South Asia even after 1947.

The fourth chapter explores thoughts and ideas which, in the wake of European influence in South Asia and the findings of modern science, called for questioning the methodology of exegetical tradition and Kalām. According to Bashir, Sayyid Aḥmad Khān's criticism was directed at the epistemological approaches Muslims used to understand the Qur'an. Among other things, he criticized Muslims for trusting inferences that

were gleaned through syllogisms rather than engaging with the findings of modern science that followed empirical approaches. For him, the exegetical tradition was not always reliable, as each exegete also followed a specific agenda. Sayyid Khān assumed that there can be no contradiction between science and the Qur'an. This also led him to seek rational explanations for the miracles described in the Qur'an. Bashir mentions the example of angels (*malāʾika*), which Sayyid Khān did not regard as embodied entities. Rather, he understood them to be the greatness and power of God manifested in nature and the abilities possessed by humans. Bashir suggests that Sayyid Khān did not present his view completely detached from Islamic tradition. He cited Islamic scholars such as Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) and al-Qayṣarī (d. 1350) to support certain presuppositions for his conclusions. At this point, Bashir criticizes previous studies for only addressing Sayyid Khān's conclusions, but not how he arrived at them. Bashir explains that in the process of determining the meaning of a particular passage, Sayyid Khān first looks at Islamic tradition and linguistic details. In doing so, he emphasized that earlier exegetes read the Qur'an under the influence of Jews and Christians, allowing mythological narratives to enter the exegetical works. Bashir concludes that it would be wrong to recognize in Sayyid Khān a mere apologist, since his criticism is directed against "the chords of Muslims religious thinking" (115).

The fifth chapter discusses the Deobandī scholar Ashraf ʿAlī Thānawī, whose work drew primarily on pre-modern exegetical works and authentic hadith. Bashir explains that Thānawī also wanted his commentary on the Qur'an to counter interpretations that were speculative from his point of view, such as those of Sayyid Aḥmad Khān. In addition to relying on traditional sources, Thānawī also invoked the interconnectivity (*rabṭ*) of successive Qur'anic verses to explain certain passages, a method that enjoyed great popularity among nineteenth-century Qur'anic commentators. Bashir also argues that while Thānawī drew on *sabab* literature, he did so more to express his commitment to exegetical tradition, rather than using the material to buttress his opinion. The author describes Thānawī as a scholar who always sought to follow the "traditional" path, and he assumed that the majority opinion of Muslims in the past was also valid in his time.

This allowed him, according to Bashir, to build an image as a guardian of the exegetical tradition, protecting it against "modernist" Muslims.

The sixth chapter of the book deals with Farāhī, who assumed that historical context and linguistic aspects had limited use in the exegesis of the Qur'an because they were not reliable in part due to having too much distance from the time of the Prophet. He presumed that his concept of *naẓm* (coherence), which was based on seeing the Qur'an as a coherent text, would solve this problem. Unlike Thānawī and pre-modern scholars, his understanding of *naẓm* did not refer only to interconnectivity of verses (*rabṭ-i āyāt*). Rather, he assumed that certain suras and groups of suras are interwoven. To grasp the connectivity of the suras, Farāhī first looked for the central theme, the pillar (*ʿamūd*), of the sura around which all other verses revolved. He also divided the suras of the Qur'an into new groups based on their structure and theme. Each of the groups also had a pillar and each sura of the group dealt with a particular facet of the main theme of the group. Furthermore, Farāhī placed great emphasis on engaging with exegetical tradition rather than rejecting it. Farāhī and Thānawī did not differ in this respect of referring to pre-modern exegeses. Rather, they differed in how they employed the exegeses in their comprehensive Qur'an projects.

In the seventh chapter, Bashir summarizes the results of his analysis. He deduces from his analysis that certain concepts existed on the Indian continent prior to European influence, such as *naẓm*, which was already relied upon by al-Mahā'imī (d. 1431) in the fifteenth century. According to Bashir, however, the difference lay in the extent to which the three scholars in his sample defined *naẓm* and the extent to which they focused on this concept. All three scholars engaged pre-modern exegeses such as those of al-Bayḍāwī (d. 1316) and Rāzī (d. 1209) to determine the meaning of the Qur'an, suggesting that there was no absolute break with Islamic tradition. For this reason, Bashir concludes, the view that "modernists" stand for a break with tradition must be considered an illusion since they did not dismiss the tradition; rather, they tried to engage with the tradition (albeit in a distinct way). According to Bashir, those labeled "modernists" like Sayyid Khān did not intend to cause a rupture with tradition, but they aimed to change the tradition. For this reason, Farāhī and Sayyid Khān could be approached more as "internal

critics". However, this would imply that there were guardians of a uniform tradition before, which, according to Bashir, is not the case.

Bashir elaborates on this idea in chapter eight, in which he addresses what his findings mean for research on the Islamic tradition in South Asia. A recurring question in Bashir's book is the extent to which the dichotomous division of scholars into "modernists" and "traditionalists" is tenable. Bashir states that researchers incorrectly present the Islamic tradition as uniform and coherent. This leads to the erroneous conclusion that traditionalists were the guardians of a coherent Islamic tradition while modernists rebelled against this tradition. In the view of scholars such as Sayyid Khān and Farāhī, this coherence and uniformity had never existed in the Islamic tradition. Bashir concludes that the classification into "modernists" and "traditionalists" began due to the polemical discourse of the time, which was adopted by researchers on Modern Islam.

Bashir's book is one of the first works to deal comprehensively with the exegetical tradition in South Asia. However, the book does not delve very deeply into the respective exegeses; it rather illuminates how modern exegeses deal with the exegetical legacy of the past. While Bashir insists on the point that there has never been a break with Islamic tradition in South Asia, he does not take into account that modernists do not necessarily distinguish themselves by discarding tradition. Sometimes modernists are understood as reformers or revisionists. Other times they are distinguished by placing more emphasis on certain values. It would have been interesting to know how Bashir would have classified these criteria in his understanding of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Muslim scholarship. Even so, the book provides a comprehensive overview of various approaches that Muslims used to understand the Qur'an in the course of colonialism and that continue to shape the development of hermeneutical approaches in South Asia today.

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