

Principles of a Modern Qur'an Interpretation: Muhammad Abduh's Reformation on the Methodology Reform of Qur'an Interpretation

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Abstract

The Qur'an is the source of the Islam teachings which has an absolute nature, while the tafsir of Qur'an is relative in nature. The *mufassirs* (interpreters) interpret the Qur'an in accordance to their educational background and capacity of knowledge. As the result, there are books of *tafsir* (interpretation) which have a tendency in certain areas. Based on the paradigm, Muhammad Abduh argues that the interpretation of Quran needs to be updated so that the guidance of the Quran illuminates the life of mankind. The research purposes: 1. To prove whether it is true that Abduh's renewal originates from the *tafsir* methodology? 2. To know how his reformation in understanding the Qur'an is. 3. To know what his method is based on. Research methods used are normative doctrinal and descriptive analysis, because this research is concerned with theoretic aspects i.e. the *tafsir* theories. This research shows that Muhammad Abduh's reformation on the methodology of the Qur'an interpretation is essentially based on modern rationalism. He pursues this way in order to make the Qur'an as the guideline to meet the demands of modernity faced by Muslims. For doing so, this modern method should be based on several principles: 1) The Qur'an is the primary source of Islamic dogmas; 2) The Quran is absolute and universal; 3) Reason is the primary means to understand the Qur'an, so rationality becomes the measure of the truth; 4) Very selective in interpreting verses with prophetic tradition (Hadith); 5) the main function of the Qur'an is as the guidance for mankind.

Keywords: Abduh's reformation, rationalism, the Qur'an interpretation

1. Introduction

Some Muslims assume that books of *tafsir* are scriptures that have an absolute truth. The books of *tafsir* are understood as a final work which cannot be changed in all their aspects. They do not remember that the *mufassirs* (interpreters) who compiled the books are ordinary humans whose opinions are relative and they are not immune to the possibility of mistakes. Tafsir is the most extensive and many-sided study. The *mufassirs* tend more to interpret the Quran in accordance with their ability and authority of their knowledge. That is why *tafsirs* are often influenced by specific areas of *mufassirs*' academic backgrounds. Therefore, the sect, the theology, Fiqh (jurisprudence) and sufism embraced by the *mufassirs*, often affect them in expressing their *tafsir* works, hence occur *tafsirs* patterned theology, jurisprudence, sufism, philosophy, and more. The *tafsir* of *Al-Kasyaf*, for example, is a *mu'tazili tafsir* because its author was a Mu'tazilah theologian. The *tafsir* of *Mafatih al-Ghaib* is a philosophy *tafsir*, because its author was a philosopher. *Tafsir Jami al-Qur'an* emphasizes legal aspects because its author, Al-Qurtuby, was an expert in fiqh. While tafsir *Al-Qur'an al-Karim* of Ibnu Arabi (638 H) brings many esoteric and spiritual meanings, because he was a great sufi known for his concept of *wahdat al-wujud*.

Thus, it is true what Husayn az-Zahabi (1986, pp. 9) proposes that when a *mufassir* has expertise in a particular field of study, his tafsir will be so tinged with it. In such

conditions, Muhammad Abduh came and brought new methods of interpreting the Qur'an. Abduh does not want the Qur'an interpretation to be affected by its authors' academic experts, nor does he agree if *tafsirs* are filled with explanations that are not valid and not rational, hence it makes the Quran far from its proper function. For Abduh, the Quran is the source of the Shari'ah (Rida, n.d.), therefore the Quran should not be used to legitimize a particular sect, but rather all the sects must be restored and taken back to the Qur'an.

Tafsir proffered by Abduh is the *tafsir* that is based on the qur'anic paradigm that is the Quran is a guideline of life which should be able to bring human to the welfare in the world and happiness in the hereafter. From the basic assumptions that the Qur'an is a guidance of human life, then essentially the *tafsir* of Quran is an attempt of how the Quran can be taught so that its messages can be understood, lived, and practiced in everyday life. To realize the basic ideas, Abduh tried presenting new patterns in how to understand the Qur'an, reflected in the *tafsir al-Manar*.

2. Problem Formulation and Research Objectives

Based on the background written above, this research would try to explain the pattern of Abduh's thought in how to understand Qur'an verses. In other words, this paper wants to uncover the problems formulated as follow:

1. If Abduh is viewed as a reformer, is it true that his renewal starts from how to interpret the Qur'an?
2. How is Abduh's reformation in understanding the Qur'an?
3. What is his method based on?

As reflected in the problem formulation above, this research aims to directly and critically uncover things as follows:

1. Proving rationally that the renewal of Abduh started from how he interpreted the Quran.
2. Explaining Abduh's reformation in understanding and interpreting the Qur'an.
3. Examining requirements and principles of Abduh's method in interpreting the Qur'an.

3. Tafsir Al-Manar

Talking about *tafsir Al-Manar* cannot be separated from Rashid Rida's role. Muhammad Abduh was indeed the one who delivered the *tafsir* lectures at Al-Azhar University, but these lectures were conducted solely on the initiative of Rida, and he himself later codified the lectures delivered by Abduh, which at the end became a form of books as we can now see.

The early Rashid Rida's interest towards Abduh was actually caused by Abduh's writings in the *al-Urwah al-Wusqa* magazine. After the thoughts of Al-Afgani and Abduh were in his mind, Rida wished to be able to learn from both major figures. However, unfortunately his ideals failed in the middle of his way, for Jamaludin Al-Afgani passed away before Rida met him.

In 1897 AD., shortly after Jamaludin died, Rida intended to come to Egypt because in his view, Egypt gave more opportunities to develop the intellectual and fight for the glory of Islam. Besides that, he would like to meet and learn from the man very close to Afgani. On January 3, 1898 AD. Rida arrived in Egypt through Alexandria. On the 23rd in the same month, he was heading to Cairo, and on the next day he met Abduh (Assyrbasyi, n.d.).

This meeting was the second time between Rida and Abduh, because when Abduh was in exile in Beirut, Rida once met him (Nasution, 1979). After a rather long in Egypt, Rida asked his new teacher to publish a media for *dakwah* and renewal in an attempt to advance the Muslims. The teacher initially felt objected, but after given an explanation of its benefit and purpose, he was finally willing to approve it. At the beginning of Shawal, precisely on 22nd of 1315 H. (March 15, 1898 AD.), they published the *al-Manar* magazine.

In its first number, it was explained that the purpose of its publication was similar to the published *Al-' Urwah al-Wusqo* magazine, for updating media in religious, social, and economic fields, eliminating concepts that were not in line with Islam, improving the education quality, and defending Muslims from Western political injustice (Adams, 1933).

Rida sees that the Qur'an, which is a guidance for mankind, must be understood, internalized, and then actualized in social reality. The Qur'an which contains divine concepts needs to be interpreted rationally. For this reason, he urged his teacher to interpret the Quran in modern way. Rida's ideal became real, once in 1896 A.D. the teacher started giving lectures on the Qur'anic Tafsir at al-Azhar by using methods and ways that suited his expectations (Rida, n.d.).

These *tafsir* lessons lasted for a year and a half, starting from Muharam 1317 H and ending in the middle of the month Muharram 1323 H. He noted the descriptions given by the teacher and systematically collated them in the scientific narrative form. Due to requests of his friends, the lessons were published in the al-Manar magazine.

The first writing of *tafsir* was published in the month Muharam 1318 H., in the al-Manar third edition. This was the embryo of the *tafsir Al-Manar*. Anything that had been published in the magazine was regularly rearranged and shown to the teacher before printed. Normally, al-Imam (Abduh) agreed without any correction, even he often gave praise to his student efforts. Thus, what was then known as *Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-Hakim (Al-Manar)* was born. He gave lectures of *tafsir* until he passed away in 1905M. After he passed away, the student continued writing the *tafsir* in accordance with methodology, idea and spirit brought by the teacher. The *tafsir* which was given by Abduh was until Surah An-Nisa: 125, or until Juz 3 of the whole Qur'an (Rida, 1931).

4. Literature Review

Nurwajah EQ (2003), a postgraduate lecturer at UIN Bandung, conducted a comparative research on both of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida interpretation methods. This research concluded that Abduh was very rational and ignored tradition, while Rida was equally the same, but he often used traditions in interpreting the Qur'an. In addition, Abduh's commentary was brief (*ijaz*), while Rida's commentary was lengthy. However Rida claimed that his interpretation method is similar to Abduh's one.

Harun Nasution (1987) wrote a dissertation that has been published under the title Rational Mu'tazila Theology of Muhammad Abduh. This research explains that Abduh theology is closer to Mu'tazila than to Asy'ariyah. It can be seen from his thoughts about the role of reason and revelation, the absolute will of God, human relationship with God, and God's justice. In his thesis, Sahrah (2015) wrote that the renewal of Muhammad Abduh in education was as a modernization strategy. When serving as Rector of Al-Azhar, Abduh (aggressively) did a lot of educational thoughts and applied them at Al-Azhar. In addition, he eliminated the dichotomy of science. He furthermore added mathematics and philosophy as subjects in Al-Azhar curriculum. He also complemented Al-Azhar infrastructure and improved lecturers and staff welfare.

While the focus of this research is to critically reveal Abduh renewal principles in *tafsir* methodology in order to make the Qur'an as a primary guideline in modern life, accomodating its problems and demands.

5. Abduh's Principles of A Modern Qur'an Interpretation

In interpreting the Qur'an, Abduh bases his method on several principles necessary to be concerned, as follow:

1. The Qur'an is the primary source of Islamic teaching.

Regarding to this principle, he states that the Qur'an is the main source for faith, Sharia and other religious thoughts. A person should not make the Quran as the legitimacy or the justification for a sect or belief he trusts. If so, there are only two possibilities; whether it is true that we get the guidance or we even get away from the Quran. To avoid the latter, the *muffasir* should put the Qur'an as the primary source and the benchmarks of all teachings and religious schools, and should not make the sect as the main, then the Quran is imposed through the *ta'wil* or *tahrif* to support schools or sects being believed (al-Shahatah, 1960).

2. The Qur'an is universal.

Concerning with this concept, Abduh argues that the meaning of each verse of the Qur'an applies to anyone and its guidance continues from the time of the Prophet until the judgment day. Advices (*mauizah*), promises and threats of the Qur'an are not only apply to certain people within a specified time, but also apply universally. Thus he adheres a *tafsir* principle used by scholars, namely:

العبرة بعموم اللفظ لا بخصوص السبب

Abduh wants the Qur'an to be the way of life and ethical guideline in the daily activities. It appears to us that the orientation of Abduh's *tafsir* is the improvement of social life under the Qur'anic guidance. In addition, az-Zahabi (1976, II, pp. 549) mentions Abduh's *tafsir* as *al-Adab* and *al-Ijtima'i* style (literary and humanitiy style), that focuses on the accuracy redaction of the Quran, then arranging the explanation content of the Qur'anic verses in a beautiful wording, by elaborating the purpose of Qur'anic revelation, that is bringing guidance to human life through natural laws applied in the human community and world development (Shihab, 1984).

It is the duty of every Muslim to build a community based on the Qur'anic guidance, without neglecting the development of modern life, and in accordance with the public benefit. If the Quran instructs us to spend treasures in the God's way, it means that God tells mankind to build a good life that can be reflected in the form of education means development, civil organizations, hospitals, transportation, and other institutions that become the primary needs of human beings.

3. The reason (*aql*) is the most important means to understand the Qur'an

In the Abduh's opinion, reason and revelation must not be contradictory. If there is *zahir* (apparent) verse that looks different from reason, then it is a must for a *mufassir* to believe that what is intended is not the textual meaning. Therefore, there are two options for the reason, whether to give the sense of metaphorical (*takwil*) to the verse, or to let the meaning of the verse to God (*tafwid*) (Abduh, 1994).

The widespread use of reason in Abduh's method causes his *tafsir* to be viewed as a modern *tafsir*. In this case, the modernity of a *tafsir* can be seen from its approach that relies on the sharpness of reason in interpreting each verse of the Qur'an, and also it can be seen from its correspondence with the development of modern society. Quraish Shihab writes that Abduh uses his reason as freely as possible in understanding religious teachings while narrowing the unseen areas as much as possible (Shihab, 1984). In this context, Abdullah Saeed (2008, pp. 209) poses that this form of *tafsir* can be viewed as an active response to the modern challenges, while remaining faithful to Islamic dogmas. As a consequence of his *tahkim al-aql*, he fights hard against *taqlidism* (blind imitation). *Taqlid* according to Abduh is one of the causes declining Muslims in all fields. His strict attitude towards *taqlid* is often found not only in the verses related to it, but also in the unrelated verses.

For example, when discussing Q. 105: 3-4 (*surah al-fil*), Abduh interprets *tayran ababil* as flies or mosquitos carrying various diseases, while *bi hijaratin min sijjil* he interpret as stones made of poisonous clay. Therefore, Abraha and his soldiers were actually attacked by an epidemic of smallpox and measles. In addition, Abduh also bases this opinion on a

narrative from Ikrima: “it was the first time smallpox had appeared in the Arab lands” (Abduh, n.d.). Abduh chooses to interpret this surah metaphorically by neglecting its apparent meanings because according to him, they contradict to rationality.

4. Using *tafsir bi al-ma'thur* carefully and avoiding totally the *Israiliyat*.

Muhammad Abduh is very selective in interpreting the Quran by using historical tradition (*tafsir bi al-ma'thur*/ interpretation based on tradition), because in his opinion, many of its transmissions contain weakness. It may be in the transmission process, its contradictive material, and the weakness of the narrator (*rawi*) or its origin itself. Related to this fact, Ibnu Khaldun, as cited by Sahatah, once said: "the Arabs were not the people of the book (good at writing) and scientists. They were nomadic and illiterate people. When they were about to find out something, such as the origin of creation, they asked the people of the book. After they converted to Islam (*ahl al-kitab*), their accepted informations had been considered as a truth. Eventually, the books of *tafsir* became full of excerpts from them. Finally, the *tafsirs* of the Quran were full of *isra'iliyat* without any selection (1960, pp.163).

To avoid any doubt in using *tafsir bi- al-riwayat*, Abduh took the shortcuts by using only the *qat'i* transmission narrated in *mutawatir* way, in an attempt to interpret the Quran, while giving priority to the role of reason as explained in earlier.

5. The Qur'an is the guidance book to govern human life and to straighten the faith.

Abduh criticizes former *mufassirs* who neglected the Qur'anic main function as the guidance. On contrary they extended the Quranic explanation from different sides, such as deepening lexical meanings in terms of *nahwu* and *sharaf*, or exploring the *khilafiyah fiqhiyah* (jurisprudence disputes) and other purposes that in Abduh's view could turn the Qur'an away from its revelation purpose. Hence, az-Zahabi judges that *tafsir al-Manar* carries the new pattern in how to understand the Qur'an. It is familiarly called as the *al-Adab al-Ijtima'i* pattern, or socio-literary exegesis, which focuses on the accuracy of the Qur'anic wording, then the explanation of the Qur'anic verses is compiled in a beautiful and brief wording, by presenting the main function of the Qur'an revelation as guidance for human race.

According to Abduh, *tafsir* is not final purpose (*ghayah*) but is a means (*wasilah*) for achieving *ghayah*. That is why he classified *tafsirs* into two levels. The first level (elementary) is the *tafsir* that only examines words related to *i'rab*, verse redactions and other things. In view of Abduh, this kind of *tafsir* cannot be called as *tafsir* yet. The second level, the *tafsir* whose *mufassir* endeavors to understand God's Words, objectives of shari'ah, both in matters of creed or legal problems, that can drive Muslims to be charitable. The essential goal of all, according to Abduh, is making the Quran as the guidance, which is apparently viewed as final goal.

6. Abduh's Renewal in How To Interpret The Qur'an Based on His Principles

To find out his renewal in interpreting the Quran, firstly it is very worth to describe what the renewal is. Renewal in Arabic is called *tajdid* or *islah*, and in English modernization or reformation. Etymologically *tajdid* is *al-'Iadah wa al-Ihya* (restore or turn on). While terminologically, *tajdid* is an attempt to adapt religious teachings with contemporary life through the way of *ta'wil* or to interpret religious teachings that are relevant to the development of science and technology, as well as the social conditions of community (Shihab, 1992).

From above definition of *tajdid*, it can be concluded that on the one hand, *tajdid* has to maintain basic tenets of religion derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah, and on the other hand it needs to develop the thoughts in understanding the Quran and sunnah rationally in line with the development of science and technology. The modernization in Western societies refers to mind, school, movement, and efforts to change concepts, customs, old institutions,

and so forth, to be adapted to the new atmosphere brought by advances in science and modern technology (Nasution, 1975).

When Muslims were in contact with the West, the modernization that came from the West brought new ideas to the Muslims world. Finally, in line with the progress of modern science and technology, appeared the idea of thinking and movement in the Islamic world to readjust the religious concepts with new developments caused by advances of science and modern technology. If it is agreed that the essence of renewal is to restore the original teachings to the original sources which are *qat'i al-dilalah* (certain meaning) and to develop rationally an understanding of the Qur'an verses and sunnah which are *zanniyyah ad-dilalah* (uncertain meaning) in order to be relevant with the development of science and technology, it seems that renewal process actually starts from how to understand and interpret the Qur'an as a main source in Islamic dogmatic system.

It is suspected then that Abduh is first *mufassir* who tries to understand rationally the Qur'an along with the development of human civilization. For Abduh, the Qur'an speaks not only to people's hearts but also to their mind. The revelation is not possibly contrary to the reason. Islam is the rational religion which is in line with the reason and human characters. Rational thought is the first basis of the eight Islamic basics that he described in his writings about "Islam and Christianity". Rational thought according to Abduh is the way to realize the true faith (Nasution, 1987). Unless based on the reason, faith will not be totally perfect; faith must be based on the truth, not on mere opinion, and here is the reason that becomes the main source of the human belief in God.

The role of reason in Abduh interpretation method is very clearly great, so that in some cases he rejects the *ahad hadis* because it does not suit for the reason, even if majority of ulama consider it valid, for example the *hadith* about magic. It is mentioned in the *hadith* that the Prophet was exposed to the influence of witchcraft performed by Lubaid bin A'asam, hence the Prophet felt working on something but not, felt to come to something but not. Then the God informed it to the Prophet. Based on the information, the prophet removed the magic knots (*al-'uqad*) from an old well which was not too far from the Prophet home. After that, the Prophet recovered by himself. Historically this event was the cause for al-Falaq's revelation (*sabab al-nuzul*).

While commenting on this Hadith, Abduh states that it had better to believe that the Qur'an is *qat'i* in nature; the Quran is the book of God which is transmitted collectively through a prophet who is infallible (*ma'sum*). That is what should be believed, not the contrary. The Qur'an that is *qat'i* comes by neglecting magic from the Prophet, and on the contrary says that magic will affect to its enemies, namely the unbelievers. Besides, hadith that explains the magic above, though valid, is an *ahad* Hadith. It can not be relied in *aqidah* (faith) matters. The protectivity of the Prophet from magic influence is the creed. Therefore, it cannot be drawn from uncertain (*zanniyyah*) arguments, but it must be drawn from certain arguments (*qat'i*).

If *ijtihad* is required (obliged), in view of Abduh, he does oppose the *taqlid* (blind imitation). When interpreting surah al-Baqarah: 170, he argued, as cited by Harun Nasution, that the teachings in the Qur'an and the Hadith about worships are explicit, clear and detailed. Meanwhile, the teachings about society problems are just very little. Additionally, he argued that all of them can be conditioned to demands of the era (1987, pp. 65-89). To customize those basics with the modern situation, a new interpretation needs to be done. This *Ijtihad* is held directly on the Qur'an and the Hadith, as the primary sources of Islamic tenets.

Since the beginning, Abduh realized that interpreting the Quran is not an easy job. It is difficult but very urgent to do. Its difficulty lies on some aspects. One of them, it seems the most important, is that the Qur'an is the word of God, The Knowing, given to the most

perfect human heart (the Prophet); it contains so high teachings that can not be reached except by humans with the pure soul and intellect.

Even so, Allah gives easiness to us; the command to understand God's verses is limited according to levels of human ability. It is because the Qur'an was given as the guideline to mankind. It includes information about the Shari'ah and the rules that should be the guidance for humans life. Of course, it could not be done except by those who understand the Quran correctly. According to Abduh, a *tafsir* at least must explain globally and give the impression in the hearts about God's Majesty and His Holly from the deficiency, turning ourselves from sin and encouraging humans to be willing to do good things (Rida, n.d.). However, the ideal *tafsir* according to Abduh, is the *tafsir* that fulfills the requirements as follow:

1. The *mufasssir* has to understand words brought by the Quran clearly. This could be known through the linguistic approach. In interpreting the Quran, a *mufasssir* cannot only mention someone else's opinions, but he must be sure scientifically that his interpretation is the more closely intended meaning.
2. Understanding the *uslub* (style) of the Qur'an. *Mufasssirs* should master knowledge that can help them to understand the high Qur'anic linguistic styles.
3. Mastering the knowledge that deals with human life. The Qur'an contains stories involving human beings, the stories of the previous races, and the natural laws of All Allah creatures. Therefore, a *mufasssir* should pay attention to sociology and studies related to Earth Science in a broader sense, such as the basics of physics, astronomy, cosmology, etc.
4. Knowing the Qur'an instructions for mankind by understanding the Arabs' social life, before and after the revelation of the Qur'an. People who lived in the time of Islam, and do not know the circumstances of people before Islam, will not know contextually the influence of the miraculous Qur'an guidance.
5. Understanding the life of the Prophet and his companions, regarding to their knowledge traditions, as well as their good relationship patterns associated with the world or the hereafter.

From above explanations, the *tafsir* developed by Abduh is to understand the Quran in its position as the primary source of religious teachings and the guidance that should be able to bring people to achieve prosperity and happiness in the world and the hereafter. Therefore, according to Abduh, the *mufasssir* cannot focus only on one aspect while neglecting the important thing that the Quran is the book of guidance. Indeed, the Quran can not be understood except by mastering Arabic and sciences related to it, but it is not on the proper place if *mufasssirs* discuss *nahwu*, *saraf*, and *balaghah* in tafsirs, ignoring the main role of the Qur'an.

7. Conclusion

The experts of *tafsir* put Muhammad Abduh in a reformers group of the Qur'an *tafsir* methodology. The renewal done by Abduh in various fields such as in education, social and politic, is derived from his renewal in how to interpret the Qur'an. The method he developed is based on principles that he established by himself. As we can see, the essence of principles of his interpretation method is modern rationality, which means that the straight reason is definitely in accordance with the Qur'an, so that it must be understood rationally in accordance with the demands of modernity. According to Abduh, all the Qur'an teachings are reasonable. It speaks not only to people's hearts but also to their mind. As the result, if an apparent (*zahir*) verse is opposite to the reason, then the verse must be understood metaphorically, in order to make sense. Due to this principle, Abduh's *tafsir* work is

considered as a modern *tafsir*, which can be seen through its rational approach and its suitability for the demands of human development and modern life. On the contrary, his interpretation is very closely selective in interpreting verses related to prophetic traditions (*tafsir bi al-ma'thur*).

The Qur'an interpretation is not the goal, but rather a means for achieving the guidance as the main purpose. The Qur'an as guidance should be used as the guideline for personal life, society, and state, to pursue happiness in the world and the hereafter. In addition, a new pattern of *tafsir* expectedly appears and becomes the main character of Abduh's *tafsir*, namely the *al-Adab wa al-Ijtima'i* style, or socio-literary exegesis, which always pays attention to the linguistic beauty and orients on solving social problems. Next to his renewal in understanding the Qur'an, he also brings a renewal in broader religious thoughts. The essence of his thoughts, as explained above is rationalism. He places the reason more dominant than other human faculties, so that he does not concern with the unseen dimensions in interpreting the Qur'an.

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