

Introduction: the Qur'an, interpretation and the Indonesian context

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THE QUR'AN is the foundational source of guidance and inspiration for Muslims around the world. Yet much of the literature on the Qur'an written in the modern period, particularly in major 'Muslim' languages other than Arabic, is not easily available to a wider audience. This is especially true of Islamic scholarship on the Qur'an in Indonesia. Much has been written and published in Indonesian (the official language of more than 12 per cent of the Muslim population of the world) on the Qur'an and other Islamic topics, but little made available or accessible to the non-Indonesian reader. Furthermore, those books available in English that discuss Indonesia are often primarily the work of non-Indonesians.

This book addresses these gaps in two ways. First, it makes available to an English-speaking audience a sample of writings on Qur'an-related topics by intellectuals from the world's most populous Muslim country. And second, it presents work by a range of Indonesian authors. While the first essay, which provides a historical context for the volume, is by a non-Indonesian, the rest of the essays are by Indonesian scholars and intellectuals. This puts the volume in the unique position of offering insight into the currents of contemporary Indonesian thought and Qur'anic exegesis.

From its inception, the aim of this volume was to compile a 'snapshot' of writings associated with the Qur'an, reflecting

individual scholars' interests. When a number of Indonesian Muslim intellectuals were invited to write on issues related to the Qur'an for this volume, no particular theme or focus was suggested. The book therefore is a collage of writings, some more scholarly than others, intended to show the range of ways in which the Qur'an is studied, approached and explored in contemporary Indonesia. It emphasises a diversity of voices, rather than presenting a school of thought.

As approaches to the Qur'an in Indonesia are related to developments both in Indonesia and elsewhere in the Muslim world, I will start by providing an outline of modern trends in the interpretation of the Qur'an. Developments in Egypt, for example, were transmitted to what we call today 'Indonesia' by students in the al-Azhar seminary of Cairo as early as the late nineteenth century. In the twentieth century such contacts continued between Indonesia and centres of intellectual activity in the Muslim world. Works on the Qur'an in the Arab world, and to a lesser extent from the Indian sub-continent, were studied and at times translated into Indonesian. New ideas explored elsewhere became readily available in Indonesia, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. Readers will see these ideas reflected in the contributions to this volume.

Yet despite such external influences and exchanges, Indonesia's own social, political and intellectual contexts have provided the main basis for the development of fresh and innovative approaches to the Qur'an in the later part of the twentieth century. The second part of this introduction will outline the trends in Islamic thought in Indonesia with a particular focus on traditionalism, modernism and neo-modernism. Until the late 1960s, Islamic thought in Indonesia was usually classified as either 'modernist' or 'traditionalist'. However, beginning with the late 1960s, observers of Islamic thought in Indonesia noticed the emergence of a new trend referred to as 'neo-modernism'. Associated with this trend was a flurry of activity in the area of understanding and interpreting the Qur'an, heavily influenced by works on the Qur'an from other parts of the Muslim world.

Modern trends in interpretation

Modern trends in the interpretation of the Qur'an are often traced to Shah Wali Allah of India (d. 1762), who lived during the later years of the Mughal empire. He perceived a mismatch between the message of the Qur'an and the reality of life for many Muslims. His search for answers led him to approach the Islamic tradition creatively. He narrowed the area of *taqlid* (blind following of earlier juristic views or interpretations) and extended the application of *ijtihād*.¹ In the area of *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis), his emphasis on reason in interpreting the Qur'an is unmistakable. In moving away from the blind following of tradition, he rejected some of the traditionally accepted views related to the principles of exegesis (*uṣūl al-tafsīr*). An example of this is his position on *naskh* (abrogation of one ruling in the Qur'an by a subsequent ruling).² Although Shah Wali Allah's ideas do not appear to be radical from a twenty-first century perspective, they were highly original at the time and later became very influential, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Baljon, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, Shah Wali Allah 'was loudly acclaimed in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent as the man who discerned the signs of his times. And when at present an Urdu-writing modernist is looking for arguments from Muslim lore, he weighs in with the opinions of the Shah.'³

In what may be called the beginning of the modern period in Islamic thought, perhaps the most daring and radical attempt to reinterpret the Qur'an was made by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) of India. Khan felt that Muslims needed to reassess their tradition, heritage and ways of thought in line with the newly emerging, dynamic and all-too-powerful knowledge, values and institutions of the West,⁴ and he published a series of works on interpretation from 1880 towards this purpose. Prompted by nineteenth-century European rationalist thought, he argued that reason should be the arbiter of truth. Ahmad Khan's approach was unpalatable to many Muslims, but he clearly influenced

Qur'anic scholarship in the Indian sub-continent well into the twentieth century. The Islamic modernist tradition that developed in India was highly indebted to his thought.

Around the same time, debates emerged in the Middle East (in particular in Egypt) which also called for the renewal and reform of Islamic thought. However, such efforts were resisted by many traditionalist Ulema and members of the influential institutions, such as al-Azhar in Cairo. Their rejection of the renewal and reassessment of Islamic traditions appears to have been based in part on their belief that there was a 'hidden colonial agenda' to subvert Islam. Despite this, in the late nineteenth century Muhammad Abduh⁵ (d. 1905) began expounding the Qur'an in a systematic fashion, paying attention to its relevance to the contemporary needs of Muslims. He gave a series of lectures on interpretation and dictated a (partial) commentary on the Qur'an, which was later compiled, added to, edited and published by his student Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935). This commentary, *Tafsīr al-manār*, was a fresh development, although not as radical as the work of Ahmad Khan. Abduh criticised some of the approaches and techniques employed in traditional *tafsīr*. He dismissed the emphasis on philological and rhetorical features of the Qur'an, saying that such an exercise was 'dry and distances [one] from God and His Book.'⁶ He was critical of the juristic focus which viewed the main function of the Qur'an as legal, and asserted that legal topics were the least discussed matters in the Qur'an (*aqallu mā jā'a fī 'l-Qur'ān*).⁷ Going beyond the grammatical, philological and legal commentaries prevalent in the *tafsīr* tradition, Abduh interpreted the Qur'an in a way that commented on the problems and issues faced by his society. For him, the role of *tafsīr* was to understand the intended meaning in the Qur'an (*fahm al-murād min al-qawl*), and the reasons inherent in its legislation, belief system and rulings in a way that would attract people to the Qur'an and enable them to be guided by it.⁸ These ideas have continued to be developed both in the Indian sub-continent and in the Middle East.

Continuing this theme, Amin al-Khuli of Egypt (d. 1966) developed a thematic approach to the understanding and interpretation

of the Qur'an. This approach emphasised the relationship between the text of the Qur'an and its historical context, as well as the relationship of one part of the text of the Qur'an to others with the same theme. While opinions differ as to what constitutes the thematic approach, it is undeniable that it has become highly influential in the modern interpretation of the Qur'an. This approach has been adopted by many in the Arab world and outside of it, including Indonesia. Leading theoreticians of this approach include 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman (also known as Bint al-Shati') (d. 1998) of Egypt, 'Abd al-Hayy al-Farmawi of Egypt, and Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1996). Many commentaries of the late twentieth century employed this method, or were heavily influenced by it, including such works as Sayyid Qutb's (d. 1966) *Fī zilāl al-Qur'ān* and Muhammad Husayn al-Tabataba'i's (d. 1981) *al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*.

The idea that the Qur'an should be treated as a unified text was an important influence on Qur'anic interpretation in the second half of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most influential intellectual who contributed to the development of this idea was Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), a Pakistani-American. Rahman criticised early Muslims for their failure to 'understand the underlying unity of the Qur'an' and for their adoption of an 'atomistic approach'.⁹ He also argued that in the modern period the piecemeal treatment of the Qur'an had worsened, and that the formulation of an 'adequate hermeneutical method' was 'imperative'.¹⁰ In addition to emphasising the unity of the Qur'an, Rahman also stressed the importance of the 'context' while broadening the understanding of what context is. For Rahman, context has two aspects: the context of the revelation (at the time of the Prophet), and the social, political, economic and intellectual context of the Muslim (in the modern period). Both of these concepts were to have a lasting influence on many young Muslim thinkers of the late twentieth century. The contributions of Mohammed Arkoun,¹¹ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd,¹² Mahmoud Ayoub¹³ and Farid Esack¹⁴ have also been highly influential, and their works have played an important role in Islamic scholarly discourse in Indonesia.

The Indonesian context: between traditionalism and modernism¹⁵

Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim country and contains some 200 to 300 ethnic and linguistic groupings, making it one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. It is religiously diverse as well; of its estimated population of 211 million, approximately 85 per cent are Muslim, 10 per cent Christian, 2 per cent Hindu, and 1 to 1.5 per cent Buddhist.¹⁶ The rest are followers of other religions, including animism, which is practised in the remote regions of Kalimantan and Irian Jaya.¹⁷

Since the 1920s, the debate on Islam and Islamic thought in Indonesia has generally developed along divisions between 'modernist' and 'traditionalist' Muslims. Islamic modernism was brought to Indonesia in the early twentieth century by Indonesian students returning from their studies in the Middle East, particularly Egypt. The first modernist organisation in Indonesia, the Muhammadiyah, was founded by Kiyai Haji Ahmad Dahlan (d. 1923) in Yogyakarta in 1912. According to Clifford Geertz, the founding of the Muhammadiyah marked a period when the self-conscious Muslim 'was a man not only fond of his religion in theory, but also committed to it in practice'.¹⁸ The Muhammadiyah, with a predominantly urban base throughout Indonesia, was concerned with providing educational and social institutions such as hospitals and schools. Today, it claims a membership of over 30 million. The founders of the Muhammadiyah were interested in issues such as *ijtihād* and reform of Islamic law, and the introduction of modern education. They were highly critical of syncretism and were opposed to what they considered to be the practice of *bid'ā* (innovation in religious matters) by the traditionalists.

In response to this modernist movement, Nahdatul Ulama (NU)¹⁹ was founded in 1926 by Kiyai Haji Hasyim Asy'ari. NU was based on the support of the more conservative, traditionalist Muslims in rural Java, with strongholds in Central and Eastern Java.²⁰ NU leaders were opposed to the idea of *ijtihād* espoused

by the Muhammadiyah. They practised *taṣawwuf* (Sufism) and upheld both the institution of *taqlīd* and the visiting of tombs, which the modernists regarded as *bid'ā*. NU currently claims over 40 million members and, like the Muhammadiyah, has established a large number of schools, hospitals and other social welfare institutions.

Initially, the religious outlooks of the Muhammadiyah and NU were diametrically opposed. However, with the formation of Masyumi (Majelis Syuro Muslimin Indonesia, or Consultative Council of Indonesian Muslims)²¹ in 1943, the Muhammadiyah and NU worked together to present a more unified position in representing the nation's Muslims. Masyumi sought to maintain the unity of the Muslims in Indonesia in order to oppose the competing ideologies of communism and secular nationalism. During the struggle for independence, the traditionalists and modernists cooperated so that the interests of the Muslims could be established. However, throughout this period, the Muhammadiyah and NU preserved their distinct identities.

After independence, the Preparatory Committee for Indonesian Independence under the leadership of Soekarno (d. 1970), the first president of the country, adopted Pancasila as the nation's philosophy.²² Pancasila was not a completely secular doctrine, but a religiously neutral one. Following independence and the adoption of Pancasila, the traditionalists and the modernists drew closer to each other (and away from Muslims of a secular nationalist orientation) in their views on a number of religious matters. However Masyumi, the arm through which the modernists and traditionalists cooperated at the political level, was dominated by modernists with Western education from the Muhammadiyah faction. The traditionalists, represented by NU leaders, were lacking in Western education, and felt disadvantaged within the structure of Masyumi. For this and a variety of other reasons, NU left Masyumi in 1952 and established itself as an independent political party. As a result, Masyumi became primarily a modernist political party. Masyumi itself was disbanded by Soekarno in 1960 for several reasons, including its opposition to Soekarno's 'Guided Democracy'. The ban did not affect

Muhammadiyah as such and it continued its work on education and social projects, independent of party politics.

Emergence of neo-modernism

The politics of the period since independence, the failure of both the Muhammadiyah and the NU at the political level (through Masyumi), and the bitter experiences of the 1960s had a marked influence on the development of Islamic thought in the post-1970 period. The 1960s were a turbulent period in Indonesia's history with the fall of Soekarno, the killing of more than 500,000 suspected communists and the emergence of the New Order period under Soeharto. Like his predecessor, Soeharto was insistent on the adoption of Pancasila (although perhaps with a more authoritarian interpretation), keeping political Islam at bay and nurturing an apolitical Islam in order to use it as a tool in the economic and social development programme of the New Order. It was in this environment that neo-modernism emerged in Indonesia in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a trend that grew out of both the modernist and the traditionalist schools of thought. In the process, neo-modernism adopted a more liberating position *vis-à-vis* tradition and also some of the rigid stances of Islamic modernism in Indonesia.

Among the intellectuals who led this trend was Nurcholish Madjid (a well-known public intellectual, and a contributor to this volume). Neo-modernists came from all sectors of the Muslim community in Indonesia. There were neo-modernists who were members of the Muhammadiyah, some who were members of NU, and others who belonged to neither organisation. Intellectuals associated with the neo-modernist trend usually combined traditional Islamic scholarship with modern Western education, which gave them the ability to synthesise traditionalism with modernism. Although Madjid, more than any other, is credited with advocating what later came to be known as 'neo-modernist' ideas, the precursors of the trend included former Minister of Religious Affairs Mukti Ali, who in the 1960s

played an important role by actively encouraging debate and discussion on matters related to *ijtihād* and Qur'anic interpretation.

Neo-modernists are concerned with the 'essence' rather than the 'form' of Islamic teachings. For instance, they are more interested in whether Muslim women lead ethical, productive lives than whether or not they wear the *hijāb* (veil, headscarf). They also believe that social change must be reflected in the interpretation of Islamic foundation texts. Furthermore, they subscribe to the need for fresh *ijtihād*, with a new methodology to deal with contemporary problems. Neo-modernists believe that social and economic matters, rather than political power, should remain the priority for Islamic organisations in Indonesia, hence their disagreements with 'Islamic' political parties. They are less hostile to Western and other outside influences, and more ready to acknowledge the legitimate interests of secular groups and cooperate with those groups on a sustained basis.

In Qur'anic interpretation, three ideas dominate the thinking of many neo-modernists. First, neo-modernists assert that the Qur'an was a text revealed at a certain time and in a certain context and circumstances, which it reflected and responded to. This idea de-emphasises the total 'otherness' of the Qur'an that the classical tradition stressed so strongly. Second, they argue that the Qur'an is not exclusively a book of laws but an ethical-moral guide, with both particular and universal dimensions. The particular dimension is limited in scope and is essentially a reflection of the context in which the Qur'an was revealed: the cultural, historical and legal aspects directly related to the situation in Arabia at the time. The universal dimensions are related to areas that are not bound by the specific context of seventh-century Arabia. The third idea relates to the emphasis that the classical Muslim scholars placed on certain aspects of the Qur'an, and which neo-modernists argue should be re-thought. The classical scholars drew on some parts of the Qur'an and certain interpretations at the expense of other parts and interpretations, taking their cue from their own specific social, political, economic and intellectual contexts. Neo-modernists believe that, in the modern period, a

shift in emphasis that takes the interests of today into account is essential, and that such a shift should not necessarily be seen as a subversion of Islam.

Given this, the neo-modernists are often the target of criticism by ultra-conservative groups who consider them not sufficiently Muslim or regard some of their views as tantamount to *bid'a* (innovation in religious matters) or even heresy. Needless to say, neo-modernism is a term that may or may not be palatable to some intellectuals who espouse the ideas of neo-modernism; some may prefer terms such as 'contextualism', 'transformationalism' or 'substantialism', or 'liberal Islam'. However, we will use the term 'neo-modernism' to refer to all of these, as they all share the core ideas espoused by neo-modernism even though their emphases vary.

Consolidation of neo-modernism

Two factors in particular appear to have contributed most to the consolidation of neo-modernism in Indonesia: the reform of Islamic studies education undertaken by political figures entrusted with running the Ministry of Religious Affairs; and the space and freedom available to explore neo-modernist ideas without restriction by the political or religious authorities.

In the area of education, the 1950s saw state involvement in the establishment of a number of institutions for Islamic studies, referred to as Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) or State Institute of Islamic Studies. These institutes were initially established in Yogyakarta and Jakarta but were gradually introduced into other parts of Indonesia. They are state-funded and managed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. In the 1960s, the IAIN system was transformed in an attempt to bring both secular and religious education into one institution resulting in a more modern form of religious education. Unlike the *pesantren* (traditional religious boarding schools) funded and run by NU and other Muslim organisations, the IAINs espoused a modern education system which combined Islamic Studies with disciplines such as anthropology, sociology,

psychology, and with modern methods of teaching.

The reform of IAINs was based on the idea that Islam was compatible with modernity, and that it could foster tolerance and pluralism. Mukti Ali (the first Minister of Religious Affairs [1971–77] entrusted with the reform of the IAIN) thus aimed to change the IAINs into modern institutions of Islamic learning, whose graduates would be open-minded agents of modernisation and able to broaden the outlook of Indonesian Muslims. This philosophy entailed exposing IAIN students to various trends in Islamic thought (both classical and modern), even the so-called heterodox, as well as to Orientalist and modern Muslim scholarship. Unlike many other Islamic universities and institutions, the IAINs managed to provide their students with a broad frame of reference. Critical reflection was introduced into the curriculum. Within the IAIN context, students and lecturers were given considerable freedom to explore and discuss ideas, including those that went outside the boundaries of 'orthodox' dogma (as espoused historically by Indonesian Muslims). Many Muslim intellectuals of Indonesia today are graduates of the IAIN system or associated with that system (including some contributors to this volume).

The second most important factor that facilitated this consolidation is the relatively high degree of freedom available to neo-modernist Muslim thinkers to discuss and explore new ideas related to religion in Indonesia. In other parts of the Muslim world, where relative homogeneity (in religious orientation, both legal and theological) exists, and where local orthodoxies are protected by the state, views or writings that appear to be in conflict with the 'local orthodoxy' might be considered dangerous or heretical. But because of the pluralistic nature of Indonesian society and the absence of a unified religious outlook, it is difficult for a particular local orthodoxy to be imposed. It is impossible even for a centralised institution such as the national Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, or Indonesian Council of Ulema) to impose its own views on what is or is not Islamic. Also key religious organisations, such as NU and the Muhammadiyah, have their own central councils of Ulema. Often, because of the diver-

sity that exists even in the same organisation, it is simply not possible for the central council of an organisation to force uniform views on its members. This very broad diversity and plurality has long been an essential trait of Indonesian Islam at all levels of the religious hierarchy. Especially in the post-1970 period, young Muslim scholars were able to advocate views which might be considered problematic in some other parts of the Muslim world, and to challenge some traditionalist and modernist assumptions, beliefs, views and institutions.

Many young scholars sympathetic to neo-modernism have become committed to experimenting with and exploring new ideas, and incorporating ideas from both modernist and traditionalist streams of thought. The interpretation of the Qur'an has become an important part of this discourse. Contemporary discourse in Indonesia ranges from critiques advanced by these younger scholars on the classical tradition of *tafsir* to the development of alternative methodologies and frameworks when dealing with the interpretation of the Qur'an today. The debate has also involved reinterpreting some of the institutions and laws that were developed in the classical period, and rethinking the foundations of classical laws. This interest in the Qur'an and efforts to approach it in new ways can be seen in the literature on the Qur'an in Indonesia over the last three decades of the twentieth century, from monographs to articles in both refereed journals and popular magazines, as well as theses written on or about the Qur'an, most notably at the IAINs of Jakarta and Yogyakarta. The translation into Indonesian of works on the Qur'an by Muslim intellectuals elsewhere is another example of this intense interest.

Essays in this volume

The contributors to this book represent a variety of trends in Islamic thought in Indonesia, from traditionalism and modernism to neo-modernism. However, not every contributor can be confined by one of these labels; some contributions are unmistakably 'traditionalist' in their approach, while others may

be considered 'innovative' and therefore disagreeable to some Muslims. Readers may use their own judgement in placing the authors within a given category. What is noticeable is that many contributions come from those sympathetic to the ideas of neo-modernism (even though the contributors may not refer to themselves as 'neo-modernists').

The essays are a sample of the wide range of approaches to the Qur'an practiced in Indonesia today. Some pieces are more scholarly than others, but the purpose of the collection is to present the diverse points of view and approaches taken to the Qur'an in Indonesia, while addressing topics pertinent to contemporary Indonesian society. The essays therefore vary in focus, approach and analysis. While some were submitted in English, others were submitted in Indonesian and later translated into English. Although the volume includes essays both by established and by emerging scholars, most of the contributors are well known in Indonesia. Many essays are not strict examples of traditional *tafsir* – instead, they are attempts made by the authors to reflect on the Qur'an's relevance to contemporary life. Some authors adopt a more theoretical approach, while others examine social problems. The topics considered include developing new methods to approach the text, the reform of Islamic law, questions about women's struggle for equal rights, human rights, inter-faith relations, and the use or misuse of Qur'anic symbols and terms.

The first chapter, by Emeritus Professor Anthony Johns, sets the scene for the rest of the volume. For the past four decades Johns has contributed enormously to the understanding of *tafsir* literature in the Malay world. His chapter provides an overview of exegetical scholarship in modern Indonesia, tracing the development of the *tafsir* tradition up to the modern period and giving a historical context for more general discussion in the volume.

The next three chapters deal with aspects of Qur'anic exegesis and translation in the work of three important and sometimes controversial Indonesian intellectuals – Hamka, Quraish Shihab and H.B. Jassin. In chapter six, Taufik Adnan Amal and Samsu Rizal Panggabean address the scarcity of studies on *tafsir* in

Indonesia and the limitations of traditional methods of interpretation. Then the book turns towards the application of the Qur'an in everyday life. In the chapters by Lukito, Marcoes-Natsir, Mudzakir and Azra, the authors directly address some difficult issues in Indonesia today, including abortion and the use of Qur'anic verses in contemporary politics.

In the final chapter, Nurcholish Madjid deals with the topic of religious pluralism according to the Qur'an. In his view, humankind must approach God by following the straight 'path'. According to the Qur'an, this path is common to all prophetic religions. Since God is the one source to which all believers strive, there should be no conflict or distinction between those who follow religious traditions; all of them must be considered essentially on the 'true' path. This view of religious pluralism, as interpreted by Madjid, is gaining ground in Indonesia in neo-modernist circles, although it is still challenged by many traditionalist scholars.

The compilation thus reflects the concerns, interests and approaches of a new generation of Indonesian Muslim scholars. The articles are an indication of how the scholars seek guidance from the religious texts through bringing them into the contemporary context. They remain part of a creative effort among Indonesian Muslims to project new ideas and to assert that Islam and the Qur'an are in a broad sense compatible with the aspirations of Indonesian Muslims today.

There is a receptive readership for these writings in Indonesia among the younger generation, particularly those of a 'liberal' persuasion. This generation was born in the 1970s and 1980s and includes those influenced by early neo-modernists like Nurcholish Madjid, emerging scholars trained in the IAIN system, and more recently those associated with the 'liberal Islam' trend. One of the most hotly debated issues in Indonesia still today is the ability of Islam to meet the challenges posed by modernity. Given that the most ardent supporters of Islam's ability are found in the young generation of more liberally minded Muslims, the expectation is that intellectuals will be bold in their attempts to demonstrate this ability.

The Qur'an, interpretation and the Indonesian context

But why are such creative efforts in dealing with the Qur'an possible in Indonesia? One potential reason is that, in addition to the high degree of religious tolerance in Indonesia, scholars often have been free to experiment with creative ideas in the religious arena. Another reason may be that, although Islamic scholarship in various parts of modern-day Indonesia goes back several centuries, this scholarship is less rooted in a continuous tradition than in other parts of the Islamic world. This allows a high degree of fluidity and flexibility in scholarship, and one can be relatively free to approach the Qur'an in a more creative way. Whatever the cause, evidence of this creativity can be found in the essays of this volume, which we hope will contribute to a greater understanding of some aspects of Islamic thought in the world's most populous Muslim nation.