Chapter 14  The Qurʾān and modernity


John B. Henderson, *Scripture, Canon and Commentary: A Comparison of Confucian and Western Exegesis*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 221, provides the following assessment of the transition in commentaries in modern times: “The abandonment or supersession of commentarial forms in the intellectual culture of early-modern times has often gone unremarked. Yet this development is probably of greater significance in the intellectual transition between the medieval and modern worlds than most of the great ideas of leading philosophers and scientists of this same age. For the form of the commentary influenced modes of thought, and did not just provide the format for their expression.”

The beginnings


Muḥammad ‘Abduh


ʿAbduh and the Qurʾān


Abūʾl-Kalām Āzād

Some of Āzād’s work is available in English: Ashfāq Husain and Abūlkalām Āzād, *The Quintessence of Islam: A Summary of the Commentary of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad on al-Fateha, the First Chapter of the Quran*, Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1960 (originally published in 1958 under the title *The Spirit of Islam*).


Sayyid Qutb


Freedom, equality and social justice are, of course, ideals acclaimed by the western liberal, democratic tradition but Quṭb emphasizes the absolute sovereignty of God within a truly Islamic society; see Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988, chapter 5.


**Ṭanṭāwī Jawhari**


*Tafsīr* in other parts of the Islamic world


Types of critical approach

These three Quranic passages are taken from the translation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qurʾān: Text, Translation and Commentary*, Beirut, Dar al-Arabia, 1968 (but many prints exist); this translation is accompanied by an extensive commentary in the footnotes which exhibit Modernist tendencies (especially in the desire to “spiritualize” various aspects) which
are also reflected in the translation itself although modern Saudi reprints of the work have removed those elements. For an overview of modern approaches to the Qurʾān (with a classification of them into six types) see Erik Ohlander, "Modern Qurʾānic Hermeneutics," *Religion Compass*, 3 (2009), 620–36.

**The first example**


**The second example**

On Muslim interpretations of the birth process in light of these verses see Abul Fadl Mohsin Ebrahim, “Biology as the Creation and Stages of Life,” in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, Leiden, Brill, 2001–6, volume 1, pp. 229–32.


**The third example**

The interpretation of this highly contentious verse has received a great deal of attention; for a good summary of its treatment see Karen Bauer, “‘Traditional’ Exegeses of Q 4:34,” *Comparative Islamic Studies*, 2/2 (2006), 129–42.

**The issues at stake**

A reflective study on the impact of conservative interpretation of the Qurʾān on women, illustrating the moral and legal issues that arise, is found in Adis Duderija, “Neo-traditional Salafi Qurʾan-Sunnah Hermeneutic and the Construction of a Normative Muslimah Image,” *Hawwa*, 5 (2007), 289–323.
The miraculousness of the Qurʾān

Shabbir Akhtar, *A Faith for All Seasons: Islam and Western Modernity*, London, Bellew, 1990, chapter 3, argues against the traditional assessment of the Qurʾān in terms of its form—an argument which has no persuasive value among opponents, he says—and prefers the argument from results. He does not use this as a basis for questioning the non-contingent nature of the text (which he maintains) but simply as a more effective argument.


Muḥammad Khalaf Allāh and historical specificity


A Study in the Sciences of the Qurʾān”), Cairo, Markaz al-Thaqāfī l-‘Arabī, 1990. This is analyzed in Sukidi, “Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd and the Quest for a Humanistic Hermeneutics of the Qurʾān,” *Die Welt des Islams*, 49 (2009), 181–211.

**A contemporary response**


**The contingent nature of Quranic law**

The discussion of the nature of the Qurʾān often leads to discussions of the need for an Islamic “reformation”; for a critique of the use of this term see the provocative analysis in Paul R. Powers, “You Say You Want a Reformation? Parsing the Ubiquitous Rhetoric of an ‘Islamic Reformation’,“ *Comparative Islamic Studies*, 4 (2008), 37–73.

**Fazlur Rahman**


Pushing the “limits”
