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The Historical Status of the Qur'an: Modern Discussion among Turkish Academics

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ABSTRACT Recently, Turkish academics have been increasingly interested in discussing the historicity of the Qur'an. Some revisionist academics think that the Qur'an was revealed in precise historical circumstances and primarily responds to such circumstances. Thus qur'anic commands in general are not universal and do not, therefore, satisfy the demands of all Muslims for all time. So a new understanding is inevitable. Having used both Muslim and non-Muslim sources, they try to develop a new methodology to transform qur'anic prescriptions for the present day. The scholars who adopt an anti-historical approach to the Qur'an hold the view that, by historicizing the content of the Qur'an, revisionist academics create an artificial problem. They believe this is not an internal Muslim problem but that this controversy was injected into the Muslim world with the promulgation of both modernity and Western influence.

The modification of the rules (religious regulations) which are connected with the customary (habitual) laws of the people is not an innovation, *bid'a*. In fact this is related to the problem of what is to be done if the religious texts are in conflict with custom. According to Abū Yūsuf, the religious rules (texts) can be set aside when the customs of society change. Thus in the case of those qur'anic verses which were revealed with reference to the customs of the Arabs, it is not permissible to force the non-Arab Muslim nations to follow Arab custom. The problem of the headscarf is a very good illustration of this. A Muslim society where women do not customarily wear the headscarf should not be excluded from the circle of Islam.¹ (Kadri, 1999, p. 185)

These lines are taken from a long article by an important political figure, Hüseyin Kazım Kadri, whose life spanned the Ottoman and Republican eras. The title of his article can be rendered into English as 'The Regulations Issued by Men and God'. He wrote the article one year before his death to indicate that Islamic law has a great potentiality to adjust itself to new situations. He had lived long enough to see many legal innovations enacted by the

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new Turkish statesmen. At that time, however, most of the religiously oriented Turkish scholars did not approve of these revolutionary regulations. Consequently, despite the many changes that were transforming the life of the Turkish people, Kadri's arguments did not prompt Turkish intellectuals to question whether the Qur'an is a text that should be interpreted primarily in its historical context rather than as universal truth for everybody and for every age.

This issue did not appear on the agenda of Turkish academics until the publication of the works of the Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman. This article will concentrate on the changes in attitudes towards the interpretation of the Qur'an among Turkish academics under the influence of such figures as Fazlur Rahman, Hasan Hanafi, Muhammad Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and others. We shall examine the discussions on the concept of revelation, the contents of the Qur'an, and the notion of the historical contextualization of the Qur'an. We shall focus especially on the questions: 'Is it possible to understand the Qur'an objectively?', in other words, 'Is it permissible for someone to claim that his interpretation is binding and others should follow it?'² and 'Is qur'anic law universal or historically contextualized?' Although we shall try to avoid a partisan stance, it should be said that the last two decades have seen an ongoing and expanding argument between the historical and anti-historical approaches to the Qur'an in Turkey, which goes beyond the interests of a few academics; many non-academics are also participating openly in the debate between the proponents and opponents of a historical reading of the Qur'an. This article, however, will only consider the debate amongst academics together with a few other intellectuals.

At this juncture it will be useful to give some information about the scholars I shall discuss in this article. There are mainly three groups of academicians and writers: people who put great stress on the historically contextualized status of the Qur'an; people who stress the universal status of the Qur'an; and finally people who take a middle position. The representatives of the first group consist of three academicians from the Divinity Faculty at Ankara University: Halis Albayrak, Mehmet Paçacı and Ömer Özsoy. Although there are some nuances in their approaches to the issue, they constitute unofficially 'the school of Ankara' because of their unlimited stress on historical hermeneutical discussion. Albayrak is now vice-dean of the faculty and a professor of qur'anic studies in the department. Paçacı is also a professor of qur'anic studies in the same department and he is a very influential person as a result of his long interest in methodological problems. Özsoy is also a professor and one of the most liberal thinkers concerning the discussion on the historical status of the Qur'an. They are very prolific authors and are especially influential among educated people.

The representatives of the second group are the four scholars Tahsin Görgün, Ali Ünal, Yasin Aktay and Ebu Bekir Sifil. Interestingly, none of them is a lecturer in the Divinity Faculty though two of them are graduates of it. Nonetheless, they are considered the best-known critics of the first group. Görgün works in a research centre in İstanbul established by the Presidency of Turkish Religious Affairs. His main interest is in Islamic philosophy and methodology of jurisprudence. Because of his many works and great stress on tradition he is quite famous in Turkey. Ünal, whose work is very critical of modernist approaches, is a well-known writer, thinker and journalist. Aktay is a lecturer in Selçuk University, Konya. His main interest is sociology, sociology of religion, modernity and politics. He is also a very prolific author and has written many books and articles concerning the historical status of the Qur'an, the language of the Qur'an, etc. He is generally

known for his conservative tendencies. Sifil, who is a graduate of the Divinity Faculty, is a freelance author and has written many works critical of modernist thinkers (including Fazlur Rahman).

The most influential representative of the third group is Professor Sadık Kılıç. He is a lecturer in the Divinity Department at Ataturk University in Erzurum. He stands between the liberal and conservative scholars.

We shall first discuss the scholars who focus primarily on the historically contextualized status of the Qur'an. In his article entitled 'Understanding the Qur'an Means Understanding What the Qur'an Is', Halis Albayrak deals with the problem of the nature of the Qur'an in great detail. He says that experts concentrate mainly on the interpretation of the Qur'an, neglecting to discuss its nature, but unless the problem of the nature of the Qur'an is solved all discussions on the hermeneutics of the Qur'an are meaningless. Albayrak goes on to say that it is unfortunate that the concept of the Qur'an established by the scholars who lived in the first three centuries of Islam is still held today without any alteration. He therefore argues that Muslim intellectuals should develop new approaches to understanding the nature of the Qur'an (Albayrak, 1995, pp. 166–167).

In response to the question 'Why do Muslims need a new understanding of the nature of the Qur'an?' those Turkish academics who emphasize the importance of a historically contextualized reading of the Qur'an agree that modernity forces contemporary Muslims to change their attitudes towards the text. Many argue that the pace of development in modern civilization continues to accelerate, whereas in the early and middle periods of Islam the pace of social and economic change did not compel Muslims to adopt new understandings of the Qur'an.³ Despite this, Muslims today live as though they were outside history. They lack historical consciousness and are unable to come to grips with the problems that surround them because of an absence of historical perspective. These scholars believe that their fellow Muslims' inability to develop a meaningful historical approach stems from their distorted understanding of the nature of the Qur'an. So first and foremost Muslims should be very clear about the identity of the Qur'an. The key question 'What is the Qur'an?' therefore needs to be answered satisfactorily.

Most of the academics who are in favour of a reading of the Qur'an in its historical context express dissatisfaction with the explanations of classical exegetes concerning its status. It is well known that a central tenet of traditional scholarship is that the Qur'an is the Word of God and is therefore not created. Although the discussion around this view can be considered as an extension of the explanation of God's attributes, the acceptance of this doctrine entails that the teaching contained in the Qur'an is eternal. To prove this, classical scholars draw attention to the concept of *al-lawh al-mahfūz*, which maintains, to put it briefly, that the entire content and form of the Qur'an already existed before God sent it down.⁴ According to modernist thinkers, this belief is an obvious error because the history of the Qur'an shows clearly that the revelation was transmitted over a period of 22 years. On the basis of this argument they reject the idea that the Qur'an was first sent down as a whole to *bayt al-izza*, and was then sent down to the Prophet Muhammad in fragments. They consider this view a late formulation designed to prove that the Qur'an existed before being revealed.⁵ Thus, the detailed dogmatic explanations regarding the status of the Qur'an propounded by the classical exegetes are regarded by revisionist Muslim academics as unnecessary.

As noted above, the history of the revelation is extremely important for these scholars' attempts to identify the essence of the Qur'an. The Qur'an was revealed during a period of

over twenty years to meet specific needs of the contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad. Thus they see the revelation as the direct oral response of God to the demands of His servants. Although they believe in the continuing relationship between God and man, they lay great stress on the period of revelation, arguing that the relationship during this period was different from that prevailing at any other time. In short, God communicated with His servant(s) during the revelation on ontological, epistemological and oral levels, whereas after the revelation the oral and epistemological communications ceased (Albayrak, 1996, pp. 36–37). This point is crucial to their discussion of the nature of the Qur'an. Briefly, their argument is that the Qur'an did not exist in the form of a book during the period of revelation, and indeed it is impossible to ascertain whether the Prophet Muhammad wanted or planned to leave behind a complete book for the use of his followers. Thus, although we, who live after the revelation, might believe that we have a complete and definitive text of the Qur'an, our perception of the Qur'an as a text is a natural error (Özsoy, 1996, p. 136).

We shall now examine some basic features of the time of revelation in order to analyse in more detail these scholars' views of the essence of the Qur'an. The first question we have to consider is how to define the relationship between the revelation and the events of those twenty-plus years. First of all, these scholars generally argue that the Companions never perceived the Qur'an as a book, since, although it may have been written down, it was not yet compiled as an ordered text. Furthermore, the dialogue between God and man during the period of revelation was so lively and immediate that people were fully aware of the occasions of revelation. To put it another way, the Companions did not try to understand the Qur'an on the basis of textual analysis but followed the qur'anic teachings and put into practice what they learned. To show this relationship, Albayrak adduces many pieces of qur'anic evidence concerning the way in which God communicated with His servants by revelation. He says that during this period God sometimes works as a 'secret agent' informing the Prophet of the hypocrites' private conversations (Q 9:45–49; 63:1–8). Sometimes He works as a 'skilful strategist' who supports the Muslims when the Jews set the Medinan Muslims (ʿAws and Khazraj) at loggerheads (Q 3:100). From time to time God provides information to the Muslims which would only be known by someone conducting sociological and anthropological research, such as the characteristics of the Bedouin (Q 9:97). It is also seen in the Qur'an that while God sometimes declares war against the unbelievers, at other times He makes peace (Q 9:1; 48:25). God sometimes acts pragmatically by asking the believers to give what they have in His cause, while at other times He Himself announces to the believers the good news of the booty that will be theirs after the battle. In addition, God sometimes criticizes the people (Q 24:12–20; 62:11), mentions the names of specific individuals and gives information that is unknown to others (Q 17:73–74; 33:37). All this evidence proves that God's verbal communication reflects the general atmosphere of the time of revelation. Albayrak also draws attention to the qur'anic verses that begin with the formula 'they ask you . . .' (*yas'alūnaka ʿan . . .*) in order to argue that actual problems were the main causes of the revelation (Albayrak, 1996, pp. 36–46). In other words, God does not define any rule unless the Muslim community are in need of it (Albayrak, 1998, p. 87).

Clearly, we have here a concept of God which limits the universality of His revelation by placing it within a specific historical context. In this connection Özsoy asks an interesting question: 'Is it possible to think that all Divine answers, responses and information concerning the needs of the Companions are universal; can these verses satisfy the demands of all Muslims up until the Day of Judgement?' For Özsoy, one of the biggest

mistakes Muslims make today is to fail to distinguish between the message of the Qur'an and its discourse (1996, p. 135). He argues that the literal meaning of the qur'anic text is neither timeless nor universal. Using the modern narrative paradigm about the difference between text and discourse (*langue* and *parole*),⁶ Özsoy insists that the Qur'an is a textual discourse (1996, pp. 137–138). He thinks that by this definition Muslims should understand more authentically the true nature of the Qur'an. The gist of his analysis is that the meanings of a discourse in its oral and written forms should be separated. The context in written material is in the text itself, but in oral discourse the context should be sought outside the discourse. Thus one needs external references in order to understand each qur'anic passage. Although Özsoy's clear-cut distinction between the oral and written form of the Qur'an is open to discussion, it is safe to assume that he primarily insists on the oral composition of the Qur'an. After the Prophet, the Muslims have in their hands the text of the Qur'an, and consequently they treat it as a text, forgetting its oral history. Thus Özsoy develops new terminology that contains both natures of the Qur'an: textual discourse (oral and written form). By this formula he saves himself from the burden of a one-sided approach (not only a text and not only speech). It is also important to note that, according to Özsoy (1996, p. 138), these external references are no other than the occasions of revelation.⁷ It should be borne in mind that Özsoy and other scholars of his persuasion are aware of the fact that not every qur'anic verse or passage has an occasion of revelation. Nonetheless, the solution Özsoy finds to this is quite simple: 'We do not claim that every verse has an occasion of revelation. But although there might not be an occasion of revelation in relation to each verse there is a frame of revelation' (*ibid.*, p. 141). What he means by 'frame of revelation' is the general history of the revelation. He also thinks that sometimes a verse itself constitutes some kind of occasion of revelation.

Thus the notion of the occasion of revelation is essential to the historical approach to the Qur'an. For many modernist academics, the occasion of revelation sheds light on the true nature of the Qur'an and is also necessary to any authentic interpretation. Nevertheless, the occasion of revelation is not the sole means of proving that the Qur'an came into existence within a particular historical context. Among the most important evidence for the historical status of the Qur'an is its language. Albayrak insists that Arabic is not the language of God, but God chooses to use this language because the people to whom He sends His final revelation speak Arabic. So He reveals His messages within the boundaries of the Arabic language (Albayrak, 1996, p. 100). To put it another way, the divine discourse exists within the limits of the human. Emphasizing this feature of the qur'anic revelation, some revisionist academics argue that Muslims do not make any distinction between the historical Muhammad and Muhammad in faith (Paçacı, 2000, p. 136).⁸

Furthermore, the notion of *naskh* (abrogation) is considered both an important proof of the Qur'an as a discourse that developed in historical circumstances, and strong evidence against its being conceived in the form of a book before it was transmitted. The irony here is that in early modern approaches to the Qur'an many thinkers denied the existence of *naskh* in the Qur'an.⁹ However, today modernist thinkers use it as a cornerstone in their attempts to prove the book's historical status. It is also noteworthy that, although they delineate the relationship between the historical relativity of the Qur'an and *naskh*, the traditional distinction between Meccan and Medinan suras is also seen as evidence of the historical development of the Qur'an.

We have so far tried to summarize modernist scholarship's understanding of the historically determined nature of the Qur'an. At this juncture the question arises, 'What are the main motives behind this approach?' Apparently the pressures of modernity have forced these scholars to develop this new approach, but this explanation seems inadequate. First and foremost it should be noted that they generally think that the discussion of the historical status of the Qur'an is not alien to Islamic tradition. Using classical sources and basing their argument primarily on Muslim tradition, they hold that the historical relativity of the Qur'an is a matter internal to Islam. It belongs to Muslims themselves. According to Paçacı, for instance, the dispute between the *ahl al-ra'y* and the *ahl al-ḥadīth* is a typical example of this discussion (Paçacı, 2000, p. 22). Here Paçacı refers to the importance of *ijtihād*, which is used frequently by the *ahl al-ra'y*. He thinks that in order to re-integrate Muslims into history, Muslim intellectuals should re-activate the notion of *ijtihād*, and that by doing so they will help to solve the many problems faced by contemporary Muslims.

Superficially the relationship between the Qur'an and *ijtihād* is not very complex, since every comment on the Qur'an is also some kind of *ijtihād*. But this statement leads to a more contentious question: 'Can *ijtihād* go beyond the literal meaning of the Qur'an?' Most of these scholars consider that the Qur'an is essentially a religious and ethical scripture, and that other fields of study (such as law, history and scientific investigation) can be used to support these two aspects. It follows that if one can discover the real purpose (or cause, *illa*) of the verse(s) one might be justified in going beyond its literal meaning. *Illā* (cause), *sabab* (cause), *ḥikma* (wisdom), *maṣlaḥa* (benefit, general good) and finally *maqāṣid* (purposes) are the key terms that are deployed in the argument. In other words, instead of focusing on the literal meaning of the verse, these scholars try to discover the spirit of the verse(s). Sometimes in doing so they are constrained to go beyond its literal meaning. Nonetheless, this can only be done with the support of the proper *illa*.

Thus they try to establish a new understanding on the basis of the Qur'an, although to put their new approach into practice a proper knowledge is required of the historical conditions that provide a context for the Qur'an's legal verses. Like Fazlur Rahman's 'double movement', they first refer back to the time of revelation, then return and search their own situation to make a suitable *ijtihād*.

As we have noted, the importance of *ijtihād* lies in its creative potential for the community of believers. Having insisted on the need for new *ijtihāds*, Paçacı makes a very interesting comparison between today's Muslims, the Pharisees at the time of Jesus, and the Christians after Paul. To clarify this comparison we will use Paçacı's model (Figure 1). Forming the base of this structure are the fundamentals of faith, which may be considered the foundation of religious belief. It is noteworthy that each category supports those above it. Without *aqā'id* there can be no *akhlāq*, without *akhlāq* the *mu'āmalāt* are meaningless and so forth. According to Paçacı, if the *mu'āmalāt* (legal rules) are removed and the *aqā'id* (fundamentals of faith) are distorted, the result is Christianity. Christianity, says Paçacı, is not Semitic but Hellenist. When the legal rules level is widened (and emphasized) and the ethical level is narrowed, the result is Judaism. Today's Muslims, according to Paçacı, are similar to the Jews of the time of Jesus in their focus on the law and neglect of ethics, that is, the spirit that lies beneath the legal formulations. He argues, therefore, that every Muslim should take all four aspects equally into consideration. In order to meet the challenge of new situations, Muslims will always need Qur'anic guidance, and

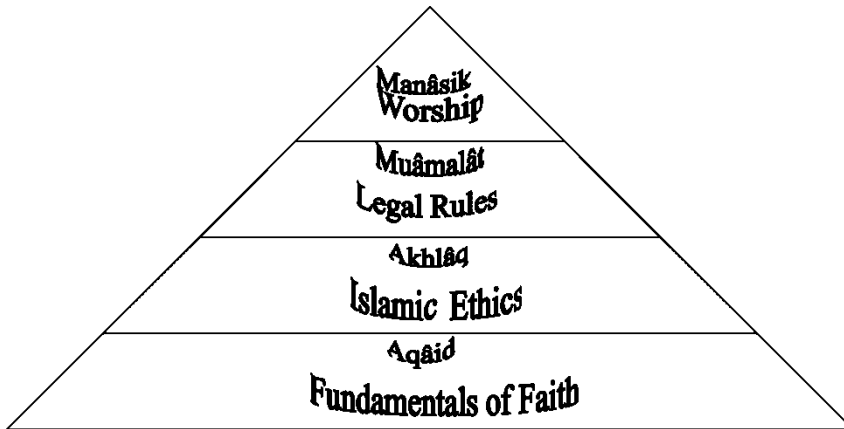


Figure 1. Paçacı's model of the fundamentals of faith

so they cannot say like Paul 'Today we are free from the Law' (Paçacı, 2000, pp. 27–28). This is not to say, however, that every qur'anic legal rule is universal, but Muslims should try to use the legal verses of the Qur'an to adjust to new historical situations. Thus the question arises: 'Is it permissible for Muslims to enact new rules despite the existence of qur'anic law?' Those scholars who promote the importance of the historical reading of the Qur'an believe it is.

At this juncture it is important to note that the primary influence behind such an approach is the *ijtihâds* of ʿUmar, the second caliph. Although these scholars are by no means the first to discover the importance of ʿUmar in introducing new practices,¹⁰ in developing a systematic evaluation of his *ijtihâd* they analyse his innovations in unusual depth. They generally argue that while ʿUmar's *ijtihâds* were attempts to reformulate the rules in order to deal with new situations, almost all of these new enactments can be considered as annulling the former rules. Briefly, despite the existence of qur'anic and Prophetic assertion, when conditions changed ʿUmar employed *ijtihâd* and put different rules into practice. Important examples include annulment of the rule concerning the division of the conquered lands among Muslim fighters, cancellation of the alms given to the people whose hearts are to be reconciled (Q 9:60), abrogation of the punishment for theft in time of famine, and prohibition of selling a slave's mother to her owner's child. All these examples show that when conditions change one is allowed to give a judgement beyond the literal meaning of the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet. Thus, these scholars argue, the qur'anic law that two women's testimony is equal to one man's should be changed because there are many educated women today who are well acquainted with, for example, financial matters. The reasoning is that if the qur'anic revelation can be said to be a continuing phenomenon, many rules will need to be changed in accordance with current conditions (Albayrak, 1995, p. 167). Clearly, the idea that conditions determine revelation is a dominant theme among the academics who promote the reading of the Qur'an primarily in its historical context.

In the foregoing pages we have discussed the general approach of those academics who are in favour of a historically contextualized reading of the Qur'an. However, it should be

noted that there are many scholars whose approaches are neither purely historical nor anti-historical; in other words they do not make a clear-cut distinction between these methodologies. They assert that while the Qur'an derives directly from God and is therefore beyond time and space, it is nonetheless addressed to humanity, and accordingly to the human condition; therefore it is not plausible to interpret the Qur'an only on the basis of acknowledging its divine source. So the Qur'an should be seen as both text and discourse (Kılıç, 1996, pp. 26–28). The requirements of text and discourse may seem superficially incompatible but their opposition should not be seen as necessarily absolute in practice. The title of Kılıç's article to some extent reflects this approach: 'The interpretation of the text is the reading of the divine answers come down to the human space' is an attempt to settle an argument between two groups of academics. We are not, however, mainly concerned with this 'middle way', and so in what follows I will present the views of the critics of the historical approach to the Qur'an and its interpretation.

Interestingly, the most serious objection to the historical reading of the Qur'an as a historically contextualized discourse comes from academics whose main field is either philosophy or sociology. They place great emphasis on the idea that the Qur'an derives from God's absolute knowledge. Having established this as a cornerstone of their approach, they raise a number of questions to criticize the proponents of the historical reading of the Qur'an:

- i. Is the problem (belief in the historicity of the Qur'an and development of a methodology which is suitable for this understanding) real or virtual?
- ii. What is the aim of the historically contextualized reading of the Qur'an? Do its proponents want to delete the legal verses and retain only a few ethical verses? Do they see the Qur'an as a book that has only a limited function or no function at all?
- iii. Why are they opposed to the Islamic traditions?
- iv. Why do they choose to criticize the classical approaches? The Qur'an should be read for the purpose of understanding and implementing its teachings rather than for the sake of mere criticism.
- v. Can they show any verse in relation to the daily life of believers which has ever been misunderstood? (Polat, 2001, p. 22).

Clearly, these readers oppose historicizing the Qur'an. For many of them the problem created by revisionist thinkers is virtual and artificial. Moreover, they generally believe that it is not an internal Muslim problem and that this controversy was injected into the Muslim world with the spread of modernist attitudes. Thus, what historicity means to Muslims is very different from what it means to the West (Alper, 1997, p. 51). The West, especially after the experience of the Enlightenment (positivism), rejected the notion of the sacred (both revelation and church) and replaced it with positivist reason, believing that rationality would answer every question and supply every want. After the First and Second World Wars, unable to explain these catastrophes, they inclined to the new hermeneutics (historicity), originally based on relativism. Here there is no absolute truth or reality (*ibid.*). The evaporation of the meanings in the sacred texts resulted in the annulment of the binding nature of divine revelation. In short, the critics think that historicity is a Western invention that for Muslims entails alienation from the essence of Islamic teaching in general and Qur'anic teaching in

particular. Almost all of them insist that the effect of the historical approach will not be to make Muslims more religious, and they point out that most Muslim countries are not governed in accordance with Islamic principles. Today's Muslims generally live in an un-Islamic environment and so what the modernist Muslim thinkers are trying to do is adjust Islam to an un-Islamic context (Ünal, 2002, p. 27). Such a project is meaningless and harmful.

Furthermore, they argue, the revisionists miss a very important point in their historical approach: the existence of the Muslim community makes the Qur'an understandable, but the correct understanding of the Qur'an cannot lead the people to the formation of a Muslim community (Aktay, 1998, p. 196). Thus most of the critics accuse those Turkish and other thinkers (such as Fazlur Rahman, Arkoun, Abu Zayd and Hanafi) who promote the notion of the historically contextualized status of the Qur'an of adopting an alien Western methodology.¹¹ Moreover, modern Western hermeneutics was developed in order to solve the many problems connected with the interpretation of the Bible. It should be noted that the critics of the historical reading of the Qur'an make a clear distinction between the Qur'an and the Bible. Although we will not go into detail here, it is worth pointing out that they emphasize that the canonization of the Bible occupied a very long period whereas the Qur'an was collected immediately after the death of Prophet Muhammad. Furthermore, the notions of the sacred text in the two traditions (Judaic-Christian and Islamic) are also very different. According to the critics, the books of the Old Testament and the Gospels did not come down directly from God but were the works of later scribes who were supposed to have been inspired. Therefore many narratives in the Bible could have been changed in accordance with the writers' literary abilities, but the Qur'an is a direct revelation from God and as such no word of it can be changed. So the attempt of modernist hermeneutics to discover the meanings in the author's mind (decoding the intention of God) cannot accord with qur'anic exegesis, though it is a very useful method for interpreting the Bible. But this is not to say that the original meaning of the Qur'an is impossible to ascertain or that the Qur'an has no objective meaning.

The critics of the modernist approach also suspect that the idea of reformation is being smuggled in under the guise of the historical approach, and many insist that Islam, unlike Christianity, is not a religion which needs reformation. The qur'anic principles are understandable, in contrast to many unexplained dogmatic doctrines found in the Bible (Ünal, 2002, p. 30). Probably this comparison is made in order to show that there are many rules (*ahkām*) in the Qur'an that determine the behaviour of the believers, whereas in Christianity there are not many such rules to organize the personal and communal life of the faithful. In addition, the critics think that the danger of secularism appears to lurk in the susceptible attitudes of the proponents of the modernist approach. After the experience of the Enlightenment and the acceptance of the positivism, the West freed itself from Christianity and the Church and finally took refuge in secularism. Thus human priorities replaced those of God, and humankind became sole arbiter of all things.

To return to our discussion of the occasion of revelation, we find that the academics who are in favour of the historical reading of the Qur'an use this principle frequently to prove that the Qur'an is the product of a particular historical context. For the critics of this approach the occasion of revelation is also important, but they find the great emphasis placed on it by the modernists exaggerated, and so they try to limit its role in our

understanding of the Qur'an. First of all they do not consider the occasion of revelation (*sabab nuzūl*) of a verse to be the same as the occasion of its existence (*sabab wujūd*).¹² The connection between the occasion/condition (*sabab*) and the revelation (*nuzūl*) is not a *sine qua non* relation: it is incorrect to argue that if there is no occasion there will be no revelation. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that there is a relation between occasion and revelation; namely, the occasion of revelation is an auxiliary means for understanding the qur'anic verses in question (Görgün, 1998, p. 149). Furthermore, the critics point to the fact that there are many verses in the Qur'an which have no occasion of revelation. This indicates clearly that events (conditions) in seventh-century Arabia did not determine the sending of the revelation but, on the contrary, the revelation determined or shaped the events. In other words, the critics do not accept the idea that the qur'anic content is passive in contrast to the active external conditions that surrounded the revelation. In addition, those verses which came as a direct response to specific questions cannot be considered to answer only those specific queries. This issue can be stated in the famous technical formula: the specificity of the *sabab* (occasion) is not an obstacle to the generality of the rule. Having accepted some differences between the first generation of Islam (who knew the exact external references of the revelation but did not have the complete text of the Qur'an at the time of the Prophet) and today's Muslims (who have the complete text of the Qur'an but do not know exactly the external conditions), the critics insist that the Muslim community is a product of the Qur'an. Even the qur'anic narratives do not give precise information about past events but ask Muslims to act in accordance with what God commands.

Finally it is important to deal with how the critics evaluate the Caliph 'Umar's practices, because some of his seemingly alternative *ijtihāds* are cited by the supporters of the historically contextualized reading of the Qur'an. It is not possible to present all the critics' arguments here, and so we shall choose one example and give their opinions in some detail. First of all there are reasonable interpretations for each practice 'Umar carried out. Thus, for the critics, none of the examples cited by the revisionists can be considered to prove the validity of the historically contextualized approach.

The example we will now examine is the critics' explanation of 'Umar's annulment of the rule laid down by the Prophet concerning the division of conquered lands (the *sawād* lands in Iraq) among the Muslim fighters. One critic, Ebubekir Sifil, argues that the idea of annulment came from 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and Mu'ādh b. Jabal and not from 'Umar. In addition, it is not correct to say that 'Umar was acting in opposition to the Prophetic tradition because it is very well known that the Prophet did not distribute all the conquered land in Khaybar to the fighters; he divided the land, giving half to the fighters and permitting Jews to occupy the other half. Thus 'Umar acted in accordance with another practice of the Prophet concerning the law applicable to conquered lands. Furthermore, 'Umar allowed the owners to retain some land after his conquests. Like the Prophet, he left some lands in the hands of the original owners on the condition they paid the *kharāj* tax, and gave other land to the fighters—the properties of Chosroes, the lands of the people who fled away, the lands of the people who were killed in the battle and the lands containing large springs (Sifil, 1999, pp. 133–135).¹³ Thus the critics hold 'Umar to be a very important figure, not only because of his new *ijtihād* but also because of his strict application of the Prophetic tradition. Concerning the *sawād* lands, 'Umar, based his decision on the Prophetic tradition supported by the consensus of the Companions and returned the greater part of the land to the former owners and distributed the remainder to other individuals.¹⁴

Clearly the critics here are attacking those scholars who, they allege, misuse the reports concerning the practices of ʿUmar and base their argument on them. Similarly, there are many reasonable explanations for ʿUmar's other *ijtihāds* and so these scholars do not consider any of them as an alternative to the Prophetic tradition or qur'anic law. What ʿUmar has done, according to the critics, is only to follow the Prophet's precedent rather than issue new legal rules.

Conclusion

Historically contextualized reading of the Qur'an is not a new phenomenon, but it is safe to say that it has not been discussed in detail before. Since translations of the works of Fazlur Rahman, Hasan Hanafi, Muhammad Arkoun, Abu Zayd and others appeared in Turkey, Turkish academics have been increasingly interested in discussing this possibility. Although we have not focused on these scholars' knowledge of modern hermeneutics, it is safe to assume that many of them are well acquainted with hermeneutical discussion.

As we have noted, these academics sincerely believe that modernity forces Muslims to adopt a new attitude towards life today. In order to fulfil this duty, Muslims need to re-evaluate their tradition, including their understanding of the status of the Qur'an. Thus any explanation of Islam depends on an authentic understanding of the nature of the Qur'an. If Muslims do not change their classical approaches to the Qur'an they will very soon find themselves outside the historical mainstream, and in order to re-engage with history it is vital to accept a historically contextualized reading of the Qur'an. This view, according to revisionists, derives from the Islamic tradition itself. For example, Muslim exegetes have used the occasion of revelation, the notion of *naskh*, the distinction between Meccan and Medinan suras and verses, and so on, in order to show the contexts of revelation. All these hermeneutical devices show that the Qur'an was revealed in precise historical circumstances and primarily responds to such circumstances. Consequently, most of the rules offered by the Qur'an are to some extent limited to these historical circumstances. For many proponents, this conclusion shows that there are both changeable and unchangeable rules in the Qur'an. In order to support their arguments concerning the changeable status of the qur'anic rules, they also point to decisions made by the Companions of the Prophet that seem to contravene these rules. They pay great attention to the *ijtihād* (personal opinions) of the second caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, who they say interpreted the rules in opposition to the literal meaning of the Qur'an though in accordance with the spirit of the Qur'an. Thus, basing their argument on this evidence the modernists claim that the historical approach to the Qur'an is not imported from the West, but belongs to Muslim tradition.

The critics of these scholars insist that the acceptance of the historicity of the Qur'an is an alien import. First and foremost they do not deal with the Qur'an only from an epistemological viewpoint; it is not a book only to be read or to be learnt from, because to know much about the Qur'an does not necessarily make someone more Muslim or increase his/her sensitivity towards Islamic principles. The critics argue that there are profound connections between Muslims and the Qur'an, and so it is not wise to deal with the Qur'an simply as a text. It is more than this, a book of remembrance, *kitāb dhikr*, a book of contemplation, *kitāb fikr*, a book of ritual, *kitāb ʿibāda*, a book of prayer, *kitāb duʿāʾ*, etc. Concerning the notion of the occasion of revelation, they point out that, since there are many verses that have no occasion, it is wrong to say

that the Qur'an was revealed in accordance with external conditions. For them the determiner is God alone, not the circumstances of revelation. They also believe that discussion of the historicity of the Qur'an is not an internal Muslim matter. The historically contextualized approach was developed in order to resolve the many apparent contradictions in the Bible, which was canonized only after a long period of existence as a loosely organized collection. However, the Qur'an is literally the Word of God and contains no contradictions. So historicity is not a useful concept for the interpretation of the Qur'an. The critics also argue that many advocates of reading it historically also misuse the Islamic sources, especially the materials concerning the *ijtihāds* of 'Umar. Thus, for them, the problem is artificial and cannot benefit Muslims. In addition, they make several comments on the approaches of the critics to show that a historical reading of the Qur'an does not make people more religious. In other words, modern efforts to understand the Qur'an take Muslims away from Islam rather than increasing their religious sensitivity, with the inevitable consequence of worldliness and secularism. It would be presumptuous to predict whose views will prove more influential, those of the revisionists or their critics', and it remains to be seen how the course of events will provide a solution to this controversy.

Notes

1. Interestingly, Hüseyin Kazım Kadri (1870–1934), generally wrote under the pseudonym 'Shaykh Muḥsin al-Fānī', thus proclaiming himself an erudite religious scholar.
2. This is an important problem. When we compare Qur'anic exegesis with other religious disciplines such as Islamic jurisprudence, which prescribes Muslim prayers, conduct and punishments, and theology, which constitutes the fundamentals of belief, exegesis plays a minor role. Therefore classical works of exegesis take many differing approaches to the Qur'an. In contrast to their classical counterparts, modern Muslim thinkers include exegesis among the functions of both jurisprudence and theology. Having accepted the new mission of exegesis, they expend much energy finding authentic, binding and universal meanings of Qur'anic verses. This, however, seems almost impossible.
3. Ömer Özsoy, for instance, says that modernity does not produce the differences or contradictions between the life of today and the Qur'anic discourse (or the literal teachings of the Qur'an) but allows people to discover (or makes them aware of) these contradictions. (Özsoy, 1996, p. 141; 1997, p. 94).
4. There is a serious debate between Mu'tazilite and Sunni scholars about the created or uncreated nature of the Qur'an. This topic, however, lies beyond the scope of this article.
5. Albayrak points out that this definition of the Qur'an was quite important for the stability of Muslim communities at that time, but in the following centuries Muslims thought of this definition as an established fact (Albayrak, 1995, p. 169).
6. As is well known, Saussure draws a basic distinction between *parole* and *langue*, the former being the individual utterance in its infinite variety, and the latter, which is his own prime focus, being, in his words, 'the whole set of linguistic habits which allow an individual to understand and be understood'. (For further information see <<http://www.home.netspeed.com.au/derek.allan/language.html>>).
7. Elsewhere Özsoy writes, 'If we judge the Qur'an in accordance with literary criticism we will see that it displays various weaknesses. For example there is no chronology in it, there are many repetitions, it lacks textual harmony, there is no thematic consistency in the suras, there are some contradictory expressions and so on. All this shows that it was not intended to be a written book' (Özsoy, 1996, p. 137).
8. Moreover, some scholars, discussing the concept of *Nūr Muḥammadī* or some miraculous anecdotes about the life of Muhammad before his prophethood, conclude that all these narratives are fabrications (cf. Özsoy, 1996, p. 136).
9. These scholars include Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (see Rahbar, 1956, pp. 108–110).
10. Scholars from the famous Andalusian Shāṭibī to modern thinkers such as Fazlurrahman, Jabiri, Hanafi and Abu Zayd have used Umar's practices to support their arguments.

11. Fazlurrahman's efforts to regulate the qur'anic laws of interest (it is forbidden), women witnesses (two women witnesses equal one man), inheritance (women should be given half of a man's portion), etc. are considered un-Islamic solutions. The reason for this is not very complicated: having seen the technological and scientific superiority of the West over the undeveloped Muslim countries, Fazlurrahman deals mistakenly with these issues from an un-Islamic perspectives (Ünal, 2002, p. 28).
12. There are some scholars who hold that the occasion of revelation (*sabab nuzûl*) is associated with the revelation (*sabab iqtirân*) (Çapan, 2002, p. 38).
13. Sifil uses many traditional sources to support his argument, including Abû 'Ubayd's *Kitâb al-amwâl*, Ibn Rajab al-Hanbalî's *Al-istikhrâj li-ahkâm al-kharaj*, Abû Yûsuf's *Kitâb al-kharaj* and al-Tahawî's *Ma'ânî al-âthâr*.
14. It is recorded that he promised that he would give some land to the people of the Bajila tribe when he conquered Iraq. After the battle he gave them one-quarter of the land. Here Sifil cites Abû 'Ubayd (Sifil, 1999, p. 136).

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