



Impact of the contextual approach on the qur'anic interpretations

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Abstract

The contextual approach, according to contextualists, is the best methodology for cognizing the true spirit and the real message of the Qur'ān, as it provides such interpretations that are based on the values of equality, fairness and justice. The contextualists assert that they seek to promote an Islam which is more human-centred, peaceful and flexible. They also regard most of the classical Qur'ānic explanations, especially pertaining to certain social issues (like the Rights of Women, Interfaith Relations and Hudūd Punishments), to be historic, specific and context-based. They argue that to determine the relevance of the Qur'ānic teachings today, such interpretations should be re-understood, re-interpreted and re-applied according to the modern context and demands. They contextualize the Qur'anic interpretations on the name of modernity, rationality, liberty, success and universality. This article aims to understand the contextual approach as well as its impact on the Qur'ānic interpretations. The thoughts and philosophy of Fazlur Rahman, the twentieth-century leading proponent of the contextual approach, are the major focus of this study. This study is an attempt to help the Muslims remove the evolving misunderstandings about Islam and stimulate them to implement the Qur'ānic wisdom in their thoughts and lives in a better way.

Keywords: *Al-Qur'ān, Sharī'ah, modernity, contextual approach, beliefs and practices, social justice.*



The Qur'ān is considered to be the most important and fundamental source of Islamic teachings and Islamic law (*Shari'ah*). This is the light, the guidance and the last and final decree of Allāh, revealed for our redemption in the world herein and hereafter. Therefore the Qur'ān continues to be a living manuscript, not only for the common adherents of Islam but also for the Muslim Intellectuals. Understanding of the Holy Qur'ān helps them recognise their real identity and explore what it means to be a true Muslim in the modern world of today.

Tafsīr literature (the Qur'ānic exegesis), henceforth, is the most precious treasure of knowledge for the Muslim *Ummah*. The *mufasssirūn* (exegetes) do their best efforts to understand the intent of Allāh and to interpret the Sacred Qur'ān in its accurate and authentic meaning. Like the Qur'ān, its exegesis also deals with different dimensions of human life, thoughts and actions. So the most genius Muslim minds exclusively attempt to prove the Qur'ān as a practical text, instead of limiting it in a sanctified and religious transcript merely used for religion and worship. They strive hard to interpret its text and discern its instructions' relevance to contemporary life, the changing situations, concerns and issues. In this endeavour they take extreme care so that the Word of Allāh and the word of humans remain distinct and do not intermingle. It reveals the dedication of these scholars towards the service of Islam and the Holy Qur'ān.

The purpose of this study is to explore that how much contextualization is appropriate to comprehend the true Qur'anic meanings and the Divine will. It also focusses on scrutinising that how much this approach is suitable to meet the contemporary needs of life and the challenges posed by modernity. Explication of some verses related to the social issues like the Rights of Women, Interfaith Relations and *Hudūd* Punishments has also been tried to be comprehended to suit the purpose of the study. This research has been conducted by applying "Discourse Analysis Method" and its technique "Framing analysis", to understand how the contextualists use rhetorical frames in their discourses to bring the paradigm shift in the Qur'anic meanings and interpretations.

The Qur'ānic exegesis has an elongated complex history and the Muslims have always made consistent efforts to apprehend and apply the verses of the Qur'ān in their faith and everyday lives to meet their current necessities. For this purpose, they have established an extensive range of exegetic approaches and methodologies to understand the Qur'ān from multiple aspects.

The traditional methods of interpreting the Qur’ān include, *tafsīr* through the Qur’ān, through the *Sunnah*, through the utterances of the *Sahāba*, and the successors (*tabi’ūn*). All these interpretations are categorized as *tafasīr bi’l mathūr*. For such *tafsīr*, Manna‘al-Qattān (1925-1999) said, it is also incumbent to have; a correct belief so that the interpretations are not perverted by personal yearnings, perfect understanding of the Arabic language, and the disciplines of the Qur’ān along with the comprehensive knowledge of the Qur’ān.¹ Except these, there is also another kind of commentary called *tafsīr bil rā’ay*, which is done by using reason and *ijtihād*.

Methods of interpretation of the Qur’ān have, nonetheless, constantly been altered and advanced throughout Islamic history. Two diverse approaches are predominantly found in this regard; the “textual” and the “contextual” approaches.

Textual Approach

Classical Qur’ānic *Usūl-e-Tafsīr* prefers to *Tafsīr Musalsal*, i.e., a linear, atomistic and verse-by-verse methodology for interpretation of the text, the continuing form of which is called traditional or textual approach. The textualists argue for adopting a literal approach and following the text strictly. They interpret with the help of traditions and put more emphasis upon the grammatical, rhetorical, legal or theological aspects. According to them, the meanings of the Qur’ān are fixed and their implication is universal.²

Qattān stated in this regard that we must follow and maintain the *Tafsīr* based on text/tradition because it leads us to the route of authentic knowledge and guards us against ascribing error and deviation to the Sacred Manuscript of Allāh.³

Contextual Approach

The Study of the Qur’ān, however, is going through a *paradigm shift*, both in the content and approaches applied for interpretation, since the classical period to the modern age.⁴ In the contemporary era, the Qur’ānic *Tafsīr* has been developed to re-define the understanding of Qur’ān in the light of modernity. So *Tafsīr* has become a vehicle for the dissemination of innovative ideas in the Islamic world. Manifold new concepts are being made relevant to the present-day Muslims by attempting to base them in the Qur’ānic Scripture.⁵

Hence a new approach has been generated by Modernity, for interpreting the Qur’ān, that is, the “contextual approach”, which is gaining rapid popularity, specifically amongst those Muslims known as progressives and *ijtihādīs*,⁶ the modernists and more commonly the liberals, and the scholars amongst them are referred to as the “contextualists”.⁷

Contextual Approach means “the insertion of the context of the interpreter and his/her perspective of understanding which establishes the fundamental philosophy of the text, as well as the background of the text itself”.⁸ The contextualists stress upon considering the socio-historical context of the Qur’an at the time of revelation in the seventh century Arabia, the purpose of revelation, as well as the needs and concerns of the present Muslims,⁹ so that the Qur’ānic message can be made functional in the contemporary dynamic life, at the universal level.

The contextualists persist that the Qur’ānic exegesis should not only be confined to give details of the historic meaning of the text through theoretical and linguistic inquiry. Instead, the exegete must also be able to contemplate its verses in an extensive context, to apply their meanings to modern situations and to reply to major issues.¹⁰ In this way, they pronounce, they can apply innovative techniques to approach the Qur’ān, without losing connection with history.¹¹

Contemporary contextual methodology, the contextualists insist, reveals the action-oriented spirit of the Qur’an, and is more scholarly, non-sectarian and critical.¹² The contextual interpretations tend to be different from those of the preceding ones, in reaction to the massive global advancements. According to the contextualists, the changed perceptions and structures of several institutes, like, ethics, politics and overall scenario, must be considered for the Qur’ānic understanding to pursue compatibility of the Qur’ānic teachings in daily life and the ideals of modernity.¹³

The contextualists are more concerned with the factors like social, cultural, financial, political, legal and historical contexts when the verses were sent down, understood, interpreted and put into practice, to better understand the Qur’ānic content,¹⁴ especially related to the matters involving social justice, like, the regulations concerning the Rights of Women and the rules related to *Hudūd* and Interfaith Relations. They are assured that moral, social and legal dictates of Islamic law are reliant upon time and place, hence could be employed differently, according to the varying requirements and circumstances of the Muslims of the day.¹⁵

The contextualists also recount that meanings are interactive, in which the readers are not just passive receivers but have a definite role in constructing the meaning of the text. It would help the readers to understand the text within their context and then to interpret it more productively.¹⁶

In brief, the contextualists presume, the Qur'ān was revealed fourteen centuries back. So to believe in its message and teachings, it must be reinterpreted and applied according to the contemporary conditions of life otherwise its traditional structure might vanish and could not be retrieved.¹⁷ This approach is, indeed, a struggle to keep Islam in harmony with other contemporary civilizations and to join the process of modernization and liberalization.

After understanding the contextual approach, we will now study the works and views of some prominent contextualists to comprehend this approach and its impact on the Qur'ānic interpretations more comprehensively.

Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898)

Syed Ahmad Khan of India, wrote the first modern *Tafsīr* of the Qur'ān, known as *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, and became the first modernist reformer by having a lasting influence on the Muslim world. Though, he is not recognised as a contextualist, his ideologies and writings, however, laid the foundation of the contextual approach, later on. His approach indicates that the Qur'ān, only re-defined by reason, will provide a guideline to Islam's accommodation to Western supremacy and will bridge up the gaps between the conventional Islam and the modern world of science.¹⁸ According to him, *Sharī'ah* must be reinterpreted according to the modern context, as the traditional *Sharī'ah* reveals the thoughts and actions of the early Muslims. He contended that except for the regulations related to *'ibādah* (religious rituals and worship), all laws are changeable according to the new circumstances.¹⁹

He proposed that the Qur'ān could be interpreted by itself, merely by applying a rational and devoted mind. His method of *Tafsīr* did not rely on *Sunnah*. For him, universality is the great miracle of the Qur'ān, due to which all generations can relate its teachings to their situations, in spite of the continuous advancement in human knowledge. But interpretations based upon *Hadīth*, incline to constrain the Qur'ānic meanings to particular historical circumstances, hence putting the perpetuity and universality of the Qur'ān at risk.²⁰ This attitude directed Ahmad Khan to apply a critical approach to the *Sunnah*. Under the inspiration of Biblical criticism, applied to the transmission of *Hadīth*, by European scholars like Pfander (1803-1865), Muir (1819-1905), Goldziher (1850-1921) and Schacht (1902-1969), he ultimately rejected almost all *Hadīth* literature as untrustworthy,²¹ and attempted to synchronize Islamic instructions with Western standards.

Moreover, he suggested that the words and expressions of the Qur'ān must not be assumed utterly in their apparent literal meanings, specifically when they negate common sense or intelligence, and because the Divine text frequently uses allegories, metaphors and other indirect expressions of reality. He also regarded the understanding of the pre-Islamic Arabic literature to be a prerequisite to apprehend the Qur'ān. He insisted that very little is known about pre-Islamic Arabic literature and there is enough possibility that connotations of words and phrases are different from those described by the linguists. It is therefore vital to accept those meanings of the Qur'an which are based upon other sources, although they may not be found in lexicology.²² In this way, Zayd asserted, Ahmad Khan's interpretations reveal the new religion of secularism.²³

Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905)

The majestic *Mufti* (Justice) of Egypt, Muhammad 'Abduh, explained in his *Tafsīr al-Manār*, that the style of the Qur'ān expresses its message by following the intellectual level of the Arabs of the seventh century. Whatever appears to be illogical or incongruous in the Qur'ān, should consequently be understood as reflecting the Arabs' visualization of the world at that time.²⁴ This was surely the first explicit endeavour of the re-contextualization of the Qur'an, a technique, which was established by the forthcoming Muslim scholars. Through this process 'Abduh de-mythologized and de-mystified the narrative of the Qur'ānic text.²⁵

'Abduh also wrestled against the traditional *Tafsīr*, by rejecting theological speculations and detailed grammatical discussions, and by arguing that the commentary must be relevant to the modern needs.²⁶ He applied reason and modern knowledge to the exegesis. According to him, the Qur'ān contains everything and its objective is to provide moral doctrines valid for all ages.²⁷ He anticipated reforming Islam and *Sharī'ah*, by selectively embracing traits of Western culture and practices that, he supposed, were not conflicting with Islam. He put the view that the instructions related to *mu'āmlāt* (social life) are alterable and must be re-interpreted for the sake of the betterment of humanity. He was a practical example of how to relate the Qur'ānic teachings with daily lives. He applied the principle of *maslahah* (public welfare) in his *fatwās* (legal rulings), by permitting the laws to be reformed according to the modern needs and concerns.²⁸

‘Abduh also adopted a critical attitude towards the *Sunnah* related to canons. Ahmad Khan’s stress on the universalism of the Qur’ān and the historicity of the *Sunnah* turned ‘Abduh’s cautious approach towards *Hadīth* collections into a more radical outlook, raising the slogan “Islam is the Qur’ān alone”.²⁹

‘Abduh and Ahmad Khan both tried to contextualize the Qur’ānic message by applying allegorical and metaphorical meanings to the text.³⁰

Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988)

Fazlur Rahman, a twentieth-century Pakistani-American scholar and philosopher, is the most noticeable exponent of the contextual approach, who systemized the contextualist hermeneutic to its fullest shape and conclusion. The historical and contextual concept of the Qur’ānic interpretation, particularly enunciated by him and his followers, has given novel perspectives to the Qur’ān and the Muslims.

Rahman contended against traditional approaches to interpretation, prevailing amongst the orthodox jurists and *mufassirūn*, because according to him, they usually take the Qur’ān as fragmentary and do not try to grasp it and the message of the Prophet ﷺ coherently.³¹ He therefore argued that the traditional atomistic approach must be replaced by a new hermeneutical model to understand the Qur’ān in a holistic way.³²

Rahman further illustrated that the Qur’ān should then be read in its proper social and historical background, and this relates not only to some specific verses for which there were the “circumstances of revelation”, but also to the entire Qur’ān for which there was a background in Pagan Makka, that can be known as “the occasion of the Qur’ān”.³³ Subsequently, he presented his hermeneutical method: “The Qur’ān was revealed by God, in response to the moral and social conditions of the Arabia of the Prophet ﷺ, through the mind of the Prophet ﷺ”.³⁴ In this way, opposing to the established traditional belief, he stated that the Qur’an is the Word of Allah as well as the word of Muhammad ﷺ.

Rahman’s methodology is, however, grounded upon drawing “general principles” through “double movement theory”, i.e., “from the existing circumstances to the Qur’ānic periods, then back to the contemporary age,” which can be applied now. For this, firstly, it is required to understand the particular text, by learning the historical context in which it was revealed, and the issue to which it was the answer, along with the meaning of the Qur’ān as a whole. Secondly, by taking a broader view of that specific answer, and then articulating that reply as general moral objective (such as justice or fairness), that can be elicited from that particular text, with the help of the socio-historical context. Rahman maintained that the present circumstances must also be carefully studied for the right application of these

answers. This is, for him, principally called “Ijtihād”, through which, according to him, the Qur’ānic laws will become afresh and operative once more.³⁵ Thus Rahman took into account the situations and circumstances of both the revelation period and the modern era, and then related the text to the needs of the present community. In doing so, he did not adopt an analogical model, used in the traditional Fiqh.³⁶ Instead, according to his thoughts, he relied on the spirit of the Qur’ān and the understanding of the Prophet ﷺ coherently.

Rahman also emphasised that the Qur’ān should be interpreted by exploring its moral purpose rather than by the verbatim meanings. He separated *legal* instructions from the *moral* guidelines, and said that the Qur’ānic legal judgements are obligatory only morally, not literally. Rahman further narrated that much of the traditional Qur’ānic commentary and laws were erroneous due to overlooking the moral objectives of the relevant verses by the legal scholars, who took the text as comprising inflexible, literal-legal bindings.³⁷ He postulated that the nature of the Qur’ānic laws is contingent; therefore the Qur’ān only determines a course, not an everlasting mandatory destination, towards which the society is binding to move.³⁸ He insisted that Muslim communities could today prevent crimes by discovering some other means, without altering the underlying concerns of the Qur’ān. For example, he stated that the basic intention of the Qur’ān which has been described in the “amputation verse”³⁹ seems to be the avoidance of theft and not cutting off the thief’s hand.⁴⁰ In this way, he strived for determining the general moral principles behind the text related to law, as, according to him, laws are contextualized by time-period and space whereas the principles are perpetual and could be applied worldwide. But indeed, he turned to subjectivism under the veil of what he called the Qur’ānic general principles.

His model of explanation became very persuasive, predominantly in the methodologies of *Tafsīr* proposed by the Muslim liberationists and feminists.

Abdullah Saeed (b. 1964)

Inspired by Rahman, Abdullah Saeed, a progressive Australian academic and scholar, highlighted that today for understanding the Qur’ān, the Muslim scholars must take into consideration their modern-day experiences, including rational and modern disciplines of knowledge and historical-critical research methods.⁴¹ Thus according to Saeed, the Qur’ān was revealed in a certain context and its message was precisely for the Prophet ﷺ and his community. It was not meant for other societies on earth, even at that time, which had no link with the Arabic peninsula.⁴² He also stated that moral imperatives alter with the change in circumstances.⁴³ So at present, many Muslims regard certain Qur’ānic commandments to be remote, outdated and not very appropriate to the existing situations and concerns if taken

according to their literal wording.⁴⁴ He subsequently indicated that the Qur'ānic injunctions have often been approached in a firm, literalist and legalistic way, whereas the contextualists' primary objective is not the implementation of stern and inflexible rules, but creation of such societies which are based upon the principles of justice, virtue and beauty. He admitted that contextualists have adopted this approach in response to the demands of modernity, and they present such interpretations of the Qur'ān that are harmonious with the situations of the modern world.⁴⁵

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943-2010)

Abu Zayd from Egypt was a liberal academic, who applied his linguistic studies to understanding the Islamic texts. According to Zayd, the Qur'ān is Divine, but at the same time it is a historical phenomenon, revealed in a particular time and place, the interpretation of which is human. He advocated studying the Qur'ān allegorically and symbolically because they permit the reinterpretation of religious rulings according to their spirit rather than their words.⁴⁶

He regarded the Qur'ān as a text, which should be studied like any other book.⁴⁷ In this way, he openly challenged the holiness of the Qur'ān. He also expressed that the Qur'ān is not everlasting but was produced in a certain context.⁴⁸ According to him, if we analyse some of the legal enactments of the Qur'ān contextually, such as the penalties of adultery, fornication, theft, instigating societal disorder and killing, these punishments were fundamentally not introduced by Islam, because generally these were pre-Islamic and a part of past traditions. Zayd pointed out that it is not to be appreciated in this modern time, when human rights and honour have become essential values, to regard amputation or execution as compulsory religious punishments enforced by God. Similarly, Islamic laws dealing with the Rights of Women and Human Rights in general, must also be reviewed and re-defined,⁴⁹ according to the upcoming demands of the present age. Due to presenting such weird thoughts, he was announced to be the perpetrator of heresy, terminated from his job at the University, forced to divorce his wife and finally exiled from Egypt.

Amina Wadūd (b. 1952)

Rahman's contextual approach gave birth to a new methodology in modern Qur'ānic Tafsīr, known as "the egalitarian feminist hermeneutic", to counter the established interpretations regarding women in Islamic orthodoxy. Amina Wadūd, an African-American progressive scholar, is one of the most central figures of this movement of feminism, who has been recognised for formulating the hermeneutics of "Equality"⁵⁰ and "Gender-Jihād".⁵¹ It reflects her commitment to striving for

Gender-Equality, as the traditional Sharī‘ah according to her, has offered a religious and legal authority to oppress and subjugate women.⁵²

Related to the verse 4:34, she defies its literal meanings, that establish man’s authority over woman, submission to her husband forcibly and the right to hit noncompliant wives.⁵³ Wadūd also proclaims that the Qur’an does not put any restrictions upon women to lead other women or both men and women, if she is qualified and efficient to accomplish the task. Rather if she is insightful and given liberty, she might prove herself a better leader.⁵⁴

Her principles seek to discern the “ultimate intent” or “hidden spirit” through constructing “unity” of the message of the Qur’an.⁵⁵ She also opposes imposing *Hudūd* Punishments. Moreover, she contends that the interpretation of the Sacred Texts and *Ijtihād* must not be left in the hands of the ‘*Ulamā*, and, that all Muslims ought to contribute in the dialogue about what teachings of Islam are correct at this time.⁵⁶ She even regards interpretation as always a relevant and subjective process, and according to her, no reading can be truthfully accurate.⁵⁷ Her unique and unusual thoughts also created many controversies and agitation among the Muslims.

Justification of the Contextualists for adopting the Contextual Approach

According to the contextualists, in the structure of a developing Islamic society, there is adequate approval in the Qur’ān and the Sunnah to modify certain judgements or at least some features of their application through re-reading. Reinterpretation is not new in Islamic history, as it also occurred in the course of the formative period.⁵⁸

They also insist that just as Naskh (abrogation) was an important method in modifying at least some of the earlier rulings in the Qur’ān many times, to meet the evolving requirements of the community, similarly it can still change laws according to the contemporary needs and situations.⁵⁹ Thus laws are valuable as long as they offer a solid and rational foundation for the appropriate functioning of the community. If they do not accomplish that purpose, they must be reformed according to the changed circumstances. For example, the modernists like Najm al-din al-Tūfi (1276-1316), considered *Maslahah* (public interest) as a solid base for making and even for changing the rulings.⁶⁰ *Tūfi* maintained that the *Hadīth*, “No harm shall be inflicted nor reciprocated” reinforced the unconditional primacy of the public interest. So laws, even if they have been drawn from the Qur’ān or the

Sunnah, should be improved to serve the purpose of the welfare of the public.⁶¹ In the same way, Ibn Qayyim (1292-1350) persisted that the law should be altered, if ‘*Urf* (custom), on which it was based, changes.⁶²

Critique of traditional scholars on the Contextual Approach

Contrary to the contextualists, the orthodox scholars, like Imam Al-Shafi’ī (767-820), asserted that all rulings stated in the Qur’ān and the reliable *Sunnah* are impeccable and must be obeyed strictly.⁶³

The traditional scholars contend that contemporary inclinations of re-reading and re-interpreting the Islamic fundamentals are merely an attempt to integrate the ontological conjectures of modernity into the Islamic structure under the influence of secularism.⁶⁴ According to them, progressive scholars desire to develop Islam by westernizing it. They re-define the Qur’ān and *Hadīth* through the parameters of secular and liberal ideologies of human rights, feminism and multiculturalism.⁶⁵ Therefore Syed Qutb (1907–1966) stated that Islamic *Sharī‘ah* provides a complete guideline to every aspect of life, and, that the *jāhiliyya* (paganism) in the times of the Prophet ﷺ is still present in the shape of neo-paganism of both Western and Muslim modern secular world.⁶⁶

Consequently, the traditional scholars affirm that we should reform our approaches, idleness, egotism and short-sightedness, and not some imaginary imperfections of Islam. We must change ourselves, not to go astray but to become good Muslims and to follow the true teachings of Islam.⁶⁷

Discussion and Analysis of the Contextual Approach

This section comprises discussion and analysis of all points of the contextualists one by one. Like:

1- The contextualists stress to rely mostly upon the Tafsīr through the Qur’ān, and avoid accepting *Hadīth* as a trustworthy source of exegesis. In this respect, it should be kept in mind, that the Almighty Allāh, who has revealed the Qur’ān on His esteemed Prophet ﷺ for the guidance of humanity, has also taken the responsibility for the protection of this Holy Scripture. Besides this, He is also well aware regarding the preservation of the *Ahādīth* of His Prophet ﷺ, who was the most authentic commentator of the Holy Qur’ān. To save *Hadīth* literature, Allāh nominated such pious people, who dedicated their entire lives for this noble purpose, and did their best efforts to separate the forged ones from the true sayings. Though an extensive range of unauthentic and unsound narrations still exists in the *Hadīth* collections, but the scholars possessing comprehensive knowledge of the

science of Hadīth can easily distinguish the accurate narrations from the erroneous ones.

The worth of *Ahādīth* can also not be denied, because they are believed to be revealed by Allāh. Hence the Messenger ﷺ of Allāh articulated: “Know, that I have been given the Qur’ān and something like it”.⁶⁸ Surely, it was his *Sunnah* which had been transmitted in the form of *Hadīth*. Allāh has also given the testimony of the authenticity and the importance of following the sayings of the Prophet ﷺ, by announcing that “He who obeys the Messenger ﷺ, has indeed obeyed Allāh” (Al-Qur’ān 4:80), because, “He does not speak of (his own) desire, but by a revelation revealed” (Al-Qur’ān 53:3-4).

2- Most of the contextualists also consider interpretation of the Qur’ān to be a relevant and subjective process. In this way, they have given the right to interpret the text to everybody according to their will, even if they completely disregard and diverge from the works of those classicists, who had devoted their entire lives in the struggle of knowing the true meaning and the spirit of the Holy Qur’ān.

The contextualists, indeed, take the contemporary developmental stage in Islam as similar to that of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, which created a *paradigm shift* and generated Europe’s leap forward into modernity. They persist that the Islamic world also needs the same religious improvement to move ahead, and to free it from despairing fatalism and blind submission to the *‘Ulamā*, as well as to become a vigorous force and to reach the level of Western societies swiftly.⁶⁹ Contrary to this assumption, the Prophet ﷺ urged on the importance of learning the Religious teachings from the *‘Ulamā*, and stated that “What you know of the Qur’ān, act upon, and what you are not aware of, ask from those who know it”,⁷⁰ because “the *‘Ulamā* are the descendants of the Prophets ﷺ”.⁷¹

3- The contextualists also proclaim that the cultures and circumstances have enormously been changed from the past and now the world is progressing very promptly. Moreover, now mankind has become more refined due to an immense increase in knowledge. Thus they need to re-visit the Qur’ānic teachings because the orthodox commandments are based upon cruelty and injustice, and generate social conflicts,⁷² and so are no more suitable and valid in this modern context.

If we observe the reality in-depth, we come across the fact that although cultures can vary intensely from area to area and epoch to epoch but human societies always operate basically in a similar manner. Consequently, we can imagine how and why events would have emerged thousands of years ago, by understanding how individuals and groups act and behave in our societies today. If at large, they are inclined to pursue their benefits and work for their personal agendas today, they would have done the same in initial times, and no one can be freed from such human impulses.⁷³

We also notice that human beings are still having the same instinct and idiosyncrasies, despite all their progress and enhancement in knowledge, which they possessed in the past eras. The reasons for their delight and distress are still the same. They are still involved in the same crimes, like, homosexuality, adultery and fornication. They are still eager for accumulating wealth even through theft, brigandage or taking usury. They still want to enjoy power and authority even by killing and murdering and by exploiting others' rights, and so on. So if the crimes mentioned in the Qur'ān still exist rather more robustly, how can the Qur'ānic commandments and punishments related to these matters be irrelevant today, and how can the Qur'ānic instructions lose their worth, effectiveness and freshness today? And, by forgiving or being lenient towards the culprits of such heinous offences and by ignoring the misery of the victims, how can we avoid violence and promote peace, human rights and social justice? Especially, if the criminal is seasoned, do not intend to compensate, not even ashamed of his/her sins, and instead is prone to committing these crimes even further.

Indeed everybody approaches the Qur'ān with certain objectives. Only those who are not prejudiced and whose minds and souls are purified, get guidance from it. And, only they realise that the Qur'ānic message is not based on brutality and unfairness. Rather they find that "Allāh is the most merciful and the compassionate".⁷⁴ While going through this Holy Manuscript, they find that 'justice' is the fundamental (Al-Qur'ān 4:135) and equality is the core teaching (Al-Qur'ān 49:13) of the Qur'ān, and 'peace' is the key concept (Al-Qur'ān 5:32) and 'tolerance' is its necessary value (Al-Qur'ān 7:199).

4- Related to the matter of re-interpretation based upon reason and public welfare, Syed Qutb admits that these are important principles of Tafsīr, but should be used only within the framework of Islamic directions.⁷⁵ As far as the issue of reading the Qur'ān by applying reason and by abandoning its literal wordings is related, Al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) explained the principle of interpreting the Qur'ān or Qānūn at-Ta'wīl as, the interpreter should first apply the literal (the most obvious) meanings of the verses, but if it is impossible due to some valid reason, then he

must examine it with reason and intellect and apply metaphorical meanings to avoid the discrepancies.⁷⁶

This principle is so reasonable and clear that it cannot be disregarded even in the common human discourses.

5- The contextualists' debates regarding the "literalist or symbolic" readings of the Qur'ān often fail to identify that the practice of reading the Qur'ān in its context is an integral methodology to exegesis endorsed by the early classical Islamic scholars, who established the "Islamic Sciences". They were the first to emphasise the need to understand the true purpose of the Qur'ān correctly by studying the verses in their context. Conceptualizing the verses out of their context, they affirmed, would entirely damage the understanding of the true intent of the revelation. For example, Imam al-Shāṭabī (1320-1388) regarded the linguistic, historical and circumstantial context of the verses as prerequisite for understanding the Qur'ān.⁷⁷

Contrarily, those who are biased and learn the Qur'ān to search out what they have previously decided is in it, they will surely find it. For example, those who aspire to have evidence that there is no harm in using intoxicants will refer to only a specific verse, instead of reading the Qur'ān holistically.⁷⁸ Similarly, those who read the Qur'ān to support their beliefs that Islam stimulates violence, will select verses in fragments and out of context, and will be able to create their desired impression. For example, the declaration, "kill them wherever you find them" seems bizarre and very violent because it is often taken out of its textual as well as its historical background. This verse was, indeed, revealed when the pagans of Arab not only broke the peace treaty they had signed with the Muslims but also tortured and fought against them. At that time, Allāh revealed these *Āyahs*: "Fight in the way of God, those who fight you, but do not transgress. Indeed, God does not like transgressors. And kill them wherever you find them, and expel them from wherever they have expelled you, and *fitnah* (despotism) is worse than killing" (Al-Qur'ān 2:190-191).

Thus understanding this verse in its context changes its meanings entirely, as it cannot be properly understood without knowing its background. The contextualists' objection, henceforth, that the traditional scholars ignore the underlying purpose of the Qur'ānic message by reading it in fragmentation, has no base. The idea of understanding the Qur'ān as a whole is, in fact, not new in Islamic history. Allama Zarkashi in his *Burhān* and Suyūṭī in his *Itqān* mentioned the idea of the *Sūrah*s as unities. Syed Qutb is also one of the most important scholars, who

urged the importance of reading the Qur'ān as unity.⁷⁹ And, Allama Tabātabā'ī (1904-1981) emphasised in this regard that no verse should ever be tried to be understood in isolation, rather verses should be comprehended by considering other relevant Āyahs elsewhere in the Qur'ān in a holistic and interconnected way.⁸⁰

6- The contextualists' also claim that the door of *Ijtihād* has now been closed and needs to be re-opened to make the Qur'ānic teachings relevant to contemporary situations. But it must be remembered that *Ijtihād* is the method, given by Allāh and His Messenger ﷺ, to deal with the evolving changes in the social and political structures of the world, and is obligatory in Islam to ensure its vitality. Al-Qurtubi (1214-1273) firmly believed, in this respect, that there could not be an appropriate *Tafsīr* of the Qur'ān without *Ijtihād*.⁸¹ Therefore this is merely a misconception that today *Ijtihād* has become impossible and not permitted to be undertaken. Hence Islam can never become stale nor can its teachings be ever irrelevant and outdated.

7-Finally, when we look through the context of the lives and ideologies of the contextualists, we become aware that the reason of their objections on the classical exegesis is, that either due to the exposure or due to the inspiration from the western culture and academics, they have embraced Western outlook in their studies of Islam, and more radically, of the Qur'an.⁸²

8- In addition to these points, when we study the works of Fazlur Rahman, the leading figure, who established the contextual approach in its fullest form, it becomes clear that his thoughts must be understood against the perspective of religious politics in Pakistan during the 1960s. He was appointed by General Ayyūb Khan, the then President of Pakistan, to suggest the modernist and semi-secular interpretation of Islam to the constitution, to support his regime. General Ayyūb intended to bypass the traditional sources of religious authority to formulate his policy. Consequently, we notice liberal Family Laws in the legislation of 1962, through the re-interpretation of the Qur'ān and Sunnah.⁸³ Due to such revisions, Fazlur Rahman was entitled as Abu'l Fazl, the notorious Vazīr of the Mughal emperor Akbar, who purportedly introduced a new religion. Eventually, he had to face severe controversies and was forced to leave the country.⁸⁴

Moreover, to understand Rahman's proposal for applying the contextual approach in the Qur'anic understanding, it is essential to comprehend his idea of revelation, which was based on the *Mu'tazilite* conception of "the Qur'an as 'created' ". According to him, the Words of Allah were actualized in the mind of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. He received the Qur'an in the form of ideas in his mind, and to make sense of them to people, he converted them into Arabic words according to his own ordinary human volition.⁸⁵ In this process, according to Rahman, the psychology of the Prophet ﷺ played a significant role. The process of revelation, thus, did not complete with the act of transmission by God to Muhammad ﷺ, but his mind also had a fundamental contribution in producing the final Script of the Qur'an. Rahman's idea of the revelation, therefore, was split into two levels, i.e. divine and human. It led him to the notion that the Qur'anic words are not wholly divine. Due to introducing his new hermeneutic, he was called a heretic.

Conclusion

The Muslims firmly believe that the Qur'an has been descended absolutely for their guidance, and its laws and teachings are eternal and valid for all times and places. There is ultimate wisdom behind each verse of the Qur'an. All its instructions and injunctions are ultimately for their benefit and protection, because Almighty Allāh is the author of this Sacred Book. Allāh has also created everything, and is well acquainted with His creatures, so, He is the Supreme legislature, and cannot do injustice to anyone. Allāh has revealed the Holy Qur'an for the guidance and the well-being of the human race, as well as to establish social justice amongst them.

After understanding the contextual approach and its whole scenario in detail, we come to know that these scholars re-read and re-interpret the Qur'an, the principal source of Islam, through the Western methodologies, and ideologies and perspectives (i.e. rationalism, liberalism, feminism and pluralism etc.). This propensity has greatly influenced the meanings and the spirit of the Qur'an.

Reading certain verses of the Qur'an by keeping in view the background of their revelation is obligatory, but all its instructions and injunctions may not always be associated with some particular milieu. The significance of the context is indispensable but, under the subterfuge of context, deviation from the fundamental meanings and message of the Qur'an cannot be permissible. The contextual

approach proposed by the contextualists, indeed, challenges to divinity, and the authority and sanctity of the Qur’ān. It also leads to subjectivism, and is a manifest effort to set free the Muslims from the literal understanding of the Qur’ān and to liberalize them. This approach has caused a vivid transformation in the social, cultural, intellectual and religious structure of the Muslim world, and today many Muslim societies seem to be a part of the West.

But we must also realize that though some Muslims seem to be inspired by modernism, but as a part of “One Muslim *Ummah*”, they can neither accept nor can allow any endeavour to quiver the foundation of their beliefs and practices, and such attempts will always have to counter harsh ramifications. This is because, the *Ummah Muhammadiyah*, as a whole, believe that they do not have to mold *Sharī’ah* according to their whims and requirements, and do not have to impose their intended meanings to the text. Rather they have to struggle sincerely and seriously to understand the perspicacity and the will of Allāh.

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⁷⁸ “They ask you about intoxicants and games of chance. Say: In both of them there is a great sin and means of profit for men” (Al-Qur’ān 2:219). Those who want to defend drinking wine, refer to this part of this verse, “intoxicants ... means of profit for men”. By reading this single verse, they also claim that this is just advice and there is no such *Āyah* in the Qur’ān which clearly and strictly forbids the consumption of intoxicants.

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