The Impact of the Islamic Theories of Revelation on Humanist Qur’anic Hermeneutics

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Published online 3 April 2024

Résumé

Dans le présent article, j’illustre l’impact des théories islamiques de la révélation sur la construction de différents types d’herméneutiques coraniques, en mettant l’accent sur ce que je définis comme une “herméneutique humaniste”. L’article est divisé en trois parties. Dans la première partie, j’expose les deux principaux cadres théoriques exploités ici pour analyser différentes théories classiques et modernes de la révélation et leur herméneutique correspondante, à savoir la compréhension de la révélation par Shahab Ahmed et ma propre définition de l’herméneutique humaniste et de ses principales caractéristiques. Dans la deuxième partie de l’article, je présente succinctement quelques théories pré-modernes de la révélation, en mettant l’accent sur quelques exemples de la grande variété de conceptualisations philosophiques péripatétiennes musulmanes et sufies qui sont pertinentes du point de vue de l’herméneutique humaniste. Les approches contemporaines et contextualistes de la révélation concluront l’article. Je m’ concentre sur la reconnaissance du rôle du prophète Muhammad dans l’élaboration du texte coranique et de son expression, ainsi que sur l’interaction entre la formulation du texte coranique et son contexte social.

Mots-clés

herméneutique coranique – théories islamiques de la révélation – herméneutique humaniste – Coran – exégèse coranique
Abstract

In the present article, I illustrate the impact that the Islamic theories of revelation have on the construction of different types of Qur’anic hermeneutics, with a special focus on what I define “humanist hermeneutics”. The article is divided in three parts. In the first part I expose the two main theoretical frameworks exploited here in order to analyze different classical and modern theories of revelation and their corresponding hermeneutics, namely Shahab Ahmed’s understanding of Revelation and my own definition of humanist hermeneutics and its main characteristics. In the second part of the article, I succinctly present some pre-modern theories of revelation, emphasizing a few examples from the large variety of philosophical Peripatetic Muslim and Sufi conceptualizations that are relevant from a humanist hermeneutics perspective. Contemporary, contextualist approaches of revelation will end the article. My general focus is on the acknowledgement of the agency of the prophet Muhammad in the construction of the Qur’anic text and its expression, and on the interaction between the formulation of the Qur’anic text and its social context.

Keywords

Qur’anic hermeneutics – Islamic theories of revelation – humanist hermeneutics – Qur’an – Qur’anic exegesis

Despite being historically preceded by a long and passionate discussion on the ontology of the Qur’an within the Islamic classical tradition, the historical, theological and philosophical academic research regarding the Islamic theories of revelation is still at the beginning. Trans-ideological, trans-theological and trans-sectarian perspectives have just begun to develop, but the analysis of the multiple conceptualizations of revelation is still deficient in regards to variety, breadth and interdisciplinarity. Moreover, the studies that concentrate on the relation between the different theories of revelation and hermeneutics are even scarcer. In the present article I will try to fill in this gap and illustrate the impact that the Islamic theories of revelation have on the construction of different types of Qur’anic hermeneutics and its methodologies, with a special focus on what I define “humanist hermeneutics”. The article is divided in three parts. In the first part of the article I will define the two main theoretical frameworks exploited here in order to analyze different classical and modern theories of revelation and their corresponding hermeneutics, namely Ahmed’s understanding of Revelation and my own definition of humanist hermeneutics and its main characteristics. In the second part of the article I will analyze some
pre-modern theories of revelation, insisting on the philosophical Peripatetic Muslim and Sufi theories of revelation for their – reflected hermeneutically – humanist potential. Contemporary, contextualist approaches of revelation will be succinctly discussed in the third part of the article.

1 Theoretical Frameworks: Shahab Ahmed’s Theory of Revelation and Humanist Hermeneutics

In this article I will use the following two frameworks in order to organize and analyze different classical and modern theories of revelation and their corresponding hermeneutics. Methodologically, I will exploit, in regards to the theory of revelation, the analytical and conceptual apparatus regarding the different and multiple spatial dimensions of Revelation developed by Shahab Ahmed in *What is Islam?* For theories of hermeneutics I will use as a framework my own definition of what constitutes a humanist hermeneutics.

Proposing a more nuanced and complex understanding of Revelation, Ahmed distinguishes between the Pre-Text, Text and Con-Text of the Revelation. The Pre-Text is defined as the Revelatory Premise of the Universal reality of the Unseen God, as the source of Revelation that remains ontologically prior to and alethically (regarding the Truth) larger than the Text of Revelation, namely the textual product of the revelation – the Qurʾān. The Text represents a limited expression of and contingent upon the Truth of the Pre-Text.\(^1\) Regarding the Text, Muslims agreed that the Qurʾān does not exhaust the Truth of the Pre-Text, but they embraced different epistemological methodologies of accessing and knowing the Truth of the Pre-Text: without the Text, via the Text or only in the Text.\(^2\) Finally, the Con-Text, as a product of prior hermeneutical engagement with Revelation, represents “that whole field or complex or vocabulary of meanings of Revelation that have been produced in the course of the human and historical hermeneutical engagement with Revelation, and which are thus already present as Islam”.\(^3\)

Despite the fact that Ahmed does not further explicitly differentiate between various views of the process of revelation itself,\(^4\) emphasizing only the distinctions manifested on the level of the product and interpretations of the revelation, I have chosen this model for heuristic reasons, in order

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4 While other authors do. See below, for example, Andani Khalil’s differentiated understanding of the Revelatory Principle, Revelatory Process and Revelatory Product.
to simplify the argumentation and concentrate here solely on the relation between the theories of revelations and hermeneutics.

Moreover, using Ahmed's conceptual distinctions regarding revelation, I will apply my own definition of "humanist hermeneutics" to distinguish the theories of revelations that have generated the most humanist Qur'ānic hermeneutical developments in the pre-modern and contemporary period. As I have defined in another study, by "humanist hermeneutics" I refer to any Qur'ānic theory and methodology of interpretation that recognizes and asserts the inherent interference of the human factor and/or limitation of the human comprehension on – at least part – of the following levels: on the level of the source of the revelation itself, on the level of the process of the revelation itself, on the level of the product of the revelation itself, on the level of the interpretation of the Text itself.

The Islamic theories of revelation have a great impact on the construction of Qur'ānic hermeneutics and its various methodologies. Condensing the previous analysis of the different theories of revelation, we could further characterize a humanist hermeneutics in the following manner. Humanist hermeneutics designates any Qur'ānic theory and methodology of interpretation that recognizes and asserts the inherent interference of the human factor and/or limitation of the human comprehension on – at least part – of the following levels:

a. **on the level of the source of the revelation itself** – asserting that: the knowledge of the Pre-Text cannot be confined to or exhausted by any of the products of the revelation / by any Text; the Pre-Text – ontologically, alletically and axiologically – precedes the Text and plays a decisive role in the understanding of the Text; the textual knowledge is not sufficient and is not the exclusive type of knowledge that can access the Pre-Text. This hermeneutical strategy is obvious – limited to the examples discussed below – in Muslim philosophers, Şūfi, Ismāʿīlī, Muʿtazīli theologica hermeneutics, and contemporary contextualist theories of revelation and in their humanist socio-legal exegetical results;

b. **on the level of the process of the revelation itself** – asserting: the human agency of the prophet Muhammad in the construction of the final product of revelation / the Qur'ān; and/or the construction of the final product of the revelation / the Qur'ān / the Text, be it conceived under the form of

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5 Of course, given the length limits of this article, the analysis is far from being exhaustive, but it is meant to illustrate the correlation that exists between the different theories of revelation and hermeneutics.

an oral discourse or a text, as a temporal reaction to or as an interaction, an interactive dialogue with a specific historical community/society/culture that therefore leaves its imprint on the Text itself. This hermeneutical strategy is obvious in Muslim philosophers, Ṣūfī, Ismāʿīlī, Fazlur Rahman, Abdolkarim Sorouch, Nasr Abu Zayd, Aksin Wijaya's theories of revelation;

c. on the level of the product of the revelation itself – asserting, based on the prophetic human agency and/or the interaction with the 7th century Hijaz culture (see b.) in the construction of the final product of revelation itself, that the content of the Qurʾān/the Text is ineluctably influenced by either the Prophet's personal understanding, feelings, experience, and/or its general historical context of revelation, namely the cultural, social, political, linguistic understanding and conditioning of the first communal Muslim interlocutor and recipient of knowledge, as well as its larger historical context of the cultural and especially religious ecosystem of the late Antiquity Near East. The content and the expression of the textual product of revelation, more specifically the Arabic linguistic constraints (the language functioning as a reflection of a whole culture and Weltanschauung), the themes and topics, ideas, practices, institutions, approaches, instructions and solutions described – and not necessarily always normed – in the Qurʾān, are therefore inextricably interwoven with a certain historical situation and socio-cultural understanding of the human beings. This hermeneutical strategy is obvious – limited to the examples discussed below – in Muslim philosophers, Ṣūfī, Ismāʿīlī, Fazlur Rahman, Abdolkarim Sorouch, Nasr Abu Zayd, Aksin Wijaya's theories of revelation;

d. on the level of the interpretation of the Text itself – recognizing the decisive role of the interpreter and of the interpretative and hermeneutical methodologies in the process of the extraction of the Qurʾānic meanings. The human interpreter of the Text does not objectively and transparently discover, retrieve or reproduce the meanings, considered to exist in the divine auctorial mind, of the Qurʾān, but participates to and negotiates the construction of meanings, assuming openly his/her own inescapable subjectivity. Therefore, in a humanist hermeneutics, it is disclosed the influence that the “prior text”, particularly the historical, cultural, social, political, educational background of the exegete and his/her own inclinations, preferences, expectations, personal experiences, psychological configuration and, not less important, gender,7 have on the process and

the results of the interpretation itself. Furthermore, applying different interpretative and hermeneutical methodologies to the reading of the same Text can lead to different exegetical results. For example, a heavily textualist, ethically voluntarist, semi-contextualized and atomist interpretation of the Qurʾān facilitates a patriarchal normative view on gender relations in Islam, while an aim-based, thematico-holistic, rationalist, contextualist and historically informed Qurʾanic hermeneutics leads to a gender egalitarian exegesis.\(^8\) The same last hermeneutical strategies were used by feminist Muslim theologians to deconstruct the hierarchical, exclusivist understanding of religious alterity and to propose an inclusive soteriological pluralism.\(^9\) However, the hermeneutical methodologies, in the absence of a humanist theory of revelation, may have a limited functionality. These hermeneutical assumptions are obvious in Muslim philosophers, Ṣūfī, Ismāʿīlī, contemporary contextualist theories of revelation.

2 Pre-modern Theories of Revelation and Their Hermeneutical Impact

Nowadays there is a widespread understanding of the Qurʾān as the literal, eternal, uncreated Word/Speech of God, infallibly transmitted verbally through Angel Jibril to the prophet Muhammad, who, without any interference of his own subjectivity, recites it verbatim to the new Muslim community that preserves it as a physical scripture. This supposedly central and unique theological conceptualization of the Qurʾān is in fact, at best, a reductionist and deprived of nuances representation of the Sunni Ḥanbalī perspective.\(^10\) As Andani remarks, according to Ḥanbalī, God’s uncreated Speech, as part of God’s uncreated eternal knowledge, was ontologically identical to the Arabic


\(^10\) Even the Ḥanbalī theologians have formally made a distinction between the uncreated divine Speech and the temporality, the lacking of sequence, and other specific characteristics of a created mortal speech. Andani, Khalil, *Revelation in Islam: Qurʾanic, Sunni, and Shiʿī Ismaili Perspectives*, doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, 2020, p. 727.
Qurʾān transposed in eternal sounds and letters.\textsuperscript{11} Such an oversimplified contemporary popular vision on Qurʾānic text does not reflect Muslims’ historical understanding of revelation “through diverse, competing, and mutually contradictory visions, each of which entail[ing] different theories of Qurʾānic hermeneutics” constructed in various historical, epistemic, cosmological and theological contexts.\textsuperscript{12}

In order to put in a larger historical perspective the above-mentioned simplistic contemporary suppositions regarding the conceptualization of the Qurʾān as revelation, Andani Khalil proposes a detailed historical and analytical study on the cosmologies and theologies of revelation as presented in the Qurʾān, Sunnī and ‘Īmāmī Shīʿī ḥadīth, Sunnī and Twelver Shīʿī kalām theology, and in Shīʿī Ismāʿīli philosophical theology from the first/seventh century to the fifth/eleventh century.\textsuperscript{13} Muslims have conceived the Arabic Qurʾān in multiple ways, such as: “God’s uncreated and eternal verbatim speech; a pre-existent scripture inscribed in heaven at the beginning of time; God’s created speech generated in real-time in direct response to historical events; a temporally created verbal expression of God’s eternal non-verbal speech; the Prophet Muhammad’s divinely inspired words composed in response to his own circumstances; and a revelatory discourse of symbols and parables coined by God or Muhammad to represent higher level spiritual truths”.\textsuperscript{14} Consequently, four types of Qurʾānic revelation models are identified and analyzed by Andani: the “Qurʾānic model” (the divinely inspired Arabic Qurʾāns recited by the Prophet are the manifestation and adaptation of the divine transcendent kitāb/Writing); the dominantly Sunnī “scriptural models” (Qurʾān is conceived as a pre-existing divine Book in heaven); the “theological divine speech models”, specific to Sunnī and Twelver Shīʿī kalām theology (the Arabic Qurʾān and/or the Prophetic Sunna are revelatory manifestations of God’s created or uncreated Speech), and the “divine inspiration models”, encountered in early Twelver ḥadīth and Shīʿī Ismāʿīli philosophical theology (Qurʾān is “a divinely inspired discourse of the Prophet that manifests God’s transcendent Word and cosmic Writing and requires the Imams’ divinely inspired revelatory hermeneutics (taʾwil) to unveil its real truths”).\textsuperscript{15}

As detailed below, these revelation models can be further nuanced and differentiated, in Andani’s terms, according to the various conceptualizations of the Revelatory Principle,\textsuperscript{16} Revelatory Process and Revelatory Products.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Andani, Revelation in Islam, p. 219.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Andani, Revelation in Islam, p. 7.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Andani, Revelation in Islam.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Andani, Revelation in Islam, p. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Andani, Revelation in Islam, p. 726.
\item \textsuperscript{16} New denomination for Shahab Ahmed’s concept of Pre-Text.
\end{itemize}
The Revelatory Principle represents the ontologically prior and transcendent revelatory source, the domain of reality and the comprehensive truth matrix, potentially cognoscible to human beings, connected to or a part of God such as God’s verbal or non-verbal Speech (kalām Allāh) and Writing (kitāb Allāh), or even Neoplatonic emanations. The hierarchical Revelatory Process refers namely to the various modes of divine/angelic sending down (tanzīl or ‘inzāl) and inspiration (wahy). Finally, the Revelatory Products can include the qur’anic recitation, the scripture, the Prophetic Sunna, even the Shi‘ī Imamate, the Ismā‘īlī Ta‘wīl, the Šāfi‘ī’s God’s Friends’ divine inspirations, etc.\(^\text{17}\)

In the next sections of the first part of the article, I will succinctly present a few examples from the large variety of philosophical Peripatetic Muslim and Šāfi‘ theories of revelation that are relevant from a humanist hermeneutics perspective. In addition, I will also explain the definitory elements of the Zāhīrī, Ash‘arī, Mu‘tazilī, Ismā‘īlī and legal hermeneutics, in general, while emphasizing how their specific theory of revelation impacts the construction of hermeneutical methodologies.

### 2.1 Zāhīrī and Literalism

Vishanoff, in a series of in-depth studies on Islamic legal hermeneutics and its theological determinations, draws attention to the crucial implications that conceptualizing God’s Speech in a certain manner by a scholar have on his/her Qur’ān’s understanding and interpretation. There is no hermeneutical accident that, Zahiris, for example from Dāwūd to Ibn Ḥazm, who treated the Qur’ān as a clear, explicit, without ambiguities textual revelation, had no interest in deciphering the divine authorial intentions and limited jurists’ freedom of interpreting the text to identifying its literal, apparent meaning. Moreover, their approach of the Qur’ān curtailed the understanding of law to a set of linguistic rules, ignoring the possible moral objective that founded the prescriptions.\(^\text{18}\) Zāhīrī hermeneutics, in opposition to other Sunnī schools, generated a stricter understanding of the Qur’ānic commands as obligations instead of possible recommendations. In this manner, they confined the meaning of the legalistic and social verses to what it is written explicitly in the Qur’ānic text, rejecting the otherwise accepted exegetical methods of analyzing verbal implications and analogy.\(^\text{19}\)

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17 Andani, Revelation in Islam, pp. 17-19.
19 Idem.
2.2 Ashʿarī and the Hermeneutics of Ambiguity

On the other hand, the followers of Abū l-Ḥassan al-Ashʿarī’s theory of revelation (b. 260/873-74-d. 324/935-36), despite some minor internal ideological differences, distinguished – ontologically and formally – between God’s Speech (kalām Allāh), subsisting in God’s Essence as an uncreated, eternal divine attribute that possesses an eternal meaning (maʿna) – namely non-verbal commands, prohibitions, information – and its created expression, the Qurʾān. The Arabic Qurʾān transmitted through Jibrīl to prophet Muhammad is only a verbal-linguistic recitation (qirāʾa), or indication (dalāla), compounded of sounds and letters. This more complex Ashʿarī view on revelation allowed constructing a hermeneutics of ambiguity that lead to a higher intellectual and interpretative humility and simultaneously freedom of the Qurʾānic interpreter. For instance, Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (b. 338/950-d. 403/1013) admitted that differentiating between the divine meanings of God’s speech itself and the created words of the Qurʾān forces us to engage in an unlimited, overwhelming process of rational deliberation and interpretation of the Qurʾānic terms and phrases. This process is based on a large, unquantifiable possible additional evidence and it aims to identify the scope and the exact, inner meanings residing in God. The inherent uncertainty and ambiguity of this hermeneutical challenge justified the legitimacy of an almost open process of flexible, socially responsive interpretations, avoiding thus the canonization of some authoritarian jurists’ interpretations.

From the perspective of the theory of revelation, Ashʿarī identifies God’s eternal speech as the Pre-Text and its created expression as the Text. Generally speaking, the theological/kalām hermeneutics remains captive in a dual approach. It continues to seek the Truth of the Pre-Text, but confines the rational investigation of the Pre-Text about the Pre-Text and the Text itself to the Text. Moreover, it oscillates between a literal and metaphorical understanding of the meanings of the Text, within the constraints of the belief that to humans are cognoscible only the limited expressions of the truth of the Pre-Text transposed in the words of the Text. This type of hermeneutics does not integrate in the logic of the humanist hermeneutics, because it confines the God’s speech only to what it is expressed or expressible in the Qurʾānic Text and it does not acknowledge the Prophet’s contribution to the formation of the Text.

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20 Andani, Revelation in Islam, pp. 307-309.
Moreover, Ashʿarī hermeneutics does not recognize that the product of the revelation, the Text, unavoidably also reflects the interaction with a specific human cultural context.

I have mentioned that Ashʿarī hermeneutics identifies and accepts the ambiguity and polysemy of the Qurʾānic text and opts for a more open interpretation of the Text. However, the solely fact that it recognizes the active human deliberative process in the construction of meaning from the text, does not mean that it can also manage to avoid the major pitfalls of authoritarian hermeneutics. By “authoritarian hermeneutics” I refer to a hermeneutics that “involves equating between the authorial intent and the reader's intent, and [that] renders the textual intent and autonomy, at best, marginal”.

The epistemological supposition that founds the authoritarian hermeneutics is that interpreter's subjectivity can be eluded or diminished, so that the possibly objective interpreter to be able to transmit, using an empirical methodology, pure collected facts – textual proofs (nass).

Authoritarian hermeneutics nourished a type of Text idolatry that finally strangulated the communication with Pre-Text and a larger Con-Text, conflating – juridically – despotically, inevitably human, interpretations of the Divine Will with the Divine Will itself.

2.3 Muʿtazili and Minimalist Hermeneutics

Paradoxically, the Muʿtazili theories of revelation did not have the hermeneutical results that were expected from a theory that considers Qurʾān to be created. Muʿtazili theories of revelation assumed that God’s uncreated and eternal Justice determines His Will that it is expressed, for the wellbeing of His creatures, through God’s created, made, divided Speech as an Arabic Qurʾān, temporally generated as a response to historical events. This Qurʾān contains the intended commands, prohibitions, information, namely the legal obligations and the normative-ethical value of various actions that God wanted to communicate to human beings.

For example, for ʿAbd al-Jabāb (d. 415/1025), God’s Speech/kalām is not an attribute of His Essence but only one of God’s actions – actions that, rationally analyzing, cannot be but good, trustworthy, beneficial and produced in time.

This speech act is heard by angels and its reproduction is further dictated verbally for over twenty years by Angel Jibril to

25 Abou El Fadl, Speaking in God's Name, pp. 128, 67.
the Prophet who simply recites the Arabic reproduction of the divine created Speech to his community.28

ʿAbd al-Jabbār’s argumentation was based on the premise that Qurʾān is not a source of theological knowledge per se, this being already achievable through reason and human nature, nor a performative speech that tries to create new moral human relationships. On the contrary, Qurʾān is an informative set of statements regarding divine law, a source of jurisprudential knowledge accessible to human comprehension.29 The pragmatic purpose of the Qurʾān leads Muʿtazili to assert a rather minimalist and literalist legal hermeneutics (ʾuṣūl al-fiqh) based on the principle of clarity that axiomatically tries to suppress textual ambiguities. The Qurʾānic text cannot be but clear and reliable if God is just and if the textual intent of conveying laws is purely informative. Furthermore, the textual intent is clarified by other explicit and prompt, not delayed, supplementary and explanatory Qurʾānic evidence.30 The Muʿtazili pragmatically centered hermeneutical suppositions of achieving unambiguous, certain Qurʾānic meanings were nevertheless doubled by a more flexible practice that recognized the use of analogy and interpretation as a mean of reconciling conflictual Qurʾānic evidence.31

Puzzling enough, despite postulating the created nature of the Qurʾān and practicing the metaphorical interpretation in theological hermeneutics, Muʿtazili legal hermeneutics did not allow the development of a contextualist historical Qurʾānic interpretation. Their understanding of the function of revelation as an indicative sign that conveys descriptive information regarding human beings’ legal duties blocked any important tendency of extensive historical contextualization. Using Ahmed’s conceptual distinctions, we can conclude that Muʿtazili could have understood the (Qurʾānic) Text as a clear and exclusive knowledge of a part of the Pretext. However, from Andani’s perspective, the Muʿtazili conceptualization of the Pre-Text/the Revelatory Principle is resumed to God’s Will as determined by God’s Justice. Even if could be also so, Muʿtazili recognized an access to other types of knowledge of the Pre-Text that is not via Text, but via reason, like the theological knowledge, and this part was exploited by later modernist and progressive Muslim interpreters like Abu Zayd, mentioned below.

2.4 Legal Pragmatic Hermeneutics

After the 5th/11th century a more pragmatic legal hermeneutics started to dominate the major Sunnī legal schools that opportunistically combined the Ashʿarī interpretative flexibility with the authoritarian proclivity of arrogating to the own jurist’s interpretation the very divine, so-called obvious, transparent, indisputable meanings of God’s Speech itself. In the name of a simplistic legal reading of Qurʾān were thus camouflaged the interpreter’s own unavoidable axiological subjectivity and ideological bias. For example, the Ḥanbalī Abū Yaʿlā Ibn al-Farāʾ (d. 458/1066) disregarded his own theological presupposition of an eternal God’s speech and treated the Qurʾān jurisprudentially as a socially relevant act of speech. This hermeneutical strategy allowed him to expand the possible legal Qurʾānic content and to consider it either as a clear, self-explanatory, literal meaning of the revelation, or as a default meaning that we must deviate from on the basis of other interpretative evidence invoked in the process of legal interpretation. This ambivalent approach of the Qurʾān reflected the various requirements of his own subjective knowledge, interests and social context but still within the constraints of his scholarly tradition.

In Ahmed’s terms, the discursive hermeneutical engagement present in fiqh/Islamic law accepts ontologically the Revelatory Premise of the Pre-Text, but it denies its actual, concrete, social-actionable and probative epistemological value. The Pre-Text is considered to be either exclusively comprehensible by the prophets, or a source of subjective, personal truths. Methodologically, the Pre-Textual jurisprudential values such as underlying principles/ʿusūl, values/ahkan and ratio legis/ʿilal al-ahkan are identified as self-evident, transparent meanings of the Text via the statements of the Text and the legal methodology of the Text. In a nut shell, legal Qurʾānic hermeneutics does not engage directly with the Truth of the Pre-Text, but only with its expressions in the Text itself, and their inevitable use of reason is confined to the relation with the Text. Inevitably, the law will therefore propose a truth that is “public, objective, non-hierarchical and socially-actionable”, a prescriptive truth that orders the domain of the Seen.

32 Of course, there are nuances and differences within this category that will not be discussed here due to article length constraints.
2.5 Philosophical Peripatetic Muslim Theories of Revelation – Pre-Text and Reason

Philosophical Peripatetic Muslim theories of revelation are based on the theory of prophecy. For Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (b. c.259/872-d. c.339/950), for example, the philosopher-prophet-lawgiver is granted revelation by God through the mediation of the Active Intellect’s (al-ʿaql al-faʿāl) emanation to his faculty of representation and his perfect imagination. The Active Intellect is the ultimate source of knowledge that transmits universal concepts to humans, including the content of revelation, ensuring the connection between the spiritual and physical realm through a process of emanation. The Active Intellect, besides being the Aristotelian actualizer of the human intellect, is also the most proximate transcendent intelligent; intellect, “the divine being that infuses the sensible world with intelligence and intelligibility [...] is the angelic giver of forms”. We notice here the symbolic understanding of the angel of revelation as the Spirit, the Active Intellect itself that, while being in conjunction with the prophet's soul, emanates/produces the revelation. The union with the Active Intellect, that takes place only after a gradual development of the prophetic intellect, coincides with the perfect man's achievement of the highest degree of human intellection – the Acquired Intellect (ʿaql al-mustafād) – that allows the receiving of the revelation and felicity. The prophets' faculty of imagination allows them to receive abstract knowledge, “intelligibles directly from the source as well as through an engagement with the sensible intermediaries”, and to transpose that knowledge into a figurative language (parables, metaphors) that can be understood by ordinary listeners. The direct acknowledgement of the prophetic agency in the process of revelation is a mark of humanist hermeneutics.

Ibn Sīnā (b. 370/980-d. 428/1037) extends Al-Fārābī’s theory of prophecy and develops a philosophical epistemology in a rationalist neo-platonic hierarchical and emanationist vision of cosmos and humankind. For Ibn Sīnā, the highest action or process of Self-knowing, namely “the perfection proper to the rational soul” necessitates for the “rational soul to become an intelligible world in which there is impressed the form of the cosmos and the cosmos’ intelligible order... until the entire configuration of existence is

42 Al-Farabi, *On the Perfect State*, pp. 244-245.
completely contained within the soul itself.” Nevertheless, there is a difference between the prophetic intellect that, while being in conjunction with the Active Intellect, accesses the secondary intelligibles without the mediation of thinking through an instantaneous discovery, the non-discursive intuition (insight)/al-hads, “an inspiration of the Active Intellect in all things”, and the philosophical (acquired) intellect that must cultivate ethical virtues and, through discursive thinking/al-fikr, finally conjoin with the Active Intellect. Like Al-Fārābī, Ibn Sinā considers that the angel of revelation, the Spirit, is the Active Intellect, the received emanating power that descends on the prophets and only in their imagination takes a physical form. Both the philosopher and the prophet can perfect, under the supervision of the intellect, the power of the creative imaginative prophecy that allows them to receive the symbolic expressions of the emanation of the Active Intellect, have a sensory experience of prophecy and also express their teachings figuratively, symbolically and persuasively. Muslim philosophers make a distinction between the original revelation, accessed through a different superior epistemological mode, and the product of revelation, the Qurʾān. The revelation is practically filtered, translated and adapted by the prophets according to the level of comprehension of their audience and finally delivered under a discursive form. The expression of the revelation is imbued by the prophets’ own understanding and linguistic preferences and limited by the current knowledge and social realities of their human receptors. Like Al-Fārābī, Ibn Sinā admits thus that the content of the Qurʾān reflects the human agency of the Prophet. All these, as we have explained at the beginning, are elements that can be attributed to a humanist hermeneutics.

Ibn Sinā continues to explain the inevitably epistemological hierarchy transposed in the cosmological and human-social domains: the superior Real-Truth (al-ḥaqāʾiq) can be accessed only by superior human intellects and a lesser version of this Truth, communicated via prophets, is prescribed to the lesser human intellects. Hermeneutically this means that the Qur’anic text represents only a useful adapted form of that Truth comprehensible by the common, ignorant people’ intellect that need simile, symbols and other figures of

46 Azadpur, Reason Unbound, p. 60.
48 Azadpur, Reason Unbound, pp. 61-63.
speech to access the deeper, non-discursive meanings. In order for common people to socially benefit from the divine guidance, prophets also translate the transcendent Truth into an ethical and religio-political program. However, adds Ibn Sinā, the Qur’anic injunctions and prescriptions “are not intrinsically true, but only instrumentally so”, meaning they maintain the same degree of authenticity and validity as other forms of Truth without reclaiming to contain the exclusive, ultimate meaning.

In Ahmed’s terms, Muslim philosophers practically subjected the Text of Revelation to the universal Pre-Textual Truth of the Revelatory Reason of the cosmos. Philosophers engaged hermeneutically only with the Real-Truth extracted directly from the Pre-text through Reason, generating private and hierarchical philosophical truths. The mediation of the Text is necessary only for the non-philosophers. In fact, Reason was the Revelation itself, the Pre-Text not only of the Text, whose inferior, limited, discursive (Qur’anic) meanings are completely contingent on the prior, higher and universal meanings of the Pre-Text cognoscible by reason, but also of the cosmos/God’s Rational creation itself. Cosmos is just an expression and enactment of the divine Reason, therefore also intelligible and accessible to reason.

We notice here how cosmos was accepted as an equally valid source of knowledge and divine revelation. This extended epistemological fluidity is also definitory to humanist hermeneutics. Furthermore, another characteristic specific to humanist hermeneutics is Muslim philosophers’ acceptance of the Prophet’s agency in determining the verbal content of the Qur’ān.

2.6 Ismā‘ilish Hermeneutics and the Ample Historical Contextualization

A more complex situation we find in Ismā‘ili theories of revelation that preserve the distinction between God’s Creative, Incorporeal and Eternal Speech as a Divine Universal Light reflected in the spiritual and corporeal worlds, and the Qur’ān. The Qur’ān represents only prophet Muhammad’s symbolic articulation (Arabic words and commands, parables, allusions)/taprivation of the real-truths of the God’s Speech initially received as a non-verbal divine inspiration/wahī.

References:

49 Ahmed, What is Islam?, pp. 11-12.
50 Azadpur, Reason Unbound, p. 61.
52 Ahmed, What is Islam?, p. 520.
55 There are some differences between the pre-Fatimid Ismā‘ili, non-Fatimid Ismā‘ili Neoplatonic, Fatimid Ismā‘ili, Ismā‘ili Neoplatonic theories of revelation as there are some differences between the different Ash‘ari followers’ theories of revelation or Mu’tazili, Ḥanbali or Maturidi’s, but here we mention only the common elements. For more details see Adnani, Revelation in Islam.
and taʾyūd.56 The Prophet, the locus of manifestation of the Universal Intellect, recites the Arabic Qurʾān and legislates the sharīʿa that is reduced to a merely exoteric expression (al-ẓāhir) of God’s Speech. The interpretation of the Qurʾān requires the Ismāʿīlī form of hermeneutics of the Imams known as taʾwil or revelatory exegesis, the esoteric expression (al-bāṭin) of God’s Speech, that effectively “returns” the symbolic truths of the Revelatory Products to the real-truths of the Revelatory Principle.57 This means that in Ismailation the revelation can also take a “living personal” form, namely the Prophet or the Imam that is “the speaking kitāb of God and the speaking Qurʾān, to whom the oral and written manifestations of the Qurʾān remain subordinate”.58

Unavoidably, such a construction of revelation that admits and explains the prophetic creative agency in producing the Qurʾān will hermeneutically treat the Arabic Qurʾān as being conditioned by the cultural, social and historical circumstances of the 7th century Hijaz. This historical contextualization of the product of the revelation is specific to humanist hermeneutics. Engaging in historical contextualization, Ismāʿīlī consider that the Qurʾān can be read and interpreted also as a literary, artistic, historical, ethical and theological text.59 The hermeneutical consequence is a higher flexibility in approaching the juridical and, in general, social Qurʾānic injunctions, while taking into consideration the contemporary evolution of human knowledge and social mentalities. On a soteriological level, the Ismāʿīlī hermeneutics leads to a pluralist religious view based on the recognition of an internal, esoteric unity that bonds different revelatory discourses and religious traditions. Ismāʿīlī hermeneutics clearly takes the Pre-Text into consideration when interpreting the Text and emphasizes, in a Ṣūfī manner, the connection that exists between interpreter and interpreted. The Imam itself, while embodying a form of revelation, represents the purest and highest epistemological authority capable of acceding to and transmitting the real-Truths of the Text. Historical contextualization and the accent placed on various ways, besides the textual one, of accessing the Pre-Text, with their socio-political relevant corollary, the religious and soteriological pluralism, allows us to identify at least parts of the Ismāʿīlī hermeneutics as humanist hermeneutics.

2.7 Ṣūfī Theories of Revelation – Pre-Text and Existential Knowledge

We have seen how the philosophical models of revelation are constructed in consonance with an anthropocentric epistemology based on the idea of the

56 Andani, Revelation in Islam, pp. 568-569.
57 Andani, Revelation in Islam, pp. 574-575.
59 Andani, Revelation in Islam, pp. 737, 740.
perfectibility of the human being’s self-knowledge/self-awareness that values the discursive, rational syllogistic reasoning as a way to access the Real-Truth (al-haqāʾiq). This anthropocentric theme is further developed as an experiential based epistemology, namely as a mystical holistic cultivation of all human faculties of knowing – body, mind, spirit, in Ṣūfī approaches of revelation. For instance, Mullā Ṣadrā Shirāzī (b. c.980/1571-2-d. 1050/1635) applies a holistic and transcendental philosophical method in understanding the Qurʾanic revelation within the frame of theoretical Sufism. His metaphysical, cosmological, psychological, theological, and soteriological investigations of revelation, that are inextricably intercorrelated and share common epistemological suppositions, are finally rooted in his ontological doctrine regarding the primacy/fundamentality of being (ʾaṣālat al-wujūd), the unity of the reality of existence (wahdat ḥaqīqat al-wujūd), and modulation/gradation in the levels of being (tashkik al-wujūd). Ṣadrā’s fundamental ontological principle asserts the existence of an undefinable, unique being, the ultimate reality, God’s Essence (dhāt) and mercy (rahma), a dynamic principle that cannot be known in and of itself but only through its multiple instantiations. This self-individuation of being constitutes in fact the cosmic order.

Qurʾān, as God’s Word (kalām), is just the first delimitation, instantiation of being. The being remains hidden and also completely manifest, being identifiable with God’s Command [ʾamr] – “Be!” – through which things are existentiated when God’s Word emerges from its latency and silence within the Essence. God’s Command is higher and above all engendered things and cannot be encompassed. The primary instantiations of the originating Command, namely the intellective and disembodied products issued by God’s Command, are God’s Perfect Words. God’s Perfect Words are intermediaries that transmit the divine will from divinity to God’s Perfect Words’ instantiations/shadows that constitute the scroll of being in the cosmos/created world, the God’s Book (kitāb Allāh), more specifically to the entities of all the existent things that are signs [ʿayāt] of Allāh. There is an ontological and epistemological connecting thread between divinity, the origin of everything, and creation.

60 Mullā Ṣadrā is just one example of philosophical Sufism.
65 The highest and the most inaccessible of God’s Words is Qur’an.
The same connection is expressed in a different manner in Ibn Sīnā’s ontology for whom God, the sole Necessary Existent (wājib al-wujūd) upon which all other existents are necessarily contingent, manifests His Essence and Existence as Love.

The fact that Ṣadrā parallels this doctrine of fundamental ontological and metaphysical monism with a consonant epistemology and soteriology has a hermeneutical relevance. Not only that Qurʾān, as a prototype of being, is both one and multileveled in a scale of gradual intensity (shidda) and authenticity, but Qurʾān’s levels correspond to the levels of being and to the levels of human being. The closer the being is to the origin of its process of self-concretization, the more intense its reality, its ultimate nature manifests.67 The human being cannot comprehend and interpret more accurately the Word of God without simultaneously engaging in a deeper taʾwil/interpretation, discovery and returning of her/his own soul/ego to unity, to its true undifferentiated, transcendent Origin/Self. Self-knowledge, meaning the knowledge of the heart, the “God-given knowledge”, explains Ṣadrā, implies simultaneously more presence and being. Immersing in the depth of the Self is a prerequisite for penetrating the being and the heart of the Qurʾān as a prototype of being.68 The interpreter who achieve the excellence in (self) knowledge and presence is called al-Insān al-Kāmil, the Perfect Man.69 “Being can only be known by visionary presential knowledge (al-ʿīlm al-ḥuḍūrī al-shuhūdī),”70 asserts Ṣadrā. Since being is presence, this means that knowledge, namely the experience of its reality, is possible only through a non-conceptual and intuitive ‘tasting’ (dhawq) that starts with self-knowledge.71 Furthermore, that is why, continues Ṣadrā in Asfār, “metaphysical doctrines can only be grasped by inner revelation (mukāshafat bāṭiniyya), secret contemplation (mushāhadat sirriyya) and existential investigations (muʿāyanat wujūdiyya) and cannot be really known through rehearsing discursive doctrines.”72 However, philosophical, demonstrative intellectual inquiry is not rejected or seen in opposition with the intuitive, inner disclosure of truth, but conceived in a relation of complementary.73 Ṣadrā’s preferred epistemological model remains the immediate and infallible presential knowledge that is predicated upon an existential unification of the intellecting subject and its intelligible object, being-intellecting and being-intellected constituting

68 Rustom, The Triumph of Mercy, p. 43.
69 Rustom, The Triumph of Mercy, p. 84.
70 In Ṣadrā, Asfār, 1: 413. Cited in Rizvi, Mullā Ṣadrā and Metaphysics, p. 89.
71 Rizvi, Mullā Ṣadrā and Metaphysics, pp. 89-91.
72 In Ṣadrā, Asfār 11: 326. Cited in Rizvi, Mullā Ṣadrā and Metaphysics, p. 25.
73 Rizvi, Mullā Ṣadrā and Metaphysics, p. 4.
just simple interdependent correlatives. The true knowledge consists in uniting with the Active Intellect. We can notice here a type of humanist hermeneutics that recognizes the major role that the interpreter plays in the process of interpretation and that does not remain confined to a binary opposition between the Text, the object of interpretation, and the Reader, the subject engaged in interpretation. The same theme will be adopted by Sa’diyya Shaikh in the contemporary period, as explained below.

In Ṣadrā’s theory of revelation, there is a fluid communication and correspondence between being, Qurʾān, knowledge of the book of the universe and of the human soul. Not only that the revelation is not frozen in its discursive, textual form, the Qurʾān, not only that self-reflexivity and Cosmos are seen as valid sources of manifested revelation, but Ṣadrā ontologically justifies the epistemological fluidity that engages simultaneously the Self, the Text, and the Cosmos. Inherently, the hermeneutical process is indelibly correlated to the interpreter’s own existential and epistemological evolution stage. This acknowledgement is another characteristic of humanist hermeneutics. The textual Qurʾānic interpretation, considers Ṣadrā, can either be confined to its superficial, outer/exoteric reading based on grammar, lexicography, dialectical theology/kalām, and law/fiqh, as “scholars of the husk” prefer, or returned to its innermost reality through the reading applied by one of the people of the heart, the possessor of a deep understanding. Furthermore, in Ṣadrā’s theory of prophecy, we notice again the recognition of the active and pragmatic role the prophets’ imagination plays in the process of revelation. Imagination is conceived as an intermediary instrument between the power of political leadership and the power of pure contemplation, a particular materialization of the concept of “the imaginal world” residing and mediating between the intelligible and sensible worlds. Imagination empowers prophets, including prophet Muhammad, to transpose the divine truths in a digestible and impactful manner for the ordinary believers, testifying for the active involvement of the human mind and understanding in the process of rendering and making intelligible for others a divine revelation.

Similarly, epistemologically, the Sufis engage in kashf, in a direct, personal, holistic, existential and experiential revelatory comprehension of the Pre-text of the Revelation, of the Divine Existence that is the Real Truth and Meaning from and in the Unseen, that is beyond and behind the Truth of the Text and

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74 Rizvi, Mullā Ṣadrā and Metaphysics, pp. 92-93.
75 Rustom, The Triumph of Mercy, pp. 41-42.
is also cognoscible via the existential knowing of the cosmos, an expression of the Divine Existence of the Pre-Text. Hermeneutically, according to the Ṣūfī approach, the language of the Text of the Qurʾān is conceived as ‘ishārāt – “pointers, indicators, allusions” to the higher Unseen Truth of the Pre-Text. The Text itself is just a finite, mediated, linguistically confined Representation of the Infinite Real Truth of the Pre-Text that was accessed by the visionary prophetic Imagination and rendered in an accessible form for the persons who are not able (yet) to access directly the Real-Truth (al-ḥaqāʾiq). If both philosophy and Sufism are explorative projects concentrated on the domain of the Unseen, given the nature of the Text itself/the Qurʾān as an interpretation of a divine message, the exegetical engagement could be understood, in fact, as a second-hand type of hermeneutics, an interpretation of an interpretation.

Nevertheless, regarding the role of the Prophet Muhammad in the formation of the Qurʾān, as Rahman underlines, Ṣadrā has a partially different opinion than Al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā who considered that “the Prophet receives the Intellectual Truth as a totality which is then transformed by his power of imagination into a symbolic form and a verbal mode”. Because Ṣadrā supports the idea of an objective, ontological World of Symbols or Images or the “lower Angels”, he also asserts that “the Prophet’s mind becomes totally identified with the Active Intelligence both at the intellectual level and the imaginative level – that is to say, it is not the Prophet’s mind which creates – although the Prophet has an inner psychological and unconscious compulsion – the symbolic or imaginative truth but his mind ‘perceives’ or rather ‘becomes’ that truth as well as the intellectual truth.” However, the Prophet does not possess an imitative knowledge, but a reasoned one, because he does not blindly follow the Angel’s words or the Qurʾān, but comprehends the objectives of these words and infallibly interprets the verbal message.

In the second part of the article I will explore more contemporary examples that prove the connection between the Islamic theories of revelation and Qur’anic hermeneutics in order to allow me later to extract and succinctly explain the main characteristics of a humanist hermeneutics.

80 Idem.
81 Rahman, The Philosophy, p. 159.
3 Contemporary Theories of Revelation and Humanist Hermeneutics

New theories of revelation constructed in the modernist/progressive frame of contextualist scholarship have emerged since the second half of the last century, trying to dismantle the contemporary widespread supposition of Qurʾān being conceived as the literal Word of God and of the prophet Muhammad as a passive receiver and transparent conveyer of revelation. A contextualist “humanistic” approach of revelation, as Ali Akbar names it, starts to substitute this heavily literalist/textualist view by recognizing that the human recipient of the revelation, prophet Muhammad, contributed directly, in various ways, to the content of revelation that was simultaneously shaped by the broader social, cultural, political and economic conditions of the seventh-century Arabian society. Ali Akbar analyzes in detail how some of the Muslim thinkers that were engaged in the “reform theology” project – Fazlur Rahman, Abdolkarim Soroush, Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd – aimed at proposing concrete socio-legal humanist Qurʾānic interpretations by radically reconstructing the fundamentals of the theological understanding of revelation as such. Akbar explains the direct connection that exists between their specific theory of revelation, their Qurʾānic hermeneutics and their concrete interpretation of some socio-legal verses that can also have a political impact, tackling themes such as human rights, women rights, democracy and religious pluralism. For these authors, Qurʾān is not only a divine, sacred text originated in a transcendent realm, but also a human one. Qurʾān is a product of its initiator, God, but also inevitably of the Prophet’s mind and of their direct interaction with the socio-cultural conditions of the first recipient community.

3.1 Fazlur Rahman

Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988) conceived the Qurʾān as having a dual nature: a divine one as the infallible and truthful Word of God, the external source of revelation, and a human one. Rahman considers that the process of revelation was internal to the prophet Muhammad who received the revelation not directly from God, but mediated by a Spirit infused in the Prophet’s mind and producing “an actual mental sound, not a physical sound, and an idea-word,
The ontology of these mental idea-words is not very clearly defined in Rahman's writing, but he explicitly distinguishes "the total 'otherness' of the agent of Revelation from the conscious personality of Muhammad (PBUH) in the act of Revelation". At the same time, specifies Rahman, "the words heard were mental and not acoustic, since the Spirit and the Voice were internal to him, and there is no doubt that whereas on the one hand, the Revelation emanated from God, on the other, it was also intimately connected with his deeper personality." Prophet Muhammad actively transformed the mental idea-words and visions that descended as revelation in his heart into acoustic, sound-words that were impregnated by Prophet's personality, feelings, ideas, life experiences and transmitted to his immediate audience. This "humanistic" theory of revelation, as Akbar names it, was reflected into a double historicized hermeneutical approach to the Qurʾān. The process of Qurʾānic interpretation must take into consideration, on one hand, the role the socio-political and cultural elements of Arabian society and mentality play in decoding the ratio legis of Qurʾānic legal rulings, and, on the other hand, the active role that prophet Muhammad's concerns and personality played in the process of revelation. For instance, the ethico-moral content and goals of the Qurʾān, that must guide the understanding of the mutability of the law, were perceived as an expression of Muhammad's concerns and personality.

3.2 Abdolkarim Sorosh

Abdolkarim Sorosh (1945) proposes even a more radical humanistic and historicized theory of revelation. Revelation itself is conceived as a form of human religious inner experience, shaped in a socially constructed context and subject to a gradual process of expansion, evolution and enrichment. Revelation has a visual rather than an auditory nature, similar to poetic inspiration, including reveries, visions, images, insights and illuminations perceived

86 *Idem*.
87 *Idem*.
89 Our definition of humanist hermeneutics includes the content of Akbar's definition of "humanistic hermeneutics" but it expands and enriches it, adding a multidimensional view on its determinations.
through prophets’ faculty of imagination and intellect.\textsuperscript{91} In other words, for Soroush, revelation is just a historical, natural phenomenon whose content is the product of Muhammad’s human experiences determined by his response to his societal life, conditions, and specific historical events.\textsuperscript{92} Qur’an is an expression of prophet Muhammad’s personality, mind and heart, knowledge and imaginary. He is responsible for forming the formless truths, the non-verbal divine inspiration and mystical experience into his own concepts and words in the Arabic language of his audience.\textsuperscript{93} Of course, in this theory of revelation, the angel of revelation cannot be but an internal phenomenon, or an apparition in Muhammad’s imaginative faculty/psyche.

Soroush’s experimental and evolutionary nature of revelation requires the construction of a contextual hermeneutics that must understand the gradual process of the revelation of the Qur’an under its very specific socio-historical and cultural circumstances. At the same time, his theory recognizes the right and role of the contemporary Muslims to expand and further enrich the religious experience in accordance to the development of the nowadays society and knowledge.\textsuperscript{94} More specifically, from a hermeneutical point of view, Soroush was able to distinguish between the accidental, historical and cultural aspects of Islam that can be negotiated, challenged and transformed, hence his egalitarian, humanist, religious pluralist and democratic views in jurisprudence, and the absolute and universal essentials of Islam that are unchangeable and universally applicable.\textsuperscript{95} Furthermore, given the fact that Qur’an is nothing else but the Prophet’s interpretation of revelation, the Qur’anic interpretation must be recognized and practiced as an open-ended, evolutive, fallible, contingent, unavoidably subjective human endeavor of understanding.\textsuperscript{96} We can remark that Soroush is impressed by the unknowability of the Pre-Text and constantly emphasizes the epistemic limits of human understanding, fact


\textsuperscript{92} Soroush, Abdolkarim, Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush, ed. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 32-34. Hence the dialogical nature of the Qur’an that it is a performative revelation that requires an audience of listeners and speakers.

\textsuperscript{93} Soroush, Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam, pp. 32-37. Akbar, Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation, pp. 64-66, 75.

\textsuperscript{94} Akbar, Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation, pp. 70, 103-104.

\textsuperscript{95} Soroush, Abdolkarim, The Expansion of Prophetic Experience, Leiden, Brill, 2009, pp. 63-76. See also Akbar, Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation, p. 79.

\textsuperscript{96} Soroush recognizes the role that the interpreter’s prior knowledge, understanding, and biased views play in exegesis.

\textsuperscript{97} Soroush, The Expansion of Prophetic Experience, pp. 52-62.
that opens the Text to a never final process of interpretation that recognizes as sources of knowledge both the Cosmos, and the human soul, with all the corresponding (non-Islamic) sciences involved.

3.3 Abu Zayd Nasr

In both Rahman and Soroush’s theories of revelation, among other pre-modern and modern scholars, it is easily perceived the influence of Al Farabi, Ibn Sinā, and Mullā Ṣadrā. The Muʿtazili theological theory of revelation is partially speculated by Abu Zayd Nasr (1943-2010) who proposes a different theory of revelation, still “humanistic”, according to Akbar’s criteria. Aby Zayd focuses not on the active role of the Prophet in the process of revelation or on the symbolic angelic transmitter, but on the human nature of the Qurʾān as a historical, linguistic text. For Abu Zayd, Qurʾān is a time-bound and context-based historical product of the communicative interaction – that occurred in time and included dialogues, disputes, argumentations, negotiations – between God and His Prophet. Consequently, Qurʾān, as a text limited in space and expressed in a human language, as a construct and product of a conditioned human culture, must be distinct from the unlimited, transcendent, incomprehensible discursively Word of God. Qurʾān represents only a manifestation and humanization of the Word of God. The divine intention that exists beyond actual Arabic Qurʾānic words remains always epistemologically inaccessible to human beings, considers Abu Zayd. This supposition is what enables the author to plead for an interpretative pluralism. Readers cannot know the author’s divine intentions expressed in the Qurʾānic message, adds Abu Zayd, but identifying the manner in which the text was conceptualized by the first community of believers helps us discern between the stable, historical meaning (maʿnā) of the text and its changing significance (al-maghzā) that varies according to the text being read by a series of different human interpreters, situated in different epochs and societies. The hermeneutical consequence of his theory of revelation consists in the mandatory contextual approach of the Qurʾān. Qurʾānic meanings are constructed in a human language and therefore inevitably ingrained, shaped and impregnated by the seventh century Arabian socio-cultural and historical circumstances of the society in

98 Abu Zayd, Nasr Hamid, Rethinking the Qurʾān: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2004, pp. 22-35.
99 Abu Zayd, Rethinking the Qurʾān, pp. 25-35. Akbar, Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation, p. 133.
which the revelation emerged. Based on this hermeneutical strategy, Abu Zayd openly supports the intra- and inter-religious plurality and the enhancement of women’s rights.

3.4 **Sa’diyaa Shaikh**

In the contemporary period and within a contextualist hermeneutics, the feminist Muslim scholar Sa’diyaa Shaikh (b. 1969) explores the Śūfi view on revelation and epistemology. Contesting the subject-object binary mode of doing hermeneutics, Shaikh proposes a triadic, multidimensional model of hermeneutical science that includes the multiple, interweaving, dynamic realness of the sacred text/the Qurʾān, the world, and the self. Human being, as a dynamic and fluid reader, is a living moral agent engaged in a living embodied moral ethics. This reader can take part in a productive interpretation of the dynamic sacred text only if she/he adopts a mode of reading that demands simultaneously reading the self and reading the dynamic socio-political horizons. Śūfi hermeneutics is therefore, for Shaikh, simultaneously a spiritual practice and a journey of transformation between these three dynamic modes that inform each other: from the inner self to the text to the social horizon. The Muslim readers must take full responsibility for their own interpretations depending on their inner refinement, searching for the most beautiful meanings that can be derived from the text, and be responsive to the contextual demands of their time. Moreover, concludes Shaikh, if the Qurʾanic text is polysemic and presents “an ocean of interpretive possibilities”, our exegetical products must remain fluid and dynamic, continuing to unfold and preserve the Qurʾanic openness. Each of our individual and collective insights should always be treated as provisional. Most elements definitory for humanist hermeneutics are obvious in her presentation.

3.5 **Aksin Wijaya**

Given this obvious connection between the theory of revelation and hermeneutics, some contemporary scholars have even tried to relatively artificially and rather non-systematically construct a theory of revelation subordinated to their contextually-sensitive hermeneutical and interpretative pragmatic goals, especially in the field of legal hermeneutics and exegesis. For instance,

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102 All the ideas exposed here are extracted from the following conference presentation: Shaikh, Sa’diyaa, “Reconfiguring Normativities: Gender, Sufism and Feminist Hermeneutics”, International Workshop. *The Normative Verses (āyāt al-ahkām) in Modern Times: A Challenge Not Only for Muslims*, University of Tübingen: AIWG 6th-7th May 2022.
the Indonesian thinker Aksin Wijaya (b. 1974) proposes a tripartite model of God’s Speech that distinguishes between revelation/wahyu, the miraculous, non-intermediated, immediate, unreflective act of communication between the spiritual worthy Prophet and God, in a culturally independent and non-specific private language or sign system; the chosen – by the Prophet – Arabic words of the oral Qurʾān, the second act of communication between the Prophet and his original Arab audience that traps the divine universal message in the specific Arabic linguistic and cultural system; and the ‘Uthmanic Codex, the third communicative limiting process, decided by the Prophet’s Companions, after his death, in order to further entrap God’s message through the act of writing it – namely within the linguistic and cultural system of one particular tribe, the Quraysh.103 The hermeneutical consequence of this theory of revelation is that nowadays Muslims may have access to the remaining 30% of the universal, non-temporal divine message only if they engage in a process of linguistic analysis and also purge the ‘Uthmanic Codex by the Arab (and Qurayshi) cultural imperialism.104

Using his onto-metaphysical suppositions regarding divinity and his theory of revelation, Wijaya pleads for a wise and humanist Qur’anic interpretation that preserve the role of the interpreter in his/her clearly defined epistemological boundaries. This hermeneutical stance can also dismantle the legitimacy of the juridical practice of issuing aggressive verdicts against other Muslims’ supposed unbelief, polytheism or innovation. The argumentation is as follows. If the communicant (prophet Muhammad) cannot manipulate the position of the communicator (God), implicitly also manipulating the Qurʾān (the message), this means that the exegetes and jurists (and Muslims in general, the second communicants) belonging to radical, violent groups cannot arrogate for themselves God’s authority as a lawgiver. They cannot justify claiming the monopoly on the “authentic” Qur’anic interpretation, when the Prophet himself had a passive role in relation to divinity, acting as a merciful and humanity loving messenger that supported not an exclusive truth, but a variety of ways to truth based on the same Qurʾān.105

The Qurʾānic message is originated in God and “reflects His attributes and names which reflect the quintessence and epitome of God”, comments Wijaya.106 However, Qurʾān is also a historical, actual and futurist text as it reflected and directly addressed the historical context in which was revealed,
and also contained meanings intended and adaptive to different contexts of
time and space.\textsuperscript{107} Henceforth, continues Wijaya, the Qurʾān can be perceived
through a dual dialectical lens: as God’s representation, possessing plurisemantic and rich meanings that cannot be exhausted by the human interpretative capacity, and as a legitimate object subjected to human interpretations who are giving life and voice to the text through ījtihād. In Wijaya’s own terms, Qurʾān is a text that “undergoes development and alteration of meaning related to the context of its secondary communicant who interprets it”, but within the scope of the semantics of the Qurʾān.\textsuperscript{108} Consequently, Qurʾān possesses a relative autonomy: it is not subordinated to the second communicants’ interests, but also it is not “sacrificing the human being to defend God”. This means that the Qur’ānic meanings are produced as a result of a dialectic-synthetic process that involves tafsīr (the extraction of the semi-objective, outer message based on the interpretation of theologians and jurists), taʾwīl (the extraction of the mystical, symbolic, inner message based on the interpretation of Sūfī and philosophers) and also hermeneutics (the extraction of the praxis-based message, contextually-sensitive, constructed within the borders of an Islamic anthropocentric epistemology).\textsuperscript{109} Together, these hermeneutical methods will allow the derivation of a more comprehensive message of the Qurʾān, despite the fact that the essential message, accessible only to God and His Prophet, will remain in the domain of the “unthought”.

Wijaya further distinguishes between a theocentric Islamic paradigm that uses taqlīfī reasoning in order to find the divine message commended to humans (the focal point is the knowledge of divinity that gradually extends to that of the universe and of the human being) and an anthropocentric Islamic paradigm. The anthropocentric paradigm uses human rights as a basis of reasoning in order to find what God has given to human beings. The religion, originated in the divine sphere, transmitted through prophets who were finally ordinary men, aims for the benefit of mankind and thus cannot be understood but in the context of human interests, conditions and needs.\textsuperscript{110} Obviously, Wijaya recommends using the contemporary anthropocentric Islamic paradigm that


\textsuperscript{108} Wijaya, “Message to Mankind”, p. 1412.


allows for a *maqāṣidī* approach (approach centered on God’s good intention and purpose aiming the benefit of mankind, cogniscible through human intellect) not only to jurisprudence, but also to *tafsīr*. The *maqāṣidī* *tafsīr* becomes an alternative that can connect the textual-scripturalist *tafsīr* (dependent upon and serving the text) to the liberal-substantialist one (free from text, even deconstructing it). Epistemologically, the products of *maqāṣidī* *tafsīr* are always diverse, a result of * ijtihād* and endowed with only a degree of probability. They cannot be infallible, certain, unchallengeable or determined by a single authority, because the Qur’anic intentions and universal meanings represent God’s intentions which cannot be objectively known according to neither the teller/subject, text or context.

*Maqāṣidī* *tafsīr* is focused on the spiritual-contextual Qur’anic meanings, namely the divine messages that can be applied to all different contexts of space and time and can be identified through philosophical hermeneutics, the hermeneutics searching for the productive meaning that is meaningful to the reader. Because the divine intention does not consist only of spiritual-contextual meanings but it is also attached to Qur’anic textual meaning and its moral ideal, *maqāṣidī* *tafsīr* must combine the three hermeneutical approaches (*tahlīlī* *tafsīr*, objective hermeneutics, and philosophical hermeneutics) to reveal the textual, moral-ideal and contextual-spiritual dimensions of the Qur’ān meaning.

We notice in Wijaya’s anthropocentric hermeneutics the influence of Toshihiko Izutsu, Fazlur Rahman and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd in treating Qur’ān as a literary and historical text, deeply embedded in the Arabic culture. Moreover, it is also discernable the impact of Ashʿarī doctrine of God’s Speech in considering Qur’ān as possessing a transcendent, authentic, divine message. Simultaneously, Soroush and Hassan Hanafi’s contextual hermeneutical suppositions serve well his plea for a historical contextualization of the Qur’ān that allows for an “Indonesianization” of Islam. As Rüdiger Lohlker explained, this drive for a state-supported indigenization or “Indonesianization” of Islam is also reflected in the humanitarian approaches of Islamic law within Indonesian Islam as a “living process of adapting to ever-changing circumstances”. Islam *nusantara*, Indonesian Islam, rooted in

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111 For more details see Wijaya Aksin and Muzammil Shofiyullah, “Maqāṣidī Tafsīr”, pp. 461, 463, 465.
a normative Sufism since its formative period, is not accidently today focused on avoiding the antagonism between religion/law and local culture through the reviviscence of a new, non-restrictive *ijtihād*117 practiced in a contextualized, adaptive understanding of jurisprudence. Furthermore, Islam *nusantara* is centered on rejecting Arabism, especially in the form of – in various degrees – the religious intolerant, exclusivist, extremist Muslim Brotherhood, Wahhabi/Salafi, and jihadi orientations.118 The previously mentioned hermeneutical and ethical Indonesian debates are informing the Indonesian efforts of *ʿuṣūl al-fiqh* reconfiguration through a more expansive, philosophical and ethical view on *shariʿa* that gravitates around its "higher objectives"/ *maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*, understood in a non-restrictive manner, and purposes/ *maṣlaḥa* of Islamic law, namely around the ethico-moral concepts of justice and equity.119 The *fiqh* resulted from such a sensitive and adaptive approach of *shariʿa* ideals in relation to the evolution of social realities and human material and spiritual needs will unavoidable take a “humanitarian” turn. Problematic views of orthodox, authoritative Islam are consequently recontextualized and the equal rights of all human beings, especially to those categories historically discriminated as a group, for example, Non-Muslim or Muslim minorities and women, are protected and guaranteed.120 We see here the jurisprudential application of the hermeneutical principle that separates the normative from the circumstantial Qur’anic verses, namely the universal, unchanging religious norms from the contingent ones that depend on a specific circumstance of time and place. This last set of verses can be reinterpreted and adjusted in a flexible *fiqh*, according to the current evolution of knowledge and society, “based on an indigenized understanding, put in a globalized context” and universalized.121 The humanitarian Islam is not only a project that aims to the formation and consolidation of an Indonesian genuine school of thought, but it reclaims a global competence and impact in the Islamic world and beyond through the universal Islamic meanings that it proposes, without “excluding other Islamic and non-Islamic parts of the global society” but trying to find a common axiological and ethical language that does not poses Islam and modernity in opposition.122

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117 The process of individual jurisprudential reasoning.
118 Lohlker, “Fiqh Reconsidered”, pp. 188, 190, 192.
122 Lohlker, “Fiqh Reconsidered”, pp. 204-205.
Conclusion

The contemporary, trans-ideological, trans-theological and trans-sectarian academic research in the field of Islamic theories of revelation is just developing and still lacking in diversity, breadth and connection across disciplinary areas. Furthermore, there are even less studies that concentrate on the relation between the different theories of revelation and their impact on the Qurʾanic hermeneutics and its methodology. In this article I analyzed how various theories of revelation influence the construction of Qurʾanic hermeneutics, continuing to place a special accent on what I define “humanist hermeneutics”. We can conclude that more often than not the concept of revelation in the complex Islamic tradition was not confined only to the idea of a scripture/book, namely the recited and/or written Qurʾān. The concept of revelation was part of a meta-textual homology in which the cosmos and the human soul themselves were understood as revelations/books/divine signs that must be deciphered simultaneously, in a multidimensional epistemological frame that exceeds its discursive limitations and is subjected to similar hermeneutics.

The large variety of Islamic theories of revelation is an important factor in understanding not only the different hermeneutical approaches to the Qurʾānic text and their social implications from a humanist perspective, but also the essential connection that exists between the diverse conceptualizations of revelation itself, within and beyond the Qurʾānic recitation and/or text, the onto-metaphysical suppositions regarding divinity, and the main Islamic hermeneutical paradigms. I have noticed how, especially the Muslim philosophers’ and Șūfī’s theories of revelation recognize, in different degrees and manners, the distinction between the source of the revelation, the Pre-Text, and the discursive product of revelation, the Text that cannot comprise the whole knowledge or meanings present in the Pre-Text and that must be, consequently, interpreted through the rational or existential direct knowledge of the Pre-Text. Moreover, we have observed here the acknowledgement of the agency of the prophet Muhammad in the construction of the Qurʾānic text and its expression, as well as the interaction between the formulation of the Text and its social context. The most direct medieval theory of revelation models that explicitly asserts the Prophet’s agency in determining the verbal formulation and expression of the Qurʾān remains the Ismāʿīlī understanding of revelation. Philosophical Peripatetic Muslim theories of revelation also affirm the prophetic agency but insist less on this aspect comparing to the Ismāʿīlī thought. The Ẓāhirī, Muʿtazilī, Ashʿarī, and even some Șūfī models do not recognize the influence that the specific personality and the knowledge of the Prophet Muhammad exerts on the discursive content of the Qurʾān. In regard
to modernist models, Soroush and Wijaya theories of revelation recognized the Prophet's productive or creative agency the most, whereas Rahman and Abu Zayd have insisted less on this aspect. All these approaches of the Qurʾānic text are identified as common determinations of a humanist hermeneutics.

Acknowledgements

Research for the article was funded by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) fellowship.

Funding statement

This article received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) grant agreement, 101027399.

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