**Book Review**

Abdullah Saeed  
*Reading the Qurʾan in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach.*  

Muslim scholarship in the field of ‘Qurʾanic Studies’ has continued throughout history, and by the 20th century, especially from its second half as well as in the present century, this scholarship has seen an increased proliferation because scholars have approached the study of the Qurʾan in a variety of ways. Many Muslims, living both in Muslim countries and societies and in the West as well, have produced various prolific works on the various facets of this area.

One such distinguished Muslim scholar is Abdullah Saeed, a Muslim-Australian Academician, who has been very active in this field from many years. Abdullah Saeed (Sultan of Oman Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Melbourne) is an internationally recognized Muslim thinker and academician, who has been writing mostly on modern Islamic thought and has authored many works on the different aspects of Qurʾanic Studies, including such major works as *Interpreting the Qurʾan: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (Routledge, 2006); *Contemporary Approaches to the Qurʾan in Indonesia* (Oxford, 2005); *The Qurʾan: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2008), and *Reading the Qurʾan in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach* (Routledge, 2013).

*Reading the Qurʾan in 21st Century* deliberates on the development of Qurʾanic interpretation by highlighting modern debates around new approaches to its interpretation. Exploring how Muslims from various lego-theological, socio-political and philosophical backgrounds think about the meaning of relevance of the Qurʾan, it elaborates on how their ideas apply in the contemporary world. Providing a practical guide for interpretation, Saeed presents the principal ideas of a ‘contextualist approach’, which situates socio-politico-economic cum culturo-intellectual context. Besides, advocating a ‘flexible’ method of interpretation, with due recognition given to the earliest methods of interpretation, it tackles the issue from the modern perspective, with emphasis on the changing conditions and the need to approach
the Qur’an afresh today. The book focuses on these major themes: it reflects on ‘Textualism’ – one of the most dominant approaches to interpretation in the pre-modern period; covers such critical, crucial, and central issues such as identifying the hierarchical nature of Qur’anic values, criteria for using *ahadith* in interpretation; and examines, comparatively, pre-modern and modern interpretations on some hotly debated issues like ‘authority’ of men over women, Prophet Jesus’s crucifixion, *riba*/interest, and *Shura*-democracy relation.

Broadly speaking, making a case for a “contextualist approach to interpreting the Qur’an”, Saeed in this book provides a theoretical and practical guide for undertaking “contextualist interpretation”, i.e., the method, process, and technique of reading the Qur’an in light of “historical context of its revelation and subsequent interpretation”, with an aim “not to reduce but to expand the contemporary significance of Qur’anic teachings” (p. 3).

Dividing into four parts, the book consists of fifteen (15) chapters, including Introduction and Epilogue. Outlining the development of Qur’anic interpretation up to the modern period, part I, “Background and modern examples of contextualism: past and present” (chapters 1-4) provides a context in which modern debates on interpretation are taking place and highlights some of the key ideas associated with those debates. For example, in chapter 3, some of the interpretations of key Qur’anic texts by Umar al-Khattab (the second caliph, r. 634-44 C.E) are provided as an example of “an early form of a contextualist approach to [Qur’anic] interpretation” (p. 26), showing how they “approached the interpretation of Qur’an with due regard to the context . . . [and] in relation to changes” and circumstances: “a quasi-contextualist thinking” (p. 36).

Similarly, chapter 4, “A modern form of contextualism” explores some of the views, significant insights, ideas, and methodological principles, by some modern women scholars, for a “contextualist interpretation of the Qur’an” (p. 38). The prominent figures included are: Amina Wadud, Leila Ahmed, Asma Barlas, and Azizah al-Hibri; and the key issues they highlight include an emphasis on “macro context”, justice and fairness, non-patriarchal readings, and on reading the Qur’an holistically and intra-textually. Saeed puts forth that these Muslim scholars are “attempting to read the Qur’an in a contextualist manner, challenging textualist readings and pre-modern interpretations that support readings that were not favorable towards women” – thus, promoting a “gender-neutral reading of the Qur’an” (p. 47).

In Part II, as the title itself reveals, “Key ideas and principles of contextualist interpretation” (chapters 5-10) are presented. The ideas and issues covered are: revelation and contextualization; hierarchical nature of Qur’anic values; parallel texts from the Qur’an and dealing with the hadith; meaning in a contextualist framework; interpretation of the ‘fundamentals of the religion’;