RETHINKING ISLAMIC PEDAGOGY: THE INTERFACE OF THEOLOGY AND *TAFSĪR*

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Abstract

This article explores the conception of knowledge in two distinct yet related disciplines of the Islamic sciences—namely, theology and Qur’ānic exegesis. As this article is both a historical and an educational enquiry, it adopts an interdisciplinary approach in offering a critical analysis of the pedagogies through which Muslim scholars attained and transmitted such knowledge during the first few centuries of Islam. Its findings suggest that both disciplines ought to be studied in light of one another in a way that is relevant to the learners’ own contexts. The paper concludes by offering new perspectives in developing curricula for both disciplines in line with educational pedagogic research.

Keywords: Islamic pedagogy; Muslim theology; Quranic exegesis; Islamic Education, *Tafsir*

INTRODUCTION

The Arabs of Late Antiquity were a nation with a low literacy rate.¹ Situated in between the Roman Empire and the Sassanid Dynasty in Persia, the Arabian Peninsula was home to nomadic tribes who were yet to form a civil society. While writing was still uncommon, the Arabs had a strong oral tradition where the memorisation of ‘long, epic poems glorifying tribes and heroism in war’ was a cultural norm.² Such poems as the ‘Hanging Odes’ were the epitome of wisdom they possessed. The 7th century CE then saw an emergence of knowledge that was to revolutionise the world forever.

The advent of Islam gave rise to a genre of knowledge then known only by Jewish and Christian traditions. That is, the knowledge of the Divine. At the end of the first five verses revealed to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, the Qur’ān describes God as the one who ‘taught through the pen’ (96:4).³ The Qur’ān mentions not only the medium of knowledge transmission but also its content: as such, the Qur’ān asserts that God ‘taught man what he did not know’ (96:5). According to some exegetes,⁴ this refers to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ

¹ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn* (Damascus: Resalah Publishers, 2015).

² Firas Alkhateeb, *Lost Islamic History: Reclaiming Muslim Civilisation from the Past* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017), 4.

³ Passages of the Qur’ān are cited with the *sūrah* number along with the *āyah* number(s). All translations of Arabic texts, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

⁴ See Muḥammad al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi‘ li Ahkām al-Qur’ān wa l-Mubayyin limā Taḍammanathu min al-Sunnah wa Āy al-Furqān* (Beirut: Resalah Publishers, 2006).

himself, as is understood from another verse, ‘...and [God] taught you what you did not know’ (4:113). Elsewhere, the Qur’ān elucidates the two things of which the Prophet ﷺ was previously unaware: ‘Scripture’ and ‘faith’ (42:52). Inspired by the verse, this paper will take a closer look at the development of theology and Qur’ānic hermeneutics.

What is of interest to educationists is the conception of ‘knowledge’, along with the methods of its acquisition and transmission. As such, the central thesis of this paper will be to compare critically the perceptions of *‘ilm* (knowledge) and *ma‘rifah* (recognition) in theology with *tafsīr* (exegesis) and *ta‘wīl* (interpretation) in the science of Qur’ānic hermeneutics. Additionally, this paper will explore the methods of the acquisition and transmission of knowledge in both genres.

Theology

Conception of *‘ilm* and *ma‘rifah* in Islamic theology

The word *‘ilm* (knowledge) in the context of theology appears in the Qur’ān itself: ‘So, know (*fa‘lam*) that there is no god except Allāh’ (47:19). Likewise, the word *ma‘rifah* (recognition) too appears in the Qur’ān in a verse about the pagans of Makkah: ‘They recognise (*ya‘rifūn*) Allāh’s favour then deny it, and most of them are the disbelievers’ (16:83). Though not in the context of beliefs or creed per se, recognising (and rejecting) the favours and signs of God is directly relevant to theology, which is why the Qur’ān attributes this trait – of acquiring the knowledge but pretending otherwise – to the ‘disbelievers’, the pagans of Makkah.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ also used the word ‘recognition’ in the context of theology. As he dispatched his companion Mu‘ādh ibn Jabal to the ‘People of the Bible’ in Yemen, he said, ‘...the first thing you should call them to is the worship of Allāh.’ He continued, ‘If they recognise (*‘arafū*) Allāh, then tell them that Allāh has ordained upon them five prayers in their day and their night.’⁵ Accordingly, Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ (d. 1149) infers from this ḥadīth (as cited in al-Nawawī) that merely worshipping God and displaying His recognition does not, in fact, make one cognisant of God if it comes at the cost of denying a messenger. He adds that such unorthodox theological views as corporealism, anthropomorphism and the trinity are at direct odds with *ma‘rifah*.⁶ Therefore, it follows that traditional Muslim scholars like Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ understood *ma‘rifah* to not only be a recognition of God, but also a coherent theology that is befitting of God, as well as the acceptance of God’s final messenger.

The books of speculative theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*) build upon the sacred texts and engage in a philosophical justification for the claims in the Qur’ān.⁷ In his commentary to the Nasafī Creed, al-Taftāzānī defines knowledge as a ‘trait by which the mentioned [thing] becomes clear for the one who [has] it.’⁸ The Ash‘arite scholar and theologian al-Bājūrī prefers a simpler definition of *‘ilm* as articulated by al-Aṣṣfahānī – that is, to ‘comprehend a thing by its

⁵ Muslim: 19. See the third variant.

⁶ Abū Zakariyyā al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Damascus: Dār al-Fayḥā’, 2010).

⁷ While ‘speculative theology’ has become the conventional terminology, *‘ilm al-kalām* is a discipline that spans beyond theology to include physical theory and thus also cosmology. For a detailed treatment, see Alnoor Dhanani, *The Physical Theory of Kalām: Atoms, Space, and Void in Basrian Mu‘taẓilī Cosmology* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

⁸ Sa‘d al-Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-Nasafīyyah* (Karachi: Maktabat al-Bushrā, 2009), 39.

essence’.⁹ However, when discussing the meaning of *ma‘rifah*, al-Bājūrī maintains that it is a synonym of *‘ilm*, yet offers a different definition; here, he defines both *‘ilm* and *ma‘rifah* as ‘conviction [of something that is] congruent with reality, [based on] evidence.’¹⁰ He elaborates that each of the qualifiers denies its opposite from being considered ‘knowledge’: ‘conviction’ negates mere likelihood (*ẓann*), doubt (*shakk*) and imagination (*wahm*); ‘congruent’ negates beliefs that are factually untrue and incongruent with reality, such as the conviction of Christians with respect to the Trinity; and ‘evidence’ negates blind faith (*taqlid*). He categorically denies each of them (uncertainty, incongruence with reality and lack of evidence) from being *ma‘rifah*.

In short, Muslim theologians conceptualised *‘ilm* as a capacity that allows the living being to autonomously capture, to the level of certainty, a reality that was, until then, unknown to them.

Epistemology of acquiring theology

The Qur’ān, in numerous verses, reminds its readers and listeners of the human’s sources of gaining knowledge. In one verse, for instance, the Qur’ān says, ‘And God brought you out from the [wombs] of your mothers, when you [did] not know a thing; and He [gave] you hearing, eyesight and hearts, so you be thankful’ (16:78). Thus, the ears, eyes and minds are the epistemological sources of knowledge as per the Qur’ān. Consequently, this is the adopted position of Atharī theologians, who draw on textual hermeneutics as a primary source of theology.¹¹ The 12th century theologian al-Nasafī (as quoted in al-Taftāzānī, 2009) extends these sources to three broad principles: (i) the five senses, (ii) authentic testimony and (iii) reason. As such, the five senses include the natural and social sciences, as well as all empirical knowledge; authentic testimony includes history, religion and the humanities at large; and reason covers the metaphysics.

As for what type of knowledge is expected of a Muslim with regard to the validity of their faith, scholars of different theological leanings maintained polarised expectations of whom they consider a believer. In his commentary on the famous ḥadīth compilation *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, the 13th century ḥadīth expert al-Nawawī (d. 1277) cites Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 1245) that such speculative theologians as the Mu‘tazilites mandated a philosophical conviction in the existence of God – based on demonstrative evidences – for a person’s faith to be considered valid.¹² This was also the view of some Ash‘arite scholars like al-Sanūsī.¹³ However, this approach appears internally inconsistent, as there seems to be little to no evidence to substantiate this view; as such, it would be difficult to consider the Mu‘tazilite viewpoint a

⁹ Ibrāhīm al-Bājūrī, *Tuḥfat al-Murīd ‘alā Jawharat al-Tawḥīd* (Damascus: Maktabat Dār al-Daqqāq, 2002), 60. See also Rāghib al-Aṣḥānī, *Al-Mufradāt fī Ghariḥ al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, 2014), 347.

¹⁰ al-Bājūrī, *Tuḥfat al-Murīd*, 86.

¹¹ Hatem al-Haj, *Between the God of the Prophets and the God of the Philosophers: Reflections of an Athari on the Divine Attributes* (Highland Park: Independently published, 2020).

¹² See commentary under ḥadīth 12.

¹³ See al-Bājūrī, *Tuḥfat al-Murīd*.

valid Islamic position.¹⁴ Nonetheless, it is indeed one of many pedagogical approaches to theology that Muslims have taken, which happens to be in line with contemporary education theory. It can be said that the Mu‘tazilite approach to theology advocates an autonomous and experiential learning journey, thus opening the doors for healthy debate and challenges the ‘culture of compliance’, which Alexander asserts is a hindrance to progress in creating a healthy pedagogical discourse.¹⁵

On the other hand, those who leaned to a more purist, text-based approach (namely, the scholars of ḥadīth) maintained that the mere acceptance of an authentic testimony to the truth of Islam is sufficient for the validity of a Muslim’s faith. They draw this conclusion on the ḥadīth of Ḍimām ibn Tha‘labah, in which the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ accepted his faith on the basis of him recognising the truth of Islam from a short dialogue with the Prophet ﷺ, without demanding philosophical evidence.¹⁶ In essence, the Mu‘tazilites mandated reason-based evidence in order for one’s faith to be deemed valid, while the ḥadīth experts considered faith by authentic testimony to also be an acceptable way to recognise the oneness of God.

Methods of attainment and transmission of Islamic theology

In the lifetime of the Prophet ﷺ

In the initial days of Islam, during the Meccan period, the very first way the Prophet ﷺ transmitted theology to his then-wife, Khadijah, through narrating his own lived experience. Khadijah attained the theology through testimony, not only of the Prophet ﷺ himself but also of her cousin, the Judeo-Christian scholar Waraqah ibn Nawfal.¹⁷ This was the first of many instances of conversions to Islam, and authentic testimony appears to be the pedagogic approach the Prophet ﷺ had adopted during the private call (*al-da‘wah al-sirriyyah*).¹⁸ Later, when the time came for the public call (*al-jahr bi ‘l-da‘wah*), the Prophet ﷺ began addressing people for whom a testimony alone was not sufficient; consequently, he preceded the appeal to his trustworthiness by first offering a parable about an attacking army on the other side of the mountain.¹⁹ A learner-led pedagogical method, Sahin describes parables and storytelling as a ‘provocative and critical pedagogy’.²⁰ This pedagogical approach coincides with modern educational theory: Beetham & Sharpe emphasise that creativity in ‘guiding others to learn’ is a unique part of pedagogy that ‘deserves scholarship in its own right’.²¹ The Prophet ﷺ

¹⁴ It can be said that Bukhārī: 86 and Muslim: 905 appear to lend credence to this view, but the *kalām* literature did not appeal to this ḥadīth in support of it. That said, the ḥadīth in question is referring to people who lacked an internal belief, which is different from affirming faith by drawing on authentic testimony over philosophical reasoning.

¹⁵ Robin Alexander, *Essays on Pedagogy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008) 2.

¹⁶ Bukhārī: 63; Muslim: 12.

¹⁷ Bukhārī: 3.

¹⁸ ‘Alī Muḥammad al-Ṣallābī, *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah: ‘Arḍ Waqā’i’ wa Tahlīl Aḥdāth* (Mansoura: Maktabat Fayyāḍ, 2007).

¹⁹ Bukhārī: 4770; Muslim: 208.

²⁰ Abdullah Sahin, *New Directions in Islamic Education: Pedagogy & Identity Formation* (Markfield: Kube Publishing, 2013), 181.

²¹ Helen Beetham, and Rhona Sharpe, “An Introduction to Rethinking Pedagogy,” in *Rethinking Pedagogy for a Digital Age: Principles and Practices of Design*, ed. Helen Beetham and Rhona Sharpe (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 2.

continued this critical and reflective pedagogy well into the Medinan era, which is where an emergence of hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*) took place (9:101). The Prophet ﷺ draws a parable of different types of fruits to illustrate the nature of the believer and the hypocrite with respect to their reciting the Qur'ān. According to al-Bukhārī (d. 870), the Prophet ﷺ said:²²

The example of the believer who reads the Qur'ān is like the example of a citron: its fragrance is nice and its taste is nice. The example of the believer who does not read the Qur'ān is like the example of a date: it has no fragrance [but] its taste is sweet. The example of the hypocrite who reads the Qur'ān is like basil: its fragrance is nice [but] its taste is bitter. And the example of the hypocrite who does not read the Qur'ān is like the example of a colocynth: it has no fragrance and its taste is bitter.

Theology through Scripture

The Qur'ān produces original themes of arguments that were not 'familiar in the elite literature of the Greco-Roman world.'²³ Therefore, it would not be incorrect to assert that the theme of teaching Islamic theology through the means of a textbook can have its roots traced back to the Prophet ﷺ directly, as he taught theology primarily through the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān says that God 'sent to the Gentiles a messenger from among themselves who recites unto them His verses and cleanses them' (62:2). The term 'cleanses' (*yuzakkīhim*) refers to theological purity.²⁴ This later developed into a pedagogical method in itself, as will be discussed in the next section.

Being the cosmopolitan city it was, Madīnah was home not only to Muslims but also to the diaspora of a settled Jewish community. The need for engaging in comparative religion thus became inevitable. The 'People of the Bible' (*Ahl al-Kitāb*), hailing from a rich prophetic tradition, were already familiar with Scripture. As such, the Qur'ān called on the Prophet ﷺ to appeal to the Scripture when engaging with adherents to the Jewish faith (3:64). The Prophet ﷺ engaged with the Christians of Rome in the same way, as is evident from the letter he had written to the then-Emperor of the Byzantine Empire, Heraclius.²⁵

Political influence on theology

Later generations saw Muslims differ among themselves with regard to abstract theological issues. Blankinship questions the nature of such partisanship and sectarianism, however, as it is clear that their origins are not theological in nature but 'lay in political contestations that had little to do with credal or legal matters.'²⁶ It is true that much of these polemics are irrelevant to the core theology of Islam; however, such debates nonetheless made their way into the literature and played an important role in the pedagogy of the attainment and transmission of Muslim theology.

Ibn Yusuf notes that the integration of Hellenistic philosophy into Muslim theology gave rise to the Mu'tazilite influence on the ruling class, which, in turn, impacted how theology was

²² Bukhārī: 5427.

²³ Khalid Blankinship, "The Early Creed," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 34.

²⁴ al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'ān*.

²⁵ Bukhārī: 7; Muslim: 1773.

²⁶ Blankinship, "The Early Creed," 35.

to be passed on to the general populous, such that Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855) faced public persecution for refusing to renounce Sunni normativity.²⁷ This confirms the account by Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), who expounds the development of the *'ilm al-kalām* (natural theology) genre, to the point that it became so polluted with Hellenistic philosophy that pure theology no longer remains discernible from philosophy in the books of *'ilm al-kalām*. In other words, theology had moved away from a Qur'ān-centric pedagogical framework, as was the case in the early days of Islam. Instead, the Qur'ān and Sunnah became tools to justify new creed rather than its core epistemological sources.

In a critical tone, Ibn Khaldūn laments the pedagogical approach taken with respect to the theoretical debates on heresies, which have no significant bearing on real life. This indicates that Ibn Khaldūn considers theology to not only be about abstract beliefs but that such beliefs ought to have a relevance in one's practical life. As such, he prescribes his own pedagogical approach, which happens to be in line with contemporary educational research, as will be discussed in the next section.

Muslim theology today

Methods of acquiring and transmitting the knowledge of theology today largely remains as it was during the time of Ibn Khaldūn – that is, through theoretical debates in refutation of rival sects rather than an objective construction of creed. This remains the case in British institutes of Islamic higher learning, where the writer's own experience of formally studying theology was pedagogically questionable. Where in such subjects as Arabic or *fiqh* (jurisprudence) a number of texts of various levels are studied in a logical progression, theology is taught without a progressive development, and only one book is included in the syllabus – *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id al-Nasafiyyah*. This book is taught not with a focus on equipping the learner with the tools to understand the rational evidences for the existence of God, but, rather, with the polemical aim to debate centuries old peripheral issues that perpetuate the sectarianism that is unneeded in contemporary Britain, where Muslims are a minority who cannot afford to be divided. Instead, a radical change is required in the way theology is to be taught in institutes of Islamic higher learning.

Modern social science research stresses the need for concept-based learning, which invites learners to take a personal interest in the subject knowledge by encouraging self-reflection on their own lived experiences.²⁸ This motivates learning and is an evidence-based pedagogical method that leads to the attainment of knowledge in a holistic sense. The 15th century thinker Ibn Khaldūn appears to share the same sentiment. He maintains that what is of concern with regard to the study of theology is not the mere affirmation of faith but, rather, the development of a character trait that personifies the knowledge of theology. As such, he creates a dichotomy between *'ilm* (knowledge) and *ḥāl* (state), arguing that it is the *ḥāl* that is the objective of studying Islamic theology.²⁹ This is also consistent with recent conceptual

²⁷ Abdur-Rahman Ibn Yusuf, *Imām Abū Ḥanīfa's Al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained* (Santa Barbara: White Thread Press, 2007).

²⁸ Erickson, H. L., Lanning, L. A. & French, R., 2017. *Concept-Based Curriculum and Instruction for the Thinking Classroom*. 2 ed. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press Inc.

²⁹ Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*.

studies on the Qur'ān's proposed pedagogy of learning being that of a learner-led, reflective and transformative nature.³⁰

In light of the pedagogic concerns of classical Muslim thinkers, contemporary Muslim educationists as well as social scientists, radical changes ought to be considered with regard to the teaching of Muslim theology in 21st century Britain. If theology is to remain authentically Islamic, it must be Qur'ān-centric as it was during the time of the first generation of Muslims. If learning is 'a process, not a product',³¹ theology must be taught in a developmental way so as to foster learning and growth. If Muslim theology seeks to equip learners with a *ḥāl* that emotionally invests them on a personal level through their lived experiences, the content of the curriculum ought to include such ethical and scientific issues as the concept of slavery, sexual ethics and the various theories of evolution, which are some things young Muslims are grappling with in the present context. As such, including selected readings from Brown's *Slavery & Islam* (2019) into the curriculum can be considered, as the work is a modern attempt at justifying the Islamic understanding of slavery to a post-slavery American audience.

This is not to dismiss the need for *'ilm al-kalām*, however. Instead, after a rudimentary knowledge of the core creed of Islam, learners and teachers can benefit from the hermeneutical tools in the *kalām* literature when treating modern issues. Jackson's *Islam & the Problem of Black Suffering* (2014) is an example of contemporary scholarship on theodicy, which too could be introduced into the curriculum at Islamic institutes of higher learning within the western world. However, the Qur'ān and Sunnah must remain at the centre of the discourse if the curriculum is to remain purely and authentically Islamic. According to Günther, Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) proposed that even six year olds are taught ethics, morals and good behaviour through the Qur'ān.³²

Subsequently, this, gives rise to another crucial question regarding Qur'ānic hermeneutics: if the Qur'ān is to be the reference point for the discussions on theology and not a mere tool to justify sectarian agenda, how should Muslims engage in Qur'ānic hermeneutics in the modern world? This will be discussed after an exploration of the conception of *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* along with methods of knowledge attainment and transmission of the genre.

Qur'ānic hermeneutics

Conception of *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* in Qur'ānic hermeneutics

There are two words used in the classical Islamic tradition to denote the knowledge of God's intended meanings behind the words of the Qur'ān. The word *tafsīr* (lit. clarity) only once in the Qur'ān: 'And they bring you no parable without Us bringing the truth and a [response] better in clarity' (25:33). However, this verse is not in the context of interpreting Scripture. The word *ta'wīl* (lit. outcome) appears a number of times in the Qur'ān, the first occurrence being in the context of interpreting the ambiguous verses of the Qur'ān: 'And

³⁰ Sahin, *New Directions in Islamic Education*.

³¹ Susan A Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 3.

³² Sebastian Günther, "Be Masters in That You Teach and Continue to Learn: Medieval Muslim Thinkers on Educational Theory," *Comparative Education Review* 50, no. 3 (2006): <https://doi.org/10.1086/503881>.

none knows its outcome (*ta'wīl*) except Allah' (3:7). Like *'ilm* and *ma'rifah*, there have been scholars and exegetes who considered *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* synonymous. Perhaps the most famous case in point is Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), who opts for the word *ta'wīl* throughout his magnum opus *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*. In it, when commenting on the above verse, he defines *ta'wīl* as '*tafsīr*, end result and outcome.'³³ It is, therefore, clear that al-Ṭabarī considers *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* to be one broad category: interpreting the Qur'ān. This renders the demarcation by the contemporary scholar al-Ṭayyār questionable. He notes that those who considered *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* to be synonymous permitted the continuation of the above verse as 'And none knows its outcome (*ta'wīl*) except Allah and those grounded in knowledge;' and that those who made a distinction between the two insisted that 'and those grounded in knowledge' marks the beginning of a new sentence.³⁴ However, al-Ṭabarī is an example of an exegete who maintained not only that *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* are synonymous but also that the sentence ends as 'Allah', thus 'those grounded in knowledge' do not know the interpretation of the ambiguous verses of the Qur'ān.

Ibn Qutaybah al-Dīnawarī (d. 889) is the author of *Ta'wīl Mushkil al-Qur'ān*, a famous work treating the topics with which many struggle when interpreting the Qur'ān. There, he appears to use the word *ta'wīl* in the same way as al-Ṭabarī. However, he vehemently opposes the position that God would reveal verses that no human can understand.³⁵ This is in line with al-Ṭayyār's explanation. Ibn Qutaybah strengthens his argument by drawing on an authentic *ḥadīth* that the Prophet ﷺ once embraced his cousin Ibn 'Abbās and supplicated, 'O Allah, teach him wisdom and the interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of the Scripture.'³⁶ This is evidence that the Prophet ﷺ, at least according to Ibn Qutaybah, believed such verses could be understood by human beings. For the purposes of this paper, however, this *ḥadīth* suggests that the Prophet's ﷺ conception of *ta'wīl* appears to have been broad and inclusive of all matters related to interpreting the Qur'ān.

Other scholars, however, maintained the linguistic nuance in the terminological meaning of the said words. According to Saeed, al-Māturīdī (d. 944) understood *tafsīr* to refer to the original meanings and linguistic interpretation of the Qur'ānic verses, while *ta'wīl* refers to the rulings and implications that one derives from the given text.³⁷ From the contemporary scholars of Qur'ān, the Saudi-based academic al-Ṭayyār is a key figure who advocates this view. He defines *tafsīr* as 'explaining the meanings of the Noble Qur'ān.'³⁸ By emphasising 'meaning', he seeks to negate variant readings (*qirā'āt*), rulings and implications from being part of *tafsīr*. As such, he understands *tafsīr* to refer only to the linguistic interpretation and meanings of the Qur'ān.

³³ Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* (Giza: Dār Hujar, 2001), 5/222.

³⁴ Musā'id Sulaymān Nāṣir al-Ṭayyār, *Al-Taḥrīr fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr* (Jeddah: Markaz al-Dirāsāt wa 'l-Ma'lūmāt al-Qur'āniyyah, 2017), 14.

³⁵ See Ibn Qutaybah al-Dīnawarī, *Ta'wīl Mushkil al-Qur'ān* (Damascus: Resalah Publishers, 2015), 117-119.

³⁶ Ibn Mājah: 166. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūṭ graded it *ṣaḥīḥ*.

³⁷ Sohaib Saeed, "The Digital Mufasssir: Re-imagining the Tafsīr of al-Alusi for a New Era," in *Osmanh'da İlm-i Tefsīr*, ed. M. Taha Boyalılık and Harun Abacı (Istanbul: İSAR Publications, 2019b).

³⁸ al-Ṭayyār, *Al-Taḥrīr*, 15.

Although the former view is more compelling, the term *tafsir* became the dominant word used when referring to the exegesis of the Qur'ān, just as *sharh* became the dominant word for commentaries on *ḥadīth*, poetry, theology, *fiqh* and other disciplines.³⁹ Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, *tafsir* will be the word used throughout the paper to denote knowledge of interpreting the Qur'ān.

Epistemology of acquiring *tafsir*

One of the first scholars to write a dedicated treatise on the epistemology of *tafsir* hermeneutics, Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) prescribes what he believes is the best epistemology to gain the knowledge of what God intends in the Qur'ān. He noticeably advocates a *tafsir bi l-ma'thūr* pedagogy – that is, textual analysis of transmitted reports from the sources of Islam. As such, the first step Ibn Taymiyyah calls for is intraquranic hermeneutics, or to allow the Qur'ān to interpret itself. Secondly, where this is not possible, then to resort to interpreting the Qur'ān through the Sunnah. The third step is to rely on the statements of the companions of the Prophet ﷺ, and finally the statements of their successors.⁴⁰

One of Ibn Taymiyyah's most prominent students, Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) demonstrates an exemplary exegetical pedagogy by blending *tafsir bi l-ma'thūr* with a wide 'range of interpretive methods'.⁴¹ The rules and guidelines on *how* to interpret the verses of the Qur'ān, *ḥadīths* of the Prophet ﷺ and statements of the *salaf* (earliest generations of Muslims) are discussed in the books of *uṣūl al-tafsir*,⁴² which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Methods of attainment and transmission of *tafsir*

Tafsir pedagogies in the past

During the time of the Prophet ﷺ and the first generation of Muslims, the verses of the Qur'ān were revealed in stages, as per the needs of the time and people; of these, some were related to theology, while others to action of the limbs.⁴³ Such revelations included verses that came later and abrogated previous rulings, thus the Prophet ﷺ had to 'make clear to the people what was revealed to them' (16:44). The critical engagement with *naskh* (abrogation) serves as a precedent to employing historicity as a pedagogical method when engaging with *tafsir*. During the Renaissance, a scientific approach to history emerged, now known as the Historical Critical Method, which scholars have since been using to discern fact from fiction in historical reports.⁴⁴ While the context of *tafsir* at the time of the Prophet ﷺ was not of fact and fiction, the knowledge of Meccan and Medinan verses along with *naskh* became a popular genre in itself within the field of '*ulūm al-Qur'ān*'.⁴⁵

³⁹ See al-Ṭayyār, *Al-Taḥrīr*.

⁴⁰ Ibn Taymiyyah, Aḥmad. *Muqaddimah fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*. Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2012.

⁴¹ Sohaib Saeed, "The Shāhīn Affair and the Evolution of uṣūl al-tafsīr," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 21, no. 3 (2019a): 120, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2019.0401>.

⁴² See al-Ṭayyār, *Al-Taḥrīr*.

⁴³ Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*.

⁴⁴ Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*. (London: Oneworld Publications, 2018).

⁴⁵ Musā'id Sulaymān Nāṣir al-Ṭayyar, *Amwā' al-Taṣnīf al-Muta'alliqah bi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Dammām: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 2013).

After the time of the early Muslims, the need was to preserve the interpretations of the *salaf*. As such, *tafsīr* was passed down generation after generation within the *tafsīr bi l-ma'thūr* pedagogical framework.⁴⁶ During this period, the books of *tafsīr* narrated the opinions of the *salaf* through *isnād* chains.⁴⁷ The work of al-Ṭabarī is a prime example of such a genre. Later, as people moved further away from the time of revelation, the Arabic language had begun evolving. The rules of language, syntax and grammar had to go through a codification, which the earlier Arabs did not need on account of intuitive familiarity.⁴⁸ Inevitably, the need of the time led to the emergence of a pedagogically innovative subgenre of *tafsīr* literature – that is, linguistic *tafsīr*. Consequently, according to Ibn Khaldūn, there became two subgenres of *tafsīr* literature: transmitted and linguistic. Each of these underwent a development.

Not unlike the *Atharī* (textual; transmitted) approach to theology, exegetes of the *tafsīr bi l-ma'thūr* tradition felt the need to maintain a clean understanding of the Qur'ān without the influences from uncritical historical reports that entered from beyond the Islamic tradition. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, the nomad Arabs of 7th century Arabia were largely unfamiliar with Scripture. Thus, they would resort to asking such Jewish converts to Islam as 'Abdullāh ibn Salām (d. 663), Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. ca. 652) and Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 738) for details on the genesis of creation and the secrets of existence.⁴⁹ Other than these scholars, the majority of Jews in Arabia were, like the Arabs, nomad Bedouins, who knew no more of the Torah than the laity knew. As such, Ibn Khaldūn asserts, a range of ancient Jewish fables made their way into the books of *tafsīr*. The critical scholars and exegetes felt the need to sieve the wheat from the chaff, filtering the reliable from the unreliable exegetical narrations. According to Ibn Khaldūn, Ibn 'Aṭīyyah (d. 1146) critically engaged with the previous *tafsīr* literature, carefully selecting the most accurate of them and producing a widely acclaimed work in the process. Ibn Khaldūn continues that al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273), a fellow Spaniard, was influenced by this work and adopted a similar methodology in his own work.

The subgenre of linguistic *tafsīr* was not independent of the knowledge transmitted by the *salaf*. Rather, like the *kalām* tradition in theology, it used the earlier reports as one of many tools – such as *Jāhili* poetry – for critically verifying or falsifying a valid explanation of a verse. It is worth noting that both the *kalām* and linguistic *tafsīr* emerged only after knowledge had already developed into various sciences and disciplines.⁵⁰ Another noteworthy parallel between *kalām* and linguistic *tafsīr* is the polemical nature of the founding fathers of the tradition. Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144), an expert in Arabic rhetoric and an unapologetic adherent to Mu'tazilite creed, pioneered the linguistic *tafsīr* tradition. Although written with the primary objective of demonstrating the inimitability (*i'jāz*) of the Qur'ān, al-Zamakhsharī seizes every opportunity to make subtle condescending remarks against mainstream Muslim theology, the way of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa 'l-Jamā'ah.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*; al-Ṭayyar, *Amwā' al-Taṣnīf*.

⁴⁷ al-Ṭayyar, *Amwā' al-Taṣnīf*.

⁴⁸ Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*.

⁴⁹ Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*.

⁵⁰ Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*.

⁵¹ Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*.

According to al-Ṭayyar, however, the subgenres were more than just linguistic *tafsir*. In his treatise on the various types of authored works related to *tafsir* of the Qur'ān, he writes that each author focused on their field of specialism when engaging with *tafsir*. These specialisms included not only language but also *fiqh*, legal theory and history, among other disciplines.⁵² This, al-Ṭayyar argues, is what made the books of *tafsir* differ so vastly in methodology.

In this regard, al-Ṭayyar's analysis appears more congruent with reality than Ibn Khaldūn's. Ibn Khaldūn considers the work of al-Qurṭubī to be from the critical *tafsir bi 'l-ma'thūr* school, as per the approach of Ibn 'Aṭiyyah. However, a closer look at the work reveals that it includes not only a significant number of uncritical explanations rooted in *Isrā'iliyyāt* (historical reports from the Judeo-Christian tradition), but also outright forgeries in the name of the Prophet ﷺ.⁵³ Accordingly, it would be incorrect to count al-Qurṭubī's work as a product of the critical *tafsir bi 'l-ma'thūr* school. Instead, as his title 'Compendium for the Laws of the Qur'ān' suggests, al-Qurṭubī's work is better categorised as a legal commentary of the Qur'ān, which accords with al-Ṭayyar's coherent analysis of the development of the *tafsir* literature.

Tafsir pedagogies today

In the British Muslim context, a striking parallel with the study of theology is that *tafsir* is taught in institutes of higher learning through the means of only one book – that is, *Tafsir al-Jalālayn* – typically in the fifth year of the curriculum.⁵⁴ Naturally, a minimal exposure means students' grasp of neither *tafsir* nor theology is on par with their competence in such subjects as *fiqh* and Arabic grammar. More importantly, it does not equip learners to directly address the theological and psychological challenges British Muslim youth are facing, unless the teacher takes liberty to add his or her own lecture notes into the lessons. While this method certainly has its advantages, such as covering topics organically as per the exposure to the learner, it fails to remove the stagnation of knowledge in the field of *tafsir* that is uniform across the British Muslim institutes of Islamic higher learning.

To solve this dilemma, radical changes are yet again required – not necessarily in terms of books per se, but more so in terms of the pedagogy by which learners engage with *tafsir*. This can happen not only by teachers adopting a learner-led pedagogical framework,⁵⁵ but also by exposing students to the historical development of the *tafsir* literature and taking benefit from all genres by applying the skills into their own contexts. This will involve revisiting and rethinking the *tafsir* literature in light of modern scientific developments, such as ultrasound scans enabling midwives to discern the sex of an unborn child, which is directly at odds with some classical interpretations of the final verse of Sūrat Luqmān and can thus raise theological questions to the 21st century Muslim.⁵⁶ Similarly, the controversial discussions surrounding the theories of evolution and the creation of Prophet Adam ﷺ as the first human being poses another theological challenge that can only be treated by revisiting the

⁵² al-Ṭayyar, *Amwāl al-Taṣnīf*.

⁵³ See the commentary on the incident involving the Queen of Sheba in vol. 16, pp. 174-180.

⁵⁴ Haroon Sidat, "Between Tradition and Transition: An Islamic Seminary, or Dar al-Uloom in Modern Britain," *Religions* 9, no. 10 (2018): 314, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9100314>.

⁵⁵ See Sahin, *New Directions in Islamic Education*.

⁵⁶ See Ḥātim al-'Awnī, *Takwīn Malakat al-Tafsir* (Beirut: Markaz Namā', 2013).

verses of the creation of man. The concern here is not to speculate what might or might not have happened but, rather, to draw theological boundaries within which a person will remain a believer. Contemporary Saudi-based scholar and academic al-‘Awnī coins a term for this pedagogy: *tajdīd fī l-tafsīr* (rethinking *tafsīr*), which takes full advantage of the *pedagogy* and *methodology* of the *salaf* rather than demand an uncritical acceptance of every speculative comment they made.⁵⁷

In short, the contemporary Muslim learner, teacher and scholar need adequate exposure to the various subgenres among the *tafsīr* literature, while being confident enough to engage in *tajdīd fī l-tafsīr*. Rethinking *tafsīr* is necessary for ensuring consistency in such theological challenges as the nature of the creation of Adam, sexual ethics, soteriology and comparative religion – especially in a globalised world where the Biblical language Hebrew is once again a living language, after over 2,000 years of being a dead language used only for Jewish liturgical purposes.⁵⁸ Not only can rethinking *tafsīr* help the 21st century Muslim learner navigate through modern life in a way that is consistent with their understanding of the Qur’ān; it can also pave the path for further developments in their fields of specialism, especially of such new disciplines as the social sciences.⁵⁹

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear from the central thesis of this paper that there are striking parallels between the conceptions of *‘ilm* and *ma‘rifah* in Islamic theology and *tafsīr* and *ta‘wīl* in Qur’ānic hermeneutics. Both disciplines developed greatly over the last 14 centuries due to the needs of their own contexts; as such, Muslims who live as minorities in a post-caliphate world must be able to attain and transmit knowledge of both disciplines in light of the needs of not the past but their own time. They can do this by filtering the authentic and relevant from the inauthentic and irrelevant ideas that made their way into the books of theology and *tafsīr*. Contemporary Muslims can achieve this by exploring theology from the lens of the Qur’ān, and keeping the Qur’ān as the central reference point, while taking advantage of the hermeneutical tools that the later scholars developed. Similarly, when engaging with *tafsīr*, they can sieve the authentic exegetical reports by drawing on the methodology of the *salaf* by adopting a critical *tafsīr bi l-ma‘thūr* pedagogy, then engaging with the content through a *tajdīd fī l-tafsīr*. This will aid in meeting the pressing need of finding answers to deep theological questions that are almost exclusive to the modern world. To put simply, Muslims are to attain and transmit the knowledge of theology through the Qur’ān and Qur’ān through theology.

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⁵⁷ al-‘Awnī, *Takwīn Malakat al-Tafsīr*.

⁵⁸ Chaim Rabin, “The Revival of Hebrew as a Spoken Language,” *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 36, no. 8 (1963): <https://doi.org/10.2307/2264510>.

⁵⁹ For examples relevant to the current paper, al-‘Awnī quotes a psychology and education specialist who derived 25 educational points from a single verse of the Qur’ān. See al-‘Awnī, *Takwīn Malakat al-Tafsīr*, 45-49.

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