

ORAL PRESENTATION VERSION

Reenchanting the Qur'ān:  
Hermeneutical Applications of the Ash'arī Concept of God's Eternal Speech

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Introduction: Metaphysics, hermeneutics, interpretation

Today for the first time I dip my big toe into the flood of recent Indonesian writings on Qur'anic hermeneutics in order to consider the relationship between metaphysical claims about the Qur'ān and hermeneutical theories about its interpretation. How an interpreter conceptualizes the Qur'ān *sometimes* has an impact on how she interprets it. Sometimes the reverse is true: her interpretive program leads her to imagine the Qur'ān in a way that lends plausibility or authority to her interpretations.

One central aspect of Muslim discussions of the Qur'ān's metaphysical status is the old theological debate over its created or eternal nature. This debate had a substantial influence on *some* forms of classical Qur'anic hermeneutics. Modern interpreters, if they address this question at all, commonly assert some version of the Ash'arī doctrine that God's speech itself is eternal while the Arabic words that express it are temporal and created. This assertion, however, does not seem to play the same role for all these interpreters. Today I want to introduce to you one living and not particularly prominent Indonesian thinker, Aksin Wijaya, who is unusually explicit about how his Qur'anic metaphysics supports his Qur'anic hermeneutics and his interpretive project of indigenization—stripping away the outdated and foreign Arab cultural baggage that he says make up seventy percent of the present Qur'anic text to rediscover the universal divine message that God addresses to Indonesians and to all human beings today. His

Qur'ānic metaphysics and, to a lesser extent, his hermeneutics are systematic and laudably forthright, but he leaves me scratching my head about this larger question: what intellectual functions are metaphysical and hermeneutical theories playing in contemporary Muslim exegetical discourses—and, for that matter, non-Muslim discourses, including secular ones, about the interpretation of sacred or foundational texts? Do such theories function as premises? Methods? Rhetorical strategies? Ideologies supporting claims of authority, authenticity, or legitimacy? Are they imagined universes constructed and inhabited by interpreters for their own intellectual satisfaction, or simply to preserve their own sense of sanity and religious grounding? Theologically motivated disenchantment? The Mu'tazila and their modern heirs

One prominent movement in modern Qur'ānic hermeneutics has been to historicize and effectively disenchant the Qur'ān so that it can be subjected to the same kinds of critical, historical, and literary readings as other texts. This historicizing trend is sometimes regarded as a revival of the Mu'tazilī doctrine of God's created speech. It is often assumed that this doctrine entails a flexible and rationalistic hermeneutic, but that requires some qualification. I have argued elsewhere that, at least in the domain of morality and law, the early and classical Mu'tazila espoused theories of interpretation that were typically less flexible and sometimes more literalistic than those of their Ash'arī, Māturīdī, and traditionalist opponents. Contrary to what one might expect, the Mu'tazila did not make historical context a significant factor in interpretation. They typically affirmed the usual doctrine that what matters for interpretation is “the generality of the verbal expression, not the specificity of the historical occasion of revelation.” The doctrine of God's created speech did have important hermeneutical implications which some Mu'tazilī theologians followed to their logical conclusions; for them, hermeneutics followed metaphysics. But the resulting hermeneutic was not as flexible as contemporary historicizers and disenchanters of the Qur'ān might wish.

### Symbolic reenchantment: Naṣr Hāmid Abū Zayd and Abdullah Saeed

In fact, modern interpreters who wish to historicize the Qur'ān often think more like Ash'arīs. Naṣr Hāmid Abū Zayd, for example, spoke favorably of the Mu'tazilī view that the Qur'ān is created, and he is understood by Aksin Wijaya as a modern Mu'tazilī, but I believe he was really just arguing against the extreme traditionalist view that the very words of the Qur'ān are eternal. In fact, like the Ash'ariyya, he did posit the existence of some prelinguistic and suprahistorical divine speech, but he regarded it as beyond the reach of human knowledge and therefore dismissed as nonsense all metaphysical speculation about it. For interpreters, all that matters is the form God's speech took when it entered the human realm through the Prophet Muḥammad. A similar Qur'ānic metaphysics is affirmed in greater detail by Abdullah Saeed, who proposes that revelation “becomes deeply embedded in the concerns, needs and issues of the Prophet and his community” when it enters the physical and temporal realm, but that revelation as it exists in the heavenly realm is simply unknowable. For both men, acknowledging a transcendent dimension to God's speech appears to be motivated principally by a desire not to flout orthodoxy any more than necessary. I have not found that this transcendent Qur'ān plays any substantive role in their theories of interpretation. Their reenchantment of the Qur'ān seems to me significant mainly as a symbolic gesture.

### Hermeneutically motivated reenchantment: Muḥammad Shaḥrūr and Aksin Wijaya

For a more robust Qur'ānic metaphysics we might look to the modern Syrian Muḥammad Shaḥrūr, who developed at great length a distinction between a suprahistorical *qur'ān* and a historical *umm al-kitāb*. This metaphysical distinction had a definite hermeneutical purpose: it allowed Shaḥrūr to classify Qur'ānic teachings that fit his own modern liberal values as eternal and objective while declaring other parts of the Qur'ān to be historically contingent and subject to human reasoning. While Shaḥrūr embedded his view of the Qur'ān in a broader philosophical framework, it appears to me from what I have read—though I would willingly be corrected on this point—that his Qur'ānic metaphysics is principally motivated by hermeneutics: its

intellectual function is to legitimate his hermeneutical theory. That is just an observation; it does not imply a criticism unless one assumes that metaphysics should govern epistemology and not vice versa.

Another remarkably elaborate and creative Qur'ānic metaphysics is that proposed by Aksin Wijaya, a forty-year-old Indonesian scholar trained and employed in the traditionalist yet forward-looking government-sponsored State Institutes and Schools of Islamic Religion. Adapting for his own ends the distinction made by Mohammed Arkoun between divine revelation, the Qur'ān, and the 'Uthmānic Codex, he attempts to reconstruct the Qur'ānic Sciences around a tripartite theory of God's speech. Like the Ash'ariyya, he thinks it important to distinguish between God's transcendent suprahistorical speech and its temporal verbal expression, but then he also distinguishes sharply between the oral and written forms of the Qur'ān, and rather than focusing on the metaphysical properties of each aspect of God's speech, as the Ash'ariyya did, Dr. Aksin focuses instead on the nature of the communicative interaction between two parties that each aspect of God's speech represents.

He defines the first dimension of God's speech, which he calls revelation (*wahyu*), not as an eternal attribute but as an act of communication that took place when the Prophet, by virtue of his extraordinarily spiritual orientation, transcended the physical dimension of his human nature and entered the realm of spirit and divinity. This communication took place, he argues, in a private language or sign system that was not Arabic and may not even have been a verbal language at all but was freely chosen by God and was thus independent of any specific culture. This communication involved no intermediary; the stories about Gabriel conveying God's messages were just the Prophet's way of explaining his claim of revelation to an audience who conceived of supernatural inspiration as coming through intermediaries such as *jinn*. It is only this original message, which cannot be explained as the product of Arab culture, that God promised to protect from corruption, and that constitutes the Qur'ān's principal miraculous feature. Because it is free of cultural trappings and is therefore relevant to any social context, only this part of the Qur'ān's message is authoritative for all.

The words of the oral Qur'ān (*al-Qur'an*) Aksin regards as a second act of communication that took place between the Prophet and his original Arab audience. This required transferring the divine message from the private language in which the Prophet had received it into clear Arabic. The Arabic words of the Qur'ān did not exist in the heavenly realm; they were chosen by the Prophet himself. In his initial prophetic experience in the cave the Prophet had been commanded to “read”—not to recite particular words that were given to him, but to “read” or diagnose the social reality of his time and place in light of the universal revelation he was to receive. He did so using the existing medium of Arabic which, following Abū Zayd, Aksin regards as a carrier of its own cultural message. (He does not mention the classical debate over the origin of language, but he clearly sides with those who regard language as a social construct.) The Prophet responded to pagan Arab society in its own terms, employing Arab concepts such as revelation communicated through otherworldly intermediaries and expressed in poetic form. The result was that God's message became “trapped” in an Arabic linguistic and cultural system, so that it could not speak directly to everyone. The oral Qur'ān proclaimed by the Prophet carried both a divine message and a human cultural message in approximately equal proportions. Aksin does not say how he reaches his figure of fifty percent, but by giving a specific number he makes a commendably clear statement about just how radical his interpretive project is: he will consider himself at liberty to dismiss about fifty percent of the Qur'ān's content as Arab cultural baggage that need not be imported to Indonesia.

The third communicative event occurred after the death of the Prophet, when his Companions passed on the Qur'ān's message in writing. In order to avoid conflict over the oral Qur'ān's seven variant recitations (which Aksin regards as irretrievably lost), they reduced it to a single written text, the 'Uthmānic Codex (*Mushaf Usmani*). In this way God's message was further entrapped, this time by the linguistic and cultural system of one particular tribe, the Quraysh, and also by the act of writing itself. Aksin argues that the very act of fixing the Qur'ān as a written text broke the direct connection between speaker and hearer that had previously allowed the Companions to understand the oral Qur'ān immediately and unreflectively. The

‘Uthmānic Codex, which is the only form in which we now have access to God’s message, can now be understood only with the help of linguistic analysis, which tends to highlight the cultural messages that are embedded in the Arabic language. Equally problematic is the hegemony accorded to specifically Qurayshī language and culture. The seven variant readings were intended to address the linguistic and cultural diversity among the Prophet’s Arab audience, but the ‘Uthmānic codification further narrowed both the cultural relevance and the cultural message of revelation, so that the message of the text we read today is about twenty percent Qurayshī ideology. That leaves only thirty percent of the text’s message that can be attributed to God himself. The task of hermeneutics is to identify and extract that thirty percent from behind the veil of Arab and Qurayshī culture so that revelation can speak to all societies including Indonesia, without subjecting them to Arab cultural imperialism.

This is a splendid example of forthright and explicit Qur’ānic metaphysics unabashedly designed to serve hermeneutics. Aksin reworks the classical Ash‘arī doctrine of God’s eternal speech in terms of modern communication theory, and ends up with a metaphysical justification for a hermeneutic of recovery that is, in the end, just a little bit more sophisticated than that of Fazlur Rahman. The hermeneutical dimension of his project remains underdeveloped in his book on the Qur’ānic sciences. He says that “exegesis,” which considers only the language of the text, can only discover the Qur’ān’s Arab cultural message, so he calls for it to be supplemented with “hermeneutics” so as to consider both the internal linguistic and external contextual dimensions of the text. He calls for analysis of Qur’ānic vocabulary after the manner of Toshihiko Izutsu and for isolation of the divine elements of the Qur’ānic message from its Arab cultural elements, along the lines of Fazlur Rahman and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd. Following Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ṭāhā, he suggests that God’s universal message is more readily apparent in the Meccan portions of the ‘Uthmānic Codex. It remains unclear, however, how the narrowing from seven oral to one written version of the Qur’ān is to be undone in the process of “searching for God’s message behind the phenomenon of culture,” as his book is subtitled. The sample exegetical problem to which he applies his hermeneutic—the Qur’ānic term *islām*—is even less developed than his

hermeneutical theory: he never gets beyond internal vocabulary analysis before leaping to a laundry list of modern liberal values that he concludes must be the universal values that form the genuine revealed core of the Qur'ānic message. It is not his interpretive method but his metaphysics that is most detailed and suggestive.

But why construct such an elaborate theory about a transcendent suprahistorical revelation behind the temporal Qur'ān, when all the interpretive moves Aksin wishes to make have already been articulated and justified by the historicizing, “disenchanted” criticism of Fazlur Rahman, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, and others? Dr. Aksin supports such “desacralizing” of the Qur'an, but only if does not lose sight of the Qur'ān's divine dimension. He seems to feel the need to reenchant the Qur'ān. This is no mere lip service to theological orthodoxy. In his hermeneutic, as in that of Shaḥrūr, the doctrine of an eternal heavenly message plays a quite substantial role: it is the object of interpretive inquiry, as it was in the hermeneutics of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī and his tenth-century follower Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī. As for those Ash'arī thinkers, so for Aksin Wijaya the concept of a suprahistorical Qur'ān is not just a pious token but an imagined locus of pure meaning untainted by the processes of human communication and interpretive reasoning. If the Qur'ān is a historical and literary text comparable to other texts, in a linguistic medium that reflects a particular human society, then the desire for a divinely authoritative normativity that transcends human cultures seems to require the positing of a suprahistorical revelation that is nevertheless present in some discernible form in the historical traces of the Prophet's words. The interpretive mechanisms that would guarantee recovery of that pure divine message may be impossible to define with any precision, and certainly would be impossible to carry out in any objective manner, but this does not trouble Aksin. It is enough, apparently, to believe that there is gold beneath the dross of Arab culture. This justifies not so much a certain method as a certain attitude toward the Qur'ān, and toward those who would try to impose its foreign values and customs on Indonesian Muslims.

Indeed, the Indonesian context is crucial for understanding the relation between Dr. Aksin's Qur'ānic metaphysics and his hermeneutics. The state-supported drive for indigenization

or “Indonesianization” of Islam is the “tail that wags the dog” of much Indonesian Qur’ānic hermeneutics. For Wijaya and his circle, the interpretive outcome is not in doubt; even the historicizing hermeneutic is already largely a given. What is needed is something to legitimate that hermeneutic: an updating of the Qur’ānic sciences that shows how traditional concepts like the occasions of revelation, the distinction between Meccan and Medinan verses, and above all the Ash‘arī doctrine of God’s eternal speech actually support historicizing hermeneutical theories. As with Shaḥrūr, I think that we have here a case of hermeneutically motivated metaphysics.

#### Theologically motivated hermeneutics? Al-Ash‘arī and al-Bāqillānī

Have metaphysical and theological claims about the Qur’ān always been secondary to hermeneutical concerns? For the Mu‘tazila it seems to have been the other way around: their doctrines of God’s justice and the created Qur’ān entailed a relatively literalistic legal hermeneutic that some of them were actually willing to embrace, at least for a couple of centuries. I believe theology was the driving force for al-Ash‘arī and al-Bāqillānī as well. Both of them, most notably al-Bāqillānī, employed the distinction between God’s eternal speech and its temporal expression to open up a hermeneutical space within which a flexible process of interpretive reasoning could take place. That was not, however, what motivated their theology. Their hermeneutic was, in fact, rather impractical, and did not survive long. For them Qur’ānic metaphysics preceded Qur’ānic hermeneutics.

#### Conclusion: Metaphysics, hermeneutics, interpretation

Theology no longer holds the central place that it once enjoyed, if only briefly, among Muslim intellectuals. Even law and exegesis have been displaced in some quarters by “hermeneutics,” which seems to be filling a need not so much for an interpretive method as for a sense of legitimacy among Muslims who find themselves articulating views that do not yet enjoy the obviousness of longstanding tradition, and therefore require explicit justification. In such a



context Qur'ānic metaphysics is no longer primarily a theological exercise that logically precedes epistemology, Qur'ānic interpretation, and law. Instead it seems to be providing a plausibility structure to support the hermeneutical theories that in turn make plausible the great variety of convictions that Muslims now hold. To be a Muslim intellectual today in Indonesia, and perhaps anywhere, almost seems to require a way of imagining the universe in which revelation is both pristine and complex, eternal and historical, divine and human. The paradoxical Ash'arī doctrine of the eternal and created Qur'ān is proving once again to be a valuable intellectual resource—precisely because, like so many “orthodox” ideas in Islam and in other traditions, it provides not a clear and straightforward picture of the universe, but one that a modern religious person can inhabit with integrity.