Hermeneutics and the Traditional Islamic Sciences in Indonesia Today Rhetoric, Retraditionalisation, or Creative Anti-Foundationalism?

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Abstract

Numerous recent Indonesian books on Qurʾānic hermeneutics present their adaptations of modern and postmodern Western theories as reformulations or extensions of the classical Islamic disciplines of exegesis (*tafsīr*), legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), and the Qurʾānic sciences (*ʿulūm al-qurʾān*). This essay considers three such authors: Sahiron Syamsuddin, who links methods of classical exegesis with modern hermeneutical theories to legitimate modern liberal values; Aksin Wijaya, who reformulates the classical Ashʿarī doctrine of God's eternal speech to support a more critical but still essentially foundationalist project; and Yudian Wahyudi, who reimagines the classical doctrine of consensus as a basis for an open–ended, pluralistic, and political reconstruction of Sharia. Each fuses classical Islamic and modern western hermeneutical theories to justify forms of Indonesian Islam that are both local and modern, but the first two retain the textualist foundationalism of the classical interpretive tradition while the third leaves it behind in favor of an explicitly local and socially constructed reformulation of Islamic law.

Introduction

Preparing for this session has prompted me to ask new questions about the many theories of Qur'anic interpretation that are being developed very actively in Indonesia today: how are Indonesian Muslim thinkers drawing on local traditions and classical Islamic traditions for the content and the method of their proposals for Indonesian Islam, and are they appealing to those traditions in foundationalist or anti-foundationalist ways?

Now, I'm a newcomer to the study of Indonesia and of the modern world—my previous work was on classical Islamic legal hermeneutics—so I'm not yet sure that I fully understand the terms retraditionalisation, anti-foundationalism, and glocalisation, but for this paper I'm going to take anti-

foundationalism in an epistemological sense: as a rejection of the foundationalist epistemologies associated with Descartes, the positivists, and indeed most post-Enlightenment thought. An example of modern foundationalist Islamic hermeneutics, therefore, would be Fazlur Rahman, who thought the Qur'an could be interpreted and applied through a contextual but objective method. An example of anti-foundationalist hermeneutics, I think, would be Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who regarded the Qur'an as a cultural product whose interpretation can only be based on the contingent particularities of specific local cultures. Since that precludes any pretense of secure epistemological access to a transcendent source of religious authority, I take Nasr Hamid to be a an anti-foundationalist.

This contrast exists in Indonesia today at two levels: at the level of the content of Indonesian Islam, where local traditions are often in conflict with so-called universal Islamic norms, and at the level of method, where classical Islamic Qur'anic and legal sciences are pitted against modern western hermeneutical theories. Today I want to look at this second level, comparing three scholars who are attempting to combine "hermeneutics" with the classical Islamic sciences: Sahiron Syamsuddin, Aksin Wijaya, and Yudian Wahyudi. All three teach in the State Islamic University system, which is home to many scholars on the liberal, tolerant wing of the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama. I have been studying their works, and I just had the pleasure of interviewing all three over the last few weeks.

Sahiron Syamsuddin

Sahiron Syamsuddin has played a large role in popularizing western hermeneutics at the State Islamic University in Yogyakarta. He encountered Gadamer during his M.A. studies at McGill University, but he says he didn't understand him until he took a full semester seminar on him while earning his Ph.D. at the University of Bamberg, where he wrote a dissertation (in German) on the Syrian thinker Muḥammad Shaḥrūr and on the Arab responses to him. On returning to Yogyakarta he helped make "Qur'anic hermeneutics" a regular part of the curriculum, and authored a number of books introducing the discipline and showing connections between modern hermeneutics and the classical Qur'anic sciences (*ʿulūm al-qurʾān*). He uses the writings of Jorge Gracia as his main tool in introducing basic hermeneutical concepts.

Starting from Gracia's distinction between historical meaning, the meaning constructed by the interpreter, and implication—the significance that a text has for a particular situation—Sahiron has developed his own method (or at least his own terminology), which he calls the method of *maʿnā cum maghzā,* meaning and significance. Like most Muslims, he believes that the Qur'an is divine not only in

its meaning but even in its verbal form, and in this he differs from Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who says that only the eternal Qur'an, which is inaccessible, is free from human cultural construction. So Sahiron is foundationalist in this sense, that he regards the Qur'anic text as a divinely authoritative and directly accessible source of knowledge and ethics, and he considers it to have a single original historical meaning, which it is usually possible to ascertain. But the text's significance, he says, is contextually relative. The distinction between meaning and significance is one that classical interpreters and legal theorists did not generally make, at least not explicitly. They typically assumed that the legal implications of a verse were determined by its linguistic meaning, not by its historical or interpretive context. In this respect Sahiron has moved beyond classical textualism.

Sahiron also shows some flexibility in determining the original textual meaning of a Qur'anic verse. Here he appeals to the classical hermeneutical device of distinguishing between passages that are *muḥkam,* absolutely clear, and *mutashābih,* equivocal. Medieval Muslim interpreters used these terms in order to justify reinterpreting a Qur'anic verse or Hadith to agree with some other piece of evidence. If a verse did not align with the legal view a jurist wanted to advocate, one option was to say that the verse was ambiguous and could have several possible meanings, and that its intended meaning was clarified by some other evidence that did agree with the jurist's opinion. Therein lay much of the flexibility of classical interpretive theory, and Sahiron is very much in line with that tradition when he uses the concepts of *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* for the same purpose.

The content of Sahiron's interpretations, however, are not traditional. When he argues that the verses calling for violent *jihād* against non-Muslims are equivocal, and must be clarified by the more pacific verses that represent clear universal principles of tolerance, he is making a typical medieval interpretive move to oppose the dominant classical interpretations regarding *jihād*. But Sahiron is not claiming that he can reinterpret the significance of these verses for a new context; he is claiming that the *jihād* verses were inherently ambiguous to begin with, and were always meant to be interpreted in light of more pacific verses. Epistemologically, therefore, he remains a foundationalist, legitimating his interpretations not just by appealing to his present local context but by claiming to have discerned a universal and authoritative Qur'anic imperative.

Moreover, the results of his interpretations represent quintessentially modern liberal values, which he presents as both Islamic and universal. So while he may support certain local Indonesian traditions such as visiting the graves of saints and chanting God's name, he is not a champion of local cultural values per se, nor is he arguing that Islam and the meaning of the Qur'an are finally governed by the cultural

location of the interpreter. I think we have here a pure modernist, who supports certain traditional practices and employs some traditional interpretive methods, but does so to support universal moral claims on the basis of an epistemology that is every bit as foundationalist as that of Fazlur Rahman, and that of the classical Islamic sciences.

Aksin Wijaya

Another Indonesian scholar who has made a special effort to integrate classical discussions of the ontology of the Qur'an into his hermeneutics is Aksin Wijaya, a teacher at the State Advanced School of Islamic Religion (STAIN) in Ponorogo. He has not studied western hermeneutical theories to the same extent as Sahiron Syamsuddin, though he refers to the works of Paul Ricoeur, for example. His principal reference points are modern Arab scholars like Amīn al-Khūlī, Muḥammad Shaḥrūr, and Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī. Just last week I had a long and delightful conversation with him at his home in East Java, during which it became clear that his epistemology is not quite anti-foundationalist.

The ontological foundation of Aksin's interpretive methodology is a creative reworking of the classical Ashʿarī doctrine that God's speech has a created component, the letters and words that make up the text of the Qur'an, and an eternal component which is the meaning behind those words, identified both as God's "inner speech" and also as an attribute of speech subsisting in God's essence. This theory was advanced by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī and later by Ibn Rushd, whose works have been a special focus for Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī and for Aksin himself. This theory posits two interrelated components of God's speech, but Aksin has added a third, and has reframed them not as distinct entities but as distinct communicative events: the first, which he calls revelation (*wahyu*), took place between God and the Prophet Muhammad in the spiritual realm in a private language that is inaccessible to the rest of humanity; the second, which he calls the Qur'an, was the Prophet's act of communicating orally to his contemporaries in their own language which was shaped by Arab culture; and the third, the Uthmanic Codex, was the written form that the Qur'anic text was given after the Prophet's death when the multiple oral versions in circulation were reduced to a single dialect of Arabic, that of the tribe of Quraysh, whose specific cultural ideology thus became permanently embedded in the Muslim scripture. The hermeneutical consequence of this tripartite model is that God's own message now constitutes a mere thirty percent of the Qur'an's content; another fifty percent of the text's message is merely an expression of Arab culture, and another twenty percent an expression of specifically Qurayshi culture, which need not be applied in Indonesia today.

On the face of it, the hermeneutical purpose of this tripartite ontology is to enable a modern interpreter to filter out and dismiss anything that looks like Arab culture. The divine message that Aksin ends up finding behind these cultural forms turns out to be a predictable list of modern liberal values like religious tolerance and women's rights. It appears, therefore, that Aksin is just as much a foundationalist as Sahiron, claiming the sanction of divine revelation for his own modern cultural norms by appealing to the classical doctrine of God's eternal, supra-historical speech, which he claims to be able to discern behind the historical and culturally embedded words of the Qur'anic text.

In fact, though, his thought is a bit more complex. For one thing, by drawing on Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's notion that the Qur'an as we have it is a cultural construct he is opening the door to regarding its interpretation as an entirely a human product. This should make him, I think, an anti-foundationalist, and in fact in a recent book he calls for an "anthropological turn" in Islamic epistemology. Interpretation, he says, must begin and end with the particular needs of particular human societies, for that is the whole purpose of religion: it is all about human welfare, not about God or his demands. It begins to sound like Aksin, along with many modern Christian theologians, has come to regard religious discourse as fundamentally a human exercise in addressing human concerns rather than an attempt to know a transcendent God or that God's will for humanity. When pressed, however, and asked whether this is in fact the upshot of his thought, Aksin denied that he was thus "secularizing Islam," as he put it. He preferred to say that he was humanizing Islam, giving it a clearer basis in and orientation toward particular human societies, without making the content of human interpretations solely a reflection of those societies. The interpreter and the Qur'an itself may be inescapably intertwined with particular cultures, but he still believes it is possible to discover the actual intended divine meaning behind all those cultural forms. He admits that one can never claim to have discovered all of that divine meaning, or to have found the only correct interpretation, he is nevertheless confident that his interpretations are at least within the limits or range of meanings that God intended his speech to have. He therefore denies that the modern liberal values that he finds behind the Arab cultural veneer of the Qur'an are just a reflection of his own particular cultural moment.

So his epistemology remains a kind of mitigated foundationalism. By reconfiguring a classical orthodox Islamic doctrine about God's speech he has found an ontological foundation that gives his interpretations some claim to transcendent legitimation.

Yudian Wahyudi

I did meet one interesting scholar, however, who, I think, can be categorized as a thoroughgoing anti-foundationalist. Yudian Wahyudi earned an M.A. and Ph.D. at McGill University, and now teaches at the State Islamic University in Yogyakarta, where he has been known to offer sharp criticism of those who are trying to integrate modern western hermeneutical theories with classical Islamic legal theory and the Qur'anic sciences—without, he says, really understanding either one. Of the three thinkers I've described, he seems the most concerned that classical Islamic discourses not be pushed aside by "hermeneutics," and in many ways he sounds the most traditional.

But he is not naïve about western hermeneutics. For his dissertation on Ḥasan Ḥanafī, Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, and Nurcholish Madjid (with which Carool is familiar) he studied not only Ḥasan Ḥanafī's voluminous Arabic works but also his early French works in which Ḥanafī reinterpreted classical Islamic legal theory in terms of phenomenology. He values Ḥasan Ḥanafī's example of a deep integration between the classical Islamic sciences and modern western thought. But I think what really influenced him the most was Ḥanafī's argument that hermeneutics must be political. Yudian does not speak of revolution as Ḥanafī does, but rather of democracy, and he finds ways to integrate a democratic polity with classical legal theory, arguing (as have others like Hashim Kamali) that the classical doctrine of *ijmāʿ,* consensus, should take in the modern world the form of legislative assemblies, including both experts in Islamic law and elected representatives. He regards such a democratic form of consensus as the only way to get beyond the subjectivity of interpretation and achieve an authoritative and biding form of Islamic law. This means that he is forgoing the textualism of classical legal theory and making negotiated communal agreement the basis for Islamic law today, deliberately leaving it open-ended rather than tethered to Islamic scriptures. What is more, he appears to be genuinely pluralistic: he is perfectly comfortable having non-Muslims participate in the democratic process to produce legislation that will be binding on Muslims—not just as a matter of necessity, but as a religiously binding Islamic law. What Islamic law requires of Muslims today, in a religiously pluralistic context like Indonesia, is precisely to allow non-Muslims to participate in the construction of a national state-enforced law that will become Islamic law for Muslims. This leaves the door open for Islamic law to become virtually anything, or at least anything that Indonesian society can agree on. Aksin seems quite comfortable with that prospect. So here at last, I think, is a genuine anti-foundationalist, who regards local and evolving social norms as the proper basis for Islamic law. And he grounds this ideology in classical Islamic legal theory—no longer in its outwardly textualist and foundationalist form, but in a newer and essentially

anti-foundationalist political form that has been slowly gaining ground among modern Muslims and that finds its legitimacy in a reappropriation and reinterpretation of the classical doctrine of consensus.

Conclusion

Out of these three figures, then, our one genuine anti-foundationalist is the one who, at first glance, seems the most reactionary and socially conservative. (I heard no gushing about modern liberal values from Yudian!) Listening to him speak, I felt at times that I was listening to a revivalist. Yudian didn't fit my image of a hip, postmodern anti-foundationalist. But that, I think, shows that the category of epistemological anti-foundationalism has actually been a useful tool: it enabled me to see something I did not expect to see, and to classify and characterize thinkers in ways I would not otherwise have done. So even if I have not yet fully grasped how others are using terms like retraditionalisation and anti-foundationalism, interacting with them has changed the questions I ask and the way I interpret my data. And that, I think, is what theory is for.