

PIONEERS OF MODERN TAFSIR: A SURVEY OF IMAM MUHAMMAD ABDUH'S METHOD OF TAFSIR

By

Ibrahim Shuaibu Saidu, PhD

Department of Islamic studies

Faculty of Arts,

Federal University Dutsinma Katsina State

isshuaibu@fudutsinma.edu.ng / smalamaisafana@gmail.com

+234 8026499394 / +234 7038766183

ABSTRACT

Tafsir of the Qur'an is a living subject that goes with time. It reflects on intellectual, social, political, scientific and spiritual trends of the society at all ages. Modern ideas and development have found their way in the Muslim's way of life as a result of European inversion of their land. *Tafsir* being a living subject reflected on these developments right from that time to present. The pioneer of modernism in the field of *Tafsir* was Imam Muhammad Abduh of Egypt. He developed a method that combined traditional scholarship with modern methodologies in expanding the meaning of the Qur'an. This paper surveys the methods of *Tafsir* in the light of modern development as propounded by *Imam* Muhammad Abduh and his followers. It also highlighted Abduh's view on the necessity of the reopening of the so-called "closed door of *ijtihad*" so as to emancipate the Muslims from the bondage of *taqlid* (imitation) and blind literalism, and guide them to realize the aim of the Qur'anic revelation. The paper concluded with some observations on merits and demerits of Abduh's method of *Tafsir* and finally proffers a way forward.

Key words: *Tafsir*, Modernism, *Ijtihad*, *Taqlid*, Egypt, Islamic revival and Pan-Islamism.

Introduction

Qur'an, as the word of Allah and a source of guidance,¹ was revealed in Arabic Language² through the Arch-Angel Jibril³ to the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). This revelation contains clear and allegorical statements,⁴ metaphorical expressions, parables,⁵ abrogating and abrogated verses⁶ etc. To achieve the aim of its revelation, it is necessary for the Prophet (SAW) to explain the Qur'an to his immediate companions,⁷ hence the science of *Tafsir* started from these explanations made by the Prophet (SAW). The companions of the Prophet (SAW) transmitted it to the *Tabi'un* (their followers) who later transmitted it to the later generations.⁸

Literally, *tafsir* means clarification, explanation and illustration.⁹ The Qur'an has used the same meaning where Allah says:

And no question do they bring to thee but We revealed to thee the truth and the best explanation (thereof).¹⁰

The word *tafsir* also is derived from an Arabic word '*fassara*', which means to explain, expand, explicate, elucidate, interpret or comment. Technically, *Tafsir* means, knowledge that deals with the explanation of the Qur'an, its expression, meaning, recitation, its single and composite injunctions, causes of revelations, abrogation and abrogated etc. To bring its understanding to human level so as to actualize the essence of its revelation.¹¹

If one looked into historical development of *Tafsir*, one could see that *Tafsir* is a living subject in the sense that it reflects the intellectual, social, political, spiritual and scientific trends of the

Islamic society (source). The *Tafsir* of the first generation of the Muslims was purely traditional (*Tafsir bil-Mathur*); this is because *Hadith* was the dominant knowledge of that time. Thus, *Tafsir* was just a form of *Hadith* at that time. In the course of time when many Islamic traditional sciences mature and new ones developed, *Tafsir* received developments in the form of philological, jurisprudential, theological, philosophical, and mystical trends among others. In the era of stagnation, *Tafsir* took the form of commentaries and abridgements of the *tafsir* works produced by the previous scholars.¹² In the modern time; tafsir took a new dimension reflecting on modern developments intellectually, socially and politically in the world of Islam. Thus, one would find additional forms of *tafsir* that include a scientific *tafsir*, socio-literacy or revivalist kind and many others. The concern of this paper is, however, on the socio-literary or revivalist trend as propounded by Imam Muhammad Abduh. The central tendency of the modern *tafsir* is to bring back *ijtihad* and reflect on the Qur'anic verses freely to connect the meanings of the Qur'an with societal development in such a way that will make one feel truly that the Qur'an is meant for the day- to -day guidance of human life at all ages.¹³

Abduh's Biography

Muhammad Abduh belongs to an Egyptian peasant family and was born in 1849 in Mahallat Nasr and spends his childhood there. Having learned the Qur'an by heart, he was sent to the theological College of Tanta in 1862. He left Tanta to Cairo's Al-Azhar Mosque in 1866. In 1872, he comes into contact with Sayed Jamaladeen al Afghani, who had just arrived at Egypt. Al-Afghani revealed traditional learning to Abduh in a new light. He directed his attention to European works accessible in translation and attracted his interest finally to Egyptian and Muslim problems of the day.¹⁴

After concluding his studies at the Azhar Mosque and acquired a certificate of an '*Ālim*' and was appointed in 1880 to teach in Government schools. He was redeployed to liberal ministry and appointed as chief editor of the official gazette. He then exiled to Beirut, and after the suppression of the Urabis revolution by the British colony, he went to Paris and join Afghani where both jointly established the famous Magazine "*al-Urwat al-wuthqa*" (the firmest bond) which has to cease publication after eight months, due to the interference of the British Government. He was later pardoned by the British government in 1888 and returned to Egypt. Afterwards, he held many important and sensitive positions in Egypt such as Grand Mufti, a member of consultative council of Egypt, the president of Islamic society and member of the Governing body of the Azhar University, which has been constituted by his suggestions. He died in the year 1905 but his teachings have retained its influence steadily to the present time.¹⁵

Muhammad Abduh's Program

Abduh was interested in reforming Muslim society to meet the challenges of the West, and he called for the abandonment of *taqlid* as the starting point for that reform. He stressed the need for approaching the Qur'an with....fresh.....unencumbered.....past interpretations.¹⁶ Throughout his life, he tries to falsify the notion that portrays Islam religion as obsolete to moder challenges, by proving that Islam is adaptable to every human progress once its principles are properly adhered to.¹⁷ He, thus, criticizes holding on to the *madhabib* (school of laws) as well as *taqlid* (imitation) in support for freedom of *Ijtihad* and a new '*ijma*' in keeping with modern conditions based on the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, and to endeavour to create a more ethical and deeper religious thought instead of mechanical formalism.¹⁸

Abduh's Method of Tafsir

Muhammad Abduh was a fervent advocate of revivalism and a strong critic of blind adherence to *taqlid* (imitation). He viewed the prevailing state of *taqlid* during his time as a stagnant, lifeless practice, and called for the reopening of the “closed door” of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). Building on this, Abduh developed a distinctive approach to *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), diverging significantly from his predecessors. He regarded the Qur'an as a guide that directs humanity towards the path of righteousness, leading to success in both this world and the Hereafter—a concept he saw as the core purpose of Qur'anic revelation.¹⁹

Abduh was highly critical of *mufasssirun* (Qur'anic commentators) who, in his view, deviated from this principle by engaging in unnecessary discussions on topics such as grammar, rhetoric, or the justification of legal and theological biases. He believed these distractions pulled readers away from the Qur'an's essential message. For Abduh, true *tafsir* was about uncovering the spirit of the Qur'an—helping people grasp the wisdom behind Islamic beliefs and legislative injunctions in order to motivate them to observe Islamic principles sincerely.²⁰

He argued that faith should be derived directly from the Qur'an, without imposing preconceived notions upon it. Instead, he urged readers to approach the text with an open and balanced mind, free from bias, and to avoid attempts at justifying personal opinions. In Abduh's view, the Qur'an was the ultimate source of *aqidah* (creed), and human opinions should not be projected onto it.²¹ He believed this method should be applied not only to matters of belief but also to fields like jurisprudence.²² Abduh also criticized the tendency of some *mufasssirun* to delve into trivial discussions, such as the identity of unnamed individuals or locations in the Qur'an, emphasizing that if such details were important, the Qur'an would have provided them.²³

In his broader mission to reform Muslim thought and liberate Muslims from oppression and dogmatism, Abduh used *tafsir* as a tool for social and moral reform. He highlighted the intellectual, social, and moral aspects of the Qur'an in an effort to uplift the Muslim community from stagnation and backwardness. One key element of his *tafsir* was his rejection of *Isra'iliyat* (Judeo-Christian traditions) in interpreting the Qur'an, which many previous scholars had relied on. Instead, he championed the use of reason as an essential component of Qur'anic interpretation, asserting that reasoning demonstrates the Qur'an's dynamic nature.²⁴

Abduh was critical of scholars who limited themselves to *Tafsir bil Ma'thur* (traditional commentary) without incorporating reason, as he believed this method was largely relevant only to earlier times. He argued that reason was not only a key tool in *tafsir* but also a fundamental source of religion itself. Without reason, he contended, Islam could not be fully understood.²⁵ He went so far as to say that reason could serve as a substitute for prophetic guidance in calling people to Islam, as both reason and revelation are in harmony, never contradicting each other.²⁶

Abduh's reliance on reason also led him to re-interpret certain metaphysical concepts in the Qur'an. For instance, he disagreed with the traditional understanding of angels, jinn, and Shaytan (Satan). He viewed angels as symbolic of natural forces that govern the material world—positive forces that promote growth and construction. Similarly, Shaytan represented destructive forces in nature. Thus, while positive forces (angels) work towards constructive ends, negative forces (Shaytan) cause harm and destruction.²⁷

This symbolic approach extended to his interpretation of the story of Adam and Iblis. Abduh explained that the positive forces (angels) were made subservient to Adam, while the negative force (Iblis) was in constant rebellion against the positive. He saw this narrative as an allegory for the internal struggle within humans, where angelic forces drive people towards righteousness, while satanic forces seek to corrupt and debase them.²⁸

Abduh interprets the *Jinns* as evil forces of nature which cause diseases in our body and it could never be seen with naked eyes.²⁹ Likewise, when he came to interpret the story of '*tairan-Ababil*' (swarms of flying creatures) in *surah Al-fil*, he stipulated that '*tair*' means any flying creature whether visible or invisible. He refers to *Tairan-Ababil* sent to destroy the elephant troop as invisible flying organism carrying bacteria in their bodies. It is this disease that they injected to the people of the elephant and destroy them but not physical birds carrying baked clay as explained by the traditional *Mufasssirun*. To him these flying creatures were part of Allah's troops that nobody can estimate their number. He generally called them microbes.³⁰

In his attempt also to accommodate scientific theories he interpreted the verse that talk on the end of the universe in line with modern scientific views. He explained how the heaven could be perished by referring to some physical ideas and experiences such as the law of gravity. Thus, he said that the heaven will be perished if planet or stars went astray and collude with another.³¹

Imam Muhammad Abduh also rejected the concept of magic and defined it as hallucination and false imagination. In his interpretation of *surah al-Falaq* and *al-Nas*, where majority of the *Mufasssirun* explained that the *surahs* were revealed in order to rescue Prophet Muhammad (SAW) from Labid bn A'sam's magic as reported by Bukhari and Muslim,³² Abduh stated that these *surahs* has no relationship whatsoever with this concocted story. He argued that the report contradicts one of the fundamentals of Islamic belief, which requires Muslims to believe that the Prophet is not a mad man or bewitched.³³ This is because the *hadith* shows the magic has influenced his mind to the extent that he imagines that he did things unconsciously. Accepting this *hadith* will affirm the assertion of the unbelievers that he was *Mashur* (bewitched) and *Majnun* (possessed by *Jinn*),³⁴ may Allah forbid.

When he came to interpret the verse in *Surah al-Falaq*, 'from the evil blowers on knots'³⁵ he interpreted that the blowers on knots refers to gossipers, or who cuts the bond of relationship and love between people and a sadist. He compared that with a *Sahir* (witch) whose results of his evil action turned the lovers to haters.³⁶

Muhammad Abduh on Social Reformation

One of the areas of concern by Muhammad Abduh was liberation of the Muslim as well as strengthen their unification. He gave emphasis on the aspect of the Qur'an that talks of unity of the humanity in general and of the Muslim in particular. The following verses emphasized the unification of the whole people of the world. They were only divided after they received revelation. Those who accept faith form one nation while those who reject faith form another nation. It is therefore, only when Muslims unite that they can face the challenges of the rivalry of the other nations. The verse reads as follows:

Mankind was one single nation and God sent Prophets with glad tidings and warnings and with them sent down the books in truth to judge between people in matters wherein they differed. And only those to whom the scripture was given differed concerning it after clear proofs had come to them through hatred, one to another. God by his grace

guided the believers to the truth concerning that wherein they differed for God guides who He will to a Path that is straight.³⁷

He also explained in detail the verses that talk of the welfare of the weak and the orphans to hammer on those who have the means and denied to cater or improve the standard of living of the poor and the orphans. He warned individuals and Governments for the consequences of neglecting the oppressed and the weak. Among those verses is where Allah says:

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces toward east or west, but it is righteousness to believe in God and the last day, and the angels, to spend of your substance out of love for him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the way farer, for those who ask and for the ransom of slaves, to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity, to fulfill the contracts which you have made, and to be firm and patient in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout of periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the God fearing.³⁸

This verse talks about the importance of improving the standard of orphans and the weak, fulfillment of promise, tolerance while in critical condition and endurance, all these are connected with social life of the people. Muhammad Abduh uses these types of verses in order to uplift the social standard of the people. He expresses that social aspects of mankind are as also important as that of spiritual. He, therefore, warned that people should not only attach themselves to the mosques, they should strive to establish good relationship among themselves and help the needy so that the society is improved.

The Successors of Abduh

After the death of Muhammad Abduh his disciple, Muhammad Rashid Rida, continued the *tafsir* based on Abduh's method. Abduh commented from *Surah al-Fatihah* up to verse 126 of *Surah al-Nisa*. The *tafsir* was published in Rida's famous magazine *al-Manar*. Later, a book of *tafsir* with the title *Tafsir al-Manar* was produced and published. The method employed by his student had only minor deviations such as bringing more traditions to support the verses, making lengthy researches on important questions that concern Muslims in the modern time. Rida died without completing the *T tafsir* of the whole Qur'an. He stopped at verse 101 of *Surah Yusuf*.³⁹

After the death of Rida, Abduh's school of *tafsir* was further strengthened by *Ustazul-Akabar*, *Shaykh* Mustafa al-Muraghi, who died in 1945. He was deeply influenced by Muhammad Abduh. He followed his method of *tafsir* strictly in line with the idea of revivalism and revolution. His *tafsir* focuses on different topics and was compiled in a book title *al-Durus al-Diniyyah*. (Lessons on religion).⁴⁰

A Muslim revolutionary in Egypt, Sayed Qutb, the author of *Tafsir Fi Zilal al Qur'an* (in the shades of the Qur'an), was another modern intellectual who was influenced by the ideas of Muhammad Abduh. His voluminous *Tafsir, Fi Zilal*, is revolutionary and transformative in nature. It is almost an extension of ideas of Abduh and his disciples, especially on social and political reformation. For instance, his *tafsir* analyses comprehensively the materialistic ideologies of the contemporary society, points out their fallacies and present the Qur'anic perspective of solving each and every problem. It has greatly influenced Muslim youth world over and created a sort of awakening and consciousness among them in order to revive and rejuvenate the values, systems, concepts, doctrines, civilizations and culture to live in an Islamic way. He was executed in 1966 by the government of Jamal-Abdel Nasir of Egypt

because of his association with Muslim brotherhood (*Ikhwan al-Muslimun*) movement founded by Hassan al-Banna who was also assassinated in 1949 by the ruler of Egypt.⁴¹

Other modern writers who were influenced by Muhammad Abduh either directly or indirectly include Sayed Abdul A'la al-Mawdudi of Indo-Pakistan origin. He has authored a *tafsir*, titled *Tafhim al-Quran* (Understanding the Qur'an) in Urdu Language. He was the founder of *Jama'ah al-Islami* movement in Indo-Pakistan region in 1940's. His *tafsir* has extensively dealt with the problems of the modern society in a very impressive manner. It places great emphasis on the meanings of certain Qur'anic terminologies such as *ilah*, *rabb*, *ibadah* and *din*. The *tafsir* is aimed at creating a sort of awakening and consciousness among the Muslims so as to lead them to established a movement, a society and an Islamic State and government thus providing an opportunity to transform the existing secular order into a perfect socio-economic order based on the Qur'anic framework, and make it a prime reference in all walks of life.⁴²

Careful examination of *Tafsir Radd al-Azhan ila Ma'anil Qur'an* (Returning the minds to the meanings of the Qur'an) of *Shaykh* Abubakar Muhmud Gummi revealed the influence of *Tafsir Juzu' Amma* of Muhammad Abduh on *Tafsir* of *surah al-Falaq* and *al-Nas*.⁴³

Conclusion

It is obvious that the main aim of Abduh's *Tafsir* is to convey the real message of the Qur'an with the hope of reforming contemporary Muslim societies morally, socially and intellectually so that they so that they would be successful in this world and achieve salvation in the next world. Beside this, there are certain issues on which Abduh's *tafsir* is criticized. One of the most criticisms against his *tafsir* is his inability to conform to one of his principles i.e

Still, one will find numerous quotations from the Bible in his attempt to interpret the verse that talks on *Talut* Box and the subsequent event of war with Goliath in his interpretation of verses 246 to 251 of *surah al Baqarah* in his *tafsir*.

His interpretation of Angels, *Jinns* and *Shaytan* is not acceptable to the Muslim majority. His method of applying reasoning in interpretation the Qur'an induced the mind of some Muslims to consider him as *Mu'tazili*. Others considered him as anti-*Sunni* with regard to his attacks on *madhahib*, *Taqlid* and rejection of some *Hadith* accepted by Muslims as authentic especially those in Bukhari's and Muslim's collections.

In spite of his short comings, he was able to arouse modern scholars to using *ijtihad* in their intellectual discourse. He also never lost chance to depend Islam against its enemies' attack from both within and outside. He also tried to enlighten the Muslims to accept and accommodate modern discoveries that are in conformity with the religion and utilize them for their worldly progress.

The unique approach of Abduh towards *tafsir* made his school to survive to the present time. Many modern scholars followed his method in trying to interpret the Qur'an in the light of modern development. His attitude towards *taqlid* and *ijtihad* made his school to attract the attention of many contemporary Muslim intellectuals.

I wish to recommend that the *Jama'at Nasrul Islam* and the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs in Nigeria to hold a kind of conference or workshop to review the position and relevant ideas of *Imam* Muhammad Abduh so as to come out with a guiding principle that the Muslim scholars will follow in issuing *fatwa* on new development that affect the life of the Muslims

Considering the current scientific and technological developments, Islam being a dynamic religion, requires a neo-*Ijtihad* to accommodate these developments within the limits of the *Shari'ah*.

Notes and References

1. Qur'an 2:2
2. Qur'an 12:2, Qur'an 13:37, Qur'an 43:3 Qur'an 46:12
3. Qur'an 26:192-193
4. Qur'an 3:7
5. Qur'an 17:89
6. Qur'an 2:106
7. Qur'an 14:4
8. M. H. Al Dhahabi, *Al Tafsir wal Mufasssirun*, Cairo: Dar Kutub al Hadith, 1976. vol. 1, 15. Print.
9. M. Qattan, *Mabahith fi ulum al Qur'an*, Beirut: Mu'assasah al Risalah, 1983. 323. Print
10. Qur'an 25:33
11. I.S. Saidu, *Samples Questions and Answers on Islamic Religious Studies for A Level Students (IJMB, NCE, DIPLOMA & UNDERGRADUATE) Qur'an and Sunnah*. Dutsinma: Eddy Press, 2000. 60-61. Print. See also, A.J al-Suyuti, *Al-ittiqan fi ulum al-Qur'an*, Beirut: Darul Fikr. 1984. vol.1.74. Print
12. A. A. B., Philip, *Usool at-Tafseer: The Methodology of Qur'anic Explanation*, Lagos: Ad Daawat-ul-Islamiyah Book centre: n.d. 25. Print
13. S. M. R., Rida, *Tafsir al Manaar*, Cairo: Al Manaar Pub., 1346 A.H. vol. 1.17. Print
14. <https://en.wikipedia.org> accessed on 16th August, 2024.
15. <http://www.Britannica.com> accessed on 16th August, 2024
16. Philip, p26
17. Rida, Tafsir al Manaar...vol. 1, p25
18. Rida, p25
19. Rida, p25
20. Rida, p18
21. Al Dhahabi, Al Tafsir wal... vol 2. p556
22. Al Dhahabi, vol 2, p555
23. Al Dhahabi, vol 2, p5
24. Rida, Tafsir al Manaar...vol. 1, p18
25. This is purely a Mu'tazilite view.
26. Rida, Tafsir al-Manaar vol. 1. p23
27. Rida, vol. I pp 267-268 see also, Al-Dhahabi, Al Tafsir wal...vol.2 p611
28. Rida, Tafsir al-Manaar... vol. I, pp 281-282
29. Rida, p282
30. Al-Dhahabi, Al Tafsir wal... Vol. 2, p569
31. I. M. Abduh, *Tafsir Juz'u Amma*. Cairo: Al Manaar Pub., 1346 A.H. Print
32. Sahih Bukhari Hadith No. 5763, Sahih Muslim Hadith No. 2189. Graded as Sahih.
33. Q51:52, Q51:39
34. Abduh, Tafsir Juz'u., pp 181-192
35. Q113:4
36. Abduh, Tafsir Juz'u ... p181
37. Q2:213
38. Q2:177
39. Rida, Tafsir al- Manar ... Vol. I, p4
40. S.M.M, Al- Muraghi, *Al- Durus al- Diniyyah*. Cairo: Matbi Al-Azhar, 1345 AH.
41. D.T. Ushama, *Methodologies of the Qur'anic Exgesis*, Kuala Lumpur: As-Noordeen. 1995. 102. Print
42. Ushama, p104
43. S.A.M. Gummi, *Radd al-Azhan ila Ma'anil Qur'an*, Vols.I and II, Beirut: Dar Fikr 1986. Print