Different Faces of Critical Traditionalism in Approaching the Quran in Contemporary Indonesia

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Abstract. There has been a dynamic development of Islam in contemporary Indonesia as seen from the approaches to interpreting the Quran. One of the trends of thought is traditionalism, which is commonly perceived as a broad category of the school of thought. There is no single entity called traditionalism since it takes on different faces. With specific references to M. Quraish Shihab, Abd Muin Salim and Nashruddin Baidan, this article aims to study all these traditional Muslim thinkers' views on Quran interpretation by employing a historical approach. The study mainly focuses on, first, the continuity and changes concerning elements initially derived from some sources and elements developed originally and secondly, on response to modern Western legacies of social sciences and humanities approaches. This article will argue that critical traditionalism constitutes many faces. This trend of a mode of thought is viewed from its followers' insisting on the sufficiency of traditional sources of interpretation, based on argumentations set up primarily by classical Muslim scholars, rationalising traditional argumentations and critical response and clarification to Western approaches in interpreting the Quran.

Keywords and phrases: critical traditionalism, Quran, philosophy of science of interpretation, reconstruction, thematic unity

Introduction

Anthony H. Johns (1984, 155) once stated, "the present state of Quranic studies in Indonesia and Malaysia is not well surveyed", which sparked various works and responses from many authors on Quranic studies. Nonetheless, thus far, there are only a few works to address Quranic studies, including Howard M. Federspiel who only conducted a survey of 58 popular literature on the Quran in Indonesia and Islah Gusmian, who merely surveyed 24 exegetical works from 1990 to 2000.

What Johns called "Quranic studies", certainly refers to both the work of exegesis and approaches to the Quran.

All in all, there has been a significant development in the studies on approaches to the Quran in contemporary Indonesia as compared to that in other countries, such as in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Despite the number of studies on this topic, the existing studies seem to be less sufficient to cover the breadth of the issue in Quranic studies. For instance, Baidan (2003), Federspiel (1994) and Gusmian (2003) merely limited their focus on products or exegetical works written from the 20th until the 21st century. Some other authors, such as Johns (1984, 155–206; 1988, 257–287; 1999, 109–134; 2005, 17–40), Riddell (1989, 107–124; 1990, 3–19; 2002, 1–26) and Feener (1998, 47–76) only focused their research on a wide range of exegesis development in the Indonesia-Malay world. Similarly, the work of Zuhdi (2014) has paid insufficient attention to issues of exegesis approaches to the Quran. His study focused almost entirely on mapping and classifying exegetical works written in Indonesia from 2000 to 2010 based on a framework for exegetical types; quasi objectivist-traditionalist, quasi objectivist-rationalist, quasi objectivist-revivalist and quasi objectivist-modernist. The extraction of the applied approaches does not "capture the real picture" of the emerging thought on approaches to the Quran, which generates the existing dynamics and development in contemporary Indonesia.

Izza Rohman, through his article, sought to establish a thesis delineating that exegetical works written by Southeast Asia's Muslim scholars, including Indonesian interpreters, play an essential role in shaping the development of exegesis in the world as a whole. Triggered by Wielandt's statement that most recent approaches to the Quran developed in Arab countries, especially Egypt, he contended, as Abdullah Saeed insisted, that the main reason for this is that many of the published works in Indonesia are available in the Indonesian language (Rohman 2007, 207). The thesis proposed by Rohman is self-contradictory because there is no valid evidence for spreading Indonesian exegetical works across countries other than Southeast Asia, except for a few works written in Arabic, such as Nawawi's *Marāḥ Labīd*. Besides, Rohman's analysis of Indonesian Muslim scholars' thought, such as M. Dawam Rahardjo, Kuntowijoyo, Taufik Adnan Amal and M. Amin Abdullah, by viewing them through existing contexts does not support much for his thesis on the contribution of Indonesian scholars for the dynamics of Quran exegesis approaches in the world by neglecting an analysis of the originality in terms of continuity and change, or the old and new elements of thought.

Wielandt's thesis is valid to the extent that most works on approaches were developed in Arab countries, only because almost all of the Indonesian exegetical

works have been written in the Indonesian language. However, the thesis could be deemed as neglecting the current developments in contemporary Indonesia.

Wielandt was not the sole author to suggest this notion. Other authors, such as Federspiel and Johns, also tended to see the development of Quranic studies in the archipelago as an "extension" of Middle Eastern exegesis. Federspiel, for instance, concluded that the model of the Quran interpretation in Indonesia had come from the Egyptian Muslim writers who lived one hundred years ago (Federspiel 1994, 292). Nevertheless, Johns's studies are limited to Middle East-oriented Malay-Indonesia exegetical works (Johns 1984, 155; 1988, 257–287; 2005, 17–36) and thus the conclusion is not entirely true. Some works of literature used in the early development of interpretation in Islamic boarding schools are works of Middle Eastern scholars, such as *al-Jalālayn.* The originality of some of the works written by Indonesian scholars, such as Abd al-Ra`ūf Singkel's *Tarjumān al-Mustafīd*, has also been in dispute (Saenong 2006, 511–512). However, it does not mean that the overall Indonesian exegesis does not have its originality as seen from the contents but the method.

The criticism toward Arab-based Quranic studies in Indonesia is also addressed by some authors of an anthology, *The Qur'an in Malay-Indonesian World: Context and Interpretation*. This anthology denotes that, "The largely Arabo-centric approach to the academic study of *tafsīr* has resulted in the absence of literature that explores the diversity of Quranic interpretation in other areas of the Muslim-majority world" (Daneshgar, Riddell and Rippin 2016, 1). Nevertheless, the book also suffers from a missing focus on approaches that underlies interpretations due to its limitation in studying context and interpretation.

Research Methodology

The actual state of affair is not merely a matter of accessibility and authorship, as presupposed in the book, edited by Danesghar, Riddell and Rippin, or of distinguished character, as argued by Rohman, but also the originality of proposed ideas and Indonesian Muslim thinker's response to modern Western social sciences and humanities. The standard by which the originality can be proved is to the extent that the proposed thought is sourced from the previous legacy of Islam within the "sciences" of the Quran (*'ulūm al-Qur`ān*) and to the extent that developed ideas can be regarded as new. The continuity-change framework can only be applied to assess the past and present. Here I propose a modified John Dewey's continuity and interaction concerning human experience, due to its weaknesses, inclination towards continuity, changes and responses (Hohr 2013, 25–38).

Traditionalism and rationalism are matters of mindedness in response to approaches outside of the believed traditions. Traditionalism is not automatically defined here as the rejection of Quran interpretation using reasoning (*bi al-dirāya* or *bi al-ma`qūl*), which is indeed applied even by some traditional interpreters (Rūmī 2009, 70–81). Meanwhile, the response can be categorised as a "critical" one in the sense of making a critical appraisal, parallelism, or even academic rejection of modern approaches.

Results and Discussion

The critical traditionalism: Between originality and responsiveness

On this account, originality refers to continuity and change as commonly applied in historical inquiry. Historically speaking, the trend of the interpretation of the Quran in contemporary Indonesia has begun with the emergence of critical traditionalism. However, at the same time, this trend is inseparable from its origin and change in terms of sources of interpretation. "The traditionalism" in this context, therefore, should be understood as a mode of thought that is characterised by adopting interpretation approaches from Islamic legacies (*turāth*) of the previous Muslim scholars (ulama), dominated by narrative sources. In addition to the origin and change, the term "critical" is viewed from the proponents' responses to "outsiders" sources of interpretation, especially Western approaches. The change may be done either by rationalisation, rearrangement, or revitalisation of classical Islamic legacies.

The critical characteristics of the trend can be identified by three main features. First, modification of traditional sources or approaches of interpretation by employing a critical approach through Islamisation of selected elements of Western approaches. Second, a critical comparison between traditional and modern sources and approaches of interpretation is ended with acceptance or rejection of all or some aspects of Western approaches. Third, refinement of traditional approaches to turn them into "modern" ones is conducted to be contested with the Western ones.

The attitude of the abovementioned critical characters towards Western thoughts, for instance, on hermeneutics and the philosophy of science related to the interpretation of the Quran, is indeed rather diverse. However, at least they have tried to make "critical clarification" by positioning the Western thoughts in the context of the interpretation of the Quran, "scientification" by explaining the "modernity" of traditional approaches by borrowing the terms of philosophy of

science, such as the epistemology of *tafsīr* (exegesis) or even rejection of any Western approaches.

Quraish Shihab on thematic approach

Shihab has contributed to developing the thematic approach to the Quran, especially the "thematic unit of Quran chapters", in Indonesia (Wardani 2017, 29–41). Amin and Kusmana (2005, 67–84) called this thematic approach, "purposive exegesis". The term is more plausible to apply to thematic unity because understanding the purpose (*hadaf, gharad*) or the main idea contained in a surah is one of principle tasks of interpretation using this method of thematic unity. This approach constitutes the basis for his interpretation in his masterpiece, *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, which circulated in Southeast Asia (Mazlan, Jawiah and Muhd Najib 2018, 152).

This thematic approach is defined as "an interpretation that involves a Quranic surah by explaining its objectives in general and particular and the relationship connecting between various issues in the surah to allow the integration and interconnection between the whole issues as a single entity" (Shihab 1992, 117).

Using a parable, Shihab analogised this kind of thematic approach with a "box" containing Quranic messages extracted from many verses of a particular surah. Theologically believing in hidden divine wisdom behind the name of a surah, it is assumed that the naming, as long as it is proven valid from the prophet's narrative, can be used as a starting point to determine the master idea of the surah. Surah al-Kahf, for instance, which literally means "cave", symbolises "a place of protection", as it did historically protect a group of young men who avoided the rulers' cruelty at that time. Employing the analogy, he shifted from the physical meaning of the cave as a place of refuge to its abstract meaning. The cave as protection serves as the master idea of the surah, which can protect those who practice the surah's messages. By transferring the semantic into semiotic meaning, the meaning of "protection" then becomes a master idea that covers the themes in some passages of the surah. Thus, the interpretation of each verse or passage is associated with the meaning of protection (Shihab 1997, 12–13).

Hamdani Anwar regarded this thematic approach as the new approach in Quranic studies. However, it is incorrect to deem it as a brand new approach since it belonged to some previous authors and thus not originally developed from Shihab's thought. Aḥmad al-Sayyid al-Kumī from the Azhar University of Egypt is the one who initially suggested the approach, which was then developed and applied by some Muslim authors, such as al-Farmāwī (1976), Muslim (2009), al-Khālidī (2008),

al-Daghāmīn (1995) and Sa'īd (1991) with some differences of concept, terminology and even steps among them (al-Nuṣayrāt 2013).

As a matter of fact, even before al-Kumī, al-Shāṭibī (d. 1388 CE) also suggested the application of this approach in interpreting the Quran when he said that it is not correct to limit an analysis only to parts of a speech by only understanding the literal meaning of word etymologically. Thus, he suggested that it is necessary to understand the spectator's purpose. If the meaning is not found, we should pay attention to the wholeness of that speech from the beginning to its end (Shihab 1992, 112–113).

Shaltūt, as stated by Shihab (1992, 117), has applied this approach in his interpretation of the Quran, *Tafsīr al-Qur`ān al-Karīm*. The thematic unit (*al-waḥda al-mawḍū'iyya*), which becomes the basis of this approach has also been brought about by Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ḥijāzī. Farāhī also suggested the same idea through his concept of surah as a unity that Iṣlāḥī further developed at a later stage (Mir 1986). Among these figures, it is alleged that Shaltūt had a direct influence on Shihab's thought on this approach because of Shihab's educational background at al-Azhar University and his intensive contact with the scholar.

Abd Muin Salim on "philosophy of science" and techniques of interpretation

Abd. Muin Salim (d. AH 1432/2011 CE) is a professor of Quran interpretation at Alauddin State Islamic University, South Sulawesi. He suggested what might be called here the "philosophy of science" of Quran interpretation. He elaborated on the Quran interpretation as viewed from the perspective of ontology, epistemology and axiology. First, he argued that the process of interpreting the Quran is a form of scholarly inquiry into text that falls under the rules of objectivity and rationality. In principle, he sought to make "scientification" of Quran interpretation, which is in contrast to "Islamisation of knowledge or science". He sought to reconstruct a "scientification of Islam", particularly the procedures of interpretation. In a way of justification, this classical Islamic discipline is intended to make it seem "scientific" or "scholarly" viewed from modern explanations, especially from the philosophy of science. Therefore, he first defined the word *tafsīr*, as viewed from the ontological and linguistic perspectives. In his opinion, this word indicates two meanings, namely as process and product of interpretation. More extensively, he then distinguished the notions of interpretation into three positions, namely as a process, as a scientific discipline and as an object (result) of interpretation (Salim 2010, 12).

Based on this distinction, he further distinguished two interpretation processes, namely interpretations that have "explanatory" goals to obtain a deep understanding and "exploratory" interpretations to obtain deep insights (Salim 1990, 2). In Quran interpretation, the former is usually aimed at exploration, an effort and endeavour to interpret the meaning of the text in an in-depth. Presumably, he wanted to open up opportunities for interpreters to interpret God's word through in-depth scientific enterprises, as seen in scientific interpretation (*al-tafsīr al-'ilmī*), not only to understand it as scripture that contains guidance for humans concerning daily rituals and practices. Meanwhile, the latter is intended to drive the interpretation that focuses on irenic understanding, or the interpretation that is not projected to study critically the doctrines of the Quran and thus this interpretation approach could be regarded as a phenomenological understanding (Salim 1990, 42).

Concerning the axiological aspect of Quran interpretation, Salim regarded interpretation as an effort to interpret the Quran by applying a scientific perspective. According to Salim, as a philosophical starting point, as an "authentic scripture" revealed from God, the Quran is open to study from a multidisciplinary approach, both through textual approaches to explore theological, legal and moral doctrines and through scientific approaches applying social sciences and humanities. This scripture is also open to being approached both by insiders who aim to understand doctrines and outsiders who study it for a scientific purpose (Salim 1990, 43–44). In his view, the authenticity of the Quran should be proven from the perspective of belief in the broader sense covering religious evidence and science's perspective. Departing from this starting point, the explanatory function of interpretation emphasises the research to explain Quranic teachings, while the exploratory one explains the contents of the Quran related to sciences in a broader sense, or in Salim's terminology, "Quranic sciences" (Salim 1990, 45–48). In his view, the Quran interpretation should be addressed as exploring the contents of the Quran covering exegetical hadiths ascribed to the Prophet Muḥammad and various other issues, such as philosophical, social, historical, linguistic and scientific ones (Salim 1990, 49–52).

Contrary to the mentioned philosophising or "scientification of interpretation", as mentioned above, Salim proposed "scientific interpretation" or what he termed *al-tafsīr al-'ilmī* that will result in what is known as "Quranic sciences" (*al-'ulūm al-Qur`āniyya*), or scientific miracles contained in the Quran, including natural sciences, sociology and history.

In addition to "philosophising" the Quran interpretation, the other aspect of Salim's thought is "renewing" the terms of interpretation techniques, i.e. textual interpretations through inter-textual analysis and by prophetic hadith, linguistic

interpretations by semantic analysis, logical interpretation by reasoning, systematic interpretations by analysing verses and surahs correlation (*munāsaba*) and cultural interpretation employing theories of natural or social sciences.

The techniques that Salim presented have almost no new elements. Despite modern scientific terms used, most of them have been known and practised for a long time in the interpretation of the Quran. The technique he proposed is a modified scientific interpretation (*al-tafsīr al-'ilmī*), which has long been applied by interpreters in interpreting the verses concerning universe phenomena. However, he introduced the term "cultural", which was initially intended to emphasise the dimensions of human effort to discover science and make it seem more inclined to social than natural sciences, even though these two types of knowledge are both classified as "science".

There are three seemingly-new interpretation techniques offered. The first is a socio-historical technique with historical accounts related to Arab society before and during the revelation of the Quran. Some Muslim intellectuals have already brought about such interpretation by understanding the socio-historical background in a broader sense. Fazlur Rahman, for instance, emphasised the need for the "general social-historical background of the Quran", not only *sha`n al-nuzūl* (the specific background commonly called *sabab al-nuzūl*). The historical data are obtained from the prophet's biography (*sīra*) and hadiths, pre-Islamic Arab history and commentaries (Rahman 1984, 143). Later, similarly, Rahardjo (2005, 152–156), Amal and Panggabean (1989, 50–51) also suggested this approach. Nevertheless, classifying this technique as an interpretation by narratives (*al-tafsīr bi al-ma`thūr*) implies that this interpretation is still limited to narratives on the contexts of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) and the narrative-based prophet's biography, such as *Sīrat Ibn Hishām.*

The second is teleological interpretation. The term "teleological" was derived from *telos* (end). In this context, Salim defined that an interpretation is based on "wisdom" (*ḥikma*) behind Islamic doctrines. The starting point from which he proposed such an approach is the universal message of the Quran, which underlies its revelation at the very beginning of Islam, that is, to situate humankind within a better condition (*maṣlaḥa*). However, unfortunately, Salim likened wisdom to legal maxims (*al-qawā'id al-fiqhiyya*). In essence, the former belongs to the values behind Quranic legal formulations through the perspective of *maqāṣid al-sharī'a*, while the latter is the general rules of Islamic law. This is not a novice idea since it has been suggested by many scholars, such as Auda (2008), al-Raysūnī (1999, 34–35), Muḥammad Shaḥrūr, Ṭāhā Jābir al-'Alwānī and Muḥammad 'Izza Darwaza (Iman n.d.; al-Wāzinī n.d.).

The third is cultural interpretation. The term seems original, but in this sense, "culture" refers to nothing more than knowledge obtained by humans through experience or reason, which does not conflict with the Quran. The following case as Salim pointed out, seems to explain this type of culture. Unfortunately, one example of this kind of interpretation (Salim 1994, 30–31, 96), actually cannot be deemed as an interpretation, but a *taṭbīq*, as Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabā`ī defined as an "application" of a proposed interpretation that is already available in exegetical works (Shihab 1992, 110). Salim defined this kind of "established knowledge" as the science obtained through specific scientific methods. Perhaps, since a scientific interpretation is only part of interpretation with human knowledge, he did not use this term but instead used the term "cultural interpretation" to include rational and empirical experiences. Interestingly, he said that this kind of interpretation is recognised because, as understood in the Quran, the knowledge sourced from the universe (*kawn*) is parallel to the revealed knowledge (*qawl*) (Salim 1994, 30).

Nashruddin Baidan on the reconstruction of the science of Quran interpretation

Nashruddin Baidan (b. 1951 CE) is a professor of Quran interpretation at Surakarta State Islamic University, West Java. He is a well-known author of many books related to approaches to the Quran and exegetical works circulating among academicians of Indonesian Islamic universities in particular and Indonesian Muslim society in general.

Through his book, *Wawasan Baru Ilmu Tafsir*, Baidan aimed to reconstruct the science of the Quran (*'ilm al-tafsir*). The reconstruction should be understood from his view on the structure of knowledge that forms the science of Quran interpretation twofold. The first is knowledge about "external components" concerning the Quran's identity related "firstly" to the history of the Quran, the context of revelation, variants of reading, abrogating and abrogated verses, *muḥkam* (clear meaning) and *mutashābih* (unclear meaning) verses, the miracle of the Quran, verses and surahs correlation, stories in the Quran and rules of interpretation and "secondly" related to traits or personalities of the interpreter. The second is "internal components" related to forms of interpretations, either by narrative or by reason, methods consisting of global or paraphrastic (*ijmālī),* analytical (*taḥlīlī),* comparative (*muqārīn*), or thematic (*mawḍū`ī*) and exegetical orientations, such as legal, scientific, philosophical and linguistic ones.

In terms of "interpreter's traits or personalities", to replace "requirements of interpreters" in classical exegetical literature, Baidan suggested some conditions related to theological (true belief), ethical (sincerity, noble character, neutrality and

awareness) and spiritual (*'ilm al-mawhiba*) aspects. In Baidan's opinion, the latter term implies that when the requirements are met, there must be an interpretation. Interestingly, the reason for his rejection of the term "requirement" is that he refuses what is so-called "causation" between a requirement as a cause and an interpretation as an effect. If there is no requirement, there is no interpretation. He argued that any interpretation, either valid or invalid, could arise from anyone who either meets the requirement or not (Baidan 2011, 10–11). The interpretation is meant here, either as lay interpretation or "lay exegesis", as Görke (2013, 363) recently called and as Rahardjo (2005, xix, 11–12) even supported before, or as an expert's interpretation. Baidan's statement certainly should be comprehended in terms of what happens, instead of what should be.

Regarding the interpreter's traits (*shurūṭ al-mufassir*), Baidan included traits of sincerity, neutrality, awareness and having divinely given knowledge (*mawhiba*). Long before Baidan, some scholars had also emphasised sincerity as one ethical basis for interpreting the Quran (al-Suyūṭī n.d., vol. 2, 175–184). Baidan added nothing to this agreeable condition.

Although some scholars have also emphasised neutrality as one of the interpreters' ethical basis, Baidan's highlighting of this requirement seems something new because it is necessary for every scholarly inquiry. In the contemporary era, it is M. Quraish Shihab, an Indonesian prominent author, who suggested the same principle, namely "objectivity" (Shihab 2013, 397–398). However, the concept of awareness according to both authors seems slightly different; Baidan, by the term, criticised many distorted interpretations among themselves (Baidan 2011, 357–361), while Shihab, would open more broadly any non-Muslim interpretation that can be recognised if it fits objectivity.

The awareness differs from neutrality. According to Baidan, unlike neutrality, whose pillar lies in objective facts within texts, self-awareness belongs to man's inner dimension. Etymologically, awareness is "having knowledge of something through alertness in observing or in interpreting what one sees" (Neufeldt, Victoria 1995, 95). According to Baidan, an interpreter should have the inner awareness that he or she stands on a particular ground when facing the Quran as a scripture containing sacred words of God, which was revealed for being guidance, having a universal message with unique language style and structure (Baidan 2011, 362). This awareness contains three elements, namely who revealed the Quran (God), to whom the Quran was revealed and man as the target of the interpreted verses (Baidan 2011, 363).

Based on Baidan's explanation of awareness as "fully understanding and experiencing" (*memahami dan menghayati*) (Baidan 2011, 363) and his way of connecting it to the scientific principle of objectivity and to the spiritual commitment to respect the Quran as indeed God's speech, awareness refers to the interpreter's alertness, based on his mastery on methodology and sources of interpretation and his strong commitment in interpreting the Quran objectively. There are three fundamental elements embodied in the awareness. The first is knowledge of rules of interpretation; the second is spiritual commitment to free an interpretation from individual biases; the third is social responsibility in being aware of the risk that if the proposed interpretation that will be targeted to public Muslims is incorrect, it will be misleading. This fact can be implied from his insisting on the necessity to respect the Quran as God's speech and that an interpreter, contrary to Shihab's view, should be a Muslim.

Concerning the last condition, to master divinely given knowledge (*'ilm al-mawhiba*), Baidan referred to the notion by al-Suyūṭī in *al-Itqān*. He translated the term in the wrong etymology as "acquired knowledge", even though this translation only is rendered from *al-'ilm al-muktasab* or *al-'ilm al-kasbī*. Baidan's argumentation refers to Surah al-'Ankabut (29:69) which states that whoever strives in God's cause, He shall most certainly guide them onto paths that lead to Him (Baidan 2011, 364). Besides sourced from textual evidence, the argumentation is also inferring that an engineer could get new knowledge from his experiences and thus an interpreter could also gain new knowledge from his experiences (Baidan 2011, 366). Therefore, the evidence that Baidan put forward for acceptance of this requirement is the ethical and spiritual bases, namely, as a Muslim, an interpreter should implement the doctrines of the Quran that are even explored by himself through his or her interpretation. Therefore, it is ethically wrong if he or she neglects their implementation. That implementation is a fundamental key to obtaining the given knowledge through spiritual insights.

Baidan's stand on traditionalism appears in his attitude to this kind of knowledge. He sought to argue for al-Suyūṭī's inclusion of such knowledge as a condition for the Quran interpretation. It seems that he tried to rationalise this term that is well-known among Muslim Sufis. Baidan also stated that it was primarily for the interpreter to master this knowledge. The qualification was very much influenced by the Sufistic view (Baidan 2011, 92–93). Baidan even further rationalised this kind of knowledge by taking such science not as a "divinely given knowledge" but as an "acquired knowledge" by implementing mastered knowledge on the previous Islamic teachings.

By referring to Quranic verses, the prophetic hadith and analogy, this kind of "rationalisation" of that traditional concept of Sufis indicate the "critical" aspect of Baidan's traditionalism. Although he gave a new foundation, the content, namely *'ilm al-mawhiba*, remains traditional.

Responses to Western approaches in Quran interpretation

Shihab's revitalisation of the thematic approach and review of orientalists' thought

This approach has been implemented in his masterpiece, *Tafsir al-Mishbah*. Two factors are contributing to the writing of these works; first, in 1997, he published *Tafsīr al-Qur`ān al-Karīm*, wherein he employed an analytic approach (*taḥlīlī*), but the work did not attract Muslim society's attention due to prolix interpretations (Shihab 2002, xiii–xiv); second, he responds Richard Bell's attack toward the authenticity of the Quran, because the unsystematic arrangement of Quranic verses is evidence that there is infiltrated verses into the Quran (Shihab 2002, xxi).

Concerning Bell's attack, in principle, Shihab advanced critical literary analysis of the Quran. He put forward a hypothesis concerning the "collection" of the Quran, namely that "parts of the Quran had been written down at a fairly early stage in Muḥammad's career, but more particularly that the occurrence in the middle of a surah of a passage wholly unrelated to the context was to be explained by the supposition that this passage had been written on the back of a scrap of paper used for one of the neighbouring passages which properly belonged to the surah" (Watt 1970, 101). For instance, Bell selected Surah al-Ghashiyah (75:17–20),[1] which is regarded to have no connection of thought, either with the previous or subsequent passage and it is marked by rhyme. He hypothesised that this passage has been placed there because they were found written on the back of passages 13–16, as indicated by the different rhyme from that of preceding verses, which were a later addition to this and had been written on the back of a "scrap" which already contained passages 17–20 (Watt 1970, 102).

Replying to this attack, Shihab proposed three main arguments. First, many authentic narratives ascribed to the prophet serve as evidence that neither Muḥammad nor his companions, but God, arranged the Quranic verses (Shihab 2002, xxii). Second, the changing rhyme is aimed to remove the audience's saturation (Shihab 2002, xxii). Third, the correlation between apparent breaks among verses and surahs needs to be linked rationally through *'ilm al-munāsaba* (the science of Quran correlations), namely through intellectual exercise, as initiated by al-Khaṭṭābī (d. AH 388/998 CE), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. AH 606/1210 CE), al-Shāṭibī

(d. AH 790/1388 CE), al-Biqā'ī (d. AH 885/1480 CE), al-Zarkashī (d. AH 794/1392 CE), al-Suyūṭī (d. AH 911/1505 CE), 'Abdullāh Dirāz (d. AH 1377/1958 CE) and many others (Shihab 2002, xxiv–xxxi). In short, in Shihab's view, to prove the logical structure of the Quran, there should be narrative evidence, rhetoric and intellectual exercise.

Shihab's argumentation against Bell's attack here constitutes a "critical clarification" in the sense that he revitalised the old concept of Muslim scholars on the coherence of the Quran and this kind of thematic approach becomes a way to prove the well-structured composition of the Quran.

In line with his attack on Bell's thought on the structure of the Quran, Shihab also criticised hermeneutics as the Western approach to the Quran. According to Shihab, the possible application of hermeneutics in the Quran interpretation could not be "black and white", to say "feasible or infeasible", categorised as the standard answer for such sophisticated issues. Instead, it needs a detailed clarification of its aspects and assumptions (Shihab 2013, 428). His open-mindedness to any approach appears from his statement that "not all of the ideas suggested by schools and experts of hermeneutics discussed here are false. There must be a new, good and feasible approach that can be used to widen horizons of knowledge, even to enrich interpretation" (Shihab 2013, 427). Moreover, he cited a prophetic hadith stating that "the wisdom is the believer's losing property and thus he is the worthiest to reclaim it whenever it might be found" (Shihab 2013, 452).

Despite open-mindedness, Shihab criticised hermeneutics, because of the weakness of this approach as compared to the *tafsīr*. First, like the objection of the members of the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought and Civilisations (INSIST), such as Armas (2005, 40–42), Shihab criticised hermeneutics since it is a method applied to Biblical studies. He argued that unlike the Hebrew Bible written about 2,000 years after its revelation, the Quran was well preserved since the era of the Prophet Muḥammad, so its authenticity is undoubted (Shihab 2013, 431–437). Second, some of the hermeneutic questions related to text and its interpretation have been exceeded and solved by early Muslim scholars, such as the problem of God's revelation of His indefinite words into human's actual words. Referring to Surah al-Zukhruf (43:3), he argued that the pronoun in *ja'alnāhu* indicates "inner speech" (*kalām nafsī*) from which the Quran was revealed (Shihab 2013, 437).

Concerning the first point of Shihab's objection, historically speaking, the hermeneutics has been applied in Biblical studies and although this scripture is in inspiration-revelation, while the Quran is in *verbatim*-revelation, both scriptures are formulated in the form of comprehensible human's language (Syamsuddin

2009, 72–73). Meanwhile, his second objection, in principle, implies that it is impossible to understand the psychological condition of the author as suggested by Schleiermacher. Nonetheless, Shihab himself offered the solution by changing the necessity of understanding the author's psychological condition. In this regard, it is related to the Quran of Allah by looking at the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad through the context of revelation (Syamsuddin 2021, 497).

Furthermore, Shihab's description of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics by emphasising merely two aspects of the rule of interpretation: grammatical and psychological analysis, in Syamsuddin's view, is way too simple. Three aspects are missing from Shihab's attention, namely the necessity of looking at the author's text in determining the original meaning, the importance of syntagmatic analysis by looking at other words surrounding the word being interpreted and the analysis of all parts of a text in interpretation (Syamsuddin 2021, 488).

Regarding Gadamer's hermeneutics that the interpretation aims at understanding the historical meaning, instead of the original meaning and that a text does not have a rigid, permanent and fixed meaning, Shihab shared an incomplete explanation that might lead him to its misunderstanding. The other main ideas of Gadamer that are not described by him are the awareness of effective history (*wirkungsgeschichtliches bewusstsein*), the pre-understanding (*vorverstandniss*), the fusion of horizons (*horizontverschmelzung*) and the application (*anwendung*). These theories are missing from Shihab's writing on Gadamer's hermeneutics that might lead to his understanding of it, especially when he says that this hermeneutical theory belongs to subjectivism schools, which makes it incompatible for interpreting the Quran (Syamsuddin 2021, 488).

Shihab's misunderstanding that the autonomy of text in Gadamer's hermeneutics necessitates interpreting a text based on the reader's pre-understanding and interest is because Gadamer proposed a fusion of horizons of text and its reader. It means that the interpretation is neither fully objective nor subjective (Syamsuddin 2021, 492).

Salim's "philosophy of science" of Quran interpretation and Islamic universalism

The idea of "scientification" of the Quran interpretation is closely related to the idea of Islamic universalism in Indonesia, especially in Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University at Ciputat, Tangerang, Indonesia. The idea initiated by Harun Nasution, one of the "architects" of Islamic universities (state Islamic colleges, state institutes for Islamic studies and state Islamic universities), was very influential.

Through his well-known book among the students, *Islam Ditinjau dari Berbagai Aspek* (*Islam Viewed from Its Multi-Aspects*), he has sought to show that Islam is a religion that contains teachings about theology, spirituality and morality, history, culture, politics, law, institutions, mysticism, philosophy and science (Nasution 1984, vol. 2, iv). It seems evident that Harun's thought was very influential in shaping students' mindsets; among whom is Salim. In the initial phase, Harun was well-known as a defender of reason (Martin, Woodward and Atmaja 1997).

Salim's response to the Western legacy in his effort to "scientify" the Quran interpretation is closely related to the philosophy of science. He made a "critical clarification" in explaining "traditional Quran interpretation" vis-a-vis science and rationalism. However, he tended to be traditional because he emphasised that the traditional approach is more adequate than the rational one. This fact can be inferred from the techniques of Quran interpretation that he proposed.

Salim's traditionalism concerning Western legacy as an alternative source of knowledge viewed from an epistemological perspective appears in the following points. The first is the distinction between *tafsīr* as a process and as a product. However, the distinction is not commonly found in the classical literature of Islam. Muslim scholars never defined the word `*ilm* (knowledge) concerning the position of *tafsīr* as "science" in a proper sense but as knowledge (Zarqānī n.d., 3–4). The "scientification" by employing the philosophy of science terms seems to be mere old labelling redefined by "new" terms.

The second is concerning "scientific interpretation" (*al-tafsīr al-'ilmī*) as one of two aspects that Salim termed "exploratory interpretation". The jargon that "a correct experience and reasoning does not contradict with the Quran" (Salim 1994, 31) does not refer to a principle to make a proposed interpretation a scholarly endeavour in the proper sense, but merely to prove the miracles of the Quran (*i'jāz al-Qur`ān*).

Baidan's "reconstruction" of the science of Quran interpretation

The discourse on hermeneutics in Indonesia began with initial touch in 1985 until 2000. Some Indonesian Muslim scholars, such as M. Amin Abdullah, Komaruddin Hidayat and Ulil Abshar Abdalla have introduced hermeneutics in their writings (Wibowo 2017, 395). The so-called "Quranic hermeneutics" has resulted in tensions and debates among Indonesian due to interests and ideologies embodied both in reception and rejection (Achmad 2015). Due to this particular issue, unlike Salim, who was interested in philosophising the Quran interpretation from the philosophy of science, Baidan's concern was to respond to this issue by making a

critical comparison between the science of Quran interpretation and hermeneutics. Baidan devoted his first work to this issue in 2001 in a journal (Baidan 2001), then in 2005 in his book, *Wawasan Baru Ilmu Tafsir*.

He tried to make such a "critical clarification" by comparing hermeneutics and science of Quran interpretation (*'ilm al-tafsīr*), not to adopt but to reject hermeneutics in interpreting the Quran. Through comparison, he arrived at similarities and differences between the two. According to Baidan, there are similarities between the two, in the sense that the triadic structure within hermeneutics, namely text, interpreter and audience, can also be found in Quran interpretation (*tafsīr*). In his view, these three aspects of hermeneutics are also parts of *tafsīr*. He mentioned Ibn Taymiyya as an authority who argued that the interpreter should comprehend them. Both disciplines also share the goal of explaining a text as objective as possible to the extent of the ability of an interpreter (Baidan 2011, 72–76) and share the process to deliver the message of the Quran to the audience, wherein the interpreter becomes a communicator (Baidan 2011, 384–385).

Besides the similarities, Baidan noted some significant differences which constitute weakness of this Western legacy; first, Hermes, as imagined in hermeneutic theory, is regarded to be able to interpret and even modify the text, so the authority seems to be out of Gods' control, while the Prophet Muḥammad is not (Baidan 2011, 77–81); second, citing Schleiermacher's statement, interpreting text with hermeneutics only proceed by basic grammar and understanding psychological condition instead of a specific procedure as that of *tafsīr* (Baidan 2011, 81–82); third, the main focuses of hermeneutics are solely on events, social and psychological contexts as text's background, while the so-called triadic structure (text, interpreter and audience) is neglected (Baidan 2011, 83–87); fourth, unlike Quran interpreter (*mufassir*), a hermeneut is regarded to have the ability to interpret text even beyond the ability of the author himself (Baidan 2011, 87–89); fifth, a hermeneut is perceived to be able to understand the author even better than that the author can do for himself (Baidan 2011, 89–91).

From his comparison, it is clear that he insists on the sufficiency of traditional Islamic apparatus, such as verse-by-verse interpretation and prophetic hadith, instead of hermeneutics. In his view, although the *tafsīr* could be termed as "Quranic hermeneutics", the former is more adequate in interpreting the Quran than the latter (Baidan 2011, 8).

Originality and Responsiveness

To sum up, the thoughts of three Indonesian Muslim thinkers on Western legacies that can be applied in Quran interpretation as mentioned can be classified into three stands. The legacies are not merely in the controversy of hermeneutics but also social sciences and humanities. The interests that lead to rejecting hermeneutics as a possible approach to the Quran can be classified into three kinds: puritanism-fundamentalism, traditionalism and scholarly enterprises (Achmad 2015).

First, the thought of these three Indonesian thinkers contains a sense of originality that should be understood in terms of its continuity and changes as presented in the following table:

Table 1. The originality of thoughts

No.	Thinkers	Orientation	Aspect of approach	Continuity	Change
1.	Abd Muin Salim	a. Modification; Scientification	Techniques of interpretation	Classical Muslim authors	Refinement of terminologies and procedures of interpretation
		b. "Philosophy science" of Quran interpretation	Quranic epistemology		Rationalisation
2.	Nashruddin Baidan	"Reconstruction" of the science of Quran interpretation	a. Internal components of *tafsīr*	al-Suyūṭī	Rearrangement
			b. External components of *tafsīr*		
3.	Quraish Shihab	Revitalisation	Thematic interpretation	Shaltūt	Revitalisation

Second, three kinds of critical-traditionalist Indonesian interpreters' responses to Western approaches are as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Responses to Western approaches

No.	Thinkers	Kinds of stands	Aspect of approach	Orientation
1.	Abd Muin Salim	Scientification / Islamisation tends to revivalism	The science of Quran interpretation can be explained in terms of the philosophy of science	Apologetic
2.	Nashruddin Baidan	Critical clarification with a tendency for rejection	There is a possibility that hermeneutics is applicable to Quran interpretation	Open-mindedness, but without going into details
3.	Quraish Shihab	Critical clarification with a tendency for rejection	There is a possibility that hermeneutics is applicable for Quran interpretation with some notifications	Open-mindedness

The critical nature of these stands is critical clarification or justification through argumentation for the sufficiency of traditional approaches in Islamic legacies vis-a-vis Western ones.

Conclusion

Traditionalism has played an important role in the emergence of contemporary thoughts of Indonesian Muslim thinkers on approaches to the Quran. Unlike the widely held assumption, traditionalism is not a single face. The so-called traditionalism here refers to the critical traditionalism that is multifaceted. In this context, it can be inferred from the term that reason and traditionalism can interact with each other.

Unlike conservative traditionalism, which is static and constitutes a single face, critical traditionalism is characterised by a critical explanation of traditional sources of interpretation and a critical response to Western approaches. In principle, its proponents insist firmly on the sufficiency of the traditional sciences of the Quran (*'ulūm al-Qur`ān*) in interpreting this scripture. The traditional nature of proposed approaches lies in sources that are mainly adopted from traditional accounts. However, at the same time, the proponents rise "faces" of "critical clarification", namely by way of modification of traditional approaches employing Western elements, by having a critical comparison between the two to criticise, even to

reject modern Western approaches and by employing a "modern" approach within Islamic legacy to be contested with a Western approach. These three critical stands of traditionalism are closely related to the emerging discourse of "scientification" of knowledge in Islamic universities that lead to "scientification" of *tafsīr*, the discourse of "Quranic hermeneutics" that causes "reconstructing" the science of Quran interpretation (*'ilm al-tafsīr*) and the discourse on the structure of the Quran among orientalists that triggers the exploration of a thematic approach to Qur`an chapters (*al-waḥda al-mawḍū'iyya fī al-sūra*). The denial of Western hermeneutics is also one of the effects of this traditional stand.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Richard Bell, as cited by William Montgomery Watt (*Bell's Introduction to the Qur`an*, pp. 101–102), concluded that verses 17–20 (which read as follows: *afala yanzhuruna ila al-ibil kayfa khuliqat*… until ..*wa ila al-ard kayfa sutihat*) belong to Surah al-Ghashiyah. The actual number of the surah is 88, but Watt mentioned 75. The difference between two number probably has been caused by different method numbering, as occurred between Muslims' and Western thinkers' scholarship on this issue.

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