

**The Arabic Modernist Hermeneutics and the Mechanism  
of De-Sanctifying the Religious Text**



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***Abstract:***

The study aims to criticize some of the interpretation mechanisms employed by the Arab modernists in order to open the meaning of the legal texts to several readings, as they relied on some verbal interpretation approaches in order to argue for the humanization of the text and the removal of its holiness and the impact of reality on it, especially with the Mu'tazilit theory of the creation of the Qur'an to confirm the claim of the existence of two levels of revelation (divine and transcendent). And (human incarnate), (eternal and created).

***key words:*** Interpretation modernity; theology; humanization; Modernist interpretation; desacralization; Creation of the Qur'an.

## **Introduction:**

Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, and prayers and peace be upon the Master of the First and the Last, our Prophet Muhammad, and upon his family and companions, all of them. And after:

Whoever contemplates the subject of modern Arab interpretation and follows its mechanisms and methods of dealing with the religious text will notice the amount of importation of Islamic heritage methods in reading, which dealt with the religious texts either by removing the speaker's intention or by canceling the intention of the texts, and thus producing a meaning contrary to what appears.

The most important interpretive approaches that Arab modernists were interested in are rational theological interpretation and Sufi allusive interpretation, because they rely on the apparent and the evidence in giving the meaning of the texts and interpreting them, unlike the esoteric approaches that completely eliminate the apparent and do not rely on the context, but rather open the meaning of the text to produce the meaning without any evidence. What distinguishes the theological interpretation is its reliance on the evidence that the language bears in giving the meaning of the text in order to seek the speaker's intention or seek sanctification as in the texts of beliefs, so that the principles of belief work as guidelines that produce an acceptable meaning that does not conflict with reason or language for the religious and doctrinal texts as in the verses of attributes, for example. Thus, the meaning of the religious texts becomes confined to the internal logic of the language or changes in meaning according to the semantic developments resulting from the interaction of the language with social variables and is not related to the context or current and situational evidence, but the meaning is determined by the lexical language according to what linguistic excavations allow, as with the modernists, which eliminates the characteristic of certainty from the texts, so the meaning is not a common usage as is customary in the Arabic language in their understanding of it by controlling its methods and determining its meanings precisely.

Here, the truth of the Arab modernists' call for theological interpretation, especially for the mechanisms of interpretation of the theologians and the Mu'tazila in particular, will appear, so that they did not employ it in a comprehensive systematic way, but rather in a selective manner, taking it as a cover to pass many philosophical ideas and theories that eliminate the reference and sanctity of revelation and the truth of prophecy, and even eliminate the management of the Creator, and starting from the intentions of all the theologians from their interpretations, there is nothing but argumentation on beliefs and proving prophecies and inferring the existence of the Creator and His exoneration from deficiency. Thus, the modernist

employment of theological interpretation has another purpose other than reaching the speaker's intention or proving a correct truth from him, but rather it was in order to bring it down from its transcendence to the level of human language from the most serious criticism under the pretext that it is in clear Arabic and then it is permissible to focus the views of contemporary reading on it and reproduce it according to the requirements of the changing reality, especially when we know that the most important obstacle that Arab modernist thought wanted to dismantle is the sanctity of revelation, and this is what made it call for the theories of traditional reading to give legitimacy to the interpretive process of religious texts so that the Muslim mind would accept them.

In this research, I will try to answer a fundamental question that caused the displacement of the meaning of religious texts and the complete cancellation of their intentionality, whether in beliefs or religious matters.

**It is: Does the theory of the creation of the Qur'an among the Mu'tazila call for its Humanism?**

**The importance and objectives of the research:**

- Defending the approach of the theologians in dealing with the legal text compared to the Arab modernist extremism in reading the text.
- Showing that the purposes of theological interpretation are completely different from modernist interpretive practices.
- The rational theological expansion in opening the meaning of the legal texts was specific only to the conjectural meanings, especially in the field of beliefs and did not include the field of legalities.
- The truth of the theory of the creation of the Qur'an is to sanctify Allah and bestow sanctity on His law, not as the modernists employed it.

As for the method followed in the study: it is comparative analysis to monitor some modernist interpretive models and compare them with the method of the theologians

## **The first section: The concept of interpretation among the theologians**

### **The first requirement: Interpretation in the language**

Interpretation: A source from the chapter of activation and its origin is “Awwala” from “al” ya’ul, and its linguistic material revolves around meanings which are:

- 1-Interpretation (Ibn Faris, 1979)
- 2-Reference and Destiny (Al-Tabari, 1969) (Ibn Manzur, 1956)
- 3-Al-Khuthur and Al-Taghyir (Ibn Faris, 1979)
- 4-Al-Aqeba (Al-Raghib Al-Isfahani, 1997)
- 5-Al-Siyasa and Al-Islah (Al-Zamakhshari, 1922)

Al-Zubaidi said: “Interpretation is what something leads to, and it was said: It is the explanation; It is an explanation of the stories that came in summary in the Holy Book, and an approximation of what its strange words indicate, and an explanation of the matters for which the verses were revealed. As for interpretation: it is clarifying the meaning of the ambiguous, and the ambiguous is that which is not definitively defined in its meaning without hesitation, and it is the text. Al-Raghib said: “Interpretation: returning something to its intended purpose; whether it is a word or an action.” (Al-Zubaidi, 1993)

On this linguistic basis, the first generation of the Salaf formed a technical concept with two meanings:

1.Interpretation of speech and clarification of its meaning, whether it agrees with its apparent meaning or contradicts it. Accordingly, interpretation is synonymous with exegesis, and this is what Mujahid meant when he said: “The scholars know its interpretation”: meaning the Qur’an. (Ibn Kathir, 1999)

2.The external, realistic truth. If the speech is a request, its interpretation is the same as the requested action, and if it is news, its interpretation is the same as the thing being reported. (Al-Dhahabi, 2000)

Two trends have preserved this concept of interpretation in the Islamic heritage: (Al-Qadi, 2014)

1.The literal trend (Dhahiriyyah): Ibn Hazm considered any deviation from the concept of the word in the language a type of Distortion. (Ibn Hazm, 1998)

2.The contextual trend (Hanbalis): They relied on the context in the interpretive process.

Both trends share a central idea: that the speaker’s intent is clear from the situational indicators, but the literalists believe that “every word has a specific meaning, otherwise there would be no explanation at all.” (Younis Ali, 2006)

### **Second requirement: Interpretation in the terminology of theologians**

Al-Amadi defined it as: “Taking a word to mean something other than its apparent meaning while assuming it to be so with evidence that supports it” (Al-Amadi, 1982). Later jurists and theologians followed this definition of interpretation, and it was a scientific method for them, as Al-Juwayni made: “Interpretation is returning the apparent to what it leads to in the interpreter’s claim” (Al-Juwayni, 1998) With a similar definition, Al-Ghazali said that interpretation: “is an expression of possibility supported by evidence that makes it most likely to be the meaning indicated by the apparent meaning.” (Al-Ghazali, 1996)

This becomes clear that the technical interpretation that was established by the later jurists and theologians is in reality a method for looking at the legal texts that has disciplined interpretive rules that take into account the absolute and the restricted, the general and the specific, the general and the detailed... in contrast to the interpretations that deviate from these methods and do not recognize the apparent at all, as they are trends that are based on esoteric philosophies and subjective views. (Al-Alawi, 2014)

## **Section Two: The Modernist Approach to Reading Islamic Texts**

The most important thing that Arab modernity relies on in its reading of Islamic texts is to remove the obstacle of the unseen, which modernity considers a closed fence and a dogmatic context (Arkoun, *Fundamentalist Thought and the Impossibility of History/ Towards Another History of Islamic Thought*, in front of the renewal that it seeks for the Arab and Islamic mind, and for this reason they made the basis of their renewal reading the saying of the priority of reason and its replacement of religion, as Hassan Hanafi stated that “the mission of heritage and renewal is to liberate oneself from authority in all its forms, the authority of the past and the authority of inherited, so there is no authority except for reason and no authority except for the necessity of reality.” (Hanafy, 1992)

This is why modernist thought sought to research the Islamic heritage in order to find a heritage approach that magnifies the mind, as the Mu'tazila did in reading the religious texts. This is what allows for shifting the concept of revelation by distancing it from its transcendent source and then projecting contemporary interpretive reading theories onto it and its implications.

### **The first requirement: canceling the transcendent source of the text**

The most important foundations of Western hermeneutics in reading the Bible, which Arab modernity imitated and projected onto the legal text, was the theory of

the death of the author, which was made the basis for the hermeneutical reading, as Paul Ricoeur explained by saying: “Reading a book is looking at its author as if he had died.” (Ricoeur, 2001)

Accordingly, Arab modernity, despite its theoretical recognition of the belief in the transcendence of the source of revelation, practically seeks to limit it to human possibility, as decided by the strict philosophical view, which is the opposite of the Islamic concept of the concept of revelation, and its basis is based on three issues: (Al-Qarni, 2012)

1. Denying the existence of Allah, or denying His intervention in history
2. Rejecting the principle of transcendence and its impossibility
3. Conceiving prophecy as a mere human possibility

Arab modernists have resorted to several methodologies that enable them to criticize and interpret the legal text, including: (Abdul Rahman, 2006) (Al-Masqari, Yahya Muslih Ali, 2017)

**First:** Removing expressions of glorification from religious texts:

We find that they replace the terms denoting religious texts with modern terms that have many intellectual and philosophical connotations that do not conform to the communicative specificity of the Arabic language, such as: the closed official code, the phenomenon, the structure of the text, the prophetic discourse, etc.

Hashem Salah explained the reason for Arkoun’s use of such an approach in employing terms, saying: “We notice that Arkoun uses purely linguistic terms to talk about the Qur’an. He says: the spoken or linguistic phrase instead of (the Qur’anic verse), and he says the textual code instead of (the Qur’an)..etc., and the reason for that is that he wants to neutralize the theological charges that quickly take over our consciousness when we talk about the Qur’an.

The theological sanctity or the great theological prestige that has surrounded the Qur’an for centuries prevents us from seeing it as it is: that is as a linguistic text composed of words, letters, linguistic, grammatical and rhetorical structures... In other words: the linguistic materiality of the Qur’an has completely disappeared or has been hidden from our sight because of the great prestige that surrounds it” (Arkoun m. , 2001)

That is why Hassan Hanafi makes the condition of intellectual and rational progress for the West that they be able to: “abandon the language of theology...” (Hanafi H. , Heritage and Renewal (Our Position on the Ancient Heritage), 1992) unlike what we Arabs have done today, where, as he claims, “we have taken another step back and cancelled development and preferred the language of closed theology

over the language of open thought.” (Hanafy, Heritage and renewal (our position on ancient heritage), 1992)

**Second: All texts are equal in criticism.**

Modernists deal with religious texts as linguistic texts, not because they have a sacred miraculous aspect or because they are superior to other texts. Rather, even the Holy Quran is a text produced according to the requirements of the culture to which its language belongs. As Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd said: “Religious texts are nothing in analysis but linguistic texts, meaning that they belong to a specific cultural structure and are produced according to the laws of that culture.” (Abu Zaid N. H., Criticism of Religious Discourse, 1994)

This is what made modernists link religious texts to the human source that is affected by reality, culture, and cognitive backgrounds. Hassan Hanafi says, as Muhammad Amara quoted him: “Our mission is to move our civilization from the old divine stage to a new human stage. Instead of our civilization being centered on Allah...it will be centered on man.” (Amara, 2006)

One of the most important results of the cancellation of The sanctity of the legal text in modernity is: (Abdul-Rahman, 2006)

1. Transferring the Holy Quran from attachment to the absolute to attachment to the relative, where legal texts were made mere linguistic texts whose reading is related to culture and not related to the intent of its speaker.

2. Legal texts became open in their meaning to infinite interpretations

3. The legal text became independent from its source to become the property of the reader who can interpret it as he wishes.

4. Saying the Humanism so that the meaning of the legal text becomes in a semantic shift according to reality.

**Second requirement: The authority of reality over the text**

For modernists, the legal text is not determined by linguistic meaning, but rather is a process directed by intellectual principles, even at the expense of the laws of language (Aliou Muhammad, 2007) ; Reality is a mechanism of interpretation, as Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid said, where he made dealing with religious texts start from two angles: (Abu Zaid N. H., Criticism of Religious Discourse, 1994)

1. The angle of history in the sociological sense to place the texts in their context in order to reveal their original meaning.

2. The angle of the social and cultural context that represents the motive for moving towards interpretation.

Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid says: “Reality is the origin, from reality the text was formed and from its language and culture its concepts were formulated and through its movement people interact with the renewal of its meaning, so reality comes first, reality comes second, and reality comes third...” (Abu Zaid N. h., 1994) ,and on the idea of the authority of reality, modernists establish the concept of the historicity of the religious text to prove that it was formed through its real history and then its concept and meaning are determined, and this is what made Abu Zaid say that the Qur’anic text is a cultural product (Nasr Hamed, 2014),and likewise Arkoun stated that the text emerged from reality and not from sky. (Arkoun., 1996)

Thus, Arab modernist thought sought to bring down the most sacred text in the Islamic concept, namely the Holy Qur’an, to human reality, thereby removing its sanctity and transcendence over the rest of the texts. One of the most important modern philosophical mechanisms they applied was the logic of The Marxist dialectic of the priority of reality over thought. (Politner, No Year)

### **The third topic: The occurrence of the text between the Mu'tazila and the modernists**

#### **First requirement: The concept of the theory of the creation of the Qur'an according to the Mu'tazila**

The reality of this theory is related to the attribute of speech for Allah Almighty (Hanafi A. A.-E., 1988). One of the most important foundations of the methodology of the theologians in the attributes of Allah was that they made the most specific description of Allah to be eternity and the most specific description of the creation to be occurrence. From this, it is necessary to exonerate Allah Almighty from the occurrence of accidents in His essence. This is what obliged the theologians to interpret the texts from which it is understood that Allah is likened to His creation. (al-Juwayni, 1965)

Thus, the Mu'tazila reject the establishment of speech by the essence of Allah Almighty on the pretext of exonerating Him and denying similarity to Him (Abdul Jabbar Al-Qadi, 1960) In order to support this statement, the Mu'tazila established a method armed with a rational, philosophical, linguistic, and rhetorical methodological arsenal. We summarize some of their arguments in the statement of the theory of the Qur'an: (TamimAl-Qadi, 2014)

1. They argued with the words of Allah Almighty: ﴿ **Allah is the Creator of all things, and He is, over all things, Disposer of affairs.** ﴾ [Surat Az-Zumar: 62]. And His words, the Most High: ﴿ **Or have they**

attributed to Allah partners who created like His creation so that the creation [of each] seemed similar to them?" Say, "Allah is the Creator of all things, and He is the One, the Prevailing. ﴿ [Surat Ar-Ra`d: 16], and His words, the Most High: ﴿ **Originator of the heavens and the earth. When He decrees a matter, He only says to it, "Be," and it is. ﴿ [Surat Al-Baqarah: 117].** And the Almighty says: ﴿ **That is Allah, your Lord; there is no deity except Him, the Creator of all things, so worship Him. And He is Disposer of all things ﴿ [Surat Al-An'am: 102].**

They said that the word (**all**) indicates generality and the Qur'an is a thing and is included in this generality, and this is evidence that it is created (Ibn-Hanbal, 2003). Al-Qadi Abdul Jabbar says: "On the saying of Allah the Most High: ﴿ **Allah is the Creator of all things, and He is, over all things, Disposer of affairs. ﴿ [Surat Az-Zumar: 62]** indicates that the Qur'an was created, and that He the Most High created it according to the generality of the verse." (Abdul-Jabbar, 1960)

2. Their argument is based on the saying of Allah the Most High: ﴿ **Indeed, We have made it an Arabic Qur'an that you might understand. ﴿ [Az-Zukhruf: 3]. ﴿ And thus We have revealed to you an inspiration of Our command. You did not know what is the Book or [what is] faith, but We have made it a light by which We guide whom We will of Our servants. And indeed, [O Muhammad], you guide to a straight path - ﴿ [Surat Ash-Shura: 52].**

They said that making means creation, so everything made is created, so the Qur'an is therefore created, Q.Abdul-Jabbar said: "It necessitates its occurrence because making and action are the same in reality, and all of that and what is similar to it indicates the occurrence of the Qur'an." (Abdul-Jabbar, 1960)

2. They made the occurrence means the created, as Abu Al-Hussein said : ﴿ **Indeed, it is We who sent down the Qur'an and indeed, We will be its guardian ﴿**
3. **[Surat al-Hijr: 9].** This indicates that the Qur'an is a reminder, and the Almighty's saying: ﴿ **And no revelation comes to them anew from the Most Merciful except that they turn away from it. ﴿ [Surat al-Shu'ara: 4].** This indicates the occurrence of the reminder, so it is necessary for both verses that the Qur'an is a reminder. Updated. (Al-Basri, 1964)

4. In the Almighty's saying ﴿ [And mention] when the angels said, "O Mary, indeed Allah gives you good tidings of a word from Him, whose name will be the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary - distinguished in this world and the Hereafter and among those brought near [to Allah]. ﴾ [ Surat al Imran: 45]. They compared a word from Him, (Jesus, peace be upon him) to the word of Allah, and said that the Qur'an is created. (Al-Rassi, 1988)

**The second requirement: The modernist employment of the theory of the creation of the Qur'an**

The modernists have based the theory of the creation of the Qur'an on the claim that it is historic and that it is subject to change, alteration and interpretation, to the point that Arkoun considered the employment of the theory of the creation of the Qur'an to be the first step towards dismantling the Qur'anic text and removing the firm belief in its transcendence and sanctity, as he said: "In order to open a breach in the dead end of history, what does this thesis mean? It simply means that the Qur'an needs human mediation. To say that the Qur'an is created means that it is embodied in a human language." (Arkoun M. , 1998)

Modernity has made the belief in the eternity of the text one of the most dangerous established ideas, according to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who says that: "One of the most dangerous of those established and dominant ideas, to the point that it has become, due to its antiquity and entrenchment, part of the creed, is the idea that the Holy Qur'an, which was revealed by the faithful revelation to Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, from Allah Almighty, is an ancient, eternal text and is an attribute of the divine self..." (Abu-Zaid, The Text, the Real Authority, 1995)

For this reason, modernists have invoked the theory of the creation of the Qur'an and employed it for a modern, renewing reading of the religious texts, as Hassan Hanafi explains that: "The subject of the creation of the Qur'an is the first to be revived in our contemporary thought with a modern connotation in considering revelation as an expression of reality... Its understanding and interpretation change according to the requirements of Reality...». (Hanafi H. , From Doctrine to Revolution, 1988)

The modernists found in the theory of the creation of the Qur'an their goal to break the authority of the legal text and place it in two levels:

- A lost transcendent eternal which is what is in the Preserved Tablet (Mother of the Book)
- A created human manifestation (the Qur'an)

They sought to differentiate between what is in the Preserved Tablet and the Qur'an by considering one of them to be transcendent eternal and the other to be a manifest earthly Qur'an as Arkoun calls it when he said: "...We say this despite the fact that the Qur'an itself insists on an eternal, infinite divine existence preserved in the Mother of the Book (the Preserved Tablet), and on the existence of a revelation sent down to earth as the manifested, visible, linguistically expressible and readable part; It is part of the infinite speech of Allah as one of the attributes of Allah. This distinction between two types of revelation, or rather between two levels of revelation, is found in the Mu'tazila theory of the creation of the Qur'an.." (Arkoun M. , *The Qur'an from Inherited Interpretation to Religious Discourse Analysis*, 2001)

The truth is that this idea is adopted by all Arab modernists, even if their expressions differ, as they sought to dismantle the Islamic concept of revelation in order to accept the application of contemporary reading theories to it so that it can be reproduced anew according to the outcomes of Western civilization. (Al-Qarni., 2012)

Thus, it appears that the Arab modernists' dealing with the Mu'tazila theory of the creation of the Qur'an was merely an ideological employment in order to remove the sanctity and transcendence of the Holy Qur'an. Despite the extremism of the Mu'tazila in their rational construction and interpretations, they did not intend these results that the Arab modernists reached, as they restored the sanctity of the legal text and abolished the authority of revelation and contributed to the total elimination of religion from the reality of life. As for the Mu'tazila, their intention behind the theory was the opposite. Exactly, so they wanted to sanctify Allah from being the subject of created. The Qur'an, for them, is a book of guidance, even if they said that it was created.

### **Conclusion:**

What Arab modernity did in terms of employing some traditional reading methods was not according to a specific scientific method, but rather a selective process devoid of any scientific integrity, especially since it was adapting these traditional theories to intellectual data and philosophical burdens from outside the Arab circulation field in order to adapt the Qur'anic text to the data of Western civilization, and to apply modern theories in reading texts.

Through the research, I reached the following results:

- The solid core of the mechanisms of modern reading does not accept any doctrinal universals such as the concept of divinity or revelation and prophecy due to the existential vision that modernity adopts for existence and knowledge.

- The modern mind insists on breaking the authority of the text and does not care about the truth of the methodology, whether it is theological, Sufi, or even esoteric.
- The framework in which the theologians worked is to argue for the doctrine and to exonerate revelation from deficiency, so even the theory of the creation of the Qur'an was in the context of exonerating Allah from similarity to events, not to disable the text.
- Modernists employed the theory of the creation of the Qur'an to make the text influenced by reality, changing its meaning and immersed in history.
- The theory of the creation of the Qur'an in its theological framework did not call for humanizing the text or removing its sanctity.
- The ideological employment of the theory of the creation of the Qur'an demonstrated the bankruptcy of Arab modernity from any integrated scientific approach in reading the text and calling for renewal and criticism of heritage. Rather, it is merely an imitation of Western theories from outside the communicative structure of Arab civilization, which has its contexts and problems, and is different from ours.

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