

The Role of Reason and Rationality in the Message of the Quran

Muhammad Asad

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Abstract:

The paper will investigate the role of reason and rationality in the exegesis by Muhammad Asad (d. 1992), a prominent Muslim scholar of the 20th century. The tafsir, which addresses the Western intellectual audience, is considered by many to be among the best in the English language. The work inculcates traditional exegesis and traditional hermeneutics, producing a contemporary interpretation. His work is controversial – well received in academia and attributed to ingenious scholarship; criticised by conservative Muslims for alleged neo-rationalistic tendencies. The study of Muhammad Asad’s method is crucial to understanding his modern worldviews and the underlying pattern of scientific and rational thought grounded in his work, which reflected the renewal project of Islam advocated by Shaykh Muhammad Abduh and Sayid Muhammad Rashid Rida in Tafsir al-Manar.

Rational arguments profoundly inspired the tafsir method developed by Asad in classical works such as Abu Muslim al-Isfahani, al-Tabari, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, and al-Zamakhshari. Tafsir al-Manar also significantly influenced the approach of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida in their monumental works. The paper will try to discover how Muhammad Asad used human reasoning to explain the Quran. How did he collaborate between tradition and modernity in his work? How did practice and modern exegetes ‘mufassirin’ impact his thought process and narratives?

Keywords: Muhammad Asad, Qur’an exegesis, hermeneutics, tafsīr, ta’wīl, reason and rationality, modern Muslim thought

Muhammad Asad is one of the most distinguished Muslim intellectuals of the twentieth century. His contribution to Islamic thought remains a topic of investigation and enquiry amongst the intelligentsia in the East and West equally. Asad spent a lifetime understanding the Qur’ān. He stayed in Saudi Arabia to get first-hand knowledge of the language of the Qur’ān. He spent time with Bedouins to understand the nuances of the language of the book of God.

Muhammad Asad regarded Qur’ān and Sunnah as “the most perfect plan for human living.” He is often referred to as a “bridge between Islam and the West “by academia. For some readers, his life may seem to be a connecting point between the two, but his son Talal Asad disagrees with this notion about him. For Talal, Asad’s embracement of Islam was more like entering a rich and complex religious tradition that had evolved in diverse ways. He tried to integrate reason (‘aql), tradition (naql), and free will (irada) to form a coherent and distinctive vision of Islam. (Asad, 2011).

Stressing reason as a guiding principle employed by the past great thinkers of Islam who had understood the problem entirely, Asad explains: “In their commentaries, they approached the Qur’an with their reason:

that is to say, they tried to explain the purport of each Qur'anic statement in the light of their superb knowledge of the Arabic language and of the Prophet's teachings - forthcoming from his Sunnah - as well as by the store of general knowledge available to them and by the historical and cultural experiences which had shaped human society until their time. And they were fully aware, too, of the Prophet's profound saying, "The Differences of Opinion (ikhtilaf) among the learned men of my community are [an outcome of] divine grace (rahmah)" - which clearly implies that such differences of opinion are the basis of all progress in human thinking and, therefore, a most potent factor in man's acquisition of knowledge."

According to Asad, "reason" and "revelation" cannot conflict with one another. Therefore, according to him, "reason" ('aql) is the closest friend of revelation as it helps man understand the sacred texts. If a man cannot use 'aql properly, he remains incapable of showing due respect to God who created him. In the Foreword of the book, 'The Message of the Quran Asad writes :

"The reasoned "argument was central to how Muslims should treat disagreements among themselves – whether in public matters or private life. The work I now place before the public is based on a lifetime of study and many years spent in Arabia. It is an attempt - perhaps the first attempt - at an idiomatic, explanatory rendition of the Qur'anic message into a European language." This is how he described his journey of writing the exegesis of the Quran. In his magnum opus, 'The Message of Quran '. Asad deployed various approaches and methods and benefitted immensely from classical writers of Tafsīr, like Abu Jaafar al-Tabrī (d.310/923), al Zamakhsharī (d.538/1144), al-Rāzī (d.606/1210), al-Baydāwī (d.ca.685/1286), ibn Kathīr (d.774/1373) to name a few. Asad also utilised the lexicographical and philological resources such as Lisan al-'Arab, by ibn Manzūr (d.711/1311-12), al-Mufradat fi Gharib al-Qur'an for Raghib al Isfahānī and Murtada al-Zabidi's Taj al- 'Arūs fi Sharh al-Qamūs.

Asad agreed with many scholars of the Quran that the book of God should be seen as an integral whole and not as a compilation of individual injections. He cross-referenced the Quran to explain one verse with the help of another verse. This is what the Ulema called Tafseer e Masoor. Muhammad Ábduh explained this phenomenon by saying that the "Quran is its own best commentary".

Another (and no less critical) point that Asad stresses that the translator must take fully into account is the ijaz of the Qur'an: that inimitable ellipticism which often deliberately omits intermediate thought clauses to express the final stage of an idea as acutely and concisely as is possible within the limitations of a human language. As I have explained, this method of Ijaz is a peculiar, integral aspect of the Arabic language and has reached its utmost perfection in the Qur'an. To render its meaning into a language which does not function in a similarly elliptical manner, the thought links which are missing - that is, deliberately omitted - in the original must be supplied by the translator in the form of frequent interpolations between brackets, for, unless this is done, the Arabic phrase concerned loses all its life in the translation and often becomes a meaningless jumble. (Asad M. , 1980)

Some Examples of Use of Reason and Rationality In The Message of the Quran:

Asad translated Verse 54 of Surah Al Baqarah (The Cow) as:

"And [remember the time] when We vouchsafed unto Moses the divine writ - and [thus] a standard by which to discern the true from the false" The Arabic word Al Furqan, according to his translation, is a standard by which we can differentiate the truth from the false. Here, quoting Muhammad Ábduh, Asad supports his translation. Muhammad Ábduh stresses and highlights the faculty of reasoning and rationale in human beings. Reason is an essential focus word in Abduh's views and is vital to his idea of theology. Muslim philosophers and jurists such as al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and al-Ghazali believed that knowledge has

no religious, geographic, or political boundaries. This idea was taken up by modern Muslim scholars such as Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Muhammad Iqbal, who stressed and argued the need to benefit from European knowledge selectively. (Tampon, 2013).

'Muhammad 'Abduh strengthens the above elucidation of al-Furqan (adopted by Tabari, Zamakhshari and other great commentators) by maintaining that it also related to "human reason, which enables us to distinguish the true from the false" (Manar 111, 160), apparently basing this broader interpretation on 8:41, where the battle of Badr is described as yawm al-Furqan ("the day on which the true was distinguished from the false"). While the term Furqan is often used in the Qur'an to describe one or another of the revealed scriptures, and particularly the Qur'an itself, it has undoubtedly also the connotation pointed out by 'Abduh: for instance, in 8:29, where it clearly refers to the faculty of moral valuation which distinguishes every human being who is truly conscious of God,. (Asad M. , The Message of the Quran pg,37, 1980)

The Message of the Quran has set new precedents in interpreting the Holy Quran and serves as a guiding light for modern translators. He emphasised the etymological and linguistic aspects to achieve the most authentic interpretation. His translation of some popular terms of the Quran helps the reader reach the real essence of the Qur'an.

For example, the term 'Taqwa' has been a topic of discussion among scholars, and very few translations of the term have successfully transmitted the message of the Quran. Muhammad Asad translated 'Taqwa' as 'God-consciousness, which is very close to the soul of the word. He translated Al Kitab' as 'the divine writ', 'Kafir' as 'those who are bent on denying the truth', 'Jizya' as 'the exemption tax' etc. By doing so, Muhammad Asad makes an earnest effort to dispel doubts raised by the critics of Islam with rational arguments and scientific reasoning. He reiterates that often, the Qur'an uses parables, allegories, and metaphors to express metaphysical facts and draw the human mind by presenting them in the form of symbols and parables. For example, the Qur'an uses metaphors in describing the issue of 'Istawa ala al Arsh, the scenes of heaven and hell, etc., and according to Muhammad Asad, it has been done to draw similarities so that they are rightly understood. In certain places, he relies more on the interpretations propounded by modernist Muslim thinkers like Mufti Muhammad Abduh and Rasheed Ridha, who emphasise rational understanding. In many places, he tries to rationalise certain metaphysical events (which seem to be against the intellect), which are at times in contrast with the traditional understanding of the Qur'an. He resorts to 'ijtihad,' i.e., independent reasoning in interpreting the Quranic text in many places.

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