

The Contextual Interpretation of the Holy Qur'an: Perception of Early Modernists

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Abstract

Muslim community is under the influence of modernity like all major religions in every domain of life, whether it is the area of intellectualism or socio-politics. There have been several efforts to reconcile the Islamic principles with the modern values such as the movement of Islamic Modernism which began as a response of Muslim intellectuals to the European modernity. Islamic modernists emphasized on the need to re-interpret and reapply the religious principles in order to respond to the changes brought about by modernity. The early modernists supported a new interpretation of religion of Islam that is modern, liberal as well as progressive at the same time. It was stressed to revive the spirit of ijtihād and these calls for re-interpretation demanded a dynamic and context-driven approach to ijtihād. This study aims to build up an understanding regarding the development of contextual approach to Qur'anic interpretation over time. In this context, this article will study the thoughts of four renowned scholars of the early modern period, i.e., Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Jamaluddin Al-Afghani, Allama Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Abduh to understand the trends and transformations in the history of contextualization.

Keywords: Islamic Modernism, Ijtihād, Modernity, Qur'anic Re-interpretation

Introduction

Islamic Modernism was a movement initiated to reconcile the Islamic principles with the modern values and it began as a response of Muslim intellectuals to European modernity. Modern scholars emphasized on the need to re-interpret the Qur'anic texts due to difference in the political, social, economic and cultural contexts of today and the circumstances at the time of revelation of the holy Qur'an.¹ The modern sociocultural and religious environment requires a contextualized interpretation of Qur'anic message. An interpretation method can be regarded as modern only if its explanation addresses the issues of the modern or current era.²

1.1 Islamic Revival and Modernity

Like all major religions, the Muslim community is also under great influence of modernity. There is no domain of life which is not affected by modernism, whether it is the area of intellectualism, science or socio-politics. It is a matter of great fascination for the historians and reformers to see that how the Muslim society absorbed, transformed, rejected or adjusted to the modern changes brought about by the changing circumstances.³

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The term ‘modernity’ can be defined as a quality or state of being modern. It can be elaborated further as an, ‘intellectual tendency’ or a ‘social perspective’ which can be achieved by departing from traditional ideas, doctrines and beliefs in the favor of contemporary ideas and beliefs specifically those ideas which relate to scientific rationalism and liberalism.⁴

Islamic modernism is mainly dominated by theological considerations. Islamic modernism is basically a religious reform aimed to move away from traditionalism and pre-conceived ideas and adapt to the ever changing demands of modern life.⁵ According to John L. Esposito Islamic modernists are those who realized the need for a reinterpretation or revivalism of Islamic thought in response to the changes brought about by the modern life.⁶ This reformulation of Islamic heritage is a response to the changing political, cultural, and scientific challenges posed by western and contemporary life. The modernists assert to show that the religion of Islam is compatible with the modern trends that include reason, science and technology, democracy, constitutionalism, and representative government.

Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī is highly recognized as the man of intellectual renaissance in the sub-continent whose major concern relied on the faculties of reason, tradition and intuition. All the modernist thoughts in the sub-continent got his influence and gushed out from the prolific works produced by Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī. Traditionalist, revivalist and modernist groups all aligned themselves on the thought pattern introduced by him. Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī formulated a restatement of Islam which was broader in scope as compared to the definition formulated by the traditional Muslim theology. His major contribution was Islamic renaissance and he is acknowledged as a modernist in every term even before the advent of modernity.⁷

In his famous Persian work *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr fī Uṣūl at-Tafsīr*, Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī laid down his concepts and principles regarding Qur’ānic exegesis. He also wrote a translation of the holy Qur’ān in Persian language under the title *Fath ar-Rahmān* that is still in great demand in the present times. He emphasized on the need to understand the holy Qur’ān by taking into account the inner context of a verse and by considering the context of other related passages as well. He strongly encouraged the students of the holy Qur’ān to acquire sufficient knowledge of the Arabic language and utilize that acquired knowledge to work with the text independently, without feeling the urge to read the earlier commentaries on the text. Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī maintained the view that the holy Qur’ān should be understood in accordance with the requirements of every age.⁸

The first introduction of Muslims to the concept of modernity was brought by the colonial occupation and military expeditions. In response to the demands posed by modernity, Muslims naturally searched for the solutions to

these modern challenges in their fundamental document i.e., the holy Qur'ān since the holy Qur'ān provides ultimate guidance to the Muslims in every aspect of life and modernism is no exception. Reform and renewal are matters of great significance in the religion of Islam. Therefore, in order to cope up with the challenges of modern trends, the Muslim scholars turned to the holy Qur'ān. A number of religious movements emerged in the Muslim countries in response to the calls for modernization. The scholarly efforts to re-interpret the holy Qur'ān and in broader perspective, to re-interpret the religion of Islam was a major response to modernity.⁹

During the 19th century, a reform movement emerged from South Asia and Middle East. The modernist reformers called for re-interpretation of Islamic tradition by re-applying principles of critical hermeneutics i.e. ijtihād in order to re-evaluate the issues of human rights, democracy, scientific progress and rationalism in scenario of modern circumstances.

The modern trends in Qur'anic exegesis emerged as a response to Western Sciences in different parts of the Muslim world such as 'Indian Sub-continent' and 'Egypt'. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Abduh were the prominent figures and the advocates of modernist exegesis. Their approach was different from traditional scholars and they suggested for a compatible approach to the holy Qur'ān that can resonate with the changes of modern life. They put forward a strong need to re-interpret the Qur'ānic text by adopting a scientific approach. The modernists held the view that traditional Qur'ān commentaries had posed some difficulty in understanding the holy Qur'ān in its true spirit, specifically in the scenario of modern and changing social contexts. The modernists asserted the need to approach the holy Qur'ān afresh.¹⁰

Muslim modernism can be broadly classified into two periods: *early modernism* and *Neo-modernism*. The *early modernism* is aimed to harmonize the Islamic tradition with the Western thought and sciences and it emerged in the colonial period. The *neo-modernism* on the other hand, is more concerned with bringing compatibility of modernism with the changes arising in their respective societies in response to the western model. In order to resonate with the changes in the West, early modernists called for reform. Furthermore, early modernists were apologetic in their discourse whereas neo-modernists were more concerned with the social problems.¹¹ Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Abduh are recognized as pioneers of early modernism while Fazlur Rahmanis regarded as a neo-modernist.¹²

1.2 Early Modernism

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the sources of Islamic jurisprudence were examined by a group of Islamic scholars. This era was considered to be the most creative in the history of revival of Islamic thought. The main objective of the Islamic movements that emerged in that period in

different parts of the Muslim world was to verify the validity of knowledge that was obtained from the sources other than the religion of Islam. These modernists asserted the need to re-interpret the holy Qur'ān and the prophetic sun'nah in the light of scientific rationalism. They presented Islam in a modernistic and rational manner. The literature and the Qur'ānic exegesis produced by these early modernists presented an astonishing new doctrinal development in the religion of Islam which was different from the traditional fundamental discourse.¹³

The pioneers of modern reforms were: Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), Jamaluddin al Afghani (1838-1897), Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), and Allama Muhammad Iqbal(1877-1938).Although the early modern scholars differed in their methodological approach but all of them responded to the demands of the modern age that arose in response to the technological and scientific advancements.¹⁴

The thoughts and views of four prominent early modern scholars will be discussed to understand the impact of modernity on Islam and on the interpretations more specifically.

Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan

Allama Muhammad Iqbal

Sayyid Jamaluddin al Afghani

Muhammad Abduh

1.2.1 Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) was among the most prominent personalities in the history of Islamic modernism.¹⁵He was an Islamic modernist writer, an architect of Two-nation Theory(which resulted in the creation of Pakistan in 1947), an educational and political activist, a social reformer and the chief organizer of the Modernist Islamic Movement that emerged in the Indian sub-continent in the 19th century. Moreover, he was a theologian and a journalist who stood against conservatism, superstition and ignorance as a prominent dynamic force and played a significant role in the transition of India from "medievalism to modernism". He is also considered as having a divergent thought since he believed to understand the Qur'ānic text independently by bypassing the hadith.¹⁶

After the traumatic experience of the Indian rebellion, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan urged to prove that the religion of Islam does not prevent Muslims from co-existing and co-operating with the British. He presented a modern scientific conception of nature and universe and attempted to demonstrate that modern Natural Science is in harmony with the holy scripture of the Muslims¹⁷.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan advised the Muslims to remain loyal to the English government and added that there is no greater sin than being unfaithful to the government, when the Muslim community is living peacefully and with

freedom under their governance.¹⁸ Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was the supporter of freedom of thought and he held the view that it is very bad to keep the opinions closed because of fear, whether it is a religious fear, the fear of nation, fear of a scandal or the fear of tyranny of the government. He was of the view that the closure of opinions is harmful for all human beings and he regarded the freedom of thought as a solution to all problems of the Muslim ummah. He explained the usefulness of ijtihād and considered stagnation of thought as a national loss since such stagnation and closure of religious thought is harmful for present and future human beings.¹⁹

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan highlighted the disadvantages of restricting freedom of expression. He commented that in the absence of debate and freedom of opinion and speech, people forget their cause and also the significance of sharing one's opinion which leads to dividing them into different sects eventually bringing a decline as a nation. The only way to resolve the differences is through open discussion and debate.²⁰

One of the fundamental aspects of the modernist project initiated by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was to re-examine the traditionalist conception of social status of women. The sole purpose of modernist exegesis is to bridge the gap between modernity and Islamic belief system.²¹ The missionaries and westernizers targeted the institution of polygamy and the general maltreatment of women in India. Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan claimed that there is no advanced country in which women are given such rights and authority as they are given in the religion of Islam²², but unfortunately in practice the women in advanced countries are found to be in better state than they are in Muslim countries. The advanced countries have focused on improving the status of women. In contrast, Muslims had made no progress in the area of women rights.²³ Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan attributed the decline of Muslims to the non-acceptance of female education. According to Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, there are a number of issues related to the status of women in society, for instance, social acceptance, and removal of veil, religious sensitivity and cultural sensibility. It is a complex issue that requires divergent views that should be taken into account. He wrote a detailed note about the concept of education with special emphasis on the education of female in India.²⁴ He also stressed upon the need to correct the religious thoughts and ideas of the Muslim nation and he regarded 'fundamentalism' as the main cause of the decline of Muslim ummah. According to Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the Muslim ummah is facing intellectual stagnation and unwarranted imitation has made the Muslim ummah to believe that there is no room for reflection in the case of religious matters. He was against the blind following of the earlier traditions and he regarded it as the cause of degradation of Muslim ummah.²⁵

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was a rationalist in his religious approach who stressed on the need for a rational interpretation of Islam and Qur'ānic exegesis.

He held the view that there is harmony between words of Allah i.e. the holy Qur'ān and the work of Allah i.e. *Nature*. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan created a room for modern progressive trends in the religion of Islam by his liberal interpretations. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was the first Muslim reformist who advocated for a re-interpretation of Islamic teachings that should be 'liberal', 'modern' and 'progressive'.²⁶

1.2.2 Allama Muhammad Iqbal

Allama Muhammad Iqbal was born in a middle class and highly religious family of Sialkot on 9th November, 1877. It was the time when Western civilization was dominating and the Muslim world was facing decline in all domains of life including political, cultural, economic and social life. According to Allama Muhammad Iqbal, the reason of decline of Muslim ummah was the stagnation of religious thought and he asserted the need to reconstruct the religious thought both in the areas of theology as well as in law and Jurisprudence. He stressed upon the need for *ijtihād* in order to rescue Muslims from the stagnation of religious thought.²⁷

Allama Muhammad Iqbal critically and deeply evaluated the existing tensions between Islamic tradition, secularism and modernity as compared to other Muslim thinkers of his age. He saw modernity as a practical necessity. He saw modernity as an internal response of society to the changes imposed by modernization and explained that modernity mirrors the aspirations of the society. He elaborated further that adapting to modern ideas does not mean diverting from the past traditions or conforming to the western values but he related it to human freedom. Modernity requires adapting to the conditions and demands of the present day society and to fulfill the requirements of the future by providing freedom for each and every individual. Allama Muhammad Iqbal presented the concept of modernity that was essentially Islamic in nature.²⁸ According to Allama Muhammad Iqbal, the future of Muslims does not depend on gaining western education only but it also requires maintaining a balance between western knowledge and their own tradition.²⁹

Allama Muhammad Iqbal emphasized on the need of reforming the legal system of the religion of Islam to accommodate the changes posed by modernity while maintaining its basic religious principles. He rejected the view of considering the Islamic law as static and claimed that the Islamic law needs to be dynamic in nature to facilitate the changes brought about by modernity. Allama Muhammad Iqbal agreed with the view of modern Muslim liberals who supported the re-interpretation of fundamental religious principles according to the altered modern conditions. He believed that *sharī'ah* is dynamic in nature and it would be wrong to consider *sharī'ah* as static when people's life is changing. Allama Muhammad Iqbal asserted that the progressive teachings of the holy Qur'ān have the capability to facilitate each generation to solve their

problems so that they could develop solutions to their problems by taking guidance from the work of their predecessors.³⁰

Allama Muhammad Iqbal emphasized on the elements of permanence and change in his approach to legislation. According to this great Muslim scholar, the legal system of Islam should be adaptable to changes within its specified framework without deviating from the fundamental principles of Islam. He explained that the matters related to worship (ibadat) are fixed and unchangeable but the matters related to practical aspects of shari'ah i.e. (maamlaat) are not fixed and are subject to change in all-time. These include civil and criminal matters which should be interpreted according to the changing conditions and the needs and circumstances of the Muslim community at that time.³¹

1.2.3 Jamaluddin al-Afghani as-Sayyid

Jamaluddin al-Afghani (1838-1897) was a Muslim politician, political campaigner, a journalist and an Islamic reformer. The political activism of Jamaluddin al-Afghani made him 'a great hero of the east' and 'an enemy of colonialism'. There was a great influence of his thoughts on the whole Muslim world. His main struggle was to revitalize the Islamic world.³²

Jamaluddin al-Afghani is recognized as an architect of the modern Islamic intellectual revival, who took a middle path between traditionalism and modernism. He was named as 'Hakeem al Sharq' i.e. the sage of the East in the Arab world and was regarded as the defender of Islam. There are various claims about the nationality of Jamaluddin al-Afghani. His closed disciple Muhammad Abduh, Shakib Arsalan and other biographical accounts held the view that he belonged to a Sunni Sayyid lineage from Asadabad, Kunar, Afghanistan. Some Western scholars are of the view that he concealed his Iranian identity and the probable reason behind this is his interest to be recognized more as a Muslim rather than to be identified by some specific sectarian association that was against his mission.³³

According to Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muslims should gain only that knowledge from Western sciences that is beneficial and in accordance with the environment and needs of Muslims. He asserted that it is not necessary that the sciences that led to the development of Europe can also lead the Muslims on the path of progress because our way of life and environment is different from that of Europe. Jamaluddin al-Afghani regarded the attempts to establish institutes of western style as futile and suggested that this thinking reflected in Western sciences can weaken our capabilities. Thus, he was against the Western institutions.³⁴

Jamaluddin al-Afghani believed that the religion of Islam is compatible with the modern science, economics and political theory and there could be no contradiction between them. He claimed that the teachings of Islam should be

developed in the light of guidance from the holy Qur'ān. He believed in the radically modernist interpretation of the holy Qur'ān and was against the traditional approaches of interpretation that can hinder the progress of Muslims and could affect their strength. He was in strong favor of modern interpretation of the religion of Islam that is based on national cohesion, anti-traditionalism, modern science and technology.³⁵

1.2.4 Muhammad Abduh

Shaykh Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) had been a dominant figure in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in *Egypt* and all over the Muslim world. Muhammad Abduh was one of the most prominent Muslim reformers and an architect of Islamic Modernism. He was a 'Nationalist' who influenced a whole school of thinkers and reformers that included non-Egyptians and non-Muslims as well. As a recognition of his struggles and achievements, he got the title of 'al-Ustadh al-Imam (the Master and the Guide)'. The efforts of Muhammad Abduh can be categorized into four fields i.e. theology, politics, culture, Arabic language and educational system. His political influence reached from 'North Africa to Southeast Asia' and he influenced not only the 'Arabs' but also the 'Indonesians' and 'Malays'.³⁶

Muhammad Abduh was a distinguished student of Jamaluddin al-Afghani and he was deeply influenced by Jamaluddin al-Afghani's profound aspiration and he became his strength and his supporter and further expanded the efforts and struggles of his mentor. Muhammad Abduh broadened his philosophical inquiry to extend his efforts to different fields that include theology, law, social and political science and mysticism and his expertise in these fields strengthened his urge to re-interpret classical Islamic text and to bring radical change and reform in Al-Azhar. All his efforts were aligned with the creative and dynamic thoughts of Jamaluddin al-Afghani. Muhammad Abduh further transferred this inspiration to his students, so that they may proclaim and understand the urgent need to resist the European intervention in the life of Egyptians and he also highlighted the importance of unifying the Muslims into one community.³⁷

Jamaluddin al-Afghani held Muhammad Abduh in high esteem and he made the following remarks about him that Muhammad Abduh's wisdom will suffice for Egypt.³⁸ Muhammad Abduh believed that the holy Qur'ān should be perceived as a divine guidance and he was a high critique of traditional and classical tafsīr trends that were developed according to the views of early exegetes and did not focus on the purpose of revelation.³⁹ Muhammad Abduh seemed to be dissatisfied with the nature and structure of classical exegetical commentaries.

Muhammad Abduh presented his modernist ideas in 'Tafsīr al-Manar' to present a 'modern and rational interpretation' of the holy Qur'ān.

⁴⁰This tafsīr was written as a response to the requirements of modernity. Muhammad Abduh explained his methodology of Qur'ānic interpretation as mainly relying on the Qur'ānic text only and remaining hooked to the text without going out of it. This approach of Muhammad Abduh was in line with the thought of Salafis but his methodology was mainly based on the holy Qur'ān and his approach towards the interpretation of the Qur'ānic text was to start everything from the beginning and to use a flexible approach to tafsīr⁴¹.

According to Muhammad Abduh, the only way to establish a true interpretation is to rely solely on the holy Qur'ān. Muhammad Abduh relied only on authenticated ahadiths universally agreed upon by the Muslims.⁴² He emphasized that 'the holy Qur'ān and sun'nah of the holy Prophet ﷺ both are sources of Islam but he accepted only 'mutawatir' ahadiths whose proof-value and reports were certain and evident.

Although Muhammad Abduh viewed the 'holy Qur'ān as the primary source of Islamic law', but he did not always limit himself to the literal meaning of the revealed text. He pointed out that the meaning of Fiqh is understanding. Therefore in order to make a legal decision, the jurists (Faḳīh) should take the spirit of law under consideration along with understanding the literal meaning of the text. Muhammad Abduh did not consider that person a Faḳīh who just performs literal interpretation of the Qur'ānic text without understanding the intentions and implications of the text.⁴³

It can be observed from the tafsīr written by Muhammad Abduh that he was pragmatic in his approach. He sought to interpret the overall universal message of the holy Qur'ān. He did not simply interpret verses in the form of fragments but related those fragments to specific events that happened at the time of holy Prophet ﷺ or earlier. Muhammad Abduh believed that interpreters should interpret the message of the holy Qur'ān in the light of their intellect, the quality of their knowledge and the contemporary cultural conditions. It must be taken into account that the cultural conditions prevalent at present times are different from the cultural conditions of past interpreters. Therefore, it is the duty and responsibility of the interpreters to interpret the Qur'ānic message by taking into account the present intellectual, social and cultural conditions.⁴⁴

1.3 Traditional view about the Concept of Revelation

According to Muslim theology, the Qur'ānic revelation is: "communication of Allah's will to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and through the prophet ﷺ to his community present in the early seventh century". The primary view about the concept of revelation is that the revelation was carried by angel Gabriel in Arabic language to the prophet Muhammad ﷺ. The message of the holy Qur'ān was strongly related to the context in which it was revealed and it is eternal in its essence and a text which

transcend history. Many Muslim scholars hold the view that the context plays an important role in understanding ‘the revelatory nature of the holy Qur’ān’.⁴⁵

Islamic traditionalist consider the holy Qur’ān as absolutely and completely the word of Allah. According to them, the holy Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم was just a recipient of the Qur’ānic revelation and the angel Gabriel was the intermediate source between Allah عزوجل and the holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم. Therefore the traditional view considered the holy prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم merely as a “telephone receiver” which means that neither the content nor the words of the message belong to the holy Prophet.⁴⁶

1.4 Early Modernists’ Views about the Concept of Revelation

The concept of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan about the Qur’ānic revelation is that there is no intermediate source between Allah and the holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم than in the form of angel that brought messages from Allah and delivered them to the holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم. He asserted that it is basically the prophetic faculty which heard the divine words. Allah spoke about the angel Gabriel several times and in Chapter al-Baqarah, He described that the angel, Gabriel, has brought it down to thy heart with Allah's permission". From that description, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan perceived that the idea to be brought to the heart and mind of man is not something that is external to man, rather it belongs to man’s own inmost nature. Allah alone put the words of revelation to the heart of the holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم. The verses were then read and interpreted by the holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan regarded the ability to receive the message from Allah as a natural prophetic faculty like other human faculties.⁴⁷

According to Allama Muhammad Iqbal, revelation is a universal property of life and reason and revelation are inseparable. Although both reason and revelation are equally essential for the well-being and evolution of life, their role is different in the process of growth. The analysis of Allama Muhammad Iqbal showed that the range of meaning associated with wahy is much broader than how it is actually assumed. The primary purpose of revelation is to support the life as it encounters novel challenges and strive to attain new visions of reality. The phenomenon of revelation is bestowed upon a few selected individuals that possess prophetic consciousness. The wahy as Prophetic revelation has come to an end but wahy in other forms that are other than prophecy will continue to emerge in the post-prophetic period. For Allama Muhammad Iqbal, the notion of revelation in the capacity of reason supports the humanity to move from the stage of consciousness to the stage of self-consciousness. He explained that the ultimate goal of revelation is twofold: To provide guidance to the human beings to use their reasoning abilities that Allah has bestowed them to appreciate their reality and validity. There is need to understand the role of reasoning faculties that how they can perform in the post-

prophetic period in order to interpret and understand the knowledge it claims in all domains of human experience. In other words, the emergence, validity and evolution of revelation cannot be separated from the emergence, validity and evolution of reason.⁴⁸

Jamaluddin al-Afghani equates the essence of Islam with Islamic rationalism and he asserted that the type of knowledge which the Prophets acquired through revelation could also be acquired by Philosophers through the use of reason. In the process of Qur'ānic interpretation, the major tool is the human reason. If there is contradiction between the text of the holy Qur'ān and human reason, the Qur'ānic text should be interpreted symbolically. According to Jamaluddin al-Afghani, there are many hidden secrets in the holy Qur'ān that are still unknown until the time will come, when the human reason will progress enough to uncover those hidden truths.⁴⁹

Muhammad Abduh perceived revelation as an inner knowledge and not merely words, speech or action and he explained this term as revealing something to others. Revelation in his view was taken in cognitive and spiritual form rather than in material form. According to Muhammad Abduh, there are men among the human beings who possess high purity of soul and are blessed with inward disposition. Such men can see the things of Allah by natural vision while others could not reach such level by reason or sense nor by the aid of proof and demonstration. He had the view that ordinary human beings can understand the phenomenon of revelation through intellectual reasoning by which they are able to attain a sound belief. Reason justified the possibility of revelation for the prophets.⁵⁰

1.5 Early Modernists' View about the Concept of Reason

The idea of compatibility of Islam and modern science was supported by all Muslim ideologues of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan regarded reason as the most pure form of human intelligence. He was of the view that religious principles should be understood through a process of rational scrutiny. Reason can be used to resolve the misconceptions developed about the concepts of Allah, human destiny, ethics, morality and social norms.⁵¹

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan reclaimed the original religion of Islam which was disclosed by Allah and the holy Prophet. According to Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, there is complete harmonization between the religion of Islam and reason.⁵² He further added that reason is a quality that can be acquired and makes the human beings capable of distinguishing between 'good and bad', 'right and wrong'. He used the terms understanding, reason and intellect interchangeably and he regarded the faculty of reason as a behavioral entity rather than substantive.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan underlined the need of rationalistic interpretation of Islamic sources. He believed that in order to make the religion

of Islam understandable and acceptable to the new age, there is a need to use reason. He also insisted that the interpretation should be based on the holy Qur'an alone and only authentic ahadiths should be referred. He also added that there is a strong need to distinguish between false and authentic ahadiths.⁵³

Allama Muhammad Iqbal made a critical evaluation of sources of Islamic law to search for the inherent potentialities of Islamic law in order to meet new challenges. He supported the idea of having progressive nature of life and consulting the holy Qur'an in order to find out the solutions to the emerging problems. He advocated the religion of Islam as a progressive religion and stressed on the importance of ijtihād and rationalistic interpretation in order to make the implications of Shari'ah as 'advanced', 'progressive' and 'effective'. He endorsed the idea that freedom to ijtihād abolishes rigidity and stagnation.⁵⁴

Allama Muhammad Iqbal emphasized on the practical and progressive nature of the religion of Islam. According to him, the religion of Islam always remains responsive to the changes brought about by the material and cultural forces and in this regard the importance of ijtihād cannot be over emphasized.⁵⁵ He stressed on the need to re-construct and re-interpret the basic Islamic legal principles in the light of changes brought about by modernity. There was a strong need to revive the spirit of reasoning so that individuals could be capable of discovering new standards by understanding the already established principles. For Allama Muhammad Iqbal, it was necessary to re-discover the past of Islamic religion in such a way that could provide a strong basis for understanding the present situation and he wished that change should arise from the existing structure of social order.⁵⁶

Jamaluddin al-Afghani was a great advocate of Islamic modernism. His view was that the concepts of philosophy, science and reason are not alien to the religion of Islam and these concepts are not purely a product of the West as well. Rather there is a harmony between the religion of Islam and the scientific instrument of reason and it is the religion that supports the faculty of reason and independent thinking.⁵⁷

Jamaluddin al-Afghani believed that the religion of Islam was not only compatible with 'reason', 'progresses and 'social solidarity' but if it is properly interpreted it would form the foundations of a modern civilization. He suggested the formation of a united alliance of Islamic civilization as a solution to the threats imposed by the West.⁵⁸

Jamaluddin al-Afghani supported the use of intellectual reasoning and he was against the stagnant orthodox nature of religious principles. He advocated for 'novel' and 'dynamic' principles aligned with 'Science' and 'modern knowledge'. He struggled to develop a reconciliation between 'fundamentalism' and 'modernism'. He provided a 'broad intellectual framework' in order to re-define the role of religion of Islam in the changing world.⁵⁹

According to Muhammad Abduh, the revelation and reason are complementary. He argued that there is need to apply a rational approach in the interpretation of the holy Qur'ān and Sun'nah.⁶⁰ Muhammad Abduh asserted that to practice ijtihād is not just limited to the use of reason to deduce rulings from the traditional interpretations produced by the earlier scholars but as a matter of fact it involves a broader re-interpretation of Islamic principles in the light of foundational texts.⁶¹

Muhammad Abduh described an ideal Muslim society as the one developed on the foundations of 'revolution', 'reason' and 'law'. He claimed that rational interpretation of Islamic law results in the development of society. Conversely, when it deviates from its fundamental principles, this results in an uncertain chaotic state of the society.⁶² For Muhammad Abduh, the renewal of religion of Islam could not be simply achieved by adopting the path of western modernization but an Islamic legal and social reform is also required for this purpose. The religious reformation agenda of Muhammad Abduh advocated the need of re-interpretation and reformulation of Islamic ideals in response to the modern changes that were emerging in every field of life. The main struggle of Muhammad Abduh was directed towards the reconciliation between revelation and reason. These thoughts of Muhammad Abduh were reflected in the works of his followers later on, i.e., Sayyid Syekh Al-Hādī's work 'Islam and Reason' and Muhammad Asad's work 'The Message of the Qur'an'.⁶³

1.6 Exegetical Views of Early Modernists on the Holy Qur'ān

The exegetical method of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was based on the principle of rationalization of religious beliefs and he provided rationalist interpretation of supernatural phenomenon. For instance, Muhammad's accession to heaven, angels, satan, jinn, the parting of the sea by Moses, and Noah's flood. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was of the view that the traditional ulamā off Islam were not well-equipped to deal with the modern problems and there is a need to re-interpret Islam to accommodate rational thinking and modern advancements. He highlighted the sole authority of the holy Qur'ān in all matters and argued for 'the interpretation of the holy Qur'ān by the Qur'ān' itself and disregarded tradition and opinion of any other scholar. The exegesis of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was based on reason and nature and he abandoned orthodoxy.⁶⁴ He considered the traditional Qur'ānic commentaries as baseless and more prejudiced that have no relation with the actual spirit of the text of the holy Qur'ān. He stressed on the need of revisiting conventional interpretations with a scientific attitude. Allama Muhammad Iqbal regarded Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan as the first Indian Muslim who felt the need for a re-interpretation of the religion of Islam.⁶⁵

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan mostly relied on earlier Islamic sources for his Qur'ānic study. Altaf Hussain Hali mentioned 52 points of difference between

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and contemporary ulamā in a biography of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, out of which 41 cited by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan were from the traditional sources. There were just 11 points where Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan offered new interpretations.⁶⁶

According to Allama Muhammad Iqbal, the holy Qur'ān is revealed in Arabic language and this is a universal phenomenon that in order to understand a book and to explore the multilayers of meanings, one needs to understand the language of book. Therefore, in order to understand scriptural interpretations and exegesis, one needs to possess adequate linguistic knowledge and skills. Similarly, for understanding the message of the holy Qur'ān, a mere knowledge of Qur'ānic language is not sufficient, but it requires a deeper understanding of Qur'ānic language in order to engage in a fruitful act of scriptural reading and interpretation.⁶⁷

Allama Muhammad Iqbal asserted that the holy Qur'ān does not merely contains substantive legal provisions but also indicates the means of how it should be interpreted and supplemented. He regarded the holy Qur'ān as an embodiment of moral principles and positively constructed legal rules and this two-fold nature of holy Qur'ān ensured to satisfy the needs of people. Allama Muhammad Iqbal considered the violation of these two things as the cause of deterioration and corruption of Judaism and Christianity. He asserted that Judaism became confined to legal rules and Christianity remained directed towards asceticism and other-worldliness. Whereas the holy Qur'ān provides man with a revolutionary outlook and unique insight into life to reform and refashion his/her entire life in accordance with the spirit of Islam.⁶⁸

According to Allama Muhammad Iqbal, the Muslim scholars have distorted the original message of the holy Qur'ān by applying unauthentic, non-scientific and biased interpretations and exegesis. Therefore, he suggested few steps to refresh the concepts of ummah and to revive the true Islamic spirit which are as under:

To restore the original doctrine of the holy Qur'ān

To replace the prevalent Islamic educational curriculum with the restored Qur'ānic curriculum

To restore the Qur'ānic curriculum in a way that it is followed by Qur'ānic science.⁶⁹

According to Sayyid Jamaluddin al-Afghani, the main cause of decline of Muslim ummah is the absence of self-investigation. Another prominent factor is that the new questions are responded with pre-determined answers. He stressed on the philosophical version of the religion. According to Jamaluddin al-Afghani, there is absence of questions like “who we are and what we need” in the Islamic world and he expanded his Islamic critique to the realm of empirical sciences. Jamaluddin al-Afghani regarded the rationalistic interpretation of principles of sharī'ah as the means of developing a democratic society.⁷⁰

Jamaluddin al-Afghani rejected taqlīd bila kayf and advocated a revival of Islamic spirit. He asserted that the past exegetes could not fully grasp the full meaning of the Qur'ānic text. Their discovery about the secrets of the holy Qur'ān is just like a 'drop in the ocean'. He supported the idea of 'Sufism' which defines the meaning of the holy Qur'ān as infinite and in order to fully understand the layers of this meaning there is a need to refresh the interpretation of the text of the holy Qur'an which is relevant to the modernistic conditions⁷¹.

Jamaluddin Al-Afghani rejected the philosophical approach to Qur'ānic interpretation and regarded it as too speculative. In order to differentiate between esoteric and exoteric verse, Al-Afghani employed critical methods. Jamaluddin al-Afghani suggested that the obscure verses i.e. al-ayat-al-*mutashābihāt* should be understood in the light of clear verses i.e. al-ayat-al-*muhkamāt*. His student Muhammad Abduh was greatly inspired by his approach to interpret the holy Qur'ān on rational grounds and he paid special attention to the verses related to social matters.⁷²

Muhammad Abduh advocated for a method to approach holy Qur'ān afresh in response to the modern developments. He emphasized that the modern traditional exegeses are just following the pre-conceived interpretations of the classical exegetes and this approach poses a hindrance in understanding the true purpose of Qur'ānic revelation. Moreover, some works on exegesis just focus on literal meaning of words and take into consideration the language structure and philological aspects of the Qur'ānic verses and offer just practical exercises in language. Muhammad Abduh added that the efforts of the past has little relevance to the needs and questions of the present day. He employed the method of interpreting the holy Qur'ān in modernist terms to make Islam compatible with modern Western empiricism and conducted independent judgment in his work. He directly read and interpreted the holy Qur'ān without just relying on certain exegetical books.⁷³

The Challenge of Modernity

Throughout the Islamic history, a legal and literal approach is used for Qur'ānic texts particularly those texts that were ethical and legal in nature. The scholars considered this approach as least error-prone and most appropriate. There were a number of ongoing debates in the eleventh to twelfth century about the issue: whether the door of *ijtihād* has been closed or it is still open. From the eleventh century onwards, there was a decrease in the tendency of creative and independent reasoning and an increase in following one's own legal school.⁷⁴

Muslim thinkers from eighteenth century advocated the practice of *ijtihād* in order to revive the Islamic spirit and to adapt to the changes of the modern world. Some of the prominent traditional reformers of that era include: Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī (d. 1765'), 'Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (d. 1832)', and 'Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Sanūsī (d. 1859).⁷⁵ But the general trend at

the beginning of the nineteenth century throughout the Islamic world was blind following of legal schools and a number of modern Muslim scholars supported a rational interpretation of Islamic tradition. Their idea was to make reason and revelation compatible. They regarded religion and the pronouncements in line with each other and suggested the need to come up with the interpretations of the text of the holy Qur'ān that resonates with the reason wherever needed.⁷⁶

The emergence of Islamic modernism called out for a reformation i.e. iṣlāḥ and re-interpretation i.e. ijtihād throughout the Muslim world. Islamic modernism paved the way between the Islamic traditionalists and secular reformers. Islamic modernists considered the traditional ulama responsible for the stagnation of Islamic thought and they struggled for a new synthesis between Islam and modern science.

The response of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan to the challenge of the West or British colonialism was a surrender in response to the challenges of modernity. He insisted that the teachings the holy Qur'ān and the practices of the holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم should be a source of inspiration for the Muslims. He claimed that there is a strong need to change the way of responding to the modern advancements and to revive the original version of religion of Islam which was disclosed by Allah and the holy Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم and disapproved the version of religion which ulama and their followers were preaching. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan considered reason as a quality that can be achieved and enables the Muslims to choose the right path.⁷⁷

Allama Muhammad Iqbal explored the tensions between Islamic tradition, secularism and modernity and he viewed modernity as a practical reality. He regarded the notion of modernity as the aspirations of the society in response to the pressure of modern ideas. He attempted to bring Islam and the West together in a global narrative and he believed Islam as an intermediary source between East and West. Iqbal sought to reconcile the earlier Islamic thought and the modern European thought and Science. He asserted that the European development on the intellectual side in fact resonates with the most important phases of the cultural development of Islam. Allama Muhammad Iqbal claimed that Islam and modernity have overlapping concerns and are not oppositional or contradictory.⁷⁸

The pioneer of pan-Islamism, Jamaluddin al-Afghani also held the view that only science and technology could eliminate economic and cultural backwardness. He said that modern science is universal and he objected the idea of dividing science into the domains of European and Muslim. He argued that in the previous centuries, the ulama categorized the sciences in order to declare some of them as Islamic and some others as non-Islamic and on the basis of this differentiation they forbade people from studying certain type of science by declaring them as non-Islamic. He pointed out those who banned certain sciences and knowledge claiming that they are protecting the religion from

enemies and are propagating the original version of religion. Jamaluddin al-Afghani recognized the work of scientists as missionary. He added that the verity of prophet was the fruit of inspiration and the verity of scientist was the fruit of reason. He asserted that supremacy initially originated from the Islamic world and it was Science which ultimately became the cause of Western development. He urged the need of strengthening and empowering the Muslims by reclaiming it.⁷⁹

Muhammad Abduh was the ‘founder of Islamic modernism in Egypt’ and he held a massive influence throughout the Islamic world. He was the major proponent of modern Islam who led a major intellectual movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His movement played a significant role in defending religious autonomy, resisting European colonialism and preventing the flourish of bid’ah i.e. innovation and traditional and conservative ways of taqlīd. He stressed on the need to reform the religion of Islam in order to agree with the modern conditions. The modernist project of Muhammad Abduh was aimed at providing a common platform between western and Islamic ideals. He challenged the rigidity and conservative ways employed for textual interpretation and he emphasized the need to understand the social requirements and the challenges of the time.⁸⁰

Conclusion

Islamic modernism established a reconciliation between Islamic fundamentalism and the modern concepts such as nationalism, constitutionalism, rationalism, human rights and so on. Modernists asserted the need of reconstruction of religious thought in order to develop a harmony between Islam and the modern world. The modern changes require new approach towards religion and a fresh re-interpretation. The religion of Islam is dynamic and flexible enough to respond to the needs of changing situations and can provide guidance about all aspects and facets of life. The changes brought about by modernity also demand an upgraded approach to re-understand the religious texts and the basic theme behind the message in the present context.

Ijtihād is an essential means of contextualizing religious teachings in the perspective of changing circumstances. The contemporary era is facing a number of key challenges that require the re-interpretation of religious doctrines. Ijtihād being contextual in nature is the best way to provide reinterpretation of Islamic principles. This era of changing circumstances needs to revitalize the spirit of ijtihād in order to respond to the modern-day challenges.

This research study discussed the early modern period of Islamic modernism to understand the trends and transformations in the history of contextualization. Muslims were introduced to the challenges posed by modernity through colonial occupations and military expeditions. In order to adapt to these modern changes, the early modernists of nineteenth century

stressed on the need of reviving the Islamic tradition of *ijtihād*. The early modernist asserted that the traditional Qur'ānic commentaries had made the Qur'ānic message unclear and difficult to understand in the scenario of changing circumstances and there is need to approach the holy Qur'ān afresh. They stressed on the need to re-interpret the message of the Qur'ān in a rational and modern manner. This led to the development of modern Qur'ānic exegesis. The approaches of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Abduh towards understanding the Qur'ānic text was rational. Therefore, reform movements emerged throughout the Islamic world that called for the need to re-interpret the religious texts in the light of modern developments. These calls for reviving the spirit of *ijtihād* led to the emergence of the concept of contextual approach to interpret the Qur'ānic texts in the twentieth century.

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