

RETHINKING TRADITIONAL TAFSÎR THROUGH *THE STUDY QURAN*: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

A Thesis

**Submitted to the Master's Study Program of Islamic Studies at the
Faculty of Islamic Studies in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of**

Master of Arts (M.A.)



by:

Mirza Nursyabani

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ABSTRACT

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This study focuses on *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, authored by a team of scholars led by Seyyed Hossein Nasr along with four American professors. It aims to examine whether *The Study Quran* (TSQ) aligns with traditional commentaries, as its authors claim, or whether it departs significantly from premodern interpretations. The research is based on the assumption that TSQ is shaped by a distinct understanding of “tradition” held by its authors, which may result in interpretations that differ from the mainstream of classical tafsīr. This study adopts a qualitative methodology, combining comparative textual analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The former is used to identify whether TSQ’s interpretations converge with or diverge from earlier exegetes, while the latter enables the study to go beyond descriptive content by uncovering how TSQ articulates power relations and ideological positioning through its commentary. The primary data source is *The Study Quran* itself, with a focus on its commentary rather than its translation or supplementary essays. The secondary sources include a range of tafāsīr, from medieval to modern, along with relevant books, journal articles, and scholarly works. This research investigates TSQ’s interpretive orientation through two main themes— theological and legal—by analyzing its treatment of Q 3:19, Q 3:85, and Q 4:34, to understand how TSQ positions itself within broader modern tafsīr discourse. Drawing on Fairclough’s CDA framework, this thesis argues that *The Study Quran* represents a traditionalist-universalist tafsīr: a project that re-appropriates classical commentary to support a universal metaphysical vision. While heavily drawing on traditional sources, TSQ in some cases departs from classical epistemic structures and reframes tradition through universalist ideas, positioning itself as a post-traditional intervention in contemporary Qur’anic interpretation.

Keywords: *modern tafsīr, The Study Quran, traditional tafsīr, traditionalist-universalist*

للمختص

تركّز هذه الدراسة على كتاب *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (TSQ) ، الذي ألفه فريق من العلماء بقيادة السيد حسين نصر وأربعة أساتذة أمريكيين. وتهدف الدراسة إلى فحص ما إذا كان هذا العمل ينسجم مع *traditional tafsīr* كما يدّعي مؤلفوه، أو أنه يُظهر انقطاعاً كبيراً عن التفسيرات ما قبل الحديثة. وتفترض الدراسة أن TSQ تأثر بفهم خاص لمفهوم *traditional* يحملهُ المؤلفون، مما قد يؤدي إلى تأويلات تختلف عن التيار السائد في التراث التفسيري الإسلامي. تعتمد هذه الدراسة على منهجية نوعية تجمع بين التحليل النصي المقارن وتحليل الخطاب النقدي (CDA) وفقاً لنموذج فيركلاف. يُستخدم التحليل المقارن للكشف عما إذا كانت TSQ تتفق مع مفسري العصور السابقة أو تختلف عنها، بينما يُستخدم تحليل الخطاب للكشف عن العلاقات السلطوية والخلفيات الأيديولوجية التي تتجلى في التفسير. يمثّل المصدر الأساسي في هذا البحث بكتاب (TSQ) نفسه، مع التركيز على التعليقات التفسيرية دون غيرها من الأجزاء، أما المصادر الثانوية فتشمل عدداً من (*traditional tafsīr*) والحديثة، بالإضافة إلى الكتب والمقالات والدراسات ذات الصلة. تبحث الدراسة في موضوعين رئيسيين هما: العقيدة والشريعة، وذلك من خلال تحليل تفسير الآيات آل عمران ١٩، آل عمران ٨٥، النساء ٣٤، لفهم موقع هذا العمل ضمن خطاب التفسير القرآني المعاصر. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن (TSQ) يمثّل نموذجاً لما يمكن تسميته "traditionalist-universalist"، حيث يُعاد توظيف التراث التفسيري الكلاسيكي لدعم رؤية ميتافيزيقية شاملة. وعلى الرغم من اعتماده المكثف على المصادر *traditional tafsīr* -، إلا أن هذا التفسير ينأى عن البنى المعرفية ما قبل الحداثي ويُعيد تشكيل التراث من خلال أفكار كونية (universal)، مما يجعله تدخلاً post-traditional tafsīr في خطاب التفسير القرآني الحديث.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القرآن الكريم (The Study Quran) ، التفسير traditional ، التفسير الحديث،

traditionalist-universalist,

TRANSLITERATION GUIDE

Arabic	Roman	Arabic	Roman	Arabic	Roman
ا	a	س	s	ل	l
ب	b	ش	sh	م	m
ت	t	ص	ṣ	ن	n
ث	th	ض	ḍ	و	w
ج	j	ط	ṭ	ه	h
ح	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ء	'
خ	kh	ع	'	ي	y
د	d	غ	gh		
ذ	dh	ف	f		
ر	r	ق	q		
ز	z	ك	k		

Short Vocal

Arab Alphabet	Roman Alphabet	Arabic Example	Transliteration
ا	A	فتاح	<i>fataḥa</i>
إ	I	عَلِمَ	<i>'alima</i>
أ	U	حَسُنَ	<i>ḥasuna</i>

Long Vocal

Arab Alphabet	Roman Alphabet	Arabic Example	Transliteration
إِ/ى	Ā	رَضِىَ/قَامَ	<i>riḍā/qāma</i>
يِ	ī	قَرِيبَ	<i>qarīb</i>
وِ	Ū	مَجُوسَ	<i>julūs</i>

Diphthong

Arab Alphabet	Roman Alphabet	Arabic Example	Transliteration
أَوْ	Aw	قَوْمَ	<i>qawm</i>
أَيَّ	Ay	رَيْبَ	<i>rayb</i>

Notes:

1. Consonant with shaddah (ّ) for instance سُلَّم is written as *sullam* (double letters).
2. The Arabic letter *hamzah* (ء) at the beginning of a word is transliterated into “a” not into “’a”. For instance أَكْبَر is written as *akbar* not *’akbar*, except in the middle of a term after a consonant. For example, مَرَأَة is written as *mar’a*.
3. The Arabic script of *alif-lām qamariyyah* and *alif-lām shamsiyya* (ال) is written as “al” at the beginning of words. For instance الْمَجْلِس is written *al-majlis* and الرَّجُل is written *al-rajul*.
4. The Arabic letter *ta’ marbūṭa* (ة) is unwritten/invisible when it is located at the end of the words, such as سُورَة is written as *sūra*. When located in the middle of a sentence is written as “t”, such as صَلَاةُ الْمَغْرِبِ is written *ṣalāt al-maghrib*

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Tafsīr, as a foundational genre of Islamic scholarship, has historically played and continues to play a central role in shaping Islamic intellectual tradition. As Walid Saleh notes, tafsīr functions as a mediating discourse that links Muslim communities to the divine message of the Qur'an.¹ Through its genealogical nature, Qur'anic interpretation has not only sustained the meaning of revelation across historical periods and geographic contexts, but also provided space for Muslims to negotiate identity, authority, and the rearticulation of sacred meaning. This genealogical and adaptive character of tafsīr is evident when tracing its development from the Prophet Muhammad's time through classical and medieval commentators, and into the modern period. For instance, as Andrew Rippin observes, modern tafsīr shares a similar character with its classical counterpart in the way interpreters have always sought to relate the meaning of revelation to the conditions of their own time.²

Historically, Quranic interpretation or tafsīr in pre-modern times³ had a long journey and was predominantly carried out by highly authoritative individuals. Their unique insights and methodologies contributed to a diversity of interpretation and enriched the field with various approaches. Hussein Abdul-Rauf has effectively summarized the history of Quranic interpretation in the pre-modern era by categorizing the main features of each period and highlighting key figures of each era.

¹ Walid Saleh, "Quranic Commentaries," in *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, First edition, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al. (HarperOne, An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 1657.

² Andrew Rippin, *The Qur'an and Its Interpretive Tradition*, Variorum Collected Studies Series CS715 (Ashgate, 2001), X–18.

³ There is no exact time to define "pre-modern" in Quranic exegesis. By "pre-modern" I refer to all tafāsīr written before the advent of Modernist Muslims, spanning from the Prophet period until the nineteenth century exegetes such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) and Muhammad Abduh (d.1905).

Quranic interpretation began with the Prophet Muhammad at the time of the Quran's initial revelation. During this period, an interpretation typically involved explanations as a response to questions from his companions. Prophet Muhammad himself established an understanding of how to interpret the Quran within the Muslim community, although the exact extent of his interpretations remains uncertain. After his passing, the companions and subsequent generations took on the responsibility of interpreting the Quran. They discussed with each other what could be the most appropriate meaning of certain verses which gradually results in a richer tradition of exegesis. The classical era of interpretation is marked by figures such as Ubay b. Ka'b (d. 649), Ibn Abbās (d. 687), Ibn Mas'ūd (d. 653), Hasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728), Muqātil (d. 767), and al-Farrā (d. 822), reaching its peak with Ibn Jarīr al-Tabari (d. 923). From this point onwards, extending into the medieval period, Quranic interpretation matured and diversified into various analytical approaches, including linguistic, theological, philosophical, and Sufi interpretations. Some prominent figures from this mature period include al-Tha'labi (d. 1035), al-Zamakhshari (d. 1143), Fakhruddīn al-Rāzi (d. 1207), Ibn Kathīr (d. 1372), and al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505).⁴

In the modern period, Qur'anic interpretation has persisted as a central mode of intellectual engagement, even as Muslim societies have faced serious challenges brought about by modernity. By modernity, I refer to the evolving project grounded in Enlightenment ideals of freedom, reason, and progress, which, as Peter Wagner emphasizes, has taken multiple forms across societies rather than following a single Western path.⁵ While such developments disrupted many traditional Islamic disciplines, they simultaneously renewed attention on tafsīr as a primary medium through which Muslims express and explore their religious identity. As Saleh notes, while disciplines such as law and theology experienced institutional weakening, tafsīr became even more significant, particularly as the Qur'an itself remained the unchallenged foundation of Islamic authority.⁶ In this sense, modern Qur'anic

⁴ Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis: Genesis and Development*, Culture and Civilization in the Middle East 18 (Routledge, 2010), 233.

⁵ Peter Wagner, *Modernity: Understanding the Present* (Polity, 2012), 4–5.

⁶ Walid A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur'ān Commentary of al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035) by Walid A. Saleh*, Texts and Studies on the Qur'ān, v. 1 (Brill, 2004), 2.

interpretation is not merely a repetition of inherited methods, but a renewed effort to engage the text meaningfully in a changing world.

One of the major tensions in modern tafsīr, as described by scholars like Tamer and Farouki, lies in the question of whether interpreters should defend the legacy of classical tradition or pursue new readings that reflect contemporary concerns. Faced with the challenges of rationalist and liberal thought from the West, Muslim thinkers began to revisit and engage with classical methodologies—not to replicate them, but to respond to the demands of the present. As such, some exegetes aim to preserve the authority of the tradition, while others push for re-interpretations that emphasize ethical, social, or political concerns.⁷ This tension, however, is not only hermeneutical; it is also deeply tied to questions of identity. In the modern era, the act of interpreting the Qur'an—whether by citing classical texts or composing new commentaries—is often shaped by broader ideological or theological aims. Consequently, as scholars have noted, modern tafsīr shows a range of tendencies, from progressive or modernist approaches that seek novel understandings, to traditionalist projects that argue for the defense of established interpretations.⁸ However, despite this diversity, traditionalist approaches often receive less attention in academic and public discourse, leading to an imbalanced portrayal of the landscape of modern Qur'anic interpretation.⁹

In this shifting landscape, *The Study Quran* (TSQ), published in 2015, emerges as a distinctive intervention.¹⁰ Unlike many modern Quranic commentary (or

⁷ Suha Taji-Farouki, ed., *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, Qur'anic Studies Series 1 (Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 2; Georges Tamer, ed., *Handbook of Quranic Hermeneutics: Vol. 4: Quranic Hermeneutics in the 19th and 20th Century*, 1st ed., De Gruyter Handbook (De Gruyter, 2023), x.

⁸ Saleh, "Quranic Commentaries," 1657–58; Jonathan Brown, "Scripture in the Modern Muslim World: The Quran and Hadith," in *Islam in the Modern World* (Routledge, 2013), 19.

⁹ Johanna Pink, *Muslim Qur'ānic Interpretation Today: Media, Genealogies and Interpretive Communities*, Themes in Qur'ānic Studies (Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2019), 6; Walid A. Saleh, "Contemporary Tafsīr: The Rise of Scriptural Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, by Walid A. Saleh, ed. Muhammad Abdel Haleem and Mustafa Shah (Oxford University Press, 2020), 693, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199698646.013.56>.

¹⁰ *The Study Qur'an: A New Translation and Commentary* is an English-language Quranic commentary published in 2015, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and published by HarperOne. The work took a decade to develop by a team personally chosen by Nasr, including Joseph Lumbard, Maria Massi Dakake, Caner Dagli, and Muhammed Rustom, who compiled and commented the Quran. Claimed to root its interpretation in traditional tafāsīr, *The Study Quran* spans nearly 2,000 pages. It begins with an introduction by its general editor and is enriched with maps of the Arabian

translation) projects that pursue reform on contextual re-interpretation, TSQ represents a new kind of engagement by chasing new readings but with a different emphasis: a return to traditional standing of Quranic interpretation. This claim invites further scrutiny. Why, in an age when many tafsīr projects focus on reform, does TSQ return to tradition? Can a modern exegetical project truly be considered traditional within a diverse and contemporary academic context especially given that it was authored by five scholars based in the United States? Finally, this claim raises a deeper question: what does it mean to be “traditional” in the 21st century? And in this context, is tradition being used as a method, a message, or an identity marker?

To illustrate the dynamics described above, consider al-Nisā verse 34, a verse frequently debated in relation to gender and domestic authority. The phrase *wa-dribūhunna* (“and strike them”) has long been interpreted by traditional exegetes—and reflected in many English translations—as permitting light, non-injurious discipline. However, figures like Amina Wadud, Laleh Bakhtiar, and Edip Yüksel have challenged this reading on ethical and philological grounds, arguing for alternative renderings¹¹. In *The Study Quran*, Maria Massi Dakake—one of its few female contributors—critiques these modern reinterpretations, maintaining that the verse’s linguistic and contextual evidence supports the classical view. Yet, she carefully clarifies that this does not justify domestic violence, emphasizing restraint and spiritual responsibility. Her position, while aligned with the traditional reading, is mediated by modern ethical sensitivity and the awareness of a diverse readership. This example highlights TSQ’s broader hermeneutical strategy: engaging the classical canon while navigating contemporary moral discourse, a tension that is key to understanding its interpretive project.

This study examines *The Study Quran* as a significant development within contemporary Quranic and Tafsir studies, questioning whether it truly represents

Peninsula, extensive annotations, and fifteen essays by respected scholars in Islamic studies, discussing various aspects of the Quran. The tafsīr is highly influential both in the academia world and beyond.

¹¹ Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective*, 2nd ed (Oxford university press, 1999), 76; Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran: Original Arabic and English Translation*, Rev. ed (Library of Islam ; Distributed by Kazi Publications, 2011), 144; Edip Yüksel et al., eds., *Quran: A Reformist Translation* (Brainbow Press, 2007), 93.

traditionalist considering its historical influences and ideological inclination of its authors. By analyzing the traditional perception held by its authors and direct example of commentaries, this research seeks to understand whether it functions as a new traditional paradigm or represents a unique synthesis within the ongoing discourse on Quranic interpretation. Specifically, I explore *The Study Quran* through the verses that address the Quranic engagement with other religions on Āl ‘Imrān 19, Āl ‘Imrān 85 and al-Nisā 34 on male authority verse or domestic discipline. These verses were chosen as a study case based on the initial assumption that this theme provides the most suitable example for assessing *The Study Quran*’s continuity to the traditional tafsīr. As this thesis will ultimately argue, *The Study Quran* is not merely a tafsīr among others—it is a discursive project through which the very idea of “tradition” is reframed, negotiated, and reactivated in the twenty-first century.

This study contributes to Qur’anic Studies by challenging the dichotomy between traditional and modern tafsīr. It offers a model for evaluating how classical sources are used in modern interpretive projects and how these uses influence theological and epistemological boundaries in the twenty-first century by providing a discourse-critical reading of *The Study Quran*.

1.2 Literature Review

To make the discussion clearer, this literature review is organized into two main themes: first, research on modern tafsīr and its interpretive dynamics; and second, scholarly engagements with *The Study Quran* since its publication

1.2.1 *Research on Modern tafsīr trend (s)*

Discussing *tafsīr* in the modern era cannot be separated from the broader discourse on modernity and the various attempts made by Muslim thinkers to interpret the Qur’an within their contemporary contexts. The socio-political condition of the Muslim world positioned it to confront Western modernity—often introduced through colonialism and the imposition of foreign ideas—pushed many Muslim scholars to reconsider how the Qur’an should be understood in modern times. Scholars such as Campanini and Brown argue that modernity, especially as

introduced through colonial power and foreign domination, compelled Muslims to re-evaluate their religious traditions and to try to reconcile them with the dominant realities of the modern world.¹² Baljon even go further to state that no historical event has shaken Qur'anic interpretation as much as the Muslim encounter with Western Enlightenment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹³

This encounter brought a sense of tension between Western modernity and Islamic teachings—including the interpretation of the Qur'an. However, as many scholars note, this tension never resulted in a single or uniform response. For example, Tamer, when analyzing nineteenth and twentieth-century *tafsīr*, observes that although this period was marked by a desire to make the Qur'an relevant to changing socio-political conditions, many Qur'anic interpretations remained rooted in pre-modern exegetical traditions.¹⁴ In sum, modernity gave rise to two major directions in Qur'anic interpretation: one that calls for a fresh reading of the Qur'an in light of modern challenges, and another that continues to maintain and defend the traditional interpretations inherited from earlier periods.

One key characteristic of modern *tafsīr* lies in how it views the Qur'an not only as a source of theological ideas—as was common in the medieval period—but also as a tool to express and assert Islamic identity. Some scholars argue that the Qur'an remains a central source for Muslims in seeking answers to modern problems. In the process of addressing these issues, modern Muslims often express their Islamic identity, signifying the different of Islamic interpretation they supporting at.¹⁵ Regarding this issue, Saleh emphasizes this point by noting that modern interpreters of the Qur'an are not just writing religious commentaries; they are also positioning their current religious views in relation to earlier *tafsīr*, particularly from the medieval period. In other words, referring to classical interpretations is also a way to establish one's position in today's religious discourse.¹⁶

¹² Brown, "Scripture in the Modern Muslim World," 14; Massimo Campanini, *The Qur'an: Modern Muslim Interpretations* (Routledge, 2010), 2.

¹³ J. M. S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation: 1880 - 1960*, Repr (Brill, 1968), 2.

¹⁴ Tamer, *Handbook of Quranic Hermeneutics*, 1.

¹⁵ Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 4th ed, The Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices (Routledge, 2011), 235.

¹⁶ Saleh, "Contemporary Tafsīr," 696.

Farouki identifies three main themes that show the connection between contemporary Islamic thought and modern *tafsīr*. First is the effort by some Muslim thinkers to show that Islam is compatible with the modern world. Second is the ongoing challenge of using the Qur'an as a tool for reform. Third is the shift in interpretive authority—from the traditional scholars (*ulama*) to a wider range of individuals who now have access to Islamic knowledge, including *tafsīr*. However, not all contemporary Muslim thinkers agree on the need for reform or on how far that reform should go.¹⁷ The last point, which talks about the Qur'an as a starting point for change in society, shows that there are those who feel that the Qur'an, not limited to reform, is the word of God that is not fully subject to the dynamics of history and social change. As a result, Qur'anic interpretation today can be understood along a spectrum, reflecting different views on how to relate to earlier interpretations.

On one side of the spectrum are modernist readings of the Qur'an that seek to respond to the demands of modern life or to bring reform to current socio-religious conditions. This approach, often labeled as *modernist tafsīr*, tends to treat the Qur'an more as a functional guide for modern life than merely as an inherited text. According to this view, the meaning of the Qur'an must be aligned with present-day realities rather than simply repeating past interpretations. As some scholars point out, this approach emphasizes how the Qur'an can offer guidance, assist reform efforts, or engage with the modern world.¹⁸ Campanini, for example, associates modern *tafsīr* with the attempt to find practical dimensions in the Qur'an with concepts such as *tajdīd* (renewal) and *iṣlāḥ* (reform) are often central in their discourse.¹⁹ As a result, as noted by several scholars, interpretation in the modern century has produced a wide variety of styles or approaches ranging from scientific exegesis, socio-political, historical-critical methods, among many others.²⁰ This

¹⁷ Suha Taji-Farouki, *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, n.d., 3.

¹⁸ Mun'im A. Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur'an and Other Religions* (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10; Pink Johanna, "Striving for a New Exegesis of the Qur'an," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, by Sabine Schmidtke, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford University Press, 2016), 779.

¹⁹ Campanini, *The Qur'an*, 4.

²⁰ For a fuller account of new readings of the modern Quranic interpretation See Johanna, "Striving for a New Exegesis of the Qur'an," 765–92. See also Tamer, *Handbook of Quranic Hermeneutics*, x–xi.

focus on reform and practicality, however, does not necessarily mean that modernist approaches explicitly reject classical *tafsīr*. Rather, modernist interpreters often adopt a different attitude toward the pre-modern exegetical tradition. This approach signifies a shift in the conception of interpretive authority within Qur'anic exegesis. These thinkers usually choose to stay quite away from the classical *tafsīr* works. Instead, they prefer to read and interpret the Quran based on current problems and their modern ways of thinking.

On the other side of the spectrum are contemporary Muslim thinkers who continue to invest in the long-standing tradition of classical or medieval *tafsīr*. This approach not only embraces earlier interpretations but also seeks to preserve them. While emphasizing the link between modern *tafsīr* and classical traditions, some scholars categorize this approach as part of a "traditionalist" or "classical" trend. Scholars like Saleh and Brown, despite their different terminologies, both identify this traditionalist strand alongside the modernist one.²¹ As a result, there are still modern *tafsīr* which is not detached from the intellectual legacy of the Quranic interpretation. However, even within the traditionalist trend, there are different opinions on which earlier *tafsīr* works should be embraced. In practice, defending the tradition often involves selecting certain texts while ignoring others—suggesting a selective and dialectical process in the production of meaning. Some scholars illustrate this with examples of epistemological paradigms that prioritize a return to the earliest generations of Islam—such as in Salafi or revivalist approaches—while disregarding much of the broader *tafsīr* heritage.²²

This selective reading of the tradition further complicates how the last camp is perceived and categorized in modern scholarship. Compared to substantial discourse on progressive or reformist *tafsīr*, the traditionalist strand remains relatively underexplored in contemporary scholarship. As a result, Traditional *tafsīr* in the wider discussions of modern Quranic interpretation is sometimes reduced to a label

²¹ To see a more complete explanation of the trend of interpretation of the Qur'an in the modern era according to the two scholars See Brown, "Scripture in the Modern Muslim World," 19–30; Saleh, "Quranic Commentaries," 1657–58.

²² Saleh, "Contemporary Tafsīr," 696; Johanna, "Striving for a New Exegesis of the Qur'ān," 766.

for anything that is simply not modern or is seen only as a complementary part of more progressive approaches. Mathiesen has made a similar point, arguing that in contemporary Islamic thought, “fresh”, “innovative” ideas tend to receive more attention than those that continue earlier traditions.²³ In the field of *tafsīr*, this has created an imbalance in how different trends are studied. Despite their contemporary context, many modern *tafsīr* projects and interpreters continue to operate within epistemic frameworks that are grounded in pre-modern exegetical conventions.²⁴ As Walid Saleh rightly concludes: “Indeed, the history of *tafsīr* in the modern Islamic world cannot suffice with a rehashed version of the story of Muhammad Abduh or Naṣr Abu Zayd.”²⁵

This body of research highlights the wide range of approaches in modern Qur’anic interpretation. It shows that Muslim thinkers vary greatly in their methodology and worldview when interpreting the Qur’an today. Therefore, generalizations should be avoided when trying to understand the full picture. While the modernizing trend—highlighted by scholars such as Saleh and Brown—has received significant attention, it is not the only trend. On the other side lies a traditionalist reading, rooted in classical and medieval interpretations. As Farouki notes, these interpreters often choose to preserve and rely on older readings of the Qur’an—sometimes even excessively so.²⁶ Unfortunately, this trend has not been given the scholarly spotlight it deserves. Thus, this research is expected to fill this gap by mapping the presence of traditional *tafsīr* in the twenty-first century and situating it within the broader academic discussion of modern *tafsīr*. Furthermore, by investigating TSQ’s claim to tradition, this research contributes to the larger discussion on how contemporary Muslim scholarship negotiate scriptural authority, authenticity, and the limits of orthodoxy in a pluralistic intellectual environment.

1.2.2 Research on The Study Quran

Since its publication in 2015, *The Study Quran* has sparked considerable academic interest, with various studies examining its unique interpretive approach

²³ Kasper Mathiesen, “Anglo-American ‘Traditional Islam’ and Its Discourse of Orthodoxy,” *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 13 (2013): 191, <https://doi.org/10.5617/jais.4633>.

²⁴ Pink, *Muslim Qur’ānic Interpretation Today*, 6; Rippin, *Muslims*, 235.

²⁵ Saleh, “Contemporary Tafsīr,” 694.

²⁶ Taji-Farouki, *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur’an*, 26.

and claims of traditionalism. Muchlisin (2017), for instance, examines *TSQ* through the lens of traditionalist hermeneutics, highlighting *TSQ*'s universalist perspective, and its effort to preserve classical exegetical voices.²⁷ Ismail (2021) focuses on the Sufi dimensions of *TSQ*, particularly Nasr's spiritual and esoteric reading, while Nauval (2021) investigates Nasr's Neo-traditionalist Quranic approach to ethico-legal verses, identifying a blend of traditional principles and modern ethical considerations.²⁸ Riza (2018), similar to Ismail, highlights the esoteric element in *TSQ*'s commentary, positioning the work within the broader tradition of spiritual exegesis, whereas Redjeki (2022) explore Nasr's concept of *tawhīdic* aesthetics reflected in *TSQ*'s emphasis on harmony between God, humanity, and cosmos.²⁹ Most recently, Ayyuubi (2024) examines the religious literacy, interfaith dialogue, moderation and inclusive stance as supported by *TSQ*'s authors through its commentary within a multicultural context.³⁰

Collectively, despite the variety of thematic and methodological elaboration of *TSQ*, these studies remain neglect one area that is crucial to take into consideration: the specific implications of the traditional nature asserted by the authors of *The Study Quran*. Although previous studies recognize the traditionalist undertones in *TSQ*, many tend to either oversimplify or exaggerate Nasr's framework, lacking conceptual nuance. In other words, some studies gloss over the complexities of Nasr's traditionalist framework, while others exaggerate the degree to which *The Study Quran* embodies the traditionalist principles. For instance, Ayyuubi (2024) and Muchlisin (2017) provide context on Nasr's background and mention the

²⁷ Annas Rolli Muchlisin, "KESARJANAAN TRADISIONALIS AL-QUR'AN DI ERA KONTEMPORER: Telaah Terhadap *The Study Quran* a New Translation and Commentary Karya Seyyed Hossein Nasr Dan Tim," *Epistémé: Jurnal Pengembangan Ilmu Keislaman* 12, no. 2 (2017): 2, <https://doi.org/10.21274/epis.2017.12.2.287-310>.

²⁸ Muhammad Ismail, "Penafsiran Traditionalis Sufistik Terhadap Al-Quran: Studi Kritis Penafsiran Seyyed Hossein Nasr Terhadap Ayat-Ayat Khawf" (Masters, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, 2021); Mukhammad Hubbab Nauval, "Neo-Traditionalisme Seyyed Hossein Nasr Dan Implikasinya Terhadap Penafsiran Ayat Ethico-Legal (Studi Atas Buku *The Study Qur'an: A New Translation and Commentary*)" (Bachelors, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2021).

²⁹ Sri Redjeki, "Konsep Estetika Tauhid Pada Arsitektur Islam (Studi Pemikiran Seyyed Hossein Nasr Dalam Tafsir *The Study Quran: A New Translation And Commentary*)" (masters, Institut PTIQ Jakarta, 2018); Zikri Riza, "Corak Tafsir Esoterik Dalam *The Study Qur'an: A New Translation and Commentary Karya Seyyed Hossein Nasr, et.Al*" (masters, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, 2022).

³⁰ Mohammad Salahuddin Al-Ayyuubi, "Representation of Religious Literacy In Tafsir '*The Study Quran*'" (masters, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2024).

Traditionalist School but curtail their supposedly thorough analysis. In another case, the term traditionalist is used interchangeably with Sufi, as seen in Ismail's study, which equates traditionalism with Sufism, even though Nasr's view distinguishes the two in significant ways. Nauval (2021) oversimplifies Nasr's role, implying that *The Study Quran* reflects his individual vision without sufficiently addressing its collaborative nature.³¹

Bruce Fudge and Mobeen Vaid are the only scholars who directly question *The Study Quran*'s claims to traditionalism, arguing that certain interpretations diverge from what they consider authentic traditional exegesis. Vaid critiques the work's stance on issues like the punishment of stoning or lapidation (rajm) and theories of salvation, suggesting that it deviates from traditional scholarly consensus (ijma').³² Fudge goes even further, suggesting that the traditional nature claimed by the authors is superficial, given the text's influence by Perennial Philosophy and, in his view, even Protestant Christian elements in its structural approach.³³ However, Fudge's critiques also suffer from overgeneralization, as he does not consistently substantiate his arguments with concrete examples nor fully define Traditionalism or Perennial Philosophy.

These critiques, particularly those from Fudge, raise compelling questions about *The Study Quran*'s accuracy as a traditionalist text: To what extent does it diverge from classical traditional interpretations? How significantly is Nasr's Traditionalist philosophy embedded within the text? And are there other ideological influences at play, such as Protestant or Perennial Philosophy? These questions summarized the gaps to be filled in thus providing a nuanced understanding of *The Study Quran* as a modern representative of traditional exegesis. Therefore, this study aims to clarify the traditional nature of *The Study Quran* and to examine whether it aligns with, or departs from, previous traditional commentaries thus help situate the

³¹ Mukhammad Hubbab Nauval, "Neo-Tradisionalisme Seyyed Hossein Nasr Dan Implikasinya Terhadap Penafsiran Ayat Ethico-Legal (Studi Atas Buku *The Study Qur'an: A New Translation and Commentary*)" (Undergraduate Thesis, Yogyakarta, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, 2021).

³² Mobeen Vaid. "The Study Quran Review" *Journal of Islam and Science* Vol.13 (Winter 2015), 105-18.

³³ Bruce Fudge, "Study the Quran or The Study Quran?," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 138, no. 3 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.7817/jameroriesoci.138.3.0575>.

tafsir in a broader context of modern trends of exegesis as stated in the previous subsection

1.3 Research Questions and Hypotheses

This research argues that *The Study Quran* reinterprets what it means to follow “traditional commentary.” It goes beyond classical tafsīr by placing it within a broader, metaphysical and religious universalism influenced by Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s Traditionalist philosophy. While it draws selectively from pre-modern sources, *The Study Quran* builds a new, post-traditional model of Qur’anic interpretation. To prove this argument, the study seeks to address the following questions:

1.3.1 How is the legacy of traditional tafsīr re-appropriated to construct the epistemic and methodological orientation of TSQ?

1.3.2 How does *The Study Quran* position itself within scholarly discourse of modern tafsīr, and how does it reflect a continuity or departure from traditional commentaries?

1.4 Research Limitations

This study has some potential limitations. Although the title presents modern tafsīr which could be regarded as a broad concept, the subtitle of this study has already implied the limitation by mentioning *The Study Quran* as the main object. The term modern tafsīr is used because this groundbreaking tafsīr, despite the traditional claim it contains, still can be counted as modern tafsīr, at least from a periodic standpoint. Besides, *The Study Quran* as some its critique suggested it may not be fully traditional tafsīr as its authors claim. I assume this critique also means that *The Study Quran* has possible alignment with modern tafsīr rather than the traditional ones. Therefore, the limitation by the “modern tafsir” here implies that this study, while focusing primarily on *The Study Quran* and its traditional claim, still holds the possibility of examining other modern tafāsīr for comparative purposes.

Lastly, the limitation of the study lies in the possible findings from analyzing the main object. To capture the uniformity of TSQ's collaborative methodology and

outlook, the analysis is limited to three specific verses which only focuses on selected themes. These famous themes, revolves around verses on religious plurality and Islamic gender roles (which scholars often refer to as domestic violence), are crucial for generating examples of the vibrant discussions—and even debates—on how exegetes, from classical era to contemporary times, may agree or disagree on one verse. Therefore, given the limited time available to complete this research, broader themes—although potentially more enriching and yielding more comprehensive findings—fall outside the scope of this study.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

This study seeks to examine the way *The Study Quran* situates itself in the scholarly discourse of modern tafsīr by asserting the Quranic reading championed by traditional exegetes. In addition, this research also wants to verify whether *The Study Quran* truly embodies the traditional *tafāsīr* values or instead mirrors the characteristics of any other contemporary works. These objectives will be achieved through close examination of the interpretation from *The Study Quran* by specifically looking at the Qur’anic verses dealing with some contestable themes in the modern era. These aspects, reason as well as the verses selected, are already stated elsewhere in this chapter.

To uncover ideological patterns or motives within *The Study Quran*, and to analyze the socio-historical factors that contribute to this influence, this study will employ Critical Discourse Analysis theory by Norman Fairclough. Theoretically, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) operates— whether written text or spoken language— may play a major role in sustaining inequality, oppression, and injustice within a society. Fairclough, in his *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* argues that discourse is neither natural nor neutral, as it is shaped by specific values, interests, and biases depending on how individuals produce the discourse. Furthermore, he proposed three levels of discourse analysis: description, interpretation, and explanation. In other words, he posits that a comprehensive understanding of a text will be insufficient only by looking at the surface level. Instead, the text should continuously be contextualized and consulted within its

surroundings.³⁴ In this study, CDA will be employed for two main purposes: first, to assess whether the interpretations are constructed to maintain the authority of previous interpretations or to reveal new synthetic products of knowledge. Second, how TSQ connects its discourses generated from the text with the wider socio-cultural context.

This framework will clarify the direction of this study and enable a broader and meaningful analysis thus will allow a nuanced exploration of *The Study Quran* and its relationship with traditional tafāsīr and the modern ones, leading to the most appropriate findings of this study.

1.6 Methods

This research will employ a qualitative methodology through critical discourse analysis approach (CDA). Since critical discourse analysis is usually designed to analyze how texts and discourses reflect or reinforce power relations, social contexts, and ideological constructs, it is used to examine how *The Study Quran* constructs and conveys traditional interpretation tendencies within a modern framework.

The primary sources for this research are *The Study Qur'an* and the secondary sources include books, journal articles, and other sources that discuss the supporting arguments made by TSQ's authors, scholarly critiques of *The Study Quran*, and *tafāsīr* both from traditional and modern representatives. Additionally, the study also consults sources relevant to constructing traditional tafāsīr framework.

In the analysis section, I will first collect TSQ's interpretation from selected Quranic verses based on two major themes: theology and Islamic law (*fiqh*). To limit my research, I will only focus on three representative verses from the theme that could best generate either contrasting or similar interpretations between *The Study Quran* and selected classical-medieval or modern tafāsīr. The verses such as Āl 'Imrān 19, Āl 'Imrān 85, and al-Nisā 34 were chosen not only for their strong themes—religion and gender—but also because they have rich interpretive histories across classical

³⁴ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 2. ed., [Nachdr.] (Routledge, 2013), 10.

to modern tafsīr. These verses often spark debate and are explained by different authors in *The Study Quran*, making them ideal for showing how TSQ engages with tradition while addressing modern concerns. For the comparative purpose, I collected the tafsīr of the three verses from ten (roughly) tafsīr both from classical-medieval and modern time, ranging from Ṭabari (d.923) to the latest Asad's *Messages of the Quran* (d.1992). The collected data will then be interpreted through discourse analysis by systematically examining both primary and secondary sources to identify recurring patterns. Guided by the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis, the discussion will begin with the textual descriptions, followed by deeper levels of interpretation and explanation. Lastly, given that one of the main objectives of this research is to verify whether *The Study Quran* truly incorporates traditional interpretation or is instead closely tied to modern interpretations, a comparative textual analysis will be employed.

1.7 Overview of the Study

This thesis consists of five chapters. In chapter 1, I provide the introduction of the research, providing the background, literature review, research questions and hypotheses, theoretical framework, and methods. In chapter 2, I discussed the conceptual framework to further guide the analysis which in chapter 4 will be needed for discussion purposes. It further connects the two different variables; traditional Islam and traditional tafsīr, which the former is argued to influence the latter. In chapter 3, I analyze critically *The Study Quran* with a purpose to situate it within the broader scope of modern Quranic interpretation. In this chapter, the historical emergence of *TSQ*, the background of its authors, some technical and epistemological aspects of the tafsīr, as well as the brief elucidation of its reception are explored. In addition, another purpose of this chapter is to familiarize ourselves with the philosophical approach as well as the commonly understood traditional readings to the Quran held by its authors. In Chapter 4, I aim to present the results and discussion, interpreted from the selected data, using Qur'anic interpretations from approximately ten tafsīrs—both classical-medieval and modern—as a case study of theological and legal verses. Based on the analysis, this chapter is expected to answer the questions raised in chapter 1 and to provide appropriate findings

regarding the nature of *The Study Quran*, which is claimed to revive traditional commentaries. Finally, in chapter 5, I draw conclusions and offer a reflective evaluation of the study before suggesting potential areas for further research.

CHAPTER II

DEFINING TRADITIONAL COMMENTARIES THROUGH TRADITIONAL ISLAM: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Chapter Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the trends, tendencies, and characteristics that define how Qur’anic exegesis operates in the modern era, particularly how scholars reconstruct tradition by including or omitting aspects of pre-modern interpretations in engaging with the Qur’anic text. Focusing on *The Study Quran (TSQ)*, this study has also reviewed how existing research has explored various aspects of TSQ but has paid less attention to the “traditional commentaries” referred to by its authors—an epistemological foundation essential for a closer analysis of TSQ and its position within the broader map of modern tafsir. While the previous chapter outlined how TSQ diverges from other contemporary exegetical projects, this chapter investigates what is meant by “traditional commentaries”—a question that lacks a simple answer, as the term traditional tafsīr is itself modern and absent in pre-modern discourse. Seyyed Hossein Nasr addressed this issue decades before producing *The Study Quran*, offering a foundational definition of tradition that informs the current work.. He states:

“What is directly opposed to tradition is counter-tradition... and of course modernism, without whose existence there would in fact be no need for the usage of such term as tradition.”³⁵

This statement articulates the resonance between tradition and modernity, a pairing that scholars frequently examine together, though they may differ on the nature of the relationship. Beyond definitions, the binary framework between tradition and modernity is also highly relevant in discussions of Islamic schools of thought in the modern era, especially concerning Islamic scriptures. As Kersten points out, the Qur’an “remains the first point of reference for all things Islamic”³⁶

³⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, Repr (Kegan Paul International, 1994), 18.

³⁶ Carool Kersten, *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World: Trends, Themes, and Issues*, Contemporary Thought in the Islamic World (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 4.

among contemporary Muslims. The word “remains” here indicates continuity—something that continues to be contested over time. In other words, the Qur’an and modern Islamic thought are mutually influential: the former, through modernistic or tradition-based tafsir, can shape the views and philosophies of today’s Muslim communities; the latter, through shifts in thought, can affect how the Qur’an is interpreted.³⁷

Thus, “traditional commentaries,” as the focus of this chapter, may best be understood through the lens of Islamic intellectual schools, especially by considering epistemological differences and the degree to which they view and incorporate the pre-modern exegetical heritage (especially classical and medieval works) developed over 1400 years. Among the various intellectual trends in Islam today, arguably no school of thought is more deeply invested in traditional commentaries than the one known as Traditional Islam. It is important to note that, in relation to Qur’anic interpretation and modern Islamic school of thoughts, this chapter is inspired by at least two key scholars—Daniel Brown and Walid Saleh—both of whom categorize the tendencies of Qur’anic interpretation into four major trajectories.³⁸

Building on these foundations, this chapter argues that traditional tafsīr is not a term that emerged in or was used during the pre-modern period. Rather, it is a

³⁷ Amer Zulfīqar Ali, “Brief Review of Classical and Modern Tafsir Trends and Role of Modern Tafasir in Contemporary Islamic Thought,” *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2018): 40, <https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v3i2.87>.

³⁸ Brown explains how modernity plays a key role in shaping the relationship between modern Muslims and their scriptural traditions, especially the Qur’an and the hadith. He distinguishes between Western modernity, which developed naturally within its own communities, and modernity in the Muslim world, which came because of European colonialism. Essentially, Brown argues that modernity is a lived and unavoidable experience for both contexts, and it has led to divisions among Muslims in how they view their own religious traditions. In his writing, Brown categorizes Muslim responses into four main groups: Islamic modernists, modernist Salafis, traditionalist Salafis, and late Sunni traditionalists. Daniel Brown, “scripture in the modern Muslim World: the Quran and Hadith” in Jeffrey T. Kenney and Ebrahim Moosa, eds., *Islam in the Modern World*, Religions in the Modern World (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 19–30; Similarly, Saleh identifies four major trends in modern Qur’anic interpretation: the modernizing, the Salafi, the classical, and the fundamentalist. According to him, these trends reflect different attitudes that result from the complex effort to balance tradition in the present day. Unlike in the pre-modern period—when classical interpretations were respected and mostly carried out by insiders—modern interpretations often aim to challenge pre-modern readings and can be conducted by anyone, whether Muslim or non-Muslim. Walid Saleh, “Quranic Commentaries” in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, First edition (HarperOne, an imprint of Collins Publishers, 2015), 1657–58.

contextual construct shaped by the dichotomous framework of modernity—a classification that has emerged within the context of modern Islamic studies. Acknowledging the retrospective and normative nature of this term, the chapter begins with a guiding question: How do contemporary scholars understand, define, and use the category of Traditional Islam, and how can this understanding be critically applied to the construction of what we now call traditional tafsir? To address this, the chapter proceeds in three stages: first, by tracing the genealogy of the term “tradition” and its relationship to modernity; second, by examining the characteristics of Traditional Islam or traditionalists in modern scholarship; and third, by exploring how this mapping can be used—with conceptual caution—to understand the contours of what is now referred to as traditional tafsir.

2.2 The Idea of Tradition in Islam and its Encounter with Modernity

To speak of traditional Islam, whether as an epistemological orientation or as a mode of understanding, is to necessarily engage with the very notion of tradition itself. Although defining the term “tradition” is often tricky—and, as some would argue, even meaningless—many scholars have emphasized the importance of release it from the conceptual burdens that have been imposed upon it over time. As Waldman properly noted, tradition is “one of the most problematic words in the English language.”³⁹ This difficulty arises not only from widespread misunderstandings of the term—as will be elaborated in the following paragraphs—but also from its inherently ambiguous and polyvalent nature. In religious contexts, for instance, the term encompasses a wide range of applications such as “Christian tradition,” “Jewish tradition,” and “Islamic tradition,” each carrying distinctive meanings and frameworks. In his *Tradition*, the American sociologist Edward Shils highlights the significance of tradition in human life, despite acknowledging that the discourse surrounding it is inherently endless.⁴⁰ This infinite character of tradition may, perhaps, be most evident in the ongoing debates over the nature of Islamic tradition, especially as it intersects with the equally contested notion of modernity. These debates are central to any meaningful understanding of traditional Islam—

³⁹ Marilyn Robinson Waldman, “Tradition as a Modality of Change: Islamic Examples,” *History of Religions* 25, no. 4, (1986): 318.

⁴⁰ Edward Shils, *Tradition*, Nachdr. (The Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007), viii.

though not without their own limitations.

Before proceeding to discuss the concept of tradition or traditional Islam, it is necessary to first clarify what is meant by modernity in the context of this study. Much like the term “tradition,” modernity is far from a straightforward concept; there is no clear consensus on when it began, where it originated, or how it should be defined. As noted by Sztompka, scholars generally approach the concept of modernity in two ways: historically and analytically.⁴¹ For the purpose of this study, modernity refers to a social and intellectual project rooted in the Enlightenment, emphasizing human freedom, rationality, and progress. It is reflected in institutions such as democracy, market economies, and scientific advancement. Although often tied to Western historical experiences, modernity also encompasses universal aspirations for self-determination and social improvement. In line with Wagner’s view, this study acknowledges that while modernity originated in the West, it has taken on multiple forms across diverse cultural and historical contexts.⁴² Recognizing these multiple modernities, including those shaped in Islamic settings, provides a more nuanced foundation for analyzing how modern influences have shaped Qur’anic interpretation—particularly relevant given this study’s focus on contemporary developments in tafsir and the evolving relationship between modernity and Islamic thought.

As for tradition, the term derives from the Latin *tradere*, meaning “to hand over” or “to deliver.” Shils defines a traditum as “anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present.” Tradition thus encompasses a wide range of elements: beliefs, events, practices, institutions, and even physical objects such as buildings, books, or machines. Importantly, Shils also notes that tradition refers to something believed to have been done or thought in the past and is still recognized as such in the present.⁴³ From this understanding, tradition is natural and omnipresent in every civilization. Soskice, in her elaboration on the concept of tradition, offers a compelling example: the choir at Jesus College, which can recreate the harmonious sounds of Renaissance performances despite having been trained for

⁴¹ Piotr Sztompka, *The Sociology of Social Change*, (Blackwell, 2003), 69–70.

⁴² Wagner, *Modernity*, 23–24.

⁴³ Shils, *Tradition*, 12–13.

only a short time. This beauty, she argues, is not merely a product of individual talent but emerges from the continuity of a living tradition that has been carefully preserved. In this sense, human beings are “traditional” by nature, as we learn most things through inherited knowledge and practices.⁴⁴

However, with the advent of modernity, tradition came to be perceived—particularly in the post-Enlightenment European context—as an obstacle, if not an outright enemy, to progress and the flourishing of life. The conceptual framework of tradition was reconstructed in such a way as to deny its dynamic and enduring nature. Consequently, tradition became associated with negativity—reduced to “inherited culture,”⁴⁵ anti-modern, dogma, source of ignorance, superstition, and religious intolerance.⁴⁶ In response, some scholars have challenged this reductive view and have worked to deconstruct the false dichotomy between tradition and modernity. They argue that the negative portrayal of tradition stems largely from a fundamental misunderstanding of its essence. Yadgar, for instance, notes that one of the key errors lies in perceiving tradition as something passively handed down, without critical engagement. According to him, this perception is a central reason why the liberal West often sees tradition merely as a relic of the past. Using three core analogies—tradition as language, as narrative, and as horizon—Yadgar underscores the dynamic nature of tradition, which is always open to reinterpretation and transformation by its adherents.⁴⁷ Thus, tradition and modernity are not inherently in opposition. So long as the latter does not seek to dismantle the former in ways deemed disruptive by the tradition-bearing community, the relationship between the two should not be understood in strictly binary terms.

In the Islamic context, modernity represents only a small fraction of the broader discourse on tradition. The two are constantly in conversation, but not necessarily in conflict. Modernity does not replace tradition, nor must tradition be abandoned to

⁴⁴ Janet Soskice, “Tradition” in David Marshall, ed., *Tradition and Modernity: Christian and Muslim Perspectives: A Record of the Ninth Building Bridges Seminar, Convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., May 2010*, Building Bridges Seminar, Washington, DC (Georgetown University Press, 2012), 25–26.

⁴⁵ Waldman, “Tradition as a Modality of Change: Islamic Examples,” 319.

⁴⁶ Shils, *Tradition*, 5–6.

⁴⁷ Yaacov Yadgar, “Tradition,” *Human Studies* 36, no. 4 (2013): 451–70, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-013-9294-9>.

move forward. It is here that Talal Asad's theoretical contribution proves especially insightful. Asad moves us beyond the binary opposition between tradition and modernity by reframing our understanding of Islamic tradition through the notion of the discursive tradition. Asad distinguishes his approach from both essentialist and nominalist accounts offered by some Western anthropologists and so-called Westernized Muslims. Rather than seeking an all-encompassing definition of Islam, Asad emphasizes the importance of understanding Islam as a discursive tradition—a living space of continuous meaning-making that links past practices with present and future concerns. He defines it as follows:

“These discourses relate conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions). An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present. Clearly, not everything Muslims say and do belongs to an Islamic discursive tradition.”⁴⁸

Thus, Islamic tradition can be seen as both expansive and bounded. On one hand, it spans time—from its historical roots to contemporary applications and future projections. On the other, it remains bounded by the norms and recognitions of the community that upholds it. Asad's formulation implies a crucial rethinking: tradition is not static or obsolete, but dynamic, dialogical, and open to reinterpretation. The dichotomy between tradition and modernity, once presumed to be antagonistic, is blurred. Certainly, what counts as relevant or progressive within this dialogical framework depends on who defines those terms. Yet even within these divergences, Islamic tradition—understood as a discursive tradition—retains a commitment to maintaining continuity with the past while adapting to the present and contemplating the future. Central to this is Asad's notion of orthodoxy—the idea that a tradition must remain within recognizably valid boundaries, as determined by the community of practice.

⁴⁸ Talal Asad, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2009): 20, <https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.17.2.1>.

Perhaps, then, there are visions of progress aligned with modernity that are also embraced within Islamic tradition—and others that are not. As we shall see in the subsequent sections, traditional Islam (and arguably, traditional tafsīr) has continually engaged with the challenges of modernity—not by rejecting it wholesale, but by reflecting upon it through the lens of inherited tradition.

2.3 Traditional Islam: Epistemic Structures and Core Features

As previously described by Shils and several other scholars, tradition is an infinite term—and the same holds true for discussions surrounding *traditional Islam*. Acknowledging the breadth and diversity of Islam as a tradition is necessary, as there has never been a singular definition of what is included or excluded under this term. Thus, this section does not concern itself with questions of “true Islam,” “orthodox Islam,” or similar debates, because Islam was never meant to represent a monolithic point of view. Instead, *traditional Islam* here refers to a religious attitude—more precisely, an intellectual movement, as Mark Sedgwick suggests—whose epistemological framework is rooted in pre-modern understandings.⁴⁹

In this section, I will carefully map out the most distinctive features of their mode of thought, along with the individuals who can be identified as adherents of traditional Islam. Regarding the latter, terms like *traditionalist*, *neo-traditionalist*, and *traditionist* may be helpful. While the last is more commonly associated with the people of the Sunna (i.e., the *muhaddithīn*), the first two are used interchangeably by Islamic studies scholars. Still, it is important to emphasize that these are largely academic labels—not self-ascribed identities. Most of these actors refer to their orientation simply through keywords like “traditional Islam” or “traditional society”, among many others that reflect their preference of premodern understanding of Islam.

Modernity plays a crucial role in helping us trace the emergence of traditional Islam, although this movement positions itself as one of modernity’s staunchest

⁴⁹ Mark Sedgwick, “The Modernity of Neo-Traditionalist Islam” in Dietrich Jung and Kirstine Sinclair, *Muslim Subjectivities in Global Modernity: Islamic Traditions and the Construction of Modern Muslim Identities*, International Studies in Religion and Society, volume 35 (Brill, 2020), 139.

opponents. For example, the term “traditional Islam”, according to Mathiesen was rarely used to describe specific Islamic groups in academic databases like Google Scholar before the 1980s.⁵⁰ This suggests that although this movement upholds pre-modern interpretations of Islam, it is, in a periodical sense, a modern intellectual phenomenon. Geographically, while the movement draws heavily from Islamic knowledge centers in the East—such as the Yemen descendent of the Prophet, the Azharites in Egypt, or Shi’ite scholars in Iran—it has largely flourished in the West. However, as also found in research conducted by Syamsul Rijal, one can also trace traditional Islam in places far removed from the Arab world, such as Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia.⁵¹

However, modernity does not serve as the main factor in the proliferation of traditional Islam. As a group committed to pre-modern interpretations, their defining features lie in modes of knowledge transmission and epistemic frameworks formed long before the advent of modernity. Engaging with modernity serves more as a reflective tool—sometimes linked to questions of orthodoxy—rather than a source of legitimation. Ultimately, identifying who the traditionalists are can be understood both through what they oppose and what they uphold. This section builds the conceptual framework of traditional Islam through the lenses of two outsiders—William Graham and Kasper Mathiesen—and one insider, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, whom Mathiesen calls a foundational figure in the emergence of traditional Islam discourse.

Nasr and The Essence of Traditional Islam

In the modern context, especially in the West, Iranian scholar Hossein Nasr stands as one of the pioneers in defining and identifying *Traditional Islam*. In 1987, through one of his major works, Nasr introduced the idea of the *Islamic tradition*, which serves as the foundation for understanding *Traditional Islam*. Importantly, the background to the emergence of this concept was Nasr’s concern with how some Islamic movements the modern era is often mistaken for Traditional Islam, even

⁵⁰ Mathiesen, “Anglo-American ‘Traditional Islam’ and Its Discourse of Orthodoxy,” 196.

⁵¹ Syamsul Rijal, *Defending Traditional Islam in Indonesia: The Resurgence of Hadhrami Preachers* (London New York: Routledge, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003358558>.

though the two differ fundamentally in many aspects. Nasr refers to this mistaken identification as *pseudo-traditional*, describing it as essentially *counter-traditional*—similar in nature to modernism itself.

For Nasr, tradition is not what many people assume—customs or habits passed down from generation to generation. Instead, tradition is a reality that originates from something beyond the human, something sacred. He states:

“Tradition is at once *al-dīn* in the vastest sense of the word, which embraces all aspects of religion and its ramifications, *al-sunnah*, or that which, based upon sacred models, has become tradition as this word is usually understood, and *al-silsilah*, or the chain which relates each period, episode or stage of life and thought in the traditional world to the Origin, as one sees so clearly in Sufism.”⁵²

Based on this understanding, Islamic tradition originates from God, continues through His messengers, and lives on among Muslims in the form of religious life and transmission from the early period until today. *Traditional Islam* can be characterized by its recognition of the Qur’an as the divine word, along with the diversity of its interpretation—both *exoteric* and *esoteric*, and through both oral and written transmission. In the matter of hadith, Nasr acknowledges that Traditional Islam includes not only Sunni Islam but also the Shi’a world. Therefore, besides the six canonical hadith books (*kutub al-sittah*), Traditional Islam also recognizes the four main Shi’ite compilations of hadith. Moreover, Traditional Islam affirms the institutionalized existence of *sharī‘a* (Divine Law) through the *madhhab* system on one hand, and the institutionalized dimension of *taṣawwuf*, the inner dimension of the Islamic revelation, as *ṭarīqa* on the other. Lastly, Traditional Islam embraces various other manifestations in fields such as philosophy, *kalām*, art, politics, and economics—with all their internal debates and differences.⁵³

From this explanation, we can observe how broad and inclusive Nasr’s concept of Traditional Islam is. It encompasses multiple branches of Islamic knowledge and transcends theological, sectarian, and even civilizational boundaries. One may draw this conclusion by examining the references Nasr recommends regarding Traditional

⁵² Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 13.

⁵³ Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 14–16.

Islam, which include works by Nasr himself, other Traditionalist-Perennialist⁵⁴—those focused on the esoteric dimensions of religious traditions—and various Sunni and Shi'a scholars.⁵⁵

Before we proceed, it is necessary to clarify the form of Traditionalism that Seyyed Hossein Nasr adheres to and actively promotes. This is not merely an intellectual current that seeks a return to Islamic premodern teachings, but part of a broader Western intellectual and philosophical movement that upholds the metaphysical legitimacy of all major religious traditions of the premodern world.⁵⁶ At its core lies the Perennial Philosophy, which Sedgwick defines as “the belief that all religions share a common origin in remote antiquity,” and that “all religions are different paths to the same destination.”⁵⁷ Several key figures shaped this movement: René Guénon (d. 1951), who laid its philosophical foundations; Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998), who transformed it into a universalist esoteric path; Ananda Coomaraswamy (d. 1947), who articulated its aesthetic and symbolic dimension; and Nasr, who integrated it into the Islamic intellectual tradition.⁵⁸

While Guénon critiqued the spiritual crisis of modernity and Schuon interpreted religions as symbolic expressions of metaphysical truth⁵⁹, Nasr situated these insights within Islamic metaphysics. As Sedgwick observes, “Nasr made peace between Traditionalism and individual religious identities,” and in doing so, “he

⁵⁴ Throughout this work, I make a clear distinction between Traditionalist (with a capital T) and Neo-traditionalist. The term Traditionalist refers to a philosophical and intellectual movement led by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and other major figures, especially René Guénon (d. 1886) and Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998), which emphasizes timeless spiritual truths found across the world's major religions. On the other hand, Neo-traditionalist refers to a contemporary Sunni Islamic movement that focuses on following the four Sunni legal schools (madhabs), upholding theological views rooted in the Ash'arī, Māturīdī, and Atharī traditions, and maintaining Sufi practices. Adherents of this movement regard it as preserving the essence of classical Sunni Islam.

⁵⁵ See Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 23.

⁵⁶ The Traditionalist movement involves a complex group of metaphysical claims, historical developments, and interreligious engagements that cannot be fully addressed in a single paragraph. For deeper study, see Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2004); Mark J. Sedgwick, *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order* (Oxford University Press, 2023). Foundational texts by Guénon (*The Crisis of the Modern World*), Schuon (*The Transcendent Unity of Religions*), and Nasr (*The Need for a Sacred Science*) are also essential.

⁵⁷ Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 344.

⁵⁸ Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 268.

⁵⁹ Mark Sedgwick, *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order*, 363.

Islamized Traditionalism.”⁶⁰ This distinct position sets Nasr apart from most Islamic traditionalists, whose approaches remain within classical Islamic frameworks and rarely engage with the metaphysical ideas shared across world religions. As a result, his understanding of Islamic tradition—as seen above—differs significantly, and, as we shall later observe, shapes a reading of Islam and the Qur’an that departs from conventional interpretations, especially when “Islamic traditionalist” is narrowly defined as referring to the class of ‘ulamā’.

Returning to Nasr’s understanding of Traditional Islam, nonetheless, a key point in Nasr’s definition is that the continued existence of Traditional Islam is *natural*, meaning it results from a sustained transmission of knowledge and a way of life in which the Qur’an and Sunnah hold the highest authority. Consequently, any entity that obstructs this continuity is considered by Nasr to be *pseudo-* or *counter traditional*, which, according to Nasr, this is the essential character of the recent phenomenon called *modernism*. On the latter, as tradition is also defined by something related to the sacred, *modernity* for Nasr is not simply something chronological. He states:

“When we use the term 'modern', we mean neither 'contemporary' nor 'up-to-date'; nor does it signify for us something that is successful in the conquest and domination of the natural world. Rather, for us 'modern' means that which is cut off from the Transcendent, from the immutable principles which in reality govern all things, and which are made known to man through revelation in its most universal sense. Modernism is thus contrasted with tradition (*al-dīn*); the former, as already mentioned, implies all that is merely human and now ever more increasingly subhuman, and all that is divorced and cut off from the Divine source.”⁶¹

Modernism, therefore, is not simply the opposite of tradition in terms of historical time. If we only consider chronology, then tradition always remains part of society, even today. Nasr's juxtaposition of the two terms simply because the essential values of modernism entail a rupture from Islamic tradition—or at the very least, a gradual elimination or reduction of tradition. In contrast, the *existence* of Islamic tradition implies divine intervention, prophetic legacy, and religious

⁶⁰ Mark J. Sedgwick, *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order*, 195.

⁶¹ Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, 98.

understanding transmitted through an *unbroken chain* (*al-silsilah*).

The Metastructure of Traditional Islam

The next major characteristic of Traditional Islam relates to what I call its *metastructure*. By *metastructure*, I refer to the framework of thought that underlies how Islam is taught, understood, and practiced—always in relation to the Islamic teachings of the past. The term *metastructure* is borrowed from Kasper Mathiesen, who analyzes how two Anglo-American Neo-traditionalists—Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad (also known as Timothy Winter) and Nuh Ha Mim Keller—attempt to establish orthodoxy within Sunni Islam through the concept of *discursive tradition* (as developed by Talal Asad), especially via the hadith Jibrīl, which outlines the tripartite essence of religion: *īmān*, *islām*, and *iḥsān*.

According to Mathiesen, this hadith becomes a crucial basis for Neo-traditionalists, where each of the three aspects corresponds to the major Islamic sciences: *islām* (fiqh), *īmān* (‘aqīda), and *iḥsān* (taṣawwuf).⁶² Through this framework, Mathiesen offers a definition of Traditional Islam and its boundaries. There are three discourses that represent this tripartite structure. Firstly, in terms of fiqh, Traditional Islam defends the four institutionalized madhāhib of classical Islamic law and stresses the importance of *taqlīd* to one of them. Secondly, in the aqīda, Traditional Islam recognizes the Māturīdī and Ash‘arī schools as orthodox creeds. Lastly, in taṣawwuf, it is considered by traditional Islam not only a legitimate part of Sunni Islam, but also the inner reason behind revelation and prophethood itself.⁶³

These three discourses demonstrate how Traditional Islam aims to establish both *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxy*, wherein each of the three is protected in both practice and authority. As such, the discourse also helps to identify who is excluded from this group. Movements like Wahhabism or Salafism are seen as challenging these established norms by rejecting the Ash‘arī and Māturīdī creeds, denying the authority of the four madhāhib, and misunderstanding the essence of *taṣawwuf*.

⁶² Mathiesen, “Anglo-American ‘Traditional Islam’ and Its Discourse of Orthodoxy,” 198.

⁶³ Mathiesen, “Anglo-American ‘Traditional Islam’ and Its Discourse of Orthodoxy.”

Mathiesen goes on to summarize:

“This basic definition of the identity of Traditional Islam gives us a preliminary hint to whom it considers its adversaries within the broader landscape of contemporary Sunni Islam. Firstly, there is the aspect of passing down knowledge within unbroken chains of transmission from the time of revelation and onwards... Secondly, and more specifically, Traditional Islam positions itself firmly in opposition to Wahhabism/contemporary because of its stern criticism of the authority of the four *madhāhib* of *fiqh*, its denial of central doctrines of the Ash‘arī and Māturīdī schools of *‘aqīda*, and, especially, because of its hostility towards *taṣawwuf*... Finally, all attempts to break with or redefine the methodology or canonized scholarly knowledge of any sub-genre of Islamic knowledge, whether in *ḥadīth*, *tafsīr*, or *uṣūl al-fiqh*, is shunned in principle.”⁶⁴

This definition refers to how Traditional Islam understands religious essence through a continuous structure crystallized in those three domains—among others. Although Nasr offers a broader definition of Traditional Islam, Mathiesen’s study aligns with Nasr’s view in emphasizing the importance of *chain of transmission* and metaphysical continuity. Thus, for instance, both perspectives arrive at the same conclusion regarding *fundamentalist Salafī* movements, which, from the lens of Talal Asad, abandon the necessary discursive nature of tradition.

Al-Ittiṣāliyah: The Transmission of Tradition

The final component—complementing the characteristics of Traditional Islam, which strives to link its religious worldview with the Islamic past—is the very process of transmission itself. While the previous two components primarily discussed the ways of understanding Islam or the framework of thought, this part focuses on what traditionalists do with these modes of understanding.

Traditionalism and traditionalists, according to Graham, refer to those who regard tradition as their primary reference in navigating life. However, he emphasizes that this preference does not necessarily imply opposition to modernity or a rejection of modern progress. Traditionalism is not inherently antagonistic to modernism—except when the latter is perceived to threaten or dismantle the

⁶⁴ Mathiesen, “Anglo-American ‘Traditional Islam’ and Its Discourse of Orthodoxy,” 199.

established order upheld by the former.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the Islamic tradition, further elaborated by Graham, ideally also speaks to how Muslims affirm the vitality of the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the formative generations of Islam. Like Mathiesen, Graham in this discussion relates not only limited to the Salafis and instead refers to the long and continuous Muslim communities starting from the Prophet and the Companions, which later developed into various sustained traditions.⁶⁶

This wide-ranging concept of tradition, he argues, is realized through an essential element he calls the “sense of connectedness,” or *ittiṣāliyah*. According to Graham, this *ittiṣāliyah* is realized through the called the *isnād* paradigm, which originally emerged from the discipline of hadith in early Islamic scholarship. It is based on the fundamental claim that the authenticity of a tradition does not lie in physical artifacts such as books or documents, but rather in the human-to-human chain of connection.⁶⁷ In traditional Islamic society, both past and present, this linkage is regarded as sacred and remains a central priority in the transmission of knowledge. Along with the *ijazah* system, the *Isnād paradigm* forms the foundation of Muslim learning and scholarship across various fields such as the Qur'an, hadith, *fiqh*, *ṭarīqah*, and others. Graham suggests that the core aim of this transmission process is to reinforce the *sanad* or *silsilah* (chain), which traditionalists deem essential as it connects them to the most authoritative sources of truth—namely the early Muslim generations and, ultimately, the Prophet Muhammad himself.⁶⁸ And since the Islamic tradition transcends disciplines and geographic boundaries, Graham notes that this paradigm can also be found in other areas, such as Sufi affiliations, the emphasis on prophetic lineage in Shi'ism, and *Sharifism*.

Thus, Graham's conception of interconnectedness, or *ittiṣāliyah*, is essentially an effort to preserve the continuity and genealogical integrity of the Islamic tradition—an element that had already been emphasized by both Nasr and Mathiesen in their conceptions of Traditional Islam. This interconnectedness within the

⁶⁵ William A. Graham, “Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (1993): 499, <https://doi.org/10.2307/206100>.

⁶⁶ Graham, “Traditionalism in Islam,” 500.

⁶⁷ Graham, “Traditionalism in Islam,” 507.

⁶⁸ Graham, “Traditionalism in Islam,” 512.

characteristics of Traditional Islam demonstrates that being a traditionalist does not merely mean passively inheriting the legacy of previous generations. Rather, the active effort to strengthen the chain of transmission—as Graham has argued—reflects a conscious act of contextualization: a living link between the orthodoxy of the past and the challenges of the present and future.

2.4 Traditional Tafsīr: preliminary definitions and genealogies

The focus of this chapter, which needs to be restated, is to construct a conceptual framework for understanding traditional tafsīr, or more broadly, what is referred to in English as traditional commentaries. Due to space limitations, two important aspects have not yet been fully addressed. First, the complexity of traditional Islam, particularly how it may be elaborated in non-English or non-European languages. Second, how, in the Islamic context, terms such as traditionalist or neo-traditionalist—used here interchangeably for the purpose of simplifying analysis—have produced diverse interpretations in academic scholarship.

Regarding the first issue, the problem of translating the term Traditional Islam into other languages can be observed in an encounter narrated by Quisay involving the well-known Neo-traditionalist scholar, Alī al-Jifrī. In their conversation, they encountered a linguistic impasse when attempting to find an adequate Arabic equivalent for the English term traditionalist. Literal Arabic terms such as *turāth* or *taqlīdī* fail to capture the epistemic and spiritual dimensions embodied in the English usage of traditionalist. Thus, in response, al-Jifrī proposed the term *al-madrasah al-aṣīlah*—“the authentic school”—to express the approach taken by traditionalists such as himself. Although not commonly used in English-speaking contexts, this term encapsulates key characteristics of Traditional Islam, including its quest for a past-oriented orthodoxy and its resistance to reformist understandings of Islam. In Arabic intellectual discourse, *mu‘āṣarah* (contemporary time) often stands in opposition to *aṣālah* (authenticity), revealing the broader tension between traditionalism and reformism.⁶⁹ This example underscores the difficulty of naming

⁶⁹ Walaa Hamed Quisay, *Neo-Traditionalism in Islam in the West: Orthodoxy, Spirituality and Politics* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 38.

“traditional” Islam outside English-speaking frameworks—a difficulty that might be encountered in conceptualizing traditional tafsīr, which not exist in non-English languages.

Furthermore, the term traditionalist has been widely employed by scholars of Islamic studies across a variety of fields, each leading to different understandings. For instance, in Islamic theology, Binyamin Abrahamov describes traditionalists (or pure traditionalists) as those who prioritize revelation over reason as the foundation of religious truth—based on his study of medieval kalām literature.⁷⁰ Emad Hamdeh, on the other hand, working in the field of Islamic legal authority, distinguishes between traditionalists and Salafis, noting that while the former uphold adherence to one of the established madhāhib, the latter—represented by figures like al-Albānī—rejects such affiliation.⁷¹ These examples, even though demonstrate the loose of the term traditionalist which is shaped by the field and methodology of the study in question, at the same time they open an analytical space for considering what traditional means in the context of Qur’anic exegesis—the focus of this chapter.

In Arabic, the terms tafsīr and ta’wīl are commonly used to signify various forms of commentary—often used interchangeably with English terms such as commentary, exegesis, interpretation, or hermeneutics. Etymologically, tafsīr derives from the root f-s-r, which connotes explanation (al-ibānah), unveiling (al-kashf), or elucidation of meaning (iẓhār al-ma’nā).⁷² Ta’wīl, on the other hand, comes from the word *awl*, means returning to its origin.⁷³ Classical Qur’anic scholars have debated the distinction between the two. Some argue that they are synonymous, though the majority emphasize their differences. Al-Zarkashī, for instance, states that tafsīr pertains to the exoteric aspects of the Qur’an—its reasons for revelation, Meccan/Medinan classification, legal and abrogated verses (muḥkam/mutashābih,

⁷⁰ Binyamin Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998), x.

⁷¹ Emad Hamdeh, *Salafism and Traditionalism: Scholarly Authority in Modern Islam*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108756594>.

⁷² Mannā Khalīl Qaṭṭān, *Mabāhiṭh Fi ’Ulūm al-Qur’ān* (Maktabah Wahbah, 1999), 316.

⁷³ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur’an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (Taylor & Francis, 2006), 58.

nāsikh/mansūkh). Ta'wīl, by contrast, focuses on extracting deeper, esoteric meanings within context—what might be called *istinbāt*—without contradicting the Qur'an or the Sunnah.⁷⁴ Some scholars further distinguish tafsīr as being based on transmitted knowledge (riwāyah), while ta'wīl is derived from interpretive reasoning (dirāyah).⁷⁵

Having defined both, we can now turn to the notion of traditional tafsīr or traditional commentary. At the outset, it is important to acknowledge the fluidity of this term. Most straightforwardly, it may refer to pre-modern tafsīr. Thus, when Ayoub notes that “modern commentators have in general been sharply critical of traditional interpretations with their hagiographical tales and often fantastic legends,”⁷⁶ he likely refers to some medieval exegetical works filled with isrā'iliyyāt. However, the chronological limitation of this term is insufficient, as the label traditional tafsīr—whether neutrally or critically applied—continues to be used for works produced well into the modern era. As will be explored further, traditional tafsīr—regardless of the terms used—has multivalent meanings, often going beyond mere chronology.

Massimo Campanini, for example, devotes a chapter to traditional and traditionalist commentaries, discusses 20th-century exegetes whom he considers traditional. According to Campanini, traditional commentary still heavily influences how Muslims engage with the Qur'an in the past two centuries. In his framework, traditional commentary comprises three strands: Salafi commentary, traditionalist commentary (with a relationship between the two), and scientific commentary, though he does not elaborate how the latter fits within the traditional paradigm. On traditional tafsīr, Campanini identifies its four primary features as follow: (1) adherence to long-established exegetical frameworks; (2) prioritization of the Sunnah; (3) reliance on earlier exegetes; and (4) emphasis on the original context of revelation.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, Campanini does not explicitly define what is meant by

⁷⁴ Badruddīn Muḥammad b. Abdullāh Al-Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān Fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. Abu l Faḍl Al-Dimyātī (Dār al-Hadīth, 2009), 416–17.

⁷⁵ Al-Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān Fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 417.

⁷⁶ Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters* (State university of New York press, 1984), 89.

⁷⁷ Campanini, *The Qur'an*, 34.

traditional nor elaborate who qualifies as a traditionalist—leaving unresolved the issue of grouping together figures as diverse as Sayyid Qutb, Ibn ‘Āshūr, and Ṭabāṭabā’ī under a single label.

The term traditional tafsīr is also often linked to a specific epistemological foundation: *tafsīr bil-ma’thūr*. This mode of tafsīr refers to commentary grounded in transmitted reports from the Prophet, his Companions, and the early generations.⁷⁸ Husein Abdul-Raof refers to *tafsīr bi’l-ma’thūr* as both traditional exegesis and mainstream Qur’anic exegesis, characterized by a limited scope of sources and a hierarchical structure of authority. There are four main sources of this school of interpretation that show the hierarchy of interpretation. Quranic intertextuality, the first and strongest, is how a verse of the Quran is interpreted by another verse either within the same surah or part of another surah. This source as well as the second, the sunna and hadith are usually tawqīfī, i.e. interpretations that are usually explained by the Prophet Muhammad who, as the Qur’an says, functions as an interpreter as well. However, the presence of the Prophet Muhammad certainly had a time limit, so when the Prophet passed away and the Muslim ummah expanded, the activity of Qur’anic interpretation continued with the next sources, *aqwāl al-saḥābah wa aqwāl awwal al-ṭabī’in*, meaning the interpretive views of the Companions and early successors, respectively.

While this model forms a vital part of the traditional tafsīr framework, it is also limited. In reality, most tafsīr works—especially in the classical period—draw from a wide array of methods. Already in the first century of Islam, as Saeed has noted, alongside tradition-based interpretation, exegetes employed linguistic, mystical, and rational approaches (e.g., tafsīr bi’l-ra’y).⁷⁹ Saeed then states:

“Traditional interpretation of the Qur’an, despite its apparent similarity across theological, religio-political, legal, or mystical trends among Muslims – particularly in the interpretation of legal texts – should not be seen as homogeneous. Neither should it be seen as being entirely focused on a literal reading or a philological analysis of the text. Rather, it is possible to discern layers of analysis: after establishing a grammatical (morphological and syntactic) analysis,

⁷⁸ Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur’an*, 42.

⁷⁹ Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur’an in the Twenty-First Century*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2013), 15, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315870922>.

individual commentators usually embarked on an interpretation that was faithful to their theological, mystical, or legal position.”

According to Abdullah Saeed, traditional interpretation, even from its earliest stages, has never taken a singular or uniform form, nor has it been restricted to a single method. Rather, exegetes have always employed a variety of interpretive approaches, many of which, although not necessarily literalist, remained within the bounds of interpretive consensus (ijmā‘) recognized by the broader Muslim scholarly tradition. Saeed further illustrates this point through examples of exegetes across different historical periods. For instance, al-Ṭabarī, a classical Sunni exegete from the fourth/tenth century, had already acknowledged the existence of multiple layers of meaning in the Qur’anic text. In the twentieth century, Ṭabāṭabā’ī, a prominent Shī‘ī interpreter, reaffirmed the importance of this multilayered hermeneutic in understanding the Qur’an.⁸⁰

Having traced how the term traditional tafsīr has been employed and conceptualized, it becomes evident that the definition of traditional is not confined to a temporal framework alone. Rather, it has been identified through a set of characteristics that include methodology, sources of interpretation, and even the exegete’s epistemological attitude. However, I contend that many of the analyses offered by earlier scholars remain limited in scope, insofar as their definitions of traditional tafsīr represent only a fragment of the broader exegetical landscape. For instance, while Saeed introduces traditional interpretation primarily to lay the groundwork for a transition toward contextualist approaches in the contemporary period, Abdul-Raof frames traditional exegesis as one of the primary theological approaches to the Qur’an. In the following section, I will offer a conceptual framework that aims to more comprehensively define traditional tafsīr, by integrating various dimensions—temporal, methodological, epistemological, and sociological—into a coherent and analytically useful category.

2.5 Traditional tafsīr through Lens of Traditional Islam

Walid Saleh, in explaining the rationale behind the incorporation of poetry and

⁸⁰ Saeed, *Reading the Qur’an in the Twenty-First Century*, 16.

other forms of Arabic literary tradition by the medieval exegete al-Tha‘labī, argues that Qur’anic interpretation was never limited to conveying meaning alone, but also constituted a ‘*cultural*’ and ‘*pietistic*’ act rooted in the belief that the Qur’an represents ‘*the ultimate expression of the ideal Islamic experience*’.⁸¹ In other words, the exegetes often interpret the Qur’an through a particular conception of its function—shaped by context and their vision of ideal Islam—which influences the tafsīr’s purpose, audience, and relation to past interpretations. On one hand, for instance, some exegetes emphasize solving socio-political or cultural issues, viewing the Qur’an as *hudā*, thus focusing on relevance. On the other hand, others stress continuity with inherited meanings, thus prioritizing authority. This tension between relevance and authority, as argued in this chapter, characterizes what is commonly called *traditional* tafsīr.

In the previous section, several definitions offered by earlier scholars have been reviewed. While some of these definitions reflect the characteristics of traditional commentaries, others remain either partial or ambiguous. Abdul-Raof’s characterization of *tafsīr bi al-ma‘thūr* as ‘traditional tafsīr’ could serve as an example. In both of his works, he consistently presents *tafsīr bi al-ma‘thūr* and *tafsīr bi al-ra’y* as binary oppositions, as though a single commentary must entirely embrace one while excluding the other.⁸² Furthermore, his decision to describe “traditional” as equivalent to “mainstream exegesis,” represented exclusively by Sunni interpretations, has implications that not only narrow the understanding of traditional tafsīr but also associate it with oversimplified orthodoxy and authority.

On the other hand, Campanini’s use of the term ‘traditional’ lacks clarity, as he neither identifies who qualifies as a traditionalist nor elaborates on what constitutes traditional tafsīr. As a result, his explanation remains overly vague. While it is true that some of the exegetes he discusses—such as Ṭabāṭabā’ī and Ibn ‘Āshūr—can be regarded as traditional commentators, particularly based on their

⁸¹ Walid Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur’ān Commentary of al-Tha‘labī (d. 427/1035)*, (Leiden Boston: BRILL, 2004), 22.

⁸² See for more Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur’anic Exegesis*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203867037>; Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Theological Approaches to Qur’anic Exegesis*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203127018>.

extensive citation of pre-modern exegesis, the inclusion of figures like Sayyid Quṭb and Salafī commentators—allegedly inaugurated by ‘Abduh—raises critical questions. Although these latter figures also engage with traditional sources, many scholars consider them pioneers who fundamentally challenge, rather than uphold, traditional commentary.⁸³

However, these scholars also help to shed light on the features of traditional tafsīr which are often characterized by their diversity of approaches, methods, and interpretive sources. Building on these characteristics, this study proposes defining traditional tafsīr by engaging with the features of Traditional Islam outlined earlier. The central argument here is that traditional tafsīr—like Traditional Islam—is fundamentally concerned with how tradition is conceived, preserved, revised, and rearticulated. As Saleh suggests, when modernity disrupted the traditional structures of other Islamic sciences such as law, ḥadīth, kalām, and Sufism, Qur’anic exegesis was similarly affected—though in this case, the disruption occurred through a transformative process initiated by modern Muslim thinkers, given that tafsīr, unlike other fields, was never fully institutionalized.⁸⁴

Previously, this study laid out a preliminary description of Traditional Islam, characterized by its *metastructure*—namely, the interconnectedness (*al-ittiṣāliyah*) and the chain of scholarly transmission (*al-silsilah*) that traces back to the Qur’an and Sunna, and continues to operate as a discursive tradition. Central to this tradition are the concepts of authority and orthodoxy, which are continuously emphasized and renegotiated across time. Based on this framework, traditional tafsīr can be

⁸³ Sayyid Qutb and Muhammad Abduh—whose *al-Manār* commentary was, in practice, largely compiled and expanded by Rashīd Riḍā—are frequently identified by scholars as exegetes who inaugurated a new phase in Qur’anic interpretation, distinct from traditional tafsīr. Both Pink and Bauer, for instance, argue that the works of Abduh and Qutb mark a departure from classical modes of exegesis, representing a shift toward what may be characterized as “modern” tafsīr. In their assessment, these figures initiated a new exegetical trajectory that diverged from the hermeneutical norms of traditional commentaries. For further elaboration, See Johanna Pink, *Tradition and Ideology in Contemporary Sunnite Qur’anic Exegesis: Qur’anic Commentaries from the Arab World, Turkey and Indonesia and Their Interpretation of Q 5:51*, Brill, January 1, 2010, 56, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006010X489801>; J. J. G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (E.J. Brill, 1974), 56; Karen Bauer, *Gender Hierarchy in the Qur’ān: Medieval Interpretations, Modern Responses*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 14–15.

⁸⁴ Walid Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 2.

understood as exegesis that remains engaged with earlier commentaries and preserves an interpretive continuity within a broadly accepted consensus (*ijmāʿ*).

In general, the tradition of Qurʾanic exegesis demonstrates characteristics noted above. Both Bauer and Saleh, for example, describe tafsīr as ‘conservative’ and ‘genealogical’ respectively. They assert that exegetes typically engage previous interpretations and uphold a continuity of authority. However, this engagement is not necessarily understood by passive definition. Bauer, for instance, focusing on contemporary tafsīr, argues that new interpretations are often added because of dissatisfaction with earlier explanations.⁸⁵ In contrast, Saleh, whose analysis centers on classical tafsīr, maintains that dissatisfaction did not result in novel voices but rather led exegetes to consult alternative pre-existing interpretations not found in major collections.⁸⁶

When examined through the lens of Traditional Islam, traditional tafsīr inherently considers orthodoxy—meaning that despite its expansive scope, Qurʾanic interpretation remains committed to questioning which interpretations are accepted and which are not. To assume that traditional tafsīr merely relies on past interpretations is to overlook its role as a discursive tradition—one that must engage not only with the Qurʾan and the Prophet’s statements on interpretation but also with the process of compilation and transmission. Hence, classical and contemporary exegetes, as well as scholars of *ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, have rigorously discussed interpretive methods, the qualifications of a mufasssīr, distinctions between *tafsīr* and *taʾwīl*, and categorization of valid (*maḥmūd*, *maqbul*) versus rejected (*madhmūm*) interpretations.

However, as some scholars note, such categorizations are not always effective. In practice, most tafsīrs incorporate both tradition-based and reason-based interpretations and apply multiple methods and approaches.⁸⁷ As such, Saleh suggests understanding the tafsīr tradition as encyclopedic—one that allows for

⁸⁵ Bauer, *Gender Hierarchy in the Qurʾān*, 15.

⁸⁶ Walid Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 14.

⁸⁷ Saeed, *Reading the Qurʾan in the Twenty-First Century*, 16; Walid Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 16.

interpretive consensus (*ijmā'*) to emerge. This consensus, he argues, is primarily built on the Sunni tradition, which, much like Sunni jurisprudence enables the growth of accepted *madhabs*, generates diverse yet legitimate interpretations of the Qur'an.⁸⁸

Accordingly, traditional tafsīr, when understood through the paradigm of Traditional Islam, involves both the preservation of earlier tafsīr scholarship and the capacity to construct present meanings within the boundaries of interpretive consensus. At this point, it can be argued that most tafsīrs may be classified as traditional unless they demonstrate characteristics that contradict this framework. To illustrate this point, we may refer to McAuliffe's observations regarding trends in tafsīr across historical periods:

"Classical and modern tafsīr represents, to a large extent, a coherent and internally consistent body of literature. It has developed within the confines of a limited number of hermeneutical principles. It is a remarkably uninterrupted craft, whose contemporary practitioners are fully conversant with their tenth-, twelfth-, and fourteenth-century counterparts... Yet just as uncommon would be the modern Muslim exegetes who were not thoroughly familiar with al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144), and Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373)."⁸⁹

McAuliffe's assessment suggests that, then and now, Qur'anic interpretation is a largely consistent hermeneutical activity—dialectical, dynamic, and constantly engaging earlier exegetes, both in principles and sources. These characteristics, to a greater or lesser extent, form the foundation of what I define in this section as traditional tafsīr. Therefore, any tafsīr that deliberately seeks to distance itself from these characteristics falls outside the scope of the traditional model. Throughout history, we can observe tafsīrs that intentionally or unintentionally depart from traditional frameworks. This includes overly ideological or sectarian interpretations that justify specific group agendas while neglecting broader interpretive traditions. Similarly, certain commentaries may overemphasize contextual concerns at the expense of inherited exegetical heritage. Nevertheless, determining whether a tafsīr

⁸⁸ For more elaboration on Qur'anic *ijmā'* according to Saleh, See Walid Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 17–20.

⁸⁹ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*, Transferred to digital printing 2008 (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 28.

is “traditional” or otherwise is not always straightforward. Tafsīrs are often multi-volume works, requiring thorough analysis to assess accurately. That said, some exegetes and commentaries do clearly attempt to negate traditional interpretations.

2.6 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has proposed a conceptual framework for understanding traditional tafsīr, a term that is established in the modern era and has since been used in diverse, often contested ways. As discussed earlier, traditional commentaries are deeply connected to both the modern period and the discourse of modernity. Rather than positioning modernity and tradition as binary opposites, many scholars argue that they interact in complex and complementary ways. In the field of tafsīr, modernity prompts two main responses: the reaffirmation of established epistemologies, or a call for their re-evaluation. Traditional tafsīr, then, is less about chronology than about an intellectual orientation that emphasizes continuity with the Islamic interpretive tradition.

Arguably, the group most strongly committed to preserving Islamic tradition—indeed, what some scholars regard as an over-reliance on it—is one that, as Mathiesen observes, is still overlooked compared to other intellectual currents in Islamic thought. It is important to reiterate that the conception of Islamic tradition employed in this chapter refers to a discursive tradition—one that continuously shapes present and future understandings based on previously validated and widely accepted interpretations. The central contention of this chapter is that the characteristics of Traditional Islām, taken here as a conceptual variable, are assumed to influence the formation and function of traditional tafsīr.

Thus, traditional tafsīr, as used in this chapter, is understood as an exegesis that remains engaged with earlier commentaries and preserves interpretive continuity within a broadly accepted consensus (*ijmāʿ*). It represents a textual manifestation of a commitment to sustaining the legacy of Islamic interpretive tradition. In sum, this chapter has sought to articulate a conceptual structure for traditional tafsīr through the epistemic lens of traditional Islām. Importantly, however, it does not aim to establish a fixed or normative definition of traditional

tafsīr. While recognizing the fluidity and contestations inherent within both traditional Islām and traditional tafsīr, the framework proposed here offers a structured yet open-ended lens for engaging with the interpretive dynamics that shape contemporary articulations of the term.

CHAPTER III

ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY QURAN (TSQ)

3.1 Chapter Introduction

The interpretation of the Qur'an has been an ongoing endeavor by Muslims since the earliest days of its revelation until the present. A wide range of motivations underlies this interpretive impulse, from the need to understand the meanings of individual words, to seeking how the Qur'an—as a sacred scripture—engages in dialogue with humankind across different historical contexts, or even to mobilize the Qur'an in defense of ideological commitments held by its interpreters. As a result, throughout the centuries, Qur'anic interpretation commonly known as *tafsīr* has evolved into a distinct field of Islamic scholarship, drawing on a variety of disciplinary approaches including linguistics, theology (*kalām*), Sufism, philosophy, Islamic law, ethics, and many more.

A significant shift in interpretive approaches can be observed in the modern era compared to earlier generations. While classical and medieval exegetes are often built upon the works of their predecessors, modern *tafsir* is characterized by its direct engagement with the challenges and sensibilities of modernity. In the words of Walid Saleh, “Writing *tafsir* in the modern period is not primarily intended to explain the Qur'an.”⁹⁰ This striking statement highlights the fact that contemporary Qur'anic interpretation often goes beyond mere exegetical or intellectual exercises. Rather, it is frequently tied to questions of identity, authority, and authenticity—namely, which articulation of Islam is more “true,” “authentic,” or relevant in modern times.

In this context, modern interpreters may selectively draw upon pre-modern exegetical traditions to position themselves within ideological or theological currents. For example, as Saleh notes, some modern interpreters who adopt a Salafi orientation often privilege the works of Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) as their authoritative reference, envisioning his interpretations as a means to reclaim a perceived golden

⁹⁰ Saleh, “Contemporary *Tafsīr*,” 696..

age of early Islam.⁹¹ This strategic invocation of pre-modern tafsir reflects broader attempts to respond to the disruptions and questions posed by modernity.

The diversity of interpretive efforts in the modern period underscores the need for nuanced classification. As discussed in the previous chapter, several scholars have attempted to classify tafsir works across different historical periods and methodological tendencies. While such classifications—whether chronological or methodological—are helpful for mapping the terrain of Qur’anic interpretation, I would argue that they remain insufficient unless we critically evaluate a tafsir’s methodology, epistemology, and thematic concerns. In other words, assessing the strengths and limitations of a tafsir requires a deeper engagement with how and why it was written.

This chapter aims to offer a critical analysis of *The Study Quran*, exploring its historical emergence, the scholarly backgrounds of its contributors, its distinctive features, technical structure, and the interpretive approaches it employs. It will also address the reception of the work, highlighting both critiques and appreciations that have been expressed in the academic and broader Muslim communities since its publication. Through this analysis, the chapter seeks to situate *The Study Quran* within the broader landscape of modern Qur’anic interpretation and to evaluate its contribution to contemporary Islamic thought.

3.2 In the Making of The Study Quran: The Author’s Intellectual Outlooks and Their Approach to the Quran

The first crucial point to remember about The Study Quran (TSQ) is that it is a collective work by five Muslim scholars from diverse backgrounds, nationalities, and generations—ranging from Seyyed Hossein Nasr, born in the 1930s, to Muhammad Rustom, over fifty years younger. Although Nasr exercised editorial oversight, the exegetical content reflects the scholarly voices of Dagli, Dakake, Lombard, and Rustom, necessitating an analysis that attends to their distinct methodologies. Moreover, though Nasr claims in the general introduction that the

⁹¹ Nasr, *The Study Quran*, First edition (HarperOne, an imprint of Collins Publishers, 2015), 1696.

project is non-confessional and selected contributors accordingly, this claim can only be tested by examining their interpretations and giving balanced attention to each contributor's role and perspective.

3.2.1. Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Nasr's intellectual development is distinguished by a remarkable combination of modern scientific training and traditional Islamic education. He completed his secondary education at Peddie School in New Jersey. Due to his strong aptitude in mathematics and the sciences, Nasr chose to study physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) from 1950 to 1954, initially believing that scientific inquiry could offer a comprehensive understanding of reality. However, encounters with prominent figures such as Bertrand Russell (d.1970) and Robert Oppenheimer (d.1967) convinced him of the absence of ontological realism in modern physics thus triggered him to a deep intellectual and spiritual crisis. Gradually, he shifted toward the humanities, inspired by his interactions with Italian philosopher Giorgio di Santillana (d.1974), who introduced him to the works of René Guénon (d.1951). This eventually led Nasr to study other central figures of the Traditionalist School, including Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon. Despite this shift, he completed a master's degree in geology and geophysics at Harvard, followed by a Ph.D. in the history of science under leading scholars such as George Sarton, H.A.R. Gibb, and Harry Wolfson. In 1958, he returned to Iran to study Islamic philosophy directly under masters such as Sayyid Muḥammad Kāẓim 'Aṣṣār, Husayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, and Sayyid Abū'l-Ḥasan Qazwīnī, grounding his thought in Islamic metaphysics and Sufism.⁹²

Around 2005, Nasr received an offer from HarperCollins, the main publisher of his works, to lead a project involving both the translation and interpretation of the Qur'an. As a thinker and figure in Islamic philosophy, the Qur'an surely had long served as a source of inspiration for his hundreds of writings (books and articles) throughout his academic career. However, Nasr himself is not a *mufasssir*. On one occasion, he only referred to himself as a "student of the Qur'an" and felt too small

⁹² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, with William C. Chittick (World Wisdom, 2007), x–xi.

to speak about something as great as the Qur'an.⁹³ Nevertheless, the project was eventually completed in 2015, largely as a collective effort between Nasr and, in greater part, four younger American Muslim professors. While these students will be discussed later, it is also important to first explain Nasr's vision of Qur'anic interpretation. I will argue that Nasr's definition of the Qur'an and his understanding of interpretation are crucial for understanding the structure, methodology, and epistemology developed by the authors of *The Study Quran*.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is widely recognized as a Traditionalist, meaning he strongly upholds the authority of established Islamic tradition, including classical Qur'anic interpretations. Nevertheless, his long experience in the West has significantly shaped how he constructs the meaning of the Qur'an. In many of his writings, Nasr consistently articulates his view of the Qur'an from the perspective of a traditional Muslim addressing a Western audience. This is reflected in his frequent use of terms like "traditional Islamic authority" and "traditional commentaries," along with efforts to compare Qur'anic concepts to Western religious ideas.

For Nasr, the Qur'an is a sacred, living reality for Muslims. He often uses the word "sacred" when describing the Qur'an, emphasizing that everything about it—its meaning, sound, structure, even its letters—comes from God and was revealed in sacred Arabic to the Prophet Muhammad.⁹⁴ The Qur'an, he adds, is the Book of Knowledge, the source of all Islamic sciences—not only theology and law but also medicine, astronomy, philosophy, and art.⁹⁵ Specifically in the field of Quranic Studies, He often criticizes modern interpretations that reduce the Qur'anic explanation in many forms to narrow frameworks as merely books of ethics, history, or science. As a result, for Nasr, one cannot properly interpret the Qur'an without

⁹³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *The Study Quran*, xl.

⁹⁴ Ḥusain Naṣr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, New rev. ed (Chicago, IL: ABC International Group, 2000), 30; Ḥusain Naṣr, *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World*, 3. ed (Chicago, IL: Kazi Publ, 2003), 9; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, (New York, NY: HarperOne, an imprint of Collins Publishers, 2015), xxiii.

⁹⁵ Naṣr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 39; Nasr, *The Study Quran*, First edition (HarperOne, an imprint of Collins Publishers, 2015), xxix; Nasr, *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World*, 1. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, eds., *History of Islamic Philosophy*, Routledge History of World Philosophies, v. 1 (Routledge, 2005), 71.

first affirming its sacredness, as Muslims do. In addition, each one of Quranic verses must be approached with the combination of spiritual awareness on the one hand and claiming authenticity by referring to the classical commentary tradition.

Arguably, another key point among many others in his Qur'anic understanding is the layered meaning of the text. According to Nasr, The Qur'an should not be read only for its outward (zāhir) meanings, such as legal rulings or grammar, but also for its inward (bāṭin) meanings, which guide spiritual life. In *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, Nasr quotes Rumi from his Mathnawi:

“The Koran is as a bride who does not disclose her face to you, for all that you draw aside the veil. That you should examine it, and yet not attain happiness and unveiling, is due to the fact that the act of drawing aside the veil has itself repulsed and tricked you, so that the bride has shown herself to you as ugly, as if to say, “I am not that beauty.” The Koran is able to show itself in whatever form it pleases. But if you do not draw aside the veil and seek only its good pleasure, watering its sown field and attending on it from afar, toiling upon that which pleases it best, it will show its face to you without your drawing aside the veil.⁹⁶

By this quotation, Nasr emphasizes that true understanding of the Qur'an requires spiritual penetration; a superficial reading will only scratch the surface. The act of referring to the previous exegetes, rather than dismissing them which Nasr thought could be found in many modern Quranic commentators is critical to generate the true meaning of the Quran. He regards classical commentaries as indispensable for both Muslims and non-Muslims who seek to understand the Qur'an. It is only twofold approach—tafsīr for outward meanings and ta'wīl for inner meanings—is, for him, what traditional commentators aimed to achieve. This is evident throughout many of his works, especially *The Study Quran*, where he emphasizes the necessity of engaging with the Islamic tradition ranging from hadith, sirah literature to the *Mathnawi of Jalal al-Din al-Rumi* which he stated have developed as a reflection of the Qur'an itself.⁹⁷

As a Traditionalist, Nasr does not assume that all new approaches are good beneficial. At a conference titled *New Approaches to Qur'an and Exegesis*, held by

⁹⁶ Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 47.

⁹⁷ Nasr et.al, *The Study Quran*, 2015, xliii.

the Abu Sulayman Center for Global Islamic Studies, Nasr questioned what was meant by “new” as is proposed by the organizer. In the final minutes of his keynote lecture, however, he proposed his own notion of newness in Qur’anic interpretation which are a revival of the old and a renewed focus on the Qur’an’s universal message.⁹⁸ Whether one sees the former as reflecting a Neo-Traditionalist view, as Shepard proposes⁹⁹, or the latter as a philosophical concept rooted in Guénonian Traditionalism, as Sedgwick contends¹⁰⁰, what remains evident is that Nasr has introduced a unique perspective to the contemporary field of Qur’anic interpretation.

3.2.2. Joseph Lombard

Joseph Lombard is a prominent American Muslim scholar whose academic and spiritual journey bridges Western education and classical Islamic scholarship. He currently serves as Associate Professor of Quranic Studies at Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Qatar. Lombard earned his B.A. and M.A. in English Literature and Religious Studies from George Washington University in 1993 and 1995. He later completed his MPhil and Ph.D. in Islamic Studies at Yale University by 2003.¹⁰¹ Alongside his formal education, he studied key Islamic sciences—such as the Qur’an, Islamic law, theology, philosophy, and Sufism—with traditional scholars in Morocco, Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, and Iran.¹⁰²

Before joining HBKU, Lombard held teaching positions at several institutions, including the American University of Sharjah, Brandeis University, and the American University in Cairo. He also served as Advisor for Interfaith Affairs to the Jordanian Royal Court and founded the Islamic Research Institute shortly after

⁹⁸ “Seyyed Hossein Nasr - Keynote Address - YouTube,” accessed May 23, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=erYxvmHVlcs&embeds_referring_euri=https%3A%2F%2Fislamicstudiescenter.gmu.edu%2F&embeds_referring_origin=https%3A%2F%2Fislamicstudiescenter.gmu.edu&source_ve_path=MjM4NTE.

⁹⁹ William E. Shepard, “Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, no. 3 (1987): 320, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800056750>.

¹⁰⁰ Mark Sedgwick, “The Modernity of Neo-Traditionalist Islam,” in *Muslim Subjectivities in Global Modernity: Islamic Traditions and the Construction of Modern Muslim Identities*, International Studies in Religion and Society, volume 35 (Brill, 2020), 127–28.

¹⁰¹ “Joseph E. B. Lombard: Life and Work,” accessed May 23, 2025, <http://www.worldwisdom.com/public/authors/Joseph-Lombard.aspx>.

¹⁰² “Dr. Joseph Lombard | Hamad Bin Khalifa University,” accessed May 23, 2025, <https://www.hbku.edu.qa/en/staff/dr-joseph-lombard>.

the events of 9/11, with the goal of combining Western modern academic with the classical Islamic tradition. Originally raised in the Episcopal Church, Lumbard experienced spiritual disillusionment and found little guidance in contemporary Christianity. While at George Washington University, friends encouraged him to take classes with Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr. This experience became pivotal. After nearly two years of studying under Nasr, Lumbard began to reconsider his religious orientation to come back to Christianity. However, he realized that the values and spiritual truths he cherished in Christianity were present in Islam as well. It had occurred to his mind that conversion to Islam will allow him not only to follow the message of Jesus within a broader Abrahamic framework but also satisfy both his spiritual longing and intellectual inquiry he had during his study.¹⁰³

Now a figure in Islamic philosophy, Sufism, and Quranic studies, Lumbard is known for his dissertation on the metaphysics of love in the thought of Ahmad al-Ghazali (d.1123), younger brother of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). He is also one of the general editors of *The Study Quran* and the author of the influential article *Decolonizing Quranic Studies*. In this work, Lumbard advocates for a “transmodern” Qur’anic studies framework—one that recognizes multiple epistemologies and elevates non-Western methodologies in the field of Quranic Studies.¹⁰⁴ Although trained in the West, Lumbard critiques dominant Euro-American approaches that marginalize Islamic classical sources. This fact not only implies that Western scholars do not present a unified voice in methodology or epistemology towards the study of Quran but also positions himself as a scholar that is rooted in the long intellectual enterprises of the Islamic tradition, learned through centuries of Muslim scholarship.

3.2.3. Maria Massi Dakak

To reflect the breadth of perspectives represented in *The Study Quran*, the general editor, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, appointed Maria Massi Dakake, a female

¹⁰³ “Revitalizing the Heart of Islam,” accessed May 23, 2025, <https://centerforsacredsciences.org/index.php/Holos/holos-lumbard.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph Lumbard, “Decolonizing Qur’anic Studies,” *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022): 11, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020176>.

professor, as one of the key contributors. Dakake is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at George Mason University in Virginia, where she teaches courses related to the religions of the Near East, the Qur'an and Hadith, Islamic thought, and women in world religions. She earned her undergraduate degree in Government from Cornell University in 1990 and went on to complete her M.A. and Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University between 1998 and 2000—the same institution attended by another contributor, Caner Dagli. Her academic journey also includes short-term studies at The American University in Cairo (1992), the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Research in Tehran (1996–1997), and The Queen's College, Oxford University (1988–1989).

Like Joseph Lumbard, Maria Massi Dakake is a convert to Islam who was raised in a Roman Catholic family and embraced Islam during her university years. However, while the former conversion was largely influenced by his exposure to Islamic teachings in academic settings, particularly through the works of Hossein Nasr—Dakake's decision to convert was sparked by a deeply personal encounter with the Qur'an, specifically upon reading one of the longest surah in the Quran, *Sūrah al-Baqarah*.¹⁰⁵ As a scholar of Islamic Studies, her primary research interests lie in the intellectual history of Islam, comparative religion, Sufi and Shi'i traditions, and the religious and spiritual experiences of women. Her book-dissertation, *The Charismatic Community: Shi'ite Identity in Early Islam*, is a testament to her deep engagement with Islamic intellectual history and Shi'i thought. In the field of Qur'anic Studies, Dakake has published extensively through journal articles, book chapters, and academic conferences, covering a wide range of topics related to the Qur'an. Perhaps her most notable contributions have been as a co-editor of two major collective works: *The Study Quran* (2015) and *The Routledge Companion to the Qur'an* (2021).

Maria Dakake's approach to Qur'anic interpretation reflects a commitment to both the traditional and the spiritual dimensions of the text, particularly through her emphasis on the interplay between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*. In line with Seyyed Hossein

¹⁰⁵ “‘The Study Quran’ with Maria Dakake and Joseph Lumbard – Blogging Theology,” accessed May 24, 2025, <https://bloggingtheology.net/2015/12/15/the-study-quran-with-maria-dakake-and-joseph-lumbard/>.

Nasr, Dakake situates her hermeneutics within the broader framework of Sufi and Shi'i thought, both of which serve as the main advocates of the Qur'an's inward meanings. In her essay, *Ta'wīl in the Qur'an and the Islamic Exegetical Tradition: The Past and the Future of the Qur'an*, Dakake distinguishes between the *past*—dominated by historical-critical approaches—and the *future* of Qur'anic interpretation, which she sees as open to spiritual and evolving readings grounded in the text itself. Dakake critiques the reductionist tendencies of some Western and modern Muslim scholars, such as John Wansbrough (d.2002) and Fazlur Rahman (d.1988), who emphasize the historical and cultural contexts of the Qur'an at the expense of its theological and spiritual dimensions. However, she does not dismiss historical context outright. Instead, she recognizes the role of classical tools like *asbāb al-nuzūl* and Hadith as vital to traditional Qur'anic tafsir.¹⁰⁶

The future of interpretation, as she envisions it, lies in recovering the Qur'an's own invitation to reflection, contemplation, and ongoing engagement through *ta'wīl*. While acknowledging the marginalization of *ta'wīl* as speculative or sectarian, Dakake argues that it is in fact a legitimate, endorsed method of interpretation by the Qur'an itself. She rereads Āl 'Imrān 7 to suggest that the verse critiques those who claim interpretive finality, not those who seek deeper understanding. For Dakake, *ta'wīl* enables a continuous unfolding of meaning, in which new insights can emerge across time while the ultimate meaning remains known only to God.¹⁰⁷

3.2.4. Caner K. Dagli

Caner K. Dagli is an American Muslim scholar of Circassian descent and a prominent figure in contemporary Islamic thought. He is currently an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts, specializing in Qur'anic studies, Sufism, Islamic philosophy, and interfaith dialogue. He earned his MA in Religion from George Washington University and completed

¹⁰⁶ Maria Massi Dakake, "Ta'wīl in the Qur'an and the Islamic Exegetical Tradition: The Past and the Future of the Qur'an" in Jean-Luc Marion and Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer, eds., *The Enigma of Divine Revelation: Between Phenomenology and Comparative Theology*, vol. 7, Contributions to Hermeneutics (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), p. 239-241.

¹⁰⁷ Maria Massi Dakake, "Ta'wīl in the Qur'an and the Islamic Exegetical Tradition: The Past and the Future of the Qur'an" in Marion and Jacobs-Vandegeer, p. 259.

his Ph.D. at Princeton University.¹⁰⁸ His scholarly focus reflects a deep engagement with classical Islamic intellectual traditions, particularly through the works of Ibn al-‘Arabī. His book *Ibn al-‘Arabī and Islamic Intellectual Culture: From Mysticism to Philosophy* (2016) explores this theme in depth, alongside his annotated translation of *Fusus al-Ḥikam (The Ringstones of Wisdom, 2004)*.¹⁰⁹

Caner Dagli has made some contribution to the field of Qur’anic exegesis. His approach is characterized by intellectual rigor, contextual sensitivity, and a strong emphasis on the spiritual dimensions of the Qur’anic message. He advocates for reading Qur’anic verses holistically, warning against selective or decontextualized interpretations that distort the intended meanings. For instance, in discussing themes such as conquest, conversion, and war in the Qur’an, Dagli emphasizes that *jihād*, as framed in the sacred text, is primarily spiritual and non-violent. He underscores that both the Qur’an and its primary interpretive source, the Hadīth, clarify the true essence of jihad. It is the Prophet Muhammad himself who taught, “The best struggle (jihad) is to speak the truth before a tyrannical ruler,” and upon returning from battle, remarked, “You have returned from the lesser jihad (physical combat) to the greater jihad (spiritual striving).”¹¹⁰ These traditions, for Dagli, reflect the deeper moral and ethical core of Islamic teachings and caution against reductive understandings of jihad. In another instance, Dagli engages with the symbolic interpretations of classical scholars such as Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). Referring to al-Ghazali’s commentary on Qur’an al-Ra’d 17, Dagli highlights the depth with which medieval Islamic intellectuals approached the Qur’anic text, recognizing the richness of its metaphors and symbols. This, in turn, illustrates the vital role of symbolic and spiritual hermeneutics within the broader tradition of *tafsīr*.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ “Caner Dagli | College of the Holy Cross,” accessed May 24, 2025, <https://www.holycross.edu/academics/people/caner-dagli>.

¹⁰⁹ “Caner Dagli,” *Fons Vitae Publishing*, n.d., accessed May 24, 2025, <https://fonsvitae.com/advisory-boards/board-of-scholars/caner-dagli/>.

¹¹⁰ Caner Dagli, “Conquest and Conversion, War and Peace in the Quran” in Nasr, *The Study Quran*, First edition (HarperOne, an imprint of Collins Publishers, 2015), 1806.

¹¹¹ Caner Dagli, “Metaphor, Symbol, and Parable in The Qur’an in George Archer, Maria M. Dakake, and Daniel A. Madigan, *The Routledge Companion to the Qur’an*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 198.

3.2.5. Muhammed Rustom

Mohammed Rustom is a Professor of Islamic Studies and Global Philosophy at Carleton University in Canada. He currently serves as the Director of the Carleton Center for the Study of Islam. Rustom earned his Bachelor's and Ph.D. degrees in 2004 and 2009, respectively, from the University of Toronto.¹¹² His academic interests span a wide range of areas, including Islamic philosophy, Arabic and Persian literature, Qur'anic exegesis, contemporary Islamic thought, cross-cultural philosophy, and translation theory. Within the field of Islamic philosophy, Rustom is especially known for his engagement with the intellectual legacy of Mullā Ṣadrā, as demonstrated in his acclaimed book *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā*. His upcoming work, *Reading the Book of Existence: The Qur'anic Commentary of Mullā Ṣadrā*, also explores the intersection of Sadrian philosophy and Qur'anic interpretation.

Rustom's approach to the Qur'an reflects his academic expertise, particularly his grounding in Islamic philosophy, Arabic and Persian literature, and translation theory. His public lectures, conferences, and publications—including both completed and forthcoming works—suggest a deep engagement with the Qur'an through the lens of classical Islamic tradition. While his contributions to Qur'anic Studies or Tafsir Studies are not always explicitly elaborated, his involvement as co-editor in *The Study Quran* and his article *Who Speaks for the Quran?* offer significant insight. In the latter, Rustom identifies the Qur'an as perhaps the most misunderstood sacred scripture in the contemporary world. After briefly outlining the development of tafsir since the Prophet's time—resulting in approximately 7,000 commentaries written mostly in Arabic—he argues that there are both legitimate and illegitimate ways of reading the Qur'an. To illustrate this, he draws an analogy with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, asserting that just as literary understanding should be grounded in expertise, so too must the Qur'an be approached through scholars trained within its interpretive tradition. Within Islam, various disciplines have produced scholars with distinct methodological approaches, thus the most effective

¹¹² “Mohammed Rustom | Professor of Islamic Thought and Global Philosophy,” accessed May 24, 2025, <https://www.mohammedrustom.com/>.

way to understand the Qur'an, Rustom argues, is through the lens of traditional exegetes who devoted their lives to its study.¹¹³

3.3 Some Aspects of The Study Quran

3.3.1. Structure and Creative Process

The Study Quran (TSQ), as a work of translation and commentary, is structurally situated between traditional exegetical works and modern academic scholarship. The descriptions that follow may further clarify this initial claim. In its opening section, TSQ presents several components, including a General Introduction written by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, alongside a list of forty main references and technical notes designed to guide readers interested in further exploring the work. The central part of TSQ, which constitutes its core, is a combined presentation of translation and commentary. These two elements are distinguishable through font size and verse numbering, although they are presented cohesively. To supplement readers' understanding of the Qur'an, TSQ also includes 15 essays authored by a range of scholars—both from the East and the West—each focusing on specific aspects of the Qur'an.¹¹⁴

The concluding sections of the work feature several appendices: Appendix A lists hadiths cited in the commentary, Appendix B outlines major historical events related to the Qur'an, and Appendix C provides brief biographies of the main commentators frequently referenced in the exegesis. The final pages of TSQ are dedicated to an index of key figures, terms, and significant themes, enabling readers

¹¹³ Mohammed Rustom, "Who Speaks for the Quran? (Sacred Web, 2016)," p. 75, accessed May 14, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/31935780/Who_Speaks_for_the_Quran_Sacred_Web_2016_.

¹¹⁴ To complement its tafsīr, The Study Quran also includes 15 essays exploring various dimensions of the Qur'an—both exoteric and esoteric—as well as its intersections with multiple fields within Islamic Studies. Similar to the exegetical sources, the essays are authored by scholars from different geographical regions and intellectual traditions. These contributors include Ingrid Mattson, Joseph Lumbard, Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, Muhammad Abdel Haleem, Walid Saleh, Toby Mayer, Muzaffar Iqbal, Ahmad Muhammad al-Tayyib, Mustafa M. Damad, William C. Chittick, Jean-Louis Michon, Caner K. Dagli, and Hamza Yusuf. See Nasr, *The Study Quran*, First edition (HarperOne, an imprint of Collins Publishers, 2015), viii–ix.

to trace how often particular topics arise throughout the commentary—an aspect that distinguishes TSQ from many of its classical predecessors.

One particularly notable feature of TSQ is that it was produced as a collaborative scholarly project, rather than an individual endeavor, which remains the norm in most classical and even many contemporary commentaries. Although collaborative efforts in tafsir are not entirely unprecedented, they are still relatively rare in the broader historical landscape. The five main contributors to TSQ played equally vital but distinct roles. For instance, while Nasr, as the chief editor, did not directly translate or write commentary for all thirty parts (*ajzā'*) of the Qur'an, he had the final authority on all content. He claims to have personally reviewed each paragraph, word, and even letter before publication. Muhammed Rustom, the final contributor to join the project, produced fewer commentary sections but played a critical role in editing both the translations and commentaries. The remaining three contributors were responsible for much of the translation and commentary, as will be outlined in more detail in the table below.

Producing a collective work of tafsir is no simple task. It requires consistent alignment in interpretive style, methodology, and other elements across a text as vast and intricate as the Qur'an. Over the decade-long process of producing TSQ, the contributors did not always arrive at immediate consensus regarding the appropriate interpretations—particularly when it came to translation choices between two vastly different languages. This challenge is illustrated, for example, in Nasr's account of how he and his colleagues spent several days deliberating the proper rendering of the term *taqwā*.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, Nasr has noted that the collaborative nature of the project rarely led to significant disputes. Instead, it was marked by a spirit of intellectual harmony and mutual understanding. According to Nasr, this was made possible by the shared spiritual vision and intellectual kinship that bound the contributors together, many of whom had longstanding teacher-student relationships prior to the project. The success of TSQ as a collective effort can also be attributed to their common approach to the Qur'an, as discussed in the earlier sections, and to

¹¹⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "On the Making of the Study Quran," *The Center of Islamic Sciences* 13 (2015): 99.

the shared epistemological and methodological frameworks that will be explored in the sections that follow.

Editor	Translations	Commentaries
Seyyed Hossein Nasr	Supervisor	Supervisor
Joseph E.B. Lumbard	Sūrah al-Fātiha (1), al-Ra'd, (13) al-ʿAnkabūt – al-Nās (29-114)	Sūrah al-Fātiha (1), al-ʿAnkabūt – al-Nās (29-114)
Maria Massi Dakake	Sūrah al-Nisā – al-A'rāf (4-7), Sūrah Yūnus – Yūsuf (10-12), and Sūrah Ibrāhīm– al-Anbiyā (14-21)	Sūrah al-Nisā – al-A'rāf (4-7) and Sūrah al-Nahl - Maryam (16-19)
Caner K. Dagli	Sūrah al-Baqarah & Āl ʿImrān (2-3), Sūrah al-Anfāl & al-Tawbah (8-9), and Sūrah al-Ḥajj – al-Qaṣas (22-28)	Sūrah al-Baqarah & Āl ʿImrān (2-3), Sūrah al-Anfāl & al-Tawbah (8-9), and Sūrah al-Anbiyā – al-Qaṣas (21-28)
Mohammed Rustom	General Editor	Sūrah Yūnus – al-Ḥijr (10-15) and Sūrah Ṭa Ḥā (20)

Figure 3.1 The Contributors of translations and commentaries

3.3.2. Translation and Audience

One of the primary distinctions between TSQ and traditional exegetical works is its use of English as the main medium and its orientation toward an English-speaking audience. This is evident in its translation, commentary, and even in the creative process outlined in the introductory sections. TSQ intentionally targets a diverse readership—Muslim and non-Muslim, scholars and students, Arabic speakers and non-speakers—framed within what Nasr describes as an effort “to take

a step toward transforming English into an Islamic language.”¹¹⁶ This Western-oriented audience is also reflected in specific commentaries, such as al-Baqarah 43¹¹⁷ (regarding determining the qiblah in North America), al-Isrā verse 1¹¹⁸ (connecting the Prophet’s Night Journey with Dante’s Divine Comedy), and al-Hajj 52¹¹⁹ (an elaborate discussion of the “Satanic Verses” narrative and its place in both traditional and Western literature).

Although this study primarily focuses on the exegetical content of TSQ, the translation component, as implied by its title—*The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*—must not be overlooked. Any discussion of the work would be incomplete without at least a brief engagement with its translation. TSQ does not stand alone; it is preceded by a century of English translations and interpretations of the Qur’an by both Muslims and non-Muslims, motivated by varied agendas.¹²⁰ As Pink notes, until the early 21st century, English translations were dominated by Orientalist, non-Muslim scholars.¹²¹ However, many Muslim-authored translations have since emerged, serving purposes such as call for Islam (*da‘wa*)¹²², responding to missionary critiques¹²³, or promoting specific denominational views—Sunni, Shi‘ite, or Ahmadiyya.¹²⁴ By the time TSQ was published in 2015, several prominent English translations already existed, many of which were consulted by TSQ’s authors, including those by Marmaduke Pickthall (d. 1936), A. Yusuf Ali (d. 1953), A.J. Arberry (d. 1969), Muhammad Asad (d. 1992), and Muhammad Abdel Haleem.¹²⁵

¹¹⁶ Nasr et.al, *The Study Quran*, 2015, xlvi–xlvii.

¹¹⁷ Nasr et.al, *The Study Quran*, 2015, 63.

¹¹⁸ Nasr et.al, *The Study Quran*, 2015, 695.

¹¹⁹ Nasr et.al, *The Study Quran*, 2015, 842.

¹²⁰ Johanna Pink, “The Inimitable Qur’an and the Languages of Empire: Muslim Qur’an Translation in the Languages of Western Europe in the Early Twentieth Century,” in *European Muslims and the Qur’an*, ed. Gulnaz Sibgatullina and Gerard Wiegers (De Gruyter, 2023), 219–56; Stefan Wild, “Muslim Translators and Translations of the Qur’an into English / المخرجون من سبلهم وترجمات القرآن الكريم إلى لغة الإنجليزية” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 17, no. 3 (2015): 158–82.

¹²¹ Pink, “The Inimitable Qur’an and the Languages of Empire,” 220.

¹²² Pink, “The Inimitable Qur’an and the Languages of Empire,” 229.

¹²³ Wild, “Muslim Translators and Translations of the Qur’an into English”, 167.

¹²⁴ Wild, “Muslim Translators and Translations of the Qur’an into English; Pink, “The Inimitable Qur’an and the Languages of Empire.”

¹²⁵ Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran*, xliii.

Like many of these works, TSQ upholds the doctrine that the Qur'an, as divine speech, is ultimately untranslatable.¹²⁶ However, as Iqbal notes, translations persist, inevitably shaped by the translator's intellectual tendencies, linguistic choices, and ideological limits¹²⁷—a description that arguably fits TSQ's own production. Linguistically, TSQ seeks to preserve the aesthetic and rhetorical features of the Qur'an, drawing directly from the Arabic text and employing an English style reminiscent of the archaic, scriptural tone of the King James Bible—deemed by Nasr as one of the finest religious texts in English.¹²⁸ Ideologically and intellectually, Nasr insists that the group authorship of TSQ ensured a balanced perspective, mitigating individual biases found in earlier translations¹²⁹—a claim that invites further scrutiny through comparative analysis with prior English translations and commentaries.

3.3.3. Content Overview: Sources and Methods Revisited

The study of a Qur'anic commentary (*tafsir*) is closely tied to epistemological concerns, particularly those related to its sources, methodology, and the validity of interpretation. In this section, the terms “method” (or *manhaj*) and “sources” (*maṣḍar* or *maṣādir*) are used according to the definitions provided by Mustafawi in his work, *Asāsiyāt Al-Manhaj Wa al-Khitāb Fi Dars al-Qur'ān Wa Tafsīrihī*. Mustafawi clearly distinguishes between the two, stating that method answers the question “How will we arrange or convey?” (*kaifa nabhas*), while sources respond to the question “What do we base our work on?”¹³⁰ Method, in this context, refers to the interpretive steps adopted by the authors of The Study Quran (TSQ), while sources refer to earlier exegetical works that the authors draw upon when expressing views that are not entirely their own.

¹²⁶ Fazlur Rahman, “Translating the Qur'an,” *Religion & Literature*, The Literature of Islam, Vol. 20, no. No. 1 (Spring 1988): 23; Muzaffar Iqbal, “‘Abdullah Yūsuf ‘Alī & Muḥammad Asad: Two Approaches to the English Translation of the Qur'an,” *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2000): 107; Wild, “Muslim Translators and Translations of the Qur'an into English, 164-165.

¹²⁷ Iqbal, “‘Abdullah Yūsuf ‘Alī & Muḥammad Asad,” 107.

¹²⁸ Nasr, “On the Making of the Study Quran,” 98; Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, xlvii.

¹²⁹ Nasr, “On the Making of the Study Quran,” 99.

¹³⁰ Muhammad Muṣṭafawī, *Asāsiyāt Al-Manhaj Wa al-Khitāb Fi Dars al-Qur'ān Wa Tafsīrihī* (Beirut: Markaz al-Hadarah li Tanmiyah al-Fikr al-Islami, 2009), 29.

Mustafawi categorizes methods of Qur'anic interpretation into three main types: tradition-based (*manhaj naqli*), reason-based (*manhaj 'aqli*), and Sufi-esoteric (*manhaj ishāri al-ṣūfī*). Interestingly, all three approaches are evident throughout *The Study Quran*. As a contemporary or modern commentary, TSQ engages with exoteric interpretations typically found in traditional tafsir, such as linguistic (*lughawī*) and historical (*tārikhī*) approaches—as demonstrated, for instance, in its treatment of al-Rūm 48–49¹³¹ (discussing two words *rīh* and *riyāḥ*) and al-Kahf 18¹³² (on the Sleepers of the Cave). On the other hand, TSQ also engages extensively with rationalist interpretations, particularly those rooted in theology (*kalām*) and philosophy (*falsafah*). These interpretations are widely present in TSQ, clearly visible in verses like al-Qamar 49¹³³ (on divine decree, *qadar*), the final two verses of Surah Fussilat (interpreted through Ibn 'Arabi's cosmology)¹³⁴, and the famed Light Verse in al-Nūr 35¹³⁵, a key verse among Islamic philosophers.

One might ask why TSQ spans such a wide spectrum, incorporating both mainstream and non-mainstream interpretations, which according to Hussein Abdul-Raof, the former refers to *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* (tradition-based), while the latter refers to *tafsīr bi al-ra'y* (based on personal reasoning).¹³⁶ A tempting answer lies in the academic backgrounds of the TSQ contributors—many are scholars of Islamic philosophy deeply connected to medieval Islamic traditions—as well as Nasr's own statement acknowledging the legitimacy of various traditional interpretive modes (both exoteric and esoteric), even if such inclusivity may be contested by some.

While it may be easy to judge TSQ prematurely, tafsir must be assessed from multiple angles, especially in terms of its methods and sources. After reading in its entirety, it is safe to say that both factors are critical to TSQ's interpretive process. Drawing from 41 primary sources with highly diverse characteristics¹³⁷, TSQ

¹³¹ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 996.

¹³² Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 735.

¹³³ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 1305–7.

¹³⁴ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 1170–71.

¹³⁵ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 878–80.

¹³⁶ Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis*, 0 ed. (Routledge, 2013), 9.

¹³⁷ By examining the full list of its main references, one can observe a wide array of figures originating from diverse schools of thought and, consequently, differing epistemologies. One

includes “mainstream” references such as tafsir of the Qur’an by the Qur’an, by hadith, and by the sayings of the Companions and Successors (*aqwāl al-ṣahābah wa al-tābi‘īn*), alongside “non-mainstream” sources such as al-Ghazali and Rumi’s *Mathnawī*. TSQ incorporates classical and medieval interpretations across different theological schools, time periods, and regions—an integrative approach that some may consider both a strength and a limitation.

Regarding the *tafsīr bi al-ma‘thūr* and *tafsīr bi al-ra’y* distinction, TSQ does not fit neatly into either category. Given the complexity of its interpretive sources, I would classify it as a hybrid tafsir, or what al-Khālīdī terms *tafsīr al-Athari wa al-Nazarī*—a combination of transmitted and rationalist approaches. Al-Khālīdī identifies this genre as one that neither relies solely on narrated opinions (thus rejecting *ijtihād* and *ta’wīl*) nor on reason alone (thus ignoring authoritative traditions).¹³⁸ Rather, it merges the strengths of both. On the other hand, Walid Saleh proposes an alternative classification based on the function and depth of understanding in tafsir, such as encyclopedic commentaries, which seek to incorporate diverse perspectives and methodologies.¹³⁹ He introduces this model in response to Ignaz Goldziher’s more rigid typology. Saleh also emphasizes tafsir as a “genealogical”¹⁴⁰ field—characterized by a dialectical relationship between new commentaries and past exegetical traditions—a description that suits TSQ’s methodology well.

particularly noteworthy aspect of this selection is the representation of exegetes from each century, spanning from the 3rd to the 14th century AH / 8th to 20th century CE. In addition, the exegetes come from a variety of Islamic scholarly disciplines. Of course, many exegetes from the classical and medieval periods were also prominent figures in Sufism, theology, and philosophy—often described as polymaths. A closer inspection reveals several distinct characteristics among these exegetes. Some are associated with grammatical sciences, such as al-Zamakhshari; lexicography, as in the case of Raghīb al-Isfahānī; or the science of hadith, such as al-Baghawī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Suyūṭī, Muqāṭil, and al-Tha’labī, who are often categorized as traditionists (*muḥaddithūn*). However, it is evident that three major groups dominate the list of main references: Shi’ite exegetes, philosophical or Sufi exegetes, and scholars of Islamic law—some of whom also served as muftis. This composition suggests that The Study Quran (TSQ) offers a remarkably diverse interpretive lens, with a broad thematic scope. For more information See Naṣr et al., *The Study Quran*, 1919–30.

¹³⁸ Salāḥuddīn Abdal-Fattāḥ Al-Khālīdī, *Ta’rīf al-Dārisīn Bimanāhij al-Mufasssīrīn* (Dār al-Qalam, 2012), 301–2.

¹³⁹ Naṣr et al., *The Study Quran*, 1656.

¹⁴⁰ Walid A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 14.

In terms of its interpretive method, The Study Quran follows what Quranic scholars refers as *tafsir tahlili* (analytical exegesis), or what Andrew Rippin refers to as *tafsir musalsal*. Rippin, quoted by Lane defines this as an approach that “follows the text of the Qur’an from beginning to end, providing interpretation verse by verse, phrase by phrase, or even word by word.”¹⁴¹ In practice, TSQ proceeds as follows: first, each *surah* is introduced with a description noting whether it was revealed in Mecca or Medina, and often includes a thematic overview—common practice in medieval and contemporary *tafsir*.¹⁴² Second, each verse is interpreted sequentially with elaborations where necessary. If a *hadith* or context of revelation exists, it is cited. Linguistic, legal, or historical elaborations are also offered where relevant.

The core idea of this analytical approach is to convey what the commentators deem most relevant to the verse at hand. After offering a surface-level explanation, TSQ often seeks a deeper, inner meaning, drawing from both traditional and Sufi-philosophical sources. This final step aligns with the authors’ emphasis on *ta’wil* (inner interpretation) alongside *tafsir* (outer interpretation). As Nasr puts it: “To go from the outward (*al-zahir*) to the inward (*al-batin*)... is also to return to the Origin from which all that is outward and manifested issues.”¹⁴³ It is also important to add that beside its apparent *tahlili* approach, TSQ also features comparative *tafsir*—comparing different classical commentaries, drawing parallels between the Qur’an and other scriptures like the Bible, and citing diverse schools of thought (including Shi‘i perspectives).

Let us take one example to make a clear understanding of its methodology and sources. In interpreting *al-Wāqī’ah* 79, TSQ explores several layers of meaning. It addresses the textual linkage between verses (or *munāsabah*), suggesting that the

¹⁴¹ Andrew Lane, *A Traditional Mu’tazilite Qur’ān Commentary: The Kashshāf of Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī (d.538/1144)*, Brill Book Archive Part 1, ISBN: 9789004472495 2 (Leiden Boston: BRILL, 2006), 103.

¹⁴² Mustansir Mir, “The sura as a unity: a twentieth century development in Qur’an exegesis” in G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef, eds., *Approaches to the Qur’ān*, Routledge/SOAS Series on Contemporary Politics and Culture in the Middle East (Routledge, 1993), 220.

¹⁴³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Quranic Commentaries of Mulla Sadra” in Ġalāl-ad-Dīn Āštiyānī et al., eds., *Consciousness & Reality: Studies in Memory of Toshihiko Izutsu*, Brill Book Archive Part 1, ISBN: 9789004472495 38 (Leiden Boston: BRILL, 2000), 57.

Arabic pronoun *hu* in the sentence *lā yamassuhū* refers to “a Noble Qur’an” and “a Book concealed”—both interpreted as referring to the Preserved Tablet. This view, held by Ibn ‘Ajibah, al-Qurtubi, al-Razi, and Tabataba’i, contrasts with another opinion—also discussed in al-Razi’s work—that *hu* refers to the physical mushaf. The legal implications of this verse are also explored: that the mushaf should not be touched except by those ritually pure—a point still debated among jurists. Lastly, the inner meaning of the verse is explored by the author. According to TSQ, alternative spiritual interpretation sees the verse as alluding to the idea that the Qur’an’s true meaning cannot be accessed by those whose hearts remain impure. Joseph Lumbard, the TSQ contributor responsible for this section, elaborates on this view:

As al-Ghazali writes in *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, “Just as the external side of the leather of a Qur’anic codex and its pages are protected against the external skin of a person who touches it expect when he is pure, so also its internal meaning is veiled, by the authority of its greatness and might, from the internal aspect of the reader’s mind, except when it is pure from all defilement and is illuminated by the light of glorification and reverence. Just as every hand is not fit to touch the leather of the codex, so too every tongue is not fit to understand its meanings” (*Ihyā, K. Qira’at al-Qur’ān*)¹⁴⁴

This example illustrates TSQ’s multidimensional approach: it attends not only to the literal meaning but also to inner layers of significance. Where relevant, it incorporates fiqh-related themes, complete with scholarly debates and referenced sources. In short, both sources and methods are integral to TSQ’s overall interpretive framework, contributing to its complex and holistic structure.

3.4 Critical Appreciation Towards *The Study Quran*

A written work, whether in general scholarship or more specifically within Qur’anic exegesis, is inevitably subject to public reception, which includes both appreciation and criticism. *The Study Quran* is no exception. As previously discussed, certain structural and conceptual aspects of TSQ may lead us to reflect on both the strengths and shortcomings of this work. By “critical appreciation,” This section surveys scholarly evaluations of TSQ of TSQ as an exegetical text—

¹⁴⁴ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 1327.

assessments which not only highlight its contributions but also aid in identifying its limitations. Furthermore, such responses serve to reassess the claims made by TSQ's authors throughout the volume.

Appreciation for TSQ generally stems from the fact that it is a meticulous academic project developed over a prolonged period. Some scholars have described it as a “huge scholarly effort,”¹⁴⁵ while others have considered it an asset for students in the field of religious studies.¹⁴⁶ The core components—its translation and commentary—naturally become the primary focus of both praise and critique. The translation is commended as one of the “nearest English approximations”¹⁴⁷ of the Arabic Qur'an, and the commentary is regarded as “first proper exegetical work in English.”¹⁴⁸ TSQ's inclusion of interpretations from classical and medieval exegetes is seen as helping readers move beyond a purely literal reading of the Qur'an.¹⁴⁹ It also highlights the interpretive plurality within the Islamic tradition, potentially dispelling oversimplified or prejudiced views about the Qur'an and Muslims. In addition, TSQ has been lauded as an ecumenical work that is “not colored by secular liberalism,” with its emphasis on Islamic spirituality being one of its most celebrated strengths.¹⁵⁰

However, this same ecumenical stance—particularly its attempt to represent various schools of Islamic thought—has also led some to argue that TSQ may not be suitable as a source of religious guidance, especially regarding creed (‘aqidah) and Islamic law (fiqh). According to some critics, the work includes interpretations that are biased, partial, or even dangerous, as they may challenge established or

¹⁴⁵ Karen Bauer, “The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary,” *American Journal of Islam and Society* 34, no. 4 (2017): 82–86, <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v34i4.800>.

¹⁴⁶ Abdullah Drury, “The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 27, no. 4 (2016): 493–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2016.1148886>.

¹⁴⁷ Bruce Fudge, “Study the Quran or The Study Quran?,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 138, no. 3 (2018): 575–88, <https://doi.org/10.7817/jameroriesoci.138.3.0575>.

¹⁴⁸ Mobein Vaid, “The Study Quran Review,” *Islamic Sciences* 13, no. 2 (2015): 105–18.

¹⁴⁹ Andreas Görke, “Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, Eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. New York: HarperOne, 2015. Pp. Lix, 1988; 11 Maps. \$59.99. ISBN: 978-0-06-112586-7,” *Speculum* 93, no. 1 (2018): 250–51, <https://doi.org/10.1086/696034>.

¹⁵⁰ Vaid, “The Study Quran Review.”

traditional readings of the Qur'an.¹⁵¹ This criticism becomes especially pertinent when considering TSQ's claim, outlined in its introduction, to present "traditional commentaries," implying continuity with prior exegetical traditions. Some critics have pointed out instances where TSQ departs from dominant traditional positions. Vaid, for instance, highlights two such cases: the issue of rajm (stoning) and what he terms as soteriological pluralism. The former relates to how TSQ appears to downplay hadith and legal consensus, while the latter concerns its unique view on salvation and interreligious theological matters. Bruce Fudge echoes this concern, arguing that despite its traditionalist claims, TSQ breaks significantly from classical exegesis—especially in its treatment of other religions. He contends that its emphasis on *ta'wīl*, readability, and direct personal engagement with the text reflect a modernist rather than traditionalist orientation.¹⁵² Though elsewhere he critiques TSQ for being closed to non-traditional insights, Fudge ultimately characterizes it as a "different creature,"¹⁵³ and one that "only pretended to be following tradition."¹⁵⁴

3.5 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to provide a close and detailed analysis of TSQ as a modern tafsīr that claims to revive the vastness of traditional exegetical tradition. Through an exploration of the biographies and intellectual backgrounds of its contributors, it becomes clear that TSQ was produced by a group of scholars with significant intellectual overlap—whether as mentors, students, or colleagues—who are deeply engaged in Islamic philosophy, Sufism, intellectual history, and, of course, Qur'anic studies. Their approach to the Qur'an reflects an epistemology that diverges from much of Western academic scholarship on the Qur'an, and in some ways also from certain currents within contemporary Muslim interpretation. The analysis of TSQ's sources reveals a strong commitment to pre-modern exegetical traditions, though understood in a broad and inclusive sense. This results in a tafsīr that synthesizes traditional, rational, and Sufi-esoteric dimensions—an epistemological structure that may not be universally accepted.

¹⁵¹ Fudge, "Study the Quran or The Study Quran?," 2018., p. 588.

¹⁵² Fudge, "Study the Quran or The Study Quran?," 2018, 577.

¹⁵³ Fudge, "Study the Quran or The Study Quran?," 2018, 576.

¹⁵⁴ Fudge, "Study the Quran or The Study Quran?," 2018, 588.

One of TSQ's most distinctive features lies in its ambition to serve as a bridge between classical tafsīr and contemporary English-speaking audiences. Its careful translation, structural organization, and accessible language are all designed to make the Qur'an more intelligible to a broader readership. Despite this modern orientation, the epistemological foundation of TSQ has been praised by critics for presenting the richness of Islamic exegetical tradition without being constrained by either secular-liberal methodologies or apologetic tendencies that might otherwise restrict the interpretive scope of the Qur'an. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, TSQ seeks to revive the intellectual and spiritual heritage of traditional tafsīr while striving to remain relevant in a contemporary context. Rather than simply reproducing classical interpretations, TSQ reconfigures them through a modern idiom—inviting both admiration for its scope and scrutiny for its interpretive selectivity.

Nevertheless, alongside its achievements and its self-positioning, TSQ's broad and somewhat fluid definition of "tradition" invites critical scrutiny concerning the boundaries and legitimacy of such claims. When placed in conversation with the previous chapter—which interrogated the constructed and evolving nature of the term "traditional" across Islamic intellectual history—this chapter has shown how TSQ authors' conception of Traditional Islam informs both their approach to the Qur'an and their mode of interpretation. TSQ's claim to represent a "traditional tafsīr" has thus been both celebrated and challenged, exposing deeper tensions surrounding authority, authenticity, and identity in contemporary Qur'anic interpretation—tensions that, as Saleh suggests, are central features of modern tafsīr. The next chapter will engage this dilemma more directly by placing TSQ in dialogue with earlier classical commentaries and selected modern interpretations, to critically assess the extent to which TSQ truly aligns with, or departs from, the interpretive legacies it claims to represent.

CHAPTER IV

QUESTIONING THE STUDY QURAN AS TRADITIONAL TAFSĪR: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

4.1 Chapter Introduction

In the previous chapters, I closely analyzed the structure and underlying ideas of *The Study Quran* (TSQ), particularly focusing on how it positions itself within the traditional Islamic exegetical legacy. One of the main findings from the earlier analysis was that TSQ's conception of "traditional commentaries" is not merely an effort to transmit classical interpretations but rather a conscious attempt to revitalize—or perhaps introduce—they, especially within a Western intellectual context. Additionally, the expansive and somewhat flexible definition of "traditional tafsīr" that the contributors of TSQ appear to share raises critical questions regarding their claim to represent *the* traditional commentary in the modern age.

Chapter II attempted to develop a theoretical framework for traditional tafsīr by synthesizing definitions and conceptualizations offered by various scholars from both Islamic thought and Qur'anic studies. Together, two previous chapters serve as a bridge leading back to the central research question posed in the first chapter: namely, How does *The Study Quran* position itself within scholarly discourse of modern tafsīr, and how does it reflect a continuity or departure from traditional commentaries? This chapter seeks to examine more deeply how TSQ, as a product of 21st-century Islamic scholarship, situates itself within modern Qur'anic discourses while simultaneously claiming allegiance to traditional tafsīr. In other words, it asks: To what extent can a modern tafsīr be considered traditional, and in what sense? To address this question, I employ case study by analyzing specific verses interpreted in TSQ and placing them in conversation with a range of premodern and modern interpretations. The goal is twofold: first, to evaluate the exegetical continuity TSQ claims by comparing it to the sources it cites directly; and second, to highlight significant differences by comparing it to other tafsīrs from the same or recent centuries that, according to Nasr, were intentionally excluded from consultation.

However, there are certain methodological dilemmas that must be acknowledged. Selecting only one or two thematic issues to represent the broader interpretive tendencies of TSQ already involves a degree of reduction. Moreover, since TSQ is a collaborative project, drawing broad epistemological or methodological conclusions about the work necessitates considering the contributions of multiple authors. Nevertheless, this study proceeds with the confession that while it does not claim to be comprehensive, it intends to highlight distinct interpretive features by analyzing how three contributors—Caner Dagli, Joseph Lumbard, and Maria Dakake—approach specific verses related to theology and law.¹⁵⁵ The verses examined include Āl ‘Imrān 19, Āl ‘Imrān 85, and al-Nisā 34. Another dilemma relates to the selection of comparative exegetical sources. While numerous tafsīrs could be considered, this chapter limits its scope to those written as complete works, representing a range of denominational and methodological approaches, and covering both the medieval and modern periods (in chronological terms). In total, twelve works (excluding TSQ) are analyzed, with the hope of producing meaningful analytical insights.¹⁵⁶

Before moving into the detailed sections, the reasoning behind the selection of these verses and themes must be clarified. As discussed in the previous chapters, TSQ’s traditional claim has been challenged by various scholars, particularly in relation to its theological and legal interpretations. Critics often suggest that TSQ reflects perspectives associated with Hossein Nasr’s perennialist leanings and therefore could deviate from mainstream theological positions. However, as established earlier, Nasr served only as the editor-in-chief and did not author any of

¹⁵⁵ To see the author's division, see the table provided in chapter III under the description of the contributors of TSQ.

¹⁵⁶ In this analysis, I refer to various works of tafsir that represent a range of interpretive traditions from the classical to the contemporary era. From the early period, I refer to the works of Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), al-Tha'labī (d. 1035), al-Rāzī (d. 1210), and Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), which illustrate the foundations of classical interpretation with strong *riwāyah* and *dirāyah* approaches. From the medieval to the late pre-modern period, I include Tafsir Jalālayn (d. 1459 and 1505) as well as Sufi commentaries by Aḥmad Ibn 'Aḥḥab (d. 1809) that demonstrate the spiritual dynamics of interpretation. For the twentieth century, I examine the tafsir al-Manār of Rashid Riḍā (d. 1935), al-Sa'dī (d. 1956), Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966), Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1981), and Muḥammad Asad (d. 1992), each of whom offers a response to modernity from a variety of rationalist, revivalist, and philosophical perspectives.

the actual commentary. Hence, attributing the content to his personal ideology, while tempting, is insufficient.

There are, in fact, more compelling reasons behind the selection of these particular verses and themes. First, they are authored by different contributors, which allows for an exploration of the plurality within TSQ itself. Additionally, these topics—especially those related to theology and gender role—have generated extensive debate in contemporary Islamic thought. The question of religious validity as raised by Āl ‘Imrān 19, Āl ‘Imrān 85, and the verse often referred to in Western discourse as the ‘domestic violence verse’ (al-Nisā 34), have sparked theological, legal, and sociopolitical controversies. Thus, they provide a rich site for examining how TSQ positions itself within both historical and modern exegetical discourses. The guiding question that drives this chapter is: How do the authors of *The Study Quran* understand these theological and legal verses, and how do they position their interpretations in relation to both premodern and modern exegetical traditions.

4.2 Islam as the Only True Path? Mapping Pre-TSQ Interpretations of Q 3:19 and Q 3:85

The discussion regarding the *fate of non-Muslims in the hereafter according to the Qur’an* has long generated intense debates and produced a wide spectrum of theological positions among Muslim scholars across different historical periods. This diversity of perspectives stems from the varying interpretations of Qur’anic verses that address the question. On one hand, several verses—such as al-Baqarah verse 62, al-Mā’idah 69, al-Ḥajj 17, and al-Mā’idah 48—are often cited as promoting an inclusive vision by suggesting the possibility of extended salvation¹⁵⁷ to members of other religious communities. On the other hand, verses like Āl ‘Imrān 19, Āl ‘Imrān 85, and al-Mā’idah 3 are frequently understood as asserting the

¹⁵⁷ In this context, *salvation* refers simply to the possibility of being saved from Hellfire and granted entry into Paradise. It is important to clarify that this study does not aim to explore the full theological discourse on salvation. Rather, the primary focus of this chapter is to examine how *The Study Quran* (TSQ), as the main object of analysis, engages with classical-medieval and modern exegetical traditions. Therefore, the term *salvation* is employed here primarily as an analytical tool to facilitate the discussion, rather than as a central doctrinal theme to be explored in depth.

exclusive truth of Islam, particularly because they explicitly mention *al-Islām* as the sole valid path to salvation, thereby excluding others by implication.

Among these, Q 3:19 and Q 3:85 have become focal points of modern scholarly debates. While classical commentators generally adopted an exclusivist reading—associating *al-Islām* strictly with the revelation sent to Prophet Muhammad—many modern interpreters tend to offer more inclusive interpretations. They often expand the meaning of *al-Islām* to encompass earlier monotheistic traditions, rather than limiting it to Islam as known today. Both Kamali and Ayoub, for instance, emphasize that although the Qur'an carries universal messages, these two verses are frequently cited in literalist readings to assert the superiority of Islam and its exclusive claim to salvation.¹⁵⁸ In contrast, Mun'im Sirry, after surveying a range of modern reformist exegetes, argues that they tend to acknowledge the salvific possibility for non-Muslims and generally refrain from stressing the superiority of Islam in absolute terms.¹⁵⁹

In light of this ongoing debate, it becomes particularly relevant to examine how *The Study Quran* (TSQ) situates itself within this broader exegetical tradition. Claiming to base its commentary on classical and medieval tafsīr—as seen from its extensive list of referenced sources—TSQ might be expected to reproduce a more exclusivist reading, as Kamali and Ayoub suggest. However, such assumptions need to be tested through close analysis. Therefore, this section will trace the interpretive development of the term *al-Islām* across selected exegetes from different centuries, setting the stage for a focused analysis of TSQ in the 21st century. A table will assist in highlighting key patterns and differences, helping us to assess whether TSQ continues or diverges from previous interpretive trends. After mapping how the Qur'an's discourse on *al-Islām* and the fate of the other has evolved, the following section will evaluate how TSQ articulates its position within this theological spectrum.

¹⁵⁸ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, "Diversity and Pluralism: A Qur'anic Perspective," *ICR Journal* 1, no. 1 (2020): 36–37, <https://doi.org/10.52282/icr.v1i1.12>; Mahmoud M. Ayoub, "The Qur'an and Religious Pluralism," in *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, by Roger Boase (Taylor and Francis, 2016), 278.

¹⁵⁹ Mun'im A. Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur'an and Other Religions* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 99.

Q 3:19 & 85	The meaning of al-Islām		Personal Preference
	Q 3:19	Q 3:85	
al-Tabari (d. 923)	submission ¹⁶⁰	<i>shari'a</i> ¹⁶¹	
al-Tha'labī (d. 1035)	faith (<i>al-īmān</i>) and submission ¹⁶²	-	
Al-Rāzi (d. 1210)	Submission, entering into peace, sincerity ¹⁶³	faith (<i>al-īmān</i>) ¹⁶⁴	sincerity and devotion
Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373)	submission ¹⁶⁵	<i>shari'a</i> ¹⁶⁶	
Jalālayn (d. 1459 and d. 1505)	As-shar' (Islamic path) ¹⁶⁷	-	
Ibn Ajībāh (d. 1809)	submission (to god and the prophet) ¹⁶⁸	submission (to god and the prophet) ¹⁶⁹	
Rashīd Riḍā (d.1935)	obedience and	obedience and	

¹⁶⁰ Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīli Āy al-Qur'ān*, Beirut, ed. Isham Faris al-Hurastani, vol. 2 (Beirut: Muassasah al-Risāla, 1994), 232.

¹⁶¹ Al-Ṭabarī, 2:286.

¹⁶² Abū Ishāq Aḥmad al-Tha'labī, *Al-Kashf Wa al-Bayān 'an Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān*, vol.8 (Jeddah: Dār al-Tafsīr, 2015), 166.

¹⁶³ Fakhrud-dīn Muḥammad Ibn 'Umar. Al-Rāzī, *Tafṣīr Al-Kabīr Aw Maḥāṭih al-Ghayb*, vol. 7 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 224.

¹⁶⁴ Al-Rāzī, 8:138.

¹⁶⁵ Ismā'īl b. 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafṣīr Al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, (Dār Ibn Hazm, 2000), 358.

¹⁶⁶ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafṣīr Al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, 378.

¹⁶⁷ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Ṣuyūṭī, *Tafṣīr Al-Jalālayn*, ed. Muḥammad Dhulkifli Zainuddīn al-Watani (Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 2011), 96.

¹⁶⁸ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Abū l Abbās Ibn 'Ajība, *Al-Baḥr al-Madīd Fī Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān al-Majīd*, ed. Aḥmad Abdullah Ruslān, vol. 1 (Cairo: Hay'at al-Miṣriyya al-Amma li al-Kitāb, 1999), 334.

¹⁶⁹ Ibn 'Ajība, 1:377.

	submission ¹⁷⁰	submission ¹⁷¹
al-Sa'dī (d.1957)	Submission to god (through tawḥīd) ¹⁷²	Surrender to god ¹⁷³
Sayyid Qutb (d.1966)	Submission, obedience and following ¹⁷⁴	Submission to social system (al-nizām) ¹⁷⁵
Tabāṭabā'iy (d. 1981)	Submission (taslīm) ¹⁷⁶	Al-taslīm wa al-tawḥīd ¹⁷⁷
Muhammad Asad (d. 1992)	Self-surrender to God ¹⁷⁸	Self-surrender to God ¹⁷⁹
Seyyed Hossein Nasr, et.al (w.2015)	Name of religion or Submission ¹⁸⁰	Submission ¹⁸¹

Figure 4.1

Reading the Quran 3:19 and 3:85 (insights from medieval exegetes)

Based on the table above, we can see that the term *al-Islām*, according to the first five exegetes—referred to throughout this chapter as medieval exegetes—is mostly interpreted as submission and obedience, although its meaning becomes more specific and normative in Q 3:85. One noticeable pattern in these medieval interpretations is their strong focus on linguistic analysis as well as the transmission of *riwāyāt*—including *hadīth* and the interpretations of the Companions and the

¹⁷⁰ Muḥammad Rašīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-qur'ān al-ḥakīm al-mashūr bi-tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīya, 2005), 213.

¹⁷¹ Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-qur'ān al-ḥakīm al-mashūr bi-tafsīr al-Manār*, 1–12:294–95.

¹⁷² Abd al-Raḥmān b. Nāsiruddīn Al-Sa'dī, *Taysīr Al-Karīm al-Raḥmān Fī Tafsīr Kalām al-Mannān*, 1st edition (Muassasah al-Risāla, 2002), 125.

¹⁷³ Al-Sa'dī, *Taysīr Al-Karīm al-Raḥmān Fī Tafsīr Kalām al-Mannān*, 137.

¹⁷⁴ Sayyid Qutb, *Tafsīr Fī Zilāl Al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1. (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 2003), 361.

¹⁷⁵ Qutb, 1: 423.

¹⁷⁶ Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Al-Mīzān Fī Tafsīr al-Qurān*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Muassasah al-A'lamī lil Maṭbū'āt, 1997), 139.

¹⁷⁷ Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 3, 386.

¹⁷⁸ Muhammad Asad, ed., *The Message of the Qur'ān: The Full Account of the Revealed Arabic Text Accompanied by Parallel Transliteration* (Book Foundation, 2008), 82.

¹⁷⁹ Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 95.

¹⁸⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, First edition (HarperOne, An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 135.

¹⁸¹ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 153.

tābi 'ūn. In terms of language, several exegetes—particularly in Q 3:19—define *al-Islām* around the meanings of submission (*al-inqiyād*), obedience (*tā'ah*), and exclusive devotion to God (*ikhhlāṣ al-dīn wa al-'aqīdah*), as reflected respectively in the views of al-Ṭabarī, al-Tha'labī, and al-Rāzī.¹⁸² Two other exegetes, Ibn Kathīr and al-Suyūṭī, do not discuss *al-Islām* in purely linguistic terms but instead provide more definitive and doctrinal interpretations, which will be explained in the following paragraph. Therefore, even at the linguistic level, some medieval exegetes had already connected the idea of submission to a specific theological framework and belief system.

In Q 3:85, the meaning of *al-Islām* becomes more specific, with most medieval exegetes stating that it refers to the faith and *sharī'ah* brought by the Prophet Muhammad, even though there is some room for the term to apply to earlier monotheistic communities. Al-Suyūṭī, for example, states that *al-Islām* is “the divine law (*shar'*) revealed to the messengers (*al-rusul*), which is founded upon monotheism.”¹⁸³ Another exegete, Fakhrudīn al-Rāzī, combines linguistic analysis with an intra-Qur'anic approach and argues that the essence of *al-Islām* is *īmān* (faith). To support his argument, he refers to Q 3:85 and claims that if *īmān* were entirely separate from *Islām*, then faith would not be considered an acceptable religion in the sight of God—a conclusion he clearly rejects.¹⁸⁴ Therefore, for al-Rāzī, *Islām* includes *īmān*, and both terms are often used interchangeably throughout the Qur'an.

One of the most striking explanations about what and who is meant by the term *Islām* in the Qur'an comes from Ibn Kathīr. Although his interpretation can be considered the most exclusive—especially when referring to Q 3:85, like al-Rāzī, as ultimately referring to faith—he also elaborates that *Islām* can refer to following any of the messengers sent by God before the arrival of Muhammad. Thus, he concludes his explanation by stating, “Whoever meets Allah in the Hereafter with a religion

¹⁸² Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīli Āy al-Qur'ān*, Beirut, 1–7:232; al-Tha'labī, *Al-Kashf Wa al-Bayān 'an Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 8:166; Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr Al-Kabīr Aw Mafātih al-Ghayb*, 7:225.

¹⁸³ al-Maḥallī and al-Ṣuyūṭī, *Tafsīr Al-Jalālayn*, 96.

¹⁸⁴ Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr Al-Kabīr Aw Mafātih al-Ghayb*, 7:225.

other than the Muhammadan revelation, his deeds will not be accepted.”¹⁸⁵ Therefore, although there is a possibility that salvation for non-Muslims before the time of Muhammad is acknowledged in the Qur’an, overall, the medieval exegetes define *Islām* as the revelation and creed brought by the Prophet Muhammad and regard anything outside of that as unacceptable, or at least they do not elaborate on it further.

Reading the Quran 3:19 and 3:85 (insights from 19-20th centuries exegetes)

By continuing the previous table and shifting our focus to how the term *islām* is understood in the two verses discussed (Q. 3:19 and Q. 3:85), we can see that the five exegetes—referred to here as early-modern or modern interpreters, ranging from Ibn ‘Ajībāh to Muhammad Asad—show both similarities and significant differences compared to pre-modern exegetes. On one hand, most of them still relate the term *islām* to submission, obedience, and a close association with *tawhīd*. On the other hand, some of them offer new elaborations in meaning, shaped by modern conditions, which are not found in earlier medieval tafsīrs. For example, Ibn ‘Ajībāh, Al-Sa’dī, and Ṭabāṭabā’ī represent the first trend mentioned. Their interpretations of *islām* in these two verses largely continue what was conveyed by pre-modern exegetes. Al-Sa’dī, for instance, combines insights similar to those of Ibn Kathīr and al-Tha’labī by defining Islam in 3:19 as “the submission to God through His Oneness (*tawhīd*) and obedience to Him (*tā’ah*).”¹⁸⁶ Meanwhile, in 3:85, Ṭabāṭabā’ī also interprets *islām* through the lens of *tawhīd*, though in a more spiritual and philosophical sense, contrasting with Al-Sa’dī’s more literalist and legalistic reading. Whereas the latter links submission to strict obedience to *sharī’ah*, the former connects it to existential surrender—a form of submission to whatever God wills.¹⁸⁷

Similarly, Ibn ‘Ajībāh’s interpretation follows pre-modern scholars, especially al-Rāzī, in uniting the meanings of *islām* and *īmān* (faith). However, Ibn ‘Ajībāh differs by emphasizing both the *outer* and *inner* dimensions of Islam,

¹⁸⁵ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, 358.

¹⁸⁶ Al-Sa’dī, *Taysīr Al-Karīm al-Rahmān Fī Tafsīr Kalām al-Mannān*, 128.

¹⁸⁷ Ṭabāṭabā’ī, *Al-Mīzān Fī Tafsīr al-Qurān*, 3:388.

reflecting his reputation as a commentator who blends the *ẓāhir* (literal) and *bāṭin* (esoteric) meanings. In his view of 3:19, Islam and faith must ultimately lead to full submission to *sharīʿah*. For him, Islam is not just a formal identity but a total surrender—both outward and inward—which reflects true obedience.¹⁸⁸ In other words, true Islam, according to Ibn ʿAjībāh, is not merely a claim but a lived reality through worship, faith, and submission.

On the other side of the spectrum, there are interpretations that offer new and modern understandings, sometimes departing from earlier exegetes. One of the most noticeable examples is the interpretation of *islām* as *submission to a divine social order* (*al-niẓām*), found in the works of Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb. While Qutb also interprets *islām* as *tawḥīd*, he emphasizes that the core of Islam being “the only true path” is not limited to beliefs, rituals, or the *shahādah*. More importantly, *islām* in his reading means submitting to the complete social system revealed by God.¹⁸⁹ Lastly, there are also interpretations that broaden the meaning of *islām*, recognizing that it is not limited to the religion of Muhammad. These interpretations emphasize *submission and obedience* (in the view of Muḥammad Riḍā) or *self-surrender to God* (according to Asad), and thus carry implications for how the *fate of non-Muslims* is understood—a topic to be discussed in the following section.

Referring back to Q. 3:19 and 3:85, it becomes clear that the elaborations made by 19th- and 20th-century exegetes on Islam as the path to salvation demonstrate a more diverse range of readings compared to pre-modern interpretations. While some exegetes maintain earlier understandings, others introduce new layers of meaning not found in their predecessors. Al-Saʿdī and Qutb, for instance, represent figures who continue an exclusivist approach, preserving the view that Islam is the only true religion. Both appear to follow the views of Ibn Kathīr and al-Thaʿlabī, who interpreted these verses literally as excluding the truth claims of any religion besides that of Prophet Muhammad. However, they differ in how they construct their exegetical narratives. Qutb, as noted earlier, takes a more ideological-political approach, while Al-Saʿdī remains within a normative

¹⁸⁸ Ibn ʿAjībā, *Al-Baḥr al-Madīd Fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-Majīd*, 1:344.

¹⁸⁹ Qutb, *Tafsīr Fī Zilāl Al-Qurʾān.*, 423.

theological framework, focused on creed (‘*aqidah*) and a fixed *sharī‘ah* standard. In interpreting Q. 3:85, Al-Sa‘dī even concludes by stating, “thus every *dīn* except Islam is false,”¹⁹⁰ reinforcing a firm, exclusive, and uncompromising stance.

On the other end of the spectrum, however, the exclusivist tone is either softened or not strongly emphasized. Riḍā, Ṭabāṭabā‘ī, and Asad, for instance, reflect a spirit of reform, philosophical elaboration, and inclusive theology in their commentaries. Riḍā and Asad, in particular, offer inclusive readings of *islām* in these two verses. While Riḍā describes *islām* as a *universal spirit* (*rūh al-kulliy*) that may take different outward forms depending on historical context, Asad argues that Islam in the Qur’an refers to a broader disposition of submission to God—one that has been present in all divine revelations across history.¹⁹¹ Thus, for both of them, *islām* is not merely a formal label for the religion of Muhammad but a universal principle of *tawhīd* and surrender to God that is expressed throughout all prophetic messages.

A more inclusive and philosophical understanding of *islām* is also found in the commentary of Iranian scholar Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā‘ī. After affirming—as Riḍā and Asad do—that *islām* refers to the timeless message of God delivered to all prophets, Ṭabāṭabā‘ī interprets Q. 3:85 as referring to what can be called *covenantal submission*. This refers to a form of obedience rooted in human *fiṭrah*—the natural disposition and primordial covenant (*mīthāq al-ma’khūdh*) between humans and God established at creation.¹⁹² Hence, for Ṭabāṭabā‘ī, Islam is not merely a religious identity or a set of rituals, but the deepest expression of submission to the divine order embedded within human nature itself.

Thus, the interpretations of Qur’an 3:19 and 3:85 by both medieval and modern exegetes show significant development, especially in how the term *islām* is understood over time. By focusing on the gradual shift in the meaning of *islām*, and how scholars construct the narrative of Islam as *the only true path*—as well as how

¹⁹⁰ Al-Sa‘dī, *Taysīr Al-Karīm al-Rahmān Fī Tafṣīr Kalām al-Mannān*, 137.

¹⁹¹ Asad, *The Message of the Qur’ān*, 82; Riḍā Muḥammad Rashīd, *Tafṣīr Al-Qur’ān al-Hakīm Aw Tafṣīr al-Manār*, vol. 3 (Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2005), 213–14.

¹⁹² Ṭabāṭabā‘ī, *Al-Mīzān Fī Tafṣīr al-Qur’ān*, 3:386.

they address the *fate of others*—we can see that their views carry various implications. The most important point that appears consistently across generations is that *islām*, in its outward meaning, refers to *submission* or *obedience*. Furthermore, in the pre-modern era, the meaning of *islām* was generally shaped by a theological-normative framework. In modern Islamic theology, this is often described as *exclusive*, especially in relation to the salvation of non-Muslims in the Hereafter.

However, even in medieval interpretations, scholars did not always agree that *islām* was limited only to the religion brought by Prophet Muhammad. In several cases—such as in the views of Ibn Kathīr and Al-Thaʿlabī—they described *islām* as a label for any community whose prophets brought the message of *tawḥīd* (monotheism). This perspective, in turn, is echoed in some modern interpretations. While some modern exegetes still associate *islām* with *submission* and *tawḥīd*, many tend to broaden its meaning. As a result, they offer a more *inclusive* understanding of the term. That being said, in a few cases, there remains a strong attitude that maintains the close link between submission and *tawḥīd* in a more *radical* and *uncompromising* way—as clearly seen in the works of Al-Saʿdī and Sayyid Qutb.

4.3 The Study Quran on Q 3:19 and 3:85: Continuity or Departure?

After examining ten interpretations related to the meaning of *islām* and the discourse on the fate of non-Muslims according to the Qur'an, we now move forward to see how *The Study Quran* (TSQ), a 21st-century tafsīr and the main object of this study, positions itself within this broader interpretive context. At a first glance, by closely examining the table above, we can see that *submission* becomes a key term in interpreting Q 3:19 and Q 3:85. TSQ's understanding of *islām* as *submission* is essentially a compilation of meanings already found in previous interpretations—it is nothing entirely new. Caner Dagli, the contributor for both verses, defines *islām* as “both the proper name of the religion revealed through the Prophet Muhammad and a state that describes the adherents of any true religion who conform themselves to God's will.”¹⁹³

¹⁹³ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 135.

From this definition, two main meanings emerge. The former refers to *islām* as a specific religious community, which is narrower in scope, while the latter refers to the verbal noun from the root *aslama*, describing a broader state of submission that can apply to a wider group. If we closely examine the developments of earlier interpretations, it is clear that both of these meanings are not new in the tafsīr tradition of these two verses. Defining *islām* as the name of a religion is a view shared by many earlier exegetes, especially the ten discussed in this study. However, Dagli appears to favor the second reading. This is evident in the next part of his commentary, where he immediately continues with a linguistic analysis—similar to Rashīd Riḍā—highlighting the fact that the Qur'an refers to certain pre-Muhammadan figures as Muslims.¹⁹⁴ Therefore, in this case, TSQ leans more towards the interpretation of *islām* found in modern tafsīrs, rather than those of the five pre-modern exegetes mentioned in this study. Nevertheless, as with the first reading, it is important to note that this interpretation is also not entirely new.

Regarding both verses—Q 3:19 and Q 3:85—which, as previously discussed by many modern scholars, have often been used to support exclusivist interpretations, TSQ offers a detailed response to this debate. In addressing the interpretation of *al-Islām* as “the only true path,” Dagli synthesizes views from both classical and modern exegetes previously discussed in this study, while also adding elaborations that seem absent in earlier commentaries—at least among those referenced here. Acknowledging the presence of exclusivist readings, Dagli notes that some claim Q 3:19 implies that only the narrowly defined Islam is acceptable to God. Similarly, regarding Q 3:85, Dagli points out that there are interpretations suggesting this verse abrogates the more inclusive promise of salvation in al-Baqarah 62, which allows for the salvation of non-Muslim communities.¹⁹⁵

In response, Dagli presents several arguments that reject this restrictive view. He is particularly concerned with how a limited definition of *islām* can result in a similarly limited concept of salvation. To support his argument, he employs philological analysis and references to medieval tafsīr, showing that a broader

¹⁹⁴ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 135.

¹⁹⁵ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 153.

definition of *islām* has been recognized by many Muslims. Similar to Asad, who affirms that the essential meaning of *islām* in the Qur'an is never confined to one specific religion, Dagli argues that the Qur'anic usage of the term includes other valid monotheistic traditions. Therefore, reading Q 3:85 as abrogating Q 2:62 does not sufficiently reflect the broader Qur'anic application of *islām*.¹⁹⁶ In addition, he argues that abrogation only applies in specific cases within Islamic law and should not be extended to narrative verses like Q 2:62. His second argument comes from the interpretations of Ibn Kathīr and al-Zamakhsharī, both of whom define *islām* as “a path other than God has laid down” or as simply *Divine unity*, thus opening up the possibility that this term may also include non-Muslims, such as the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*). Finally, Dagli offers a third argument based on *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation), as mentioned by al-Tha'labī and Ibn 'Ajībah. They note that this verse was revealed in response to twelve members of the *anṣār* (the Helpers) who chose to leave Islam and join the Meccan polytheists.¹⁹⁷ In light of this, Dagli suggests that the clause in Q 3:85 which discussed the non-acceptance of *islām* may only refer to those who apostatized after embracing Islam, rather than to other cases.¹⁹⁸ However, it is crucial to mention that not all of Dagli's arguments have been previously articulated within the tafsīr tradition. While the first two arguments are found in earlier tafsīrs, the third one is arguably unique or at least difficult to find in previous works.

Thus, the interpretation of the two verses above and their connection to previous interpretations shows that *TSQ* strongly considers the voices of earlier commentators. At the same time, it also presents a reconstruction of meaning—where Caner Dagli, the author of this particular section, explicitly disagrees with the exclusive interpretation of *al-Islam* as the only true path thereby aligning more with modern commentators such as Riḍā, Asad, and Ṭabāṭabā'ī. Especially in the example of *asbāb al-nuzūl* just discussed, *TSQ* demonstrates that although it heavily refers to earlier *tafsīrs*, it still constitutes a *new commentary*, as Nasr states in the introduction. Overall, *TSQ* continues to show loyalty and respect toward the earlier

¹⁹⁶ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 153.

¹⁹⁷ Ibn 'Ajībah, *Al-Baḥr al-Madīd Fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Majīd*, 1–5:377; al-Tha'labī, *Al-Kashf Wa al-Bayān 'an Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 8:458.

¹⁹⁸ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 154.

commentators referenced in this study. This is evident in its inclusion of interpretations that they do not completely agree with and particularly in how they carefully choose the word *submission*—a term in English that conveys the act of surrendering to a higher authority. This captures the core message of *islām* as *tawḥīd*, as developed by classical *mufasssīrūn*.

Now that TSQ has clearly stated a different interpretation from some previous commentators, as seen in the example above, it raises several questions. One major question is: which direction does TSQ lean toward? Does this suggest that its interpretation is closer to that of modernist exegetes, especially now that we know it does not follow some medieval commentators? Another important question, especially in the context of this verse, is: if TSQ does not agree with exclusivist readings, could it be that this so-called “traditional tafsīr” is actually more inclusive, universal, or even pluralistic?

To answer these questions, one of the best ways is to examine the factors that shape TSQ’s interpretation or, more specifically, the alternative interpretations it adopts. In addition to the data already discussed regarding Dagli’s rejection of exclusivist interpretations of Q 3:19 and 3:85, we can also explore how TSQ understands the relationship between Islam and other religions, as well as the way its contributors interpret verses that carry more universal meanings. Regarding the relationship between Islam and other religions, Dagli includes a short excursus meant to help readers better understand the term *Islam* as used in the two verses—and very likely as it appears more generally in the Qur’an. This excursus is actually an essay written by another TSQ contributor, Joseph Lombard, who discusses how the Qur’an views other religions within a framework of *covenantal history*.¹⁹⁹

According to Lombard, *tawḥīd* (the oneness of God), which is the main message brought by the Prophet Muhammad, is actually a continuation of what was revealed to Jesus and other prophets, all the way back to Adam. Thus, human history

¹⁹⁹ Joseph E. B. Lombard, “The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions,” in *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, First edition, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, with Dakake Maria M. and Caner K. Dagli (HarperOne, An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2015).

is essentially about God’s repeated reminders through revelation.²⁰⁰ The Qur’an also mentions covenants between God and earlier communities, such as Jews and Christians, as found in al-A’rāf 172. In connection with this, Lombard highlights that all humans are born with a *fiṭrah* (a primordial nature), which dates back to the descent of Adam and Eve from Heaven.²⁰¹ The main task of all God-revealed religions, through devotion and universal submission, is to affirm this *primordial covenant* and the *fiṭrah* within each person.²⁰² Therefore, the core meaning of *islām*, which is also evident in the two verses discussed by Dagli, is *total submission*—a principle that goes beyond a religion limited to one specific community.

A more complete picture of how TSQ understands other religions—and the broader question of the fate of non-Muslims in the hereafter—can be found by examining their interpretations of more universal verses. In the broader discussion of religious pluralism, particularly concerning salvation, Kamali and Khalil identify three major theological views that emerge from different interpretations of the Qur’an and Islamic tradition.²⁰³ Each view relies on specific “favorite” verses and reads other verses differently. For example, verses like Āl ‘Imrān 19 and 85 are often used to support exclusivist readings, while other verses such as al-Baqarah 62, al-Mā’idah 48, and al-Kāfirūn 6 are usually highlighted by those supporting more universalist or inclusive views. Since the first two verses have been discussed and Dagli has expressed disagreement with traditional exclusivist interpretations, the next three verses can further strengthen the analysis (even if briefly) by showing TSQ’s broader theological orientation.

²⁰⁰ Lombard, “The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions,” 1765.

²⁰¹ Lombard, “The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions,” 1772.

²⁰² Lombard, “The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions,” 1778.

²⁰³ These three categories include two extreme positions. On one side is the **pluralist** view, which recognizes Islam as only one among many valid paths to the truth. On the other side is the **exclusivist** view, which limits the path to truth (and salvation) solely to Islam, rejecting the possibility of salvation outside it. In between, there is the **inclusivist** position. This view maintains that Islam is indeed the true religion, but it also allows the possibility that some people outside Islam might be exceptions. Therefore, these individuals could still be on a path of truth and be saved in the Hereafter. See Mohammad Hassan Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 6–7; Kamali, “Diversity and Pluralism,” 34.

A brief reading of TSQ's commentary on Q 2:62²⁰⁴, Q 5:48²⁰⁵, and Q 109:6²⁰⁶ shows a consistent tendency toward an *inclusivist-universalist* interpretation. Each verse is interpreted by a different contributor, yet all of them critique interpretations that try to limit the broader meanings of these verses. For instance, in Q 2:62, Dagli offers a relatively long explanation. He argues not only that this verse cannot be abrogated—because it is not a legal verse—but also that it clearly shows God's mercy toward non-Muslims. Referring to medieval scholars such as al-Qushayrī (d. 1072) and al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), who discussed the possibility of salvation outside of Islam, Dagli adds:

“Many commentators on this verse disallow those who deny Islam and the Prophet to be included among those who are saved from eternal fear and grief, but as al-Ghazzali's position makes clear, such denial is hard to verify, especially since one's rejection of Islam in later times might simply be a verdict pronounced upon Muslims and not upon the Prophet himself.”²⁰⁷

By choosing to follow the opinions of medieval scholars who allowed the possibility of salvation beyond the followers of Muhammad, Dagli is also criticizing those scholars who limit salvation to Muslims only. Thus, this reading clearly leans toward an *inclusive* view regarding the question of salvation.

In another example, Maria Dakake comments on Q 5:48—a verse widely regarded as affirming human and even religious diversity. On the part of the verse that says “for each among you We have appointed a law and a way,” Dakake reviews various interpretations of *shir‘ah* (law) and *minhāj* (way). Muqātil, for example,

²⁰⁴ This verse translated (in *TSQ*) as following : “Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabianswhosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve”. Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 32–33.

²⁰⁵ This verse translated (in *TSQ*) as following: “And We have sent down unto thee the Book in truth, confirming the Book that came before it, and as a protector over it. So judge between them in accordance with what God has sent down, and follow not their caprices away from the truth that has come unto thee. For each among you We have appointed a law and a way. And had God willed, He would have made you one community, but [He willed otherwise], that He might try you in that which He has given you. So vie with one another in good deeds. Unto God shall be your return all together, and He will inform you of that wherein you differ.” Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 300.

²⁰⁶ “Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion”. Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 1572.

²⁰⁷ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 31–32.

interpreted both as *Islam*, and Ibn Kathīr similarly read them as references to Islam, making their interpretations exclusivist. However, Dakake argues that the next part of the verse, which speaks about God’s will in creating diverse communities, makes these exclusivist interpretations less appropriate. She strengthens her argument by citing five other Qur’anic verses that also mention the religious diversity of humanity.²⁰⁸ Thus, like Dagli—although this case is less focused on salvation—Dakake also critiques exclusivist readings, especially in a modern context where this verse is seen as “confirming the essential truth of different religious forms.”

One final verse, which is arguably one of the most well-known even among lay Muslims, is Q 109:6. This verse touches on theological issues and reflects how the Qur’an navigates the relationship between Muslims and others. In TSQ, the commentary on this verse is written by Joseph Lumbard. While this verse is often seen in the modern world as promoting religious pluralism and peaceful coexistence, it has also sparked theological debates among classical commentators. Lumbard explains:

“According to some, this verse was abrogated by the Sword Verse (Q 9:5), which commands: ‘Slay the idolaters wheresoever you find them...’ Others say the entire *sūrah* was abrogated. Still others say that the verse is not abrogated, because it is only a report (*khābar*), not a command (*amr*), and according to most scholars abrogation only applies to commands.”²⁰⁹

Indeed, based on some medieval commentaries, one might conclude that Q 109:6 was abrogated by the “verse of the sword” or other war-related verses. Therefore, those interpretations do not emphasize tolerance or inclusivity in matters of *‘aqīdah* (creed), especially since, as Ṭabarī notes, the verse was revealed when the Prophet Muhammad rejected an offer of compromise from the Meccan idolaters.²¹⁰ However, Lumbard argues—like Dagli did regarding Q 3:85—that this

²⁰⁸ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 301.

²⁰⁹ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 1572.

²¹⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān ‘an Tā’wīlī Āy al-Qur’ān*, Beirut, 7:576.

verse is not a legal ruling but a theological statement. Thus “*the two verses are not necessarily contradictory*”.²¹¹

Three verses that were previously discussed, along with two additional ones—Q 3:19 and 3:85—show a recurring pattern: each commentator tends to interpret the meanings in a broader way than those who try to restrict them. This leads us to a theological view that is clearly not exclusivist. However, a question remains: if we go back to Khalil’s earlier categorization, where can we place *The Study Quran* (TSQ)? This is certainly not an easy question to answer, especially considering the encyclopedic nature of TSQ, which presents multiple views and makes any clear classification quite difficult. While TSQ appears to give considerable room for recognizing truth (and salvation) outside the followers of Muhammad, the findings from the interpretations of these verses also show that TSQ still gives a special position to the religion of Islam and puts strong emphasis on *tawḥīd*. Therefore, it does not suggest that all religions arrive at the same truth.

In my argument, the interpretation of the five verses above seems to imply that being a follower of Muhammad is indeed a reason for receiving salvation in the Hereafter. However, since the meaning of *islām* is not limited to a formal religion but more to an attitude or state of submission, it allows space for other religious traditions to be included in that definition. If pluralism is defined as the belief that all religions are equally valid, then TSQ does not hold this view. For this reason, I categorize the view of salvation in TSQ as *liberal inclusivist* or *monotheistic inclusivism*, as also mentioned by Khalil at the end of his work.

In his book, Khalil explains that most theological views on salvation fall somewhere in the middle—between exclusivism and pluralism—under the category of *inclusivism*. This view holds that there may be people outside of Islam who receive salvation, although there are different opinions within this group about who exactly is saved.²¹² As a result, Khalil divides it into *limited inclusivism*, which has a narrower view on who receives God’s mercy, and *liberal inclusivism*, which is more open. To illustrate liberal inclusivism, Khalil mentions Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240),

²¹¹ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 1572.

²¹² Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others*, 11–12.

whose characteristics, in my view, can also be found in the interpretations in TSQ. These include how *islām* is understood, the concept of *fiṭrah*, and the relationship between Islam and other Abrahamic religions. If examined closely, we can see that one influences the other. To put it simply, the Qur’anic view on sacred history and other religions—as found in TSQ—shares the same framework as Ibn ‘Arabi’s perspective.²¹³

One might argue—and this is quite tempting—that TSQ’s view is closer to the pluralists, especially because the teacher of its chief editor, Frithjof Schuon, as categorized by Khalil is a modern pluralist thinker.²¹⁴ However, Hossein Nasr himself, like Ibn ‘Arabi, states that there is a hierarchy among prophets—placing Prophet Muhammad above the others. Even though he affirms that all prophets (and religions) are equally important, the newer revelation outshines the previous ones. In his words: “the earlier prophets lose none of their spiritual significance. Rather, they appear in the Islamic firmament as stars, while the Prophet is like the moon in that Islamic sky.” This idea, as Khalil notes, resonates strongly with Ibn ‘Arabi’s view.²¹⁵ Therefore, based on these findings, TSQ still sets boundaries regarding who is considered under the broad umbrella of *islām*, with the strongest emphasis placed on *tawḥīd* or monotheism. For this reason, in addition to calling TSQ’s interpretation *liberal inclusivist*, I also describe it as *monotheistic inclusivist*.

4.4 Reassessing Q 4:34²¹⁶: Gender and Authority in *The Study Quran*

²¹³ Compared with *The Study Quran*, Ibn ‘Arabi’s perspective—as noted by Khalil—reflects a kind of intellectual genealogy. One of the most significant examples, as clearly demonstrated in this study, concerns the term *Islam*, in which Ibn ‘Arabi prefers to interpret it as *submission* (*inqiyād*) rather than merely the name of a specific religion. Furthermore, he also asserts that absolute truth is not the exclusive possession of any one community. Instead, it is realized through a network of spiritual continuity—an idea also conveyed by Lumbard in *The Study Quran* through concepts such as the primordial norm (*fiṭra*) and the religious covenant Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others*, 56–60.

²¹⁴ Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others*, 57.

²¹⁵ Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others*, 210.

²¹⁶ This verse translated (in TSQ) as following: “Men are the upholders and maintainers of women by virtue of that in which God has favored some of them above others and by virtue of their spending from their wealth. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [their husbands’] absence what God has guarded. As for those from whom you fear discord and animosity, admonish them, then leave them in their beds, then strike them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Truly God is Exalted, Great.” Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 206–8.

As noted by Rippin and Mubarak, no verse has shocked the modern world—particularly in relation to women—more than Q 4:34.²¹⁷ Through this verse, the Qur'an and its interpretation suddenly become subjects of serious discussion. While some view this verse as evidence of Islam's alleged misogyny, others—particularly among Muslims—see it as a crucial site for interpretive reconstruction. As with the previous themes, this verse has sparked modern debates due to the presence of a Qur'anic term that is open to multiple interpretations, which has led to divergent views. This is especially the case because the verse touches on several contemporary issues, such as religious authority, gender relations, and the role of power. In short, these verses are understood differently by interpreters of the modern period compared to their pre-modern counterparts. Thus, since this chapter aims to examine the interpretive trajectory of TSQ and its position within broader modern exegetical discourse, Q 4:34 is highly relevant as an additional case study. However, due to space limitations and the verse's length, this section serves more as a detour—with the assumption that, despite not being discussed in full depth, this verse cannot be ignored due to the richness of the debates it has generated.

Q 4:34 and its interpretations have produced a wide range of insights from academic scholars, social practitioners, gender activists, and sociologists.²¹⁸ The debates around this verse are so extensive that some scholars have written entire books based solely on this verse—or even on just part of it.²¹⁹ As Saeed and Ghafurnia note, this verse represents a site of debate between two main camps: those

²¹⁷ Rippin, *Muslims*, 251; Hadia Mubarak, *Rebellious Wives, Neglectful Husbands: Controversies in Modern Qur'anic Commentaries*, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press New York, 2022), 126, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197553305.001.0001>.

²¹⁸ For the writings of the diverse mentioned figures See Nafiseh Ghafournia, "Towards a New Interpretation of Quran 4:34," *Hawwa* 15, no. 3 (2017): 279–92, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15692086-12341309>; Muhammad Hashem, "Wife Beating: Modern Readings of the Qur'ān (4:34)," *Bulletin of The Faculty of Languages & Translation* 3, no. 2 (2012): 6–50, <https://doi.org/10.21608/bflt.2012.166476>; Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century*, 111–28; Aisha Geissinger, *Gender and Muslim Construction of Exegetical Authority: A Rereading of the Classical Genre of Qur'ān Commentary*, Islamic History and Civilization, volume 117 (Brill, 2015), 42–46; Ibrahim Celene, "Verse 4:34 Abjure Symbolic Violence, Rebuff Feminist Partiality, or Seek Another Hermeneutic?," in *Muslim Women and Gender Justice: Concepts, Sources, and Histories*, ed. Dina El Omari et al., Routledge Islamic Studies Series (Routledge, 2020).

²¹⁹ Further look at the book in question See John A. Morrow, *The Most Controversial Qur'anic Verse: Why 4:34 Does Not Promote Violence Against Women*, with Charles Upton and Abdülaziz Bayındır (Hamilton Books, 2020); Ayesha S. Chaudhry, *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition: Ethics, Law, and the Muslim Discourse on Gender*, Oxford Islamic Legal Studies (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2014).

who adopt patriarchal interpretations and those who propose non-patriarchal interpretations.²²⁰ Classical exegetes are generally placed in the former group. Beyond the fact that tafsīr is a genre that is typically conservative and dialectical, many classical-medieval interpreters (though not all) are believed to have read this verse through the lens of patriarchal culture rather than deriving such values directly from the Qur'an.²²¹ As Geissinger highlights, these scholars often used Q 4:34 as a tool for constructing gender ideology, elaborating on assumed essential differences between men and women and the ontological superiority of men over women.²²² On the other hand, the modern period has seen the rise of new interpretations shaped by a spirit of reconstruction and reevaluation. While some label these interpretations as reformist or feminist, others prefer to call them contextualist. At their core, as the following paragraphs will elaborate, these modern interpreters seek to correct what they see as flawed readings by earlier male exegetes—readings that have produced interpretations unfriendly to women. Thus, today we find two general trajectories in gender-related tafsīr, particularly concerning what some scholars have dubbed the “domestic violence verse” in Q 4:34.

However, as some scholars remind us, this interpretive divide is not as black-and-white as it may seem. Not all classical-medieval interpretations are patriarchal, and likewise, not all modern ones are non-patriarchal. The interpretation of Ibn ‘Āshūr (d. 1973)—who revived the opinions of Atā’ ibn Abī Rabāḥ (d. 733), Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1148), and al-Rāzī, as elaborated by Mubarak—can serve as an example that supports this point.²²³ To put it simply, one can find “progressive” interpretations in the medieval era and patriarchal ones in the modern era. Returning to Q 4:34, this verse essentially addresses three major themes: the concept of qiwāmah, the description of righteous women, and nushūz (marital disobedience), along with its disciplinary steps. Even discussing just one of these themes can help us trace how interpretations have shifted over time. For example, Saeed focuses solely on the first part, namely qiwāmah, as a small yet significant part of his broader

²²⁰ Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century*, 111–28; Ghafournia, “Towards a New Interpretation of Quran,” 279–92.

²²¹ Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century*, 124.

²²² Geissinger, *Gender and Muslim Construction of Exegetical Authority*, 43–44.

²²³ Mubarak, *Rebellious Wives, Neglectful Husbands*, 243.

contextualist approach. Similarly, Hashem analyzes only the final part of the verse to understand how modern interpretations compare with those of Islamic scholars across intellectual history. This section, therefore, attempts to bring both approaches together—while still serving as a complement to the previous sections rather than a stand-alone, in-depth discussion.

Q 4:34	The meaning of		Personal Preference
	<i>qawwāmūn</i>	<i>waḍribūhunn</i>	
al-Tabari (d. 923) ²²⁴	Ahl qiyām (upholders and maintainers)	ḍarban ghair mubarrih (light blow)	
al-Tha'labī (d. 1035) ²²⁵	Musallaṭūn, bāligūn fī al-qiyaṃ	ḍarban ghair mubarrih walā syā'in (light, non- embarrassing blows)	ahl qiyām
Al-Rāzi (d. 1210) ²²⁶	Musallaṭūn (put in charge over), Ahl qiyām	ḍarban ghair mubarrih (light blow)	
Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) ²²⁷	Ahl qiyām, raīs, kabīr, hākīm	ḍarban ghair mubarrih (light blow)	Ahl qiyām
Jalālayn (d. 1459 and d. 1505) ²²⁸	Musallaṭūn	ḍarban ghair mubarrih (light blow)	
Ibn Ajbah (d. 1809) ²²⁹	Ahl qiyām	ḍarban ghair muallim walā syā'in	
Rashīd Riḍā (d.1935) ²³⁰	Ahl qiyām	ḍarban ghair mubarrih (light blow)	
al-Sa'dī (d.1957) ²³¹	guardians	ḍarban ghair mubarrih (light blow)	

²²⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīli Āy al-Qur'ān*, Beirut, 2:451–53.

²²⁵ al-Tha'labī, *Al-Kashf Wa al-Bayān 'an Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 10:289–93.

²²⁶ Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr Al-Kabīr Aw Maḥāṭih al-Ghayb*, 10 :90–93.

²²⁷ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān al- 'Aẓīm*, 477–78.

²²⁸ al-Maḥallī and al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr Al-Jalālayn*, 139.

²²⁹ Ibn 'Ajbā, *Al-Baḥr al-Madīd Fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Majīd*, 1:498–99.

²³⁰ Muḥammad Rashīd, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān al-Hakīm Aw Tafsīr al-Manār*, 5:55.

²³¹ Al-Sa'dī, *Taysīr Al-Karīm al-Rahmān Fī Tafsīr Kalām al-Mannān*, 177.

Tabātabā'iy (d. 1981)	Ahl qiyām biamri gairihi (<i>upholders for other than himself</i>)	-
Muhammad Asad (d. 1992) ²³²	Take full care of women or undertook the maintenance of the woman	Beat them with ḍarban ghair mubarrih (light blow)
Laleh Bakhtiar (d. 2020) ²³³	Supporters	go away
Edip Yüksel (w.2010) ²³⁴	to support the women	separate them
Seyyed Hossein Nasr, et.al (w.2015) ²³⁵	the upholders and maintainers	Strike them with ḍarban ghair mubarrih (light non-injurious strike)

Figure 4.2

By taking a closer look at the table above, we can see the diversity of interpretations (or translations) regarding the two key terms in Q 4:34. In addition, we also find elaborations that more or less align with the meaning of *qawwāmūn* as discussed by both medieval and modern figures. However, the idea of men as the dominant party is not as strongly emphasized in the modern era, as shown at least by the last three figures before TSQ in the table above. However, even though the majority of scholars mentioned above agree on limiting the term *darb* to a light, non-injurious strike, a significant shift can be observed in the translations of Bakhtiar and Yüksel. Therefore, at least linguistically, the terms *qawwāmūn* and *waḍribūhunn* do not carry a fixed or unquestioned meaning in today's context.

So, how is the concept of *qiwāmah* elaborated in this verse according to TSQ and other interpretations? To begin with, there are generally two main currents in its interpretation: while some still emphasize male leadership or dominance, others—especially modern scholars—offer quite different perspectives. TSQ itself, however,

²³² Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 127.

²³³ Laleh Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Quran: Original Arabic and English Translation*, Rev. ed, Chicago: Library of Islam ; Distributed by Kazi Publications, 2011), 144.

²³⁴ Yüksel et al., *Quran*, 93.

²³⁵ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 206.

seems to position itself somewhere in the middle, although overall it leans closer to the first group. Dakake, the contributor for this verse, includes “patriarchal” interpretations by referencing classical scholars who offer two justifications for hierarchy in the verse: ‘spiritual’ and ‘worldly distinctions’ though she does not provide any critical commentary on these justifications.²³⁶ In fact, even a quick glance at medieval tafsīr would confirm what Saeed has argued—that these interpretations are more influenced by the patriarchal context of their time than by the Qur'an itself.²³⁷ As a result, on the other end of the spectrum, Saeed continues by explaining how social change in the 20th century has necessitated a contextual reading—one that aims to uphold fairness and reflect the universal spirit of the Qur'an.²³⁸ As shown in the table above, modern interpretations tend to present this verse as promoting gender relations based on equality, rather than the subordination of women found in many premodern readings.

This modern reading primarily draws upon the continuation of the verse: “*by virtue of that in which God has favored some of them above others and by virtue of their spending from their wealth.*” The financial aspect, therefore, becomes a key factor in justifying male leadership. In the context of modern interpretation, this is important because socio-cultural and political changes have transformed family structures—such that the husband is no longer always the one who holds authority. As a result, contemporary scholars such as Wadud, Barlas, and al-Hibri argue that *qiwāmah*, rather than being about male superiority, is specifically tied to financial responsibility—something that can be forfeited when a husband fails to fulfill his duties. Abu Zayd, as also noted by Saeed, even goes further by suggesting that the wife can become *qawwāmūn* when guided by the Qur'anic spirit of justice.²³⁹

Returning to TSQ, Dakake also alludes to the possibility of *qiwāmah* being forfeited by referencing Ibn ‘Ajībah. However, she also brings in other views, such as that of al-Qurṭubī, who asserts that *qiwāmah* cannot simply be abolished, because the title stems from the act of financial support—thus, when that support disappears,

²³⁶ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 206.

²³⁷ Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century*, 124.

²³⁸ Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century*, 125.

²³⁹ Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century*, 124.

qiwāmah does too.²⁴⁰ Yet Dakake does not pursue this discussion further, as many contemporary female scholars have done. Most importantly, regarding the husband's position as *qawwāmūn*, Dakake aligns with the majority of classical-medieval exegetes, as shown in her opening statement for this verse.

This verse is the clearest statement of a man's role and authority in the marital relationship as head of the household in relation to his responsibility to provide for his wife. Other verses suggest mutuality in the relationship between husband and wife (1:187,233) but this verse indicates a hierarchy from a certain perspective between the two, at least on the social plane (see also, 2:228).²⁴¹

Through this statement, we can see that TSQ's reading of the verse offers little or no emphasis on the present-day context, and instead adopts a more conservative stance by aligning with classical interpretations. By affirming key terms such as "authority" and "hierarchy," it clearly starts from a different point than more recent interpretations, which attempt to move away from such concepts and instead highlight values like equality or "mutuality in relationship"—a direction that, as suggested in the passage, is implicitly critiqued.

The next part of verse 4:34 that deserves attention is the term *waḍribūhunna* and how TSQ situates its interpretation in relation to both classical-medieval and modern readings. The word *waḍribūhunna* here refers to the last step a husband may take if he finds his wife engaging in *nushūz*, which, as Dakake explains, may range in meaning from disobedience to the husband to neglecting his rights. Once again, TSQ interprets this part by following the mainstream line of classical-medieval tafsīr, which—as reflected in the table—permits this strike but with the condition that it be the last resort and that it be a non-injurious strike (*ghayr mubarriḥ*). In her explanation of 4:34, Dakake provides a relatively detailed elaboration, making it clear to readers that while this action may be permitted, there are many important caveats. By reading TSQ's interpretation closely—just as one might examine, for instance, the medieval tafsīr of al-Rāzī—one could conclude that this verse is far from being a direct command. In fact, from a normative perspective, as Hashem

²⁴⁰ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 206.

²⁴¹ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 206.

notes, it may even be rendered *makrūh* (discouraged).²⁴² However, simply stating that the verse allows for alternative meanings is a different matter altogether. Dakake also comments on this issue as following:

Some recent interpretations of “strike them” seek to avoid the sense of physical hitting entirely by invoking alternate idiomatic meanings of *daraba* (“to strike”), arguing that the verb can mean simply to leave the wife, given other Qur’anic usages of *daraba*, such as *daraba fi al-sabīl* (v. 94), which means to set out on a path, or *daraba fi al-arḍ*, which means to journey (2:273; 3:156; 4:101; 5:106; 73:20). Such interpretations are not entirely convincing, however, since the wider semantic range of *daraba* they invoke is activated only by various prepositions and syntaxes not found in the present verse... Moreover, the occasion of revelation is widely held to be the issue of a man’s right to strike his wife, and so one would expect the verse to address this issue specifically.²⁴³

Toward the end of her commentary, she devotes several paragraphs to critiquing interpretations that attempt to shift the meaning of *waḍribūhunna* as understood not only by some classical exegetes but also in a number of modern ones. Arguably, she has in mind figures such as Wadud, Rif’at, al-Hibri, Yüksel, and the “spiritual student” of Nasr, Laleh Bakhtiar (d. 2020). As seen in the table, the last two figures interpret *waḍribūhunna* as go away and separate them, respectively. However, while Bakhtiar highlights the psychological and ethical aspects of spousal relationships, Yüksel focuses more on linguistic accuracy and rationality in tafsīr.²⁴⁴ Dakake, however, responds to both views, arguing—through philological reasoning and the *asbāb al-nuzūl*—that interpreting the term in other ways does not make sense.²⁴⁵

Thus, based on this reading, it can be concluded that TSQ takes a very conservative approach in reinforcing earlier interpretations of husband-wife relations, rather than adapting to contemporary concerns and situations. However, even the word “conservative” here should not be taken at face value or necessarily viewed negatively without understanding the reasons behind it. In short, rather than

²⁴² Hashem, “Wife Beating.”

²⁴³ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 208.

²⁴⁴ Yüksel et al., *Quran*, 18–19; Laleh Bakhtiar, *Concordance of the Sublime Quran* (Library of Islam, 2011), xlv–xlv.

²⁴⁵ Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*, 208.

merely contrasting TSQ with more contemporary readings, perhaps it is more fruitful to think about all of these interpretations dialectically—that is, by asking: from what point of focus is each interpreter or translator speaking?

4.5 Revisiting Tradition: Final Reflections on the Discourse

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to position The Study Quran's (TSQ) exegetical direction by closely analyzing its interpretations of three selected verses and engaging them in dialogue with both pre-modern and contemporary interpretations. In previous chapters, I have also sought to establish a framework to understand the possibilities of traditional commentaries and how TSQ, as a tafsīr produced in the modern period, constructs a worldview that claims continuity with the pre-modern tradition while also acknowledging its own novelty. Thus, the findings presented in this chapter are interpreted with the aim of offering a conclusion on the essential nature of TSQ as a traditional tafsīr and how it connects to broader discussions of tafsīr in the modern era.

One of the key conclusions that can be drawn from TSQ's interpretation of Q. 3:19, 3:85, and 4:34—which address two major themes—is that TSQ attempts to maintain a balance between respect for and critique of earlier exegetes. In the first two verses, TSQ's primary stance tends to diverge from the exclusivist readings of many medieval exegetes, who understood *'islām* as a formal, narrowly defined religion. Instead, TSQ leans towards a broader interpretation of the term as 'submission,' a meaning also acknowledged by many classical commentators, yet it chooses to expand the interpretive space beyond exclusivist boundaries. Additionally, this broader understanding of *'islām* is reinforced by references to other verses (Q. 2:62, Q. 5:48, Q. 109:6), which according to the three authors, demonstrate the Qur'an's general inclination toward pluralism or at least inclusive readings. The authors repeatedly use the term "inconsistencies" when referring to exclusivist interpretations. Nonetheless, TSQ's inclusion of medieval exclusivist commentaries indicates a careful approach that does not intend to completely sever ties with the tradition.

In contrast, regarding Q. 4:34, TSQ fully supports the traditional pre-modern interpretations of key terms such as *qawwāmūn* and *waḍribūhunna*. It offers only limited engagement with modern re-readings of the verse. For example, Dakake asserts that Q. 4:34 is the clearest verse on gender roles, thereby affirming a hierarchy between husband and wife. She also maintains that *waḍribūhunna* unequivocally means “to strike” (lightly), aligning with what many modern scholars have referred to as patriarchal interpretations. As a result, TSQ situates itself in contrast with many modern humanistic interpretations, which often seek to revise or reject non-egalitarian readings. Therefore, through these two themes, TSQ demonstrates a dual stance—it promotes the exegetical authority of certain classical views while downplaying others. In other words, like many tafsīrs, TSQ is shaped by modern consciousness while wrestling with a vast body of traditional interpretations, ultimately selecting and sidelining specific voices. While it may be tempting to classify TSQ as either absolutely traditionalist or heavily influenced by modern currents, I argue that two core characteristics more accurately define its exegetical perspective.

At its heart, TSQ is a commentary that seeks to revive and articulate traditional interpretations through the lens of contemporary Muslim intellectuals. While the authors assert that the best way to understand the Qur’an is by respecting earlier exegetical traditions, their intellectual context as modern Western Muslim thinkers also informs their interpretive output. In the case of Q. 4:34, TSQ closely follows traditional methodologies such as sequential (*musalsal*) commentary and offers minimal effort to connect the verse to contemporary realities. This method, often criticized today, echoes Muhammad Abduh’s concern that such tafsīr risks rendering the Qur’an a lifeless text. The traditional approach TSQ adopts stems from a collective view held by its authors—one that considers the revival of classical interpretations as a necessary and valid method, as emphasized by Nasr.²⁴⁶

Nonetheless, as discussed in Chapter III, TSQ also exhibits unique features, such as its validation of *ta’wīl* and its ecumenical approach to sources. This, at times,

²⁴⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr - Keynote Address (Part 3), directed by AbuSulayman Center for Global Islamic Studies, 2023, 3, 17:08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TORYxbi1sp4>.

leads to the neglect of broader interpretive traditions. Consequently, some critics question TSQ's traditionalist claim. Fudge, for instance, argues that TSQ, while committed to fidelity toward classical tafsīrs, is still a modern product attempting to reconcile the Qur'an with contemporary values—especially its inclusivist stance toward other religions. Thus, he regards its traditionalist claim as rhetorical rather than methodological.²⁴⁷ Similarly, Vaid critiques TSQ's representation of traditional tafsīr, pointing to instances in Islamic law and theology where TSQ deviates from classical consensus, suggesting a lack of full commitment to traditional epistemology.²⁴⁸ Despite these criticisms, this study has shown that TSQ also displays a deep continuity with traditional commentaries, particularly in Q. 4:34, where it upholds classical views on *qiwāmah* and *nushūz*.

Another key feature influencing TSQ's exegetical vision, as reflected in this chapter's findings and echoed by critics, is its universalist outlook, especially in relation to other religions. Compared to Q. 4:34, the interpretations of Q. 3:19 and 3:85 significantly depart from classical readings, favoring alternative views. While one may initially classify TSQ as leaning toward modernist interpretations based on this evidence, further investigation reveals a segmented and complex orientation. TSQ aims to synthesize spiritual universalism rather than adopt a purely rationalist or reformist framework.

Indeed, as Nasr affirms, “there is no sacred scripture that is as universalist in its religious perspective as the Quran where God continues to refer al-Dīn as embracing religion in general were the plural of prophet or messenger (rusul) is used all the time where different sacred books are mentioned... we live in different ambiance in which the necessity of the reformulation and expansion of the universalist message of the Quran is extremely important and central.”²⁴⁹ This underscores TSQ's framework of universalist unity, particularly in Q. 3:19 and 3:85. This stance raises a critical question: is TSQ merely pretending to represent traditional tafsīr, or, as critics argue, is it actually a product of perennialist thought?

²⁴⁷ Fudge, “Study the Quran or The Study Quran?,” 2018, 582–84.

²⁴⁸ Vaid, “The Study Quran Review,” 118.

²⁴⁹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr - Keynote Address (Part 4), 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tsrgvb-w-4>.

Fudge, for instance, suggest that TSQ leans toward perennialism and is therefore ambiguously positioned between classical and modern tafsīr.²⁵⁰

However, the response to this criticism is not straightforward. In the continuation of Nasr's statement, he stresses that this universalist message must be reformulated within an Islamic framework based on the Qur'an itself.²⁵¹ This becomes a guiding principle for TSQ's authors. Lombard, for example, despite his critiques towards exclusivist theological readings of Q. 3:19 and 3:85, he emphasizes the necessity for Muslims to provide a response that remain within a traditional framework. Rather than rejecting classical interpretations outright—as some contemporary pluralists do, according to Lombard, there are alternative traditional readings to the issue.²⁵² As a result, as the findings suggested, in interpreting Q 3:85 and Q 2:62, TSQ departs from most classical and medieval exegetes. Yet, this is not done arbitrarily; TSQ still engages with the views of other medieval voices such as al-Qushayrī, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn 'Arabī, though it does so in a way that reduces or simplifies their original position.²⁵³ Hence, even though TSQ advances a universalist discourse, they remain stay within the bounds of traditional interpretation.

Therefore, the findings suggest a far more complicated picture. While TSQ clearly embraces a universalist spirit in some verses (Q. 3:19 and 3:85), even

²⁵⁰ Fudge, "Study the Quran or The Study Quran?," 2018, 584–85.

²⁵¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr - Keynote Address (Part 4).

²⁵² Joseph E. B. Lombard, "Qur'anic Inclusivism in an Age of Globalization," in *The Religious Other: Towards a Muslim Theology of Other Religions in a Post-Prophetic Age*, 2. ed, ed. Muḥammad Suhail 'Umar and Iqbal Academy Pakistan (Lahore, 2009), 154–55.

²⁵³ For example, al-Ghazālī, as mentioned by Dagli in his interpretation of Q 2:62, allows for the possibility of salvation for some non-Muslims who have not fully received the message of Islam or who have been misinformed about it. However, based on *al-Iqtiṣād fī al-I'tiqād*, al-Ghazālī still insists that groups such as Jews, Christians, Magians, and idol worshippers are generally considered kāfir (disbelievers). This is because their rejection of the Prophet Muhammad is viewed as *takzīb* (denial), which, according to both scripture and consensus (*ijmā'*), is the basis for labeling someone as a disbeliever. In his argument, al-Ghazālī differentiates between levels of rejection and explains that denying the Prophet—whether explicitly or by rejecting fundamental principles of religion known as *ma'lūm min al-dīn bi al-ḍarūra*—is a legal cause for being classified as a kāfir and, implicitly, for eternal punishment. Therefore, even though he acknowledges exceptions due to ignorance or valid unawareness, the general category of kāfir still applies to those who reject the Prophet, including Jews and Christians. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Al-Iqtiṣād Fī al-I'tiqād*, ed. Anas Muhammad Adnān al-Sharfāwī (Dār al-Minhāj, 2019), 407–9.

challenging classical interpretations, it also upholds radically conservative readings in others (Q. 4:34), affirming its continuity with traditional tafsīr. In addition, the collaborative nature of TSQ and the vast scope of Qur'anic interpretation across thirty *juz'* render any evaluation based on a few verses necessarily partial. Hence, while I acknowledge the strong presence of a perennialist spirit in TSQ, I do not see this as negating its traditional nature. I propose, instead, that TSQ be understood as a traditionalist-universalist tafsīr: one that revives classical voices while simultaneously embracing a broad, inclusive theological vision.

In summary, the analysis reveals TSQ's ambiguity in maintaining commitment to the inherited tafsīr tradition, particularly as it tries to balance traditional genealogy with the universalist worldview of its authors. While this negotiation may characterize all Qur'anic interpretation throughout history, in the modern era it becomes more explicit and pronounced. These findings echo what scholars such as Pink, Brown, and Farouki have noted. While Pink and Brown remind us the remaining trace of the traditionalist voices even though they have been overshadowed by modernist ones, Farouki highlights that acts of preservation and reliance on the tradition sometimes become excessive, affecting attitudes toward specific interpretations.²⁵⁴ Furthermore, the fact that TSQ selectively restricts its tafsīr, even while appearing ecumenical, shows that, as a modern tafsīr, it engages in both suppression and promotion of certain interpretations. This aligns with what scholars like Saleh and Rippin have emphasized: the modern condition compels Muslim thinkers to reformulate Qur'anic interpretation, underlining a key shift in orientation from medieval to modern tafsīr.²⁵⁵ As Saleh puts it, "Writing tafsir in the modern period is not primarily intended to explain the Qur'an."²⁵⁶

Therefore, the defining feature of *The Study Quran* as a contemporary work lies not merely in its commitment to pre-modern exegesis, but in how it engages with the tafsīr tradition through a modern lens of selection, revival, and reformulation. In today's context, nearly all interpretations revolve around engaging

²⁵⁴ Taji-Farouki, *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, 26; Brown, "Scripture in the Modern Muslim World," 28–29; Pink, *Muslim Qur'anic Interpretation Today*, 6.

²⁵⁵ Rippin, *Muslims*, 235.

²⁵⁶ Saleh, "Contemporary Tafsīr," 696.

earlier tafsīrs, resulting in new meanings through this dialogue. In this sense, drawing from Daniel Brown's notion of "rethinking tradition" (originally applied to sunna)²⁵⁷, we can observe how contemporary Muslim exegetes—from the most critical to the most appreciative—are actively involved in a dynamic process of reinterpreting the tafsīr tradition. *The Study Quran* does not merely explain the Qur'an through the lens of tradition; it rearticulates that tradition itself. Thus, while TSQ presents itself as a traditionalist tafsīr, its universalist orientation and epistemological selectivity, in certain cases, lead to interpretations that align more with modern sensibilities than with the medieval voices it seeks to revive. While interpretations such as that of Q. 4:34—grounded in meanings long upheld by generations of exegetes—would likely be well received by students and scholars at faculties of Sharī'a such as al-Azhar University, their theological readings and perspectives on interreligious relations may not be as easily embraced by more traditionally oriented Muslim communities across the globe.

²⁵⁷ Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, Cambridge Middle East Studies 5 (Cambridge university press, 1999), 3–4.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The writing of this thesis was motivated by one overarching question: Is *The Study Quran* (TSQ)—given its rich quotations from classical sources and an avowed traditional claim—an instance of traditional tafsīr as conceptualized in the contemporary textuality? At first sight, TSQ seems to sit in the same widening angle alongside the classical tradition of Qur’anic exegesis. It appeals to the leading pre-modern scholars, it avoids reformist and has a posture suggesting it to being very careful continuation of the existing traditional interpretation. But a closer look reveals that its relationship to tradition is more complicated.

TSQ is a remarkable project. In a time when many contemporary tafsīrs aim to modernize or reform Qur’anic interpretation, TSQ tries to restore respect for the classical tradition. Its use of pre-modern sources across theological and sectarian lines—Sunni, Shi‘i, Sufi—gives it a broad and inclusive appearance. However, as this research has shown, using traditional sources does not automatically make a tafsīr traditional in the full sense of the term. One of the most important insights of this study is that the meaning of “traditional tafsīr” is not fixed or self-evident. Rather, it is a concept that has developed in modern times, especially as Muslims began to respond to challenges like colonialism, secularism, and Western philosophy. What we now call “traditional tafsīr” is not simply what was written in the past, but what is seen today as belonging to a certain model of knowledge—one that values continuity, spiritual authority, and epistemic humility. When we look at TSQ through this lens, it becomes clear that it does not fully fit this model, even if it looks traditional on the surface.

TSQ was produced by a collective of scholars led by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, whose notion of tradition is grounded in Traditionalist-Perennialist philosophy. This school of thought sees all major religions as sharing a sacred core. Nasr believes that Islamic tradition must reflect the eternal truths revealed by God, and not just the legal or literal aspects of the Qur’an. This belief shapes the way TSQ interprets certain verses—especially those dealing with theology and salvation. For example,

in the interpretation of Āl Imrān 19 and 85, which are often understood to emphasize Islam's exclusive claim to truth, TSQ opens the door to more inclusive and pluralistic readings. While it does not reject the classical interpretations, it does not fully commit to them either. Instead, it presents several possible readings, some of which are closer to modern concerns about religious tolerance. This way of interpreting is important. TSQ does not attempt to rewrite tradition in a modernist way, like many reformist tafsīrs do. But it also does not simply repeat what classical scholars have said. It makes careful choices about which parts of the tradition to highlight and which to soften or reframe. In doing so, it constructs a version of tradition that fits certain contemporary values—especially values related to ethics, spirituality, and inclusivity.

Another good example is the interpretation of al-Nisā 34, the verse about male authority and discipline in marriage. Classical scholars often accepted some form of physical discipline as a last resort. TSQ keeps the classical legal meaning but tries to limit it through moral language, ethical warnings, and spiritual context. It avoids giving a modern re-interpretation, but at the same time, it clearly shows discomfort with the literal meaning. This balancing act reflects a broader trend in TSQ: holding onto tradition while trying to speak to a modern audience with different moral expectations. Because of this, TSQ cannot be called a purely traditional tafsīr. It does not operate within the older institutions of knowledge (like madhhab, al-silsila, or isnād), nor does it limit itself to the classical rules of interpretation. Its collaborative method, its English-language format, and its academic tone all show that it is a product of the modern world—even if it strongly respects the tradition. TSQ belongs to a new kind of tafsīr that we might call “traditionalist-universalist.” It works with the materials of the past, but reshapes them to serve present-day concerns and audiences.

This does not mean that TSQ is less valuable than traditional tafsīrs. On the contrary, it shows how the Qur'an continues to inspire new forms of intellectual engagement. But what this study argues is that we must be careful with how we define and use terms like “tradition” and “traditional.” TSQ is not returning to tradition in the same way that pre-modern scholars did. It is choosing parts of the

tradition that fit its message, reinterpreting others, and leaving out what no longer resonates with its audience. This is not a flaw—it is a sign of how tafsīr continues to evolve. But it is important to recognize this process honestly.

The analysis in this study also supports a broader argument made by scholars like Andrew Rippin and Walid Saleh: tafsīr in the modern era is not just about explaining the Qur'an. It is also about negotiating religious authority, responding to the conditions of one's time, and positioning oneself within a larger intellectual tradition. TSQ does all of these things. It offers a deeply researched, carefully worded commentary that tries to balance loyalty to the tradition with moral sensitivity and intellectual independence. But that balance does not come from the classical tafsīr tradition itself—it is created by modern scholars working in a modern context.

This helps explain why TSQ looks traditional but often feels modern. Its style, structure, and selection of sources are shaped by modern academic norms. Its purpose is not to preserve a madhhab, defend a school of theology, or continue a chain of transmission—but to present a meaningful and spiritually rich interpretation of the Qur'an to a global readership. It reflects the shift in Qur'anic interpretation from being a local, institutional discipline to being a global, interdisciplinary one. Today, tafsīr is no longer only the work of scholars inside the traditional Islamic institutions—it is also being done by academics, intellectuals, and public thinkers who speak across cultures and traditions. As a result, TSQ offers something new: not a classical tafsīr, but a modern project that uses the language of tradition to speak to modern readers. This makes it both powerful and difficult to categorize. It challenges the idea that tafsīr must be either “traditionalist” or “modernist.” Instead, it shows that tradition can be reimagined, reassembled, and used in new ways to meet the needs of different communities.

This study hopes to contribute to a more careful and critical understanding of how the idea of tradition works in Qur'anic interpretation today. TSQ proves that tradition is not just inherited—it is also selected, shaped, and sometimes transformed. The project does not simply return to the past—it brings the past into the present, filtered through the values, concerns, and questions of our time. Future

research might compare TSQ with other tafsīrs that make similar claims to tradition, but from different contexts—such as the Arab world, South Asia, or Southeast Asia. Such work would help us understand how tradition continues to live, change, and matter in the modern Muslim world.

In the end, *The Study Quran* does not just preserve the tradition—it reinvents it. It invites us to think again about what tradition is, who speaks for it, and how it can still guide Muslims today. It reminds us that tafsīr has never been static, and that the relationship between text, interpreter, and audience is always dynamic. By studying TSQ, we see how even the most sacred traditions must find new life in each generation—through the hands of those who read, interpret, and believe.

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