MUSLIM QUR’ĀNIC INTERPRETATION TODAY
MEDIA, GENEALOGIES AND INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES

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EPILOGUE: THE QURʾĀN, TEXTUAL INTERPRETATION AND AUTHORITY, OR: MAY HUSBANDS BEAT THEIR WIVES? 284

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In 2005, Muḥammad Sayf al-Dīn Ṭāhā, an Egyptian accountant working in a Gulf state, submitted a six-volume Qur’ānic commentary, or tafsīr, to the Islamic Research Council of al-Azhar, the highest Sunni institution of Egypt, in order to obtain approval for publication. He had taken approximately twenty years to write it. The result consisted of 28,000 lines of verse because it was a tafsīr in poetry – a format for which, Sayf al-Dīn believed, the time was ripe. The following is one of the only two short samples that became known to the public because an Egyptian magazine reported on the case of this tafsīr in 2009.1 It is the commentary on Q. 9:93:

(93) The ones open to blame are those who asked you for exemption despite their wealth, and who preferred to be with those who stay behind. God has sealed their hearts; they do not understand.

On this verse, Sayf al-Dīn Ṭāhā wrote:

God’s judgment comes down on those with might who, despite all their riches, refuse to fight. Coming to you, for exemption they plead. Woe unto them, they are weaklings indeed! A long life they wanted and with the women to stay, but their lives were destroyed; they were chased away. Their hearts we have tightly sealed, the good tidings remain from them concealed. And revelation with its light is forever hidden from their sight.
It took the Islamic Research Council four years to come to a decision which, after some initial dissent, was negative and upheld by a court. After that, the author seems to have made no further attempt to publish this work or any other. The reasons the Council members gave for rejecting the book varied, but none of the ‘ulamā’, or religious scholars, involved ever claimed that the content of the tafsīr was theologically problematic, let alone heretical. Rather, they criticised the bad style of poetry which uses a traditional Arabic metre. The concluding report used that fact to accuse the author of transforming the Qurʾān’s meaning into a superficial and formalistic pattern of metre and rhyme without any artistic value. As such, it deforms and defaces the Qurʾān which amounts to an insult of God. Besides, the reports said, the book does not constitute a work of tafsīr and should therefore not be called that because it does not contribute anything to the understanding of the Qurʾān’s meaning.

This assessment is slightly surprising in view of the fact that even a translation adds to understanding the Qurʾān’s meaning and is therefore called tafsīr in many non-Arabic contexts, for example in Southeast Asia.

In 2016, the well-established Egyptian journalist Muḥammad al-Bāz took up the case as the twenty-first episode of his Ramadan series The Qurʾān in Egypt. The series was published in the print and online newspaper al‑Bawāba, for which he served as editor-in-chief, and shortly thereafter all thirty episodes were printed as a book under the same title. All in all, the series strove to write a comprehensive story of the modern and contemporary interpretation of the Qurʾān in Egypt. Some of its components are surprising and unusual, such as the chapters on the interpretation of the Qurʾān through music and film. What is striking about this book, though, is not only the unconventional, but extremely plausible attempt to situate the Qurʾān in the specific context of a modern nation state, but also the eminently political character of the narrative. Al-Bāz is clearly not in love with the Muslim Brotherhood, but writing at a time at which the Muslim Brotherhood was completely banned in Egypt, he is much more concerned with al-Azhar. Already in the title of the third episode, he asks: ‘Why are the Azhar shaykhs afraid of a contemporary interpretation of the Qurʾān?’

Indeed, Sayf al-Dīn Ṭāhā’s case raises many questions that point to the importance of notions of authority and legitimacy in writing about the Qurʾān. Would the work have been deemed acceptable if it had been written in masterful poetry? Would it have been approved if the author had belonged to the ‘ulamā’ or would they have excluded him from their ranks? Would he have fared better if he had not called his work tafsīr? What, then, are the boundaries of tafsīr? What conditions do a work and its author have to fulfil in order to be allowed to carry that title? And, finally, how would
any of this have been different if it had happened in another country with
different structures of religious authority?

In the case of the failed poet-exegete, al-Bāz surmises that there are
several underlying reasons for the opposition of the shaykhs, other than a
disapproval of bad poetry: a general fear of innovation; an attempt to prevent
anyone from outside the field of the ʿulamāʾ to encroach upon their terri-
tory, especially in unconventional ways that might raise attention; and also
the fear that the Qurʿān and poetry could in any way be associated with each
other while the Qurʿān clearly states that it is not the word of a poet (Q. 36:69,
69:41). That fear is indeed a powerful motive. It had similar consequences for
an Indonesian Qurʿān translator whose verse-by-verse typesetting choices
were deemed too close to poetry by the religious establishment.6 On the other
hand, rhymed Qurʿān translations are published and sold in Turkey.7 This
has much to do with the fact that their authors come from religious groups
that are outside the field of Sunni orthodoxy anyway. They also skilfully
deploy the powerful Turkish-nationalist discourse as a legitimising factor.

The case of Sayf al-Dīn, the thwarted poet, and al-Bāz’s portrayal of the
Qurʿān in Egypt clearly show the importance of local power structures to the
interpretation of the Qurʿān and to the dissemination of such interpretations.
Sometimes, even transnational power structures are invoked when the legit-
imacy of an interpretive approach is contested. Thus, in 2012, two Saudi-
Salafi websites erroneously reported that the rhymed tafsīr was finally going
to be printed – with money from Saudi Arabia’s Shiʿi arch-enemy, Iran.8

The ʿulamāʾ are still a powerful status group. But they can only exert that
power if the state or the society they live in grant them the right to do so; if
their pronouncements carry some weight and are considered authoritative
expressions of Islam either by the government or by substantial segments
of the population. Even when that is the case, though – and it most certainly
is in Egypt – it is becoming harder for any type of religious establishment
to control the plurality of approaches to the Qurʿān. The field is globalising,
and if one country does not offer the liberty to write certain things about
the Qurʿān, others will do so. It is increasingly difficult for governments
to bar access to such ideas, not least because of the internet. Thus, plural-
isation is happening, often because of external pressures. Certain topics,
such as global human rights discourses, might be dominant enough to exert
pressure to seek justification for Qurʿānic statements that do not seem to
conform to them; and specific groups exert pressure in order to achieve such
conformity. It is this complex web of power structures and tensions, local as
well as global, that this book seeks to elucidate.
NOTES

1. Al-Sibāʿī, ‘Qaṣāʾid shiʿr’.
3. The excerpt follows the model of a classical Arabic qaṣīda where each verse consists of two halves, the second of which carries the rhyme. The metre used is wāfīr.
5. Al-Bāz, Al-Qurʾān fī Miṣr.
7. See page 202, ‘Negotiating the boundaries of Islamicness through the Qurʾān: Ali Adil Atalay ‘Vaktidolu’ (b. 1936, Turkey) on Q. 2:21’.