

To what Extent Can the Diversity of Qur'anic Tafsir Be Described as 'Traditions of Reason'

Sejauh Mana Keragaman Tafsir al-Qur'an Dapat Dikategorikan sebagai 'Tradisi-tradisi Rasional'

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Abstract

This paper examines tafsir as one of the oldest scientific disciplines developed by Muslims, who experienced dialectical shifts from time to time. Early tafsir was characterized by the *bi al-mathur* tradition or by its reliance on *riwayah* sources. While it is commonly argued that this mode of interpretation leaves no place for the mufassir's intervention, his subjectivity and rationality in choosing the preferred tradition cannot be ignored. Following that, tafsir evolved according to the *bi al-ra'yi* tradition which is believed to emphasize the mufassir's reasoning while interpreting the Qur'an. This paper is addressed to examine this categorization, using Sherman Jackson's traditions of reason that aim to compromise tafsir with varying hues of traditionalist and rationalist perspectives. This paper employs the library method by reviewing relevant literature to answers the main question. In the end, the limitations of a tafsir can be accepted as traditions of reason as long as the interpretation adheres to the fundamental criteria of interpretation. This includes mufassir's profound understanding, no conflict with other verses or hadith, and, in many cases, its conformity with logic. Traditional and Rational elements are complementary and must be addressed proportionately. The emphasis on reason has the potential to lead to the mufassir's personal preferences and biases. Meanwhile, the usage of traditional *riwayah* will limit interpretive space and the context's applicability.

Keywords: Tafsir; Tradition; Reason

Abstrak:

Tulisan ini membahas mengenai tafsir sebagai salah satu disiplin keilmuan paling awal dari umat Islam yang mengalami pergeseran dialektika dari masa ke masa. Tafsir pada masa awal ditandai dengan tradisi *bi al-mathur* atau yang mengandalkan sumber-sumber periwayatan. Meskipun ruang interpretasi mufassir dapat dikatakan belum ada dalam tradisi ini, mufassir tetap menggunakan subyektivitas dan rasionalitasnya dalam memilih-milih riwayat yang akan dimasukkan dalam penafsirannya. Setelah itu, perkembangan penafsiran kemudian bergeser ke tradisi *bi al-ra'yi* yang mulai mengedepankan rasionalitas mufassir untuk menafsirkan al-Qur'an. Tulisan ini diarahkan untuk melihat fenomena-fenomena ragam tafsir dengan kategori tradisi-tradisi rasional oleh Sherman Jackson yang berupaya untuk mengkompromikan tafsir yang memiliki keragaman corak dalam bingkai tradisional dan rasionalis. Tulisan ini menggugurkan metode kepustakaan dengan mengkaji literatur-literatur terkait untuk menemukan jawaban atas pertanyaan utama yang diajukan. Pada akhirnya, batasan tafsir yang kemudian dapat diterima sebagai tradisi-tradisi rasional adalah sepanjang penafsiran tersebut mengikuti kriteria-kriteria dasar penafsiran. Ini meliputi pemahaman mendalam yang harus dimiliki mufassir, tidak bertentangan dengan ayat-ayat lain atau hadis, dan dalam banyak kasus harus bersesuaian dengan logika. Tradisional dan Rasional adalah komponen yang saling melengkapi dan

harus disikapi secara proporsional. Penekanan pada rasional berpotensi membawa pada kepentingan dan kecenderungan subyektif mufassir. Sementara, penggunaan riwayat secara tradisional akan membatasi ruang interpretatif dan kesesuaiannya dengan konteks yang selalu berkembang.

Kata Kunci: Tafsir; Tradisional; Rasional

Introduction

The existence of the various Qur'anic tafsir product has given birth to a never-ending cycle of religious issues. Muslims of all generations are constantly confronted with questions about these tafsir of the Qur'an. Tafsir¹, the process of extracting the meaning of the Qur'an, is regarded as one of the first disciplines of thinking, rationalizing, and implementing essential Islamic principles. Tafsir eventually deals with topics like *fiqh*, *kalam*, *falsafa*, and *tasawwuf*, which contribute to the formation of different Islamic sects. Not to mention that philosophers, Sufi masters, Fuqaha', and Mutakallimun interpret the Qur'an differently. Jackson proposes a criterion for mutual recognition of theological senses in response to this diversity as *traditions of reason*.² Jackson attempts to identify the parameters within which different theologies can coexist and be mutually acknowledged. It is not intended to establish which of the existing theological schools is "correct", but rather to highlight how absurd and unfair it is to categorize a belief as heresy only because it conflicts with one's own theology. Ironically, proponents of each approach have culminated in a truth claim at their extremes, believing that their respective approach is superior to the other and that those who hold opposing views are nonbelievers (*kāfirūn*).

What is directly related to the *traditions of reason* is the relationship between Traditionalism and Rationalism. Jackson argues that history is the primary factor that separates these two perspectives. Traditionalism is a form of the application of reason, and Rationalism still depends on tradition.³ This subject has been addressed by the eleventh century Ghazali's outstanding work, *Faisal al-Tafriqah bayna al-Islām wa al-Zandaqah*, a treatise that inspired Jackson in determining the concept of *traditions of reasons* on Islamic theological orthodoxy issues. He presents a concept of *traditions*

1 The Qur'an was and is understood in the traditional Islamic world through the language of tafsir, and a large portion of what Muslims believe the Qur'an is stating is actually what tafsir says it is. Tafsir's importance in the religious history of Islam is therefore crucial. There is a new situation where many Muslim intellectuals who are not 'ulama engage in this activity, including many Muslims who have received a Western education. Nowadays, almost everyone who wants to assert something about Islam uses tafsir. See Saleh Walid Saleh, "Qur'anic Commentaries" in *The Study Qur'an: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: HarperOne, 2015) 1657.

2 Sherman Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 5.

3 This point of view directly and obviously affects the nature and significance of theological disagreement in Islam. See Sherman Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, 17.

of reason under the traditionalism and rationalism approach by establishing this work of Ghazali.⁴ The foundation of his argument is an open critique of Abrahamov's divisions between traditionalism and rationalism. Abrahamov defines tradition as a process of continuity and stability, whereas reason might alter and mean instability. While traditionalism prefers knowledge gained from revelation, tradition, and consensus, rationalism prefers reason to comprehend the truth.⁵

Concerning the categories of traditionalism and rationalism and their relation to the Qur'anic tafsir context, there are two broad topics: tafsir *bi al-ma'thur* and tafsir *bi al-ra'yi*.⁶ The former was based on what is believed to be the interpretation of Prophet Muhammad, his companions, and the successors. Tafsir *bi al-ra'yi*, on the other hand, is formed by the mufassir' competent personal reflection or valid reasoning. According to scholarly papers, the early classical popular and widely cited work of tafsir is *al-Jāmi' al-bayān* from Abu Ja'far Tabarī (d. 923).⁷ In relation to two categories as mentioned earlier, Tabarī's tafsir is a kind of traditionalist that develops interpretations based on the Prophet's hadith. However, Tabarī presents his personal reason by selecting information and stating his perspective when conflicting interpretations emerge.⁸ McAuliffe pointed out that Tabarī went far beyond simply compiling existing content. This is because his selection and ordering of his sources, as well as the judgments that he makes among differing interpretations, reveal both the

4 Sherman Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, 17.

5 Abrahamov defines rationalism as the propensity to consider reason the primary tool to reach the truth in religion and the preference of reason for revelation and tradition in dealing with some theological issues, especially when there is a contradiction between them. Traditionalists, on the other hand, maybe rationalists in dealing with a theological issue, but they might not give reason any precedence over the Qur'an or the sunnah. Jackson's criticism of Abrahamov is that his perspective exemplifies the widespread tendency for both traditionalism and rationalism to adopt fiction and ideological stances. He then goes on to analyse the development of Muslim theology using this cross-eyed vision. See Sherman Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, 18-19.

6 The conflict between the two types of commentary naturally reflects a debate that has been present in the Islamic intellectual world for a very long time and has had significant effects on modernity: the debate between reverence for the text and tradition as opposed to the desire for a progressive and rationalist reading of the revealed passages. See Massimo Campanini, *The Qur'an: The Basics*, trans. Oliver Leaman (New York: Routledge, 2007) 70.

7 Before Tabarī, Ibn Abbās (d. 688), a companion of the Prophet, began interpreting the Qur'an and acquired the status of a highly influential mufassir. Ibn Abbās worked particularly on ambiguous expressions and grammatical inquiries with his students in the eighth century. Mufassir belonging to successive generations, like Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), have attempted to resolve the obscure aspects and doubts surrounding the Qur'an by focusing on linguistic analyses. Tabarī's tafsir is from a later generation, but his work has been treated very seriously by Muslims until now. One of the reasons is that Tabarī composed a commentary that constitutes among the best examples of tafsir in accordance with authority and tradition because of a large number of hadiths were employed in the analysis. See Massimo Campanini, *The Qur'an: The Basics*, 71- 72.

8 Aysha A Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 27. Tabarī was not just a copyist, and his choices of traditions reveal his own exegetical preferences.

extent of his exegetical expertise and his thorough understanding of the other major areas of Muslim intellectual endeavor.⁹ On the other hand, Martensson observes, Tabarī ignored folkloristic and edifying traditions, from both the Sufi and Shi'i camps because he thought they were extraneous to the historical understanding of the Qur'an.¹⁰ Motzki further questions the reliability of Tabarī's tafsir's isnads, a collection of experts who have relayed hadith, by analyzing some of his diverse interpretations.¹¹ He says that much of the material was transmitted orally and that some transmission routes are not mutually exclusive.

ābūnī adds that tafsir of the Qur'an with the Qur'an is the highest value of interpretation and is unquestionable to be accepted.¹² This is due to the fact that the Qur'an is the most accurate book, with no inconsistencies between each verse. Tafsir of the Qur'an with hadith from the Prophet's instruction is the second best. This is because the Prophet did not interpret the meaning of the Qur'an based on his own reasoning but instead on divine revelation, as stated in surah al-Najm (53): 3-4, '*He does not speak from his own desire. The Qur'an is nothing less than a revelation that is sent to him*'.¹³ These fundamental principles are traditionalist views and are applicable to numerous early tafsir. However, the early tafsir of Islam, mostly based on tradition had various problems. Prophet Muhammad did not interpret all of the words of the Qur'an, leaving some verses in doubt. Also, the interpretation of the Companions is

The extent to which Tabarī depends on traditions for his exegetical content associated his work firmly with the *ahl al-hadith* camp. He also precisely recreates the isnad (chain of authorities) for each tradition referenced. Because of this, his commentary is occasionally cumbersome and turgid in parts, but it is crucial in terms of his claim to authority. Controversy has also come from this reliance on traditions for the interpretive process, with some scholars charging that he drew on weak traditions with defective chains. See Peter G Riddel, "Al-Tabarī" in *The Qur'an: an Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (New York: Routledge, 2006) 623.

- 9 This is a phenomenal and influential tafsir for the formation of the classical tafsir. His accomplishment and method represent an important turning point in the history of Qur'anic interpretation. Tabarī died almost three centuries after the prophet Muhammad's death, centuries that saw the development and unification of the four main branches of Islamic scholarship: hadith, jurisprudence (fiqh), grammar, and lexicography. See Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "The Task and traditions of Interpretation" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 191-192.
- 10 Ulrika Martensson, "Early Medieval Tafsir (Third/Ninth to the Fifth/Eleventh Century)" *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, eds. in Mustafa Shah, and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) 715-731.
- 11 Harald Motzki, "The Question of the Authenticity of Muslim Traditions Reconsidered: A Review Article" in *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed. Herbert Bert (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 241.
- 12 Muhammad 'Ali ābūnī, *Al-Tibyān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Pakistan: Al-Bushra Publishers, 2011) 92.
- 13 M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 347.

then still unclear and lacking in detail.¹⁴ While the early tafsir employs the *riwayah*, they tend to select a specific *riwayah* to satisfy the mufassirs' interests. Moreover, when tafsir was first introduced, it was tainted by the interests of various schools, enabling more spaces for the subjectivities of mufassir. The Qur'anic sensitivity to meaning may result in a range of interpretations depending on the mufassir's mind, and it allows for ideological manipulation not only of meaning but also the structure due to theologians' polemic interpretation.¹⁵ As a result, the Qur'an eventually present a wide range of meanings depending on the commentator's preference.

The tafsir *bi al-ra'yi* also had the same implications as this early tafsir. Tafsir *bi al-ra'yi*, which emphasises rationalism, gave rise to numerous sub-themes, including kalam, Sufism, philosophy, and science, all of which have a rational foundation. With their knowledge and objectivity, the mufassir on each of these themes frequently criticise one another, leaving some followers open to fanaticism. In addition, whereas the subjectivity of the tafsir *bi al-ma'thur* was about the *riwayah* chosen, the subjectivity of tafsir *bi al-ra'yi* is more complex. With these two key characteristics, it is intriguing to observe how traditionalism and rationalism of these two types are portrayed in each of their respective interpretations within the boundaries of *traditions of reason*.

Discussion of Tafsir

It would be helpful to begin the presentation with a brief overview of tafsir to introduce how tafsir evolved into numerous forms and topics. Mustaqim divides the historical evolution of tafsir into three distinct eras.¹⁶ First, the classical period when tafsir was primarily based on quasi-critical reasoning. The *bi al-ma'thur* interpretation model dominates Qur'anic interpretation in this age. In this sense, the quasi-critical reasoning is a mode of thinking that does not prioritize critique when accepting an interpretation product. This is because the Prophet's interpretation appeared to

14 Western scholars are dubious about the authenticity of early Muslim tafsir writings. This scepticism is linked to the fact that there are weak and fabricated isnad, intrusive poetic citations mistakenly attributed to pre-Islamic poets and contradictory exegetical reports which are ascribed to iconic companions that pervaded many early tafsir works. See Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis: Genesis and Development* (London: Routledge, 2010) xvi and 3.

15 To re-connect the question of the meaning of the Qur'an to the question of the meaning of life, it is now essential to point out that the Qur'an was the product of dialoguing, debating, augmenting, accepting and rejecting, not only with pre-Islamic norms, practice and culture but with its own prior assessments, presupposition, assertions etc. See Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur'an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* (Amsterdam: Humanistics University Press, 2004) 10.

16 Abdul Mustaqim, *Epistemologi Tafsir Kontemporer* (Yogyakarta: LKIS Printing Cemerlang, 2010).

be the exclusive authority and was taken for granted.¹⁷ The Companions also never criticized the Prophet's interpretations of the Qur'anic verses. During the period of the Companions, all products of Qur'anic interpretation that did not have a source from the Prophet were not regarded as tafsir but rather an opinion, and so had to be ignored. What was considered knowledge at the time was *al-ma'thur* or *riwayah* itself. This continued until the third generation, known as the post-Tabi'in era.

Second, the Islamic Middle Ages, also known as the affirmative age, were founded on ideological reasoning. The affirmative interpretation emerged from dissatisfaction with the *al-ma'thur* paradigm of interpretation, which was thought inadequate and did not interpret the entirety of Qur'anic passages. Since then, tafsir *bi al-ra'yi* has been practiced. However, the rise of Muslim religiopolitical organizations such as the Mu'tazila, Khawarij, Shi'a, and other theological groupings influenced tafsir tradition throughout this period, so the Qur'an was often interpreted as a justification for their ideological purposes.¹⁸ As a result, authoritarianism, extremism, and madhhab sectarianism grow, resulting in a truth-claim mindset. Finally, there is the reformative age which is based on critical reasoning. This era arose due to modern-contemporary mufassirs' unhappiness with the products of conventional interpretation, which were perceived to be excessively ideological, authoritarian, hegemonic, and sectarian. Hence they diverged from the fundamental objective of the Qur'anic revelation. Reformation-era mufassirs strongly assume that all forms of interpretive dogmatism must be attacked.

From another point of view, Mustaqim divides the nature of tafsir into two parts: tafsir as a process and tafsir as a product. Tafsir as a process was founded on the premise that the Qur'an is applicable for universal purposes. Thus, the Qur'an must be employed as a moral-theological framework to address today's socio-religious challenges (*sālih li kulli zamān wa makān*). This has consequences for a continuing process of interpretation in which the final meaning is not recognized. The process of tafsir must constantly continue, but it must do so in accordance with the context of the times. Because of this flexibility, any product of tafsir is not holy because these books are little more than a reflection of the commentator's circumstances at the time. The holiness of Qur'anic interpretation only causes Muslims' intellectual processes to stagnate. On the other hand, this has logical ramifications in that the Qur'an must

17 The prophetic presence was crucial for interpretive purposes because the explanatory verses themselves were best understood when they were explained by the one who had received divine revelation directly. This is one of his prophetic duties according to the Qur'an: "And upon you have We bestowed from on high this reminder, so that you might make clear unto humankind all that has ever been thus bestowed upon them, and that they might take thought" (an-Nahl 16: 44). See Farid Esack, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005) 130.

18 Abdullah Saeed, *The Qur'an: an Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2008) 59.

be constantly evaluated, interpreted, and updated. Meanwhile, the tafsir as a product emphasizes that the Qur'an is a way of life that must be studied and interpreted as a guide to human life. The result of this thought is called the book of tafsir, which is a book that collects mufassirs ijtihad in the form of Qur'anic meanings.

After the Prophet's death, tafsir became a serious discussion of Islam. The primary issue is that the highest authority, which is frequently perverted into authoritarianism, is used to impose Islam on the common populace.¹⁹ The issue of interpreting the Qur'an has remained unresolved among Muslim scholars. Arguments regarding the correctness of an interpretation can occasionally elicit much appreciation from most followers. Many Muslims become fanatical due to specific tafsir products, believing that only their interpretation is the most 'correct', making tafsir products sacred. It should be noted that since tafsir derives meanings from the Qur'an, it is just a secondary text. Tafsir is also bound by the unique circumstances surrounding mufassirs, and it is typically adjusted to the conditions at the time of interpretation.²⁰ It should be highlighted that specific conditions must be met before a person may be deemed a mufassir, such as expertise, skills, and knowledge of the Qur'an. Although the Qur'an is sacrosanct, the result of interpretation, or tafsir, is no longer sacred because it has become ingrained in human consciousness. Tafsir, according to Zahabī, is not the same as the Qur'an. It is only the intellectual work of the mufassir, who are also human beings, who can make mistakes.²¹ Tafsir is a devotional deed in the human intellectual dimension that might also harm the image of the sanctity of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an plays an essential cultural role in shaping the face of civilization and determining the character of its disciplines. If civilization revolves around texts, then text interpretation is one of the most essential cultural and civilizational mechanisms for knowledge production. Ironically, a rational understanding of this Islamic history is shielded by a religious attitude that assumes all religious products are sacred. As a result, what was supposed to be a dialectical relationship between religious spirit and rational understanding has devolved into something that contradicts each other. Abou Fadl furthermore distinguishes various Muslim communities based on their religious responses.²² Puritans adhere to Qur'anic

19 Khaled Abou Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2014) 75.

20 Abdullah Saeed, *The Qur'an: an Introduction*, 4.

21 Muhammad Husein Zahabī, *Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn: Juz al-Awwal* (Kairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 2005) 12.

22 Khaled Abou Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (New York: Harper San Fransisco, 2007)

meanings in an absolutist and literal manner as expressed in the Qur'an and sunnah without equivocation. They are susceptible to things they perceive to be secular and liberal. Liberal groups, on the other hand, those who respect individual freedom in comprehending religious texts, prefer to advocate innovative approaches to a critical and contextual reading of the Qur'an. This aims to demonstrate how Islamic teachings can be revised to be more relevant in Muslims' modern social and political environment. The last moderate group falls somewhere in between these two extremes. They argue that their religious practice does not vary from the essential principles of religion, but they also accommodate many parts of the current social and political order that are regarded as fair.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that tafsir was once a form of traditionalism that relied on the *riwayah* itself. This tafsir is viewed at the time as something that cannot be challenged and is therefore taken for granted. This phase subsequently transitioned to tafsir *bi al-ra'yi*, which emphasised rationalism but ultimately made the issue more complicated with the growth of authoritarianism and truth claims. What Mustaqim refers to as the nature of tafsir as a process and a product is an intriguing argument that can undermine these two styles of tafsir, which are founded on traditionalism and rationalism. Within this paradigm, traditionalism and rationalism can operate together to fulfill portions of tafsir's nature. Given the diversity and breadth of discussion of tafsir *bi al-ra'yi* in regard to *traditions of reasons*, the next subsection will provide several examples of kalam, Sufi, and scientific interpretation. This is intended to determine the extent to which the various tafsir *bi al-ra'yi* rely on rationalism and whether or not the application of traditionalist ideas occurs.

The Debate within 'Rationalism' Tafsir and its Argument

The Qur'an values the application of reason. It is a crucial component that distinguishes humans from other living things.²³ For this reason, as the first person, Adam could recognize what was happening around him. Qur'an surah al-Baqarah (2): 30 is a tradition based on the ability that God chooses man as his vice in the world, not an angel, although he always glorifies Allah.²⁴ In this approach, the Qur'an acknowledges human superiority while still granting freedom to control and regulate nature. However, this human freedom must be accompanied by responsibility in both sociological and theological terms. God has given reason prospective knowledge in such a way that it can create logical statements and guide questions of divinity. On

23 Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016) 18.

24 Oliver Leaman, ed., *The Qur'an: an Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 11.

the other hand, the traditions revealed by God to humankind offer messages that contain explanations concerning God himself, as well as things relating to man and his duty to God. Throughout the history of Islamic intellectual tradition, the topic of unification between the combination of tradition and reason has been the subject of polemic and controversy among Muslim intellectuals, including mufassir.

This section discusses a variety of popular tafsir themes that promote rationalism. The purpose of these examples is to illustrate the evolution and variety of tafsir that come under the category *bi al-ra'yi* in terms of how to justify their tafsir. The first example is when Mu'tazili and Ash'ari scholars disagree on the meaning of surah al-Qiyamah (75): 22-23, "On that Day there will be radiant faces, looking towards their Lord".²⁵ Mu'tazili mufassir, as expressed by al-Zamakhsharī, stated that Allah is impossible to see. While the majority of Sunni mufassir, including Fakhr Dīn al-Rāzi, believe Allah has the ability to see. In reading this verse, Zamakhsharī translated the word *nāzīrah* (looking) as *al-raj'* (waiting or hope), which means *intazara ilā ni'matillāh* (waiting for God's blessing). According to him, the context of the word *nāzīrah* is *taqdim al-maf'ūl* (precedes the object) hence the meaning of Looking at their Lord implies a specialty. Because specialization denotes a specific item to Allah, all humankind will wait or hope for Him, which he understands as "only to God they wait or hope".²⁶ Within this, Zamakhsharī concludes that seeing God is impossible because all humans are gathered together in the *mahshar*, a day of judgment, and all believers hope to see God at that time. Al-Rāzi, on the other hand, claims that this passage is a foundation for *ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* to demonstrate that all believers would be able to see Allah in the afterlife. The term *nāzīrah* probably means waiting for Razi, but the proper interpretation in this verse is "seeing God with the eyes" because the word *nāzīrah* is combined with *ilā* and is preceded by the word *wujūh*.²⁷

Tafsir by Zamakhsharī and Rāzi falls under tafsir *bi al-ra'yi*, suggesting that they favored reason over tradition. Looking at both Zamakhsharī and Rāzi's backgrounds, it is clear that their traditional theology drives their rational reasoning of Qur'anic interpretation. Zamakhsharī, who grew up in a Mu'tazila household, embraces the notion of Godness as *al-tanzīh* (purification), making it appear acceptable if he purifies God from matter. God, according to Mu'tazili doctrine, is immaterial, not bound by time, age, or place, has no beginning (*qadīm*), does not

25 M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, 399.

26 Abi Qasim Mahmud bin 'Umar Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf'an Haqā'iq Ghamāwidh al-Tanzīl wa 'Uyūn al-'Aqāwil fī Wujūh al-Ta'wil: al-Juz al-Sādīs* (Riyadh: Maktabah Abikan, 1998) 270.

27 Fakhr Dīn Rāzi, *Tafsīr al-Kabīr wa Mafātīh al-Ghayb: Juz al-Salāsūn* (Beirut: Dar Fikr, 1981) 226.

resemble a creature, cannot be seen with the sight, and cannot be heard with the ear.²⁸ By doing so, his interpretation of the Qur'an may be justified by his prior understanding of God, which human eyes cannot see God. In the same vein, the Sunni core doctrine of God is that He is capable of achieving anything and that humankind should have confidence in what Allah has ordered. Although reason is the essential pillar of Mu'tazila, they never assert that reason is the only source of knowledge and truth. According to them, the nature of God can be discovered through the evidence of cosmological arguments. Ash'ariya agrees that God can be known by cosmological argument, but God's existence must be determined by reason. This is related to the kalam debate as a discipline developed in early Islamic cultures which place a larger emphasis on reasoning.

Sufi interpretation is another tafsir discussion in a unique and separate style of personal reasoning. For Sufi, certain words often result in more questions to investigate than simply analyzing following grammatical structure standards. No literal or philological investigation can reveal the inner dimension of the Qur'an.²⁹ Consider al-Qushairi, a renowned Sufi figure, in his commentary on the Qur'an surah al-Mursalat (77): 20 "*Did We not make you from an underrated fluid*".³⁰ A man was initially created from a worthless liquid, and God then made man better from that liquid. As a result, man should not be arrogant and conceited without realizing that he is descended from something despicable. Man is insignificant in relation to God's other creatures, like a drop of liquid in the face of the ocean.³¹ He ties this description of man's creation to the psychological consequence of man becoming modest. Another example is the interpretation of Moses' conversation with Khidir in surah al-Kahfi (18): 60-82, which focuses on al-Khidir's knowledge which he claimed to have received directly from God (*'ilm laduni*). When arguing the terms *ladunnā*, al-Tustari characterizes Khidir as a person who has been endowed with knowledge from the divine presence.³² Sands illustrates several Sufi interpretations of this phrase, such as al-Razi, who regarded it as a sort of revelation (*wahy*) that is not confined to prophets, that is knowledge that God taught from Our very presence.³³

28 Oliver Leaman, ed., *The Qur'an: an Encyclopedia*, 84.

29 Sayyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Chicago: ABC International Group Inc, 2000) 50.

30 M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, 403.

31 Qushairi, *Latā'if al-Isbārāt: Tafsir Sufi Kāmil al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Kairo: Dar al-Misriyyah, 2000) 672.

32 Sahl bin Abd Allāh Tustari, *Tafsir al-Tustari: Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur'an*, trans. Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler (Jordan: Royal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2011) 37.

33 Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur'an in Classical Islam* (London: Routledge, 2006) 83.

Other tenth-century Sufis, such as Ibn 'Ata, defined *'ilm laduni* differently, arguing that it is knowledge by unveilings (*kushuf*) rather than letter dictation. The dramatic argument and, sometimes, lack of the grammatical structure of interpretation is evident indicators of these Sufi interpretations.

The key metaphor of Sufi rhetoric is the priority of inner truth. Sufis referenced the Qur'an portrayal of God in surah al-Hadid (57) :3 as "*the first, the last, the outer, and the inner*" to emphasis God as the inner aspect (*bātin*) of all things, which required articulation of the relationship between the inner and the outer.³⁴ Sufi tafsir begins with the fundamental premise that the Qur'an includes multiple levels of meaning, that humans can unveil these meanings, and that the process of interpretation is unlimited. Sufi traditional tafsir depended heavily on Ibn Mas'ūd's hadiths: "*The Qur'an was revealed with seven letters, and each verse has zāhir and bātin interpretation*".³⁵ Sufis think there is a complementary relationship between the revealing of knowledge and spiritual activity after dualism at the level of text meaning. The Sufi interpretation tradition is based on the concept that comprehensive religious practice can lead to the discovery of the true and most profound meaning of the Qur'an. Although its dependent on unique personal reasoning, Sufi established their ways of interpreting from Qur'anic verses and some *riwayah* of hadith, believing that the Qur'an contains many levels of meaning, that man has the potential to uncover these meanings, and that the task of interpretation is endless.³⁶

According to Abu Nasr al-Sarraj, the character of a Sufi is determined by his practice (*isti'mal*) of the contents of the Qur'an and hadith, which manifests into sublime word and action.³⁷ In addition, Sufis must have an understanding of the soul (*al-nafs*) in order to do heart purification. However, there are two alternative assumptions at the technical level: some argue that Sufism's relationship with the Qur'anic text is *eisegesis* (from ideas to texts), while others argue *exegesis* (from texts

34 Carl W Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (Colorado: Shambhala Publications Inc, 2006) 34.

35 Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur'an in Classical Islam*, 8.

36 Sands notes that the fundamental assumptions behind sufi interpretation are that "the Qur'an contains many levels of meaning, that man has the potential to uncover these meanings, and that the task of interpretation is endless. Sufis quote such Qur'anic verses as 'We have left nothing out from the Book' (6:38), 'We have counted everything in a clear register' (36:12), 'There is nothing whose treasures are not with Us and We only send it down in a known measure' (15:21), and, 'If all the trees on the earth were pens and the sea seven seas after it to replenish it, the words of God would not be depleted' (31:27). As further evidence that many aspects of the Qur'an are open to interpretation, Sufis frequently cite an Ibn Mas'ūd hadith, the messenger of God said, 'The Qur'an was sent down in seven *abruf*. Each *harf* has a back (*zabr*) and and belly (*batn*). Each *harf* has a border (*hadd*) and each border has a lookout point (*muttala*).' See Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur'an in Classical Islam*, 7-8.

37 Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur'an in Classical Islam*, 29.

to ideas). According to Goldziher, the Sufi interpretation tradition falls within the category of *eisegesis*. He feels that Sufi theology is influenced by Neo-Platonist concepts rather than Qur'anic ones.³⁸ The Sufis are simply looking for a foundation to support the doctrines in which they believe. He concluded that what the Sufis actually achieved was to reconcile these doctrinal disagreements and legitimate their idea in the Islamic world through an allegorical interpretation of the Qur'an. On the other hand, Zahabī presents a different perspective on the Qur'anic text's interaction with Sufism. The two come into contact in both action exegesis and eisegesis simultaneously.³⁹ He arrived at this conclusion after discovering two major variances in the Sufistic interpretive tradition. For him, Sufism or *tasawwuf*, was separated into two types: *tasawwuf nazari* (theoretical) and *tasawwuf amaly* (practical).

While Sufi is known as one of the traditions reflecting esotericism and mysticism, a scientific tafsir is otherwise. Scholars and mufassir weigh in on the scientific interpretation's pros and cons. According to Amīn al-Khūlī, scientific tafsir is tafsir that imposes contemporary scientific words of the Qur'an and attempts to draw various knowledge and rhetorical perspectives from the Qur'an.⁴⁰ Tafsir of Qur'anic sections containing science is a more acceptable definition for the style of scientific interpretation and actuality in the topic. It investigates scientific language found in the Qur'an and attempts to draw conclusions from many sciences and philosophical views found in the Qur'anic words. However, the interpreters of this genre of scientific tafsir perceive the Qur'an primarily in connection to the scientific term, whether connected or not. Tantāwī Jauharī's outstanding book *al-Jawāhir fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* is intriguing to present in this topic discussion. Jauharī was inspired by his fascination with natural occurrences that exist in the skies and on earth, as mentioned in the Qur'anic verses. For him, there are 750 verses that discuss numerous sciences and only 150 verses that clearly discuss fiqh. For example, surah al-Baqarah (2): 61 "*Moses, we cannot bear to eat only one kind of food, so pray to your Lord to bring out for us some of the earth's produce, its herbs and cucumbers, its garlic, lentils, and onions*"⁴¹ is understood by medical language and alludes to the advancement of medical research in Europe. This text, he says, advocates eating better and healthier foods made from meat and spices like honey and sweet foods.⁴²

38 Ignaz Goldziher, *Schools of Koranic Commentators* (Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006) 120.

39 Muhammad Husein Zahabī, *Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn: Juz al-Awwāl*, 120.

40 Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, "The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an", *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 23 (2003) 23.

41 M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, 9.

42 Tantāwī Jauharī, *al-Jawāhir fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Kairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 2004) p 74.

Zaghloul Raghīb an-Najjar, an Egyptian geologist who earned an academic doctorate from the University of England in 1963, also practiced scientific interpretation. Zaghloul is convinced that the Qur'an is a book of miracles in terms of language and literature, moral and worship, historical information, and scientific knowledge. The miracles refer to this book's supremacy in presenting exact information about the universe's nature, which science has not yet reached at the time of the revelation. According to Zaghloul, an ordinary human can only be allowed to demonstrate the scientific miracles of the Qur'an by applying scientific facts and principles. This is because scientific principles have not changed. Zaghloul analyzes the word *zaitūn* (olive) of surah al-Tīn (95): 1 "By the fig, by the olive"⁴³ by presenting scientific evidence that regular use of olive oil reduces the overall amount of cholesterol in the blood, as well as its other dangerous types. In particular, it lowers the risk of heart disease and cancer.⁴⁴ Allah swears by the olive and cites it seven times in the Qur'an for its high oil, protein, and low carbohydrate content. According to him, it is proof of the human body's urgent element, which Allah used to vow as a component of scientific relevance.

Therefore, it can be said that Muslims are making an effort to interpret Qur'anic verses based on reason in the form of this kind of scientific interpretation. However, the early tafsir still refers to traditionalism or *riwayah* when this verse takes a different approach. This is evident from Pink's analysis of this verse, which revealed a wide range of interpretations, including what it means as foodstuff, a place of worship, a way to clarify the exaltedness of the blessed places, and many others.⁴⁵ This scientific interpretation is rationally based among the examples of interpretations mentioned earlier, but it is also the most controversial on the other hand. Amīn al-Khūlī is one of the scholars who has criticised this style of interpretation, stating that the main issue is not merely that scientific tafsir introduces a technical language that is not intrinsic to the text but, more problematically, that it presents an interpretative mode that is inconsistent with the textuality of the Qur'an. Consequently, it is unsuitable for the kind of linguistic analysis required to determine Qur'anic meanings.⁴⁶

43 M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, 427.

44 Zaghloul Najjar, (no date) *Wonders of the Ever-Glorious Qur'an, trans The English Convoy*. Online pdf version. Available at <https://vdocuments.mx/dr-zaghloul-an-najjar-miracles-in-the-quran.html> (Accessed: 10 January 2022) 7.

45 For a more detailed and comprehensive interpretation of surah al-Tīn 1-3, see Johanna Pink, "The Fig, the Olive, and the Cycles of Prophethood Q95:1-3 and the Image of History in Early 20th-Century Qur'anic Exegesis" in *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin*, eds. Majid Daneshgar and Walid A. Saleh (Leiden: Brill, 2017) 317-338.

46 In 1930s lectures on evolution and ethics in *Kitāb al-khayr*, Amīn al-Khūlī presents two philosophical arguments against scientific interpretations of the Qur'an. First, scientific expositions of the Qur'an ignore the text's self-declared primary goal, which is to offer ethical

Using the conceptualization of Ahmed, although it is not precisely talked about tafsir, to conceptualize what is right, it must take into account the complete spectrum of component aspects, trajectories, and ideals of human and historical Islam, which includes some ambiguity, diffusion, differentiation, and contradiction.⁴⁷ These component parts must be considered with their counter-components of homogeneity, orthodoxy, and agreement in the Islamic world. Various interpretations based on either tradition or reason have existed for generations. An interpreter with a specific background of knowledge will attempt to convey the Qur'anic meaning to the best of his ability. Despite their diverse backgrounds and horizons, they share the same goal: to disclose the meaning of the Qur'an. However, the commonality of this goal still leaves a lack in some critical areas. Even though Tabarī is regarded as an independent interpreter, some of his interpretations remain unobjective because he continues to promote their principal's Sunni school. Zamakhsharī, on the other hand, considers those who disagree with the Mu'tazila ideology to be unbelievers who have forsaken Islam. In understanding surah Āli Imrān (3): 105, which contains verses directed to Jews and Christians, Zamakhsharī also mentions heretics such as Mushabihah, Jabbariyah, Hashwiyah, and others.⁴⁸

The issue with these blends of subjectivity is that the interpretation is neither universal nor realistic. As a result, the interpretation can only be followed by some people and cannot be applied to numerous societal problems throughout every generation. According to Asad, while Islamic traditions are not homogeneous, they aim for coherence in the same manner that other discursive traditions do.⁴⁹ It means that they do not consistently achieve it due to the constraints of specific conditions to which the traditions are tied and their inherent limitations. The numerous tafsir that critique each other is based on the interests or followers of each mufassir. It is not appropriate to generalize all of their works because some of their interpretation approaches share certain similarities whose accuracy levels are recognized by each other. In fact, the part in which some interpreters condemn one other is merely a small portion of their interpretation and opinions of the Qur'an. If the explanation is

guidance; and second, given our limited knowledge of the cosmos and nature, as well as the fact that the Qur'an provides little detail on these topics, scientific interpretations are inevitably flimsy and superficial. See Shuruq Naguib, "The Hermeneutics of Miracle: Evolution, Eloquence, and the Critique of Scientific Exegesis in the Literary School of tafsir. Part I: From Muhammad 'Abduh to Amin al-Khuli," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies Edinburgh University Press* 21.3 (2019) 75.

47 Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 303.

48 Abi Qasim Mahmud bin 'Umar Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf 'an Haqā'iq Ghamāwidh al-Tanzīl wa 'Uyūn al-Aqāwil fī Wujūh al-Ta'wīl: al-Juz al-Sādīs: al-Juz al-'Awwāl* (Riyadh: Maktabah Abikan, 1998) 607.

49 Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam" *Qui Parle* no. 17 (2) 2009, 23.

deemed unaccountable and deviant due to the mufassir's bias toward a specific group, the allegations have been made by all mufassirs since they have acted in their self-interest. The limit of tafsir that can be classified according to the *tradition of reasons* refers to specific criteria. In the tafsir tradition, anyone who attempted to interpret the Qur'an was subjected to restrictions. The idea was that until one was properly instructed and qualified, one should not try to study and understand the Qur'an for fear of misinterpreting it and attributing it to God.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The veracity of a verse's interpretation must not contradict other verses or hadith, and it must be recognized by common sense. The point of its conformity with verses and hadith is clearly agreed either in classical and modern scholars. Tafsir of the Qur'an must not contradict common sense because the logical principles of reason are from the revelation that the Qur'an proposes in several verses such as Yūnus (10): 24; al-Ra'd (13): 3; and al-Nahl (16): 11. The word that means logical reason appears fifty times in various forms, including *ya'qilūn* (fifty times), *yatafakkarūn* (twenty-six times), *yash'urūn* (twenty-five times), *ulī al-albāb* (sixteen times), and *ulinnubā* (two times). This indicates that the Qur'an is used as a foundation for reason and knowledge rather than being interpreted to justify the mufassir's subjectivity. The debate over the use of reason (*bi al-ra'yi*) vs tradition (*bi al-mathur*) in Qur'anic tafsir virtually froze Islamic thought and became focused on ideological differences between groups, further alienating people from the Qur'anic core premise of guidance. Tradition and reason complement each other. If there is a disagreement between the two, it is vital to consider it rationally. The predominance of reason in reading the Qur'an will result in manipulation and a monopoly of interests in the outcome of tafsir. Otherwise, using the *riwayah* or tradition to interpret will result in a static understanding with less relevance to the changing situation of every generation.

Supplementary Materials

The data presented in this study are available in [insert article or supplementary material here] (Usually the datasets were analyzed from library research can be found in the whole data references).

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⁵⁰ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London: Routledge, 2006) 21.

Authors' contributions

I did this research by myself, from preparing the materials, writing the paper, reviewing, and revising.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Conflicts of Interest

None of the authors of this study has a financial or personal relationship with other people that could inappropriately influence or bias the content of the study.

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