

Khaled Abou El Fadl's Hermeneutics as an Ethics of Living Islam: Religious Authority, Interpretive Authoritarianism, and Gender Justice

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Abstract

This article analyzes Khaled Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics as an ethical-philosophical framework for understanding religious authority, critiquing interpretive authoritarianism, and formulating an ethics of Islamic interpretation within the discourse of Living Islam. In this article, Living Islam is understood as an analytical framework that positions Islam as a living tradition shaped through the relationships among the text, authority, social practices, and Muslim experiences. This article addresses the limitations of previous studies, which have predominantly situated Abou El Fadl's thought within the frameworks of Islamic law, fiqh reform, and critiques of authoritarian fatwas, but have not explicitly examined it as an ethics of Living Islam. This study employs a qualitative library-based research design using a critical-hermeneutic approach. The primary data sources include Abou El Fadl's major works, while the secondary sources comprise literature on Islamic hermeneutics, Islamic legal authority, gender justice, qawwamun, qiwamah, lived religion, and lived Islam. Purposively selected sources were analyzed through document analysis, qualitative content analysis, and critical-hermeneutic interpretation. The findings demonstrate that interpretive authoritarianism emerges when interpreters foreclose the autonomy of the text and transform human interpretation into a final claim regarding God's will. Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics situates religious meaning within an ethical relationship among the author, the text, and the reader, while constraining interpretation through five moral prerequisites: honesty, diligence, comprehensiveness, reasonableness, and self-restraint. The interpretation of qawwamun underscores the importance of a contextual and justice-oriented approach to gender interpretation. The contribution of this article lies in its synthesis of a model of the ethics of Living Islam that connects the critique of authoritarianism, hermeneutic relationships, the moral prerequisites of interpreters, and the social consequences of interpretation for gender justice and contemporary Muslim realities.

Keywords:

Islamic hermeneutics, Khaled Abou El Fadl, religious authority, interpretive authoritarianism, Living Islam

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Introduction

Religious authority is a significant issue in contemporary Islamic discourse because the interpretation of religious texts functions not only as an intellectual activity but also shapes social practices, gender relations, moral legitimacy, and Muslims' understanding of justice. The lived religion perspective emphasizes that religion is present not only in doctrines, institutions, and normative texts, but also in the practices, experiences, and negotiations of meaning in the everyday lives of its adherents (Ammerman, [2014](#); McGuire, [2008](#)). In studies of lived Islam, attention to everyday practices, identities, and the negotiation of religious meaning also prevents Islam from being reduced solely to formal doctrine or official institutions (Jeldtoft, [2011](#)). In this article, the term Living Islam is used as an analytical concept to examine how Islamic interpretations are lived, negotiated, and evaluated in terms of their ethical effects on Muslim social realities. Therefore, questions concerning who is entitled to interpret texts, how religious authority is constructed, and the extent to which an interpretation may be claimed as the will of God constitute important issues in the study of Islam as a living tradition.

Religious authoritarianism emerges when interpretive authority becomes an exclusive claim that forecloses dialogue and restricts the possibility of alternative meanings. In this context, religion may be used to justify domination, exclusion, and injustice. Hallaq ([2001](#)) demonstrates that authority in Islamic law is always related to continuity, change, and mechanisms of legitimation within the legal tradition. Rahman ([1982](#)) emphasizes that the renewal of Islamic thought requires the ability to connect the moral message of the Qur'an with the historical challenges of modern society. Similarly, Saeed ([2006](#)) stresses the importance of a contextual approach to Qur'anic interpretation so that the meaning of the text can be understood responsibly within contemporary realities.

Such contextual awareness has an important foundation in the hermeneutic tradition. Gadamer ([1960/2013](#)) demonstrates that understanding always takes place within a particular historical horizon, such that meaning is formed through the relationship among the text, tradition, and the reader. In Islamic studies, hermeneutic awareness is important because religious texts are understood not only as linguistic objects but also as sources of ethics, law, spirituality, and guidance for life. Therefore, religious interpretation must be assessed not only in terms of its conformity with the linguistic structure of the text, but also in terms of its moral responsibility for shaping a just and humane social life.

The problem of interpretive authority is clearly evident in the issue of gender relations. Wadud ([1999](#)) demonstrates that a number of interpretations of the Qur'an are influenced by patriarchal constructions that restrict women's participation and agency. Barlas ([2002/2019](#)) emphasizes the need for readings that dismantle patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an, while Ali ([2016](#)) shows that sexual and gender ethics in Islam must be understood through the relationship among texts, hadith, fiqh, and social realities. This issue is relevant to the concept of qawwamun in Qur'an 4:34, which is frequently used as a normative basis for relations between men and women. Qawwamun was selected as a conceptual case because it directly illustrates the relationship among textual authority, interpretive claims, power relations within the family, and Muslim social experiences. Studies of qiwamah indicate that the concept cannot be reduced to a legitimation of male superiority, but must be understood in relation to responsibility, justice, protection, and critiques of patriarchal domination.

Khaled Abou El Fadl's thought is important to examine in this context because it offers a profound critique of authoritarianism in Islamic discourse. In *Speaking in God's Name*, Abou El Fadl ([2001b](#)) distinguishes legitimate authority from authoritarianism, particularly when interpreters appropriate God's voice and foreclose the possibility of alternative meanings. In *And God Knows the Soldiers*, Abou El Fadl ([2001a](#)) emphasizes the distinction between authoritative and authoritarian Islamic discourse. This critique is extended in *The Great Theft*, in which Abou El Fadl ([2005](#)) examines the contestation over the meaning of Islam between ethical-humanistic and puritanical-exclusivist tendencies. In *Reasoning with God*, Abou El Fadl ([2014](#)) underscores the importance of rethinking Sharia as a moral and intellectual tradition that cannot be reduced to rigid positive law.

A number of studies have examined Abou El Fadl's thought from various perspectives. Slater ([2016](#)) positions it as a methodology for Islamic legal reform that preserves tradition while resisting its appropriation by state authoritarianism and fundamentalism. Slater ([2020](#)) interprets Abou El Fadl's thought through relationality and Gadamerian hermeneutics, particularly regarding the

relationship among the text, tradition, and the reader. Ansori (2022) demonstrates the relevance of Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics to religious moderation, Faiz et al. (2023) examine his critique of Islamic legal authority in fatwas that restrict women's mobility, while Majid (2013) emphasizes his contribution to the development of a hermeneutics of gender-related hadith.

Although these studies have explained Abou El Fadl's contributions to hermeneutics, Islamic legal reform, religious authority, and gender issues, most interpretations remain centered on legal methodology and critiques of authoritarian fatwas. The theoretical gap addressed by this article is the lack of an adequate synthesis that positions Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics as an ethics of Living Islam, namely, an ethics of interpretation that connects religious authority, the reader's moral responsibility, gender justice, and the social experiences of contemporary Muslims. The novelty of this article lies not in its separate discussions of Abou El Fadl or qawwamun, but in integrating both into an ethical model of interpretation that evaluates the relationship among the text, the reader, and the social consequences of interpretation.

Against this background, this article aims to analyze Khaled Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics as an ethical-philosophical framework for understanding religious authority, critiquing interpretive authoritarianism, and formulating an ethics of Islamic interpretation relevant to the lived realities of contemporary Muslims. Specifically, this article addresses four questions: how Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics understands religious authority, how it critiques interpretive authoritarianism, how the concept of qawwamun is interpreted in relation to gender justice, and how his thought contributes to an ethics of Living Islam. These four questions are subsequently mapped onto five categories of findings: interpretive authoritarianism, the relationship between text and reader, the ethical prerequisites of interpretation, qawwamun and gender justice, and Living Islam.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative library-based research design using a critical-hermeneutic approach. This design was selected because the study aimed to interpret the structure of arguments, the concept of religious authority, critiques of authoritarianism, and the ethical implications of Khaled Abou El Fadl's thought for the discourse of Living Islam. Document analysis was used because the study's primary sources consisted of written works containing normative-philosophical ideas, concepts, and arguments (Bowen, 2009). The hermeneutic approach was used to examine the relationship among text, context, tradition, and the reader in the formation of religious meaning (Gadamer, 1960/2013).

The data sources consisted of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources included Abou El Fadl's major works addressing authority, authoritarianism, hermeneutics, Sharia, and gender, particularly *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Abou El Fadl, 2001b), *And God Knows the Soldiers: The Authoritative and Authoritarian in Islamic Discourses* (Abou El Fadl, 2001a), *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (Abou El Fadl, 2005), and *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age* (Abou El Fadl, 2014). The secondary sources included academic literature on Islamic hermeneutics, Islamic legal authority, gender justice, qawwamun or qiwamah, lived religion, lived Islam, and previous studies of Abou El Fadl's thought.

Data were collected through the purposive identification and selection of documents rather than through a PRISMA-based systematic review. Secondary literature was identified through Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, SAGE, SpringerLink, and university repositories using the keywords "Khaled Abou El Fadl," "Islamic hermeneutics," "religious authority," "authoritarianism," "qawwamun," "qiwamah," "gender justice," "lived religion," and "lived Islam." Literature was selected if it addressed at least one of the following areas: Abou El Fadl's thought, religious authority, Islamic hermeneutics, interpretive authoritarianism, gender justice, or Islam as a lived practice. Literature that was irrelevant to the conceptual focus, did not provide verifiable academic arguments, or was not directly related to the research questions was excluded from the main analytical corpus.

Data analysis was conducted through three interrelated procedures. First, document analysis was used to identify the context of the works, key terms, and the structure of Abou El Fadl's arguments. Second, qualitative content analysis was used to code and organize concepts, arguments, and normative propositions into analytical categories such as religious authority, authoritarianism, the relationship between text and reader, the ethics of interpretation,

qawwamun, gender justice, and Living Islam. Qualitative content analysis enables categories to be systematically developed on the basis of the texts under examination (Schreier, [2012](#)). Third, critical-hermeneutic interpretation was used to examine the relationships among these categories, contemporary Islamic discourse, and Islam as a lived practice. Within the second and third procedures, thematic analysis supported the identification of recurring patterns of meaning in accordance with the research objectives and questions (Braun & Clarke, [2006](#)).

This study did not involve human participants, interviews, field observations, or personal data and therefore did not require formal ethical approval. Nevertheless, the study maintained academic integrity through accurate citation, contextual readings of the sources, and the proportionate presentation of critiques of both primary and secondary works. The credibility of the interpretation was maintained through repeated readings of the primary texts, documentation of the analytical process, triangulation with secondary literature, and examination of the consistency among the research objectives, analytical categories, and resulting conclusions.

Results

Based on the document analysis and qualitative content analysis, the research findings are presented in five conceptual categories corresponding to the focus of the study. The category of interpretive authoritarianism addresses the question of Abou El Fadl's critique of closed interpretive claims; the categories of the relationship between text and reader and the ethical prerequisites of interpretation address the issue of religious authority; the category of qawwamun and gender justice addresses the application of hermeneutics to gender relations; and the category of Living Islam synthesizes the conceptual contribution to understanding Islam as a living tradition.

Table 1 Map of the Categories of Analytical Findings

Category of findings	Main source	Analytical finding
Interpretive authoritarianism	<i>Speaking in God's Name; And God Knows the Soldiers</i>	Authoritarianism emerges when the reader forecloses the autonomy of the text and transforms human interpretation into a final claim regarding God's will.
Relationship among text, author, and reader	<i>Speaking in God's Name</i>	Religious meaning is formed through an ethical relationship among the author, the text, and the reader.
Five ethical prerequisites	<i>Speaking in God's Name</i>	Honesty, diligence, comprehensiveness, reasonableness, and self-restraint serve as mechanisms for constraining authoritarian claims.
<i>Qawwamun</i> and gender	<i>Speaking in God's Name</i>	<i>Qawwamun</i> is interpreted conditionally, rather than as an absolute legitimization of male superiority.
Living Islam	Synthesis of primary and secondary sources	Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics can be understood as an ethics of interpretation that connects texts, justice, and Muslim social realities.

Note. This table presents a conceptual synthesis of primary and secondary sources selected purposively; the categories were developed based on their direct relevance to the research questions and recurring thematic patterns identified in the analysis.

Religious Authority and Interpretive Authoritarianism

The findings indicate that Abou El Fadl's critique of authoritarianism begins with the transformation of religious authority into a closed interpretive claim. Lexically, authoritarianism may be understood as the arbitrary exercise of authority (Pusat Bahasa, Departemen Pendidikan

Nasional, [2008](#)). In Abou El Fadl's framework, however, authoritarianism primarily refers to an interpretive act in which the reader appropriates God's authority, forecloses the autonomy of the text, and transforms human interpretation into a final claim regarding the divine will (Abou El Fadl, [2001b](#)).

In *Speaking in God's Name*, Abou El Fadl ([2001b](#)) distinguishes legitimate authority from authoritarianism. Legitimate authority requires the interpreter's moral responsibility, whereas authoritarianism emerges when human limitations in understanding the text are disregarded. Abou El Fadl ([2001/2004](#)) explains that this problem becomes apparent when religious texts are no longer allowed to express their possible meanings but are instead confined by the reader's claims. In the context of fatwas, Abou El Fadl argues that some legal authorities tend to apply rigid views that are insensitive to differences in the social, cultural, and political contexts of Muslim societies, including his critique of fatwas issued by Saudi Arabia's Council for Scientific Research and Legal Opinions (CLRO) when they are applied to Muslim communities in the United States (Abou El Fadl, [2001/2004](#)).

The Hermeneutics of Text, Author, and Reader

The second category indicates that Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics is constructed through the relationship among the author, the text, and the reader. Abdullah ([2006](#)) emphasizes that the relationship among these three elements constitutes the core of Abou El Fadl's hermeneutic approach. Within this framework, the Qur'an and Sunnah are not treated as passive objects entirely controlled by the reader, but as texts possessing autonomy, integrity, and openness of meaning.

Abou El Fadl understands textual openness as a means of preventing the reader's exclusive domination over religious meaning (Abou El Fadl, [2001b](#)). Abou El Fadl ([2001/2004](#)) notes that textual openness is intended to prevent religious meaning from being sealed by a particular authority. Within the hermeneutic tradition, Sumaryono ([1993](#)) explains that understanding always involves the reader's experience and horizon. However, the findings indicate that Abou El Fadl does not surrender meaning entirely to the reader's subjectivity because he continues to require moral responsibility, interpretive discipline, and self-restraint in reading religious texts.

Five Ethical Prerequisites of Interpretation

The subsequent findings indicate that Abou El Fadl formulates five ethical prerequisites for constraining the reader's authoritarianism: honesty, diligence, comprehensiveness, reasonableness, and self-restraint. In *Speaking in God's Name*, these prerequisites function as moral safeguards to prevent interpreters from equating their interpretations absolutely with God's will (Abou El Fadl, [2001b](#)).

Honesty requires interpreters to acknowledge the limitations of their understanding and refrain from manipulating the text. Diligence requires them to make the utmost effort to seek meaning responsibly. Comprehensiveness requires interpreters to consider relevant evidence, contexts, and arguments. Reasonableness requires arguments that can be rationally justified. Self-restraint requires humility so that interpreters do not claim the absolute finality of meaning. Brown ([2009](#)) situates Abou El Fadl within the tradition of Islamic legal hermeneutics that employs reason to evaluate and critique legal practices. Rohmanu ([2010](#)) also demonstrates that Abou El Fadl's legal thought is non-positivist because it emphasizes values, understanding, and interpretation in the pursuit of legal truth.

Qawwamun and Gender Justice in Muslim Realities

The analysis of the concept of qawwamun in Qur'an 4:34 illustrates the application of Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics to the issue of gender relations. This verse is frequently used as a normative basis for discussing male authority within the family. In Abou El Fadl's interpretation, however, qawwamun is not understood as an absolute legitimization of male superiority, but as a concept related to social context, economic responsibility, and the principle of justice (Abou El Fadl, [2001b](#)).

Abou El Fadl ([2005/2006](#)) explains that the term qawwamun may encompass the meanings of protector, supporter, ruler, or servant. Therefore, its meaning cannot be reduced to male domination. Abou El Fadl ([2005/2006](#)) also notes that his analysis of the term fadhdhala indicates that the advantage referred to in the verse need not be understood as men's essential superiority over women, but as related to the historical conditions in which men assumed economic

responsibility. When social conditions change, relations of authority also need to be reinterpreted in accordance with the principle of justice.

This interpretation differs from certain classical exegeses. Ath-Thabari (2000), for example, interprets qawwamun within the framework of men's roles as guides, educators, and leaders of women within the family structure. This difference demonstrates that interpretations of gender-related verses concern not only linguistic meaning but also the social assumptions and conceptions of justice employed by interpreters.

The Ethics of Interpretation as a Framework for Living Islam

The synthesis of the findings indicates that Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics can be understood as a framework for an ethics of interpretation within the discourse of Living Islam. The critique of authoritarianism demonstrates that religious interpretation concerns not only legal methodology but also the reader's moral responsibility in connecting texts with Muslim social realities. Within this framework, the shift from authoritarian fiqh to authoritative fiqh can be understood as a transition from closed interpretive claims to interpretive practices that are more responsible, open, and oriented toward justice.

As a qualification to this interpretation, the reception of Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics remains contested. Abou El Fadl's approach has been appreciated by some progressive Islamic legal thinkers, but has also been criticized for potentially opening the way to relativism in meaning (Abou El Fadl, 2005/2006). The concept of an open text must therefore be approached cautiously so as not to disregard debates concerning the immutable and changeable elements of Islamic law (Abou El Fadl, 2001/2004).

Overall, the analysis yielded five conceptual findings. First, authoritarianism is the abuse of interpretive authority when readers claim their interpretations to be the final will of God. Second, hermeneutics requires an ethical relationship among the text, the author, and the reader. Third, the five ethical prerequisites function as mechanisms for constraining authoritarian claims. Fourth, the interpretation of qawwamun demonstrates the importance of contextual and justice-oriented gender interpretation. Fifth, Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics can be situated as an ethical framework for Living Islam that connects texts, moral responsibility, and contemporary Muslim social realities.

Discussion

This discussion interprets the five main findings to address how Khaled Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics understands religious authority, critiques interpretive authoritarianism, interprets qawwamun in relation to gender justice, and contributes to an ethics of Living Islam. The findings demonstrate that Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics should not be understood merely as a theory of Islamic legal interpretation, but also as an ethical framework for interpretation that connects texts, authority, moral responsibility, and Muslim social realities.

This repositioning extends previous studies that have generally situated Abou El Fadl within the frameworks of Islamic legal reform, hermeneutics, religious moderation, and critiques of authoritarian fatwas (Ansori, 2022; Faiz et al., 2023; Majid, 2013; Slater, 2016, 2020). In contrast to Slater (2016, 2020), who places greater emphasis on reform methodology and hermeneutic relationality, this article positions Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics as a framework of social ethics for examining how Islam is lived within relations of power, gender, and the reader's moral responsibility. From the perspective of lived religion, religion is present not only as doctrine or institution, but also as practice, experience, and the negotiation of meaning in everyday life (Ammerman, 2014; McGuire, 2008). Jeldtoft (2011) also emphasizes that lived Islam must be examined through Muslim practices and identities in everyday lived contexts. Within this framework, Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics functions as a form of moral discipline that prevents religious texts from becoming instruments for legitimizing domination, exclusion, or injustice.

The finding concerning interpretive authoritarianism is consistent with Abou El Fadl's (2001a, 2001b) distinction between legitimate authority and authoritarianism. Legitimate authority does not reside in the interpreter's claim to finality, but in the ability to preserve the integrity of the text, acknowledge human limitations, and assume moral accountability for the interpretive process. This interpretation enriches Hallaq's (2001) discussion of authority, continuity, and change in Islamic law. While Hallaq (2001) emphasizes that authority in Islamic law is formed through the structures of tradition and mechanisms of legitimation, Abou El Fadl adds an ethical dimension to

this issue. This finding is also related to the ideas of Rahman (1982) and Saeed (2006) regarding the importance of connecting the moral message of the Qur'an with the modern context. Abou El Fadl advances this direction by emphasizing that contextual interpretation must be guided by an ethics of authority so that textualism does not become authoritarianism and contextualization does not shift into uncontrolled subjectivism.

The relationship among the text, the author, and the reader constitutes the core of Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics. His thought intersects with philosophical hermeneutics, which understands meaning as arising from the encounter among the text, tradition, and the reader's horizon (Gadamer, 1960/2013; Sumaryono, 1993). However, Abou El Fadl does not position the reader as the absolute center of meaning. He places the reader within a structure of ethical responsibility through five prerequisites: honesty, diligence, comprehensiveness, reasonableness, and self-restraint. These prerequisites demonstrate that textual openness in Abou El Fadl's thought does not constitute unlimited relativism, but rather a mechanism for ensuring that the interpretive process remains open, responsible, and nonarbitrary (Abou El Fadl, 2001b). Critiques concerning the possibility of relativizing meaning must nevertheless be considered because the concept of the open text has generated debate, particularly regarding the boundary between immutable and changeable elements in Islamic law (Abou El Fadl, 2001/2004, 2005/2006). However, this debate itself demonstrates that contemporary Islamic hermeneutics operates within the tension between openness of meaning and the need for normative discipline.

The finding concerning *qawwamun* illustrates how Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics operates in relation to a concrete issue that affects Muslim life. The interpretation of Qur'an 4:34 concerns not only lexical meaning, but also power relations, family structures, and gender justice. In Abou El Fadl's interpretation, *qawwamun* is not understood as an absolute legitimation of male superiority, but as a concept related to economic responsibility, protection, social context, and the principle of justice (Abou El Fadl, 2001b, 2005/2006). This interpretation is consistent with Wadud (1999), who critiques patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an, and Barlas (2002/2019), who emphasizes the importance of dismantling patriarchal assumptions in readings of sacred texts. Ali (2016) also demonstrates that gender ethics in Islam must be understood through the relationship among texts, hadith, fiqh, and social realities. More specifically, Mir-Hosseini et al. (2015) emphasize that *qiwamah* must be reinterpreted so that it does not serve as a basis for male domination, but is instead situated within a framework of responsibility and justice.

The comparison with Ath-Thabari (2000) demonstrates that interpretive differences are not merely linguistic differences, but also reflect different social assumptions and conceptions of justice. Classical exegesis emerged within particular epistemic and social contexts, whereas Abou El Fadl's interpretation seeks to renegotiate the relationship between the text and contemporary social realities. Within the framework of Living Islam, this is important because religious interpretation does not stop at textual meaning, but also shapes family relations, social structures, and Muslims' lived experiences.

Conceptually, this article proposes a framework for an ethics of Living Islam based on three analytical layers. The first is the hermeneutic layer, namely, the relationship among the text, the author, and the reader. The second is the ethical layer, namely, the five moral prerequisites that constrain interpreters' authoritarian claims. The third is the social layer, namely, the consequences of interpretation for gender justice and contemporary Muslim realities. This framework demonstrates that Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics explains not only how texts are understood, but also how interpretive claims must be held accountable in social life. Its theoretical implication is the need to understand religious authority as an ethical practice rather than merely as textual or institutional legitimation.

At a practical and conceptual level, these findings may be considered an evaluative framework for religious literacy, Islamic education, fatwa institutions, Islamic communities, and digital *da'wah* (religious outreach) spaces. Because this article is based on a library study, these implications are not intended as empirically tested policy recommendations, but as a basis for the conceptual assessment of interpretive practices. Evaluative indicators that may be derived from Abou El Fadl's five prerequisites include openness to context, transparency of argumentation, acknowledgment of the limits of interpretive authority, consideration of gender justice, and attention to the social effects of interpretation.

This article is limited by its reliance on library research and textual analysis. Therefore, its findings should be understood as a conceptual synthesis rather than an empirical generalization concerning interpretive practices across all Muslim communities. Another limitation concerns the

possibility of selection and interpretive biases because this article focuses on particular works by Abou El Fadl and secondary literature relevant to hermeneutics, authority, gender, and Living Islam. This focus may mean that the proposed model reflects an ethical-progressive reading of Abou El Fadl more strongly than the full range of scholarly responses to his thought. Further studies may extend these findings through empirical research on how religious authority, gender interpretation, and interpretive ethics are negotiated within Muslim families, Islamic educational institutions, religious communities, fatwa institutions, or digital media. Future research may also compare Abou El Fadl with other contemporary Muslim thinkers on issues of authority, hermeneutics, gender justice, and Living Islam.

Conclusion

This article concludes that Khaled Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics can be understood as an ethical-philosophical framework for examining religious authority, critiquing interpretive authoritarianism, and formulating an ethics of Islamic interpretation within the discourse of Living Islam. Through document analysis, qualitative content analysis, and critical-hermeneutic interpretation, this study demonstrates that the central issue of religious authority concerns not only who is entitled to interpret texts, but also how interpretive claims are constructed, constrained, and held morally accountable in contemporary Muslim life.

Taken together, Abou El Fadl's hermeneutics operates through five interrelated dimensions: interpretive authoritarianism as the foreclosure of textual autonomy and the assertion of a final claim regarding God's will; the ethical relationship among the author, the text, and the reader; five moral prerequisites comprising honesty, diligence, comprehensiveness, reasonableness, and self-restraint; a contextual and justice-oriented interpretation of *qawwamun*; and the interconnection among texts, moral responsibility, gender justice, and Muslim social realities within the framework of Living Islam.

The principal contribution of this article lies in its proposed conceptual model of an ethics of Living Islam based on three analytical layers: the hermeneutic layer, which emphasizes the relationship among the text, the author, and the reader; the ethical layer, which specifies the moral prerequisites for interpreters; and the social layer, which examines the effects of interpretation on justice, gender relations, and contemporary Muslim life. Religious authority is thus understood not only as textual or institutional legitimation, but also as an ethical practice that requires responsibility, openness, and self-restraint.

At a practical and conceptual level, these findings may strengthen religious literacy, Islamic education, the institutional work of fatwa bodies, and digital da'wah spaces by increasing awareness of the limits of interpretive claims and the social effects of religious authority. Abou El Fadl's ethical principles may serve as an initial basis for assessing whether an interpretation creates space for justice or instead forecloses it through authoritarian claims, with the qualification that their application requires further empirical examination.

This article is limited to library research and textual analysis; therefore, its findings are conceptual and are not intended as empirical generalizations concerning all interpretive practices within Muslim communities. Further studies may examine how interpretive ethics, religious authority, and gender interpretations are negotiated within Muslim families, Islamic educational institutions, fatwa institutions, religious communities, and digital media, as well as compare Abou El Fadl's thought with that of other contemporary Muslim thinkers to develop an ethics of Living Islam that is more contextual, critical, and responsive.

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Author contributions (CRediT)

Yanuar Rizki Fauziah: Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Writing – Original Draft. **Ali Murfi:** Formal Analysis, Validation, Investigation, Writing.

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This study is a library-based investigation of published sources and did not involve human participants, interviews, observations, personal data, or interventions; therefore, formal ethical approval was not required.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Submission/originality statement

This manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration elsewhere.

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