

A NEW URDU TAFSEER

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Tafheem-al-Qur'an

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It would hardly be an exaggeration to suggest that the *Tafseer* literature mirrors Muslim thought at its best. The real genius of the Muslim mind has expressed itself in its efforts to understand and interpret the word of God as enshrined in the Qur'an. *Tafseer* literature has enriched almost every language of the world spoken by the Muslims. The bulk of the treasure, however, lies in Arabic and Urdu words.

Although younger in age, Urdu is much ahead of many of its older competitors in respect of the quantity and quality of Islamic literature it has offered to the world. It has a rich tradition of *Tafseer* literature produced over the last two hundred and fifty years. According to a recent bibliography, there are 280 complete *Tafseers* and over 500 incomplete ones in Urdu¹. The list is, in no way, complete or exhaustive. There is, however, very little awareness of this literature in the non-Urdu world. In this paper an effort is being made to introduce one of the most important contemporary *Tafseer*—the *Tafheem al-Qur'an* of Sayyid Abul A'la Maudoodi.

Maudoodi is a prolific writer and is exerting an immense intellectual influence on the contemporary Muslim mind. He has written more than two hundred books and pamphlets², many of which have been translated into a number of national and international languages. His first major work—*Al-Jihad fi-al-Islam*—appeared in 1928. In 1932 he launched an academic journal *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*. His *Tafseer, Tafheem al-Qur'an* has been serialised in this journal from February 1942 to March 1973. A revised version of this has appeared in six volumes between 1950 and 1973. Parts of *Tafheem al-Qur'an* have been translated in Arabic, English, Hindi, Bengali, Pushto, Swahili etc. A complete English translation is in progress.

Most of the Urdu *Tafseers*, as also those in Arabic, can be neatly placed in the well-known categories of *Tafseer* from the viewpoint inter alia, of *Aathar, Kalam, Lughat, I'jaz, Fiqh, and Tasawwuf*. Some *Tafseers* try to cover all or most of these aspects simultaneously. A survey of *Tafseer* literature of Urdu, however, reveals at least three impor-

tant landmarks. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan initiated a new trend by introducing elements of historical criticism and comparative religions in Qur'anic interpretation. He also tried to reconcile the teachings of the Qur'an with some of the intellectual currents of nineteenth century Europe particularly those of Great Britain in the Victorian era. Ever since contemporary thought and issues have reigned more prominently in the Urdu literature on *Tafseer*, flowing unceasingly into the rather parallel streams of modernist and traditionalist thought.

Abul Kalam Azad represents another major departure from the pattern. In him the modernist and the traditionalist strands seek some kind of a convergence, smoothly more often, uneasily at places. He tried to breathe fresh air into *Tafseer* literature, striving to free Qur'anic interpretation from its earlier socio-intellectual infra-structure and re-emphasising the principle of understanding the Qur'an through the Qur'an. He appears to have been successful in identifying the challenge that confronts a modern student of the Qur'an, but Abul Kalam Azad could not go beyond the *Tafseer* of the first surah—*al-Fatihah*—and a number of explanatory notes appended to his translation of the first seventeen chapters.

Maudoodi represents the next major departure from the traditional framework. And he is the only one of the three pace-setters who has completed his *Tafseer*. One is thus in a position to study and examine his approach to the Qur'an, which he significantly calls *Tafheem al-Qur'an: An Understanding of the Qur'an*.

An analysis of *Muqaddimah* and of the contents of the *Tafheem* reveals that Maudoodi's work is based on four assumptions. The validity and usefulness of his approach seem to hinge on these assumptions.

1. The Qur'an is a book of *guidance (hidayah)* and should be approached as such. It does deal with aspects of history, geography, socio-economic relations, natural phenomena etc. but it is not a book of history, geography and social or natural science. It is a masterpiece of literature, but it was not revealed because of its literary form and beauty, or primarily as a piece of higher literature. It was revealed as a Book of Guidance and everything else is ancillary to this role. As such the Qur'an should be approached as the mainspring of guidance and should be assigned to play a decisive role in the reconstruction of thought and action, of institutions and society, as was the case when it was revealed to the blessed Prophet Muhammad. The function of *Tafheem* is not to dwell primarily or mainly on literary beauties and legalistic niceties, but to develop an understanding of the Qur'an as the source of guidance.

2. The Qur'an is a Book of a movement. It presents a message, invites the entire human race to that view of reality and society, organises those who respond to this call as an ideological community and asks this community to strive for the socio-moral reconstruction of human society. Much of the Qur'an can not be properly understood unless it is studied in this framework. The Prophet was not an idealist visionary or a poet-philosopher; he was assigned to play a historical role as the leader of the Islamic movement. The Qur'an was revealed to him in parts during the twenty-three years of his prophetic life, guiding his steps in every situation. This has a particular as well as a general and universal

aspect. In its particular aspect this milieu provides an illustration of the movement and change the Qur'an wants to effect. In its general and universal aspect Qur'an abstracts from the specific time-s context and presents the model which can should be applied in different time-s situations. Maudoodi approaches the Qur'an as a guide book for this movement for Islamic reconstruction. As such the internal evid of the Qur'an revealing different aspects situations of this Da'wah and movement Sunnah of the Prophet and of his companion and the evidence on *asbab-an-Nuzul* assume great significance in his understanding of Qur'an.

3. The Qur'an presents a complete way of life—a code of conduct and a scheme for organisation of the total gamut of human life—belief, action and society. It gives its own world view, does not divide life into water-tight compartments of material and spiritual, creates only one supreme loyalty to Allah—and tries to organise the whole of life in the light of this overriding principle. Maudoodi suggests that the key concepts of the Qur'an are *Ilah, Rabb, Ibadah al-Deen*. The Qur'an invites man to accept Allah as *Rabb*, the Sustainer and Sovereign, to harmonise his will with the Will of Allah in all its aspects (*ibadah*) and to establish the Will of Allah over the totality of life (*deen*). This is the path through which man can attain the fulfilment of his real nature.

4. The key to the understanding of the Qur'an is its style and methodology. The Qur'an is not compiled in a form which is familiar in different academic disciplines. This is so because it is not a book designed with any academic discipline as such. Its style and methodology are distinct and unique—suited to its purpose and mission and fitting into the frameworks developed in human scholarship. Its purpose is *hidayah* (guidance). It addresses itself to man, target is to develop a new consciousness of reality and to generate a new cultural movement to establish a new civilization. To accomplish this objective it has adopted a direct, straight-forward method of heart-to-heart talk between God and man. It focuses its message on the heart and soul of man, tries to move him from within. Its style is that of brief and precise *Khutabat* addressed by God to man but containing all the elements of a meaningful dialogue between the two. Every verse of the Qur'an serves this purpose individually and in the context it occupies. Maudoodi develops a new concept of *Ahwal*—system and sequence within the Qur'an. Earlier *mufassseer* have tried to elaborate the relationship between different *surahs* of the Qur'an. Some have studied *Nazm* within every *surah*. Maudoodi has attempted to study the *Nazm* of the whole of the Qur'an, of each *surah*, and the relationship between different *surahs* and between verses within a *surah* in the light of the overall objective of the Qur'an and has shown how they are woven into one fabric; the apparent diversity has permeated with a purposive unity. To him style and methodology of the Qur'an are secondary to its purpose but are its essential instruments.

These four propositions go to make up the framework in which Maudoodi has tried to study the Qur'an. In his *Muqaddimah*, he discussed the principles of interpretation and has followed and presents a treatise on the concepts of the Qur'an: *Ilah, Rabb, Iba*

* Paper presented to the XXIX International Congress of the Orientalists held in Paris (16th-22nd July, 1973) on 19th July, 1973.

1. See: "Sayyarah Digest", Lahore, Special Issue on the Qur'an, Vol. II. (1970).

2. M. Aslam, *An Annotated Bibliography of the Works of Maulana Abul A'la Maudoodi*. Dissertation, Dept. of Literary Science, University of Karachi (Mimeo).

and *al-Deen*. Every *surah* has been prefaced by an introduction giving the subject matter of the *surah*, its relevance to the overall scheme of the Qur'an, its historical setting and a summary of the questions and issues discussed in it.

He has offered a contemporary translation of the Qur'an which is neither literal nor liberal. It is an interpretative translation in direct, forceful and modern Urdu which seeks to provide an ordinary reader with an almost direct access to the Qur'an.

Another distinctive aspect of this translation is the use of paragraphs. In the text of the Qur'an there are no paragraphs. The division of the Qur'an into *Manzil*, *Juzi'* and *Ruku'* is only for the convenience of recitation. Introduction of paragraphing in translation is a major innovation in Urdu, perhaps in any language of the world by a Muslim scholar.

The translation is followed by explanatory notes elaborating the meaning of the Qur'an, giving historical and other information wherever necessary, pin-pointing the relevance of a verse to the message and spirit of the Qur'an and the demands of the Islamic movement, explaining the *hikmah* (rationale) behind different injunctions and their import for our own times. Through these notes Maudoodi has tried to develop a new '*Ilm-al-Kalam*' based upon the Qur'an and utilizing the developments of modern knowledge, principles of historical criticism, comparative religion and ideologies.

While dealing with the *ahkam* (laws) he has avoided sectarian controversies. Although he generally follows the Hanafi school, in his explanatory notes he has usually stated the viewpoint of all major schools of Islamic thought, including that of the *Shiah*. This helps a reader to appreciate how a certain verse has been explained or approached by different schools. This also identifies the area of flexibility within the domain of law.

Another distinct feature of the *Tafheem al-Qur'an* is its index. Running into over four hundred pages it is, perhaps, the most elaborate and exhaustive concordance of the Qur'an. It deals with the concepts, themes, personalities and events in the Qur'an and is an extremely useful aid to any researcher on the Qur'an.

Tafheem al-Qur'an is a major contribution to Tafseer literature. It is difficult to measure it with the yardsticks of modernism or traditionalism. It may, more correctly, be described as contemporary and universal. Its emphasis is on movement, activism and dynamism, without taking liberty with the Word of God or equating the concepts of the Qur'an with the thought content of the ideologies of the day. It is permeated with reasonable respect for the tradition in thought and practice without completely identifying the Qur'an with the thought-patterns or instituted structures produced by Muslims during the course of history. It is a plea for purposive change and tries to develop the faculty to discriminate between the essential and the incidental; between the Divine and as such permanent, and the human and as such changeable.

Tafheem al-Qur'an is, itself, a human effort and is subject to all the prospects and weaknesses of human efforts to understand and explain the Divine. It has its own contemporary flavour and this constitutes its merit as well as its limitation. No human effort is or can be final, but there are some efforts that may have more lasting relevance. *Tafheem al-Qur'an* seems to be such a work.