

Is Hermeneutics Necessary for Reading the Quran Today?

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Hermeneutics; Interpretation of the Qur'an; Maqasid Al-Syari'ah; Contextualization; Maintained Hermeneutics.	The debate over hermeneutics in Quranic studies remains a central discourse among contemporary Muslim academics. Hermeneutics is considered capable of bridging the revealed text with modern social realities but, at the same time, has the potential to give rise to relativism of meaning and shift the authority of revelation. This study aims to weigh the potential and risks of hermeneutics in the study of interpretation and to offer a middle-ground formulation called bounded hermeneutics. This study uses a qualitative method with a literature study approach, examining the main works of Abdullah Saeed, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Amina Wadud, as well as the thoughts of Indonesian scholars such as Sahiron Syamsuddin, Quraish Shihab, and Abdurrahman Wahid. The analysis results show that hermeneutics contributes to presenting interpretations that are contextual and responsive to contemporary issues such as gender, human rights, and pluralism. However, this approach also has epistemological and social weaknesses when applied without limits. Through a synthesis between the principles of <i>maqāṣid al-sharī'ah</i> , the discipline of <i>ushul al-tafsir</i> , and the contextual sensitivity of hermeneutics, this research offers <i>awake hermeneutics</i> as a model of moderate interpretation that is relevant to the dynamics of the times but still maintains the sanctity of the divine text.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a well-established fact that the Qur'an is a guide for all people in the world. This is stated in the Qur'an itself, in Surah Al-Isra', verse 9, which reads:

إِنَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ يَهْدِي لِلَّتِي هِيَ أَقْوَمُ وَيُبَشِّرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ الَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ الصَّالِحَاتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا كَبِيرًا ۝٩

"Indeed, this Qur'an provides guidance to the straightest (path) and gives good news to believers who do good deeds that for them there is a very great reward"

Nearly all commentators explain the meaning of this verse. For example, the interpretations of at-Thabari, al-Qurtubi, asy-Syinqiti, Ibn Kathir, and others state that the straightest path refers to the best guidance for faith, good deeds, and all aspects of human life throughout the ages.

In this ever-evolving world, many social issues arise, such as gender issues, human rights, pluralism, the environment, law, and so on (Al-Qassimi, 2021). The Qur'an, as a guide for all humanity, is required to be able to answer all these endless problems (Rahman, 2020). Many Muslim intellectuals are dissatisfied with the answers provided by classical commentators who rely on the Ulumul Qur'an (Mansour & Ibrahim, 2022). Therefore, they use a method they

believe can answer emerging contemporary issues: a hermeneutic understanding of the Qur'an (Ali & Sadik, 2023). Along with the emergence of the hermeneutic method, differences of opinion arose regarding it (Yusuf & Hadi, 2021). Many criticized this model of understanding due to the numerous controversies it generated (Mustafa, 2022). However, many also began to agree and follow the hermeneutic method of understanding the Qur'an, considering it a potential solution to these persistent issues (Hassan & Khalid, 2024).

In fact, classical exegetes also had their own methods for addressing constantly emerging issues (Afandi et al., 2023; Aras, 2024; Hidayati & Hutagaol, 2025; Setyarama, 2025). They developed what they called contextual interpretation and *ijtihad*, based on strict rules. This raises a crucial question: can the hermeneutic method truly be used appropriately, is it superior to existing methods, or does it actually create new problems?

Previous research on Quranic hermeneutics has generally taken dichotomous positions. Studies by Adian Husaini (2007) and Al Fiqri Ardiansyah (2025) strongly reject hermeneutics as incompatible with Islamic epistemology, while research by Sahiron Syamsuddin (2017) and Abdullah Saeed (2014) advocate for its adaptation within Islamic frameworks. This polarization has created a significant gap in the literature, particularly regarding a balanced approach that acknowledges both the potential benefits and risks of hermeneutical methods.

Looking at the results of existing research, most tend to be dichotomous (Fawns, 2022; Muradchanian et al., 2024). Consequently, research that critically examines the potential and risks of hermeneutics while offering a methodological middle ground is rare. This research is important because it positions itself in a neutral position. Furthermore, it does not simply accept or reject, but rather considers and examines the potential and risks of this hermeneutic method. Therefore, this study aims to assess the contributions and limitations, as well as the impacts it has had on society in maintaining the relevance of the Quran.

This research is expected to provide significant benefits both academically and practically. Academically, it contributes to the development of Quranic interpretation methodology by offering the concept of "bounded hermeneutics" as a middle path between rigid traditionalism and liberal hermeneutics. Practically, this research provides guidance for contemporary interpreters in addressing modern issues while maintaining the sanctity of the Quranic text, as well as serving as a reference for Islamic education institutions in developing balanced Quranic interpretation curricula that are responsive to contemporary challenges but remain grounded in authentic Islamic epistemology.

METHOD

This research employed library research with a qualitative approach. This library research was chosen because the research focuses on the thoughts of classical and contemporary commentators, as well as hermeneutic theories developed in both the Islamic and Western worlds. According to Zed (2008), a literature review aims to critically examine various literature to identify concepts, theories, and analytical frameworks relevant to the research topic. Therefore, this study does not collect field data, but relies on text as the primary data.

Data collection is carried out through an in-depth exploration of classical and contemporary sources, which include the books of *tafsir mu'tabar* (such as *at-Thabari*, *al-Qurtubi*, and *Ibn Katsir*), the works of modern hermeneutic scholars (such as Abdullah Saeed,

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and Amina Wadud), as well as hermeneutic critics (such as Adian Husaini), supplemented by academic journals and related books. Data analysis is carried out in stages, starting with descriptive analysis to categorize the arguments and methodologies of each thought, followed by critical analysis to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective by testing its internal consistency and conformity with Islamic epistemological principles, and ending with synthetic analysis to integrate findings and construct a limited hermeneutic conceptual framework. The validity and reliability of research are maintained through the triangulation of sources and the application of the principle of scientific justice (*al-insaf*) by accurately representing each argument in its intellectual context before criticism and synthesis, thus minimizing bias and providing a complete understanding of the Qur'anic hermeneutic discourse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Advantages of Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics in Qur'anic interpretation is a methodological approach that has the fundamental advantage of creating a dynamic dialogue between the sacred text and contemporary social realities. Hermeneutics not only allows for an understanding of the Qur'an protected from context, but also provides space for interpretation that integrates historical, social, and contextual aspects in understanding the Qur'anic text. The hermeneutic approach has several advantages in understanding the Qur'an in a way that is adapted to the needs of the times without losing its relevance as a guide for humanity throughout the ages.

One of these lies in the ability of the hermeneutic method to bridge the gap between the message of the revelation and the contemporary era. Hassan Hanafi, a prominent figure in commemorative hermeneutics, emphasized that hermeneutics is an effort to convey the message of God's mind to human life. Through this approach, the Quran is not viewed as a static text, but as the word of God, always relevant and able to respond to emerging challenges.

Contextual hermeneutics developed by Abdullah Saeed shows that "the interpretation of the ethico-legal content of the Qur'an needs to consider social changes in order to maintain a close relationship between the Qur'an and Muslims today. This approach makes the Qur'an always relevant to the development of the times by considering the understanding of the socio-historical context of the Qur'an at the time of the revelation of the Qur'anic verses. Another advantage of hermeneutics is the fusion of horizons feature that has been echoed by Hans-Georg Gadamer. In the context of the Qur'an, this concept means the fusion between the horizon of the Qur'anic text and the understanding of each reader, thus producing a rich and relevant understanding.

For example, Amina Wadud's application of feminist hermeneutics in interpreting QS. An-Nisa': 34: Equality versus domination. She demonstrates the superiority of feminist hermeneutics through her reinterpretation of QS. An-Nisa': 34, which has long been a reference to patriarchal domination. In her monumental work, *Qur'an and Women : Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, translated into Indonesian as *Wanita di dalam al-Qur'an* (Pustaka Publisher, Bandung, 1994) , she offers a perspective on the evolution of the verse that reads:

God willing, God willing, God willing, God willing, God willing may Allah bless him and give him peace and blessings أَمَّا إِلَهُكُمْ

"Men (husbands) are responsible for women (wives) because Allah has made some of them (men) excel others and because they (men) spend part of their wealth."

According to Amina Wadud, this verse should be understood as follows: "men (*qawwamuna ala*) are used, (on the basis of) what Allah (prefers) (*faadhala*) some of them over others, and (on the basis of) what they spend from their wealth (for the maintenance of women). So good women are (*qanitat*), who guard in secret what Allah has guarded. As for those you are afraid of (*nusyuz*). Rebuke them, throw them away them into separate beds, and scourge them. So, if they obey you, do not seek any way against them."

Wadud emphasized the key word "*bi*" (based on), indicating that male leadership over women is functionally conditional, not structurally permanent. He argued that *qawwamuna 'ala* for women has two requirements: men possessing greater tendencies than women and men's ability to support women. However, if these requirements are not met, men cannot be leaders for women.

Wadud's feminist hermeneutic approach demonstrates its superiority by emphasizing fundamental equality rather than hierarchical domination. She also stated, "Women's leadership in QS. An-Nisa' verse 34 from a gender equality perspective is functional, meaning male leadership only provides a living. However, if he is unable to do so, then the *qiwwamah* in men is lost. The meaning of the verse will change according to the existing conditions. He also explained that "the *qiwwamah* contained in QS. An-Nisa' verse 34 is functional, meaning male leadership only provides a living. However, if he is unable to do so, then the *qiwwamah* in men is lost.

The modern implications of this interpretation include women's leadership, as the contemporary era is filled with highly educated and economically independent women. Wadud provides an interpretation that opens up theological legitimacy for women's leadership in various sectors. Wadud then expands the functional relationship between husband and wife "toward goodness, reaching out to good relationships in the wider community, creating a more democratic and gender-equitable family model."

Wadud also believes that male leadership is not absolute, as it changes depending on circumstances. This does not stipulate that men are natural leaders and women are the ones who manage the household. These advantages present important methodological and theological issues that need to be examined.

2. Weaknesses of Hermeneutics

Here are some of the weaknesses of using hermeneutics.

a. Epistemological Differences

The hermeneutics adopted by the Western tradition has an epistemological basis that is fundamentally different from that of Islam. This fundamental difference lies in the perspective on the source and nature of knowledge itself. This is also expressed by a contemporary Muslim scholar: "Western epistemology tends to be guided by rationality

and empiricism, while Islam places revelation (*naqli*) as the primary foundation, balanced by reason (*aqli*), which operates through inductive and deductive methods."

Western epistemology, derived from the Greek philosophical tradition and developed through the European Enlightenment, tends to grant supreme authority to reason and empirical experience as the sole sources of valid knowledge. In contrast, Islamic epistemology integrates revelation as the ultimate source of truth, providing a framework of reference for rational and empirical activity.

Later in Western philosophy, hermeneutics emerged from the traditional critique of human texts, not revealed texts. Heidegger and Gadamer developed hermeneutics as a response to the problematic nature of human-created texts within a temporal and historical context. This is also revealed in a critical analysis that states: "The emergence of hermeneutics began with the trauma experienced by Christians at that time regarding the authority of the church and the problematic nature of the biblical text. When it entered the study of philosophy, the Western intellectual tradition, with all its secular and anti-religious worldviews, also gave new meaning to hermeneutics."

Heidegger's Fundamental Concept of the "Hermeneutic Being" Martin Heidegger developed the concept that "humans themselves are seen as hermeneutic beings, in the sense of beings who must understand themselves." For Heidegger, hermeneutics is not just a method of interpreting texts, but rather the fundamental structure of human existence (*Design*) which is forced to interpret the world in a state of facility and thrownness (*Geworfenheit*). This weakness is the basis for the need to review the richness of the Islamic interpretation tradition which has been the foundation of the interpretation of the Qur'an.

b. Problems of Application in the Qur'an

The fundamental weakness of Western hermeneutics when applied to the Qur'an lies in the ontological distinction between "human text" and "God's text." Similar criticisms have been made by scholars: "If this method is applied to the study of the Qur'an, it will damage the foundations of religion, because religion is subordinated to philosophy. As a philosophical method, hermeneutics is full of epistemological presuppositions that originate from the concept of reality and truth in a Western perspective that does not consider the metaphysical, cosmological, and ontological aspects of reality.

This can be seen from the example of the case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd where the application of Western hermeneutics without the epistemological filter of Islam has proven dangerous. Zayd stated "The Qur'an is a 'cultural product' (*muntaj thaqafi*). The text of the Qur'an was formed in reality and culture, for more than 20 years. The Qur'an is a historical text as well as a human text." He also explained the process of ontological transformation by stating "The text was originally revealed. When the text was revealed and read by the Prophet, it changed from a text from a Divine text (*nash ilahi*) to a concept or human text (*nash insani*), because it changed from *tanzil* to *takwil*."

c. Epistemological implications

Western hermeneutics produces interpretive relativism, as explained "Western epistemology starts from assumptions, prejudices or skeptical, speculative and relative efforts without being based on revelation. Therefore, Western epistemology produces sciences that are empty of spiritual values and ultimately cannot reach the truth." In contrast to Islam which maintains the absolute dimension of the text of the Qur'an. This is found in the statement of a Muslim figure who said "The Qur'an is not *turats* (cultural product) as much as a product of human interpretation (understanding) which is relative and tentative towards the Qur'an. Thus, the Qur'an contains divine absolute elements, while the understanding of the text is relative."

d. Paradigmatic differences

Another fundamental difference is paradigmatic orientation. Some Islamic figures have argued, "The Western epistemological tradition displays a secular-materialistic Western worldview and is generally anthropocentric. This secular epistemology is not actually the product of a single school of thought. Islamic epistemology is theocentric, but without negating the element of human potential in the pursuit of knowledge."

From several points, it can be concluded that Western hermeneutics has a fundamental epistemological incompatibility with Islamic revelation. This is proven by the fact that "Hermeneutics originates from the Christian, Western, and philosophical traditions, so it is impossible to uphold ideologies and values that are not necessarily in accordance with Islam. From the aspect of its historical development, it originates from the Christian, Western, and philosophical traditions, so it is impossible to uphold ideologies and values that are not necessarily in accordance with Islam." This is the fundamental weakness of the difference in perspective between "human texts" and "divine texts" that cannot be reconciled without compromising one of them. Western hermeneutics, designed for temporal human texts, when applied to the Qur'an without proper epistemological filtering, has the potential to shift the position of revelation from being a divine word to being a cultural product.

3. Alternative Internal Islamic Interpretations

Islam has a rich and multi-layered tradition of interpretation, evolving from the time of the Companions to the present-day interpreters. These interpreters have formulated systematic and ethical methodologies, such as interpretation based on narrations (*tafsir bil ma'tsur*), interpretation based on *ijtihad* (valid reason), and a combination of the two. History records that the interpretation method was used by generations of Companions and successors.

Meanwhile, *tafsir bi' al-ra'yi* (interpretation of the Quran) began to develop along with the emerging need for rational interpretation without deviating from the ethical principles of interpretation. Within this existing framework, the Islamic tradition already possesses a robust internal framework, so hermeneutics is not the only way to bridge the gap between revelation and the context of the times. Both classical scholars and modern exegetes have provided interpretive mechanisms that maintain a balance between the authority of revelation and the social context.

In the book *al-Muwafaqat fi Usul al-Syahri'ah*, the work of al-Syatibi explains: "The first step is to understand in depth the texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith of the Prophet. Then know the context in which these texts emerged and understand the context of people's lives as legal subjects, so that they can truly be of applicable value and provide benefits." Then Ibn Ashur in *Maqasid as-Syhari'ah al-Islamiyyah* (also summarized in books about maqashid) said that Islamic jurists then formulated five basic objectives of the Shari'a, namely protecting religion (hifz ad-din), soul (hifz an-nafs), reason (hifz al-'aql), offspring (hifz an-nasl), and property (hifz al-mal

). All provisions of the Shari'a aim to safeguard these five basic things for the benefit of humanity.

To understand the Quran further, proper steps are needed to understand it. First, *Ijtihad* in Islam is an early form of adaptation mechanism, namely the effort to understand and interpret the text of sharia so that it remains relevant to the needs of the times, without deviating from the framework of sharia itself. In the context of classical Islamic scholarship, *ijtihad* is a process of legal reasoning based on a deep understanding of the text and the social realities of society. Amhar Rasyid emphasized that the process of *istinbath al-ahkam* (the production of Islamic law) since its inception has positioned *ijtihad* as an effort to understand the reasons and circumstances behind the revelation of verses or hadith, which are essentially hermeneutic (interpretive).

Second, there is the concept of *maqasid asy-Shari'ah* as explained in *al-Muwafaqat*. This concept is a normative-moral framework used to understand the objectives of all provisions of Islamic sharia. Third, pay attention to the methods used by figures who promote hermeneutics, for example Fazlur Rahman. He developed the Double Movement theory as a method of interpreting the Koran with the aim of adapting it to the demands of the times. The aim of the two *ijtihad* methods based on *maqasid as-syari'ah* and hermeneutics is to have a parallel pattern and still maintain the divine principle in the text of the Qur'an.

There are figures who develop contextual interpretations without eliminating the authority of revelation. For example, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), who emphasized social interpretation, humanity, and tolerance. Gus Dur emphasized social interpretation based on human values and tolerance. In his writings, pluralism is not understood as just tolerance, but is realized through a sincere sense of mutual understanding and religious brotherhood among society. This understanding is firmly rooted in the interpretation of Al-Qur'an Surah al-Maidah verse 48 to instill justice, tolerance, and diversity in national life.

Another figure, Sahiron Syamsuddin, developed the hermeneutic methodology of *maqasidiyyah*. This methodology is an interpretive approach that combines modern hermeneutic theory with the *maqasid al-Shari'ah* framework. In his book, he emphasizes the relevance and primary purpose of sharia when interpreting Quranic verses to ensure they remain relevant to the social context of Indonesian society. He emphasizes that hermeneutics is not merely textual thinking, but also examines the purpose and deepest meaning of sharia, so that Quranic interpretation can dialogue with the realities of contemporary society.

Another figure, including contemporary ulama, is Quraish Shihab. His works such as *tafsir al-Misbah* are evidence of moderate interpretation efforts that connect the text of

revelation and the modern Indonesian context. In his work, Quraish Shihab emphasizes the importance of explaining verses in easy language, integrating meaning and imagery so that the interpretation of the Qur'an can be interpreted in an actual way without violating the authority of revelation.

From these three figures, it can be seen that there is a similar methodological orientation, namely the effort to maintain the authority of revelation while ensuring the message of the Quran remains alive in the midst of modern society, despite different approaches. This is evident from Gus Dur who emphasized the social interpretation of humanity, then Sahiron Syamsuddin who combined modern hermeneutic theory and the framework of *maqasid al-syari'ah*, and Quraish Shihab who sought to connect the text of revelation with the modern Indonesian context. The approaches brought by these figures can be evidence that Islam has its own mature hermeneutical potential, but until now there has been no methodological formulation that understands or defines the boundaries explicitly. Therefore, this study attempts to develop a safe hermeneutical concept as a form of synthesis between the creativity of modern interpretation and classical Islamic methodological discipline.

This alternative must be based on the existing reality in the academic world. Based on research results and discussions, researchers tend to be dichotomous, so this researcher offers a synthetic approach called bounded hermeneutics, which considers both sides as having important value. This approach is open to renewal but adheres to the basic principles of Islamic epistemology, such as *maqasid as-syari'ah* and the discipline of *ushul al-tafsir*. The bounded hermeneutics approach operates through several key principles:

1. Being selective in accepting elements of Western hermeneutics. This means that aspects that align with the *maqasid al-syari'ah* can be adopted, while relativistic elements must be rejected.
2. It is dialogical in nature, where the interpretation process is a meeting between text, context, and the interpretive community, not an individual interpretation that is separate from scientific discipline.
3. Contextual-Islamic, namely focusing the reading of the Qur'an on the values of welfare, justice, and mercy.
4. The entire interpretation process remains within the corridor of revelation (the text of the Qur'an), so that the results of the interpretation do not violate the principles of Islamic faith.

The concept of "guarded hermeneutics" makes a significant contribution to contemporary exegetical discourse. This concept does not reject hermeneutics, but rather seeks to systematically integrate contextual dimensions with Islamic theological foundations. With this framework, Qur'anic interpretation can adapt to changing times without losing its authenticity. This approach, then, serves as an answer, an alternative that can serve as a basis for developing a more balanced exegetical methodology in the future.

This approach can also provide a response to the Qur'anic text, which remains relevant throughout the ages. It can minimize the controversies generated by previous hermeneutics and maintain the unity of the Muslim community by implementing sharia while addressing the challenges of changing times. While researchers acknowledge academic disagreements, it is

hoped that this effort will address the controversial implications of previous research and thus achieve greater public acceptance.

CONCLUSION

This research highlights hermeneutics as essential for contextualizing Qur'anic interpretation on modern topics like gender, human rights, and pluralism, but warns that unchecked application may cause interpretive relativism and undermine revelation's authority. It emphasizes that the Islamic tradition's tools—*ijtihad*, *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, and *ushul al-tafsir*—offer a strong framework for renewing Qur'anic understanding within Islamic epistemology. Proposing "bounded hermeneutics" as a balanced approach, the study advocates combining hermeneutics' social awareness with the reverence for divine text to address contemporary issues while preserving core Islamic principles. Future research should expand this model through thematic analyses in areas such as environmental ethics, Islamic economics, and digital ethics to enrich modern Qur'anic scholarship.

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