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SUP / Foundations and Premises of Exegetical Criticism in the Reformist School

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Abstract: Modern Islamic thought's renewal approach represents a serious attempt to establish an interpretive methodology that balances textual authenticity with contemporary demands. Within this context, the Reformist School emerged with an integrated vision seeking to re-read legal rulings through a three-dimensional framework. This school is established upon pivotal pillars; the first of which is the Objectives of Islamic Law (Maqasid al-Shari'ah), viewed as legislative goals that assist scholars in deducing rulings for unprecedented contemporary issues and fulfilling human welfare. The second is Reason ('Aql), which integrates with religion as an intellectual guiding tool for humanity to discover divine laws. The third is the Social Reality, defined as an organized, interactive environment that transcends a mere gathering of individuals to become a cultural entity capable of producing means for purposeful change. Together, these dimensions constitute a reformative vision that bridges the constants of revelation with the variables of reality.

Keywords: Exegetical Criticism, Reformist School, Maqasid al-Shari'ah, Contemporary Islamic Thought.

1. Introduction

Praise be to Allah, Whose blessings cannot be computed and Whose virtues cannot be numbered. Peace and blessings be upon the most noble of His creation, His Messenger, Prophet, and Beloved (peace be upon him and his family), and upon the immaculate Imams from his Household (blessings of Allah be upon them). May mercy and divine pleasure rest upon the souls of the trustworthy and faithful exegetes, from the earliest generations to the latest, until the Day of Judgment.

By the grace and favor of Allah upon me, I have been guided to choose "The Foundations and Premises of Exegetical Criticism in the Reformist School" (*Usus wa Muntalaqat al-Naqd al-Tafsiri 'inda al-Madrasah al-Islahiyyah*) as the subject of my research.

Significance of the Research

This research derives profound significance from the light it sheds on the mechanisms of methodological renewal (*al-tajdid al-manhaj*) within contemporary Islamic thought, specifically within the Imami school [1]. Its value lies in deconstructing the critical criteria that safeguard the integrity of Quranic comprehension, liberating it from the stagnation of narrative literalism (*jumud al-riwayah*) into the expanse of disciplined, rational contemplation (*al-tadabbur al-'aqlani*)

Therefore, I have chosen this topic for the following reasons

1. Keeping Pace with Contemporary Developments: The accelerating pace of social and technological transformations necessitates that Islamic jurisprudence (*al-fiqh al-islami*) provide practical answers. Choosing this topic highlights how the Reformist School puts forward "Objective-Driven Jurisprudence" (*al-fiqh al-maqasidi*) as a flexible mechanism to deduce rulings for novel issues and unprecedented events (*al-nawazil*), thereby fulfilling the welfare of the legally accountable individuals (*al-mukallafin*) while steering completely clear of stagnation.
2. Addressing the Problematic Relation Between Reason and Revelation: The research seeks to deconstruct the traditional view that perceives an inherent conflict between revelation (*al-wahy*) and reason (*al-'aql*)—which remains one of the major dialectical dilemmas. It aims to demonstrate how the Reformist School succeeded in forging a complementary synthesis and harmony, positioning reason as an instrument to comprehend divine laws (*al-sunan al-ilahiyyah*) and apply them without sacrificing the textual integrity of the original source text (*al-nass*).
3. Linking Legislation to Social Reality: Emphasizing this axis demonstrates that reformist jurisprudence does not operate in an isolated ivory tower. Rather, it examines "social reality" as an interactive environment and a cultural matrix that influences the comprehension and application of the text. This ensures that legal verdicts (*al-fatawa*) and rulings are formulated in harmony with their environment, thereby actualizing positive change.
4. Highlighting the Renewalist Role of the Reformist School Pioneers: This stems from the academic need to re-read and ground the intellectual legacy of the pioneers of renewal (such as Allal al-Fassi, Ibn Ashur, and Malek Bennabi) [2]. It aims to illustrate how their theses established a methodology that reconciles the constants of revelation with the variables of the era—a contribution that the contemporary Islamic library currently lacks in terms of providing modern, applied frameworks.

2. Materials and Methods

1. I have introduced the foundations and premises adopted by the contemporary Reformist School in the field of exegetical criticism (*al-naqd al-tafsiri*)
2. I have presented the theological grounding (*al-ta'sil al-'aqadi*) of exegetical criticism, dividing it into six core foundations. Within these, I discussed the role of the higher objectives of Islamic law (*maqasid al-shari'ah*) and the role of reason in studying them.

I explored reason, religion, and their synthesis and harmony in uncovering Allah's commands, rulings, and His cosmic laws within creation, demonstrating that everything brought into existence by Allah the Almighty has been guided toward its inherent welfare.

Sources Utilized

The sources consulted comprise contemporary works of Quranic exegesis (*al-tafsir*). Prominent among these are the exegetical work of Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (*Tafsir al-Mizan*), and the works of Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida, including his *Tafsir al-Manar*. However, the primary sources relied upon are contemporary books of exegesis and Quranic sciences (*'ulum al-qur'an*), given that the core nature of this study is an analysis of exegetical criticism.

Finally, I extend my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to the one who truly supported me in this humble research, next to Allah the Almighty: my esteemed advisor, Dr. Duraid Musa al-Aaraji, for the immense trust and profound care he bestowed upon me, and for exhausting his efforts in reviewing, auditing, and following up on this research. He was the finest guide and mentor, bringing this research to its current fruition.

3. Results and Discussion

Chapter One: The Foundations and Premises of Exegetical Criticism in the Imami School

The issue of "methodological renewal" (*al-tajdid al-manhaji*) occupied a central position in the thought of the pioneers of the modern Islamic Reformist School. Their objective was not merely to offer fragmented solutions to contemporary developments and unprecedented crises (*al-nawazil*), but rather to formulate an integrated epistemological vision capable of reshaping the jurisprudential mind. This vision is anchored upon an interconnected conceptual network wherein the constants of revelation coalesce with the variables of reality, and the guidance of the text integrates with the intuitive and intellectual faculties of human reason. Grounded in this innovative horizon, this chapter investigates and analyzes the three core pillars that define the identity of the Reformist School. First, we shed light on the "Higher Objectives of Islamic Law" (*Maqasid al-Shari'ah al-Islamiyyah*) as the ultimate goals and the guiding compass for independent legal reasoning (*al-ijtihad*) [3]. Second, we examine "Reason" (*al-'aql*) as the cognitive tool capable of probing the depths of the text and deconstructing divine cosmic laws. We conclude with "Social Reality" (*al-waqi' al-ijtima'i*), which represents the interactive environment and the intended empirical sphere for the application of legal rulings. This study is structured according to the following sections.

Section One: The Higher Objectives of Islamic Law (Maasid al-Shari'ah) [Continue]

The higher objectives of Islamic law (Maqasid al-Shari'ah) constitute one of the vital sciences that establish specific goals and purposes for the Divine Law. Comprehending these objectives and purposes is essential for a profound understanding of religion and a conscious awareness of its rulings and legislations. The Reformist School devoted immense attention to the objectives of Islamic law, allocating a vast space in its intellectual pursuits and focus. Significant literature was produced in this discipline, which is no less important than general writings on the subject of Maqasid. Most notably, the book *The Higher Objectives of Islamic Law (Maqasid al-Shari'ah al-Islamiyyah)* by Imam Muhammad al-Tahir ibn Ashur stands out. Allal al-Fassi, and Imam Ibn Ashur before him, are considered among the most prominent pioneers who resumed writing on the objectives of the Shari'ah and grounded them on a novel foundational basis [4].

The Maqasid hold a distinguished significance in Islamic jurisprudence (al-fiqh), legal theory (usul al-fiqh), and independent juristic reasoning (ijtihad). This importance manifests in numerous ways: it enlightens scholars and jurists, and establishes the foundational rules that aid them in gaining profound insight into Allah's wise and legislative verses, as well as the clarifying and legislative Hadiths of the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him and his family). Furthermore, it facilitates the jurist's ability to deduce legal rulings for novel issues (al-mushkilat al-mustajaddah), adopt the most robust methodologies to regulate appropriate rulings, and adhere to revelation as a primary source and authoritative proof (hujjah) to secure the welfare (masalih) of the legally accountable individuals (al-mukallafin) and avert potential harms (al-mafasid). Additionally, the objectives and noble virtues of Islamic law are interconnected with various branches of Islamic sciences, including the prophetic biography (al-sirah al-nabawiyyah), the noble Hadith, the principles of Quranic exegesis (usul al-tafsir), and other jurisprudential specializations [5].

Section Two: Reason (Al-'Aql)

The Reformist School was characterized by its endeavor to liberate Quranic exegesis (al-tafsir) from the hegemony of transmitted narratives (haymanat al-riwayah). However, it occasionally fell into rational extremism (al-ifrat al-'aqlani), which led to the marginalization of certain transmitted texts (al-nusus al-ma'thurah) [6]. This reveals the problematic dialectic of balancing reason (al-'aql) and revelation (al-naql) [7]. In its study of the objectives of the Shari'ah, the Reformist School relied on both reason and religion,

emphasizing their synthesis and harmony to discover Allah's commands, rulings, and His cosmic laws (sunan) within creation [8].

Indeed, everything brought into existence by Allah, the Exalted, has been guided toward its inherent welfare, as explicitly indicated by the Almighty's saying: "He gave each thing its form and then guided [it]" (taha 20:50). However, His guidance for inanimate objects is through subjugation (al-taskhir) only; His guidance for animals toward actions they perform is through subjugation and instinct (al-ilham); and His guidance for angels is through subjugation, instinct, and intuitive reason (badahat al-'aql), along with the necessary knowledge endowed within them. As for human beings, Allah's guidance encompasses all of the aforementioned mechanisms, augmented by the faculty of thought (al-fikr) [9]. The theological premise (al-mabda' al-'aqadi) of this approach lies in the rejection of textual literalism and stagnation (al-jumud al-nassi), while preserving the core principle of divine transcendence (al-tanzih), and expanding the concept of "teleological/objective-driven reason" (al-'aql al-maqasidi) to interpret divine attributes within a framework of ethical values and cosmic laws.

Section Three: Social Reality (Al-Waqi' al-Ijtima'i)

Disrupting the stagnation of traditional exegesis and reconnecting the Quranic text with social dynamics constituted one of the most prominent methodological foundations of the modern Reformist School [10]. Within the premises of this school, "social reality" was not merely a vital space where legal rulings are deployed; rather, within "exegetical criticism," it was transformed into an epistemological tool and a critical benchmark against which the legacy of traditional exegesis is re-evaluated. Reformist exegesis originated from a central thesis: that the Holy Quran was initially revealed to address a concrete human reality, and that overindulgence in purely linguistic interpretations, scholastic theological debates (al-jadaliyyat al-kalamiyyah), or Judeo-Christian narrations (al-isra'iliyyat) contributed to isolating the Muslim nation (al-ummah) from the efficacy of revelation and its social guidance [11].

Accordingly, the exegetical criticism of the reformists is founded upon the philosophy of "applying the text to reality" (tanzil al-nass 'ala al-waqi'). Consequently, understanding the social structure, monitoring the laws of human civilization (sunan al-'umran al-bashari), and diagnosing social maladies and culture became indispensable methodological prerequisites for the contemporary exegete. The proponents of the Reformist School did not content themselves with criticizing traditional exegetical tools; they went further to reformulate the concept of "the contexts of revelation" (asbab al-nuzul) to extend into a "continuous social cause." This repositioned reality as an interactive structural foundation that assists in interrogating the text and exploring its objective and social dimensions—an aspect we investigate in this section by tracing the manifestations of this criticism and its applied premises.

"Social reality" is defined as "the matrix of social relations among people, or any collective of human beings of both sexes and various age groups, bound together within a social group that possesses a distinct identity, order, and unique culture [12].

It was also defined by Malek Bennabi as "the community that continuously transforms its social characteristics by producing the means of change, while being fully aware of the goal it pursues behind this transformation [13]. Society, accordingly, is not a mere collection of individuals, but rather a specific organization of a human character, operating in accordance with a structured system [14].

4. Conclusion

Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, and peace and blessings be upon the most noble of creation and messengers, Muhammad, and upon his pure and immaculate Household. This research concludes that the modern Reformist School has brought about

a paradigm shift in contemporary Islamic thought by activating three core pillars: the higher objectives of Islamic law (Maqasid al-Shari'ah), reason (al-'aql), and social reality (al-waqi' al-ijtima'i). The pioneers of this school—such as Muhammad Abduh, Ibn Ashur, and Allal al-Fassi—succeeded in revitalizing the science of Maqasid, transforming it into a dynamic tool for independent juristic reasoning (ijtihad) and a mechanism to confront novel contemporary issues, far removed from rigid literalism and futile linguistic debates. Furthermore, the reformist methodology sought to synthesize divine guidance with human intellectual faculty, positioning reason as an instrument to explore Allah's cosmic laws (sunan) operating throughout His creation. Conversely, social reality was elevated from being a mere passive recipient of rulings to an epistemological foundation that assists in comprehending and applying the text. This restored the Holy Quran's leading efficacy in guiding human societies and rectifying their cultural and civilizational maladies.

Research Findings

1. Revitalizing Contemporary Teleological Thought (al-Fikr al-Maqasidi): The research demonstrates that the Reformist School resumed writing on the higher objectives of Islamic law with innovative originality. This provided jurists with the necessary foundational rules to clarify rulings for unprecedented events and novel issues (al-nawazil wa al-mustajaddah), thereby guaranteeing the acquisition of public welfare (jalb al-masalih) and the aversion of harms (dar' al-mafasid).
2. The Complementary Relationship Between Revelation and Reason: The study shows that reformists relied on a synthesis and harmony between reason and religion to discover divine cosmic laws. Concurrently, they raised awareness regarding the problematic of balance, aiming to safeguard the transmitted text (al-nass al-ma'thur) from rational extremism.
3. Reality as an Instrument for Textual Comprehension: The study underscores that "social reality" within reformist thought was transformed into a critical benchmark and a cognitive tool through which the traditional legacy of exegesis is re-evaluated, rather than remaining a mere external sphere for the application of rulings [15].
4. Expanding the Concepts of the "Contexts of Revelation" (Asbab al-Nuzul): The research highlights the reformists' formulation of a new concept that transcends the specific historical incident of revelation, extending it into a "continuous social cause." This endows the Quranic text with a dynamic and enduring efficacy across time.
5. Adopting a Dynamic Conception of Society: The Reformist School (particularly in the thought of Malek Bennabi) adopted a dynamic concept of society, viewing it as a human organization possessing a conscious awareness of the goals of transformation and the production of its mechanisms, rather than a mere numerical gathering of individuals. This is precisely what is termed the "active society."

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