

The Meaning and Scope of al-Tafsir al-Mawdu'i: A Comparative Historical Analysis

*Dr. Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi**

Introduction

The idea of *al-tafsir al-mawdu'i*, both as term and concept, is a relatively recent development in modern Islamic thought, not more than a few decades old. From a general and quick survey of the available literature one can assert that there is a general agreement on the basic meaning of this genre of exegesis; it has to do with the thematic study of the Qur'anic text. That is, it consists of treating a specific subject as expounded by the Qur'an so as to construct what can be considered as *al/the* Qur'anic view on that topic. Then disagreement on its scope and the method(s) to be applied in carrying it out seems to be quite large.

The aim of this paper is not to make a literature review of this type of Qur'anic studies. However, a few words concerning the methodological aspect of such works are not out of place here. To the limited knowledge of this writer, and with only very few exceptions (reference is mainly to works in Arabic), the literature appearing under the rubric *al-tafsir al-mawdu'i* does not exhibit much concern to expound the methodological and, one should add, the epistemological and theoretical framework required by such an approach to the Qur'an. In other words, seldom do writers on this genre of Qur'anic exegesis spell out distinctly the epistemological premises and

¹ Department of Fiqh and Usul al-Fiqh, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, Editor, *at-Tajdid* (a refereed biannual Arabic journal), International Islamic University Malaysia, E-mail: mmesawi@hotmail.com

methodological guidelines of their work. However, a common feature of such works is clear; there is dissatisfaction with the traditional, verse-by-verse, approach to Qur'an interpretation that has dominated the vast and varied *tafsir* literature over the centuries. As we shall see later, this dissatisfaction stems mainly from a realization of the atomistic character of that approach as well as from a keen desire to respond to the philosophical, socio-cultural and historical challenges facing the Islamic *ummah* in modern times, from within as well as from without.

In this paper we shall analyze the ideas of a number of selected scholars whose works show striking methodological similarities despite the difference of their academic background and socio-cultural experience. The scholars on whose works we will focus are, in historical sequence, Muḥammad 'Abd Allah Drāz (Egypt: 1894-1958), Muḥammad Maḥmūd Ḥijāzī (Egypt: 1914-1972), Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr (Iraq: 1933-1980) and Fazlur Rahman (Pakistan/U.S.A.: 1919-1988). However, the views of other scholars, such as Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (Egypt: 1917-1996), Hasan al-Turābī (Sudan), Fathi Osman (Egypt/U.S.A.) and others will be mentioned whenever appropriate. The choice of these authors is based on the fact that, generally speaking, the question of method in their works has been clearly and systematically dealt with. Reference will in due course be made to other writers who offered pertinent insights on the subject.

The Meaning and Varieties of al-Tafsir al-Mawḍū'ī

Before attempting a delimitation of the meaning and varieties of *al-tafsir al-mawḍū'ī*, a bit of history about the emergence of the term might be useful. The idea of thematic or topical study of the Qur'an seems to have gained academic acceptance in the worldly most authoritative institution of Islamic learning (al-Azhar-Mosque University) somewhere in the 1960s. In the preface to the first edition of his book *al-Wiḥdah al-Mawḍū'iyah fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Thematic Unity in the Noble Qur'an), the Egyptian Azharī scholar Muḥammad Maḥmūd Ḥijāzī mentions that his theory of thematic unity sounded so strange to some Azhar quarters that some people "rejected it and even tried to prevent its discussion at al-Azhar University."¹ Knowing that this book was originally submitted to the

¹ Muḥammad Maḥmūd Ḥijāzī: *al-Wiḥdah al-Mawḍū'iyah fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadīthah, 1370/1970, p. 6.

College of Uṣūl al-Dīn as a doctoral dissertation in 1967, it can be ascertained that the mid or at most the early 1960s is the date of the 'official birth' of the concept and term of *al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī*.¹ Nevertheless, this does not mean that prior to that such an approach to the Qur'ān did not exist. On the contrary, a number of works can be found that fall under the topical study of the Qur'ānic verses, in the sense of dealing with subjects such as man in the Qur'ān, human nature in the Qur'ān, the Day of Judgement in the Qur'ān, human society in the Qur'ān, etc.² But considering such works as belonging to *al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī* might not, one must remember, be easily accepted by most traditional-minded students of *tafsīr* for whom the idea itself raises much suspicion.

Whatever the case, the concern of this paper is not to provide an historical account of the literature that may fall within the scope of thematic study of the Qur'ān. It shall rather attempt to present a broad definition of the meaning of *al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī* and general categorization of its major types as delineated by some scholars. As rightly pointed out by Muṣṭafā Muslim, the definition of the meaning of the term under consideration is subject to a variety of opinions, though it has been accepted to designate a specific genre of *tafsīr*.³ According to the same writer, it has been defined as the treatment of a specific subject or topic related to intellectual and social life or natural phenomena from a Qur'ānic perspective in order to develop a Qur'ānic theory on it.⁴ Another view is that this genre of Qur'ān interpretation consists of gathering all the verses scattered throughout the whole chapters (*sūrah*s) of the Qur'ān that deal with a specific subject whether explicitly or implicitly, with a view to interpreting

¹ A contemporary writer and professor of *tafsīr* points out that the "term of *al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī* came into existence only in the 14th century of the Hijrah, when a course under this title was introduced in the Department of *tafsīr* at the College of Uṣūl al-Dīn in al-Azhar." (Muṣṭafā Muslim: *Mabāhith fī al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍū'ī*, Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1418/1997, p. 17). Evidently, this could not have taken place before 1967 when the mere discussion of a Ph. D. thesis on the subject was itself at stake.

² See for example 'Abbās Maḥmūd Al-'Aqqād: *al-Insān fī al-Qur'ān*, Cairo: Nahḍat Miṣr, n.d.; Sayyid Quṭb: *Mashāhid al-Qiyāmah fī al-Qur'ān*, Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1980; Muḥammad Quṭb: *Dirāsāt fī al-Nafs al-Insāniyyah*, Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1980.

³ Muslim: *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁴ As we will see later, this view is upheld by al-Ṣadr, although this writer does not refer to him anywhere in his book for reasons not difficult to be detected.

them according to the higher objectives (*maqāṣid*) of the Qur'ān. A more refined version of this view is that *al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī* is a discipline that deals in a specific way with Qur'ānic themes, which are bound together whether in terms of the basic meaning or in terms of purpose, so as to identify their components and unveil the unifying bond that links them together. A third definition is that *al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī* is a study which treats of issues and subjects according to the Qur'ānic directives (*maqāṣid*) in one *sūrah* or more.¹

In a similar vein, Sheikh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī of Egypt states that there are two approaches in thematic *tafsīr*. The first approach is one according to which “each *sūrah* of the Qur'ān is treated as one whole unit.” This approach consists of identifying the *sūrah*'s “main theme, or themes, and the subtle threads of meaning and ideas that link its subject matter.” The second approach “is to identify the major themes of the Qur'ān as a whole and discuss the issues and subjects it covers in light of those themes.”² For al-Ghazālī, the thematic *tafsīr* thus understood stands in contrast with what he calls ‘local’ (*mawḍū'ī*) interpretation which “deals with one verse or a set of verses by explaining its vocabulary, [clarifying] its structure and [expounding] its rulings (*aḥkām*).”³ It is this latter approach that has historically dominated the study of the Qur'ān and characterized the classical exegetic works. Due to its atomistic nature, al-Ghazālī clearly points out, it has failed to grasp the totality of the Qur'ān and the comprehensiveness and unity of its teachings.⁴

From the preceding exposition two essential features of *al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī* emerge. The first one revolves around the idea of *theme* as the focal point in the exegetic enterprise. The second equally

¹ Muslim, *ibid*, 16. In this respect the author refers to the works of Zāhir 'Awwāḍ al-Alma'ī (*Dirāsāt fī al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍū'ī*, p. 7) and 'Abd al-Sattār Sa'īd (*al-Madkhal ilā al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍū'ī*, p. 20) without giving any details as to when these works were published.

² Muḥammad al-Ghazālī: *A Thematic Commentary on The Qur'ān*, trans. by 'Āshūr A. Shāmis, Herndon VA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1418/1997, vol. 1, pp. 9-10.

³ Muḥammad al-Ghazālī: *Naḥwa Tafsīr Mawḍū'ī li Suwar al-Qur'ān*, Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1416/1995, p. 5. It is unfortunate to note that in the English version of this book referred to in the previous footnote the translator has unjustifiably omitted this point.

⁴ Muḥammad al-Ghazālī: *Kayfa Nata'āmal m'a al-Qur'ān*, Herndon VA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1411/1991, pp. 70-72.

important feature, which is closely related to the first one, is the notion of *unity* according to which the verses of the Qur'ān are seen to constitute an integrated *coherent* whole. These two features suggest the existence of a certain affinity between *al-tafsir al-mawdu'i* as a specific genre of interpretation and the theory of *nazm* and its sister *munāsabah* developed by classical scholars in the context of their effort to establish the doctrine of the inimitability of the Qur'ān (*i'jāz*).¹ But this, as will be seen shortly, is far from the major intellectual and methodological purposes of the advocates of thematic *tafsir* whose works are the focus of this study.

Before proceeding with the examination of those works, some remarks of historical and methodological import are in order. The idea of a specific topic being the major theme of a group of verses or even one whole *sūrah* is not totally new in the history and practice of Qur'ānic exegesis, although it is more prominent in the works of modern commentators. After the eminent Ash'arite theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, the Syrian scholar Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā'i (d. 885 H.) can easily be singled out as the most outstanding commentator in the late medieval Islamic period to have devoted, in his *Nazm al-Durar fī Tanāsub al-Āyāt wa al-Suwar*,² much attention and effort to this variety of thematic approach within the context of his quest for the *munāsabāt* (sing. *munāsabah*) or concordance between the verses and chapters of the Qur'ān based on their tradition-established arrangement. As we approach the contemporary period, the emphasis on theme(s) as the unifying element in the Qur'ānic verses becomes much stronger in exegetic works.³ This, it seems, was a necessary historical and

¹ On the relationship between this genre of *tafsir* and the concept of *munāsabah* (concordance and interrelatedness) see Muslim: *op. cit.*, pp. 57-91; and for a brief, yet insightful, treatment of *munāsabah*, *nazm* and *i'jāz*, see Mir, Mustansir: *Coherence in The Qur'an*, Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1406/1986. An extensive analysis of the theory of *nazm* is to be found in Larkin, Margaret: *The Theology of Meaning: 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's Theory of Discourse*, New Haven, Connecticut: American Oriental Society, 1995.

² This commentary has been edited by Abdul Razzāq Ghālīb al-Mahdī and published in 1415/1995 by Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, Beirut, in 8 volumes

³ It will suffice to mention the following works as clearly epitomizing this orientation: Muḥammad bin 'Alī al-Shawkānī: *Fath al-Qadāir*; Muḥammad 'Abdu and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā: *Tafsir al-Qur'ān al-Ḥakīm* better known as *Tafsir al-Manār*; 'Abd al-Karīm al-Khaṭīb: *al-Tafsir al-Qur'ānī li al-Qur'ān*; Sayyid Quṭb: *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*; Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn 'Āshūr: *Tafsir al-Tahrīr wa al-Tanwīr*; Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabātabā'i: *al-Mizān fī Tafsir al-Qur'ān*.

methodological development that would lead to the emergence of the broader and more comprehensive thematic approach advocated by the scholars selected for the purpose of this study.

Laying down the Theoretical and Methodological Foundations of *al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍūʿī*

This section aims at unearthing the theoretical foundations and historical justification of thematic *tafsīr*. To reach its present level of conceptual and methodological clarity, this genre of exegetic work has, as we have tried briefly to show, followed a gradual process of development. Therefore, it would be useful to examine the works under consideration according to their historical sequence. This historical perspective will, on the one hand, enable us to link that process of development to the general cultural and socio-historical context within which the authors of those works acted. On the other hand, it will help us to gain a better insight into the dynamics of ideas in the life-experience of Muslims in the modern age. One might thus think of an accumulative process from which would grow an awareness of the need of a new approach to the Qur'ān in order to overcome the methodological inadequacies and intellectual shortcomings of the traditional one. But dealing with these works in historical sequence should not, of course, blind us to the interrelatedness and overlapping between the issues discussed by their respective authors.

In one of his earliest works, if not the earliest one (*al-Naba' al-ʿAzīm: Nazarāt Jadīdah fī al-Qur'ān*), Muḥammad A. Drāz addresses the fundamental question concerning the *origin* of the Qur'ān: whether it is Divine or human.¹ In developing his thesis on the externality and

¹ In a note to the preface (dated Shaʿbān 1376/March 1957) to the first edition of this book, the author mentions that he had worked on it over the previous twenty years and that parts of it had been given as lectures to students in class rooms at al-Azhar University as a methodological framework for a course on *tafsīr*. This, as he points out, took place before he left on a scholarship to France in 1936; more exactly before 1352/1933. He spent in France twelve years (May 1936-March 1947) during which he was preoccupied with learning some European languages such as French (which had already started at home), English and German. He joined the then prestigious Sorbonne University where he studied philosophy, the history of religions, psychology and ethics before embarking on the preparation and writing of two doctoral dissertations: a minor one under the title *Initiation du Koran*, and a major one entitled *La Morale Koran* which were both published by Presses Universitaires de France in 1951.

objectivity of the Qur'ān vis-à-vis the person and milieu of the Prophet, thus establishing its extra-human and transcendental nature, his basic argument draws on philosophical, psychological, historical¹ and linguistic (semantic and stylistic) considerations. Our interest here will be in the latter aspect of that argument as it bears directly on the subject of the present study. In adducing this part of his argument, Drāz brings into strong relief the idea of 'linguistic miracle'² as a major feature of the Qur'ān. One of the clear manifestations of this feature lies in the prominence of coherence and unity that characterize the relationship between the parts and components of its discourse. As he puts it, parts and components of the Qur'ān are "knit together in such a way as to yield an unbreakable, masterful, and firm unity."³ One might think of this feature as being confined to the shorter chapters (*sūrahs*) of the Islamic scripture or to the sets of limited number of its verses that deal with particular topics. In anticipation of such a view, Drāz assures the reader that this unfailing unity is an equally, indeed more strikingly, noticeable feature of the longest chapters (*tiwāl*). Thus, although the constituent parts of these *sūrahs* were revealed intermittently over varying periods of time, we find that each of them "constitutes a well-knit structure [consisting] of grand themes raised on firm foundations and principles. In each of those principles are grounded sub-principles from which spread out branches and ramifications..."⁴

To demonstrate this aspect, he chooses to analyze the longest chapter of the Qur'ān, *al-Baqarah*. This *sūrah*, he argues, "encompasses the widest variety of meanings. It comprises the largest number of installments (*nujūm*) as well as the longest time intervals separating its intermittent revelations."⁵ With these features, it is only natural that the *sūrah* whose revelation took place over such prolonged time intervals would deal with varying topics and coincide with different occasions and situations. But, this, as Drāz tries to

¹ Drāz: *al-Naba' al-'Azīm: Nazarāt Jadīdah fī al-Qur'ān*, Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam, 7th edition, 1413/1993, pp. 20-79. This part of the argument was reproduced and expanded in the author's minor thesis, *Initiation au Koran*, which has recently been published by I.B. Tauris, London, 2000, under the title *Introduction to The Qur'ān*.

² Drāz: *al-Naba' al-'Azīm*, p. 80.

³ Ibid. p. 142.

⁴ Ibid. p. 155.

⁵ Ibid. p. 157.

demonstrate, does not affect its underlying unity and coherent structure. In this respect, he leans on what has already been asserted by earlier scholars such as Abū Bakr al-Nisābūrī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā'ī and Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī. As they would argue, “no matter what multiplicity of propositions the *sūrah* might comprise, it is a systematic discourse (*kalām wāḥid*) whose beginning confirms its end and vice-versa, and which in its totality embraces one and the same purpose (*gharaḍ*), just as sentences hold together to express one single proposition.”¹ Guided by this conception, Drāz proceeds to examine the above-mentioned *sūrah* by applying in its analysis the same methodological considerations previously applied by al-Shāṭibī to *sūrat al-Mu'minūn*.²

As it is not our purpose here to reproduce the details of Drāz's analysis of the *sūrah*, we shall only highlight the major themes that he thinks constitute the main units around which the whole *sūrah* is structured. Four major themes (*maqāṣid*), an introduction, and a conclusion make up the overall structure of *al-Baqarah*. In the introduction (verses 1-20), consisting of the first unit, a broad definition of the Qur'ān and a general description of its main features are provided, with an emphasis on the lucidity of its message, which only ill-minded people would turn away from. The second unit (verses 21-25) presents us with the first major theme of the *sūrah*. Here, the Qur'ān invites all mankind to embrace Islam. A flashback then follows, in the third unit (verses 26-39), which turns to the Qur'ān to describe its guidance and expound its approach in calling people to its eternal truths. The fourth and longest unit (verses 40-162) has as its axis the second major theme that treats of the people of earlier scriptures (*ahl al-kitāb*), especially the

¹ Ibid. p. 159. It has to be pointed out that in this quotation Drāz reproduces, on acknowledgement, almost literally al-Shāṭibī's argument in his book *al-Muwāfaqāt*, edited by 'Abd Allah Drāz (Muḥammad's father), Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1416/1996, vol. 2, p. 375. As will be shown later, there is a striking convergence between the purposes and approach of the advocates of thematic exegesis and what al-Shāṭibī did in his celebrated work in respect of Islamic jurisprudence. As rightly pointed out by Wael Hallaq, al-Shāṭibī's methodological concern was not confined to that of the jurist. He rather attempted to bridge the gap between Islamic jurisprudence and Qur'ānic exegesis by developing his legal hermeneutic based on the method of thematic induction. See Hallaq, Wael B.: “The Primacy of the Qur'ān in Shāṭibī's Legal Theory”, in *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams*, edited by W.B. Hallaq and D.P. Little, Leiden, 1991, pp. 69-90.

² Al-Shāṭibī: *al-Muwāfaqāt*, op. cit., pp. 378-80.

Jews. It presents a lengthy discussion and analysis of their aberrations and calls upon them to shun falsehood and subscribe to the truth as revealed in the final word of God.

As for the third theme of the *sūrah* around which the fourth unit (verses 178-283) revolves, it mainly concerns the elaboration and exposition of the detailed rules and laws of Islam meant to regulate human conduct and affairs. The preceding fourteen verses (163-177), constituting a separate unit, serve as a prelude to this major theme whereby three main points are stressed: the oneness of the worshipped Creator, the oneness of the Commander, and a general introduction of the Divine commands. Then, the *sūrah*, in just one verse (284), moves on to present the fourth theme. It thus points out the religio-spiritual force (*wāzi'*) that motivates man to comply with those rules and laws and restrains him from disobeying them. Finally, in the last two verses (285-86) constituting the conclusion, the *sūrah* provides a description of the qualities of those who have accepted the Divine message and complied with its teaching and to highlight the rewards awaiting them both in this life and in the hereafter.¹

As can be seen from the previous exposition, the *sūrah* under consideration manifests an unmistakable variety of themes. Nevertheless, these different themes are not simply piled together in an incongruous or ad hoc manner. Rather, each of the various units occupies its proper place and holds harmoniously with what precedes and follows it in an unbreakable order, just as a link would belong in the proper order of a chain. According to Drāz, this reveals the existence of an organic structure and basic unity of meaning that runs throughout the *sūrah* from beginning to end, thus making it stand as one integrated whole.² Looking at its mutually 'enfolding' introduction and conclusion, one can see how they form the quantifier (*sūr*) that makes the whole *sūrah* "one coherent compact structure."³ As mentioned earlier, these features as have been revealed by the analysis of *al-Baqarah* are not, according to Drāz, confined to one particular segment of the Qur'ān, but characterize all its *sūrahs*. At the methodological level, this implies that, in order to reach an accurate appreciation of the 'local' interrelationships (*ṣilāt mawḍi'iyah*) between the constituent parts or units of the *sūrah*, one must first make

¹ Ibid. p. 163. See the detailed analysis of these themes on pp.164-209.

² Ibid. p. 158.

³ Ibid. p. 210.

sense of the major themes and organic structure running through it. Such a grasp of the whole picture is of great help in dealing properly with the particular details of the *sūrah*.¹

The foregoing summary of Drāz's reflections on the notion of thematic unity obtaining in the chapters of the Qur'ān was meant to show how this would serve, both theoretically and methodologically, as a springboard to the wider and more comprehensive conception of the thematic approach to the study of the Qur'ān; that is, treating of a specific subject by examining all relevant Qur'ānic material. As will be shown in the following discussion, this crucial development is already highly visible in the personal experience of Drāz himself and equally noticeable in the works of subsequent authors whose contributions we shall be examining. In fact, Drāz would have the occasion to further develop his views and sharpen his argument in this respect in the major treatise of his doctoral work, which he defended at the Sorbonne University in 1947. Choosing to explore the Qur'ānic moral system, he had first to solve the pressing question as to the proper method that should be adopted in such an enterprise.

To do that, he drew up a sort of methodological balance sheet of the works of classical Muslim scholars. For him, what those scholars practically did was "a kind of inventory" that only "constituted a first step in the preparation of the material for construction." However, that important step was not followed by "the necessary elaboration to erect the edifice."² By grouping the relevant Qur'ānic passages according to the order of the *sūrahs* as established by tradition, those scholars, including such a prominent figure like al-Ghazālī, present us with "a jumble (*agrégat*) of scattered materials that no family affinity (*esprit de famille*) binds them together, and in which there appears no sequence of ideas." As he differently puts it, after breaking the original unity (*unité primitive*) obtaining in each *sūrah*, they failed to provide "a logical unity" and a "methodical classification" that would present the principles and rules of Qur'ānic ethics in the form of a "coherent structure" distinguishing that ethics from other closely related disciplines.³

¹ Ibid. pp. 158-59.

² Draz, Dr. M.A.: *La Morale du Coran*, reprinted from the first edition (Paris 1951) in Morocco by Le Ministère des Habous at des Affaires Islamiques, Rabat 1983, p. xv.

³ Ibid. pp. xv-xvi.

Turning to modern scholars, especially European Islamicists, Drāz does not find much help in their works, despite the fact that a few amongst them, such as the French Garcin de Tassy and Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire, exhibit certain awareness of the importance of the thematic approach.¹

As it appears from Drāz's analysis and criticism of previous works, none has attempted and succeeded to work out a "unified system" that would link together the fundamental moral truths expounded by the Qur'ān.² Admitting that the Islamic scripture does not readily provide such a system, since revelation does not operate like discursive human thinking that proceeds from premise to conclusion, he however ascertains that the Qur'ān abounds in the essential elements necessary for its construction. These elements do not only consist of the many statements concerning such notions as truth and virtue, duty and obligation, and incitement of man to ponder and think, etc. They also, more importantly, consist of the "nature of its [i.e., Qur'ān's] arguments and the way it develops its line of argument."³

Besides the aforementioned methodological inadequacies in dealing with Qur'ānic moral and ethical precepts, Drāz mentions another point that is of historical and intellectual importance. In addressing the moral doctrine in the Qur'ān, classical Muslim scholars, so he argues, did so, more often than not, according to a pre-existing, "Platonic or Peripatetic", model.⁴ That is to say, in most cases, the Qur'ān was cited by theologians, moralists, mystics and others as a mere complementary element to just illustrate or support "one or another conception that has already been adopted."⁵ In other words, their contributions consisted mostly of putting forth the results of their meditations and philosophical studies in such a way that the Qur'ān would only occupy a secondary place in their treatises.⁶ As Fazlur Rahman would have it in a closely related context, many scholars who realized the unity of the Qur'ānic discourse often

¹ Ibid. p. xii. The works of these two writers referred to by Drāz are, respectively, *Le Koran: Doctrines et Devoirs* (Paris 1840), *Mahomet et le Koran* (Paris 1865).

² Ibid. p. xxiii.

³ Ibid. pp. xxi-xxiii.

⁴ Ibid. p. xiii.

⁵ Ibid. p. xiv.

⁶ Ibid. p. xiii.

imposed that unity “upon the Qur’ān (and Islam in general) from without rather than” deriving it “from a study of the Qur’ān itself.”¹

From these considerations Drāz infers the need for a more adequate and sound approach (*méthode plus saine*)² that would overcome the shortcomings of previous attempts to study the moral order of the Qur’ān both as theory and practical rules. This approach consists not in following the sequence of the *sūrahs* as traditionally arranged such as al-Ghazālī did, nor in adopting an alphabetic order of concepts as others tried to do, but it consists of following “a logical order.”³

In practical terms, the suggested approach operates as follows. The Qur’ānic verses are classified into categories according to the category of human relations that the general moral rule aims at organizing. Within every category a number of sub-categories are also identified and each of them is given a specific title summing up the particular moral teaching it conveys. “The totality of the texts thus arranged constitutes a complete programme of practical life according to the Qur’ān.”⁴ Likewise, Drāz sets out to construct the Islamic “moral system” through a conscious and systematic effort to discover its essential theoretical underpinnings and practical components as enunciated throughout the chapters of the Qur’ān. This exercise, as his book amply testifies, is informed with an adequate knowledge of both old and new moral theories that allows for intelligent and informative comparisons. As we shall see more clearly with Fazlur Rahman and others, the advocates of thematic *tafsīr* are actually engaged in a systematic search of such a comprehensive system of thought and life, as can be derived from the verses of the Qur’ān, in order to face the challenges of the modern age.

Developing his thesis on Qur’ānic ethics at a time when mankind was suffering from the devastating consequences of two world wars, one of the major concerns of Drāz was to bring to the attention and conscience of mankind the Qur’ānic perspective from which “the history of moral doctrines will gain much in terms of range, profundity and harmony” and which will enable moral thought “to overcome its difficulties, both old and new.”⁵ In his view, such an

¹ Fazlur Rahman: *Islam and Modernity*, op. cit., 1984, p. 3.

² *La Morale du Coran*, op. cit., p. xiii.

³ Ibid. p. xviii.

⁴ Ibid. p. xxiii.

⁵ Ibid. p. xii.

undertaking was necessary to attain a better understanding of the human condition and foster a broad humanism (*humanisme élargi*) in which all people of goodwill in every part of the world “shall join hands for the good of humanity.”¹

Before moving on to analyze the subsequent major developments in the conceptual and methodological formulation of thematic *tafsīr*, the philosophical premises on which Drāz has built his work must be pointed out. For him, the Qur’ān is not confined to merely promulgating rules of conduct in the most detailed and elaborate manner. More importantly, it lays “the most solid foundations of theoretical knowledge” for the edifice of its moral values and rules.² This theoretical knowledge to which it unfailingly invites the human mind is rooted in a very fundamental conception of human nature according to which “the distinction between good and evil is an inner revelation inscribed in the human soul, before being a Divine legislation.” Accordingly, “reason and revelation are but a twofold light revealing the same object, a twofold expression of one and the same original reality, rooted in the essence of things.”³ These philosophical premises, as we shall try to demonstrate, are actually at the bottom of some of the works examined in this paper.

It is not the intention of the present writer to credit one single person with being *the* pioneer in the emergence and development of the notion of thematic exegesis. His approach is rather to look at it as an intellectual and methodological awareness that has been gaining momentum amongst Muslim scholars and thinkers in their approach to the Qur’ān as source of inspiration for thought and action. However, one will not hesitate to contend that Drāz’s formulation of the theoretical and methodological foundations of this genre of Qur’ānic exegesis has provided a basic framework that seems to have been adopted by subsequent authors in their treatment of the subject. The only difference being in terms of further refining its theoretical arguments, elaborating its methodological rules and widening the scope of its application.

Accordingly, Drāz’s work has inspired at least two of the writers whose ideas will be examined in the following sections. In the

¹ Ibid. p. xxv.

² Ibid. p. xxiii.

³ Ibid. p. xxiv.

introduction to his last and magnum opus *A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'an*, al-Ghazālī does not leave any doubt concerning Drāz's influence on him. "In this", says he, "I have emulated the excellent pioneering work of the late Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abd Allah Drāz in his study of *al-Baqarah*, the longest chapter in the Qur'an."¹ On the other hand, al-Ṣadr is reported to have regarded, long before al-Ghazālī's work came to light, Drāz with high esteem and to have highly valued his book *Dustūr al-Akhlāq fī al-Qur'ān*.² As the same source suggests, the latter work was "present in al-Ṣadr's intellectual horizon before and while developing his thematic method in *tafsīr*."³

From the Science of *Tafsīr* to Qur'ānic Hermeneutics

The title of this section might sound uncanny, if not nonsensical, for how can one make such a contrast between two terms that stand, at least literally, for the same meaning?

Yet, the author consciously maintains that contrast on the following grounds. The term *tafsīr* is used here to refer to the traditional approach to Qur'ānic exegesis that can broadly be categorized by the absence of elaborate and systematic efforts of theorizing on methodological issues. However, this categorization should not be understood to imply that classical commentators lacked completely the concern for method or that, worst of all, they did not follow certain method(s) in their exegetic works. As for the term hermeneutics, it is used both in its general meaning as science of interpretation, especially of religious scriptures, and in its philosophical sense as the study and interpretation of human behaviour and social institutions. As will be shown in the following pages, this aspect is most obvious in the works of al-Ṣadr and Fazlur Rahman.

Before proceeding with the analysis of those works, a few general remarks on the work of Ḥijāzī must be made here. As he recalls, while writing a complete commentary on the Qur'ān within the established methodological framework, he was struck by certain features of the

¹ Al-Ghazālī: *op. cit.*, p. x.

² This is the title of the Arabic translation of *La Morale du Coran* done by the Cairo Dar al-'Ulūm scholar, Professor 'Abd al-Ṣabūr Shāhīn.

³ Jawād 'Alī Kassār: "al-Mahaj al-Mawḍū'ī: Ishārāt Muqāranah bayna Drāz wa al-Ṣadr wa Makārim al-Shīrāzī", *Qaḍāyā Islāmiyah*, Qum (Iran), 1417/1996, No. 3, p. 71.

Qur'ān that classical commentators did not account for convincingly. One of those striking features concerns the repetition in more than one *sūrah* of one or more than one subject under different lights without this affecting the internal coherence and unity of the *sūrah* in which it occurs. Classical exegetes simply evaded this phenomenon by falling back upon the doctrine of *naskh* according to which later verses in the chronological order of revelation are said to have abrogated the preceding ones.¹

For Hijāzī, this was not an acceptable and convincing solution. According to him, this Qur'ānic phenomenon, which constitutes an important aspect of *i'jāz*, has rather been grossly misunderstood by both Muslim and non-Muslim authors. Working on his three-volume commentary on the Qur'ān (*al-Tafsīr al-Wāḍiḥ*) in the period 1951-55 revealed to him important clues to a better understanding of this phenomenon. Observing that the Qur'ān treats differently of the same subject in various places and contexts, he set out to gather all the verses relating to man. This exercise enabled him to realize one important thing about the Qur'ānic style in dealing with this subject. It draws a holistic picture of man including such aspects like his origin and creation, the diversity of his colours and dispositions, his moral standing in God's sight, etc.²

Further reflection on the problem guided him to realize the existence of thematic unity (*al-wiḥdah al-mawḍū'iyah*) running throughout the different chapters of the Qur'ān and to develop it into a self-contained theory. Besides gathering all relevant verses dealing with a specific subject, applying the notion of thematic unity involves three more methodological steps. The first step consists of rearranging the gathered verses according to their chronological order of revelation, whereas the second one consists of analyzing the verse (or set of verses) and understanding its import within the context of the *sūrah* to which it belongs. Then the last step looks into the unfolding and procession of the subject throughout the totality of the Qur'ān.³ In Hijāzī's view, these steps are necessary to grasp the meaning and scope of thematic unity in the Qur'ān in terms of its logical structure and historical manifestation as well as the wisdom underlying the chronological sequence of revelation.⁴

¹ Hijāzī: *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.

² *Ibid.* p. 29.

³ *Ibid.* p. 31.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 404-408.

What further prompted Ḥijāzī to embark on such a thematic study of the Qur'ān were the many misconceptions and criticisms on the part of certain Orientalists and their local followers concerning the Islamic scripture. One of those misconceptions and criticisms is that the Qur'ānic discourse suffers from repetition, redundancy and inconsistency.¹ From a brief survey of the varieties of what he calls *tafsīr 'ām*, by which he means the traditional approach in Qur'ānic exegesis, he implies that this approach has proved inadequate to meet the intellectual and methodological challenges posed by the modern age and of which those misconceptions and criticisms are only provoking examples.² Accordingly, he suggests that thematic exegesis must prevail if a sound and viable understanding of the Qur'ān is to be achieved.³

Thus, a much wider scope for the implementation of *al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī* and further theoretical and historical justification for it are provided that consolidate Drāz's views as outlined above. Al-Ṣadr and Fazlur Rahman, to whose works we shall now turn, subsequently developed a more sophisticated argument and elaborate theorizing on the necessity and implications of this genre of Qur'ānic exegesis.

It is indeed a coincidence worthy of notice that al-Ṣadr's and Fazlur Rahman's major works on thematic exegesis appeared in the same year, i.e., 1980. While the latter wrote his book *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* in the calm academic atmosphere of the University of Chicago in the U.S.A., al-Sadr delivered his fourteen-lecture series on *al-tafsīr al-mawḍū'ī* between Jumādā I and Rajab of 1399 of the Islamic calendar (1978) in the then spiritually and politically tense

¹ Ibid. p. 402.

² Ibid. pp. 402-403.

³ Ibid. p. 405.

