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CHAPTER 2

Texts and Textualities
The Qur'ān, *Tafsīr,* and *Ahādith*

To understand how Muslims produce religious meaning, and Qur'ānic exegesis in particular, we need to know something about the primary religious texts of Islam, how they have been read, and their relationships both to one another and to social, legal, and state practices as these developed during the first few centuries of Islam, before the door of *Ijtihād,* or critical hermeneutics, was considered closed[1] in the fourth/tenth century.[2] I begin therefore by examining the nature of texts, textualities, and inter- and extra-textuality in Muslim religious discourse. By texts I mean "any discourse fixed by writing";[3] by textualities, how a text is read (modes of reading);[4] by intertextuality, the internal relationships of texts to one another;[5] and by extratextuality, the contexts of reading.

In my discussion I aim, first, to identify the methodology Muslims have traditionally used to read the Qur'ān. I then show how that methodology leads to confusing the Qur'ān with the secondary religious texts and to marginalizing it in Muslim religious discourse in spite of its unique status as Islam's Scripture. Second, in my analysis of textualities, I examine two conceptualizations of the relationship between Divine Speech and time, the conservative and the critical, and their implications for Qur'ānic exegesis, taking as an example conservative *Tafsīr* of the verses on "the veil." Finally, I give an overview of some historical trends in the formation of religious knowledge, method, and meaning, to highlight the role of the state and interpretive communities in these processes. In this chapter, I examine the nature of texts (Section I) and textualities (Section II), and in the next chapter, intertextuality and the extratextual contexts of knowledge and canon formation.

I. Texts

At the heart of each of the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is a sacred text, or a set of texts, that its adherents regard as (the embodiment of) Divine Discourse. In Islam, this text is the Qur'ān. Access to its teachings is, however, mediated by other religious (and literary)[6] texts, specifically, *Tafsīr* (exegesis), and the *Aḥādith* (narratives of the Prophet's life and praxis, or *Sunnah*). Access to the Qur'ān's teachings also is mediated by customary, state, and legal practices, which is why we need to know the extratextual contexts in which Muslims have read the Qur'ān. Figure 1 shows the fields of inter- and extratextuality in Muslim religious discourse.[7]

The Qur'ān

For Muslims, the Qur'ān is both the source of Truth and the means of realizing it in action;[8] it is the "quintessential source and language of the faith."[9] Muslims treat the Qur'ān as "the methodology of ascent to God" (Taha 1987, 148), but it is not a "*mere* devotional or personal pietistic text" (Rahman 1982, 2; his emphasis). It has had "a practical and political application" from the time of its revelation, since its teachings are concerned with "socioeconomic justice and essential egalitarianism" and are "undoubtedly *for action in this world*" (19, 14; his emphasis).

The Qur'ān not only provides a "unifying framework"[10] for Muslim praxis; it is also the source[11] of classical Muslim law (the *Sharī'ah*), viewed as the "most decisive expression of Islamic thinking [and the] essential nucleus of Islam in general."[12] The Qur'ān's importance for women is magnified by the fact that Muslims believe that the legalization of sexual inequality found in the *Sharī'ah* is in conformity with the Qur'ān's teachings even though the *Sharī'ah* departs from these teachings in significant ways (see Chapter 3).

Revealed through divine inspiration to the Prophet Muhammad over a 23-year period in the seventh century C.E. in Arabia, first in the city of Mecca and then in Madina,[13] the Qur'ān is the text of the revelation in its original form; hence, it is inimitable. It has 114 *Sūrahs* (chapters), each consisting of several Āyāt (s. Āyah; verses, or "Signs" of God). In the text, the Sūrahs are generally arranged by length, with the longest first.[14] Although this arrangement "does not reflect either chronological or rational, formal criteria," argues Mohammed Arkoun (1994, 38), it "conceals a profound semiotic order and points up the need to distinguish the types of discourses utilized in the
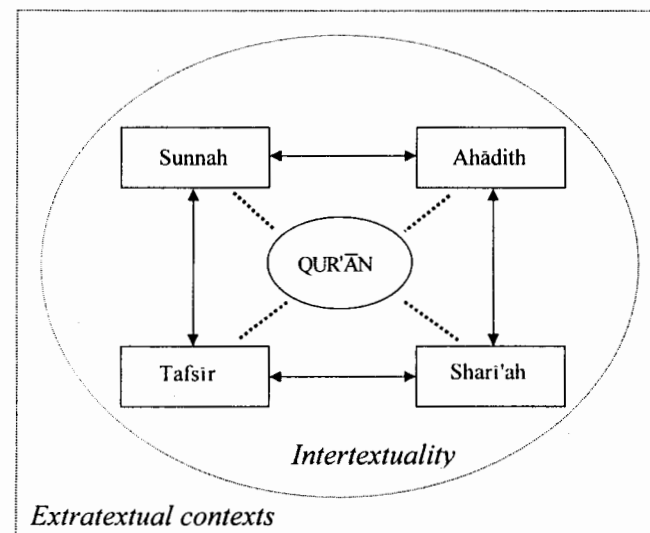

Figure 1

Quran," of which he discerns five. In the Prophet's lifetime, the Qur'ān was memorized by his Companions and had not been compiled in the form of a book at the time of his death in A.D. 632., a *Mushaf,* or official recension, being completed only under Uthman.[15]

Although the Qur'ān refers to itself as the fairest Divine Discourse sent down as a Book,[16] it also clarifies that the real, or archetypal, Qur'ān remains with God, thus rendering problematic, according to Arkoun (1994, 36), the confusion of the *Mushaf* with Divine Speech and the Archetypal Qur'ān.[17] Due to this confusion, he says, the "written Quran . . . has become identified with the Quranic discourse or the Quran as it was recited, which is itself the direct emanation of the Archetype of the Book." It is the omnipresence of the *Mushaf,* continues Arkoun, that "has sanctified the written word in the collective consciousness, which in turn has been an effective instrument of power."

As Divine Discourse,[18] the Qur'ān is inimitable, inviolate, inerrant, and incontrovertible; however, our understanding of it is not, which is why Muslim theology distinguishes between "divine speech and its earthly realization" (van Ess 1996, 189). Figure 2 conveys some sense of this relationship.[19] This distinction, which emerged from the doctrine of the uncreatedness of God's Speech, recognizes not only the limitations of human
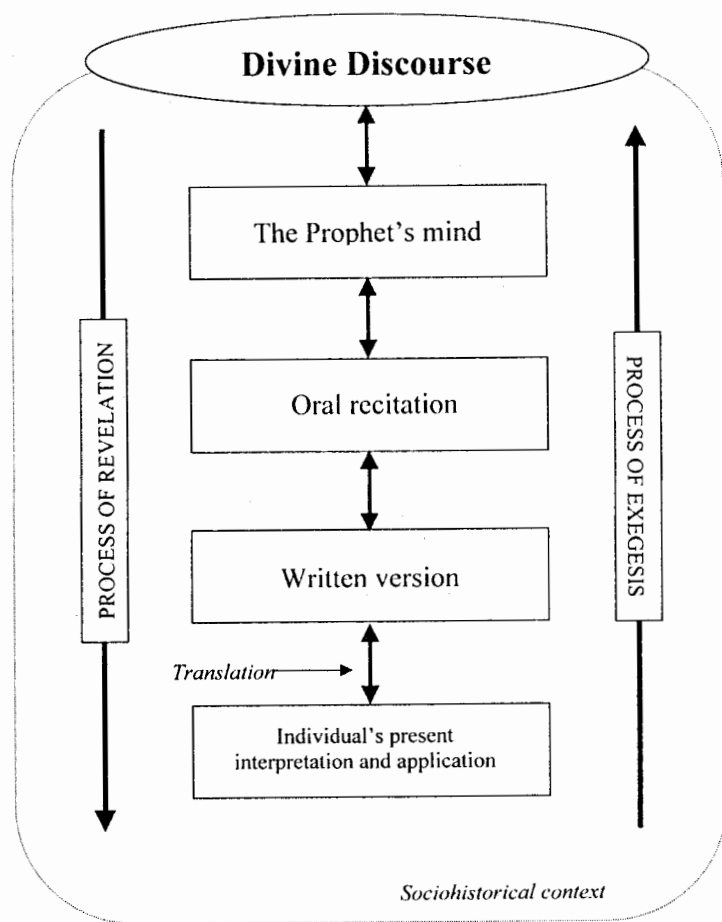
Divine Discourse

The Prophet's mind

Oral recitation

Written version

Translation

Individual's present
interpretation and application

PROCESS OF REVELATION

PROCESS OF EXEGESIS

Sociohistorical context

Figure 2

understanding, but also the interpretive nature of "sacred writings" (Holm, 1994). It thus entertains the possibility that interpreting God's Words means adapting "in varying degrees, [God's] message" (Abu Layla 1992, 229). As Talal Asad (1993, 236) puts it, "Divine texts may be unalterable but the ingenuities of human interpretation are endless." It is the interpretive process, both imprecise and incomplete, that is open to critique and historicization, not revelation itself. Thus, while Muslims understand revelation within history, insofar as they regard it to be sacred and true, they consider it beyond historicization. Although in some of its formulations this view raises com-

plications for exegesis (see Section II), it is not necessarily contradictory. As theorists argue in other contexts, "in so far as truth is apprehended by persons, it is apprehended within history; yet in so far as it is true, it transcends history" (Smith 1981, 190). As such, belief "in the suprahistoricity of the Quran . . . does not preclude its role as a historical scripture" (Esack 1993, 126). In fact, "[the Qur'ānic] phrase 'every term has a book' . . . so controversial in both traditional and modern theology," argues Abdelwahab Bouhdiba (1985, 3), "certainly allows a historicizing understanding of the Word of God." Yet Muslim tradition, as he points out, firmly rejects this idea.

Like other texts, the Qur'ān also is open to variant readings since each Āyah can be interpreted differently. In fact, even the single phrase *bismillah ar-rahman ar-rahim* that occurs at the beginning of every Sūrah except one has been rendered in six different ways by six exegetes (Haq 1989). The Prophet's Companions also are said to have had differences in understanding of some Āyāt, a fact the Prophet is reputed to have known about (Rahman 1982, 144). Not only does "[c]ollective human hearing [impose] its own necessities of awareness and interpretation"[20] on revelation, but as Paul Ricoeur (1981, 109) says of texts in general, "Plurivocity is typical of the text considered as a whole." Hence, a "key hypothesis of hermeneutical philosophy is that interpretation is an open process which no single vision can conclude" (212). In spite of prior exegetical successes, then, interpretive communities assume by their very practice that "additional discernment is always possible; the activity of discerning the divine discourse is forever *incomplete*" (Wolterstorff 1995, 185; his emphasis).

One reason that a primary sacred text like the Qur'ān cannot be expected "to deliver a *single* authoritative usage"[21] is the difficulty of reading it conclusively. Conclusive readings are made difficult by the fact that there are some Āyāt whose meaning is clear (as noted earlier, the Qur'ān itself refers to its clear Āyāt and its allegorical Āyāt[22]), some whose meaning has been settled but on which persons may hesitate, and some on which there is no consensus.[23] Interpretive differences also reflect the fact that a text "can be read differently according to the different conditioning and cultures of authors and readers, not to mention differences in education, prejudice and a vast variety of other areas" (Netton 1996, 132). It is also difficult to generate a conclusive reading because of the "multiplicity and subjectivity of shades of meanings in the original Arabic text" (Taha 1987, 28). (This makes it even more crucial to ask why exegesis relating to women's rights is considered

immutable.) Multiplicity and subjectivity of meanings are a function of the presence in Arabic of natural and artificial homographs (words and phrases with many meanings), as well as of the conflicting etymology of many words that have roots that can mean opposite things. When to such linguistic complexities is added the fact that some Āyāt are said to have abrogated others (the theory of *naskh*),[24] it should not be difficult to see why there are variant readings of the Qur'ān. Polyvalent readings are not unique to the Qur'ān, of course, and a commitment to polysemy, which "simply states that the literal meaning never exhausts scripture as a source,"[25] is common to all religious traditions.

Many Western theorists ascribe variant readings of the Qur'ān to the need to accommodate the "practical needs of the believers" (Versteegh 1993, 65), copyists' errors, or attempts by exegetes to "correct" the Qur'ān's language (al-Suyuti in Haddad 1992, 27). To Muslims, however, the doctrine of the Qur'ān's inviolability rules out the possibility that it was altered, or is alterable. Instead, they view variant readings as being of "exegetical, rather than textual, origin" (al-Suyuti in Brockett 1988, 31), that is, they are "alternative ways of reading the text" (Versteegh, 79). Thus, Muslims point to the well-known fact that before the Qur'ān was written down, "Quran reciters and scholars differed substantially in their readings of certain words, phrases, and even verses" (Ayoub 1984, 2).

If it is difficult to "fix" the Qur'ān's meanings in Arabic, it is even harder to fix them in its translations, which is why many Muslims generally view "the Quran translated [as] not however the Quran" (Forward 1994, 105). As Ian Netton (1996, 5; his emphasis) warns in this context, there is a "danger, inherent in every translation, of extrapolating from a *single* surface 'meaning'" that ignores the text's semiotic polyvalence. Moreover, as Toshihiko Izutsu (1964, 12) has shown, concepts and words in the Qur'ān "are closely interdependent and derive their concrete meanings [from the] conceptual system" at work in it; they cannot therefore be "taken separately and considered in themselves apart from the general structure, or Gestalt . . . into which they have been integrated." Even preexisting key words, he says, acquired very different connotations when employed in the Islamic semantic and conceptual systems, and it is difficult to reflect these systems in translations because of the inability of even "apparently nearest equivalents [to do] full justice to the original words" (Izutsu 1959, 20). As an example, Izutsu (1964, 14) takes the key word Allah, the name of one of the gods in *Jāhilī* (pre-Islamic) society, and shows how, by pronouncing Allah to be supreme God not in a hierarchy but *absolutely* supreme and unique, and other gods false, the Islamic system effected a "drastic and radical change of the whole conceptual system" of the Arabs, thereby also profoundly affecting "the whole structure of the vision of the universe" (15).

If it is difficult to find equivalents for original words, interpreting them "in a variety of different ways" can obscure the "structural unity of individual surahs and of the Quran as a whole" (Robinson 1996, 4). This is because the Qur'ān's unity is a function not only of a specific conceptual system, but also of an organic relationship between "structure, sound and meaning," as Neal Robinson (4) argues. To the extent that it is assonance and rhyme that give Sūrahs part of their meaning, and to the extent that both are lost in translations, so too are aspects of meaning itself.

Yet, the fact that "[no reading] of the Quran can be absolutely monolithic" or conclusive should not be cause for concern, argues Rahman (1982, 144). In fact, insisting on "absolute uniformity of interpretation is neither possible nor desirable," since it is in its ability to yield new meanings to new generations of Muslims that the Qur'ān remains a living and universal force. Not only have variant readings enriched our understanding of its teachings, but they also reveal tolerant and democratic tendencies in Muslim religious discourse that open up a pluralism of meanings. (If this democratic promise remains unfulfilled due largely to the repressive practices of states, it must not lead us to ignore the liberatory, even subversive, potential of textual pluralism itself.)

A pluralism of readings, the multiplicity of interpretive interests, and the Qur'ān's own polysemy do not mean, however, that the Qur'ān itself is variant. What changes, says Wadud (1999, 5), is not the Qur'ān, but "the capacity and particularity of the understanding and reflection of the principles of the text within a community of people." This is why in Islam, hermeneutics aspires not to erase the distinction between the Qur'ān and its exegesis but to bridge it ever more scrupulously.

It is on the basis of this distinction that Muslims regard the Qur'ān as the "primary arbiter" of its own meanings and also criticize the use of "extra-Quranic sources" for interpreting it, which, they believe, need "to be subjected to critical scrutiny" (Mir 1993, 218). Such an inquiry is crucial for women since even though exegeses and translations of the Qur'ān by men are not free of biases, the misogyny that has found a niche in Islam derives mostly from extra-Qur'ānic sources, notably the *Tafsīr* and *Ahādith*, both of which are used to interpret the Qur'ān.

Tafsīr

The necessity for exegesis arose because of the Qur'ān's polysemy and the lack of transparency of some Āyāt. It also arose because of the need to govern — if not strictly in consonance with the Qur'ān's principles, then at least formally in the name of Islam — the increasingly multicultural communities drawn into its fold following its expansion outward from Arabia after the Prophet's death. The modes of exegesis thus reflected not only the "training, religious affiliation, and interest" of scholars and jurists (Ayoub 1984, 3) but also the political goals and ambitions of the early Muslim states, especially the Umayyad and Abbasid (see Chapter 3).

Tafsīr means "general elucidation of a verse with the view to discovering its exoteric meaning and application" and is to be distinguished from *Ta'wīl*, an allegorical-symbolic explanation of "the general as well as particular meanings of the words of the Quran" (Ayoub 1984, 21), a mode of interpretation most favored by the sufis. *Ta'wīl* assumes that the Qur'ān has at least two levels of meaning: an apparent meaning (*zāhir*) and an interior truth (*bātin*) (Taha 1987, 147). Indeed, according to Taha, "the whole of the Quran is of dual meanings." Muslims also distinguish between *Tafsīr ma'thūr* (interpretation in accordance with *Ahādith* and *Sunnah*), and *Tafsīr bi al-ra'y* (interpretation by means of critical reasoning). In all its forms, however, *Tafsīr* remains an "abstract, theoretical, intellectual" and essentially literary activity (Burton 1993, 269), which is based in and also enables "polyvalent" readings of the Qur'ān (Calder 1993).
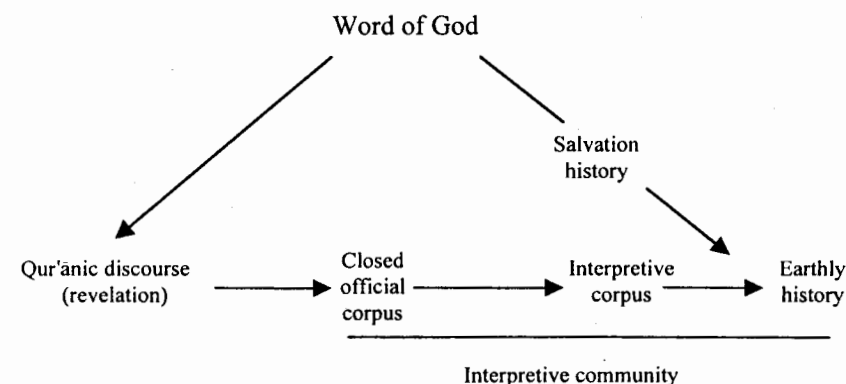
Initially, argues Mahmoud Ayoub (1984, 3), *Tafsīr* began "as an oral tradition of hadith transmission" founded on the opinions of exegetes. Varying opinions acquired legitimacy, he says, because of the "need to make the Quran relevant to every time and situation" (24). However, while the need to deal with diverse social contexts facilitated *Tafsīr*, in time, these social contexts came to shape its content; eventually, too, from being viewed as ancillary to the Qur'ān and as specific to a particular historical context, *Tafsīr* came to be confused with the Qur'ān and thus also to be given a suprahistorical status. As John Burton (1977, 271) argues, over time, "ancient *tafsir* became itself part of that past actuality now attached to the contents of the Quran, with the consequence that [it] came to be regarded as beyond question or doubt," thereby bestowing on it "a creative license to participate in the building of the sacred law [*Sharī'ah*] of Islam."

As an interpretive activity, *Tafsīr* reflects not only the training, concerns, and religious affiliations of the exegetes, but also their "knowledge . . . skills, sensitivity, imagination, even humour [as well as] their literary and sectarian loyalties," all of which also influenced the relationship between *Tafsīr* and the study of Arabic and disciplines like "law, theology and prophetic narrative" (Calder 1993, 105–106). These disciplines, notes Wadud (1999, xx), generated a literature that "began to play a role so central in Islamic scholarship that it over-shadowed the text upon which it was originally based." Not surprisingly, *Tafsīr* also became the peg on which "sectarian and scholastic theologians were able to hang their own doctrines" (Poonawala 1993, 235).

The confusion of the Qur'ān with its *Tafsīr* dates from the classical period when exegetes, naturally being unaware of "modern textual linguistics and interpretive theory" (Arkoun 1994, 41), assumed a correspondence between the two. For instance, al-Tabari could "naively introduce each of his commentaries with the formula 'God says . . .' postulating implicitly the perfect equation of exegesis with the intended meaning and, of course, with the semantic content of the words in each verse." As a result, exegesis came to be confused with "the contents of the *mushaf*, that is to say, with the 'Quran' understood as that space where the levels distinguished in Figure [3] come together" (37) (see Figure 3).

According to Arkoun, by a sequence of confusions that are peculiar to both the religious imaginary and the political realm that, he points out, is inseparable from it, "the values and irreducible functions characteristic of (1) the Archetype of the Book, (2) Qur'ānic discourse, (3) the Closed Offi-

(Reproduced from Arkoun, 1994:38)

Figure 3

cial Corpus and (4) the body of interpretative work were projected into the *mushaf.*" The Qur'ān as *Mushaf* thus became enmeshed in a double confusion: with Divine Discourse on the one hand and with its own *Tafsīr* on the other, creating enduring problems for how we understand its teachings.

Arguably, however, these confusions resulted not only from the factors Arkoun identifies but also from the very nature of intertextuality, that is, from the ability of the signifying process to pass from one sign system to another; in Julia Kristeva's words, the "transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) onto another" (in Netton 1996, 116). This transposition makes reading itself an intertextual exercise, especially of scriptures that describe "a world in which one does not already live." As such, getting a sense of "a strange text, of one that is other than one's own narrative requires intertextual interpretation" (Tilley 1995, 103). That such transpositions between the Qur'ān and its exegesis were at work is confirmed by "the number of occasions on which what is signalled as Quranic material diverges from the text of the Quran in remarkable and interesting ways" (Hawting 1993, 260). Among the themes introduced (partly by Jewish and Christian converts to Islam) into Qur'ānic material that diverge from its teachings is the name "Eve" for Adam's spouse, the assertion that she was created from his rib, and the claim that she brought about the Fall, for which all women were punished by painful childbirth and menstruation. The Muslim denials of "female rationality and female moral responsibility" also derives from "Bible-related traditions" (Stowasser 1994, 28, 41), as do Muslim depictions of such women figures in the Qur'ān as the Queen of Sheba[26] and Potiphar's wife, known by the popular name of Zuleikha.[27]

Conversely, transpositions from the Qur'ān to other texts are suggested by the fact that the status reserved for the Qur'ān was extended not only to its *Tafsīr,* the *Ahādith,* and the Prophet's *Sunnah,* but eventually also to Muslim customary practices that were absorbed into narratives about the Prophet's *Sunnah* (see Chapter 3). As a result, problems arose as early as "the second century of Islam," when the *Ahādith* (a source of *Tafsīr*), which "had come to be regarded as of equal authority with the [Qur'ān], contradicted some of its provisions."[28] Al-Shafi, an influential Arab jurist and founder of one of the four legal schools in Sunni Islam, resolved these tensions by decreeing in favor not of the Qur'ān, but of the *Ahādith,* and thus of the *Tafsīr.* He did this by making *Ijmā'* (consensus, in which the *Ahādith* were said to be based), into a source of *Sharī'ah* and interpretive tradition on the grounds that it manifested God's Will. Narratives of the Prophet's life

and praxis, reconstructed centuries after his death, thus not only came to provide conceptual access to the Qur'ān's teachings — as they well might — but to be privileged over the Qur'ān itself. And while al-Shafi was able to establish *Ijmā'* as a source of law and tradition, he came to his own ruling by means not of consensus but of independent reasoning (*Ijtihād*), against which he then decreed in the interest of protecting religious knowledge in the future.[29]

By canonizing the *Ijmā'* of the classical/medieval period, al-Shafi's ruling also canonized the *Tafsīr* (and religious knowledge) produced during this era. Rethinking was deemed innovation, or *bid'a,* and henceforth discouraged by tradition, binding Muslims to the works of about half a dozen men, which, in spite of their individual merits, were produced during an era known for its misogyny. More damaging, the doctrine of consensus also legitimized the tendency in religious discourse to elevate some texts (the *Tafsīr, Ahādith*) over others (the Qur'ān), as well as consensus (*Ijmā'*) over revelation and critical reasoning (*Ijtihād*). Since the means by which these reversals were brought about were declared closed to further inquiry,[30] the choices and sensibilities of medieval jurists, scholars, and exegetes became institutionalized in ways that proved damaging to the pluralism and egalitarianism of the Qur'ān's teachings, as also of Muslim tradition. It therefore becomes important to ask why Muslims continue to believe that communal harmony and unity depend on a set of events and choices that have been long overtaken by time and that not only discourage new readings of the Qur'ān but also undercut the doctrine of its plurivocity, a cardinal tenet of Muslim theology from the earliest days of Islam.

Classical *Tafsīr,* says Hasan Hanafi (1996, 196), did more to provide insights into its own social, historical, and linguistic contexts than it did into the Qur'ān. As he points out, most commentaries fail to treat the Qur'ān as a textual unity or thematically, or they are longitudinal in nature and focus on "accumulating meanings" rather than on developing a holistic exegesis. The inconsistency of the *Tafsīr* is a drawback, as is its sheer size — there are not only commentaries on the Qur'ān but also commentaries on the commentaries that engage each other more than they do the Qur'ān, thereby making excessive demands on readers. Finally, argues Hanafi, not only does classical *Tafsīr* confuse information with knowledge, but it also is distanced "from the needs of the soul and of present-day society." However, in spite of their awareness of such problems, Muslims have made few attempts to clarify the lineage of *Tafsīr,* the processes of its diversification, or the frame-

work within which Islamic reason was exercised, which are all crucial for explaining "how the theological, historical, and linguistic postulates of this reasoning have led to confusion about levels of signification in the Quran" (Arkoun 1994, 41).

Part of the reason for the Muslim reluctance to critique classical *Tafsīr* is its formidable hold on their consciousness. Muslims view it as an integral element of the process by which a "tradition [was] formed and then embedded in sacred history and religious writing."[31] Therefore, for Muslims, classical *Tafsīr* is not only a commentary on the Qur'ān, it also is a historical record of the circumstances in which a community, or *ummah*, and a state claiming to have lawful authority over it, emerged and developed. Communal identities are thus inextricably bound up with the role of *Tafsīr* in reconstructing history in ways that allow Muslims to experience psychically the unity they may lack at an existential level.[32]

The intertextual nature of knowledge construction also means that opening up the *Tafsīr* to inquiry will mean having to open up to similar critique reconstructions of the Prophet's *Sunnah* (praxis) by the *Ahādith*, on which classical *Tafsīr* relies for its authority. And opening up the *Ahādith* is risky because its record of the Prophet's *Sunnah* usually is confused with his real *Sunnah*, a confusion that leads to problems in exegesis as well.[33]

Ahādith

The word *hadīth* (pl. *Ahādith*), meaning tale or communication, customarily refers to a narrative of the Prophet's life and practices (*Sunnah*). These records began to be compiled over a century after his death and were not completed until three hundred or more years later. About six works are taken as canonical by various Muslim sects and, as a corpus, they are a "part of the official history of Islam and of the literature that established the normative practices of Islamic society" (Ahmed 1992, 47).

Structurally, a *hadīth* has two parts: the *silsilah*, or chain of narrators, a chain being called a *sanad* (pl. *isnād*), and a *matn*, or narrative. *Ahādith* are classified according to the quality of the *isnād* (narrators) into three groups: (1) *Sahīh*, reliable, due to the scrupulousness of their transmitters and the historical authenticity of their content; (2) *Hasan*, less reliable, due to the "forgetfulness" of some of the narrators; and (3) *Da'īf*, or weak, which do not fulfill either of the criteria of integrity of the narrators or the authenticity of the content. *Ahādith* also are classified quantitatively, based on the number of *isnād*, into two groups: (1) *Mutawātir*, those that have so many

isnād that fabrication is considered inconceivable, hence, their postulated authenticity. Such *Ahādith*, however, are few and there are hardly any on legal issues; and (2) *Ahad*, those that have only one or a few *isnād*. Finally, *Ahādith* are divided into three categories on the basis of their *matn*: those that record the Prophet's *Sunnah 'amalīya*, or praxis; those that recount his *Sunnah qawlīyah*, or sayings on ethical issues; and those that record his *Sunnah al-taqrīrīyah*, or tacit approval of deeds he reputedly knew about.[34]

Hadīth compilation most clearly demonstrates the relationship between texts (*Ahādith*) and their extratextual contexts (*Sunnah*, which provides their content and context). While *hadīth* is an oral report derived from, or ascribed to, the Prophet, the *Sunnah* is a compendium of practical religious or legal rules regardless of "whether or not there exists an oral tradition for it" (Goldziher 1971, 24). As such, a norm contained in a *hadīth* is regarded as a *Sunnah*, but a *Sunnah* may not have a corresponding *hadīth*. That is, *Sunnah* is practice, and *hadīth* theory; knowledge of both is rooted in tradition, hence the power of tradition. While theorists are unclear about the oldest original materials, they view most of the collection as resulting from "the religious, historical and social development of Islam during the first two centuries" (19). This is why they consider the *Ahādith* "a mirror in which the growth and development of Islam as a way of life and of the larger Islamic community are most truly reflected" (Esposito 1982, 116).

Some of the same circumstances that occasioned the *Tafsīr* also generated the *Ahādith*, and in this area, too, the religious and political needs of believers were intertwined. On the one hand, the *Ahādith* served an irreducibly religious function in allowing for the interpretation and historicization of the Qur'ān (Khalidi 1994). It was also the *Ahādith* that gave some Qur'ānic teachings specificity (e.g., the number and content of daily prayers). The *Ahādith* also reflected a genuine desire to learn about the life of the Prophet (which the Qur'ān defines as exemplary) and the methods and principles of reasoning he employed, so as to be able to follow his example more closely, especially after his death. In fact, the further the Prophet was distanced in real time from Muslims, the more they seem to have wanted to draw him closer in narrative time through the medium of the *Ahādith*.

At the same time, the *Ahādith* also performed a political function in the governing of lands with differing structures and conditions for which the Qur'ān offered no precedents.[35] For instance, the Qur'ān does not specify the nature of institutions for governance,[36] though it challenges modes of rule based on kinship and lineage (the two most common forms of gov-

ernance to which Muslims eventually reverted after the Prophet's death). Nor is there a church structure or a priestly class in Islam. Thus jurists, exegetes, and political rulers came to decide how best to govern people in keeping with their understanding of Islam. Since the Prophet's words "carried an ontological guarantee" (Arkoun 1994: 45), recourse to them through the *Ahādith* became critical both to debates about governance and to settling competing historical and legal claims. Competition for the "control of the tradition, itself a conditioning factor for the legitimacy of caliphal authority" (45) thus became imminent, and its objective was leadership of the community. (It is this struggle that explains variations in works that are considered canonical by different Muslim sects, says Arkoun.) The very political schisms that gave rise to conflicts, then, also were conducive for the growth of the *Ahādith,* conceived of as a way to "stabilize a social structure consisting of the most diverse elements" (Walther 1981, 23).

Significantly, scholars and political rulers tried to achieve this goal not by imposing a uniform or monolithic reading of Islam or the Prophet's *Sunnah* on the people, but by incorporating into the rubric of Islam existing ideas, discourses, and practices, including some that were in tension with and even contradicted the Qur'ān's teachings. The *Ahādith* and *Tafsīr* made possible the textual and religious eclecticism necessary for accommodating cultural pluralism, and when conflicts arose between their authority and that of the Qur'ān, scholars like al-Shafi resolved them in favor of the *Ahādith* and *Tafsīr.* An outcome of this strategy, so far as women are concerned, was that interpretations of the Qur'ān's "women parables" were formulated in keeping "with existing social norms and values," as Barbara Stowasser (1994, 23) has shown. As she says, Muslim "scholars' consensus, of need, embraced and canonized preexisting traditions in scripturalist language." Even the *Sharī'ah* was formulated not by adhering strictly to the Qur'ān, or by imposing a uniform legal code on diverse cultures, but by absorbing into the principles of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) doctrines on which there was communal accord but which were sometimes irreconcilable with the Qur'ān's precepts. In effect, compliance with Muslim rule was acquired *hegemonically*; that is, not so much through coercion and force as through reliance on consensus.[37]

If the liberality of this embrace of Others speaks to the openness and pluralism of Muslim tradition in its early years, it also disguises the fact that for women, this was a "repressive pluralism."[38] There already was a theological-legal paradigm in place based on the idea of sexual inequality,

and it was not very conducive to change. Indeed, women's position "in law and society formed part of the traditional structures and coherences that firmly underlay the medieval Muslim worldview and provided for its transregional solidarities" (Stowasser 1994, 7). The very pluralism of tradition worked against women's interests as "ideas and customs of the earlier civilization penetrated more deeply" into *Sharī'ah* "by being formulated as hadith" (von Grunebaum 1976, 25). Many of these ideas and customs, which were associated with Arab and Mediterranean culture as well as with Judaism and Christianity, embodied a deep-seated misogyny that became part of the Islamic discourses on women (Ahmed 1992). In particular, "Bible-related traditions, including their symbolic images of the female's defective nature, were seamlessly integrated into an Islamic framework" (Stowasser 1994, 23). Thus, it was the *Ahādith* that introduced into Islam images of women as "morally and religiously defective," "evil temptresses, the greatest *Fitna* [temptation] for men," "unclean over and above menstruation," "the larger part of the inhabitants of Hell, because of their unfaithfulness and ingratitude toward their husbands," and as having "weaker intellectual powers," therefore being unfit for political rule (32). Ironically, the legacy of the Prophet, a man renowned for his gentleness to women, was evoked by those who claimed to follow him most closely, the *Ahl-i-Sunnah* (followers of the Prophet's praxis), on behalf of themes that cannot be inferred either from the Qur'ān's teachings or from the Prophet's treatment of women (see Chapter 4).

It is not just the anti-woman content of the *Ahādith* that is troubling; it is also the fact that many misogynist *Ahādith* were introduced into the so-called "Official Corpus" in the fifth/eleventh century, a full hundred years *after* its alleged closure. Yet, it is these *Ahādith*, embodying the "prevalent medieval Islamic model of women as dangerous and destructive to political order" (Spellberg 1994, 143), that continue to shape present-day attitudes towards women. As Stowasser (1994, 6) argues, "Until fairly recently, modern [Muslim] conservatism continued to evoke the medieval theme of women's innate physical and mental deficiency as proof of the justice of [its] paradigm." The development of the *Ahādith* along misogynistic lines is also ironic in that, as Ahmed (1992, 73) points out, Islam is the only major living religion to include women's accounts in its central religious texts. Women's testimony also has been crucial to the correct reading of the Qur'ān, especially the testimony of 'Ayesha, the Prophet's wife, who is said to have contributed more *Ahādith* than his cousin and son-in-

law, Ali, the fourth Caliph. In fact, contends Mernissi (1996, 93), 'Ayesha's *Ahādith* transmission accounts for "15 percent of the bases of the Sharia." One out of the six volumes compiled by Ibn Hanbal is ascribed to women. (Women's participation in communal life also is manifest from the fact that the Prophet had over 1,500 women as disciples, according to Mernissi.) And, even though *Ahādith* transmission "had to do with the centrality of memory as the essential component in the process" (Spellberg, 57), many Muslims continue to view women's memory as defective because of their misreading of one Āyah (see Wadud 1999 for an explanation of this Āyah on evidence).

Finally, it is ironic that even though there are only about six misogynistic *Ahādith* accepted as *Sahīh* (reliable) out of a collection of 70,000, it is these six that men trot out when they want to argue against sexual equality, while perversely ignoring dozens of positive *Ahādith*. Among the latter are *Ahādith* that emphasize women's full humanity; counsel husbands to deal kindly and justly with their wives; confirm the right of women to acquire knowledge; elevate mothers over fathers; proclaim that women will be in heaven, ahead, even of the Prophet; record women's attendance at prayers in the mosque during the Prophet's lifetime, including an incident where a girl played in front of him as he led the prayer; affirm that many women (including women from the Prophet's family), went unveiled in the later years of Islam; and record that the Prophet accepted the evidence of one woman over that of a man (Mernissi 1994; Siddique 1990). When Muslims do refer to these *Ahādith*, they do so to emphasize Islam's egalitarianism, but they rarely question why the *Ahādith* have been erased so wholly from communal memory as to preclude the possibility of evolving a counterhegemonic discourse on sexual equality based on them.

The lack of importance attached to the positive *Ahādith* is, I believe, a function both of Muslim history and historical memory, in particular, of "the tendency of public" and religious discourse in Muslim states "to make some forms of experience readily available to consciousness while ignoring or suppressing others."[39] Both functions derive in part from the way in which religious knowledge and political/state power were configured in Muslim societies from the earliest days of their history. Thus, while the *Tafsīr*, the *Ahādith*, and the *Sharī'ah* have allowed states to legitimize their own practices, it is equally true that the state also influenced the development of the *Tafsīr*, *Ahādith*, and *Sharī'ah* along conservative and patriarchal lines. Of the early stages of the relationship between state/political power and religious *'Ilm* (knowledge), scholars note that when opponents of the Umay-

yads advanced the theory of resistance to rulers, it was "the pious theologians with their hadith" who removed "religious scruples" against rebellion by advocating the principle of obedience, even to corrupt rulers (Goldziher 1971, 93). The *Ahādith* also were used in the service of more "trivial purposes" such as altering the *Khutba* (the address at the Friday congregational prayer) so as to "divest it of its ancient democratic character" (49–50). Towards rather different political ends but in much the same way, exegetes also brought the *Ahādith* to bear on the Shii-Sunni conflict, with the Shii claiming that the Prophet backed Ali's claim to the caliphate and the Sunnis that he had condemned Ali's father to hell. As one Muslim scholar puts it,

> The vast flood of tradition soon formed a chaotic sea. Truth, error, fact and fable mingled together in an undistinguishable confusion. Every religious, social, and political system was defended when necessary, to please a Khalif or an Ameer [state ruler] to serve his purpose, by an appeal to some oral tradition. The name of Mohammad was abused to support all manner of lies and absurdities or to satisfy the passion, caprice, or arbitrary will of the despots. (Ali in Hassan 1999, 338)

Although the *Ahādith* "are closely linked with the political and social circumstances of the time and grew out of them" (Goldziher 1971, 121), this does not mean that state rulers and religious scholars during the early years welcomed the use of religion for political ends. The first four caliphs and some of the Prophet's Companions are said to have discouraged the prodigal reporting of *Ahādith* because they realized "the danger of contradictions and inconsistencies" (Junyboll 1969, 5). However, in spite of opposition, *Ahādith* were "eagerly invented, collected, and transmitted by the early Muslims, and later on the process developed into an academic discipline [with] thousands of people [being] engaged in it" (Bellamy 1979, 25). In view of the vast numbers of persons occupied in inventing traditions, by the time al-Bukhari (whose collection is regarded as *Sahīh*) began his compilation, he had "reputedly accumulated 600,000" *Ahādith* (Peters 1994, 222). Inevitably, "Every stream and counter-stream of thought in Islam [found] expression in the form of a hadith" (Goldziher, 126). Thus there is a *hadīth* on virtually every topic, even an anti-*hadīth hadīth*! Many "contain a very wide range of views, some of which are even contradictory" (Walther 1981, 22); many incorporate pre-Islamic (*Jāhilī*) concepts, reflected in the "conflicting utterances attributed to the Prophet or to his Companions" (Kister 1988, 3). Some exhibit traces not only of Jewish and Christian thought but

also of Greek, Zoroastrian, Sabian, and Indian as well, and many ascribe to the Prophet aphorisms that contradict the Qur'ān's teachings (al-Alousi 1985; Rahman 1965).

Eventually, *hadīth* compilers themselves reacted to forgeries by investigating the character of the narrators "on whom the claim of authenticity for each hadith was based" (Goldziher 1971, 134). They also began to focus on the inner consistency of the *isnād*, to see, for example, if it was chronologically possible for two narrators to have shared information with one another. While they did uncover many forgeries, they were able to exclude only some of the most egregious because of their view that if the *isnād* was sound, so too was the *matn*. As Goldziher (141) puts it, one could not say that "because the *matn* contains a logical or historical absurdity I doubt the correctness of the *isnad*." As a result of focusing on the narrator's integrity rather than on the historical consistency of the narrative, critics let pass "even the loudest anachronisms provided that the *isnad* [was] correct." Moreover, since what was disparaged was not the invention of tradition, but invention for the wrong reasons, "communal sentiment differentiated between various grades in the ethical judgment of the invention of traditions accepting as bona fide those *Ahādith* that were invented 'for good ends'" (145, 147). Indeed, it was thought that any moral maxim could be ascribed to the Prophet, whatever its accuracy (Rahman 1965, 40). Thus, in spite of knowledge about "the existence of a great body of forged 'traditions,' hadith grew into a valid source or 'root'" of Muslim law (Levy 1962, 172).

The "canonical authority" of the *Ahādith,* including those of the *Sahīhs,* then, has less to do with the accuracy of their content (which has been subjected to criticism from the earliest times) than with "the unanimous collective consciousness of the Islamic community . . . which elevated these works to the heights which they have attained" (Goldziher 1971, 236). Scholars have explained "tendentiousness" in *Ahādith* with reference to various factors, including the aspiration of "the pious condemned to live in an age of social and moral decay . . . to locate precedents for their own desires . . . in a setting that would not be doubted or gainsaid" (von Grunebaum 1976, 156). They also have explained it in terms of the assumed desirability of investing new ideas with the Prophet's authority. However, no matter how commendable their intent, the *Ahādith* represent "not so much history-writing [as] history-making" (Rahman 1965, 47); or, as Denise Spellberg (1994, 14) says of *Tafsīr,* a "politically inspired reshaping of the past," in which the real and imaginary became fused. This is why many Muslims today favor under-

taking a critique of *Ahādith* as a way to remove "a big mental block [and to] promote fresh thinking about Islam." However, as they well recognize, the "greatest sensitivity surrounds the Hadith, although it is generally accepted that, except for the Quran, all else is liable to the corrupting hand of history" (Rahman 1982, 147).

In spite of resistance to such an exercise by conservatives, debates have emerged in states like Egypt and Pakistan about the grounds on which to rethink the *Ahādith.* One concern is the long time it took to transcribe them; that is, the objection has to do with the role of memory, even the famous memory of the Arabs, which, it is held, could not have transmitted "so much material for so long a time without making mistakes or suffering lapses."[40] Another concern has to do with the reliability of the narratives, as well as of narrators like Abu Huraira, the "'Achilles' heel' of the tradition literature," who relayed most of the misogynistic *Ahādith,* and finally, the influence of *Isrā'īlīyāt,* or Jewish traditions, on many *Ahādith.*[41]

In spite of such problems, few reformists advocate the wholescale rejection of *Ahādith* since that would result also in abandoning the *Sunnah,* which believing Muslims would not want to do. Instead, scholars like Muhammad Abduh suggest ascribing only the Qur'ān and *"a small part of the sunna amaliya"* (the Prophet's actions) to the *Sunnah,* which means keeping only some *Ahādith.*[42] Similarly, Rahman (1965) wants to limit the *Ahādith* to the Prophet's *Sunnah* as it is understood by critical scholars; he has called for a "historical-critical" approach to the *Ahādith* that can bring out "their true *functional* significance in *historical context*" (78; his emphasis). Indeed, says Rahman (19), since "God speaks and the Prophet acts in . . . *a given historical context*" and since what gives Qur'ānic teachings their coherence "is the actual life of the Prophet and the milieu in which he moved," Muslims must study not just the *Ahādith,* but also revelation and the *Sunnah* historically (his emphasis). As he says, "If it is historically true, then it is *fraught with meaning for us now, and, indeed, for ever*" (Rahman, 177; his emphasis). Hence, by refusing to take an historical approach to the *Ahādith,* Muslims are ruling out this possibility and propagating a "thousand year-old sacred folly" instead (152). However, as some scholars argue, it is "always impossible to *think* the historicity of the Quran, of the hadith, of the Sharia, since one would be touching on the foundations of actual powers" (Arkoun in Watt 1988, 1; his emphasis). Not only would one be touching on the foundations of real powers, but one would also be opening up to question the framework within which "Islamic" reason was defined

and exercised historically. I make this point now by analyzing the nature of textualities in Islam.

II. Textualities: Texts, History, and Method

In spite of the inherently interpretive nature of reading, argues Ahmed (1992, 94), the fact that "its central texts do embody acts of interpretation is precisely what orthodoxy is most concerned to conceal and erase" from Muslim consciousness. And it is precisely in the nature of this interpretive process, in the *methods* that generate Qur'ānic exegesis, that we can find reasons for why some readings of the Qur'ān are unfavorable to women.

A common practice that yields unfavorable readings is the tendency to generalize the specific, argues Wadud (1999, 99). Some "of the greatest restrictions on women causing them much harm," she says, result from "interpreting Qur'anic solutions for particular problems as if they were universal principles." The reluctance to distinguish the universal from the particular within the Qur'ān stems, I believe, from how exegetes theorize the relationship between revelation (sacred/universal) and its human interpretations (specific/historical). Indeed, at the heart of textualities in Islam is the challenge of how best to define and delimit the relationship between the universal (God; revelation) and the particular (the specificity of our lives; our historicized and limited understanding of Divine Discourse). This is particularly true of Qur'ānic exegesis and the framework within which "Islamic reason" has been exercised historically. Here I examine two views of this relationship, the conservative and the critical, with the intent of exploring the exegetical methods they generate and the implications of these methods for Qur'ānic exegesis.

Conservative Theories: Generalizing the Particular

The tendency to generalize the particular is associated mainly with conservatives, but it arises in a doctrine that all believing Muslims accept: of the Qur'ān's universalism, that is, the belief that the Qur'ān, as the embodiment of Divine Speech, is universal, hence relevant to all times and places, not just to the time or place of its revelation. Although all believing Muslims accept this doctrine, they define and defend it rather differently. Conservatives theorize the Qur'ān's universalism (transhistoricity) by *de*historicizing the Qur'ān itself, and/or by viewing its teachings ahistorically. This is because they believe that historicizing the Qur'ān's *contexts* means also historicizing

its *contents*, thereby undermining its sacred and universal character. In this view, time becomes either incidental or irrelevant to explaining or understanding the Qur'ān, which is why conservatives often do not contextualize its teachings.

On the other hand, conservatives draw on a view of time-as-history to defend the theory of *naskh* (the view that some Qur'ānic Āyāt abrogate others), thereby confirming the historicity of the Qur'ān's teachings. The history-as-sacred model also is pivotal to the conservatives' defense of classical exegesis on which they draw for their own interpretive authority and practices. Thus, what renders classical exegesis (and the religious knowledge produced by early Muslim scholars) sacrosanct to conservatives is their belief that these scholars were able to replicate the Prophet's own methodology because of their proximity *in real time* to him and to the first Muslim community. Time thus becomes integral to their advocacy of a specific communal model and the passage of time a "retreat, a gradual moving away from the original Model" (Bouhdiba 1985, 4). (This view of time-as-decay borrows from Biblical temporalizations of the rift between God and humans represented by the doctrine of the Fall, which epitomizes the moment of human rupture with God; time as history then represents alienation and degeneration.[43] However, as I argue in Chapter 5, Islam does not espouse the idea of the Fall or of a rupture between God and humans, making conservative views of time incompatible with the Qur'ān's teachings.) In this way, they are led back to the very historicity they reject, but by a different route. This is why I call the conservative position universalizing, and even sacralizing, the particular. In the rest of this section, I clarify how and why they come to this position and its implications for their exegesis of the Qur'ān.

The conservative position originates in a distinctive view of the relationship between Divine Speech and time. Specifically, it arises in the idea that since time is created, viewing Divine Discourse as occurring in time means viewing it also as created; however, since God is not created, God's Speech (which they regard as an attribute)[44] cannot be created. This view extends into the claim that the Qur'ān is uncreated[45] (outside time, hence history), explaining why time and history are irrelevant or incidental to (understanding) its teachings. Thus, while conservatives believe that revelation occurred on specific occasions, they refer to such occasions as *azbāb al-nuzūl*, or occasions *of* revelation, and not occasions *for* revelation, since the latter suggests a connection between revelation and its temporal/spatial contexts, which they reject. In their view, God *speaks* in time, but God's *Speech* exists

outside time, in timeless time and in contextless space, implying that the *contexts* of this Speech/revelation are immaterial to its *contents.* This view has its (theo)logical parallel in a view of "the Quran's noncontextual eternity" (Stowasser 1994, 123), that is, the idea that the Qur'ān's contents and contexts are coincidental. Hence the conservative belief that contextualizing one will undermine the other's universality. Conservatives (and classical *Tafsīr,* on which they draw) thus focus on textual/logical time (sequence of words and meanings) within the Qur'ān, rather than on reading the Qur'ān as a totality revealed *over* time. In so far as this method deemphasizes the contexts of the Qur'ān's revelation, and thus of its teachings, it also fails to distinguish the general from the specific within the Qur'ān, generating the restrictive readings that Wadud refers to and I illustrate below.

If conservatives rely on a view of sacred time to interpret God's Speech, they rely on a view of secular (historical) time to elevate some Qur'ānic Āyāt over others and also to declare the Prophet's community paradigmatic. Ignoring the doctrine of the Qur'ān's universalism and transhistoricity, which they themselves profess, conservatives want it instead to adhere to the contexts and "unicultural perspective" of the Prophet's community, a view that "severely limits its application and contradicts the stated universal purpose of the Book itself" (Wadud 1999, 6). Moreover, instead of conceptualizing the Qur'ān's universalism in terms of its ability to be read anew by each new generation of Muslims in every historical period (recontextualized), conservatives canonize readings of it generated over a thousand years ago in the name of sacred history and historical precedent (as represented by classical *Tafsīr,* the *Ahādith,* and *Ijmā').* They thus end up with a historical defense of the sacred/universal even as they refuse to accept (at least, formally) a historicizing understanding of it.

It thus follows that, in the view of the conservatives, Muslim history should strive to recreate and reproduce the model of the first community. They expect Muslim tradition to enable and ensure this process of replication by adhering to and protecting the canon and by avoiding innovation. To look back in time/history then is to look forward to a redemptive future (hence the criticism directed against conservatives that they want to regress in time). However, looking back in time in an attempt to revive or reproduce the practices of the first Muslim community amounts to sacralizing and universalizing both the community and its practices. From a view of revelation as non-historical and eternal, conservatives progress to a view of the first Muslim community and its practices as also non-historical and eternal. (Eventually this view culminates in regarding their own interpretative practices as non-historical and eternal and in conflating these with revelation itself; see Chapter 3.)

Such a view of Divine Discourse and its relationship to time engenders specific textual reading practices. The most obvious is that in spite of their familiarity with the occasions of the revelation of specific Āyāt, conservatives usually do not read behind the Qur'ān in order to contextualize its teachings. Nor, for that matter, do they read in front of the Qur'ān in the sense of recontextualizing its teachings in light of the present historical needs of Muslims themselves. Indeed, by refusing to *contextualize* the Qur'ān, they also render the process of its *recontextualization* problematic since "one cannot proceed *to* the abidingness of the Quran, in word and meaning, unless one intelligently proceeds *from* its historical ground and circumstance" (Cragg 1994, 114; his emphases). Not only do conservatives not follow this method, they also want Muslims to read the Qur'ān *as* the first Muslims are said to have read it. Since they claim to do so themselves, they view their own reading practices as privileged over those of others, hence binding upon all Muslims.

This overview, though insufficiently attentive to the theological and philosophical complexities of the conservative position, is meant only to illustrate my claim that what leads them to downplay the significance of the temporal/spatial contexts of the Qur'ān's teachings, and thus to universalize the particular, is a specific view of time and revelation and the relationship between them. This results in readings of the Qur'ān that are restrictive for women, a point I will illustrate now by examining conservative interpretation of the Qur'ān's teachings on "the veil." (I put the word in quotes since the words veil and *hijāb* do not occur in the Qur'ān.)

Essentially, there are two sets of Āyāt on the basis of which conservatives legitimize a generalized model of veiling for all Muslim women:

> O Prophet! Tell
> Thy wives and daughters,
> And the believing women,
> That they should cast
> Their [*jilbāb*] over
> Their persons (when abroad):
> That is most convenient,
> That they should be known

(As such) and not molested . . .
Truly, if the Hypocrites,
And those in whose hearts is a disease . . .
Desist not, We shall certainly
Stir thee up against them.

The Qur'ān (33:59–60; in Ali 1988, 1126–27)

And,

Say to the believing men
That they should lower
Their gaze and guard
Their modesty: that will make
For greater purity for them:

. . . .

And say to the believing women
That they should lower
Their gaze and guard
Their modesty; that they
Should not display their
Beauty and ornaments except
What (must ordinarily) appear
Thereof; that they should
Draw their [khumūr] over
Their bosoms and not display
Their beauty except to . . .[46]

The Qur'ān (24:30–31; in Ali 1988, 904–5)

Conservatives read these Āyāt as giving Muslim males the right to force women to don everything from the *hijāb* (a head veil that leaves the face uncovered) to the *burqa* (a head-to-toe shroud that hides even the feet; some models even mandate wearing gloves so as to hide the hands). They justify such forms of veiling on the grounds that women's bodies are pudendal, hence sexually corrupting to those who see them; it thus is necessary to shield Muslim men from viewing women's bodies by concealing them. This claim draws on classical exegesis, in which, however, such a view of women's

bodies developed only gradually. Whereas al-Tabari (d. 923 C.E.) held that both women and men could show those parts of the body that were not pudendal, al-Baydawi (d. 1285 C.E.) ruled that the entire body of a free[47] woman was pudendal, the gaze itself being a "messenger of fornication." By the seventeenth century, al-Khafafi had decreed "even face and hands" pudendal (in Stowasser 1984, 27). In time, such claims led not only to forms of veiling that involved covering the head, face, hands, and feet, but also to domestic segregation. While none of the ideas espoused by these exegetes about female bodies derives from the Qur'ān's teachings (see Chapter 5), the fact that conservatives continue to cling to them demonstrates their tendency to sacralize works by early Muslim commentators and to universalize what in the Qur'ān can be shown to be specific. Thus, I believe there are two models of the notion of the veil—one specific, and the other general—in the Qur'ān, and the first set of Āyāt suggests the specific model and the second, the general (I consider the latter in Chapter 5). However, not only do conservatives not distinguish between the two sets of Āyāt and thus between the two forms of "veiling," but by generalizing and dehistoricizing the first set of Āyāt, they also subvert their openly stated intent and purpose.

In this context, it is important to note, first, that both sets of Āyāt are addressed only to the Prophet; that is, they are not a universal mandate for all Muslim men to force women to comply with them. As I argue in later chapters, not only can one not force moral praxis upon a person—as the Qur'ān (2:256)[48] says, "Let there be no compulsion in religion"—but no one, not even the Prophet, was given the right to force compliance upon his wives with any of the Qur'ān's injunctions. Second, and more to the point, the form, purpose, and content of the idea of "the veil" in these two Āyāt is not the same, and it also is completely different from the one suggested by conservatives. To begin with, the Qur'ān uses the words *jilbāb* (cloak) and *khumūr* (shawl), both of which, in ordinary usage, cover the bosom (*juyūb*) and neck, *not* the face, head, hands, or feet. The Qur'ān does not mandate such a form of veiling in any Āyāt. Women prayed unveiled in mosques until the third/ninth century and they perform the *Haj*, the holiest ritual in Islam, with faces uncovered. Even more significantly, the purpose of the covering in these two sets of Āyāt is different. In the first set, the *jilbāb* is meant not to *hide* free Muslim women from Muslim men but to render them *visible*, hence recognizable, by *Jāhilī* men, as a way to protect the women. This form of "recognition/protection" took its meaning from the social structure of a slave-owning society in which sexual abuse, espe-

lim states from the obligation of having to create public spheres in which women do not need to fear *Jāhilī*-type misbehavior on the part of Muslim men. Instead, by defining women's morality and safety in terms of their own dress codes, conservatives are legitimizing the kind of pathologies that are leading men to murder unveiled women in the name of Islam. And nowhere are the really fundamental issues being debated by the so-called "fundamentalists": how can Muslim men, if they are living by the Qur'ān's injunctions, feel free to kill or assault women; and how can we reconcile religious vigilantism with the irreducibly voluntary nature of faith and of moral responsibility in Islam? (See Chapter 4 on this point.)

Critical Theories: Historicizing the Particular

Critical scholars reverse each of the three assumptions that conservatives make about Divine Speech: that it does not occur in historical time, that it can be understood best only at the time of its occurrence, and that it is the *same as* its interpretation. On the contrary, they argue, not only does Divine Discourse occur within time, but history, "like Scripture, provides clear 'signs' and lessons of God's sovereignty and . . . intervention in human development" (Stowasser 1994, 14). Divine intervention not only reveals that there is a coherence between the contents and contexts of God's Words, but it also is what renders these Words *relevant;* it is thus precisely the location of the sacred within history that is critical to understanding its universal nature.

The Qur'ān's location in history allows us to understand what is unique about Islam itself since the "Quran's 'descent' (*nuzul*) into the world is an occurrence which interests the earthly order, creating a new historical era where truth . . . can finally and manifestly be distinguished from falsehood" (Khalidi 1994, 8). The contrast between truth and falsehood acquires in the Qur'ān a comparison not just between Islam and paganism but also between Islam and prior revelation (Judaism and Christianity), with which the Qur'ān suggests both scriptural and historical continuity, but also rupture. Thus, revelation to the Prophet evinces textual and historical continuity with the past in the Qur'ān's restatement of certain teachings of Jewish and Christian Scriptures, notably, the idea of God's Unity, and also prophetic narratives and lineages. At the same time, however, Islam also entailed a break with Jewish and Christian teachings, especially with their patriarchalization of God as Father. In its very continuity and discontinuity, then, Islam reveals an engagement with history (the context for human life and praxis),

which nonetheless remains subject to God's Rule. These views extend into the claim that the Qur'ān "occurred in the light of history and against a social-historical background" and is a "response" to it (Rahman 1982, 5). In fact, it is

> God's response through Muhammad's mind (this latter factor has been radically underplayed by the Islamic orthodoxy) to a historical situation (a factor likewise drastically restricted by the Islamic orthodoxy in a real understanding of the Quran). (Rahman, 8)

This explains why the Qur'ān is couched in semiotic, linguistic, and ethical-moral terms *specific to* Arab society. As Faruq Sherif (1985, 3–4) argues, many Āyāt "relate to a particular time and place and to circumstances which had only a temporary" importance, such as crises in the Prophet's life, and practices like slavery or the arbitrary rejection of wives, which were routine in Arabia. As a result, most Qur'ānic penal provisions are aimed at "the social conditions that were characteristic of the Arabian tribes fourteen centuries ago," which is why treating them as "binding today would in many cases be a lamentable anachronism."

To make the Qur'ān "immune from history [then] is to make its own history irrelevant" (Cragg 1994, 114). This idea, says Kenneth Cragg, "emerges indisputably from the Quranic text itself. There are several important passages which underline the necessarily periodic and contextual nature of its contents." As he points out, its "gradualism, spread over 23 years, means that" the Qur'ān's Sūrahs "impinge upon a succession of temporal events" (115). The Muslim failure "to reckon with moving time," however, transforms the " 'incidentalism' of the days of the Quran [into] the 'fundamentalism' of the centuries," an approach that does a disservice to Islam (121–22). Thus, the tendency of "Traditional Tradition [to suppose] a passive role for ongoing time in its obedience to the paragon time, a care for strict memory not for creative repossession," makes such a repossession impossible, says Cragg, even if it "remains the plainest argument for taking the Quran historically" (123).

Recognizing the historical contexts and specificity of the Qur'ān's teachings does not require an assumption that the *moral purpose* of the Qur'ān is limited to Arab society, or that we cannot derive universal laws from it; indeed, the Qur'ān itself "provides, either explicitly or implicitly, the rationales behind [its] solutions and rulings, from which one *can deduce general principles*" (Rahman 1982, 20; his emphasis). Thus, critical scholars who

argue for a historicizing understanding of revelation are not rejecting the doctrine of its universalism. On the contrary, they reject the opposite: the view that the sacred can be temporalized only within a specific context. They argue that that is what happens when we privilege religious knowledge produced in the first centuries of Islam as the only true understanding of revelation because of its proximity in real time to the Prophet's community, thus to revelation.

For critical theorists, the Qur'ān's universalism also is undermined by attempts to fix its meanings by interpretive fiat. They see the Qur'ān's universalism as lying, instead, in the ability of new generations of believers to derive new meanings from it by relying on their own 'aql (intellect) and 'Ilm (knowledge), as the Qur'ān itself asks us to do. This necessarily involves a process of recontextualizing the Qur'ān through new modes of reading, none of which can exhaust its meanings. New methods and readings are not only desirable but also essential because our knowledge of the Qur'ān is eternally evolving. This is why Ijtihād (critical thinking) is a better hermeneutic method than a blind reliance on consensus or tradition. And, while no one can claim "a monopoly" over what God means (Nayed 1992), critical scholars argue that a hermeneutic method that takes a thematic-historical approach to the Qur'ān, in addition to analyzing the semiotic, semantic, and linguistic systems at work in it, can yield better readings than a (conservative) methodology which does not.

Critical scholars also favor a thematic-historical method because only such a method can help to distinguish the general from the specific within the Qur'ān. However, they disagree on what this method entails. For some, the distinction between the general and the specific is internal to the Qur'ān itself and can be retrieved by differentiating between the two phases (Meccan and Madinan) of its revelation. Mahmud Mohamed Taha (executed for "sedition" in his native Sudan), finds differences between the Meccan and Madinan Sūrahs and urges Muslims to evolve a praxis based on the Meccan Sūrahs, which embody the revolutionary and egalitarian aspects of Islam's message (the first message). The Madinan phase, on the other hand, he argues, circumscribes some of the principles revealed in Mecca because of the unreadiness of the Madinan community to live by the standards of moral freedom needed for transforming the first message into practice. Not only is the Madinan stage focused on events specific to the lives and problems of the Madinans, argues Taha (1987, 125), but, as a result, revelation in this phase focuses more on regulation and control. In effect, differences in the

two groups of Sūrahs result not from "the time and place of their revelation, but essentially [from] the audience to whom they are addressed" (134).

Though it is the first message of Islam that is egalitarian, says Taha (1987, 21), it is from the "texts of the second stage" that the Sharī'ah is derived. This is because classical exegetes held that the Meccan Sūrahs had been abrogated by the Madinan Sūrahs though they remained "operative at a moral/persuasive level." However, the "historical Sharia," which draws on the Madinan Sūrahs, "is merely the level of Islamic law that suited the previous stage of human development." To bring it closer to Islam's first message, we need to shift some of its aspects "from one class of texts to another." We can do this by "examining the rationale of abrogation (naskh) in the sense of selecting which texts of the Qur'ān and Sunnah are to be made legally binding, as opposed to being merely morally persuasive" (23–24). What is required, in essence, is a second message of Islam that can revive the Prophet's Sunnah and transform it into law through fresh Ijtihād (critical reasoning) and Ijmā' (consensus).

For Taha, the issue of what is universal and what is specific in the Qur'ān can be resolved only by distinguishing between the Meccan (universal) and Madinan (particular) Sūrahs, and thus between different historical contexts of revelation. For Rahman (1980), though, such a distinction is problematic because it suggests discontinuities and tensions within revelation itself. He thus criticizes the tendency to view the "career of the Prophet and the Quran in two neatly discrete and separate 'periods'—the Madinan and the Meccan—to which most modern scholars have become addicted" (133). Moreover, as Wadud (1999, 30) also argues, not all the Meccan Sūrahs are general in nature, nor are all the Madinan Sūrahs specific. According to her, the best solution is to formulate a "hermeneutical model which derives basic ethical principles for further developments and legal considerations by giving precedence to general statements rather than particulars." If, for Wadud, the solution is a hermeneutic and not a historical one, for Rahman it is both; while favoring the formulation of hermeneutic principles, he also points out that since "all interpretations are historically and geographically contextualized, Muslims must exert every effort to understand those contexts in order to be able to distinguish the essential from the contingent" (Sonn 1996, 65).

In sum, to critical scholars, the indecidability of the universal and the particular can only be resolved by undertaking several steps. First, it is necessary to study the Qur'ān historically (contextually, not chronologically)

and hermeneutically, so as to replace the contexts of the first centuries of Islam with those of the fifteenth/twenty-first century. This is a process that involves reading in front of the Qur'ān by reading behind it first. Second, it is necessary to disentangle the Qur'ān from its *Tafsīr* and from reconstructions of the *Sunnah* by the *Ahādith*. This requires separating normative from historical Islam, in part by reexamining the relationship between inter- and extratextuality. Third, it is necessary to revise the *Sharī'ah* by rethinking the principles of jurisprudence. Fourth, we must undertake a critical *Ijtihād* to make possible new readings of the Qur'ān. This is a process that will not only call into question the nature and role of Muslim intellectuals, but also of the state. From textualities one has progressed then to issues having to do with inter- and extratextuality, that is, from the question of *who* reads the Qur'ān and *how*, to the *contexts* in which the Qur'ān is read. Historically, the Qur'ān has been read by exegetes and communities within discursive frameworks in whose formation the state has played a central role. As such, intertextuality has an extratextual dimension as Muslim states, acting in the name of Islam, have sought to define, limit, or normalize certain reading and textual practices. It is time, therefore, to shift to the contexts of reading, which I will discuss in the following chapter.

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CHAPTER 3

Intertextualities, Extratextual Contexts
The *Sunnah, Sharī'ah,* and the State

The Qur'ān, marvels Mohammed Arkoun (1994, 39), "never ceases duce . . . secondary, integrating texts where all the cultures of 'Islar their influence." And this, he says, provides "another fascinating, bu scarcely touched, field of investigation: the Quranic text taken as p very tangled intertextuality."

As noted in Chapter 2, intertextuality refers to the transposition systems from one text to another and to the ensuing relationship b them. While it results from the very act of reading, intertextuality a function of the extratextual contexts within which reading occurs. stance, how Muslims have read the Qur'ān historically or have define lationship to other texts (the *Tafsīr*, the *Ahādith*) or practices (the Pr *Sunnah*, the *Sharī'ah*) is a function not only of the transposition of si tems between texts but also of the contexts within which religious edge, method, and meaning were produced. Accordingly, in this c I analyze the nature of inter- and extratextuality in Muslim religic course and the connections between them. I focus in particular on t of the *Sunnah* (the Prophet's praxis), the *Sharī'ah* (law), the state, terpretive communities in shaping Qur'ānic exegesis as well as Islam temology and methodology during the early years of Muslim histo discussion aims to explain why Muslims have traditionally read the in restrictive modes and why it is difficult to read it in liberatory ones

1. Texts, Contexts, Practice(s)

A patriarchal exegesis of the Qur'ān, I argued in Chapter 2, often from applying the *Ahādith* (narratives of the Prophet's life and pra interpret it. Restrictive readings of the Qur'ān also are a function