

PROGRESSIVE ISLAMIC THEOLOGY AS A THIRD PATHWAY IN ABDULLAH SAEED'S CONTEMPORARY REVIVAL THOUGHT

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Abstract

This article examined the relevance of Abdullah Saeed's thought in promoting progressive Islamic discourse as a response to the stagnation of Islamic thought and social inequality in the contemporary era. The study was considered important because many current Islamic discourses remained bound to rigid textual approaches, which failed to adequately address contemporary issues such as social justice, the relationship between religion and the state, and gender equality. The main problem explored in this article was how Saeed's contextual approach reformulated the understanding of classical religious texts to make them more relevant to modern challenges. This research used a library research method with content analysis and a descriptive-critical approach to Saeed's major works, such as *Interpreting the Qur'an* and *Islamic Thought*. The findings showed that Saeed's contextual approach offered an alternative interpretation that was more responsive to socio-Islamic realities and opened space for strengthening inclusivity, human rights, and Islamic legal reform.

Keywords: *Conservative Islam; Islam Contextualization; Progressive Islam, Textualist Islam*

Introduction

The emergence of Progressive Islam in contemporary discourse cannot be separated from the various internal and external challenges faced by the Muslim world. Among the most prominent issues confronting Muslims today are religious conservatism and liberalism (Pribadi, 2021). On one hand, religious conservatism often traps Muslim communities in an ahistorical paradigm, characterized by highly textual and normative interpretations of religious scripture. This tendency leads to self-righteousness, in which one group claims absolute correctness based on the Qur'an and Hadith, while dismissing others as deviant. On the other hand, Islamic liberalism often becomes entangled in a narrative of religious pluralism, offering internal critiques of Islam while neglecting to address external structures such as colonialism and imperialism that continue to shape the post-independence Muslim world (Ayash et al., 2024).

Progressive Islamic thought offers a conceptual framework aimed at responding to contemporary challenges, both from within Muslim communities and from broader global contexts. Distinct from conservative approaches that tend to be text-bound and defensive, and liberal approaches that often lack historical continuity, Progressive Islam seeks to build a synthesis rooted in justice, human dignity, and the universal ethical values of Islam (Ayash et al., 2024). Issues such as human rights, globalization, environmental crises, imperialism, and colonialism are central to this framework. One of the key Muslim scholars advancing this approach is Abdullah Saeed, who advocates for a methodological renewal in engaging with Islamic texts. For Saeed, developing a dialectical relationship between text and context is essential in order to position Islam not only as normatively relevant, but also as historically responsive to evolving social realities (Saeed, 2006).

One of Saeed's central contributions to Progressive Islam can be found in his seminal work *Islamic Thought*, which focuses on contemporary Islamic intellectual development and aims to

contribute meaningfully to the advancement of knowledge within the Muslim world. Saeed highlights the importance of active intellectual engagement among Muslims in addressing global sociopolitical and cultural transformations. He argues that the dominance of Western discourse and the dynamics of modern political life pose serious challenges to Islamic intellectual traditions. In response, he proposes a reconstruction of entrenched paradigms to make them more adaptable to present-day realities. This reconstruction is not intended to sever Islam from its traditional roots, but rather to cultivate a new, contextually grounded and critical methodology that is capable of meeting the needs of contemporary Muslim societies in a more relevant and transformative manner (Saeed, 2006).

Such religious reform and renewal are urgently needed to ensure that discourses of Islamic reform can reach all levels of Muslim society. For Saeed, Islam must offer a framework that is capable of addressing the complex realities of modern life. It must remain relevant to the contexts in which it is lived and must actualize its Qur'anic teachings in ways that resonate with contemporary conditions. To this end, Saeed attempts to bridge Eastern and Western intellectual traditions, fostering a productive dialogue between them (Gafur, 2019). Consequently, contemporary Muslim scholars are increasingly challenging long-held dogmas of religious textualism, which have been rigidly maintained within the mainstream Muslim community. Islam, they argue, must become a religion that is grounded in real-life contexts, courageously engaging with evolving realities. It must be willing to present a renewed face—one aligned with the spirit of progress and human development. In this regard, Saeed seeks to break through the stagnation by proposing innovative methods and approaches to understanding Islamic teachings in the modern era.

Previous scholarship has highlighted the importance of contextual approaches in interpreting Islamic texts. Fazlur Rahman, for example, introduced the double movement theory, which

encourages a dynamic reading of the Qur'an by exploring the historical context of its verses and reapplying them to contemporary issues (Ahmad, 2023). Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd emphasized the linguistic and semiotic dimensions of the Qur'an, treating it as a communicative product to be interpreted through historical and cultural lenses (Falyouna, 2020). Meanwhile, Amina Wadud advanced a feminist hermeneutics that reinterprets gender-related verses by centering the lived experiences of women (Shahin, 2020). However, there remains a dearth of scholarship that positions Abdullah Saeed's thought as a viable methodological alternative capable of addressing socio-Islamic challenges in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia. This article seeks to fill that gap by exploring Saeed's vision of Progressive Islam as a "third path"—one that is critical of both conservatism and liberalism, while also offering a framework that is simultaneously locally grounded and globally relevant.

Method

This study is a library research project with a descriptive-analytical character. Data were collected from written sources, both primary and secondary. The primary sources of this research are the works of Abdullah Saeed, particularly *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* and *Islamic Thought: An Introduction*. The secondary sources include books, journal articles, and other publications relevant to the theme of progressive theology and the discourse on contemporary Islamic revival.

In gathering data, the researcher employed documentation methods by systematically examining the content of Abdullah Saeed's works as well as related references. For data analysis, a textual analysis approach was used, focusing on the identification of key ideas, central arguments, and the historical and epistemological context of Saeed's thought. *Interpreting the Qur'an* was analyzed to trace Saeed's methodological construction in interpreting the Qur'an contextually. Meanwhile, *Islamic Thought* was examined to explore the epistemological framework of progressive Islam that Saeed proposes

in response to contemporary challenges facing the Muslim community.

The analytical technique applied in this study is interpretative, employing a qualitative-hermeneutic approach to understand the deeper meanings embedded in the texts. Through this approach, the researcher not only describes Abdullah Saeed's views but also critically assesses their relevance as a potential third path in the dynamics of contemporary Islamic revival.

Results and Discussion

The Intellectual Biography of Abdullah Saeed

Abdullah Saeed serves as the Director of the Asia Institute as well as the Director of the Center for the Study of Contemporary Islam. He has authored numerous books, articles, and papers published by various academic presses. Across his body of work, several consistent themes emerge—particularly his engagement with contemporary Islamic discourse and Qur'anic interpretation, especially concerning the negotiation between text and context (Saeed, 2006). In addition, Saeed has written on topics such as Islamic economics, East-West discourse, and the issues of radicalism and terrorism across various parts of the Muslim world. One of his major works published in London is *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach*, while another important book, *Religion and Multicultural Citizenship*, was published in Cambridge.

Saeed's primary academic concern lies in addressing the challenges facing contemporary Islam. He maintains that Islamic teachings possess a strong historical dimension and remain relevant in responding to evolving social dynamics. For Saeed, Islam is a living tradition capable of offering solutions to contemporary societal issues, rather than being a rigid, purely normative system. This conviction underpins his advocacy for a more contextual approach to understanding Islamic teachings—an approach in which Muslims themselves become the central agents of interpretation. Saeed argues that Muslim communities have long been dominated by rigid textual

discourses, which Abid al-Jabiri refers to as the dominance of *bayani* epistemology (Amin Abdullah, 2006). In response, Saeed stresses the need to revitalize methods of legal reasoning and Qur'anic interpretation that are context-sensitive and open to social transformation, enabling Islam to remain a dynamic, transformative force in modern life (Majid Khadduri, 1996).

Fundamentally, the discourse on progressive Islam builds upon the intellectual legacy of Fazlur Rahman. In his reflections on Rahman's work, Saeed acknowledges that Rahman laid a foundational framework for the development of contemporary Qur'anic interpretation (Rahman, 2006). According to Saeed, Rahman made a crucial contribution by offering an alternative methodology for interpreting *ethico-legal* texts. Rahman proposed that Qur'anic meaning operates on two levels: first, a historical meaning that can only be understood by grasping the socio-historical conditions during the Prophet's time; and second, a contemporary meaning that connects Qur'anic values with the current social and historical context of human life (Rahman, 2006).

As a follower of Rahman's intellectual path, Saeed similarly critiques interpreters who adopt a rigid, legalistic-literalist approach to the Qur'an. He contends that such interpreters are disconnected from the historical context in which the Qur'anic message was revealed. Interpretations from the past, Saeed argues, can no longer serve as reliable guides for contemporary Muslims whose social needs differ vastly from those of earlier generations (Suriansyah & Suherman, 2011). Arising from this concern, Saeed seeks to further develop Rahman's ideas by emphasizing the progressive dimensions within the Islamic tradition itself.

Typology of Contemporary Islam

The emergence of contemporary Muslim thinkers cannot be separated from the interplay between Islam as a tradition and the spirit of modernity. More profoundly, these thinkers seek to formulate a new paradigm that reinterprets both elements—tradition and

modernity—simultaneously (Hanafi, 1987). This gives rise to a fundamental question: should Islamic tradition adapt to the discourse of modernity, or should modernity be subjected to the normative framework of Islamic tradition? This question stands in contrast to traditionalist Islam, which tends to regard modernity as foreign, and to modernist Islam, which often perceives Islamic tradition as obsolete and dispensable. Contemporary Muslim thinkers argue that *turāth* (Islamic intellectual heritage) is an essential asset of the Muslim world, while modernity is a historical condition in which human beings currently live. To negate either would result in a flawed understanding of history and civilization (Arkoun dan Louis Gardet, 1997).

Nevertheless, both *turāth* and modernity must be approached with discernment, as not everything produced by modernity is inherently positive. Thus, what is required is a creative, critical, and innovative reading of these two foundational elements. The emergence of a contemporary intellectual response was initially triggered by the defeat of Arab nations by Israel. This defeat, which symbolically represented the broader Muslim world, delivered a significant blow and prompted Muslims to engage in critical introspection, both outwardly and inwardly. This event reshaped the intellectual map of the Arab Islamic world and marked a clear demarcation between modern and contemporary Islamic discourse. Hrair Dekmejian, in his book *Islam and Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World*, noted that this moment catalyzed widespread introspection and self-criticism. Each Muslim intellectual began to question why the Arab defeat occurred and what deeper factors contributed to the decline, leading to a series of responses grounded in critical paradigms.

Among the scholars who addressed this crisis of decline was Abdullah al-‘Arwī, who offered a serious critique of the rational framework proposed by Muhammad ‘Abduh. According to al-‘Arwī, ‘Abduh’s project remained confined within a theological rationality

and failed to position reason within a proper historical context. Another figure, Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said), interrogated the Islamic historical legacy through a dialectic of continuity and change. He suspected that the decline of Islam resulted from the overwhelming dominance of traditionalist interpretations, which suppressed critical historical development in the Arab world (Adonis, 1974). In addition to these figures, others such as Halim Barakat, Hasan Hanafi, Tayyib Tizini, Mahmud Amin, and Abdallah Laroui also played pivotal roles in shaping contemporary Islamic thought.

In its subsequent development, two major trends emerged in contemporary Islamic thought: one methodological and the other epistemological. Methodologically, there have been notable advancements in the study of *uṣūl al-fiqh* (Islamic legal theory) and renewed approaches to Qur'anic exegesis. Fundamentally, these developments aim to address contemporary challenges by revising traditional paradigms in *uṣūl al-fiqh* and tafsir, which are often seen as no longer adequate for the needs of the modern era.

Commenting on this development, Bollouta identified three typologies within contemporary Islamic thought that seek to critique or counter modernist discourse (Adonis, 1974). The first is the reformist group, which aims to reform inherited traditions that have proven resistant to historical consciousness. Key figures in this category include Abid al-Jabiri, Hasan Hanafi, and Mohammed Arkoun. The second group is the transformative current, which includes Marxist-influenced thinkers such as Zaki Najib Mahmud, Adonis, and Salamah Musa. For these thinkers, traditional heritage represents a significant obstacle to Islamic progress and must therefore be rejected. The third group encompasses idealistic-totalistic movements supported by figures such as Muhammad al-Ghazali, Sayyid Qutb, and Muhammad Qutb. This group aims to restore the Arab-Islamic identity to what they perceive as its original purity, based on the Qur'an, Hadith, and the teachings of the *salaf* (pious ancestors).

Beyond Bollouta's classification, several researchers have also identified emerging post-traditionalist currents. The first is the eclectic group, which seeks to engage modern elements dialogically with tradition. When a traditional practice contradicts modern principles, it is deemed dispensable. The second is the deconstructive group, which interprets Islam through lenses drawn from post-structuralism, postmodernism, semiotics, and hermeneutics. This group is characterized by its strong opposition to religious and interpretive status quos. The third is the revolutionary group, which aims to subvert traditional Islamic discourse through critical reinterpretation to make it relevant to the contemporary context (Zuhairi miswani, 2010).

Although these typologies offer divergent views on Islam, modernity, and contemporary reality, they share a common urgency in responding to current challenges—albeit through different interpretive lenses. These thinkers attempt to trace the genealogical development of Islamic paradigms across time. A distinguishing characteristic of contemporary Islamic studies is the use of hermeneutics, critical theory, and deconstruction. These approaches represent an epistemological gateway to contemporary Islamic discourse. Their primary aim is to delve deeper into the intended meaning of religious texts. Contemporary Muslim thinkers do not passively accept established interpretations but actively seek hidden or overlooked meanings within the text.

In the hermeneutical approach, the task is to locate a convergence between the interpreter's historical subjectivity and the objectivity of the text, so that interpretation remains relevant across time. Critical theory, on the other hand, seeks to uncover the ideological and political layers that shape existing interpretations. Meanwhile, deconstruction aims to dismantle accepted understandings that are often perceived as absolute truths beyond question. It challenges complacency and stimulates a renewed awareness in Muslim consciousness—prompting the formation of a

new, historically responsive understanding (Muhammad Muslich, 2012).

These three approaches emerge from the conviction that all systems of thought are products of historical and cultural contexts and are thus open to critique and revision. The rise of such interpretive typologies has naturally provoked scholarly debate. Nevertheless, these methodologies represent a refreshing breakthrough in a field that has often remained stagnant. Many contemporary Muslim scholars apply these approaches to classical Islamic texts, while others apply them directly to the Qur'an itself. A common question arises: why is hermeneutics used to interpret the Qur'an? The answer lies in the nature of language itself—since the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, and every language embodies particular ideas and worldviews.

Contemporary and traditional approaches to textual interpretation share a foundational belief: that a text contains meaning, ideas, and intentions. However, they diverge when dealing with texts whose meanings appear opaque or absent. In such cases, contemporary scholars argue that texts must be reanimated through the application of diverse interpretive perspectives. Theories such as semiotics, semantics, phonology, sociology, history, psychology, anthropology, and political science—when integrated into Islamic studies—can significantly expand and deepen the horizon of textual interpretation (Rahardjo, 2006).

The Paradigm of Progressive Islam

In 2006, the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) organized a seminar in Marina Mandarin Singapore with the theme *"Progressive Islam and the State in Contemporary Muslim Societies."* The theme was chosen with the aim of reviving the long-buried progressive spirit within the body of Islam. This revival effort was inspired by a number of global Muslim scholars who viewed progressive thought as a foundational asset for the resurgence of Islam in the contemporary era (Tholhatul Choir, 2009).

According to Zainul Abidin Rasheed and Barry Desker, reviving the progressive spirit within Islam is a necessity. Desker refers to the discourse on progressive Islam as “an ongoing drive to reform,” suggesting that Islam, as a tradition, is dynamic and subject to continual evolution. Each era possesses its own historical traditions and progressive tendencies. Thus, in today’s context, Muslims are required to formulate anew what “progressive” means in the modern era. Rasheed echoes this sentiment, arguing that Muslims ought to ground their understanding of religion and society in a rationalist tradition. He proposes a re-actualization of Islam to offer a civilizational paradigm rooted in cultural progress and reform (Tholhatul Choir, 2009).

Muslim intellectuals hold diverse interpretations of the meaning of progressive Islam. Syed Hussein Alatas, for instance, argues that the term does not aim to reconstruct Islam as a revealed religion. Instead, he views progressiveness as one of the many facets of Islam. In contrast, Alparslan Açıkgenç from Turkey interprets progressive Islam as an effort to balance the rational and the mysterious aspects of human nature. Abdullah Saeed defines progressive Islam as a contemporary mode of thought aimed at harmonizing modern life with the contextual meanings of the Qur’anic verses. Ultimately, for Saeed, progressive Islam is about preserving and renewing Islamic tradition (Omid Safi, 2003).

The emergence of progressive Islam has not been without its critics. Thinkers such as Chandra Muzaffar criticize the project as a divisive effort that could fracture the Muslim ummah. He contends that the progressive label narrows the intellectual spectrum of Islam. Similarly, Asghar Ali Engineer asserts that Islam inherently contains a revolutionary progressive spirit and should not be reduced to a single discourse. Farid Esack likewise views the discourse as implying the existence of a “non-progressive” Islam, which he sees as problematic.

During the IDSS seminar, Abdullah Saeed articulated several key features distinguishing progressive Muslims from other Islamic

orientations. These features include: (1) comfort in reinterpreting foundational Islamic principles; (2) commitment to gender equality as a central concern; (3) recognition of the inherent commonalities among all religions, which must be protected constitutionally; (4) the belief in equal human dignity; (5) the affirmation of beauty as inherent to Islamic tradition in architecture, music, art, and poetry; (6) support for freedom of belief and expression; (7) emphasis on compassion and mercy toward all human beings; (8) respect for individual rights and choices; (9) a preference for moderation and dialogue in resolving conflicts; and (10) enthusiasm for engaging in discussions on contemporary human problems (Aminuddin, 2021).

Tariq Ramadan, meanwhile, identifies the hallmark of progressive Islam in the transformation of traditional Islamic legal systems. He argues for a new methodology and renewed *ijtihad* to address contemporary challenges. This involves a dialogue between rationalist Western educational paradigms and traditional Islamic scholarship. It also necessitates moving beyond sectarianism and theological dogmatism. Progressive Muslims believe that socio-cultural change—whether moral, legal, intellectual, economic, or technological—should be reflected in Islamic law. The emphasis is on humanistic values, social justice, gender equality, and harmonious interfaith relations (Tariq Ramadhan, 2004).

The core values of goodness (*al-khayr*), justice (*al-'adl*), and beauty (*al-jamāl*) constitute the universal ideals of Islam. These values drive the implementation of Islamic law. Any traditional legal rulings inconsistent with these values must be reformed to align with Islam's universal moral framework. Embracing these values allows Muslims to be more flexible in engaging with external ideas and responding to global challenges such as pluralism, ecology, and human rights. As Omid Safi puts it, the progressive Muslim movement is not so much an epistemological rupture but “a fine-tuning, a polishing, an editing, a grooming, a re-emphasizing of this and a correction of that” (Omid Safi, 2003).

Progressive Muslims seek to reinterpret foundational religious teachings to accommodate the needs of contemporary society. They do not propose a new religion or doctrine but instead aim to address current issues through renewed *ijtihād*, especially concerning mutable matters (*mutaghayyirāt*). Abdullah Saeed, as a leading voice in this movement, has been highly active in various scholarly and organizational contexts, both nationally and globally. His research focuses on the negotiation between text and context, reflecting a commitment to actualizing the principle of *ṣāliḥ li-kulli ẓamān wa makān*—the idea that Islamic teachings should be applicable to all times and places. To achieve this, Saeed develops a contextual method of interpretation.

The *ijtihād* model employed by progressive Muslims is based on *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*—a new approach that seeks to understand legal issues within their historical and contemporary contexts (Saeed, 2006). Rather than relying solely on traditional interpretive methods that focus on textual evidence from the Qurʾān and Hadīth, progressive *ijtihād* integrates present-day realities and the socio-historical background of revelation. This method reflects a more robust engagement with the needs of contemporary Muslim societies (Amin Abdullah, 2001).

Progressive Muslim interpretation differs from traditionalist approaches. Their re-reading of texts employs the following principles: (1) attentiveness to social and historical context; (2) recognition that certain issues were not addressed in the Qurʾān due to their historical absence; (3) prioritization of compassion, justice, and fairness in interpretation; (4) awareness of the Qurʾān's value hierarchies; (5) the validity of moving from concrete examples to generalizations and vice versa; (6) cautious use of classical sources, particularly regarding their authenticity; and (7) prioritization of the needs of contemporary Muslim communities.

Saeed is particularly critical of the classical *bayānī* method of jurisprudence, which emphasizes literal and normative readings of the

texts without sufficient consideration of social and historical contexts (Amin Abdullah, 2006). He argues that this method is no longer sufficient for addressing the complex challenges faced by Muslims in the age of globalization, scientific advancement, and social transformation. In response, Saeed proposes a contextual, reflective, and dynamic interpretive approach, drawing inspiration from Fazlur Rahman's *double movement* method but enhancing it with explicit hermeneutical elements to ensure the socio-ethical relevance of Islamic teachings (Saeed, 2006).

Despite its significance, the progressive Muslim movement faces several challenges. One such obstacle, as identified by Saeed, is the problem of *truth claims*—the belief that only one interpretation of Islamic law is valid while others are dismissed. This mindset, still prevalent in Muslim societies, is compounded by the lack of freedom and democracy. Conservative groups often perpetuate these rigid views using coercive means. Moreover, many so-called reformist scholars merely repackage old ideas in new terminologies without engaging in substantive renewal.

Nevertheless, renewal within Islamic thought continues to evolve. These efforts aim not only to affirm universal values such as justice, equality, and freedom but also to transform the interpretation and application of Islamic law in ways relevant to contemporary contexts. Through reinterpretation and methodological reform, the creative and responsive spirit of classical *mujtahidīn* is being revived. The inherent flexibility and elasticity of Islamic law—once vibrant within the classical tradition—is now being reimagined as a living and functional force within modern Muslim life.

Typology of Thought According to Abdullah Saeed

Before exploring the methodology of progressive *ijtihad*, it is essential to first examine the position of progressive thinkers within the broader typology of contemporary Muslim intellectuals. Abdullah Saeed outlines six distinct typologies in his framework. First is the **Legalist-Traditionalist**, which focuses on traditional Islamic

jurisprudence developed and interpreted by classical scholars. Second, the **Theological Puritans**, whose primary concern is the preservation of doctrinal purity in Islamic theology. Third, the **Political Islamists**, who concentrate on the study and application of Islam within the realm of politics and governance. Fourth, the **Islamist Extremists**, who adopt an exclusivist stance, asserting the supremacy of their own group while delegitimizing others. Fifth, the **Secular Muslims**, who advocate for a clear separation between religion and the state. Finally, the sixth type is the **Progressive Ijtihadists**, who engage with the classical Islamic intellectual legacy while reinterpreting it in light of contemporary realities through the use of modern scholarly tools and interdisciplinary approaches.

Saeed argues that progressive Muslims are fundamentally distinct from the other five typologies. A progressive Muslim is a thinker or intellectual who not only reads and understands the historical conditions of their context but also interprets and seeks to transform them. These individuals are grounded in the classical tradition yet simultaneously attuned to contemporary epistemological paradigms that address current challenges. Progressive Muslims are committed to fostering meaningful change in intellectual, economic, moral, legal, and technological spheres, with such transformations being reflected in Islamic legal discourse. They are not constrained by rigid adherence to a particular legal school or dogmatic institutions. Instead, they focus on issues such as human rights, social justice, moderation, and gender equity.

Abdullah Saeed's vision of progressive Islamic thought challenges the normative-literalist approach to sacred texts, which has long dominated Islamic educational institutions, including Indonesia's pesantren (Islamic boarding schools). In many pesantren, classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*) are treated as authoritative sources and are often interpreted textually with strong deference to past scholars. This corresponds to the Legalist-Traditionalist typology that Saeed critiques for its rigid literalism and lack of contextual sensitivity

(Kustati, 2020). In this regard, Saeed's thought offers a fresh paradigm for the development of tafsir methodology within pesantren, aiming to shift from a *bayānī* (textual-literal) approach to one that is more contextual and historically grounded. Saeed does not advocate for the rejection of tradition but encourages reinterpreting texts in a way that aligns with contemporary realities—thus repositioning pesantren not merely as preservers of tradition but also as engines of Islamic intellectual renewal.

Despite the promise of Saeed's contextual and socially responsive hermeneutics, implementing such ideas within pesantren remains challenging. The pesantren system is characterized by a firmly hierarchical structure in which the *kiai* (Islamic scholar-leader) serves as the central authority for validating religious discourse (Sauri et al., 2016). Consequently, any attempt at reform must be conducted through dialogue rather than confrontation (Aziz et al., 2020). Saeed himself maintains that reforming interpretive traditions does not require abandoning them; instead, it calls for a more reflective and responsive rereading. Within the pesantren context, methodological renewal can begin by enhancing curricula to include contextual studies of texts, integrating insights from the social sciences, and offering training in Qur'anic hermeneutics. This would allow pesantren to maintain the integrity of classical scholarship while simultaneously opening themselves to the demands of a rapidly changing world.

Another significant contribution of Saeed's approach lies in its emphasis on social justice, particularly gender equality. In Indonesia, gender-related issues in Islam remain contentious, especially with regard to interpretations of verses that deal with women's roles in the family, public life, and leadership (Nugroho et al., 2024). Many existing interpretations maintain patriarchal assumptions justified by classical authority. Saeed's method, which stresses the socio-historical context of revelation, opens space for more equitable interpretations. For instance, verses concerning *qiwamah* (male leadership) or inheritance laws, when viewed through Saeed's lens, can be

understood as products of specific historical contexts rather than immutable rules for all times. Such reinterpretations are highly relevant for promoting gender equity in Indonesian religious and social institutions, including in education, family law, and public policy.

Saeed's progressive Islamic thought can thus serve as a critical foundation for a new direction in Indonesian Islamic discourse—one that is open, contextual, and oriented toward social justice. In a context where many Indonesian Muslims remain mired in debates over classical jurisprudence that no longer resonate with modern realities, this approach offers a balanced middle path. It neither abandons tradition nor disregards change. Moving forward, such intellectual efforts must be supported by Islamic educational institutions—both pesantren and universities—that can function not only as centers of classical discourse reproduction but also as agents of social transformation. In the national context, Saeed's approach aligns well with Indonesia's broader agenda of religious moderation (*wasatiyyah*). Thus, Islam is presented not merely as a moral and spiritual system but also as a dynamic ethical force capable of addressing the complex challenges of the modern age.

Abdullah Saeed's Contextual Interpretation

In his interpretive process, Abdullah Saeed consistently maintains engagement with classical Islamic scholarship and literature. He firmly believes in the importance of honoring the interpretive contributions of past scholars through critical and in-depth study. For Saeed, the development of new interpretive methods cannot be achieved without a process of filtering, scrutinizing, questioning, and reassessing elements of the classical tradition. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of Qur'anic interpretation across different historical periods becomes indispensable. This enables contemporary Muslims to appreciate that interpretations have varied across times and regions. On this basis, Saeed advocates for the reconstruction of interpretive

methodology so that it may become more relevant to the conditions of the present era.

Saeed's hermeneutical approach begins with an inquiry into the nature and meaning of revelation (*wahy*). He affirms that the Qur'an is divine revelation sent to the Prophet Muhammad and fully acknowledges its originality. However, he critiques classical Muslim thinkers who conceptualize revelation as the absolute, unmediated speech of God while neglecting the socio-historical context of seventh-century Arab society. Saeed aligns with contemporary scholars such as Farid Esack, Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and Ebrahim Moosa, who emphasize the religious personality of the Prophet and the sociocultural environment of Arabia as integral to understanding and interpreting the Qur'an (Gafur, 2019).

This framework does not suggest that the Qur'an is merely the words or product of the Prophet, but it underscores the intimate relationship between revelation, the Prophet's mission, and the socio-historical context of its delivery (Fazlu Rahman, 1985). The Qur'an did not descend into a cultural vacuum. Saeed argues that the Qur'an actively engaged with the evolving conditions of its society, becoming deeply embedded in the lived reality of its recipients. Therefore, any effort to understand the Qur'an must take its socio-historical context seriously. Without this, a comprehensive and accurate interpretation of the Qur'an remains elusive.

The next step in Saeed's interpretive model involves recognizing the flexibility inherent in Qur'anic meaning, drawing insights from classical traditions. Events and narratives from the time of the Prophet and his companions illustrate the Qur'an's adaptability and responsiveness to the needs of its community. The Qur'an did not impose a rigid identity upon its followers; rather, it accommodated their socio-linguistic diversity. One notable indication of this flexibility is the revelation of the Qur'an in *sab'ah ah'ruf* (seven modes). While scholars differ on the interpretation—some seeing them as seven dialects, others as seven reading styles—the key takeaway is that

the Qur'an was revealed in a form that was accessible and pluralistic. This adaptability is instructive for contemporary interpretation: the Qur'an must remain responsive to the needs of modern communities.

Another manifestation of interpretive flexibility is the phenomenon of *naskh* (abrogation), where certain verses override or nullify the legal force of others due to changing circumstances. This principle illustrates that not all Qur'anic injunctions were meant to be timeless; some were context-specific and subject to revision. For Saeed, this serves as a hermeneutical basis for accommodating change and reaffirming the Qur'an's relevance across different eras. A further essential component of Saeed's approach is his emphasis on internal complexity within the Qur'anic text. He identifies three categories of verses that are especially challenging to interpret definitively, due to the epistemological limits of human understanding. First are theological verses—those concerning metaphysical matters such as God, the unseen realms, the Throne (*'Arsh*), Paradise, Hell, and angels. These topics lie beyond empirical verification and cannot be conclusively interpreted; thus, claims of interpretive finality are inherently problematic.

Second are narrative verses—those that recount historical events, stories of prophets, and descriptions of earlier communities. These are difficult to substantiate due to the chronological and geographical distance between the present and the events described. Third are metaphorical and allegorical verses, which employ phrases, expressions, and symbolic language to communicate abstract ideas. These verses are meant to facilitate understanding by concretizing the intangible, yet they remain open to multiple interpretations. In sum, Abdullah Saeed's contextual interpretive framework presents a critical departure from static, literalist hermeneutics. It encourages Muslims to engage the Qur'an not only as a timeless source of guidance but as a dynamic text that has always responded to historical contingencies. This interpretive model invites contemporary Muslim societies to approach the Qur'an with historical consciousness, intellectual

humility, and a commitment to justice, thus rendering its teachings more relevant and transformative in the present age (Saeed, 2006).

Conclusion

From the preceding discussion, it can be concluded that the revival of Islam must begin with a transformation in the way Muslims think. A shift in intellectual paradigm is fundamental in shaping a more comprehensive socio-political and religious movement. Abdullah Saeed emphasizes that Muslims need to deconstruct the ahistorical mindset that has long prevailed, as it impedes their capacity to engage constructively with the changes of the times. When Islamic thought loses its sensitivity to historical and social contexts, it risks becoming irrelevant in practical terms. Saeed advocates for a critical evaluation of Islamic intellectual heritage (*turāth*), not to reject it outright, but to discern which elements remain relevant and which do not. Therefore, open and reflective dialogue with the classical tradition is a strategic step toward responsible reform. This approach encourages continuity with the past while simultaneously fostering innovative responses to contemporary challenges.

In line with this, the contextual approach proposed by Saeed in interpreting the Qur'an offers significant contributions toward developing a more responsive hermeneutical method. Saeed is not merely mediating between classical tradition and modernity; rather, he proposes a new reading of religious texts rooted in historical, social, and moral consciousness. Accordingly, it is recommended that Islamic educational institutions—such as pesantren and universities—integrate contextual interpretation approaches into their curricula and pedagogical practices. Strengthening the study of hermeneutics, social sciences, and training in contextual exegesis methods are essential steps in systematically renewing Islamic intellectual frameworks. In doing so, classical heritage can be preserved critically without hindering intellectual innovation in addressing modern-day realities. This, in turn, reinforces the role of Islam as an inclusive, just, and morally grounded force relevant to contemporary life.

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