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**“Translation as Event: The Impact of Variation in Translation  
and Interpretation of Islamic Text in Informal Religious Educational  
Settings”**

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

**Abstract**

This paper will explore the development of hermeneutics as an approach to text interpretation, and show how it later came to be used as a theoretical tool in the social sciences. Using the Muslim community in New York City as a case study, I will present a two-fold approach to establishing a better understanding of a Qur'anic hermeneutic. On the one hand, providing a history of the development of *Tafsir Qur'an* as methodology for Qur'anic exegesis, and on the other hand exploring theories of interpretive anthropology and how they can be used to analyze the process of translation and interpretation of Islamic text by Muslims as meaningful action, to be seen in itself as an event for hermeneutic analysis. Focus here will be on how variation in the cultural, religious and educational backgrounds of those involved in the interpretation process can lead to alternate understanding of the texts. Borrowing from the work of Paul Ricoeur, I will introduce the concept of *appropriation* as a way of understanding the physical manifestation of what is appropriated when one understands a text in a particular and meaningful way. Further, I will show that the development of Muslim personhood is impacted by variation in the transmission of religious knowledge. That is, there is a link between the translation and interpretation of religious texts and the development of personhood.

**Introduction:**

Interpretive anthropology takes its approach from hermeneutics, broadly defined as text interpretation. The idea that one can use the interpretation of texts as a paradigm for understanding meaningful action is an idea most closely associated with the work of Paul Ricoeur (1981). Hermeneutics was developed as a way of setting forth a methodology for doing biblical exegesis, although biblical

commentary had existed long before this time. In what follows, I would like to explore the development of hermeneutics as an approach to text interpretation, and show how it later came to be used as a theoretical tool in the social sciences. Further, using the Muslim community in New York City as a case study, I will present a two-fold approach to establishing a better understanding of a Qur'anic hermeneutic. Because on the one hand, a tradition of Qur'an exegesis has existed since the time of the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who can be considered as the first interpreter. That science of interpretation became known among scholars as *tafsir Qur'an*. Further, the Islamic sciences have established methodologies for interpretation of their own which have evolved over time. On the other hand, theories of interpretive anthropology can be used to analyze the process of translation and interpretation of Islamic text by Muslims as meaningful action, to be seen in itself as an event for hermeneutic analysis. Focus here will be on how variation in the cultural, religious and educational backgrounds of those involved in the interpretation process can lead to alternate understanding of the texts.

To show how *tafsir* is approached at the highest levels of Islamic scholarship from the early Islamic periods through more recent times, it is necessary to provide a brief outline of the Qur'an sciences (*Uloom al-Qur'an*), as a way of understanding how scholars have actually understood the text. Understanding how *tafsir* of the Qur'an has evolved over time and focusing on different approaches to *tafsir* among Islamic religious scholars will in itself establish a paradigm for *tafsir*.

Additionally, it is important to explore the impact of translation on interpretation since hermeneutics sees translation as the act of bringing the text into the medium

of one's own language, and as part of the interpretive process in such respective instances (Palmer, 1969:10).

The case study is based on fieldwork currently being undertaken in fulfillment of a Ph.D. in anthropology. I will show that the development of Muslim personhood is impacted by variation in the transmission of religious knowledge. That is, there is a link between the translation and interpretation of religious texts and the development of personhood. If personhood is the physical manifestation of one's identity, then translation, interpretation, and understanding of specific text should be directly linked to the physical embodiment of that understanding, i.e. how the religion is practiced. This understanding also impacts how individuals or groups choose to present themselves in specific situations and how they choose to relate to others both inside and outside of the community. Because interpretation varies, so too will the embodiment of this understanding. This opens up the possibility for a multiplicity of emergent personhoods, as can be clearly seen when observing Muslims in New York City. By determining those spaces where meaning is either shared or contested within the community, the project explores how concepts of unity and community are articulated in religious discourse – by whom and for what reasons, through the incorporation of religious text as a teaching tool.

### **Hermeneutic Development**

To understand how hermeneutics came to be applied to the social sciences, it is necessary to look at its history as a tool for textual interpretation and its most well-known theorists. The concern of hermeneutics, as Palmer explains, is to “establish a theory or method specifically appropriate to deciphering the *human imprint* on

a work, its meaning. The meaning of a work, is the focus of hermeneutics (1969:7)” and, “Understanding a literary work, therefore, is not a scientific kind of knowing which flies away from existence into a world of concepts, it is an historical encounter which calls forth personal experience of being here in the world (ibid: 10).” Indeed the struggle with how to situate the experiences of the interpreter within the interpretation process, has been a major factor in the development of hermeneutics. This will be explored more fully below.

Initially, as a theory of biblical exegesis, hermeneutics was the methodology of doing interpretation rather than the actual interpretation itself. The word hermeneutics was first seen in writing around 1654, even though the practice of scriptural commentary had existed long before the seventeenth century (ibid: 33). Eventually the term was broadened to include non-biblical texts. However, in such cases these texts were obscure enough so as to require special methods of extracting meaning.

During the enlightenment, the application of hermeneutic methodology was expanded to include philological exegesis, both religious and non-religious. Philology is the study of written records and their linguistic meaning historically contextualized. The emphasis is on ascertaining the universal moral truths of a text in a way that could be understood to the enlightened rational man. In this way, the scriptures themselves were seen as texts that could be known through reason, and the bible was one among many texts that were open to philological exegesis.

Through the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, hermeneutics developed as the science of linguistic understanding. Schleiermacher's task was to rethink hermeneutics as the study of understanding itself, and with this came a distancing of hermeneutics from either scriptural exegesis or philology toward a more general hermeneutic (ibid:40). For Schleiermacher, hermeneutics was the art of understanding, i.e., how is an utterance, whether written or spoken, really understood? Understanding as an art is the 'reexperience' of the mental process of the text's author. This understanding is both on a grammatical level and a psychological level, and the principle upon which the interpreter reconstructs the author's mental process is the hermeneutic circle. Ultimately Schleiermacher saw the interpretive problem as closely linked to understanding in the hearer. This is what helped to move beyond the notion that the text possesses an independent meaning that can exist apart from the event of understanding (Palmer:96). For Schleiermacher the text is in dialogue with the interpreter.

Wilhelm Dilthey's approach to hermeneutics sought to establish a methodology of interpretation for the social sciences and the humanities (*geisteswissenschaften*), or those sciences which look to interpret the expressions of man's inner life. In order to understand these expressions, one must have historical understanding and personal knowledge of what being human actually means. Since hermeneutics traditionally focused on the historicity of the text, Dilthey was able to apply it to the *geisteswissenschaften*. Dilthey's contribution was his emphasis on moving away from a dependence on the natural sciences for hermeneutic paradigms. Instead, if interpretation set out with the understanding that the human sciences were man-made phenomenon, the move away from metaphysical presuppositions grounded

in the natural sciences would be achieved. Dilthey's hermeneutics is grounded in epistemology (theories of knowledge).

Hermeneutics as a phenomenology of existential understanding was most notably developed in the work of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Here, understanding and interpretation are seen as fundamental modes of man's being (ontology), and privilege is given to the role of language which is seen as shaping human reality itself. So the focus of hermeneutics is the relationship of language to being, understanding, history, existence and reality. For Heidegger, emphasis is on being and the place where the understanding of being arises. I take this to mean the individual's own understanding of being and the place where this understanding is situated, rather than an understanding of being in relation to or even in opposition to another. The understanding of being is grounded in a 'pre-understanding' of being which replaces a theory of knowing (epistemology) with a theory of being (ontology). The significance of this is that it situates the interpreter historically and allows him to understand based on a history of knowing in an anticipatory kind of way (Ricouer:54-59). Understanding comes from an historical foresight. However, there cannot be an understanding of history without reference to the present. History is always seen and understood through a consciousness grounded in the present (Palmer:176).

Gadamer begins with Heidegger's idea of historical consciousness and the idea of preunderstanding of the historicity of human existence. Gadamer sets out a theory of historical consciousness, which tries to deliver a methodology for objective historical knowledge. However he sees that truly objective knowledge would need to have a standpoint from which the individual is above history.

Since individuals are themselves situated in a historical time and place, they cannot stand above history in a truly objective manner. For Gadamer this means that hermeneutic interpretation cannot be without presupposition since individuals are located within history. Therefore interpretation itself occurs with the presuppositions that are acquired through the individual's historical situatedness. This also locates understanding, even in the sciences, along a continuum of prior understanding, creating a whole fabric of relations. Yet, we do not get our presuppositions purely from tradition, since we are also part of the historical process, and our interpretations are tied to our relationship to the present (Palmer: 179-183).

Ricoeur's approach to hermeneutics takes in Gadamer's web of interpretation and sees hermeneutics as the theory of rules that govern an exegesis, that is to say, an interpretation of a text, or any collection of signs that is capable of being considered as a text. As with all of the above philosophers, it is difficult to sum up Ricoeur's work in one or two paragraphs. Ricoeur himself has written at length on the development of hermeneutics. So for this paper, I have chosen to focus on one area of Ricoeur's work that I feel is the most relevant to the topic at hand, and that is, using the paradigm of the text to consider meaningful action. This was discussed by Ricoeur in his essay, *The model of the text: meaningful action considered as text* (1981).

A text is discourse fixed in writing, but only when it inscribes directly in written letters what the discourse means. In writing, the reader takes the place of the interlocutor of spoken discourse. However, with a written text the reader is

removed spatially and temporally from the writer, and the text is distanced from its author. Although this may seem to make the written text less referential than dialogue, Ricoeur points out that the text is not without reference. Interpretation *becomes* the reference in the text.

First Ricoeur distinguishes between explanation and interpretation. The former is borrowed from the natural sciences and applied to the human sciences, and the latter is a derivative form of understanding. One can explain a text without interpreting it. To explain the structure you can take the elementary units of the structure and see them in opposition to the other units, and this can be done without interpreting because this *intratext* explanation is done without reference to time or place. By mapping out the units and seeing how they fit, you are explaining. Yet, this process of explanation, is linked to the larger event of interpretation. This structural process has its basis in the structural linguistics, which influenced Levi-Strauss's structural anthropology. At this level, Ricoeur writes that the text is suspended since it loses its historical relationship to any reference. Reading removes the suspension of the text and the text resumes its referential movement toward a world and its subjects. In interpreting, reading becomes like speech (although not quite as dialogic). It is an event and an instance of discourse.

Since structural explanation is not temporally and spatially specific, and hermeneutics demands a temporal and spatial referential, there is a conflict that must be reconciled. The concept of a hermeneutic arc locates structural explanation as the starting point in a broad continuum of hermeneutic

understanding. Structuralism is a sort of thin description, a surface kind of interpretation and along the continuum it is possible to situate both explanation and understanding, which is more of a thick (critical) interpretation. In between one can locate the different historically and culturally situated interpretations - *interpretant*, that become incorporated into the discourse of the text over time. At the end of the arc we find the interpreter engaged in a process of appropriation – the process of self-understanding in relation to the text.

The hermeneutic arc = explanation – interpretant – appropriation

The chain of interpretations produced by the interpreting community and incorporated into the dynamics of texts is the work of meaning upon itself. Within this chain, the first interpretants, supported by the text itself, serve as tradition for the final interpretants. Henceforth, for the exegete to interpret is to place himself within the sense indicated by the relation of interpretation supported by the text (Ricoeur:163).

For Ricoeur, hermeneutics is the rules required for the interpretation of the written documents of our time. His hypothesis for setting forth the text as a paradigm for meaningful action is as follows:

If there are specific problems which are raised by the interpretation of texts *because* they are texts, and not spoken language, and if these problems are the ones which constitute hermeneutics as such, then the human sciences may be said to be hermeneutical 1) inasmuch as their object displays some of the features constitutive of a text as text, and 2) inasmuch as their methodology develops the same kind of procedures as those of text interpretation (197).

Discourse is language as event and as such, hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of discourse as a meaningful event. The four traits of discourse are:

1. Discourse is always present
2. Discourse always refers back to its speaker (it is self-referential)
3. Discourse is always about something
4. Discourse is an exchange (between things)

These four traits taken together constitute speech as an event. Writing fixes discourse, it does not fix the event of speaking itself, but it fixes what is said.

What we write is the meaning of the speech event, not the event itself. Writing does not rejoin the author to the text resulting, in a disjunction between meaning and intention. If the objective meaning of the text is different from the subjective meaning of the author, then meaning can be construed in different ways. The plurivocity of the text goes beyond just a succession of sentences. Rather the text taken as a whole is open to several different reading and several constructions.

In the plurivocity of the text and the plurivocity of human action, there is a limited field of possible constructions of meaning. For the interpretation of human action, we need to look at the motivational basis for action. The process of arguing linked to the explanation of action by its motives unfolds a kind of plurivocity that makes action similar to text.

In *tafsir* Qur'an, the text is considered the foundation for interpretation. The first interpretants were the prophet and his immediate companions. From there, the second generation of interpretants were the students of these direct companions and the chain of interpretation expands onward from there.

As we move into a discussion of the Qur'an sciences and of *tafsir* Qur'an, close attention must be paid to the Muslim scholars' focus on historical context, grammatical analysis of the text, and *intertextual* and *intratextual* relationships. What are the significant parallels that exist between traditional Qur'an exegesis and the hermeneutic approach, with particular emphasis on those hermeneutic approaches that remain focused on the text? Concern with hermeneutic approaches dealing with meaningful action and interpretive anthropology will be discussed later on in relation to the case study of interpretation and translation as meaningful events among Muslim communities in New York City. I will reintroduce *appropriation* as a way of understanding the physical manifestation of what is appropriated when one understands a text in a particular and meaningful way. Theories of personhood (Mauss), will be also useful in elaborating this idea.

### **Sciences of the Qur'an – Uloom al-Qur'an**

Sciences of the Qur'an consist of two main branches; Qur'an interpretation (*tafsir al-Qur'an*), and the other branch also related to the Qur'an and Arabic language called the foundation of interpretations (*Usool al-tafsir*). In order for the scholar to interpret the Qur'an correctly, he or she must learn and master both of these branches. These sciences of the Qur'an developed from the very beginning of the revelation, and continue to be developing even today. By the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> hijri<sup>1</sup> century Imam Suyuti was one of the great scholars of this era. In the following section we will focus mainly on his work of *Uloom al-Qur'an* (a four volume work titled *Al Itkan fi Uloom al-Qur'an*). In addition, commentaries on his work by more recent scholars will be used. In this four volume work, Imam Suyuti cites over 80 different areas to be designated as topics for study. Including all of the

sub-areas of study, Imam Suyuti's work covers over 300 topics of study within the overall *Uloom al-Qur'an*. However, it is only possible to highlight some of these topics in this paper, due to space constraints. Knowledge of these areas of study are considered essential for accuracy in *tafsir*.

### **The Qur'an - Introduction**

al-Qur'an is the holy book of Islam, and the first source of knowledge and guidance. Scholars and linguists have different opinions as to the origin of the word 'Qur'an'<sup>2</sup>. The strongest opinion comes from the Qur'an itself; which means recitation. As mentioned in the ayah (75:17-18). Also the Qur'an refers to itself by other names. For example, *al-furqan* (25:1) (the separator, that which separates true from false). *al-zikr* (15:9) (remembrance) *tanzil* (26:19) (descended). *al-kitab* (21:10) (the Written) (Al-Saleh:1988).

### **The Definition of the Qur'an**

According to Muslim scholars of different branches of Islamic knowledge, the Qur'an is the word of Allah, that was revealed through the Archangel Jibreel to the heart of the messenger of Allah, Muhammad, son of Abdullah. It was revealed in Arabic in word and in meaning, in order to prove that Muhammad was the messenger of Allah. It was sent as guidance to man and jinn to follow, to achieve the best of this life and the life after; and to be a form of worship through its recitation. It is documented, authentically, in a book called *al-Mushaf*, beginning with the first chapter (sura) – *al-Fatihah*, and ending with the last *sura*, *al-Nas*. It was transferred to humankind through *tawatur* (transferring the word from Allah, to the archangel Jibreel, to the Prophet, and to a group of righteous, trustworthy individuals, and so on until the present time), initially through word of mouth, and

then through writing from one generation to the next preserved from any change or exchange, with no additions or omissions. As Allah promised in the Qur'an "We have, without doubt, sent down the message; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption) (14:9)" (Khallaf:1952).

### **The Revelation – al-Wahi**

Through studying the life of the Prophet Muhammad, we know that the Qur'an was revealed over a period of 23 years, and the first revelation came on *Laylatu alQadr* during the month of Ramadan. The Qur'an consists of 114 suras, and each chapter consists of shorter units called ayah. A sura can be made up of as little as 3 ayah or as long as 250 ayah. Imam Bukhari narrated in his hadith collection, on the authority of Ibn Abbas that "the messenger of Allah was revealed as a prophet at the age of 40. He stayed in Mecca 13 years receiving revelations from Jibreel, then he was ordered to migrate to Medina where he remained for 10 years, after which he returned to Mecca where he died at the age of 63 (al-Saleh:1988)."

According to the Qur'an itself the revelation took place in this way in order 1) to provide guidance to the prophet as particular circumstances arose (11:120, 2:112). Such verses show the lives and struggles of prophets who came before Muhammad and were a way of showing him support and example (ibid). 2) to make memorization easier, since we know that the prophet and most of his companions were illiterate. 3) to be considerate of the situation of the new believers who were gradually transforming their lives from disbelief to belief, and transforming the culture and lifestyle in every way. It was seen as a period of great adjustment. 4) to be a challenge for disbelievers and to prove to all that

there could be nothing of its equal. 5) to prove that it was revealed from Allah; that over a 23 year time period it remained consistent in its accuracy and style.

### **Styles of Recitation – Ilm al-Ahruf Wal Qira'at**

During the lifetime of the prophet there were several different Arabic language dialects (*abruf*) spoken among the tribes of the region. The revelations were initially given in seven dialects (*abruf*) including *Quraysh*, *Kinana*, *Tamim* and *Yemen*. Eventually, the dialect of Quraysh became the most popular dialect because it was the most sophisticated (al-Suyuti:vol.1:47). Later on, according to the prophet's teaching of recitation of the Qur'an, and through the teaching of his companions to their followers, seven styles of recitation were authenticated (*mutawatar*) and are still used in prayer and recitation throughout the Muslim world today.

### **Stories and Events - al-Qusas w'l Akhbar**

These are stories, events and news about previous tribes, nations and prophets found in the Qur'an. The main aspects of these stories are that they are historically based and given as lessons to be learned and reflected upon.

### **History of the Qur'an – the Recording of the Text – Jam'u al-Qur'an**

From the beginning of the revelation the Prophet ordered his companions to write nothing but the revelation of the Qur'an, so as not to mix the word with *hadith*. The most famous of the scribes are the four caliphs: Abu Bakr, Omar, 'Uthman, and Ali, as well as Zaid Bin Thabit, Ubayy Bin Ka'ab, Mu'awiyh, Khaled Bin al-Walid. Under the direction of the prophet they re-ordered and wrote down every

ayah in its own place in the sura. Additionally, the Qur'an was committed to memory by a large number of the companions. After the death of the prophet, all of the written material was compiled into one volume called *al-Mushaf* which was kept first with Abu Bakr, second with Omar, and third with 'Uthman who formed a committee of the best memorizers and scribes who made several copies and this is what we now have as the Qur'an. (Tabbarah:10<sup>th</sup> edition).

### **The Reason and Occasion of Revelation – Asbab al-Nuzul**

During the course of revelation some ayah were revealed in response to an event or a question, and others were not. Every ayah is subject to a study of its reasons for revelation (al-Saleh:1988). It is important to know the exact context in which an ayah was revealed in order to better understand its meaning. It is also important to know the order in which the ayat was revealed.

### **Meccan and Medinan Revelation – al-Makkiy wal Madani**

The strongest opinion of Muslim Scholars (Imam Suyuti, Imam Zarkashi, and others) are that all ayat revealed before the hijra are the Meccan ayat, and all those revealed after the hijra are the Medinan ayat, even if these were revealed after the return to Mecca. The topics and style are different. The Meccan ayat focus on life, death and reckoning, reasoning about life, the life after, questions about the purpose of life and condemnation of the lifestyle of the Meccan at this time. In contrast, the Medinan ayat are mainly to do with community building, structures of business, economy, family, and dialogue with the people of the book. At this time life is more settled and the focus is on strengthening the community (Al-Zarkashi:1957). Also, Muslim scholars have further distinguished among ayat that

were revealed while the prophet was traveling or not traveling, during the day or night, whether asleep or awake, whether in summer or winter, etc. (Suyuti:1987). The importance of being able to distinguish the context of each revelation is that 1) it allows comparison among the ayat for interpretation. 2) it allows the reader to see exactly to whom the ayat are being addressed. 4) it sheds light into the lifestyle of the prophet. 5) it shows exactly how and where the prophet was living at the time when each ayah was revealed. Let us remember that awareness of context is an important aspect of the hermeneutic process.

### **Chronology of the Revelation -Tartib al-Nuzul**

This area focuses on the development of the revelation and the Shari'a. There are three reasons why this is important: 1) to show the amount of detail and effort that went into preserving the revelation on the part of the prophet and the companions with the help of Allah. 2) to show the wisdom and the style of the guidance of each revelation within a particular historical moment. 3) to determine the abrogating ayat and the abrogated ayat in case there are more than one verse dealing with a particular topic.

### **The Relationship Between Different Verses and Chapters - al-Munasabat Bayna al-Ayaat wal-Sowar<sup>3</sup>.**

Knowing the relationship between certain ayat and certain sowar helps contextualize each ayah and sura within the whole Qur'an. alZarkeshi (page 35). Manna' al-Kattan, quoting for example, Imam Izz al-din Abdulsalam said "the relationships between aya and sura is a beautiful science for those who master it (1996:98)."

### **Abrogating and Abrogated Verses – al-Nasikh wal-Mansukh**

During the course of the revelation, certain ayat were revealed early on and then later on other ayat were revealed to overrule or replace the former ayah in both the way in which it was recited, in its *hukm* or both.

### **Clear and Unclear – al-Muhkam wal-Mutashabih**

Al-mukham refers to those ayat which are very clear in meaning and interpretation. They are the majority of ayat in the Qur'an and the foundation and interpretation for the rest of the ayat in the Qur'an. They are referred to as *Um al-kitab* (mother of the book). They are understood independently of other ayat.

On the other hand, al-mutashabih are the opposite. They are the minority of ayat and they have more than one interpretation. This represents a whole science of study on its own (Suyuti: 1987).

### **General Application and Specific Application – al-Am wal-Khas**

al-Am are those ayat which carry a general applicability in their meaning, and al-Khas are those ayat where the meaning is applied to a specific case, individual(s) or circumstance(s).

### **Unelaborated and Elaborated Verses – al-Mujmal wal-Mubayyan**

Al-Mujmal are ayat that require detail and elaboration in order to be properly understood. Mubayam are ayat which are plain and obvious without any added detail to clarify their meaning.

### **Unrestricted and Restricted Verses - al-Mutlaq wal-Muqayyad**

al-Mutlaq are ayat that are applicable without any restriction. al-Muqayyad are ayat that have restriction in their application.

### **Unequivocal and Equivocal Verses - al-Nas wal-Zaher**

al-Nas unequivocally decides a particular legal action and al-Zaher are those with a probable legal signification, but which may also bear an alternative interpretation.

### **Tafsir al-Qur'an**

Having mentioned above, some of the different areas of knowledge needed for proper interpretation, we come now to a discussion of how the scholars applied these sciences in a way to that gives meaning to the text. This science of understanding the Qur'an is called *tafsir*. Countless volumes have been written on *tafsir* of the Qur'an and its methodology, and in this paper it is, unfortunately, only possible to briefly touch upon the most important aspects of this practice.

Although it is common practice to refer to all interpretation of the Qur'an as '*tafsir*', there are in fact two branches that must be distinguished – *tafsir* and *ta'wil*

Linguistically *tafsir* comes from the root ف-س-ر (fasara), meaning to clarify or to make things seen, or to unveil<sup>4</sup>. Technically the term, as applied by scholars such as Suyuti and others in the field of *tafsir*, refers to the science that deals with how

to understand the message of Allah by reciting the Qur'an correctly and understanding its meaning, and knowing what can be extracted from it such as the rulings, and the wisdom behind it through the use of our human capacity of understanding.

On the other hand, *ta'wil* comes from the root و - ل - ا *awwala*. The root means to return or bring back to the origin or source. Technically, the early scholarly application of the term is to bring back the knowledge or action to the objective meant from that statement or action, rather than to take it literally or as it is. For interpretation of Qur'an this means to provide an understanding of an ayah based on its originally intended meaning. Later on this came to mean that, in situations where more than one meaning is presented, choosing the less obvious meaning based on an indication seen by the mufassir<sup>5</sup>. An indication can be in the text, historically known or from one of the existing Qur'an sciences (*Uloom al-Qur'an*) (see discussion above).

### **Development of Tafsir as a Science**

*Tafsir of the Prophet* - Tafsir begins with the interpretation of the prophet, based on the Qur'an as revelation. In the beginning it was based on the prophet since it was revealed to him in word, and in meaning. He is the reference for *tafsir* in his own time and all times to come after him.

*Tafsir During the Lives of the Companions* - The companions made *tafsir* based on the Qur'an. They were eyewitness to the revelation and spent time with the prophet. In addition, they were connected to the spoken language of the time

period. For them *tafsir* was based on the Qur'an and if more explanation was needed they would go back to Prophet's interpretation during his own lifetime. If the answer was still not found they could rely on their own understanding or *ijtihad*. This is how *tafsir* was done during this time period. Among the *mufassirin* of the companions are the 4 caliphs: Abu Bakr, Omar, Uthman, and Ali as well as Ibn Abbas, Ibn Massoud, Zaid Bin Thabet, Ayesha and others. *Tafsir* from this period is very sound because of the close temporal and spatial connection to the prophet himself. As a result, if an interpretation is authenticated on their behalf, this interpretation supersedes all others which may come after it.

*Tafsir During The Lives Of The Students Of The Companions (Al-Tabi'in)* - This is the second generation of scholars after the prophet. The *Tabi'in* interacted with the companions of the prophet although not with the prophet himself. With the expansion of the Muslim state, the companions traveled and teaching of Islam spread. The methodology of *tafsir* of the *tabi'in* is first the Qur'an, followed by the prophetic tradition (narration by the companions about the prophet), followed by the companions interpretation, then what they learned from the other people of the book, then their own understanding and *ijtihad* (Qattan: 1996:100).

*Early Schools of Tafsir* - As a result of traveling and further expansion, three schools of *tafsir* were established: In Mecca, under the students of Ibn Abbas; in Medina under the students of Ubay bin Ka'b; and in Iraq under the students of Ibn Masood. Ibn Masood's interpretation was mainly based on sound opinion and this developed the practice of *tafsir* by opinion (to be discussed further below). It should be noted that the opinions of the *tabi'in* are considered to be accepted by

most scholars of Qur'an and cannot be rejected when the majority of them are in agreement over meaning. (Ibn Taymia, *Usool al- Tafsir*, 28-29).

*Tafsir During The Period Of Written Documentation Of Islamic Sciences* - During the last period of the Bani Ummayyid era and the beginning of the Abbasayid era (mid seventh century), came the codification of the Islamic sciences. Scholars begin to collect all the previous *tafsir* into comprehensive written volumes. The most famous *tafsir* collections come from Ibn Majah (d. 723 hijri), al Tabari (d. 310 hijri), and al-Hakem (d. 405 hijri). All of the documentation of this *tafsir* is based on the documentation of the previous generation.

*Tafsir In Later Generations* - With the expansion of knowledge, the growth of the community and the influence of the background of each *mufassir*, the interpretation of *tafsir* begins to get very specific. At this point and up to our time there are six more levels of tafsir development (9 total) based on the *muffasirin* (al-Qutan 1996: 343-346). There is not enough space to elaborate on them at this time. However, two main methodologies have been distinguished 1) *tafsir bil ma'thur*: methodology based on authentic narration up until the time of the *Tabai'in*. Also known as *manqul* or transmitted. 2) *tafsir bil ra'i* : methodology based on the *mufassir's* own particular understanding to come up with an interpretation. This is also known as *ma'qul* or opinion. However, not all of the interpretations based on opinion are seen as valid among Muslim scholars, due to variation in the background of the *Muffassir*.

Over time *tafsir* has been influenced by such things *fikh*, Arabic language, theology and philosophy. In addition to having a strong background in the previously mentioned *Uloom al-Qur'an*, some of the key components of tafsir interpretation are based on the following.

*Reading Correctly* - Knowing the science of recitation of the Qur'an, where to pause within the ayah, accuracy in pronunciation and vowelizing on each letter. There are seven styles of recitation and each style can impact the meaning of the ayah in different ways.

*I'rab* – Knowing how to analyze the *ayah* to find out how each word functions within it. This helps in accuracy of meaning. It is necessary to study *i'rab* as a science and apply it to the ayah. For example, each word has a function within the *ayat*; subject, predicate, verbs, prepositions, etc. These grammatical units make up the structure of the ayah and this enables the intratextual analysis of it (see Ricoeur above), based on the words in relation to each other. This is important because knowing the grammatical usage of a word determines its meaning and can impact how the overall meaning of the ayah is understood.

*Word Usage* - Knowing how words are used. This is based on knowing cultural meanings, knowing the meaning of the word at the time it was used, word morphology and how word meaning changes over time, and knowing whether words are being used literally, metaphorically, allegorically, etc.

### **Interpretation in the Social Sciences**

Now that we have discussed at some length, interpretive theories that focus on the text, let us now look more closely at how interpretation has influenced the social sciences. Interpretive anthropology is closely associated with the work of Clifford Geertz (1973). In his *The Interpretation of Cultures*, he puts forth his well known quote “Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore, not an experiential science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning (5).”

Indeed, Rabinow and Sullivan also stick to the web of meaning metaphor and further reject any scientific absolutes when it comes to interpreting culture. The interpretive approach in anthropology emphatically refutes the claim that one can somehow reduce the complex world of signification to the products of a self-consciousness in the traditional philosophical sense. Rather interpretation begins from the postulate that the web of meaning constitutes human existence to such an extent that it cannot ever be meaningfully reduced to constitutively prior speech acts, dyadic relations or any predefined elements. We always exist within the web of meanings, we cannot interpret outside of it. Both the observer and the observed exist within the web and there is no privileged position through which to observe or explain (Rabinow and Sullivan: 1979:5-6). In addition, understanding any action is analogous to text interpretation. This means that the intelligibility of any action requires reference to its larger context – a cultural world. The social and cultural world must be brought into the analysis in order to understand the event. This is the art of interpretation. The aim is not to uncover universals, but to explicate context and world (ibid:12-13).

Like Ricoeur, Geertz also uses the terms 'thin' and 'thick' to refer to the process of interpretation. For Ricoeur (already mentioned above), a mere structural interpretation is thin and does not fully interpret in a meaningful way. Thick description locates its subject within an historical and cultural time frame. Both Geertz and Ricoeur, as well as Rabinow and Sullivan, situate the interpreter within the interpretive process and emphasize that the interpreter cannot remove himself from the interpretive process.

In looking at translation and/or interpretation as an event, it is necessary to determine what is going on during the course of the event. What happens when people get together to interpret and translate Islamic religious texts? Who are the key players in the event? Who is in charge, what is said, what prior knowledge is brought into the event? What are the goals, individual and common, of those involved? What are the possibilities for misinterpretation at any given time? We have seen the intricacies of the Islamic sciences, and know that differences exist among scholars themselves. What is liable to happen when non-scholars are placed in the mix? Further, what are the issues that arise when attempting to translate from Arabic to a target language?

Translation studies deals not only with the historical and cultural contexts of translation, but also with the problems associated with translating texts. As good translation should fulfill the same purpose in the new language as the original did in the source language, with an attempt to maintain a naturalness of expression (Rubel and Rosman:2003, Benjamin:1968).

In the end, as interpretation and translation are used to transmit knowledge how do the receivers of this knowledge appropriate the information in meaningful ways and how do they manifest that knowledge in terms of their personhood? In the process of interpreting here and now, the reader must locate himself in a cultural context that enables him to interpret in a specific way, using cultural signs as a reference, and to give specific meaning to the text. This is why we must emphasize variation in how texts get interpreted, since variation impacts the kind of appropriation that actually occurs. When interpreting a text and then transmitting the information (as in the teaching of a text), how is the event expanded?

### **Case Study**

What follows is a discussion of interpretation and translation as meaningful event among Muslims in New York City. Focusing on informal study groups meeting in the New York City area, I will identify several situations where such activities take place. I argue that meaningful action is shaped by variation in the education process for Muslims taking part in informal study groups, since it is at such informal educational events that individuals of different background come together to share in the interpretive process. I place emphasis on the role that informal religious education plays in shaping individuals' understanding of their place within a wider religious community – both locally and globally. Muslim personhood develops largely through religious education. Personhood, as a critical theory (Mauss, 1989), draws on the embodied traits and physical manifestations acquired by individuals to explain how they develop an understanding of their place within a group – spatially and temporally. What are

the varied personas that are created as a result of individual experiences including the type of religious education one has received throughout a lifetime?

Theories of personhood show how, through practice, individuals are able to embody the characteristics favored by the group with whom they identify.

Clothing style and bodily comportment reflect group sensibilities. However, among the different communities, disagreement occurs with regard to what is the most correct way of presenting the self – particularly in the public sphere. For Muslims in New York, as elsewhere, religious phrases such as *insba'Allah* (God willing), *Ilhamdu'lilaab* (praise be to God), *Assalaamu Alaikum* (peace be upon you – used in greeting other Muslims), although Arabic in origin, are used as a way of presenting themselves as pious individuals and of belonging to the community of believers. It is also a means of training the self to remember the creator in one's everyday life. Those who do not wish to identify with the community rarely use such phrases (although some native Arabic speakers may).

As individuals identify and embody the behavior and appearance encouraged by the community, in what ways does the education process serve to further discipline practice and teach individuals how to become Muslim persons? It is a complicated process that involves both acceptance and contestation of the methods and beliefs of those charged with educating the community. It commonly leads to individuals seeking out multiple sites for religious education, and it is not uncommon to find some people who attend classes with two or three different *Sheiyukh*<sup>6</sup> each week. How does participation in multiple activities either reinforce or confuse one's ability to understand that which is interpreted?

Since informal education is less clearly defined, not always public, and often times left to the individual to seek out, it is difficult to measure the impact of these activities on the development of personhood. My research focuses on sites where informal religious educational activities take place, and pays particular attention to the ways in which Imams, Sheikhs, and other religious community leaders choose to translate and interpret Islamic texts from the original, classical Arabic, into English, modern Arabic dialects, and other languages spoken among Muslims in New York City. Findings have shown the mechanisms by which Muslims in New York City come to know themselves as *Muslim Persons*, and how they come to identify their roles and responsibilities as a result of this knowledge. Informal educational activities are often organized in people's homes - people often form close relationships with local Sheikhs and Imams and organize small study groups with them for friends and family. Community centers and the Muslim Student's Associations (MSA) at schools and universities also organize educational activities.

Theories of translation point out the political meaning that goes into translation . They also show what can happen to meaning when portions of a text are removed and decontextualized from a wider body of work. Religious leaders within New York's Muslim community are engaging in political debates about what it means to be a Muslim person, and the roles and responsibilities that come with being part of the group. Often this means citing religious texts and rendering interpretations that impact community level understanding of global and local events.

Because translation and interpretation are so integral to the education process, it is important to define and explore the issues that arise and the spaces in which translation takes place. Histories of individual educators, as well as the institutions where education takes place need to be stressed as part of this process.

Translation as an event involves both the enactment of translation and the interpretation of both the instructor and the student. Texts selected can be old or new, can cover history, *tafsir* of the Qur'an, biography and jurisprudence, and among the latter, many schools of thought exist. It is also the case that the purpose of text translation and interpretations in these settings runs from the spiritual to the political and everything in between. All of these variables play a role in grounding translation and interpretation into very specific contexts that impact the transmission of meaning between teacher and student in an educational setting. How does this variation result in the development of personhood, and the ability of the student to receive knowledge across settings? Understanding education as a process requires a critical inquiry into the context in which translation takes place, the motivations behind all those involved, and knowing the substance of what is being translated.

How is the production of meaning affected by variation in the transmission of religious knowledge? That is, what exactly is the link between the translation and interpretation of religious texts and the development of personhood? Having determined those spaces in the community where meaning is shared and those sites where meaning is contested, I now explore how concepts of unity and community are articulated in religious discourse – by whom and for what reasons. I will show specific attempts to bridge gaps among a highly diverse group of people residing in a relatively small area within the United States who, in varying

degrees, share a commitment to a specific belief in and practice of Islam.

Exploring the role of religious education in the development of personhood, its impact on how individuals interpret events, and how the production of meaning is affected by variation in the transmission of religious knowledge, highlights many of the important issues facing Muslims in New York City at a very crucial moment in history.

There are over 600,000 Muslims currently residing in New York City, and over 100 mosques within the 5 boroughs of New York City (Dodds and Grazda, 2002). Separate mosques catering to the needs of each ethnic group have become the norm, particularly outside of Manhattan. In fact it is not unusual to attend a Friday prayer service where English is not spoken. At the mosque where I attended a Qur'anic studies class for girls, the instructor was Palestinian and only spoke Arabic, and the Imam had only recently arrived in the U.S. from Egypt around 7 months ago. He spoke barely any English at all. Within walking distance of my house in Astoria, Queens, there are 2 Bengali mosques, 2 Arab mosques, and 1 Pakistani mosque. Brooklyn has 2 African American mosques within one block of each other, Harlem has a Senegalese mosque, and the tiny borough of Staten Island has an Albanian mosque and school. Topics ranging from Islamic spirituality, to social welfare among the community, to local and global politics receive varying degrees of attention depending on the Imam and the mosques one is visiting.

What a methodology for an Islamic hermeneutics ultimately needs to work out are the problems that arise in the translation and interpretation of religious text during

the education process. How meaning and the ability of educators to impart knowledge impacted as a result of interactions among individuals who have had exposure to vastly different experiences throughout their lifetimes?

One of the reasons why such diversity exists is because people are entering into the community with very different backgrounds. New Muslims (individuals from the United States who have converted to Islam – sometimes referred to as *indigenous Muslims*), often start out having little or no knowledge of Islamic history, jurisprudence, or Arabic language. On the other hand, those who are born into Muslim families have learned their religious practice through the lens of a particular culture and/or school of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). People rely heavily on their families and the mosque for continuing education. The Friday Khutba is seen as an important source of information for religious instruction and for current events, and is a primary site for scriptural interpretation and translation. Most people educated outside of the US had Islam as part of their curriculum. As each ethnic group grows among the Muslim community in New York, more mosques open up to fill their needs. One growing occurrence, which has also been observed in media reports on Islam in European countries, is the use of “import Imams”. These are religious leaders who are brought to European and American cities from their native Muslim countries. These Imams have received their training in Islamic theology from their home country, but have little or no knowledge of the culture or language of their host country. As a result, they are limited to addressing the needs of their own linguistic group. This results in further dividing the community along ethnic lines.

In larger mosques and at Muslim Students' Association (MSA) sponsored events in the city centers, there is more diversity, and events are conducted in English. On the one hand, it is in these spaces that people often come to see Islam practiced in ways that are quite different from what they experienced growing up. On the other hand, it is also in these spaces that disagreement sometimes occurs since, once again, people are entering such spaces with variation in religious education, and existing cultural influences that shape practice.

In addition to the Qur'an, there are several texts, as well as particular *hadith* (historical accounts and recorded deeds and sayings of the prophet), and *tafsir* that are frequently cited and familiar to most individuals, yet whose exact meaning is often contested. Problematically, since most of these texts are often removed from their original context, and translated from classical Arabic, people often reference such texts without actually having read them. Many individuals are completely dependent on translation and interpretation by those with formal training.

A study done by Charles Hirshkind has discusses the concept of *da'wa* (religious invitation) in Egypt. Here individuals will attempt to improve the behavior of others through invitation to religious study. The individuals in Hirschkind's study made use of audiocassette-recorded lectures by popular religious leaders. Cassette lectures on various topics are given to those it was felt needed to improve particular aspects of their religious practice or behavior. The assumption was that people in that given space were, at least in degree, following the same set of practice. In New York this is not the case, and when peoples' understanding

varies in kind, similar overtures of *da'wa* are met with open hostility and contestation, even when it is a teacher correcting the behavior of a student.

Over the course of my field work, I have participated in several different informal religious study groups where textual interpretation was the focus. To describe these events is to provide a rich description of people from all backgrounds, living in a common space, but who are entering into that space with very situated knowledges. In reading about the following very short descriptions of different study groups, just try to imagine how translation and interpretation might take place among the various individuals involved in the process in each separate set of circumstances, and how this might ultimately shape how the information is received and appropriated and how this can impact the development of personhood. 1) a group of teenage girls meeting for a religious study group at a local mosque on a Friday afternoon. Each week a different girl is responsible for interpreting a different chapter of the Qur'an and presenting it to the group. 2) A Sheikh at a local mosque teaching *tafsir* Qur'an to a group of young adults, all of whom have at least an intermediate level of classical Arabic language. 3) A group of housewives meeting at each others' homes on a monthly basis to discuss a book of prophetic *hadith*. 4) A group of university students who have organized a study group with a local scholar. They are reading a classic manual of *fiqh*. 5) A children's study group meeting at a mosque on Saturday afternoons. The teacher is a middle aged woman with no training in the Islamic sciences, and they are studying elementary Arabic language and an introduction to proper Islamic behavior for children. 6) A summer Qur'an memorization class for girls at a local mosque. The teacher speaks no English whatsoever. The class meets everyday

from 9 am to 2 pm. The girls range from the ages of 5 to 15, and come from low income families. 7) A group of men between the ages of 30-40 years, most of them have converted to Islam. They meet to discuss various religious texts but do not have a religious scholar present<sup>7</sup>. 8) A group of upper middle class families, highly educated, who have arranged to have a local sheikh teach them in a local mosque. They are studying a book of *tafsir* Qur'an. 9) A women's study group meeting twice a month with a local sheikh. Each meeting would be held at a different woman's home from among the group. In addition to studying a manual of Islamic conduct, the women also used the study group to address issues of personal concern with the sheikh, who bases his answers on years of study in the Islamic sciences. 10) A group of young families meeting in a local *balal* restaurant. The owner of the restaurant arranges to have different Islamic scholars give a lecture each week. Afterwards food was served and the meeting becomes more social.

Islam is a comparatively new religion in the U.S., yet is it one of the fastest growing religions in the country. Large waves of immigrants from Muslim countries since the 1960's, and an increasing number of converts within the U.S. attributes to this recent growth spurt. As a result, more time is needed to work out many of the issues that serve to maintain divisions among the communities. There are large divisions due to the ethnic diversity within the community, but there are also differences of opinion over matters of faith and ideology. I have argued in this paper that such differences are rooted in the education process and have attempted to explore those sites where education takes place, and to show that the manifestation of these differences can be seen in the understanding of religious

text. Differences in translation and interpretation play a large role in how events are perceived across the community. Islamic hermeneutics seeks to understand the significance of how methodologies of textual interpretation have developed over time and how the variation in situatedness among participants engaged in religious study groups lead to differences in how religious knowledge gets appropriated and presented as religious personhood.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> The *hijri* calendar begins at the time of the migration of the prophet from Mecca to Medina, approximately 620 CE

<sup>2</sup> For example, Imam Shafi'i, Imam Ash'ari, Al-Farra', Az-zajaj, each has his own opinion and proof as to the origins of the word. However, the word Qur'an could come from a root meaning to put things together, to gather things, or to put things in relation to one another.

<sup>3</sup> This is the transliterated pronunciation of the plural of the word *sura*

<sup>4</sup> Leading scholars who mention this as the root *ف-س-ر* (*fasara*) of *tafsir* include Ibn Faris, Al-Ragheb, Ibn Manzour

<sup>5</sup> Scholar of *tafsir* pl *Mufasssirun* or *Mufasssirin*

<sup>6</sup> religious scholars, the plural of *sheikh*

<sup>7</sup> Since this was a study group for men, I was not actually present at this event. However, I relate it as it was described to me by a colleague.