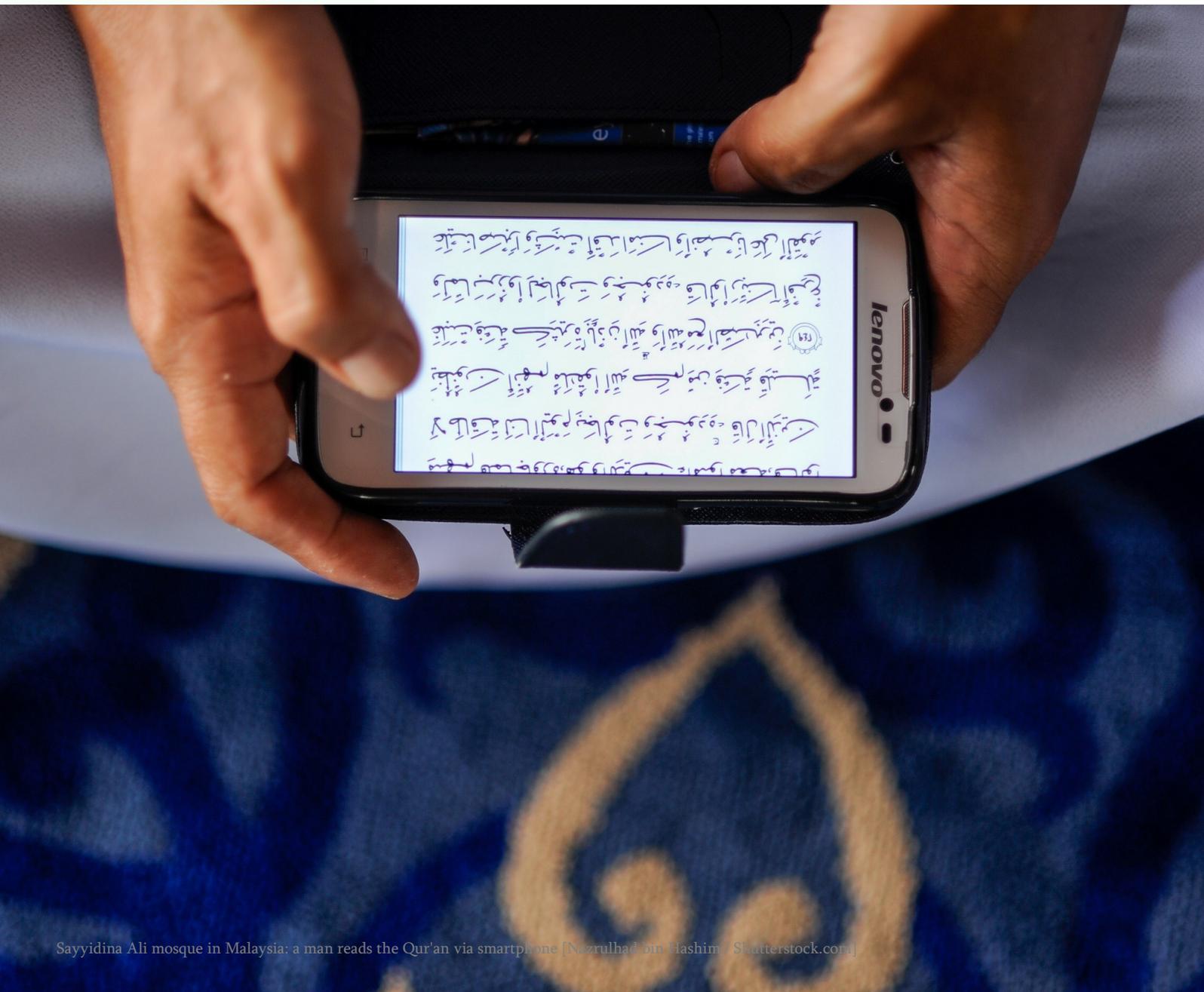


INTERPRETING THE QUR'AN TODAY: BETWEEN TRADITION AND NEW MEDIA

Johanna Pink



Sayyidina Ali mosque in Malaysia: a man reads the Qur'an via smartphone [Nazrulhad bin Hashim / Shutterstock.com]

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In order to make sense of how Muslims read and debate the sacred text, the evolution of media cannot be ignored.

‘When I was at primary school,’ writes the German Muslim [Hakan Turan in his blog](#), ‘my circle of friends contained all kinds of nationalities: Germans, Italians, Spanish, Portuguese – all of them classmates. ... My parents appreciated my good relationship with my classmates and I would never have thought that it could meet with anyone’s disapproval – until one day I met an elderly Turk who identified with political Islam which was on the rise in Turkey at the time, and he told me something that curdled my blood: “You may not be friends with these people – for the Qur’an says: *Do not take the Jews and Christians as friends. They are friends of each other.*” [Qur’an 5:51]

The same qur’anic verse that shocked Turan so much when he grew up in 1980s Germany caused a major scandal that dominated the gubernatorial election of Jakarta, Indonesia, in 2017 and might even have determined its outcome, the difference being that in Indonesia, the political battle was based on the following translation: ‘Do not take the Jews and Christians as *leaders*.’ Just as Turan’s elderly Turkish acquaintance had no doubt that the Qur’an forbids Muslims from taking non-Muslims as friends, many devout Indonesian Muslims did not stop to question their conviction that the Qur’an forbids Muslims from

electing non-Muslims into political leadership positions.

Both interpretations have some precedent in the tradition of Muslim qur’anic exegesis although non-Muslim leadership, in particular, had never been a core concern of Muslim exegetes before the 20th century’s anti-colonial struggles. However, the exegetical tradition is unable to provide guidance with regard to the question what Qur’an 5:51 should really mean to present-day believers. Nor can the contemporary debates about the application of the verse be reduced to a battle over the authority of ancient exegetes. Far from being a prerogative of religious scholars, the interpretation of the Qur’an is today negotiated in mosques and on YouTube, in blogs and on message boards, on social media and in schools. Qur’anic verses are employed to mobilize believers and to control them, but they are also used to legitimize a message of equality and liberation. And all of this takes place in dozens of languages, with all the translation problems that are inherent in this fact. It happens in Germany, where Muslims are a religious minority, and in Indonesia, where the vast majority of the population is Muslim. Today’s debates on the role of the Qur’an are inseparable from nation states that set the institutional, political, educational, and even linguistic fra-

mework in which the meaning of the Qur'an is negotiated.

The Qur'an as Guidance: From Fundamentalism to Modernism

It might seem self-evident that the meaning of the Qur'an is at the centre of countless social and political debates in Muslim societies today, given that the Qur'an is Islam's sacred scripture and Muslims generally believe it to be a *verbatim* divine revelation. But while the recitation of the Qur'an, particularly in prayer, has always been central to Muslim religious practice, the idea that all believers should consider the message of the Qur'an

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was not promoted before the late 19th century. An increasing number of scholars and intellectuals embraced the idea that believers should turn to the foundational texts of Islam, rather than rely on the authority of later scholars and on a complex tradition that had grown and evolved across centuries. In some cases, the main impetus of this demand was a desire for European-style modernization; in other cases, it was the idea that a return to the roots of faith would purify and strengthen the Muslim world against the onslaught of imperialism; and frequently, both motives overlapped.

their central source of guidance not only in matters of faith but also in terms of ethics and social organization

One lasting effect of the rise of reformist ideas was a reconfiguration of the exegetical tradition. When one enters Islamic bookshops in Cairo or Yogyakarta today and asks for a good, authoritative qur'anic commentary, chances are that the salesperson will recommend the voluminous work by the 14th-century scholar Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) above any work written by a contemporary scholar. Ibn Kathir's enormous popularity might, at first glance, demonstrate the resilience of pre-modern scholarship, but it is in fact a distinctly modern phenomenon, caused by fundamentalist reform movements that are today commonly called Salafi. They regard Ibn Kathir and his teacher Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) as icons of radical hermeneutics that relied, in their interpretation of the Qur'an, on nothing but authentic traditions about the prophet, his companions, and their successors. Ibn Kathir's qur'anic commentary was the first to be printed in a modern layout that made it accessible to lay readers; it was translated into numerous languages and reproduced in countless simplified, abridged editions that turned it into a textbook, rather than the specialised work directed at scholars that it had originally been.

The intellectual movements that emerged in the late 19th century had other, equally lasting trajectories as well. New exegetical trends emerged whose proponents wanted to read the Qur'an as a rational and socially progressive text by focussing on its 'higher aims,' rather than specific prescriptions and interdic-

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tions. They started cautiously questioning institutions such as polygamy and concepts they considered superstitious, such as the existence of *jinn*. Most of all, they aimed to establish the Qur'an as a text that inspires societal reform and human development. These ideas, in turn, later branched into different types of social activism, ranging from Islamism, as represented in the Muslim Brotherhood and the South Asian Jama'at-e Islami, to egalitarian, liberalist types of modernism.

All these developments, and many more, are part of the genealogies that lead up to the contemporary field of Muslim qur'anic interpretation. What they have in common is one notion that is probably a legacy of the famous Egyptian reformist scholar Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), more than anyone else: the idea that the Qur'an should first and foremost be a source of guidance (*hidaya*) to Muslims. It should provide ethical norms and social orientation; it should inspire Muslims to study and strive for personal success, to behave morally, to rebel against unjust rulers or to build communities of righteous believers. The messages that are considered by contemporary interpreters of the Qur'an to be at the Qur'an's socio-ethical core, while manifold and contradictory, are predominantly about behaviour and action, to a far greater extent than had historically ever been the case.

The Evolution of Media

As the example of the ubiquitous 14th-century exegete Ibn Kathir shows, it is impossible to make sense of the field of Muslim qur'anic

interpretation today without taking into consideration the evolution of media and the massive transformations that were caused by media innovation. Ibn Kathir's qur'anic commentary could not have become a popular reference work without the spread of the printing press. Salafi publishers in Egypt, India, and Syria made enormous efforts and investments to typeset, print, and distribute his work. The printing press became a threshold that determined which parts of the exegetical tradition were to make it into the 20th century; those that remained in manuscript form had little chance at being read, even by scholars. At the same time, the spread of print capitalism allowed for the popularization of new exegetical discourses at an unprecedented speed. The Cairo-based religious journal *al-Manar* was a trendsetter in that regard. It invented a form of qur'anic exegesis that was targeted at journal readers, not scholars: it was serialized, eclectic, made explicit reference to contemporary events, and was sometimes even meant to be entertaining. Likewise, the fusion of new scientific knowledge and qur'anic exegesis that became popular in the first third of the 20th century was to a large extent fuelled by the existence of journals such as *al-Muqtataf* that popularized such

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knowledge. For the first time, there were exegetical works that contained pictures in addition to text.

The press has ever since been used by religious mass movements, governments, and their opponents as a vehicle for socio-exegetical discourses. There are even some full commentaries on the Qur'an that have their origin in journals such as those by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood member Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), by the South Asian Islamist intellectual Abu al-A'la al-Mawdudi (1903–1979) and by the Indonesian scholar Hamka (1908–1981). Mass media created new communities of readers, sometimes within the space of a nation state and sometimes on the global level.

Radio and TV caused the next big transformation in the exegetical field. Even more than journals, they boosted exegetical styles that were based on preaching, rather than scholarship or journalism. Qur'anic commentaries such as those by the famous Egyptian TV preacher Sheikh Sha'rawi combine the explanation of Qur'anic verses with exhortations and excurses into social and moral advice, addressing their audience with rhetorical questions and the occasional bit of humour. They strongly emphasize the inimitability (*i'jaz*) of the Qur'an and have contributed to the enormous popularity of *i'jaz* discourses today, especially in the prestigious field of science. The common argument, found in sermons, on websites, in pamphlets, and in videos is that the Qur'an contains knowledge that was not available in the 7th century, which is proof of

its divine origin. Audiovisual Qur'anic interpretations have thus further broadened the audiences of mediated Qur'anic exegesis, beyond those literate classes that consume printed journals.

Conversely, the internet has made possible an unprecedented democratization not only of access to exegetical content but also of the means of publication and distribution. The effects are far-reaching. Social media, in particular, allows for the mobilization of believers, as was the case in the Indonesian controversy about non-Muslim political leadership. It has also created new forms of piety, such as the daily sharing of Qur'anic verses and the use of Qur'an apps that involve translations, combining ritual practices with an effort to understand and apply the meaning of the Qur'an.

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On another level, digital media has encouraged the emergence of new exegetical styles that are shaped by the platforms they use. Social media, blogs, and vlogs are conducive to the creation of personalized content, representing individual perspectives, attitudes, and feelings. Accordingly, they are more and more frequently used to present personal approaches to the Qur'an, based on the exegete's socialization, experiences, and conscience. Hakan Turan's take on Q 5:51 is a perfect example.

Languages, Nation States, Migration, and Globalization

The advent of mass media, from printed journals to digital content, has created boundaries and transcended them at the same time. On the one hand, mass media was of vital importance for the creation of a sense of community and national identity within the borders of a given territory among people who had never met and were never going to meet: only through mass media was nation-building possible. On the other hand, starting with the appearance of the first Islamic journals, publishers and readers formed part of a global community. Journals printed in Paris were distributed in Syria and journals published in Cairo were eagerly read in Southeast Asia. Migration, censorship, exile, the structure of empires, and networks of religious learning all contributed to such developments. A particularly important factor was, and continues to be, language.

The rise of nation states in the 20th century was in many cases intimately connected to the propagation of national languages in media and educational institutions. As a result, a new genre of Qur'an translation that was modelled along the lines of Bible translation flourished. Initially debated and opposed by traditional scholars and some intellectuals as a ploy to diminish the importance of the Arabic Qur'an and the tradition of Islamic scholarship, Qur'an translations were nevertheless much in demand at least from the early 20th century onward. They were indispensable for the increasing number of literate Muslims

who had been trained in modern schools and had no knowledge of Arabic, yet wanted to engage in discourses on the Qur'an. They were also a tool used by governments to further the development of national languages, as was the case in Turkey and Indonesia; and of course, they were a prerequisite of missionary activities among non-Muslims.

This has not led to a complete nationalization of exegetical thought, however, because exchange and interaction is made possible by global languages that are used and understood across national borders. For Muslims, this is first and fore-

most Arabic, which is a language that Muslim religious scholars across the world read and understand and

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holds singular religious prestige. As a result, qur'anic commentaries that have been written in Arabic have much higher chances of being translated into Turkish, Urdu, or Indonesian than vice versa.

The situation is complicated by the rising prestige and importance of global imperial languages such as French, Russian, and especially English which today serves as a *lingua franca* far beyond those territories that used to be part of the British Empire. Many Muslims write and teach in English in Western universities, and the works of important exegetes

such as Fazlur Rahman (1929–1982) and Amina Wadud (b. 1952) are translated from English into Arabic – an honour that is practically never bestowed to their Indonesian or Turkish counterparts. English might not hold any particular religious prestige, from a dogmatic point of view, but it certainly has become a major language of Islam. As such, it is also a site of debate about the Qur'an and of clashes over its correct interpretation.

Muslim Diversity

Islam is not a monolithic phenomenon and its internal variation naturally affects the interpretation of the Qur'an – at least in some regards. It would be misleading to expect an exegete's denomination to always come through, no matter what they write about. Many exegetical problems, especially in those fields that are particularly embattled today, are not a site of major sectarian division. A person's attitude toward the permissibility of polygamy is not dependent on their adherence to Shi'ism or Sufism but on whether they have an egalitarian or hierarchical vision of the Qur'an's gender paradigms.

However, there are paradigmatic verses that touch upon dogmatic rifts. Here, it is hardly possible for an exegete to ignore their denominational commitments. This is the case, for example, with Q 3:55 that concerns the death and ascension of Jesus. The Ahmadiyya movement has an interpretation of these issues that is fundamentally different from that of other branches of Islam. While most Muslims believe that God saved Jesus from death by crucifi-

xion and raised him bodily to heaven, Ahmadiis contend that he fell unconscious on the cross, was assumed dead but continued to live and later emigrated to India. It is impossible for an Ahmadiyya member to comment on this verse without defending his movement's controversial position on the issue, and many non-Ahmadi exegetes engage with it as well. While the Ahmadiyya movement is relatively small and considered heretical by many mainstream Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, it nevertheless has a conspicuous presence in exegetical debates due to its early and intense efforts at translating the Qur'an and spreading its message.

Even when no such identity markers are at stake, differences of religious and denominational adherence matter because distinct Muslim communities have their own distinct authorities. The exegetical opinions and traditions that they build upon typically distinguish a mainstream Sunni from a Sufi or a Shi'i exegete even if their actual interpretations do not differ that much.

Moreover, mystical qur'anic exegesis has always had a particular, albeit not exclusive, penchant for allegorical interpretations that, rather than discussing the straightforward 'outer' (*zahir*) meaning of a verse, search for its inner (*batin*) meaning. They might understand qur'anic terms as allegorical references

to certain stages on the mystical path or to outstanding humans whom they consider ‘perfect beings.’ They might even attribute a hidden spiritual meaning to individual letters. This type of qur’anic exegesis has come under vehement attack from the Salafi camp, but it is still thriving among the adherents of popular Sufi teachers. The high visibility of Salafi trends has tended to obfuscate the continuing relevance of mystical approaches to Islam that are markedly popular among certain social groups, such as urban middle- and upper-class academics interested in a spiritual path that emphasizes divine love, rather than obligations and proscriptions. For most Sufi exegetes, a verse such as Q 5:51 and the questions it raises about social relationships to non-Muslims hold little interest since it addresses norms of social behaviour, rather than spiritual dimensions of belief. The verse is all the more relevant to today’s debates on pluralism, interreligious co-existence, and even jihad.

Hermeneutical Clashes

Q 5:51 is a verse that, precisely because of its contested nature, offers us a glimpse into the make-up of today’s exegetical field and the hermeneutical underpinnings of the competing trends:

‘Believers! Do not take the Jews and Christians as *awliya*’ (friends/ helpers/ allies/ leaders)!

How should a contemporary Muslim apply this verse? What is the meaning of *awliya*?

What kind of relationship does the verse frame as blameworthy? These are pressing questions and we find widely varying answers that fall into a somewhat typical pattern. Of course, the following typology is neither exhaustive nor are the categories as clear-cut in real life as this description suggests. There is considerable overlap. Nevertheless, it is analytically helpful to distinguish five broad trends, each of which has its own genealogy, set of methods, and authorities.

Exegetes who define themselves as ‘*ulamā*’, as scholars who have some attachment to the tradition of Islamic learning through their educational and institutional background, can draw on a broad and multivocal exegetical tradition that offers a variety of possible interpretations for Q 5:51. Philological analysis suggests interpretations that warn about any degree of closeness between Muslims and non-Muslims, but there are also traditions that situate the verse in a political context, especially the one about the second caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khattab (d. 644), who ordered the governor of Basra to dismiss his Christian scribe despite the man’s excellent skills, based on Q 5:51. The great advantage of traditional qur’anic exegesis is that it places the exegete under no obligation to make a choice between these options. From the point of view of many contemporary Muslims, that is more of a drawback than an advantage, though, because they are looking for guidance that the exegetical tradition does not deliver.

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Several other currently popular hermeneutical trends are better suited to satisfying their demand. Salafis will be likely to read the verse as a literal, timeless command to all believers and to understand the problematic term *awliya*’ as categorically as possible: any kind of association – be it in the form of friendship, political alliances, or any other type of avoidable social interaction – with non-believers should be a taboo. They typically see the verse as closely related to the Salafi-Wahhabi concept of *al-wala’ wa’l-bara’*, of unwavering allegiance to the community of true believers while severing all ties with anyone outside that community, which might even include non-Salafi Muslims.

Islamists might, in fact, promote a wide range of interpretations depending on their vision of an Islamic society and state. And that vision is precisely what these interpretations have in common: they strongly emphasize socio-political, collective organization, rather than personal choice and individual relationships. The verse itself addresses believers in the plural, but it is not clear whether it speaks to them as a collective or as a group of individuals. Islamists, much in contrast to pre-modern exegetes, are much more interested in the first option. Heavily influenced by the modern nation state, they are concerned with the organization of a Muslim polity. Consequently, the question of non-Muslim political leadership would be a typical Islamist issue.

Modernists lean towards interreligious tolerance and pluralism. They tend to promote an egalitarian perspective on the Qur’an’s messa-

ge and would therefore want to downplay the relevance of Q 5:51 for contemporary contexts. To that purpose, they may draw on a number of methods that have gained popularity in the 20th century. For example, they might discuss the semantics of qur’anic terms such as *awliya*’ and ask what they actually meant at the time of the Qur’an’s revelation. Potentially, the term referred to a type of social relationship that does not exist anymore today. They might also read the verse against the backdrop of the historical circumstances in which it was revealed. From this, it is possible to argue

that the verse only talks about specific Jews and Christians, rather than all adhe-

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rents of these religions, and that it is really an interdiction against fraternizing with hostile parties during a war, rather than a statement about interreligious co-existence. Modernists are also particularly prone to drawing thematic connections between different verses within the Qur’an. In this case, some point to the explicit permission for Muslim men to marry Christian or Jewish women, which surely should be classified as an intimate relationship, meaning that such relationships cannot be categorically forbidden. The Qur’an, according to many modernists, is a thoroughly tolerant text that only ever criticizes specific Jewish and Christian wrongdoers, especially in a context of war, but never calls for all-out hostility against these religions.

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A rather recent, post-modern trend is more cautious of such certitudes about what the Qur'an 'really means.' How do we know, post-modernists ask, that exegetes had it wrong for 1.400 years until we, suddenly, found the correct meaning of the Qur'an? If we claim that pre-modern exegetes were unconsciously shaped by the context of their patriarchal societies that were built on notions of Muslim supremacism, how do we know that it is not merely our own egalitarian, liberal convictions that make us read the Qur'an in a certain way? Based on these considerations, post-modernists often propose similar interpretations to those preferred by modernists but are more reluctant to claim any degree of absolute truth for their reading. Rather, they are highly conscious of how their personal social and biographical background, their experiences, and their conscience shape their understanding of the Qur'an. Hakan Turan, for example, proposes an interpretation of Q 5:51 that would allow any Muslim to take Jews, Christians, and even atheists as friends while clearly stating that this is the way he wants to read the verse because regardless of what the Qur'an says, he has always had and will continue to have non-Muslim friends.

Whatever approach towards Q 5:51 a Muslim individual might embrace, it is dependent on a particular social and political context. Whether that individual is part of a Muslim majority or a Muslim minority, what kind of contacts they have with non-Muslims, whether they are living in religious or secular states, what branch of Islam they belong to,

what personal experiences they have with the issues that the verse touches upon, what degree of authority they accord to religious traditions, and many further issues shape their reading of the Qur'an. Moreover, their options are informed by their access to information and their ability to express their opinions, which in some cases is seriously restricted by reasons ranging from poverty and marginalization to censorship. Muslim Qur'anic interpretation is a contest of ideas that takes place in concrete social spaces. Both have to be understood in order to make sense of how Muslims read and debate the Qur'an today.

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