

Marginalia and Peripheries: A Tunisian Historian and the History of Qurʾanic Exegesis*

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Abstract

This article is an examination of the premises of the academic study of *tafsīr*, the genre of Qurʾān commentary, as it has been so far been practiced. It takes as its starting point a work written by the late Tunisian Mufti Ibn ʿAshūr. The work is a short history of the genre of *tafsīr* and its significance. The main argument of this work is that al-Bayḍāwī and the glosses written on his Qurʾān commentary represent the apogee of the genre. The article attempts to understand this narrative in relation to Islamic religious history. It concludes that as long as the gloss is not made part of the academic study of the history of *tafsīr* we will always be presenting a romanticized narrative of the past that fails to reflect its scholastic core.

Keywords

Ibn ʿAshūr, al-Bayḍāwī, Gloss, *Tafsīr*, *Hāshiyā*, Tunisia

To Muḥammad ʿAlī: my book guide in Cairo

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Introduction

We not only remember the past in various ways, but we also rank the different systems of remembrance hierarchically and, we believe, with good reason. On the one hand there are remembrances that we deem one sided and half-formed, incapable of comprehending the very thing they claim to recollect. On the other hand there are academic remembrances, and in our day we consider these to be more profound; these have footnotes, archives behind them. They reclaim history for us. Whereas Aristotle considered poetry to be finer and more philosophical than history, we heirs of modernity believe the opposite: the academic discipline of history is a more trustworthy act of remembrance for us than poetry — post-modernism notwithstanding. Historians stand suspicious of poets when they act as historians, and the practitioners of any genre but history are in our eyes the equivalent of poets now.

This article is about memory and history in the field of Quranic exegesis. It is a commentary, in the manner of a medieval gloss, on one particular history of the genre of Quranic exegesis *al-Tafsīr wa-rijāluh* (“The Genre of *Tafsīr* and its Men”) of Ibn ‘Āshūr — more on this history later. It is also an attempt to question the relationship between two competing fields of remembrance, the academic/historical, mainly carried out in universities in Europe and North America, and the local, carried out in the still-living tradition of the practitioners themselves — the exegetes and the editors of this literature, and the professors of Islamic studies in universities in the Islamic world. This article examines the presumptive but seldom mentioned hierarchy in this relationship, which carries with it unquestioned assumptions that determine the manner in which we function as historians. It questions the putative independence of the superior (the academic) from the inferior (the local or guild) narrative, which on closer inspection is autonomous in name only, one that betrays the anxiety of its full and actual dependency. This article also attempts to show the complexity of the local historical tradition and the competing and radically contradictory currents that were held together by the practitioners of the guild of Quranic exegesis.

Another aim of this article is to resituate the gloss, *al-hāshiyā*, as integral part of the history of *tafsīr*. In so doing, I am attempting to redeem the history of Quranic exegesis from its chief blind spot: its utter disre-

gard for the role of the glosses in the genre of *tafsīr* and its inability to position the gloss as central in any historical retelling of the development of the *tafsīr* genre. This blind spot is a shared characteristic of both the academic and the guild traditions of historical studies of *tafsīr*. The one instance of an exception is the book that is the subject of this article.¹ The central Muslim land was itself very much involved in a project of modernization that saw in the gloss a degenerate form of scholarship and vigorously pretended (and still pretends) that such works were not only marginal to the history of Quranic exegesis but also intrinsically insignificant on their own.

The story of my own encounter with the booklet, *al-Tafsīr wa-rijālūh*, a small-sized book of 200 pages, by the Tunisian Grand Mufti al-Fāḍil Ibn ‘Āshūr (d. 1970), illustrates the grip of the presuppositions of our academic training upon our imaginations: a suspicion of local narratives of this history or at best, a benign disregard for what they proffer. Like most of my colleagues, I decided at a certain point in my career to collect a library of primary sources in my field of specialty, in my case *tafsīr* and Quranic studies literature. In Cairo in the year 2003 and after much despair at trying to find what I was looking for, I met Muhammad Ali, a book dealer from the Azbakiyya book market. He proved to be a most resourceful helper in my quest to collect editions of Qur’ān commentaries; it took almost four months of weekly visits to inspect what Muḥammad ‘Alī had collected for me. He was bringing me titles I had not asked for and which I neither knew existed nor thought I needed. They were all, it turned out, essential titles, and I came eventually to fully trust his judgment. I made it clear that I did not care to collect modern commentaries (apart from the most famous, *al-Manār* and *Fi Zilāl al-Qur’ān*), a glaring mistake that I now regret. One day he showed me *al-Tafsīr wa-rijālūh*, a small bound booklet and insisted that I add it to my list of purchases. I realized that this was a modern study on the history of *tafsīr* — by a mufti no less, let alone an academic at a local university. With the notable exception of one or two works, I had by then given up on such histories, written by professors of Islamic

¹) One of the few instances of a modern scholar using a *Tafsīr* gloss is Stowasser 1984; she cites al-Khafājī’s gloss on al-Bayḍāwī’s commentary. An example of studying the gloss in another discipline is Wheeler 2003.

studies at Arab Universities, having misjudged the significance of these works. What a mufti has to say on the topic was to me more suspect and less worthy of my attention than what a trained professor at a local university had to say. Ibn ‘Āshūr was both, yet what he had to say as a mufti would vitiate his judgment as a professor. I was nevertheless curious about Muḥammad ‘Alī’s passion and insistence that I read the book, and that I would not regret buying it. The book was inexpensive so I did not object, and thought I was doing Muhammad Ali a favor by agreeing to this purchase. This article is attempts to atone for my misjudgment.

A few years later in 2005 when I got around to reading this booklet of Ibn ‘Āshūr it proved both a revelation and a slap in the face. It had taken me 15 years of studying the genre of *tafsīr* to be able to see the significance of Ibn ‘Āshūr’s slim booklet. I was by then keenly aware of the significance of the glosses in the history of the genre, but I had not seen any treatment of this aspect in any history of *tafsīr* before (Saleh 2004:226). Most local historical studies betray an essential Enlightenment prejudice that we share: a claustrophobic distaste for glosses, a horror of their crowding of the page of the ur-Text. These studies, like their counterparts in Europe and North America, never mention the glosses. Glosses, one of the main features of medieval scholarship, are not allowed to be visible at the very moment we are claiming to write a history of this process.

But Ibn ‘Āshūr’s study was more than a work that paid attention to a neglected aspect of the history of the genre. It is a grand narrative of the history of the genre, an overview from a master who has rummaged through the centuries to give us a crisp outline of the main engagements of *tafsīr*. Ibn ‘Āshūr’s method and his statements left no doubt about his approach to writing the history of this genre: a history of *tafsīr* is first and foremost an intellectual history. *Tafsīr* in his conception is central, not peripheral, in the history of Islamic religious tradition and he sees it as central to the curricular education of the seminary system in the whole of the Islamic world.

It is also clear that the mastery of our author has its roots in the education made available to him by his father. Our Ibn ‘Āshūr (al-Fāḍil) is the son of another Ibn ‘Āshūr (the father, known as al-Ṭāhir, d. 1973) a famous scholar in his own right, if not more so — who wrote a magisterial

Qurʾān commentary, *al-Taḥrīr waʾl-tanwīr*. Significantly, our author does not mention the commentary of his father.² *Al-Taḥrīr waʾl-tanwīr* is another neglected work from Tunisia that only now is starting to receive its due share of attention. A cursory survey of the sources of the father's work leaves no doubt that his influence on his student and son was sweeping (Ibn ʿĀshūr, al-Ṭāhir 1964: v. 1: 1–116). In this sense this is a history that is based on the very practice of exegesis as done in the Tunisian seminary system.

The history of the publication of the son's *al-Taḥrīr wa-rijālūh*, which I will be presenting shortly, highlights another aspect that I will be referring to throughout this article: the marginal position of Tunisia and its scholars in their attempt to imprint their vision on the central lands of the East. In coming from the periphery, however, the book is not in any sense humble; it does not suffer from its peripheral position; on the contrary, it is a magisterial narrative conveyed through a voice that is fully aware and intentionally distinct from the narratives of Azharite Cairo. The book was first published in 1966 in Tunisia. One might say it might as well not have appeared since this imprint left no impact whatsoever. The title page is adorned with the flags of all the Muslim lands, a poignant indication of the preeminent position that the Tunisian scholars perceive themselves to be holding within the Islamic world. The book however had to be reissued in Egypt, the center of Islamic scholarship, four years later for it to be noticed. It was published shortly after Ibn ʿĀshūr had died in late 1970 by no less an organ than the research center of al-Azhar University. There is no mention of the Tunisian edition in the Cairo edition, an obvious snub from the center to the periphery, since Egyptian publication laws would have necessitated clearing the rights with the Tunisian publishers. The center was only willing to allow the periphery its voice as long as it seemed to issue from itself.

² The work of the father started to appear in 1964; a first attempt to publish the work in Cairo was discontinued; only two volumes came out in Cairo (v. 1, 1964; v. 2, 1965); the third and the rest were published by the National Official Press in Tunisia (v. 3, 1969 and onwards). Not only Cairo did not care enough, but when one surveys studies of modern currents in Qurʾān exegesis one notices that this, one of the most important works of the reform movement of the 20th Century in the Islamic world, has gone totally unnoticed.

Tunisia, the periphery however, had a clearer vision in this instance, since it had escaped the radical effects of the transformations that have swept the Muslim lands in the 19th and 20th Centuries. Tunisia was changing, yet able to remember a past not disconnected from its scholastic roots. The book is as learned as it fair. It is less disparaging of the past, more attuned to the cultural concerns that were behind scholarship of the bygone centuries. It exhibits no frenzied desire to remember the past purged of its perceived failures. Ibn ‘Āshūr was not shackled by the puritan restraints that the treatise of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1327) imposed on the understanding of Quranic hermeneutic. This treatise had by then managed to become the conceptual tool by which the standard histories written by the Azharite center were envisioned (Saleh 2009). Ibn Taymiyya and his paradigm are not mentioned by Ibn ‘Āshūr, his hermeneutical program utterly disregarded — indeed Ibn Taymiyya is seen as a revolutionary in the history of Islam, not its norm (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:32).³ He is reduced to what Ibn ‘Āshūr sees as his proper size in the medieval narrative. Ibn ‘Āshūr’s history is about the historical development of a genre, while the histories in the center are about valorizing individual exegetes as heroic giants in a degenerative past.

The scope of the work and its introduction

Al-Tafsīr wa-rijāluh is a general history of *tafsīr*, starting from the moment of the revelation of the Qur’ān to the transformation brought about by the Manār school of Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935). Since the book was written in 1965, the decision to stop at this school reflects the cautious nature of Ibn ‘Āshūr’s scholarship — given Riḍā’s death some 30 years earlier (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:37). Yet to culminate his history with this school reflected Ibn ‘Āshūr’s belief that the future of the genre belongs to this school. The work, however, is not a comprehensive history of *tafsīr*, but a history that aims primarily to assess the development of the genre and

³ Although Ibn ‘Āshūr’s tone when assessing Ibn Taymiyya is positive, Ibn ‘Āshūr does consider him to be one of those who attempted to escape the norm and innovate. In any case, Ibn ‘Āshūr has no place in his work for Ibn Taymiyya’s paradigm of Quranic hermeneutics.

its religious and cultural relevance. It is also a partisan history conceived after a certain ideological slant, and thus has its limitations as to how it understands the history of *tafsīr*.

Ibn ‘Āshūr takes certain axiomatic positions towards the language of the Qur’ān. The first is that the Qur’ān is fully decipherable. The second is that the act of interpretation is completely independent of any divine assistance. See for example his assertion that the Qur’ān was fully comprehensible to its received audience (*fa-mā kāna minhum man tā’adhdhara ‘alayhi famuh*) (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:8). This is a rationalist approach that reflects his full capitulation to the tools of philology. He also believes that the genre was founded on these two presuppositions. He thus claims that all of the Qur’ān has a clear apparent meaning which can be derived from the conventions of Arabic syntax (*bal inna kull mā fīhi yadull ‘alā mā’ānin zāhira, dalālatuhu ‘alayhā bi-ḥasab al-waḍ’ al-lughawī al-‘arabī*) (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:9). More importantly, he asserts that there is no individual who has the privilege of disclosing any particular hidden meaning in the text (*wa-lam yarid fīhi nuṣūṣ lahā mā’ānin lā tuḥam illā bi-al-tawqīf ‘alayhā min ṭaraf shakḥ mu’ayyan*, Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:9); rather it is a public text, open to all. These positions towards the nature of the Qur’ān would have been mainstream had they not affected the whole conception of history that Ibn ‘Āshūr saw fit to write. This is a Sunni Ash‘arite history throughout. There is no place here for Sufi, Shi‘ite or non-mainstream Sunni works. The work is a partisan work, from the guild of Sunni exegetes, published by the Organ of the Sunni scholars, for a “reformed” Muslim world. Ibn ‘Āshūr rejects any other hermeneutical position, whether Shi‘ite or mystical, since it renders the Qur’ān, and by extension Islam, a mystery (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:9–10). That one of the most important of Sufi Qur’ān commentaries was written by one of his ancestors — the ‘Āshūrs are a venerable North African scholarly family that has been active for almost 500 years — was not enough to sway him (Nafi 2005).

Ibn ‘Āshūr is forced by this belief in the communicability of the meaning of the Qur’ān, to admit to the obvious: that the Qur’ān in a Sunni paradigm is not in need of exegesis (*fa-laysa huwa ‘alā dhālika bi-muḥtāj ilā al-tafsīr iḥtiyājan aṣliyyan*, Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:10). *Tafsīr* as a practice was, according to him, the result of historical contingencies and the particularities of the nature of the revelation of the Qur’ān. The

first reason for the rise of the *tafsīr* was the fact that the Qurʾān was revealed in a twenty-year span, and was not codified to reflect the chronological sequence of its reception. Hence knowledge of why and in what order the Qurʾān was revealed was dependent on historical reports that fall under the same category as historical knowledge (Ibn ʿĀshūr 1970:10–11). The second reason that necessitated a need for *tafsīr* was the complexity of some of the legal language of the Qurʾān (*mubham al-Qurʾān*). These two aspects generated exegetical material which early Muslims transmitted, thus creating according to Ibn ʿĀshūr the core of what Muslims call *al-tafsīr biʾl-māʾthūr*, or inherited exegetical material (Ibn ʿĀshūr 1970:13, 15–16). The material of the first order, the why and when a verse was revealed, or *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) were subject to the norms of *ḥadīth* criticism; whereas the legal interpretive material was to be treated in the manner in which one settles disputes between different legal schools. These were two standard approaches to material that has its origins in *naql* (transmission) on the one hand and in legal reasoning (*ijtihād*) on the other. Inherited material was, as such, bound to a scholastic system of assessment. This material was not above the judgment of scholars. Inherited exegetical material is thus understood as part of the historical interaction with the Qurʾān; it is not accorded here a privileged position hermeneutically, but is only a part of the apparatus needed to understand the text historically.

By Ibn ʿĀshūr’s account, two new layers of exegetical material were soon added to this inherited material, the linguistic analysis, the result of the rise of philology, and the biblical lore, material that sheds light on the many biblical topics in the Qurʾān, which was transmitted to Muslims through Jewish and Christian converts (Ibn ʿĀshūr 1970:16–17). According to Ibn ʿĀshūr, these two new elements of exegetical material, although some of it was inherited from Ibn ʿAbbās, the father of all inherited material, are not strictly speaking part of the inherited material, *al-tafsīr biʾl-māʾthūr* (Ibn ʿĀshūr 1970:17: *lā yaṣīḥḥ iʿtibāruhumā min al-tafsīr biʾl-māʾthūr*). What Ibn ʿĀshūr means by this fine division is that linguistic and biblical materials are fully dependent on human judgment and can thus be a source of dispute; they are not unimpeachable material and one can, when appropriate, simply discard them. Not so with the truly inherited material which has to undergo

the test of *‘ilm al-ḥadīth* (science of *ḥadīth* transmission) and the norms of assessing legal opinions before one rejects them.

This brief exposé of what Ibn ‘Āshūr has to say about *al-tafsīr bi’l-mā’thūr* or inherited exegetical material is not carried out here to show that he has solved the problem of the development of early Qur’ān commentary, rather to show how aware he is of the normative value given to this layer in the discourse of modern Islamic histories of *tafsīr*. His treatment is fully historical, avoiding any privileging of the material on any basis apart from the coincidental: knowledge about how the Qur’ān was revealed is tied to the early community that witnessed and reported about it; the worth of this material is not based on the doctrine of the nobility of the Companions, or on the belief that the early community was constituted of privileged Muslims. Indeed, since much of the material transmitted from Ibn ‘Abbās has been tampered with, Ibn ‘Āshūr refuses to grant it any privilege and only considers whatever of it made its way to the *Ṣaḥīḥ* books (Sunni canonical *ḥadīth* collections) which is the only material he accepts from the inherited material (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:20). As inherited material is transmitted material it can only be judged according to *ḥadīth* criteria. The brilliant twist in Ibn ‘Āshūr’s argument is his assertion that this assessment has already been carried out in Sunnism. This is a very salafi method of rejecting *salafi* material. Only the accepted hadiths of the Sunnis that have been vouched for by *ḥadīth* critics are worth keeping; yet since most of the material that stems from Ibn ‘Abbās has not passed this test, it is not reliable (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:20). *Al-tafsīr bi’l-mā’thūr* is not the core of *tafsīr*.

If historicism is the mode of modernity and one has to submit to its dictate, then Sunnism, in the person of Ibn ‘Āshūr, was here admitting to the truth of this criteria and adjusting Sunnism’s position vis-à-vis its past while preserving a very Sunni outlook. This is an old Sunni practice of self-transformation that accords with the prevailing scholarly norms. The significance of Ibn ‘Āshūr’s position has to be viewed in relation to the other contemporary prevailing Sunni paradigm in *tafsīr*, the paradigm of Ibn Taymiyya — which saw in the inherited material the only valid approach to the Qur’ān, the only interpretation allowable of the Qur’ān. This puritanical position was adopted with slight modification by most of the historians of *tafsīr* in the Muslim center. Ibn ‘Āshūr is thus showing a remarkable resistance to the influence of

the Azharite establishment. Ibn ‘Āshūr’s downsizing of the significance of the inherited material makes clear the historical connection that *tafsīr* has always had with the scholastic tradition of Islam. *Tafsīr* was always tangentially connected to the inherited material, which as a hermeneutical method was always a peripheral current in the medieval tradition. *Tafsīr*’s roots and home was the scholastic philological paradigm, which was the backbone of the genre of *tafsīr*. Ibn ‘Āshūr refused the radical break with the past that was enacted by Ibn Taymiyya in the guise of a return to the past.

Yaḥyā ibn Sallām or: the authors of the periphery

The first author with whom Ibn ‘Āshūr chooses to start his history is a Tunisian author, Yaḥyā ibn Sallām (d. 815), who until recently has neither been published nor given any place in the general history of *tafsīr* (Gilliot 1997). Ibn ‘Āshūr’s gesture towards Ibn Sallām is made with a clear nationalist pride: North Africa for Ibn ‘Āshūr was a center of early Islamic scholarship. Before turning his attention to al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), Ibn ‘Āshūr has to set the historical record straight. Ibn ‘Āshūr criticizes both Muslim authors as well as Orientalist (Ibn ‘Āshūr’s term) historians for neglecting to pay attention to this Tunisian author. These historians usually start their histories with a discussion of Ibn ‘Abbās, then commence with al-Ṭabarī. The “missing link” (*silsilat al-taṭawwur*) in the development of *tafsīr*, according to Ibn ‘Āshūr (a rather daring reference on his part to Darwin’s theory of evolution) is to be found in African Tunisia (*ḥalaqat Afrīqyā al-Tūnisīyya*) (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:27). Ibn ‘Āshūr does have a point. To jump from Ibn ‘Abbās to al-Ṭabarī, as Goldziher did — and there is not doubt that Ibn ‘Āshūr alludes here to Goldziher’s *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* which was translated into Arabic in the early 1950s and had become a standard history in the Islamic world — is to miss a major period in the history of *tafsīr* that historians were unwilling to investigate.⁴

Ibn ‘Āshūr makes another claim to justify his choice of Ibn Sallām to start his history. The commentary of Ibn Sallām is the earliest Qur’ān commentary to survive — once more, I am less interested here with the

⁴ Ibn ‘Āshūr was thus an early harbinger of Wansbrough’s groundbreaking work.

veracity of this claim but rather with the mode of Ibn ‘Āshūr’s approach. The historical method is leading Ibn ‘Āshūr along. One follows the archival record. It is the bad luck of Ibn Sallām that the manuscripts of his work are preserved in Tunisia, a peripheral, inaccessible region, although Ibn ‘Āshūr is quick to remind the reader that the Manuscript organization of the Arab League has already microfilmed the copies and they are available in Cairo. But then they are very hard-to-read copies, and it is their difficult nature, muses Ibn ‘Āshūr, that was perhaps the reason why they have been so far neglected (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:29). Here is a critique of the competency of the Muslim scholarly community; they are losing one of their most prized faculties: their ability to read the manuscripts.

Text editions and history proper

What has survived of Yaḥyā ibn Sallām’s Qur’ān commentary is now edited. The Islamic world has been editing many of the early Qur’ān commentaries since Ibn ‘Āshūr’s work. Soon after the publication of Ibn ‘Āshūr’s history, the work of Muqātil (d. 767; the earliest preserved Qur’ān commentary) was published in Cairo, only to languish in storage facilities because of the objections of al-Azhar. This was the only exception to a rather open environment of scholarly attention to early texts. The editing of texts in the Islamic world has so far been viewed by academic historians in the west as a sort of a random event occurring in the Islamic world whose mysteriousness does not prevent western scholars from appropriating for their purposes whatever texts emerge. Somehow texts are edited; research university libraries in Europe and North America acquire these texts, making them available for historians. The act of editing these texts is not accorded any role in the writing of the histories. At what moment does an editor, especially editors in the Arab world, become a member of those contributing to the process of historical assessment?⁵ In the case of *tafsīr*, these editors are invisible. The

⁵ Cf. the remarks in El Shamsy 2008 — “Lowry takes little account of six decades of Arabic-language scholarship on the *Risāla*. . . . Lowry is, of course, free to disagree with Shākir, whose view of the classical Muslim narrative is decidedly sympathetic, but there can be few perspectives on early Islamic thought as learned as that of Shākir,

field pretends to get its primary sources through a mysterious process, a process that is both reliable enough to permit scholars to consume its products and insignificant enough that those responsible for it are not given due credit. The result of this disjointed relationship is that most of the histories of *tafsīr* that we have so far (with the notable exception of the history of the pre-Ṭabarī period found in Wansbrough 1977) are squarely based on published texts issuing from the Islamic world, and this is true even of the study of Goldziher; yet the notion persists that somehow these academic histories are not related to the very process of scholarly development in the Islamic world that is making them possible. Editions stemming from the Arab world are never reviewed in any journals in Europe or North America (with the exception of the listings in *Mélanges Institut Dominicain D'Études Orientales du Caire*, which was started by an Arab scholar, and constitutes a rare exception).

I will here give an example of this situation. Recently the Qurʾān commentary of Abū Maṣūʿ al-Māturīdī (d. 944), the founder of the Maturidite Sunni school of theology, has been published in ten volumes (Māturīdī 2005). This is not the first attempt at publishing the work; unsuccessful attempts were made in the 1970s. The drive to edit the text was born of the fact that modern Muslims have been keenly aware of the significance of this commentary and its role in Hanafite religious education. Although the work has been previously discussed in an article by Manfred Götz and was the subject of a doctoral dissertation published in English by Muhammad Rahman, academic historians continue to discuss the history of *tafsīr* as if this work did not exist (see Götz 1965; Rahman 1981; Rudolph 1997).⁶ One cursory glance at this work is sufficient to make us realize that when fully investigated it will radically change the way we perceive the development of early Qurʾān commentaries (Rudolph 1997:207). Al-Māturīdī — “the famous unknown” as Ulrich Rudolph describes him — was a

whose editions of al-Shāfiʿī's *Risāla* and *Jimāʿ al-ʿilm*, al-Tirmidhī's *Sunan*, Ahmad b. Hanbal's *Musnad*, Yaha b. Adam's *Kitāb al-Kharāj*, and Ibn al-Sikkīt's *Iṣlāḥ al-mantiq* (to name only those from the third/ninth century) have made the serious study of early Islamic law possible. Lowry relies exclusively on Shākir's edition....”

⁶ Rudolph 1997:201–8, though cognizant of the significance of the commentary, does not offer an analysis, arguing that such an analysis should be done in the frame of the history of the Quran commentary tradition.

contemporary of al-Ṭabarī and they both represented different hermeneutical traditions. In this regard he is as significant a witness to the history of early *tafsīr* as al-Ṭabarī. Thus even the early period, the most studied part of *tafsīr* history, is in need of reevaluation — because of this important blind spot in the field, and a refusal to admit to the fact that we are writing histories of *tafsīr* that are mostly based on what Muslims are making available to us for reasons rooted in their own evolving relation to Islamic traditions in response to the impulses of modernity. It is the act of publishing that forces a work into the picture — even if publication *per se* is not a sufficient cause for a given work to be included in the outline of histories.

But even the standard histories written by Muslim historians (it is easy to dismiss editors who are not treated as conscious agents), though sometimes mentioned, are hardly given the role of effecting a transformation in the field such as I have suggested is at least potentially the case with Ibn ʿĀshūr.⁷ Their contributions are not something one builds upon. In the case of Ibrāhīm Rufayda, a contemporary North African historian, we have a serious scholarly study — based mostly on a careful inspection of manuscript sources — that should be used as a foundation in any history of the genre. I am thus assessing Ibn ʿĀshūr not only in relationship to Western historical writings on *tafsīr*, but more so in his relationship with the local Islamic historical studies. There is thus a very active historical tradition in the Middle East and its scope is such that it is impossible to subsume under one rubric. My contention here is that the local historical tradition is itself constituted of many currents, and worthy of serious consideration. It is contentious, scholarly, partisan, and deeply consumed by the modernizing process that has been transforming the Middle East.

⁷ The standard survey of *Tafsīr* written in Arabic is Dhahabī 1961. This is the most widely mentioned work in Western histories of *Tafsīr*. A far more important work that is hardly mentioned is the work of Rufayda 1990. This is an essential work on the history of “grammatical” works in *Tafsīr*, and is based on a survey of a large number of works. It is also the first work to offer a chronological periodization of the history of *Tafsīr*. This was originally a Ph.D. dissertation written at an Egyptian university by a Libyan. The work was published in Benghazi and not in Cairo. Even such a mundane matter as a history of a genre was tied to nationalist issues. Cairo was not interested in publishing a work of a Libyan scholar, but Libya was.

Ibn ‘Āshūr and al-Ṭabarī

Ibn ‘Āshūr devotes to al-Ṭabarī the same number of pages he gave to Ibn Sallām. This in itself is a clear indication that al-Ṭabarī is not to be accorded a privileged position in this history. Indeed, though al-Ṭabarī is considered one of the most important exegetes, the history of the genre as presented by Ibn ‘Āshūr does not culminate in him. The focal point of this history, the apex, is al-Bayḍāwī (d. ca. 1292), a surprising name, if one is to judge the significance of the works of the genre independently from the scholastic tradition that nurtured it. Al-Bayḍāwī is significant because he was at the center of the seminary education; his Qur’ān commentary was the text used to teach *tafsīr* and the text most glossed in the genre.

Ibn ‘Āshūr has some insightful remarks about al-Ṭabarī’s significance. The first is that al-Ṭabarī represented a new style in the genre, a style that gave the genre a stability of form across the ages. Here the issue is not whether an ossification set in after al-Ṭabarī but rather the question of what are the defining parameters of a genre. Continuity in style, by Ibn ‘Āshūr’s account, is not necessarily the sign of a stagnant moribund tradition so much as a sign of its maturation through its acquisition of characteristics that give it stability of form without preventing radical innovations (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:32–3). This stability exhibited by *tafsīr* is, according to Ibn ‘Āshūr, in marked distinction to the change in form and style in other disciplines, such as law, grammar, and the like. To read al-Mubarrad (an early grammarian who died in 898) is not the same as reading a late grammarian such as Ibn Mālik (d. 1274) (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:33). Ibn ‘Āshūr is perhaps overstating the point, since *tafsīr* does exhibit extreme variations — to claim that al-Rāzī (d. 1209) is in any way similar to al-Ṭabarī would be impossible and Ibn ‘Āshūr is all too keenly aware of this side of *tafsīr*. Yet even if his point is ultimately unsuccessful, this fleeting remark is of paramount significance. Ibn ‘Āshūr is comparing the development of *tafsīr* to other disciplines in the Islamic religious tradition — how its development was different, how it was similar. The history of this genre is not a disembodied history; its development was dialectically tied to the intellectual developments in its environment.

Ibn ‘Āshūr offers a far more daring assessment of al-Ṭabarī’s Qur’ān commentary. It is not a *tafsīr bi’l-mā’thūr* (inherited-material approach)

commentary. Here we have a complete reversal of how Muslim historians assessed this commentary. Al-Ṭabarī's commentary according to Ibn 'Āshūr is actually a departure from that method, placing severe limitations on its implications for the hermeneutical process and thus allowing the exegete an almost complete freedom to decide the meaning on the basis of other criteria, linguistic and legal. Ibn 'Āshūr faults historians who think al-Ṭabarī was a representative of such a school, of the same rank as al-Wāqidi (d. 823) and al-Tha'labī (d. 1035; spelled by Ibn 'Āshūr as al-Tha'alībī). He is particularly surprised that the famous historian Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1378) espouses such a view. The reason for such a misjudgment according to Ibn 'Āshūr could be the fact that al-Ṭabarī's Qur'ān commentary was unavailable, or inaccessible. For centuries this commentary was considered lost — even the most avid of medieval bibliographers, Ḥajjī Khalīfa (d. 1657), the author of *Kashf al-ẓunūn*, was unable to find a copy to inspect (Ibn 'Āshūr 1970:37). Ibn 'Āshūr's is a masterful assessment of al-Ṭabarī, both of the nature of his commentary and the history of its reception. They make clear that, for Ibn 'Āshūr, the history of reception of a work is part of the history of its significance.

The reception-history of al-Ṭabarī's commentary is a point I have not seen discussed before in any history of the genre. When I was writing my book on al-Tha'labī and was forced by the evidence to question the significance of al-Ṭabarī's work I searched the secondary literature in vain for clues on the matter. I concluded that the history of its reception was far more complicated than meets the eye (Saleh 2004:5, 207–8). Indeed most reviewers of my work took issue with my demoting al-Ṭabarī. Yet let me restate what should have been all too obvious: al-Ṭabarī's Qur'ān commentary was rediscovered by the Muslim reformers in the early parts of the 20th century after a frenzied search for a complete copy, and was subsequently placed at the center of a reconceived history of the genre. His work was hailed a classic in a cultural environment where one needed “classics” in every field. The new significance accorded to this Qur'ān commentary was soon considered to be a historical constant. When western historians place al-Ṭabarī in the center of the history of the genre, they are actually following the steps of the editors of the work in Cairo. Cairo rediscovered the work and the

whole of the Islamic world celebrated this recovery. The conviction that the history of the genre as conceived in the academies of Europe and North America was somehow independent of the publication in the Muslim world of works that lie at the basis of these histories, meant that western scholars were not cognizant of how recently the canonical status of al-Ṭabarī had been established in the Muslim world. The autonomy of the academic historical tradition from the local tradition is thus a mirage. It depends on the local tradition and its conceptual vision of *tafsīr*'s history as expressed through what it decides to edit; when a Qur'ān commentary is deemed significant it is edited and made available to the public. Ibn 'Āshūr is thus one of the few historians who are keenly aware of the history of the publication of Qur'ān commentaries and the revolution this printing has effected in the field; in the case of al-Ṭabarī he did not project the significance modern Muslims accord this commentary onto the past (Ibn 'Āshūr 1970:37).

A comparison with another academic discipline, the discipline of history (Islamic history, that is) will highlight the situation I am describing. Al-Ṭabarī, as we all know, wrote the other monumental work in Islam, a history of early Islam. When European scholars realized the significance of this work, they produced a critical edition of it. No one would ever consider the editors of this monumental work to be unaware of the significance of what they were doing, let alone fail to count them as participants in the guild of historians (Rosenthal 1989). The reverence accorded to the editors of al-Ṭabarī's history and the edition they produced has no equivalent in the history of *tafsīr* studies, although there are now at least four major editions of al-Ṭabarī's commentary. Likewise, modern Arab historians were also impossible to ignore since national histories, even when blatantly nationalist, are not without insights, and thus are accorded a measure of significance (Humphrey 1991). In any case, nationalism as an ideology is a recognized paradigm; it is the basis of the nation state and nationalist historians are an integral part of the guild. In Islamic studies, however, we are running against an ingrained distrust against religious establishments and paradigms, and most of the local historians of Quranic exegesis are not part of a nationalist program but of a religiously motivated enterprise.

Cultural history as *tafsīr* history

Chapter five of Ibn ‘Āshūr’s work is a sweeping overview of the cultural wars in the early four centuries of Islam (the title of the chapter is “From Bukhārī to the Mu‘tazila”). Ibn ‘Āshūr makes two fundamental points here (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:38–45). The first is that the Sunni partisans of the inherited-material-approach in exegesis (*al-tafsīr bi’l-ma‘thūr*) lost the battle against the philological approach of the Sunni camp; the most that the hardcore defenders of the inherited material could do was to enshrine the supposedly authentic corpus of such material in the newly constituted *Ṣiḥāḥ* compendiums. Al-Bukhārī (d. 870) would thus devote a chapter in his work to exegetical *ḥadīth*. This was a major retreat that allowed the Sunni philological camp a remarkable freedom when dealing with the meaning of the Qur‘ān. The genre of *tafsīr* was left free of the restraints of the people of *ḥadīth*. In pointing this out, Ibn ‘Āshūr is the first historian to draw a direct link between the cultural wars of early Islam, the hermeneutical battles and al-Bukhārī’s exegetical material.

The second point made by Ibn ‘Āshūr was that the Mu‘tazilites were a formidable challenge to Sunnism and their hermeneutical program could only be overwhelmed by the unthinkable: a complete surrender to its fundamental premises. Simply put, Sunnism had to take over Mu‘tazilite hermeneutics in order to survive. Once more these two insights are nothing if not daring in their complexity and their historical acumen. Here is an Ash‘arite Sunni scholar admitting to very unsettling historical realities: Mu‘tazilite hermeneutics was superior to anything the Sunni camp came up with, and *ahl al-ḥadīth* did not win every battle inside the Sunni camp, and Ibn ‘Āshūr seems to be relieved that they did not.

Not only do I agree with this analysis, but I also think that Ibn ‘Āshūr is studying *tafsīr* as it should be studied: as part of the general intellectual environment in which *tafsīr* was being produced. *Tafsīr* was part of an intellectual movement that was caught in fierce cultural wars. It is as a response to the superior challenge of Mu‘tazilism that Sunnism was transformed and part of that transformation was a reconsideration of *tafsīr*. Ibn ‘Āshūr heaps praise on the Mu‘tazilite exegetical tradition, avoiding the customary vociferous Sunni invectives. The downfall of

Muʿtazilite theology has much to do with self-confidence and nothing to do with their scholarly methods: they thought that the Sunni camp would not dare to use their very method, but evidently they did (Ibn ʿĀshūr 1970:44–5).

Chapter six continues this survey of the intellectual and cultural developments in the 11th and 12th centuries. The title of this chapter is: “From ʿAbd al-Qāhir (al-Jurjānī) to al-Zamakhsharī and Ibn ʿAṭīyya.” The topics discussed in this chapter are the rhetorical approach to the Qurʾān and the role that the doctrine of the inimitability of the Qurʾān (*iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*) played in the development of the genre of *tafsīr*. Ibn ʿĀshūr considers ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078) a central figure in this approach who allowed Sunnism to wrench rhetoric from the hands of the Muʿtazilites. His work was part of an orchestrated intellectual process that resulted in the acquisition by Sunnism of all the tools of the Muʿtazilite school. The defense of the Qurʾān was now to be the domain of the Sunnite intellectuals.

It is in this chapter that we are introduced to the two exegetes who will be discussed in the following chapters, al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144) and Ibn ʿAṭīyya (d. 1151). That Ibn ʿĀshūr chooses al-Zamakhsharī is not surprising; that he knows to equate Ibn ʿAṭīyya to him is yet another sign of how encyclopedic is his knowledge of the history of the genre. If we keep in mind that *al-Tafsīr wa-rijāluh* was published in 1966 (and once again in 1970), and that Ibn ʿAṭīyya’s Qurʾān commentary started to appear in publication eight years later, in 1974, we realize that this is a history that was not written from published sources. This is a history that is based on the library of the seminary, independent of the publishing history in the Middle East. Important also is the fact that Ibn ʿĀshūr is insisting, again, on placing the North African religious tradition in the middle of this history. Ibn ʿAṭīyya was a Spaniard Muslim (al-Ghurnāṭī), North Africa being the heir of the Iberian Islamic religious tradition. It is in this chapter that we start seeing Ibn ʿĀshūr using the term *tafsīr al-ʿilmī*, scientific exegesis, to refer to the philologically based exegesis of the Qurʾān (Ibn ʿĀshūr 1970:50; This is not the same as the other form of *tafsīr* common in the modern era, also called “scientific exegesis,” which attempts to see in the Qurʾān a scientific manual that predicted all the findings of the modern sciences).

Al-Zamakhsharī and Ibn ‘Aṭiyya

Ibn ‘Āshūr in his chapter on al-Zamakhsharī answers one of the most fascinating intellectual questions in Islamic religious history: why was the Sunnite religious establishment so enamored of the Qur’ān commentary (*al-Kashshāf*) of the Mu’tazilite al-Zamakhsharī? He gives several reasons — the most important of which was the cultural openness of Sunnism and its “fairness” (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:58). It is yet another sign of Ibn ‘Āshūr’s acumen that he thought to raise this question at all, and his answer is for the time being the most cogent we have (Saleh 2004:127–128). The admittance of *al-Kashshāf* was a complicated process. First, the Sunni establishment responded to *al-Kashshāf*, reaffirming the tenets of Sunnism. This was done by Ibn al-Munīr (d. 1284) in his book *al-Intiṣāf*. Al-Zamakhsharī’s commentary became an essential component of the Sunnite Ash‘arite educational system only when the Persian Ash‘arite school (*al-madrasa al-‘jamiyya al-Ash‘ariyya*) made it part of its curriculum. As one piece of evidence of the endorsement of the Persian Ash‘arite school, Ibn ‘Aṭiyya mentioned the endorsement of three major scholars, Sharf al-Dīn al-Ṭībī (d. 1342), al-Quṭb al-Shirāzī (d. 1311), and Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftazānī (d. 1390) (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:59). What is remarkable is that Ibn ‘Āshūr does not bother to inform the reader that he mentioned these three names in particular because each wrote a gloss on *al-Kashshāf*. It is as if he thought it to be obvious what he meant here — but clearly if one is not initiated, one will miss the point here completely. Once again the significance of a commentary is not its worth on its own, and Ibn ‘Āshūr does admit to the outstanding qualities of *al-Kashshāf*, but its real significance is that it has become an essential part of the Eastern Ash‘arite seminary system, or what he calls the Persianite (*‘jami*) school. In this sense his neglect to mention *al-Basīṭ* of al-Wāḥidī (d. 1075) becomes understandable. *Al-Kashshāf* is no match to *al-Basīṭ*, yet *al-Basīṭ* did not become a textbook in the seminary educational system.

Ibn ‘Āshūr’s discussion of *al-Kashshāf* is the first discussion of the gloss in his book. Ibn ‘Āshūr does not mention the subject of the gloss merely in order to be exhaustive, as stringing together of facts with no implications for how he conceived the history of the genre. His treatment of the gloss is not a mere listing of names. Rather Ibn ‘Āshūr considers the gloss as a turning point in the development of *tafsīr*, a

positive development, a maturation of the genre. Never before was such a decadent form of the scholastic method so earnestly praised or valued in a history of *tafsīr*. *Tafsīr* through the gloss became part of the educational system, Ibn ‘Āshūr explains. The names of those who glossed Qur’ān commentaries (*al-Kashshāf* or al-Bayḍāwī’s commentary) constitute the leading figures of the medieval tradition. Engagement with *tafsīr* for most of the medieval intellectual history was mediated through these two textbooks, and the whole intellectual dialogue covering the Qur’ān was done in the gloss, on the margin. As to what these glosses contain we are completely in the dark, an inexcusable oversight, since there are tens of copies of these glosses in every Islamic manuscript collection anywhere in the world — and a long list of them has been published already.

Ibn ‘Āshūr then devotes a chapter to a comparison between al-Zamakhsharī and Ibn ‘Aṭīyya. The main merit of this comparison is to highlight the existence of different regional schools of *tafsīr* in the Islamic world. Clear distinctions between the two schools, the Eastern and the North African, are emphasized and the historical negligence meted out to the North African school is addressed. Once more, North African exegetes (such as al-Mahdawī d. 1038), who are never mentioned anywhere, are named here (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:61). The reader should not here be under the impression that Ibn ‘Aṭīyya, the counterpart of al-Zamakhsharī, is mentioned due to prejudice born out of regionalism. The Qur’ān commentary of this Andalusian is a massive fifteen-volume work. It is a masterpiece. Medieval scholars were already aware of its significance as a counterpoint to al-Zamakhsharī’s *al-Kashshāf* (being contemporary works, they were judged together). That our modern narratives of *tafsīr* have no place for Ibn ‘Aṭīyya is our problem. The only studies of Ibn ‘Aṭīyya are in Arabic; these might as well not exist since they have no influence on the master narrative.

Al-Bayḍāwī: the apogee of the tradition

Ibn ‘Āshūr devotes three chapters to al-Rāzī and his Qur’ān commentary (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:65–88). The main point I want to mention from these pages is that Ibn ‘Āshūr considers al-Rāzī’s work to represent the maturation of the scientific theological commentary on the Qur’ān.

According to Ibn ‘Āshūr al-Rāzī’s commentary was another major work in the history of the genre, allowing theology and jurisprudence as important a say as the contributions of people of *ḥadīth* and philology. But the author is hurrying us to the main knot in the book, to the work of al-Bayḍāwī.

If one reads the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*’s article on al-Bayḍāwī, one can get a fair idea of the sort of judgment befuddling the field of *tafsīr*. Let me quote here a sample from the article: “His works are generally not original, but based on works by other authors. He is noted for the brevity of his treatment of his various subjects, but his works suffer on this account from a lack of completeness, and he has been blamed for inaccuracy. His most famous work is his commentary on the Qur’ān, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-tā’wīl*, which is largely a condensed and amended edition of al-Zamakhsharī’s *al-Kashshāf*” (*Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, sub al-Bayḍāwī). The factual information is wrong. The work is based on more than one work; in addition to *al-Kashshāf*, it draws equally on al-Rāzī’s Qur’ān commentary, and the dictionary of al-Rāghib al-Aṣbahānī (d. 1108). But the work is actually a distillation of the whole tradition of *tafsīr*. The author of this encyclopedia entry is, moreover, unable to explain why this Qur’ān commentary of all the Qur’ān commentaries in Islam, was edited in Europe in the 19th century. He mentions the edition done by H.O. Fleischer in two volumes (Leipzig, 1846–8), which incidentally was badly received. Is it possible that Europe of the mid 19th century was more aware of the significance of al-Bayḍāwī’s work than later in its history; that soon the romantic prejudice would make such an interest on the part of Europe out of place?

Nevertheless, this assessment of al-Bayḍāwī is impossible to refute; al-Bayḍāwī’s work is indeed a work based on a well-hewn tradition; it is a summary and a polishing of this tradition. The romantic modernist tradition damns such a work as derivative. I do believe that this knot of misguided judgment is impossible to refute simply because it is founded on so many questionable but in our day axiomatic presuppositions vis-à-vis the medieval tradition. We as modern agents are incapable of not damning the medieval past — and nothing makes us more uncomfortable than the notion of an unoriginal gloss or an epitome, or a hundred-times-over copied summary of a work already summarized. It

is simply suffocating. Note the attention we give to a fragment of papyrus and the neglect we heap on the gloss. It is best that I refrain from “defending” the decayed unoriginal tradition of the gloss and instead return to my running commentary on how Ibn ‘Āshūr understood this tradition.

Ibn ‘Āshūr considers al-Bayḍāwī’s commentary to be a sifting and a bringing-to-perfection of the six centuries of the *tafsīr* tradition. It summed up the different insights, permitted the reader a clear vision of the scope of the discussions on the Qur’ān and allowed the reader the possibility of using the work as a gateway to the genre. All this was done with the most polished style, a perfection of diction that was the result of the maturation of the genre (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:93). Its simplicity is precisely the source of its complexity, its very nature an invitation for a gloss and for researching anew the history of the tradition. The moment it appeared, it became clear that this was the text par excellence to use in teaching *tafsīr* in seminaries. Its publication also heralded a moment of unification for the genre; here was at last a book on a very complicated field that was unanimously used as the first reference tool by all scholars. After its appearance no one could escape this work. As the text for teaching *tafsīr* in the seminary, al-Bayḍāwī’s commentary was glossed by each generation of professors. It was in fact the most glossed text in the history of *tafsīr*; Brockelmann lists 83 glosses. I am certain that this is an approximation since we hardly have a comprehensive survey of the manuscripts of the Islamic world.

Ibn ‘Āshūr devotes a full chapter to the “Significance of the commentary of al-Bayḍāwī” (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:96–101). He considers this commentary to be “the apex of the scientific method in interpreting the Qur’ān,” which appeared as “the Islamic intellectual tradition reached its maturity” (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:96). This is a significant and radically different understanding of the development of the Islamic intellectual tradition, (al-Bayḍāwī died around 692/1293), for it means that Ibn ‘Āshūr does not consider the scholastic tradition to be a decadent period.

It is in this chapter on al-Bayḍāwī that Ibn ‘Āshūr continues his discussion of al-Zamakhsharī’s commentary. Ibn ‘Āshūr asserts that the reason for the popularity of al-Zamakhsharī’s Qur’ān commentary (*al-Kashshāf*) was the seal of approval stamped on it by al-Bayḍāwī’s

endorsement of it (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:97). This, in my opinion, might be the most cogent explanation we have of the mystery of the popularity of al-Zamakhsharī’s commentary among the Sunni Ash‘arite establishment. Ibn ‘Āshūr points to a kind of symbiosis between these two Qur‘ān commentaries. He rightly notes that the glosses on al-Zamakhsharī’s commentary began to appear only after the appearance of al-Bayḍāwī’s commentary, since to study the latter one needed to study the former commentary, hence the forbearance that Sunni professors showed towards al-Zamakhsharī’s work. Indeed, the more sophisticated scholarship in *tafsīr* studies was carried out in the glosses on these two commentaries, according to Ibn ‘Āshūr. Ideas were tossed back and forth and controversial issues in the field were discussed through the glosses on these two commentaries (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1970:98). I do take Ibn ‘Āshūr’s word on this matter as fact since he is one of the few who had bothered to read this literature, beside his father. None of us “specialists” on medieval *tafsīr*, who are lacking in this area, are in a position to judge Ibn ‘Āshūr’s insights. The limits of my competence have now been reached. The most we could do is admit to the severe limitation of our supposed expertise. But then no one can claim that no one else has studied this literature either. Put more plainly, we have to admit Ibn ‘Āshūr’s history as part of the academic discourse on *tafsīr*, since we are in no position to deny him entry.

As support for his argument, Ibn ‘Āshūr strings together a series of glosses on these two commentaries as examples of debates across the lines. For glosses on the commentary of al-Bayḍāwī he names the ones by Ibn al-Tamjīd (fl. 1475; his gloss has been published but it is rare), al-‘Iṣām (al-Isrāfīnī, d. 1538; his gloss is unpublished), Sa‘dī (Sa‘d Allāh b. ‘Īsā b. Amīr Khān, d. 1538, also unpublished), ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm al-Siyālkūtī (d. 1656; Ibn ‘Āshūr will supply us with more information later in his book, see below). In addition to the already mentioned glosses on *al-Kashshāf*, Ibn ‘Āshūr mentions the ones written by al-Quṭb al-Rāzī (d. 1311), and al-Sayyid al-Jurjānī (d. 1413) (see Lane 2006:299–328). This is not the place to discuss the significance of any of these scholars. Indeed, I am not in a position to do so. Most of these glosses have not been so far edited. None have so far been studied, since as far as the academic discipline of *tafsīr* studies is concerned glosses

have no existence, no significance. Meanwhile, we continue to pretend we are engaged in a disciplined approach to the history of *tafsīr*.

The seminary and al-Bayḍāwī's Qur'ān commentary

The significance of al-Bayḍāwī's commentary is thus primarily connected to its central role in the seminary educational system. The continuous teaching and glossing of this commentary meant that the teaching of *tafsīr* was becoming ever more refined and ever more demanding. The commentary also became the subject of the most advanced study in the seminary. According to Ibn 'Āshūr, it was at the apex of the pyramid of higher education (Ibn 'Āshūr 1970:99). The teaching of this text spread all over the Islamic lands, East and West. It was taught in Muslim India, the Iranian lands, and Afghanistan. The teaching of this text spread from the Persianate land to Asia Minor (where the Saljuks and the Ottomans were ruling) eventually becoming a staple in the Ottoman higher educational system. It also became popular in late Mamluk Cairo, when two famous scholars wrote a gloss on this work, Zakariyyā al-Ansārī (d. 1520) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505). That al-Suyūṭī should be mentioned as a gloss author on al-Bayḍāwī and not as a Qur'ān commentator who authored a major Qur'ān commentary is a clear indication of how radical Ibn 'Āshūr's rejection of the Azharite conception of *tafsīr* is. Finally by the 16th century al-Bayḍāwī's commentary was a universal textbook all over the Muslim lands, taught at al-Azhar in Cairo and al-Zaytūna in Tunisia, (the seminary that educated Ibn 'Āshūr himself) (Ibn 'Āshūr 1970:100).

Ibn 'Āshūr believes that the spread of the teaching of this commentary resulted in a standardization of the higher educational systems (or a unification) in all Muslim lands, with the result that all higher educational system were now following the method of the Persianate method (*wa-bi-dhālika taqārabat manāhij al-ta'lim bayna al-bilād al-islāmiyya kullihā, 'alā al-tarīqa al-'ajamiyya*) (Ibn 'Āshūr 1970:100). The centrality of this commentary was further solidified in the 17th century when two famous glosses were added to the list: the first is by the already mentioned al-Siyālkūtī, a Lahore scholar. Ibn 'Āshūr heaps praise on

this gloss (however unfinished), considering it one of the most important glosses ever written on al-Bayḍāwī's commentary. The second was by the Azharite scholar Shihāb al-Dīn al-Khafājī (d. 1659). These two became the most widely used. Ibn 'Āshūr brings his discussion of al-Bayḍāwī's commentary to an end by mentioning the fact that it contains some weak prophetic *ḥadīth*, a flaw that is unfortunate but understandable (Ibn 'Āshūr 1970:101).

What should be clear from this summary is that Ibn 'Āshūr was writing a history of *tafsīr* as an *intellectual history* — *tafsīr* as part of the religious history of Islam — not as a string of biographies of exegetes. The attention given to the teaching and transmission of *tafsīr* was for him central. The gloss here becomes a major part of this history; after the 13th century the gloss became the main vehicle for scholarly creativity in *tafsīr*. These insights into the history and development of the genre are simply unmatched in the field. Ibn 'Āshūr's analysis once and for all resolves the problem of assessing the cultural significance of the genre of Qur'ān commentary in Islam. It proves that *tafsīr* was central to the concerns of the scholarly elite, central to the educational system, and central in the formation of the worldview of Muslim intellectuals. The Qur'ān as a hermeneutical concern was central to Islamic culture, and this hermeneutical concern, this intellectual obsession, was independent of any apparent utilitarian function. The Qur'ān as a text was the abiding concern of the educational system.

Let me in addition to all the evidence brought by Ibn 'Āshūr add one more example of the centrality of the gloss in the history of *tafsīr*. One of the most voluminous of all Qur'ān commentary works ever published in the Islamic world was the gloss of al-Qūnawī (d. 1781) on al-Bayḍāwī's commentary. Al-Qūnawī was a professor in the Istanbul *madrassa* education system, and his gloss was the result of his lecture notes. The work was published in Istanbul in eight heavy tomes in 1868 (a very rare work now, luckily reissued in Beirut in 24 thick volumes). Intellectual historians of the modern Middle East have never explained for us why the glosses on al-Zamakhsharī's and al-Bayḍāwī's commentaries were the earliest works to be published in the 19th century. But then such a question is impossible to raise as long as we continue to do Islamic religious history the way we have been doing it so far. Such a question has no place yet in our envisioning of the develop-

ment of the modern Islamic world. Why were these rather voluminous works made consistently available? Part of the answer is that they were essential for the seminary system. As a matter of fact al-Zamakhsharī's commentary as well as that of al-Bayḍāwī's were rarely published as stand-alone works. They were always published with at least one gloss if not more, thus always imbedded in a gloss, surrounded by the apparatus of the seminary system. It is an immense loss for the field that now with the penetration of the romantic ideal into all levels of Muslim society, including that of traditional scholars, the Islamic world has ceased to publish any of these glosses; what little we have available of the glosses were almost all published in the 19th century before the dismantling of the Ottoman *madrassa* system.

Ibn 'Arafa, Abū 'l-Su'ūd and al-Alūsī

Ibn 'Ashūr devotes almost a fourth of his book to discussing three other exegetes (Ibn 'Ashūr 1970:102–141). Since my aim has been to highlight one main feature of his history, its repositioning of the gloss as central in the genre of *tafsīr*, I will here just highlight some of his remarks about these exegetes. The first is his insistence on implicating North Africa in this history. For this Ibn 'Ashūr chose to highlight the significance of Ibn 'Arafa (d. 1401), a leading figure in the fourteenth century. Once more this is a conscious attempt on his part to redress the imbalance in the presentation of the history of *tafsīr*, despite the fact that few if any outside North Africa know Ibn 'Arafa or have read his unpublished commentary. At the same time, it is patently clear that Ibn 'Ashūr has decided to leave al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273) out of this history — al-Qurṭubī being the most famous of the North African exegetes in Islam. There are cogent reasons why he might have done so. First, al-Qurṭubī belonged to the main representative stream in the *tafsīr* genre, and as such there are many works like his. Or it could be that having moved to Cairo, al-Qurṭubī ceased to be a representative of the North African tradition. Finally, al-Qurṭubī's commentary was already published in Cairo in the 1930s and there was no need to highlight its significance.

Ibn 'Ashūr's discussions of Abū 'l-Su'ūd (d. 1574; he was the mufti of Suleiman the Magnificent) and al-Alūsī (d. 1854) are insightful and

such that they change the manner in which we understand *tafsīr* in the early modern period. Moreover, I am convinced that his analysis is fundamentally sound. My decision to curtail my commentary here is simply because I think a more detailed analysis should be carried out of the Ottoman cultural period than is possible here.

The modern period: the marginality of the center

Ibn ʿĀshūr, like his father, and like many in the religious establishment in Tunisia, was solidly behind the program of reformed Islam launched by al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ʿAbduh. The chapters devoted by Ibn ʿĀshūr to the modern period in the history of *tafsīr*, full as they are of pathos, yearning and praise for this reform program, are the weakest part of the book (Ibn ʿĀshūr 1970:142–176). Their failure comes not from any weakness in the analysis but because by making central this trend of reform *tafsīr* and by claiming that it is the culmination of the historical process, Ibn ʿĀshūr misrepresents the reality on the ground. Modern *tafsīr* trends (or modernizing *tafsīr* trends, which attempt to align the Qurʾān with modernity) are not representative of contemporary *tafsīr* (the total sum of exegetical activities happening on the ground at this historical period) — a conflation that is widespread in the scholarly community — it does not represent the dominant state of *tafsīr* in the Muslim world. Ibn ʿĀshūr is not to be blamed for misjudging the situation; he was in the thick of it all. He was a partisan of the reformist, modernist current in the *tafsīr* genre. Indeed, he and his father are among the few who continued this type of approach to the Qurʾān. He was one of the last traditional scholars who was also a partisan of the reform program of the center. In this sense, reformed Cairo relocated to al-Zaytūna Mosque, which positions the periphery as the sole champion of the defeated reform program of the center.

Historical analysis needs a historical distance from its subject to be accurate. Any claim that the Manār school of *tafsīr* of the reformers is the dominant current in modern times is inaccurate — let us not forget that midway through this school a change of heart took place and a more salafī orientation became evident in the Qurʾān commentary of al-Manār. A fuller description of the current state of affairs has to await a fresh look at the last hundred years of religious development in Mus-

lim countries. Ibn ‘Āshūr, however, might still get the last word on this topic, since as we speak the conservative puritanical hermeneutical paradigm is under severe strain because of the limitation of its own victory. Presently the central Islamic lands are rediscovering the Qur’ān commentary of Ibn ‘Āshūr the father, incidentally a Qur’ān commentary I was also introduced to by my guide Muḥammad ‘Alī (see now Nafi 2005). The title of this massive twenty volume commentary is *al-Taḥrīr wa’l-Tanwīr*; translated into English it is “Liberation and Enlightenment.” So that is what the reformist Sunni camp thought they could do through the Qur’ān: nothing short of achieving the aims of modernity, liberation and enlightenment. This is a rather heavy burden to place on the shoulders of a genre. The periphery has a way of sweeping over the center, however. Wahhābism did come from the periphery. Tunisia, the lands of the Ibn ‘Āshūrs, might soon have its day. The least one can do now is to accord *al-Tafsīr wa-rijāluḥ* the value it deserves: it is one of the most insightful studies of the history of one of the most central disciplines in Islam.

Conclusion

The Islamic world has developed markedly contradictory remembrances of its past. The challenge for us is to unearth the ideological and theological underpinnings of such systems of remembrance, including our own, if that is possible. Ibn ‘Āshūr’s cultural memory was at odds with both romantic scholarship and Islamic reformist histories. It both advances our knowledge of the past and by its uniqueness enlightens us about the concerns of modern Muslim intellectuals. Although his work makes it now impossible to disregard the glosses, it poses fundamental challenges for the field. The question is how to study such a sub-genre of *tafsīr* — not an easy task for this form of writing is remarkably difficult to read! What are the issues one ought to raise, and how does one investigate such a massive literature? The other aspect raised by Ibn ‘Āshūr’s work is the cultural significance of *tafsīr* and its role in the intellectual history of Islam. What was the relationship between the gloss and *tafsīr* works proper — since the two forms of scholarship were carried out simultaneously? What propelled a certain scholar to write a Qur’ān commentary instead of a gloss or vice-versa? Was there a tension

between the two forms of scholarship? The answers to these questions will only enhance our understanding of Islamic religious history in all its complexity.

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⁸) Wisnovski 2004 came to my attention too late to incorporate in the present article.

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