

ISLAMIC HIERARCHY OF VALUE: Abdullah Saeed's progressive interpretation of the Qur'an

Choirur Rois

Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya
Jl. Ahmad Yani No.117, Jemur Wonosari, Kec. Wonocolo, Jawa Timur, Indonesia
e-mail: 02050122024@student.uinsby.ac.id

Muchlis

Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang
Jl. Walisongo No.3-5, Tambakaji, Kec. Ngaliyan, Kota Semarang, 50185, Indonesia
e-mail: 2200029058@student.walisongo.ac.id

Agus Irfan

Universitas Islam Sultan Agung
Jl. Kaligawe Raya No.Km.4, Terboyo Kulon, Kec. Genuk, Jawa Tengah 50112, Indonesia
e-mail: agus.irfan@unissula.ac.id

Hairul Anam

International Islamic University Malaysia
Jl. Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Malaysia
e-mail: a.hairul@live.iium.ude.my

Rusdi

Institut Agama Islam Miftahul Ulum Pamekasan
Jl. Raya Palengaan Km. 11, Pamekasan 69362, Indonesia
e-mail: rusdi@iaimu.ac.id

Abstract: This study explores Abdullah Saeed's progressive Qur'anic hermeneutics, focusing on his concept of the Islamic hierarchy of values as a framework for reinterpreting ethical-legal verses in light of contemporary social realities. Utilizing a descriptive-qualitative method with hermeneutic and socio-historical approaches, the research examines the epistemological foundations of Saeed's contextual exegesis. Grounded in Fazlur Rahman's double-movement theory, Saeed distinguishes between universal moral principles and historically contingent rulings, advocating for a shift from rigid textualism to a more dynamic, context-sensitive methodology. His model emphasizes the Qur'an's overarching ethical objectives—such as justice, compassion, and public welfare—over literalist interpretations, thereby ensuring the scripture's continued relevance in addressing modern challenges. The study concludes that Saeed's hierarchy of values offers a transformative and systematic approach to Qur'anic interpretation, enabling a balance between textual fidelity and ethical adaptability.

Keywords: Abdullah Saeed, Islamic Hierarchy of Values, Progressive Qur'anic Interpretation

Corresponding Author	Choirur Rois
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Introduction

The study of the Qur'an is commonly characterized by two prevailing school of thought.¹ Between the textualist flow with static linguistic ideology and the contextualist school which emphasizes flexibility in interpreting the meaning contained in the Qur'an. These two streams gave rise to separate terms and identities in the world of Islamic thought. Textualist schools are usually known as conservative, traditionalist or ahlul hadits schools in Islamic legal thought, while contextualists are known as progressive thinkers or "Neo-Modernist" Muslim thinkers in today's context. Between the two schools, according to Saeed's identification, there is also a semi-textualist school.²

In more particular manner, Saeed classifies the differences between Muslims in today's context into several typological areas:³ (1) Legalist Traditionalists with a tendency to reject Islamic law reform and criticize traditionalism with the characteristic of taqlid on the results of classical mujtahid ijtihad. (2) Theological Puritans. Principally, the theological puritans are against innovation and superstition of "heresy" such as visiting the graves and making *tawassul* and voicing the purity of ijtihad by returning to the Qur'an and al-Hadits. (3) Militant Extremists with characteristics of extreme understanding of the concept of jihad and viewing terror as a means of jihad to undermine western propaganda against Islam. (4) Political Islamists. Basing efforts for change through institutions and avoiding extremist actions even though they are anti-westernization. (5) Secular Liberals. The view promoted by this group is the separation of religion from the state and vice versa and opposes symbols of religious piety in the social area. (6) Cultural Nominalists. (7) Classical Modernists who want reform of Islamic law by emphasizing the existence of ijtihad again. (8) Progressive Ijtihad as a new form of classical modernism with the view that modern reality has made some products of traditionalist thought irrelevant to today's needs. The authors argue that Saeed's classification here is based on research relevant to *tafsîr* thought in contemporary trends and typology.

According to Saeed, the intersection of these schools can be seen from several main points in interpreting the Qur'an. Among them, the socio-historical role in interpreting the Qur'an and whether the meaning of the text of the Qur'an at the time of the Prophet had any differences when viewed from another point of time or could the meaning of the text not change over time.⁴ According to the authors' opinion, the root of the anxiety that triggers Saeed's idea of contextual interpretation is how to present the Qur'an to remain a book that is relevant for all times and places. According to Thoriq Aziz Jayana's findings, Saeed offers a pattern of contextual interpretation with several processes and frameworks that must be followed in interpreting the Qur'an.⁵

According to previous research, Saeed's thoughts are known as progressive Islamic thought with its contextual approach. It has succeeded in capturing the attention of modern scholars and intellectualists in the 21st century,⁶ especially those related to

contemporary issues.⁷ Evidently, according to Fatima Madaniyyah's notes, Saeed's thoughts also have methodological implications in interpreting and producing fiqh law.⁸ Lien Iffa Naf'atu also said that the intellectual work carried out by Saeed was seen as an effort to refine Fazlur Rahman's hermeneutic double movement idea.⁹ According to Wildan Imaduddin Muhammad and Yusuf Rahman, the existence of Saeed who lives in the midst of western state institutions (non-Muslims) with the reality of a Muslim minority according to Wildan Imaduddin Muhammad and Yusuf Rahman is also an inseparable part of the thought of contextual interpretation developed.¹⁰ However, the problem is whether Saeed's methodology is relevant in interpreting the Qur'an. This must be read against the fact that medieval interpreters remain dominating the field.

This issue raises criticism and arguments against Saeed's contextual interpretation. For example, Imron Mustofa criticized Saeed's contextual interpretation method because it was seen as too prioritizing the reality of the context and not taking into account the methodological and ethical elements of classical interpretation. This can obscure the original meaning of the text.¹¹ Other criticisms were also raised in Abd. Muin's research findings. Based on the thematic study on the crucifixion of Isa al-Masih—contained in An-Nisa' verses 157-159—Muin's findings conclude that Saeed's interpretation is categorized as a hermeneutic interpretation of *al-dakhil*. It is because interpreting the Qur'an departs from the meaning of the text without any clear guidelines and tends to ignore instructions contained in the text.¹² Other findings from Ansori's research, the meaning of a text based on Khaled is not purely determined by one of the three hermeneutical elements (author, text and reader). The meaning of a text is the complexity of the interactions of the three, therefore for each of these three elements, nothing dominates but proportionally plays its role.¹³ Another research of the same line of conclusion is that by Iqbal and Ja'far, Nirwana et al., and Fuadi.¹⁴ This means that there is no dominance gap between the meaning of the text and the context.

Previous findings raised gaps that triggered outstanding debates and academic issues to be explored in this study, about the roots of progressive Islamic ideology and epistemological genealogy of contextual interpretation offered by Saeed. Ideology and genealogy epistemology contextual interpretation offered by Saeed is intended to answer the needs of modernization in interpreting the meaning that should be taken from the text of the Qur'an. This is important to examine because it can reveal and answer the originality and authenticity of Saeed's progressive Islamic ideas. So that it can be seen how this idea can actually be used as a scientific basis in understanding and interpreting the Qur'an in today's context.

Method

This study employs qualitative library research to analyze Saeed's progressive Qur'anic interpretation through the lens of an Islamic hierarchy of values. Using textual

analysis of Saeed's primary works (Interpreting the Qur'an and The Qur'an: An Introduction) and relevant secondary literature, the research applies a threefold methodological approach: (1) value-based analysis to identify and categorize Saeed's prioritization of Qur'anic principles, (2) socio-historical examination of the intellectual and cultural contexts shaping his value-oriented hermeneutics, and (3) conceptual evaluation of his engagement with contemporary reformist thought. Through close reading, source triangulation, and systematic analysis (data reduction, conceptual mapping, and critical verification), the study not only traces the epistemological foundations of Saeed's progressive approach but also critically assesses how his hierarchical valuation of Islamic principles contributes to modern Qur'anic exegesis, offering both exposition and normative evaluation of his interpretive framework.

Results and Discussion

Abdullah Saeed's intellectual footprint

Saeed is one of the contemporary Muslim academics and scholars who is familiar with his ideas about progressive Islam, contextual interpretation and contextual hermeneutics. As an academic, Saeed has comprehensive experience in contemporary Islamic studies, both from a Western and Eastern perspective. He earned his undergraduate degree from the Islamic University of Medina in 1986 with an academic concentration in Arabic and Islamic studies. He obtained a Master's degree in applied linguistics and a doctorate in Islamic Studies from the University of Melbourne, Australia, in 1992 and 1994. Ten years later, Saeed (2004) was appointed as a professor in the field of Arabic and Islamic Studies, which also led him to become the supervisor of Islamic Studies at the University of Melbourne. Saeed is also very active in carrying out research focusing on one of the most important issues in Islamic thought today: text and context negotiation, *ijtihad* and interpretation. Saeed is also known for his progressive views on religious freedom in Islam.¹⁵

Behind the Progressive Interpretation of Abdullah Saeed

The forerunner of Saeed's Progressive Islamic Idea is based on an in-depth study of textualist and contextualist approaches in understanding the meaning of the Qur'an.¹⁶ Textualists view that the meaning of the Qur'an is static and not influenced by the dynamics of the times so that the focus of the studies carried out only considers aspects of linguistic analysis and does not take into account the socio-cultural and political conditions at the time of its revelation.¹⁷ This gap is what Saeed tries to fill with his contextual ideas. The sociological background of the revelation of the Qur'an must be involved in understanding the text of the Qur'an. For this reason, interpreting the Qur'an is not enough just by using one approach. Saeed considers it important to involve approaches from various fields. Such as hermeneutic theory and literary theory.

The assumption that develops among textualists believes that the language of the Qur'an has concrete references and cannot change. The consequence of this assumption is that textualists view the meaning of the Qur'an since the time of its revelation as still relevant and valid in the contemporary era. In contrast to the assumptions of the textualists. The contextualist group assumes that the meaning of the Qur'an is indeterminate (not known for certain). The consequence is that the meaning of the Qur'an will evolve with the times. So that the socio-historical, cultural and linguistic aspects of the text play a key role in understanding the Qur'an. The most basic thing and the point of difference between the textualist and contextualist paradigms according to Saeed is that contextualists consider the Qur'an not only a book of laws but more than that the Qur'an is a text that contains ideas, values and principles that can be applied anytime, anywhere, and for anyone so that it is not limited by space and time. To be able to position the Qur'an as these ideas, values and principles, both the broad and narrow Qur'an need to be studied based on its context to produce an objective and comprehensive understanding of the relevance of the content of meaning contained therein.¹⁸

The idea of progressive Islam with a contextual interpretation approach echoed by Saeed was influenced by several previous intellectual thoughts.¹⁹ These include Fazlur Rahman with his double movement hermeneutics, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd with his inclusive hermeneutics, and Muhammad Syahrur with his theory of the limit. Mohammed Arkoun, Khaled Abou El Fadl, and Aminah Wadud, with their rejection of the views of conservative scholars who allegedly monopolize interpretation. However, the most dominating influence on Saeed's thought is Fazlur Rahman's double movement hermeneutic thought. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration if Saeed's product of thought is called a complement to Fazlur Rahman's hermeneutics.²⁰

Saeed developed a contextual approach to interpreting the Qur'an embedded in Fazlur Rahman's double movement theory, which emphasizes two main stages: understanding the text in its historical context and applying its universal principles to the contemporary context.²¹ Saeed formalizes this framework through four methodological stages: (1) encountering the text, (2) critical analysis (linguistic, historical, literary), (3) interpretation for the first recipients at the time the Qur'an was revealed (socio-historical context), and (4) development of meaning for the present through analysis of the modern context, historical-contemporary relations, and application of universal principles in understanding and interpreting the Qur'an.²²

There are epistemological similarities in their emphasis on the dialectic between the particularity of Qur'anic law, such as the rules on slavery and polygamy, which are bound to the context of the 7th century, and the universality of ethical values (such as justice and public interest). Saeed clarifies this distinction with more systematic criteria, such as the separation of contextual messages (related to specific situations) and universal messages (timeless).²³ Therefore, Saeed's approach is not merely a continuation of Fazlur

Rahman’s double movement theory but a methodological development of Rahman’s hermeneutics, which strengthens the relevance of the Qur’an in the modern era without falling into literalism or relativism. It affirms that the interpretation of religious texts must be dynamic yet remain grounded in the fundamental principles of revelation.

Apart from the role of previous figures, Saeed’s progressive Islamic ideology also has its own characteristics. Saeed did a mapping of the types of verses in the Qur’an: verses relating to theology, history, metaphor and ethical legal (verses that contain a legal message and do not conflict with the moral message of humanity). For Saeed, verses regarding legal ethics are strategic texts in the Qur’an because they include belief systems, worship practices, essential values of shari’ah goals (*al-kulliyat al-khams*), texts of legal orders (*‘amar*), and texts regarding sanctions for violating the law.²⁴ In the realm of traditional ethical legal classified into five categories of law. Includes: obligatory, sunnah, haram, makruh and mubah. The five words are the benchmarks and standards for Islamic law.

To facilitate the interpretation of ethical legal verses. Saed formulated the concept of a value hierarchy.²⁵ The hierarchy of values in Saeed’s view has the function of determining universally and partially applicable verses.²⁶ By knowing universal and partial values, verses that require adjustments and verses that can apply continuously without intervention in the context of space and time can also be distinguished.²⁷

The hierarchy of values referred to by Saeed includes: mandatory values, fundamental values, protective values, implementation values and instructional values.²⁸ Saeed’s perspective value hierarchy can be understood in the following table:

Table 1. Abdullah Saeed’s hierarchy of values

Value hierarchy	Context	Context value
Liability Value	- Faith - Practice ritual worship (prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, zakat). - Explicit halal-haram law	Independent- Universal
Fundamental value	- Maqashid al-Shari’ah - Al-Kulliyah al-Khoms (hifdz al-mal, hifdz alnasl, hifdz aldin, hifdz al-nafs and hifdz al-aql)	Independent- Universal
Protectional value (protection)	- Maintenance	Independent -Universal
Implementative Value	- Application of syrai’at - Sharia sanctions	Dependent
Instructive value	- Order - Prohibition - recommendation	Dependent

The three levels of the value hierarchy above according to Saeed are values that apply universally and are statically independent without being influenced by socio-historical aspects.²⁹ The concept of a hierarchy of values initiated by Saeed in its application can be an alternative solution to see the relevance of the needs of modern-contemporary Muslims in reinterpreting the ethical-legal verses.³⁰

Saeed's Epistemology of Contextual Interpretation

In Saeed's view, several teachings of the Qur'an are contextual. There is a close relationship between the text of the Qur'an and the context of its revelation³¹. In fact, the determination of Islamic law cannot be separated from considering the social, cultural, political and economic context of Muslim society. The consequences of the relationship between the text and the context in the future necessitate the existence of several teachings that are less relevant or even irrelevant to the reality of the social context at certain times, especially in the 21st century AD. For example, the concept of slavery, the role and function of women adopted from the social construction of Hijaz society in the seventh. To find the point of relevance, the contextual approach is an alternative solution offered by Saeed. According to him, the contextual approach works at two different levels. From the level of literature and linguistics to macro context I and macro context II.³²

Macro context I in Saeed's terms includes social, political, economic, cultural, and intellectual contexts related to texts at the beginning of the seventh century AD and the geographical area of the Hijaz both Mecca and Medina which are said to have had norms, culture, and own social structure.³³ While the macro context II is the social, political, economic, cultural, and intellectual reality of the twenty-first century. Includes the emergence of new institutions, norms, and views and ideas about government, such as democracy, equal citizenship, and economic management, a strong emphasis on human rights, dignity, and equality of all people regardless of their beliefs, state independence and obedience to international law and the management of war and peace as a collective mission of all nations.³⁴

Departing from efforts to maintain the relevance of the text to the context of today's reality, through his contextual approach, Saeed in several case studies has a view that is very different from the products and legal provisions resulting from the *ijtihad* of classical figures. As in the death penalty for apostates (*riddah*). Because it is seen as contrary to freedom of religion. This view is based on the absence of strong support in the Qur'an and its practice during the time of the Prophet in imposing this punishment. Besides, Saeed strengthens his argument with the concept of human rights.³⁵ Saeed's contextual interpretation is also unclear when discussing verses about usury which according to him the prohibition of usury only occurred during the Jahiliyyah period. In contemporary context, interest cannot be categorized as usury, as contained in the literature on classical interpretations and the concept of classical Fiqh law.³⁶ The basis of this view refers to the

differences in macro context 1 and macro 2 in terms of Saeed's contextual approach. Between the social reality then and now.³⁷

According to the discussion, there has been a gap between the meaning of the text which has been understood literally-textually by most scholars and the socio-historical context of the Qur'an—since it was first revealed and the needs of contemporary modern Muslims.³⁸ In view of this gap, through a hermeneutic interpretation model with a socio-historical contextual approach, Saeed proposes four stages in interpreting the Qur'an contextually, namely: understanding the world of the text, critical analysis, finding the meaning of the text for the first recipient (Hijaz community) and determine the meaning and application of the text to today's reality.³⁹

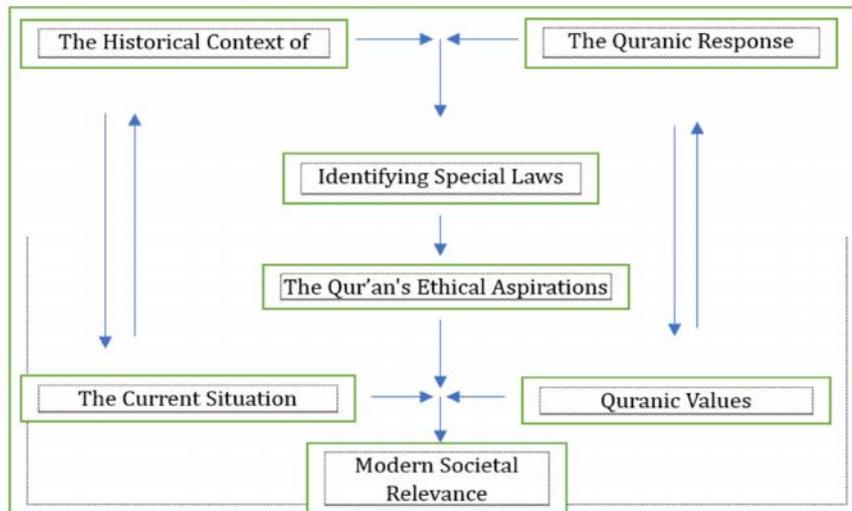
Geneology of Saeed's Contextual Interpretation

In line with the idea of contextual interpretation, Saeed is a contextualist thinker who offers the idea of the context of the Qur'an as a medium for understanding the text of the Qur'an as an effort to form a contextual paradigm.⁴⁰ Saeed's contextual interpretation paradigm is constructed based on three methodological core bases: the first basis is an emphasis on the hierarchy of values contained in ethical legal verses. Second, the emphasis on the contextual (socio-historical) meaning of revelation to bring out new meanings that are relevant to today's context. Third, systematic contextual interpretation. From these three methods, Saeed then looks at and considers the extent to which verses regarding legal ethics can be applied in modern-contemporary reality while still paying attention to the substantive value contained in a verse when the verse was revealed.⁴¹ Thus, Saeed emphasized that interpretations can change if a contextual approach is applied in interpreting the Qur'an.⁴²

Some of the contextualist figures who inspired Saeed in formulating his contextual interpretation paradigm included Fazlur Rahman. Lien Iffah Naf'atu Fina and Sheyla Nichlatus Sovia in their research findings concluded that the contextual interpretation carried out by Saeed is a continuation and refinement of the double-movement hermeneutics initiated by Fazlur Rahman⁴³. If explored further, Rahman's double-movement hermeneutics departs from that view the rules of the Qur'an can change according to the new situation, based on the basic thesis of the historicity of the Qur'an.⁴⁴ That is, Fazlur Rahman's hermeneutic method refers to emphasizing a process that involves two points of view, namely moving from today's problems to the time of revelation of the Qur'an and from the time of the Qur'an back to today's problems.⁴⁵

Rahman's double-movement hermeneutics begins with finding the meaning of the Qur'anic text through a chronological journey-historical approach—followed by identifying specific legal provisions and moral ideals in the Qur'an. Only then understand the goals and moral ideals desired by the Qur'an while still focusing on the environment when the Qur'an was revealed.⁴⁶ Systematically the workflow of double-movement

hermeneutics can be described as follows:



Source: Choirur Rois, 2023.

The description of Fazlur Rahman’s double-movement hermeneutics above has similarities with Saeed’s version of contextual hermeneutics. It’s just that Saeed perfected it with his value hierarchy theory in mapping out the values contained in the ethical legal verse. In addition, the concept of macro I and macro II in Saeed’s terms also has harmony with the historical situation and the current context situation in Fazlur Rahman’s hermeneutics. Another evidence—that can be used as the basis for the argument—that Saeed’s genealogy of contextual interpretation is in line with Rahman’s hermeneutics can be seen in several case studies, such as *riba* verses in the Qur’an. Some research results regarding the interpretation of *riba* verses using the perspective of both show the same results.⁴⁷

Hermeneutics initiated by Rahman and Saeed departs from the same anxiety and criticism. Namely their response to textualists who continue to develop interpretations based on textual understanding and theological doctrine when interpreting legal verses. According to them, this eliminates the dimension of relevance between the spirit of the Qur’anic text’s ideas and the ideals, values that are the focus of the revelation of the Qur’an and contradicts the idea that the Qur’an is *shalih fi kulli Zaman wa Makan*. The implication is that Islamic law looks rigid and does not respond to the challenges of modernization and contemporary discourse.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of Saeed’s thought, this study concludes that his proposed concept of Islamic value hierarchy provides a transformative hermeneutical framework for contemporary Qur’anic interpretation. The research also reveals how Saeed successfully constructs an epistemology of contextual exegesis capable of bridging the sociological disparity between sacred texts (the Qur’an) and modern social realities. The

key findings of the study indicate that: Saeed develops a dynamic interpretation model distinguishing between universal principles (*tsawabit*) and contextual implementation (*mutaghayyirat*), inspired by Fazlur Rahman's double-movement hermeneutics. His value hierarchy offers a balanced methodology that respects textual authority while remaining responsive to social change, particularly in addressing contemporary issues such as Islamic finance, *hudud*, and religious freedom. This approach not only enriches modern exegetical epistemology but also provides solutions to the limitations of traditional interpretations, which often neglect sociological dimensions.

This study also identifies that the contextual interpretation model based on the hierarchy of values approach proposed by Saeed exhibits a more comprehensive level of systematization than the double movement approach developed by Fazlur Rahman, as evidenced in case studies on *riba*, Islamic criminal law, and religious pluralism. Furthermore, although progressive, Saeed's thought still needs to engage critically with the classical exegetical tradition without undermining the authority of traditional *mufassir*. The theoretical implication of this study's findings is the reinforcement of a dynamic interpretive paradigm that integrates fidelity to the text with contextual relevance. Practically, this hierarchy of values framework can be applied to other contemporary issues such as gender justice and Islamic ecotheology

This study recommends three main themes for further research development. First, an in-depth comparative study between Saeed's methodology and classical exegesis to test its epistemological consistency. Second, the application of the value hierarchy framework to contemporary issues that have not been widely addressed, such as gender justice and Islamic eco-theology. Third, research on the resistance and acceptance of Saeed's thought across various Islamic scholarly traditions to understand the dynamics of accepting progressive exegesis. These mechanisms are expected to expand the discourse and application of contextual approaches in Qur'anic studies while enriching the body of contemporary Islamic scholarship.

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