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# HAMKA'S METHOD OF QUR'ANIC INTERPRETATION

Milhan

Fakultas Syariah IAIN Sumatera Utara Medan,  
Jl. Willem Iskandar Pasar V Medan Estate, 20371  
e-mail: milhany@yahoo.com

**Abstrak: Metode Hamka dalam Penafsiran al-Qur'an.** Di antara sekian penafsir al-Qur'an modern di Indonesia, Hamka memiliki keunikan dalam pendekatannya. Pendekatan ini dapat disebut sebagai pendekatan sistemik, yang menekankan kesaling-terkaitan seluruh ajaran al-Qur'an mengenai berbagai hal. Karena itu, setiap ayat al-Qur'an mestilah ditafsirkan dalam konteks sistem tersebut, bukan sebagai bagian yang terpisah-pisah. Pendekatan Hamka ini secara alamiah melahirkan pemahamannya yang khas pula tentang Islam.

**Kata Kunci:** Hamka, tafsir al-Qur'an

## Introduction

Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah, widely known by his abbreviated name, Hamka,<sup>1</sup> was much concerned with the development of Islamic teachings in Indonesia. Having been influenced by the Muslim reformist ideas championed by Muḥammad 'Abduh and his colleagues, he attempted to disseminate and ameliorate the reform ideas in his country, Indonesia, through the means available to him, that is by preaching and writing. Hamka was one of the most influential Indonesian scholars and the most prolific contemporary authors, having written 113 books including his monumental Qur'anic commentary *Tafsîr al-Azhar*.<sup>2</sup> In this commentary, he devoted to compromise between *tafsîr bi al ma'tsur* and *tafsîr bi al-ra'yi*<sup>3</sup> approach. As is well known, there are several approaches employed

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<sup>1</sup> Hamka was born in Maninjau, West Sumatera on February 17, 1908 and died in Jakarta on July 24, 1981. See Rusydi, *Pribadi dan Martabat Buya Prof. Dr. Hamka* (Jakarta: Panjimas, 1983), p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Sides Sudyarto, "Hamka, Realisme religious", in *Hamka di Mata Hati Umat*, ed. Nasir Tamara, et al. (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, 1984), p. 337-339.

<sup>3</sup> *Tafsîr bi al-Ma'tsur* is the interpretation in terms of explanation derived from the Qur'an itself, and from the traditions of the Prophet and his Companions and their Successors; while the interpretation based on the valid ideas of the commentators is called *tafsîr bi al-ra'yi*. See

in exegetical literature *tafsîr bi al-ma'tsur*, *tafsîr bi al-ra'yi*, *tafsîr al-isyarî*<sup>4</sup> and the modern approach.<sup>5</sup> For Hamka, the application of the *al-ma'tsur* method only was tantamount to “textbook thinking” and was something he did not want to engage in. However, he did not want to follow solely *al-ra'yi* for fear of deviating from the purpose of the Qur'an.

## Hamka's Systemic Approach to Qur'anic Interpretation

It is hard to elaborate Hamka's principle of interpretation comprehensively, since he did not compose a special work on it.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the works which discuss his commentary do not focus on his principle perse.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the only way to apprehend it is through his commentary, where he explains and employs this principle.

The way adopted in writing this commentary, Hamka remarks, is the way of the *salaf*. In other words, it is way of the Prophet, the Companions and the Successors.<sup>8</sup> The explanation of the Prophet is obtained from his *Sunnah*; that is his sayings (*aqwâl*), deeds

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Ahmad Von Denffer, *Ulûm al-Qur'an: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an* (London: The Islamic Foundation, 1983), p. 132.

<sup>4</sup> *Tafsîr al-Isyarî* indicates the interpretation of the Qur'an beyond its outer meanings. The people practising this kind of interpretation concern themselves with the meanings attached to verses of the Qur'an, which are visible only to those whose hearts Allah has opened to deep spiritually. This method of *tafsîr* is often found in the works of mystically-inclined authors. See, *Ibid*.

<sup>5</sup> Modern *tafsîr* is the interpretation that attempts to reconcile between the method of *tafsîr bi al-ma'tsur* and that of *tafsîr bi al-ra'yi* as well as to prove that the Qur'an is able to respond to modern needs both materially and spiritually. See J. M. S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation* (1880-1960) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), h. 80; J.J.G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), p. 17-19.

<sup>6</sup> Hamka is different from the other Indonesia exegetical scholars, such as T. M. Hasbi Ash-Shiddiqy. The latter does not only write commentaries but also writes several works on the principle of interpretation. His commentaries are *Tafsir al-Quranul Majied "An-Nur"*, 30 Jilid (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1976); *Tafsir al-Bayan*, 4 vol (Bandung: Al-Ma'arif, 1966), while his works on the principle of interpretation are, *Sejarah dan Pengantar Ilmu al-Quran/Tafsir* (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1954) and *Ilmu-Ilmu al-Quran: Media Pokok dalam Menafsirkan al-Quran* (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> At the time this article was written, two works discussing his commentary were found. The are Yunan Yusuf's *Corak Penafsiran Kalam: Tafsir al-Azhar* (Jakarta: Pustaka Panjimas, 1990). Yusuf examines Hamka's manner of interpreting the theological verses. The author concludes that Hamka's way is very similar to the approach of the Rationalists. However, he does not adopt the whole method of the Mu'tazilah. This conclusion is based on Hamka's interpretation of eight essential theological concepts. They are the authority of reason (*'aql*), the function of revelation, free will and predestination, faith, the authority and will of God, the justice of God, the action of God and the attributes of God. The second book is written by Federspiel, *Popular Indonesian Literature of Qur'an* (Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1994). In his book, Federspiel does not actually focus on Hamka's commentary. He just assesses the development of exegesis in Indonesia, including Hamka's work.

<sup>8</sup> Hamka, *Tafsir Al-Azhar*, vol. I (Jakarta: Pustaka Panjimas, 1982), p. 41.

(*af'âl*) and his decisions (*taqrîr*) concerning the activities of the Companions. The authority of the Prophet's explanations of the Qur'an was testified by God through His saying "and We have sent down unto thee (also) the Message, that you mayest explain clearly to men what is sent for them, and that they may give thought."<sup>9</sup> From his elaboration of the authority of Muhammad as the interpreter of the Qur'an, Hamka rejects any interpretation that is contradictory to the explication of the Prophet,<sup>10</sup> since the Prophet's elucidations were sanctioned by God.

Furthermore, Hamka recommends the study of the *Sunnah* because through it, one can observe that the Qur'an consists of three main components. The first component comprises the legal verses, from which all legal dictums are drawn. Moreover, since most legal verses had been thoroughly explained by the Prophet, it is unnecessary to seek any interpretation other than that of Muhammad. Hamka even condemned those who deny the interpretation of the Prophet concerning the *Syarî'ah* and merely apply their own interpretations instead.<sup>11</sup> The second component is related to '*aqîdah* or belief. To establish belief, Hamka explains, in the hearts of believers God reveals numerous signs throughout the Qur'anic verses about the creation of this universe. Interestingly, He shrouds some of their contents in mystery and ambiguity. However, several of these can be interpreted in accordance with scientific developments or with philology.<sup>12</sup> The third component of the Qur'an deals with the history of the previous peoples or prophets, such as the stories of Joseph and Moses. In interpreting the historical verses, Hamka determines, one should be extremely careful in adopting the interpretations of the previous scholars, since several of them are false. The untrue interpretations mostly originated from the *isrâ'iliyyât*.<sup>13</sup>

With regards to the *isrâ'iliyyât*, Hamka classifies them into three categories. *First* those which are not contrary to the Qur'an or the *Sunnah* of the Prophet. Such traditions are undoubtedly true and can be accepted as the basis for interpretation. *Secondly*, those traditions whose unsoundness is obvious, for they are incompatible with the purpose of the Qur'an or the principles of Islam. Those traditions, Hamka recommends, have to be

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<sup>9</sup> Q.S. al-Nahl/16: 44.

<sup>10</sup> Hamka, *Tafsir al-Azhar*, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29. *Isrâ'iliyyât* is an Arabic term which refers to those narratives which are found in commentary books written by Jews or Christians who had converted to Islam. Among the eminent *isrâ'iliyyât* authors one may count 'Abd Allâh ibn Salâm, Ka'b al-'Ahbâr, Wahb ibn Munabbih and Ibn Juraij. These authors were interested in explaining the Qur'anic verses pertaining to past events, especially to previous prophets and their followers. Understandably, these authors often drew from the vast repertoire of their previous religions knowledge, and this in turn inevitably coloured their writing. Hence the *isrâ'iliyyât* narratives are divided into three categories: the accepted, the non-accepted and rejected ones. See Muḥammad Husaya al-Dzahabî, *Al-Tafsîr wa al-Mufasssîrûn*, vol. I (Kairo: Dâr al-Kutub al-Hadîtsah, 1961), p. 165-200.

rejected. *Thirdly*, there are certain *isrâ'iliyyât* traditions whose soundness or unsoundness is doubtful. These traditions, Hamka declares, should be neither accepted nor rejected.<sup>14</sup>

In order to avoid misinterpretations, Hamka suggests following the literal meaning of stories, since they provide explanations of past events, which can, in turn, be adopted as educational elements not as real tales.<sup>15</sup> This is in line with the Qur'anic message saying that "There is, in their stories, instruction for men endued with understanding. It is not a tale invented, but a confirmation of what before it, a detailed exposition of all things, and a Guide and a Mercy to any such as believe."<sup>16</sup>

Following the interpretation of the Prophet, one may employ that of the Companions. Their elucidations, Hamka declares, are very similar to the Prophet's, especially concerning the legal matters, because "we believe that the Companions derived the interpretation of legal verses directly from the Prophet".<sup>17</sup> However, Hamka cautioned against a blind acceptance of the Companions' interpretations, especially when the latter appear to base themselves upon their personal point of view, or when a particular matter appears to draw a variety of differing opinions. In that case, our author advocated caution while scrutinizing and choosing from the various interpretations.<sup>18</sup>

The interpretations of the Successors of the Companions on legal verses were sanctioned by our author since they derived from their predecessors. However, their interpretation of historical verses were cautioned against since they often drew from the *isrâ'iliyyât* and hence should be rejected.<sup>19</sup>

It seems that Hamka's approach closely followed the *ma'tsûr* method. However, that was not the only means he deemed satisfactory in understanding the message of the Qur'an. Instead, he advocated a compromise between *naql* (traditions) and *'aql* (reason). In other words, he suggested following the way of the *salaf* (scholars of early Islam) when it is not contradictory to reason and applying reason where it is necessary to do so. Any commentary which limits itself to the thought of earlier scholars, he further remarks, is an example of "textbook thinking".<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, an interpretation based solely on reason will likely deviate from the real purpose of the Qur'an.<sup>21</sup> In addition, a measure of partiality is inevitable when writing a commentary. Many commentators, Hamka declares, have turned aside from the main *tafsîr* objective of *tafsîr* and have concentrated instead on propagating or defending the opinion of their school of thought. This can be

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<sup>14</sup> Hamka, *Tafsir al-Azhar*, p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> Q.S. Yûsuf/12: 111.

<sup>17</sup> Hamka, *Tafsir al-Azhar*, p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

witnessed in the work of Zamakhsharî, in which he propagated and defended the doctrine of the Mu'tazila, al-Razî who advocated the Syafi'î doctrine, and Alûsî who promoted his Hanafi inclination.<sup>22</sup>

Although Hamka greatly appreciated the method of Ibn Taymiyya<sup>23</sup> and mentioned that "the way that had been followed by Ibn Taymiyya in interpretation is free from *ra'yi* (reason)",<sup>24</sup> yet, he was not against the use of reason per se. Indeed, one cannot ignore reason especially when the Qur'an declares "He granteth wisdom to whom He pleaseth, and he to whom wisdom is granted receiveth indeed a benefit overflowing, but none will grasp the Message but men of understanding".<sup>25</sup> How can the wisdom of the Qur'an be obtained, Hamka questions, if Ibn Taymiyya's strictest methodology is to be followed ?

In order to reconcile between the applications of *naql* and *'aql*, Hamka propose conforming to the system of al-Ghazâlî. The latter had mentioned that it was not enough to follow the literal meaning of the verses and the interpretations of the *salaf*, but that one should contemplate the Qur'an as a whole and try to understand its global essence.<sup>26</sup> In addition to striking a middle course between the ideas of Ibn Taymiyya and al-Ghazâlî, Hamka also attempted to pursue the technique of the Companions in interpretation. He admired their devotion and method, which consisted of referral to the explanations of the Prophet and the application of their sound opinions.<sup>27</sup>

With regards to sound narratives in which the *matn* (content) contradicts reason, Hamka favoured the recourse to reason. This can be seen from his refutation of the reports concerning revelational background of verses 22: 52.<sup>28</sup> These reports explain that Satan made the Prophet pronounce the following words "Verily they (idols) are the exalted maidens (*gharânîq*)"<sup>29</sup> after Muhammad had recited verses 53: 19-21.<sup>30</sup> Hamka acknowledged that the story of the *gharânîq* had been accepted as sound by a number of

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Ibn Taymiyya emphasizes that the only sound method of interpretation is to refer, in descending order, to the Qur'an itself, the *Sunna* (the Prophet's traditions), the *aqwâl* (sayings) of the *Shahâba* (the Companions of the Prophet) or to those of the *Tabi'ûn* (the Followers of the Companions of the Prophet). See Dzahabî, *Al-Tafsîr wa al-Mufasssîrûn*, p. 48-50.

<sup>24</sup> Hamka, *Tafsîr al-Azhar*, p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> Q.S. al-Baqarah/2: 269.

<sup>26</sup> Hamka, *Tafsîr al-Azhar*, p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> Never did We send an apostle or a prophet before thee, but, when he framed a desire, Satan threw some (vanity) into his desire: but God will cancel anything (vain) that Satan throws in, and God will confirm (and establish) His signs: for God is full of knowledge and wisdom".

<sup>29</sup> The story of the *gharânîq* (exalted maidens) is well known.

<sup>30</sup> "Have ye seen Lât, and 'Uzzâ, and another, the third (goddess), Manât ? What ! For you the male sex, and for Him, the female ?"

classical scholars,<sup>31</sup> because, based on their requirements, the chain of its *isnâd* is solid enough to warrant the acceptance of its authenticity. However, Hamka argued, if we accept the above tradition, it would indicate that we believe that Satan could intervene and influence Divine Revelation.<sup>32</sup> In addition, Hamka classified the tradition as part of the unsound *isrâ'liyyât*.<sup>33</sup>

Hamka also vehemently criticized any interpretation contrary to philology. He rejected the interpretation of those who mention that all the verses of the Qur'an are accumulated in the dot under the letter b in the phrase *bismillâh*. This idea, he remarks, is baseless and highly imaginative, for it is clear that the letter b itself has no sense if it is not related to the other letters. Moreover, the dot has no meaning by itself.<sup>34</sup>

Another significant element of Hamka's principle is his view of the authorization of the learned scholars (*'ulamâ*) in discussing the Qur'an. He declares that the learned scholars are permitted to express their ideas about the Qur'an, even if their ideas are not in conformity with the interpretations of past scholars. In other words, he grants the scholars the right to devise their own opinions.<sup>35</sup> In addition, he proposes a new method of interpreting the Qur'an that is compatible with the modern era. This ideal process calls for the involvement of numerous scholars, whereby each scholar is talented in a specific field of knowledge. For instance, when a psychological matter is discussed, there should be a psychologist involved and when a social topic is examined there should be a sociologist involved.<sup>36</sup>

Then, Hamka's exegesis provides *tahlili* method.<sup>37</sup> He always starts each *surah* (chapter) with an introduction about the place and time of its revelation, and whether it was revealed during the Meccan or the Medinan periods. His purpose in doing so is to facilitate the reader's understanding of the *surah*, as each period has its own distinct characteristics. The chapters revealed in one period have their own style which helps provide a proper understanding of the situational context. This can be seen from his introduction to *surah al-Nisâ'* where he begins by providing the situational origin of the

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<sup>31</sup> Among them is al-Thabarî who argues that this story is sound by presenting several reports, see his commentary, *Jâmi' al-Bayân fî Tafsîr al-Qur'ân*, vol. XVII (Beirut: Dâr al-Ma'rifah, 1987), p. 131-3.

<sup>32</sup> Hamka, *Tafsîr al-Azhar*, vol. XVII, p. 189-96.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, h. 33.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71-2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5. Q.S. al-Nisâ'/4: 59, "O ye who believe! Obey God, and obey the Apostle, and those charged with authority among you. If ye differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to God and His Apostle, if ye do believe in God and the Last Day: that is the best, and most suitable for final determination".

<sup>37</sup> In *tahlilî* method, a commentator exegetes the verse one at a time from the first to the end of the chapter of the Qur'an.

chapter. *Al-Nisâ'*, Hamka asserts, is a Medinah *surah* as it was revealed after Muhammad's migration to Medina. This notion is based on 'Aishah's assertion that it is a Medinan *surah*. The latter was able to make such an assertion on the basis of her cohabitation with the Prophet. It was after their cohabitation, she affirmed, that this *surah* was revealed.

Hamka explains the distinction between the Meccan and the Medinan verses in the following terms. The Meccan verses, he elucidates, are primarily concerned with matters of faith while the Medinan ones incorporate all matters of social, legal, political and interhuman interactions. After providing the background information of each verse, Hamka begins his exegesis by examining one verse at a time.<sup>38</sup> After discussing each verse, Hamka draws his conclusion concerning the verse or verses discussed. The conclusion depends on the central issue raised on the verse or verses. This helps the reader understand the objective of the verse or verses. A case in point is his exposition of 4: 58-59<sup>39</sup> which he believes to be an elaboration of the main foundations of governing the state. In administering a state or government, he declares, the trust (*amânah*) has to be bestowed on those who are worthy of it and can look after it properly. Not only that, they must be skillful as well. They, as the leaders of the community, must dispense justice among people impartially and without making any exceptions to their relatives and friends.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

Having outlined the salient features of Hamka's approach of interpreting the Qur'an, one can deduce that his method is based on the following principles:

1. The interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an as the first step.
2. The interpretation of the Qur'an by the *Sunnah* of the Prophet, when one does not encounter any explanation from the Qur'an itself.
3. If one does not find any interpretation from the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*, one can resort to the interpretations of the Companions. According to Hamka, the latter were the people who knew the best interpretation of the Qur'an after the Prophet. This can be deduced from the statement in which he praises Ibn Taymiyya's method of interpreting the Qur'an through *al-ma'tsûr* method.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Hamka, *Tafsir al-Azhar*, vol. V, p. 215.

<sup>39</sup> Q.S. al-Nisâ'/4: 58, "God doth command you to render back your trusts to those to whom they are due; and when ye judge between man and man, that ye judge with justice; verily how excellent is the teaching which He giveth you! for God is He Who heareth and seeth all things".

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>41</sup> Ibn Taymiyya resorts to the Companions, as the third source of interpretation after the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*. This is in accordance with his remark: "When the interpretation of the Qur'an is not discovered from the Qur'an itself or from the *Sunnah*, I will try to find it



4. When no explanation from the Qur'an, the *Sunnah* and the Companions is found, Hamka consulted the interpretation of certain Successors of the Companions.
5. If one does not encounter any of the above-mentioned sources. Hamka allowed scholars to apply *ijtihad*. *Ijtihad* here refers to all the fields of knowledge that can help one to understand the meaning and the purpose of the Qur'an. A case in point is Arabic philology because the Qur'an was revealed in the Arabic tongue, as God says: "With it came down the Spirit of Faith and Truth, To thy heart and mind, that thou mayest admonish, In the perspicuous Arabic tongue".<sup>42</sup> []

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from the Companions, for they were the most knowlegdeable, about that". See his book, *Muqaddimah fî Ushûl al-Tafsîr* (Kuwait: Dâr al-Qur'ân al-Karîm, 1971), p. 95.

<sup>42</sup> Q.S. al-Syu'arâ'/26: 193-195.