

## Abstract

This commentary examines the **interpretive pluralism** of the Quran across Islamic history—how different Muslim communities have read the same sacred text through **varying intellectual and spiritual lenses** shaped by their eras (legal, linguistic, mystical, theological, philosophical, scientific, etc.). Drawing on *The Study Quran*'s general introduction and its fifteen scholarly essays, we demonstrate that **multiple interpretive traditions** emerged over centuries, each uncovering unique meanings from the Quran while rooted in the **same revealed Word**. From the voluminous classical *tafsir* literature to Sufi **esoteric exegesis**, from juristic derivations of law to philosophical and scientific engagements, Muslims have continually **re-read the Quran in light of the totality of human knowledge** available to them <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> . We argue that this rich tradition of interpretation — far from being a deviation — is a **fulfillment of the Quran's depth**, which, as many scholars note, possesses **"fathomless" meanings by virtue of its Divine origin** <sup>2</sup> .

Generous quotations from *The Study Quran* essays illustrate how each interpretive approach (textual-linguistic, legal, mystical, theological, artistic, etc.) addressed the **needs and paradigms of its time**, yet all drew authority from the **same Quranic text**. In parallel, we integrate insights from contemporary scholar **Dr. Zia H. Shah** (via *The Quran and Science* blog) who exemplifies a modern scientific hermeneutic – applying today's scientific and even **AI-generated knowledge** to Quranic interpretation. Shah's work on the Quran and science, cosmology, evolution, and artificial intelligence is presented as a **legitimate extension** of Islam's intellectual legacy into the 21st century, in line with classical voices that welcomed all sound knowledge as tools to understand scripture <sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup> .

Ultimately, we argue that **no single interpretation can exhaust the Quran's meaning**. Its verses have spoken anew to each generation of believers. This **plurality of exegesis** testifies to a living scripture meant to engage the whole of human intellect and experience. Thus, in our era of unprecedented knowledge (and the advent of AI as a knowledge-synthesizer), the Quran invites being read afresh "in light of the totality of human knowledge" – just as past scholars engaged the best knowledge of their times <sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup> . We conclude with a reflective epilogue on the **spiritual significance of interpretive diversity** in the Quran and prospects for **Quranic reading in an AI-integrated world**.

## Introduction: A Scripture with Layered Meanings and Diverse Readings

**"All those who embark upon reading the Quran...can learn something about the world and about themselves through engagement with it,"** writes Ingrid Mattson <sup>5</sup> . Yet, as she observes, one's reading is inevitably shaped by **context**: *"Those who will learn the most are prepared to explore three contexts... The first is the context in which the Quran was revealed and has been transmitted, interpreted, and read over the centuries. The second is the reader's own personal context... And the third context is an understanding of the inner meaning of revealed terms."* <sup>6</sup> . This insight sets the stage for understanding Quranic interpretation as a **dynamic interplay** between the **fixed divine text** and the **changing lenses** of its readers. The Quran does not present its guidance in a vacuum; it entered history in 7th-century Arabia and immediately **invited reflection** on its verses in light of language, historical circumstance, and the spiritual state of the reader

<sup>7</sup> . Over time, as Islam spread and evolved, the Quran continued to be read “**beyond a naive reading**” <sup>5</sup> through ever-expanding contexts: new cultures, languages, intellectual frameworks, and existential questions.

From the outset, Muslims understood that **the Quran carries layered meanings**. A famous saying transmitted from the Prophet’s companions holds that “*No verse of the Quran has been revealed without its having a back (ẓahr) and a belly (baṭn). Every letter has a bound (ḥadd) and a point of ascent (muṭṭala’)*” <sup>8</sup> <sup>9</sup> . Classical exegetes interpreted these cryptic terms as referring to the **outward, literal meaning** of a verse and its **inward, esoteric meanings**, as well as the legal limits of its rulings and the transcendent insights to which it can elevate the reader <sup>10</sup> <sup>11</sup> . In other words, the Quran was understood to possess multiple layers – “**a semantic continuum from the most immediate and exterior to higher and higher levels of inner meaning**” <sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup> . This multi-layered nature ensured that as different seekers approached the text – whether grammarians, jurists, theologians, mystics, or philosophers – each could delve into **distinct depths of meaning** without exhausting the Quran’s wisdom <sup>2</sup> <sup>14</sup> .

Crucially, *The Study Quran’s* editors note that the Muslim tradition never established a single, fixed method of exegesis binding on all scholars. In fact, “*the Quranic commentary tradition never established unanimous rules for how to interpret the Quran. There was more than one hermeneutical theory in medieval Islam. Indeed, most commentators availed themselves of more than one method in the same work.*” <sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup> Competition and debate among different schools of thought led classical commentators often to **record multiple interpretations** of a single verse, sometimes without choosing a definitive stance <sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> . As Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes in the general introduction to *The Study Quran*, “*traditional commentators have often given multiple conflicting opinions regarding particular verses.*” Thus, we frequently find seminal commentators like al-Ṭabarī or Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī preserving a range of opinions on a verse – not only their own view, but also interpretations transmitted from earlier authorities that they felt deserved mention <sup>17</sup> <sup>19</sup> . This plurality was seen not as a flaw, but as a **strength of the tradition**, honoring the complexity of God’s speech. As Toby Mayer observes, “**deep faith in the text was seldom grounds to restrict its semantic range. On the contrary, the sense that the Quran was of Divine origin implied that its meanings were fathomless**” <sup>2</sup> <sup>20</sup> . In Islamic mysticism especially, the Quran was “*actively experienced as a portal within the finite into a transfinite, Divine dimension.*” <sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup>

From this perspective, **interpretive pluralism is inherent in the Quran’s reception**. The Quran **declares itself** a guidance and clarification for all people (*hudan li’l-nās*, 2:185) and a scripture whose verses are “**clear signs**” (*āyat bayyināt*). Yet it also contains **ambiguities and polyvalence** (as alluded to in 3:7, distinguishing *muḥkam* verses from *mutashābih*, clear versus allegorical). This ensured that as the **Muslim community expanded** in time and space, the Quran could address **new questions** and be read with **fresh eyes**. Indeed, the very **continuity of revelation** that the Quran emphasizes – presenting itself as the culmination of prior scriptures and the final reminder to humanity <sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> – suggests that engagement with **ever-increasing knowledge** is part of its intent. In Joseph Lombard’s words, the Quran teaches that throughout sacred history, “*prophets have been sent at different times to all human communities with revelations in different tongues, but their message was one: la ilaha illa’Llah – there is no god but God*” <sup>23</sup> . Humanity’s spiritual story is seen as one of repeated **forgetting and remembrance** of truth <sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup> . Each revelation addressed the needs of its time, yet affirmed eternal principles. Likewise, the Islamic understanding of the Quran as **the final revelation** implies it contains – sometimes implicitly – guidance suitable for all future contexts. Muslims thus felt compelled to “**think about [the Quran] and interact intellectually with it**”, as Nasr puts it, “*meditat[ing] upon and think[ing] about its teachings*”, rather than treating it as a closed text <sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup> .

In this introduction, we have sketched why **multiple interpretations** naturally arose around the Quran. The following sections will delve into specific interpretive traditions, each illustrated with scholarly insights from *The Study Quran* essays and commentary. We will explore how **legal scholars**, for example, developed systematic methods to derive law from the Quran, sometimes differing across schools; how **linguists and translators** grappled with the Quran's inimitable Arabic to convey its meaning to non-Arabs; how **theologians and philosophers** debated the Quran's view of God, creation, and fate; how **mystics (Sufis)** uncovered profound spiritual allegories in the text; and even how **artists** and craftsmen drew aesthetic inspiration from Quranic themes. In each case, we will see that the interpretive lens was influenced by the intellectual currents of the age – be it the rise of Arabic grammar, the encounter with Greek philosophy, or modern scientific discoveries – yet remained anchored in the conviction that the **Quran's words are alive**, yielding new insights without losing their core message.

Finally, we bring the discussion to our contemporary period, highlighting Dr. Zia Shah's scientific and AI-assisted Quranic commentary as a **modern continuation** of this pluralistic tradition. Just as **classical commentators** integrated “the scientific or historical understandings of their times” into tafsīr <sup>29</sup>, today's scholars like Shah argue that **the Quran must be engaged with current knowledge**, from evolutionary biology to artificial intelligence. This, we will argue, is not a break with tradition but its fulfillment – an affirmation that *all knowledge, if correctly understood, points back to the One Truth*. As Muzaffar Iqbal notes, the Quran itself “invites its readers to reflect on various aspects of the three manifest realms... the cosmos, the human self, and history”, setting **signs (āyāt) in creation** so that truth may be discerned <sup>30</sup> <sup>31</sup>. Classical luminaries like al-Ghazālī even wrote that “**the principles of [all] sciences... are not outside the Quran, for all of these sciences are derived from one of the seas of the knowledge of God**” <sup>32</sup> <sup>33</sup> – implying that studying nature, medicine, astronomy, etc., can enhance understanding of scripture <sup>34</sup> <sup>35</sup>. In this spirit, we will consider how an “**AI-integrated**” approach might compile humanity's vast interdisciplinary knowledge to shed new light on the Quran, while still requiring the **ethical and spiritual guidance of human scholars** <sup>36</sup> <sup>37</sup>.

Through these explorations, a central thesis emerges: **The Quran has always been “in conversation” with the expanding horizon of human knowledge**. The **diversity of Quranic interpretation** across time is a sign of the text's divine plenitude, accommodating multiple valid readings and **speaking to diverse circumstances**. Rather than undermining the Quran's authority, this pluralism attests to its **universal depth** and its capacity to **remain ever-relevant**. As we proceed, the evidence will show that to “**read the Quran in light of the totality of human knowledge**” – including the new “knowledge” gleaned by artificial intelligence – is not a modern innovation but the logical continuation of how Muslims have approached their scripture for centuries.

## I. The Quran in Its Self-Image: Revelation, Language, and Transmission

Any study of Quranic interpretation must begin with how Muslims **view the Quran itself**. In traditional Islamic theology, the Quran is not merely inspired by God; it is **the literal Word of God** (*kalām Allāh*), revealed in Arabic to Prophet Muhammad over 23 years <sup>38</sup> <sup>39</sup>. As Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami outlines, Muslims believe the Quran descended in stages – “*continuously revealed... bit by bit, often in response to existent circumstances and conditions*” <sup>40</sup> <sup>41</sup>. This belief has two important implications for interpretation:

Firstly, because Quranic verses were often tied to specific historical incidents (e.g. battles, questions from the Prophet's contemporaries, social dilemmas in the early community), understanding those **circumstances of revelation** (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) became a cornerstone of tafsīr. Already the Prophet's companions would explain verses by narrating when and why a verse was revealed <sup>42</sup> <sup>43</sup>. *The Study Quran* editors note that “much traditional Quranic interpretation... involves an examination of the linguistic, social, moral, and political context of the initial conditions of the revelation of a verse” <sup>44</sup>. Ignoring that context risks **misreading the Quran's intent**, especially on complex topics: “To ignore the conditions of the Prophet's community when verses on gender relations, religious diversity, or political authority were revealed is to risk misunderstanding the Quran.” <sup>43</sup>. Thus, classical commentaries meticulously preserved reports of what prompted a given revelation. For example, the verse “There is no compulsion in religion” (2:256) was linked to specific incidents preventing coercion in faith <sup>45</sup>, and knowing that background helps us grasp its proper scope. The awareness that the Quran addressed real-life situations gave rise to a principle: “one must not be hasty in drawing conclusions about legal or social norms from a surface reading of a few verses”, as Mattson warns <sup>46</sup>. The **legal essay** by Ahmad al-Ṭayyib echoes this: the Quran is “**a source of law; it is not a book of law**” in the manner of a statute code <sup>47</sup>. Verses that sound absolute may in fact be qualified by context or other verses <sup>46</sup> <sup>48</sup>. Thus, early on, Muslim scholars developed the science of “connecting the verses” (al-tafsīr bi'l-Qur'ān) – interpreting Quran by Quran, reading each passage in light of the whole, ensuring contextual nuance.

Secondly, the fact that the Quran was revealed in **Arabic language** and then preserved in that original language (unlike Christianity, where the Bible quickly moved into Greek/Latin) meant that **mastery of Arabic** became essential to interpretation. As Muhammad Abdel Haleem writes, “*The Quran, revealed in Arabic, has had a profound and lasting effect on the theology, language, and culture of Arab and non-Arab Islamic peoples... Theologically, it is the Arabic text, the direct Word of God, that is considered the true Quran*” <sup>49</sup>. All Muslims, even non-Arabs, strive to recite the Quran in Arabic to connect with the actual revealed words <sup>50</sup>. This led to an immense reverence for the *textual form* of the Quran – its exact letters, sounds, and pronunciation. As a result, Arabic linguistic sciences blossomed entirely **in service of the Quran**: “*The collected written text of the Quran was the first book in the Arabic language. It was the starting point around which the various branches of Arabic language studies were initiated and developed*” <sup>51</sup>. Significantly, Haleem notes that “*it was in order to ensure correct reading of the Quran, especially when non-Arabs began to accept Islam, that Arabic grammar was first written down and developed*” <sup>3</sup>. Likewise, Arabic phonetics (proper pronunciation, *tajwīd*) and rhetoric (*balāghah*) were elaborated by Muslims seeking to understand the Quran's miraculous eloquence <sup>52</sup> <sup>53</sup>. The great 8th–9th century grammarians (Sibawayh, al-Farrā', etc.) and later rhetoricians (al-Jurjānī, al-Zamakhsharī) grounded their works in Quranic examples. Many were Persians or non-Arabs, yet they **mastered Arabic** for the sake of Quran – “*non-Arabs have excelled in [Arabic studies] alongside Arabs since the early days of Islamic civilization. In fact, most classical works of Arabic grammar were written by Persians*” <sup>54</sup> <sup>55</sup>. This cross-cultural effort reinforced a belief that **the form of the Quran – its very language – is inimitable and divinely chosen**. Joseph Lumbard's essay on **Quran in translation** underlines that “*the vast majority of Muslims do not believe [the Quran's] language is of this world*” <sup>56</sup>. The Quran's Arabic is seen as sui generis – “*as though the poverty-stricken [fabric] of mortal language were, under the pressure of the Heavenly Word, broken into a thousand fragments*” <sup>57</sup>. In other words, normal human Arabic was shattered and transformed by the Quran into a vehicle of “**glittering splendour**” beyond compare <sup>58</sup>. This doctrine of *ʿijāz al-Qur'ān* (the Quran's inimitability) had two consequences: (1) It presented **translation** as inherently limiting – “*conveying the absolute and infinite by means of the relative and finite*” is daunting <sup>59</sup>, and as Pickthall famously said, “*The Quran cannot be translated*” <sup>60</sup>. Translations are viewed only as **tafsīr in another language**, never the Quran itself <sup>61</sup>. (2) It pushed interpreters to **analyze the Arabic intensively** – every grammar subtlety, word choice, and stylistic

device – to glean meaning. This gave rise to a genre of **linguistic tafsīr**, exemplified by scholars like al-Zamakhsharī (who, as a Muʿtazilite theologian, hung doctrinal arguments on grammar) and al-Bayḍāwī <sup>62</sup> <sup>63</sup>. It also meant that variant **Qurʾānic readings** (*qirāʾāt*) – the seven or ten canonical recitation traditions with slight differences in pronunciation or diacritics – were studied for interpretive impact. For instance, one reading of 2:184 yields “*fast a number of other days*” while another can mean “*a number of days later*”, both understood as valid implications <sup>64</sup>. While *The Study Quran* commentary does not foreground qirāʾāt differences, it acknowledges that these variant readings, all considered authentic, **expand the semantic richness** of verses <sup>65</sup> <sup>66</sup>. The very allowance of multiple readings in revelation itself was seen as a mercy making the text multi-faceted.

In summary, the Quran’s **self-presentation and early history** taught Muslims that: (a) Context and contingency matter for interpretation (since verses responded to events), and (b) the Arabic form is sacrosanct, requiring rigorous linguistic analysis and cautious translation. These principles underlie many classical commentaries. For example, when approaching a legal verse, a jurist would ask “*Is this verse general or intended for a particular situation?*”; a grammarian would parse the case endings to see if two meanings are possible; a theologian would consider if an *ambiguous word* needs figurative interpretation to avoid conflict with doctrine (as with verses on God’s “Hand” or “ascending the Throne”). Meanwhile, outside scholars learned Arabic to access the Quran in original, and diverse ethnic groups – Persians, Turks, Indians, Malays – all adopted the Arabic script, in part out of veneration for the Quran <sup>67</sup> <sup>68</sup>. As Haleem notes, **Arabic’s survival as a unifying literary language owes everything to the Quran** <sup>69</sup> <sup>70</sup>.

By the same token, the need to express Quranic teachings to non-Arabic audiences eventually demanded translations, despite reservations. Lombard’s essay details the long history of translating the Quran – from early Persian and Greek translations to countless modern languages. Translators often called their works “Interpretation” (Taftir or Tafsīr) to stress they were **approximate**. The challenges they faced were immense. How to translate terms with no equivalent (e.g. *taqwa*, *rahmah*)? How to convey the Quran’s highly **rhythmic and elliptical style** in another tongue? As Lombard notes, “*reflecting upon the inimitability of the Quran has led many to conclude that the nature of Quranic Arabic is among the greatest miracles of Islam*” <sup>71</sup>. Arberry, a famous translator, admitted any translation is “*but a poor copy of the glittering splendour of the original*” <sup>58</sup>. This humbling realization perhaps made translators **more cautious interpreters**: they had to choose one meaning where the Arabic might allow several. Thus, each translation is itself a kind of **exegesis**, often influenced by the translator’s perspective (Pickthall’s more literal and pious Victorian English, Yusuf Ali’s theologically explanatory footnotes, etc.). In our context, recognizing translation as interpretation underscores the theme of pluralism: an Indonesian Muslim reading a Bahasa translation may get a slightly different nuance than an Arab reading the original or an English reader with a scholarly commentary. Yet all seek to approach the same divine message.

In sum, the early Muslim community established foundational approaches that inform all later interpretations: **contextualization** (historical and literary) and **textual fidelity** (linguistic rigor). Equipped with these, we now turn to how distinct fields and communities – law, theology, mysticism, etc. – each **engaged the Quran uniquely**, generating a tapestry of tafsīr literature unmatched in volume by any other scriptural tradition <sup>1</sup>.

## II. The Proliferation of Tafsīr: Classical Quranic Commentaries and Their Diversity

By the end of the first Islamic century, the practice of interpreting the Quran had given rise to dedicated teachers (such as the companions Ibn ‘Abbās and Ibn Mas‘ūd and their students) who began compiling exegetical remarks. In the 2nd/8th century, the first full **tafsīr** works appeared. Walid Saleh’s essay “**Quranic Commentaries**” opens by noting the staggering magnitude and continuity of this tradition: “*The Quranic interpretive tradition, tafsīr, is one of the most voluminous of Islamic literary genres, second only to the legal tradition. All generations of Muslims in nearly every Islamic land have consistently produced Quranic commentaries that reflect their outlook on fundamental issues confronting Muslim societies, making this genre a continuous record of what Muslims of different lands and different ages have thought on various topics.*” <sup>72</sup> <sup>73</sup> . This statement encapsulates several key points:

- **Every generation and region produced tafsīr:** From Morocco to Indonesia, from the 8th century to the present, learned Muslims wrote commentaries. These works inevitably **mirror the concerns and “outlook” of their contexts** <sup>73</sup> . For example, early commentaries might focus on explaining uncommon Arabic vocabulary and basic narratives (since the language was still understood by listeners, but details needed clarification). As Islamic theology developed, commentators like al-Māturīdī (d. 944) and al-Ash‘arī (d. 935) brought kalām discussions into tafsīr (e.g. disputing the Mu‘tazilī interpretations of God’s attributes within their exegesis) <sup>74</sup> <sup>75</sup> . When Greek logic and philosophy penetrated the Muslim world (9th–10th centuries), we see scholars like al-Fārābī and Avicenna using Quranic verses philosophically, and later commentators such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209) integrating philosophical arguments and cosmology into his 32-volume commentary <sup>76</sup> <sup>77</sup> . In periods of Mongol invasion and social turmoil, mystical and eschatological commentaries (e.g. al-Kāshānī’s Sufi tafsīr or al-Suyūṭī’s minor works) proliferated, emphasizing the afterlife and spiritual salvation. In colonial and modern times, reformist and scientific tafsīrs emerged (e.g. Muhammad ‘Abduh’s *Tafsīr al-Manār* in the early 20th century with an anti-superstition, rationalist bent; Sayyid Qutb’s *Fi Zilāl al-Qur’ān* in mid-20th century with a political and activist tone). **Each tafsīr is in dialogue with its time.** As Saleh observes, this makes the corpus a priceless record of Muslim thought across eras <sup>73</sup> .
- **Lack of a single methodology:** Unlike Islamic law (fiqh) which developed *uṣūl al-fiqh* – systematic principles for deriving rulings – the tafsīr tradition remained methodologically plural. “*Unpredictable*” is Saleh’s word <sup>78</sup> . Commentators were not bound to follow one school of thought exclusively in exegesis. A single commentator might use multiple tools: linguistics, Prophetic *ḥadīth*, earlier authorities’ opinions, personal reasoning (*ijtihād*), mystical insight, etc., side by side. There were certainly *trends* or *genres* of tafsīr: e.g. **narrative/ḥadīth-based tafsīr** (like al-Ṭabarī, compiling earlier reports), **legal tafsīr** (like al-Jaṣṣāṣ for the Ḥanafī school, focusing on verses of *ahkām*), **grammatical tafsīr** (like Abu Hayyān’s *Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, exploring grammatical nuances), **theological tafsīr** (al-Bayḍāwī, synthesizing Ash‘arī doctrine and al-Zamakhsharī’s linguistic brilliance), **allegorical or mystical tafsīr** (e.g. Ibn ‘Arabī’s disciple al-Kāshānī or earlier Sufi hints in al-Qushayrī). But these are not mutually exclusive categories; many works combine elements. Saleh notes that even the staunchly literalist or traditionist commentators would incorporate philological analysis when needed <sup>79</sup> <sup>75</sup> , while rationalist ones would still cite early authorities. There was a **shared reservoir** of interpretive material and no **orthodoxy police** in tafsīr (until perhaps modern times when some revivalists became very exclusivist). Only really extreme interpretations (those verging on

heresy or seen as esoteric secrets for the elite) were sometimes censured or kept esoteric. For instance, Ismāʿīlī Shīʿī commentators like Nāṣir Khusraw had very philosophical/allegorical readings not accepted outside their circles, and Sunni scholars would warn common folk against those. But by and large, mainstream tafsīrs from very different perspectives all remained in circulation.

- **Unity vs. diversity in classical vs. modern periods:** Saleh intriguingly comments that *“the tafsīr tradition [of the classical period] displayed far more unity than in the modern period. Many modern exegetes have abandoned the dictates and methodologies of the classical tradition, interpreting the Quran according to ideological stances that reduce the subtleties of revelation to the predilections of [the] present”* <sup>80</sup>. This is a critical perspective: it suggests that pre-modern commentators, despite differences, shared a broad commitment to **certain common reference points** – e.g. deep respect for Prophetic sayings and early authorities, belief in the supra-rational nature of the text (even rationalists like Zamakhsharī believed in the Quran’s miraculous eloquence and would not deny established religious tenets), and a reluctance to let personal whim dictate exegesis. By contrast, in the modern era, some commentators (he might be alluding to 20th-century nationalist or Islamist or secularist writers) have sometimes imposed *modern ideologies* onto the text, departing from classical nuance. For example, a modernist might explain miracles as mere metaphors for natural processes (to appease rationalism), or an Islamist activist might read every verse in a political revolutionary light, or conversely a secular liberal Muslim might ignore centuries of scholarship to assert novel interpretations aligning with contemporary values. Saleh sees a danger in **“reducing the subtleties of revelation”** to modern predilections <sup>81</sup>. In other words, classical pluralism still operated within bounds of traditional epistemology, whereas modern pluralism can be more fragmented. This observation will be worth revisiting when we discuss modern scientific tafsīr and AI: how to incorporate new knowledge **without** falling into a subjective imposition on the text. The ideal is to **expand** understanding, not distort it.

It is instructive to see how classical scholars categorized tafsīr works. Saleh mentions an attempt to classify by **function and scope** rather than by school <sup>82</sup>. One such division is into: **(1) Encyclopedic commentaries** – massive compendia aiming to gather all prior knowledge (al-Ṭabarī is the prototype, or later al-Suyūṭī’s *al-Durr al-Manthūr* which compiles hadiths and reports on each verse) <sup>83</sup>. **(2) Madrasa commentaries / concise summaries** – works used for teaching, often summaries of the big ones (e.g. the *Jalālayn* – a short Sunni commentary by two scholars, or *Bayḍawī*’s which condensed al-Zamakhsharī with orthodox notes, widely used in madrasas). And **(3) Specialized commentaries** – focusing on one aspect (law, grammar, mysticism, etc.) or addressing specific questions. However, as Saleh notes, **“most Quranic commentaries use more than one method and address more than one issue”**, so such categorization is imperfect <sup>82</sup>. A single scholar might write multiple kinds of tafsīr: e.g. al-Ṭabrisī (12th c. Imāmī Shīʿīte) wrote a large comprehensive tafsīr (*Majmaʿ al-Bayān*) and also an epitome; Fakhr al-Rāzī wrote an enormous commentary indulging in theology, but it also contains basic narrations. Thus, no rigid taxonomy suffices.

One notable thread in tafsīr history is the interplay between **exoteric (outer) and esoteric (inner) exegesis**. Toby Mayer’s essay **“Traditions of Esoteric and Sapiential Quranic Commentary”** dives into those streams often sidelined by legalistic or literalist narratives. He highlights that **mystical and philosophical commentators** never accepted that Quranic verses have only one obvious meaning. Indeed, *“a paradox of fundamentalism,”* Mayer writes, *“is that it sacrifices what it champions. If [a movement] restricts by scripture (with slogans like ‘Back to the Quran!’), it does so only by a restriction of scripture [itself]. By a suppressed premise equating multivalence with doubt, Muslim fundamentalist exegesis founds univalence on [texts such as 2:2: ‘This is the Book in which there is no doubt’ – meaning, they claim, no plurality of sense].”* <sup>84</sup> <sup>85</sup>. In

plainer terms, movements that insist on a single, **“literal” interpretation** as the only truth are actually **limiting** the Quran’s intent. Historically, **Sufi and sapiential traditions** vehemently opposed such limitation. As Mayer notes, *“these long-running [esoteric] traditions show that, historically, deep faith in the text was seldom grounds to restrict its semantic range. On the contrary, [believing] the Quran [is] of Divine origin implied that its meanings were fathomless.”*<sup>86</sup> . He cites Quran 31:27 – that if all trees were pens and all seas ink, the Words of God would not be exhausted – as proof that *“the scripture’s boundless meaningfulness typifies Islamic mysticism.”*<sup>86</sup> . The great mystic Rūzbihān al-Baqlī (d. 1209) wrote of the Quran: *“I found that the pre-eternal Word had no limit in the outward or the inward... underlying every one of Its letters is an ocean of secrets and a river of lights”*<sup>87 88</sup> . Such statements exemplify why Sufi tafsīrs often read verses as allusions to stages of the soul, divine love, etc., far beyond the law-oriented surface. Sunni orthodoxy sometimes viewed excessive allegorization with caution (fearing it might override Sharia or doctrinal tenets), but by and large, mystical commentaries (like al-Qushayrī’s or Ibn ‘Ajlaba’s) came to be **accepted as complementary** readings, provided they did not negate the outward Sharia meaning. Indeed, many mainstream scholars were also Sufis or influenced by Sufism (e.g. *Fakhr al-Rāzī* integrated mystical insights; *Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Bayḍāwī* in 13th c. at times hints at esoteric layers; the *Jalālayn* commentary includes occasional Sufi notes too).

Another dimension was **Sunni-Shi’i differences in tafsīr**. While sharing most interpretive methods, Shi’a commentators (especially Imāmī Twelvers) had distinctive concerns: validating the spiritual authority of the Prophet’s family (the Imams) and reading verses in light of that. Many early Shi’i tafsīrs were lost or remained in manuscript, but later ones like *al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s al-Mīzān* (20th c.) synthesize philosophy and Shi’i tradition. There are also the **Ismā’īlī** esoteric commentaries (e.g. by Ja’far al-Sadiq as claimed, or by Nāṣir Khusraw) that often interpret everything symbolically (e.g. every mention of “sun” or “light” as symbols for the Imams or for gnosis). These represent a far end of the spectrum of plurality. Sunnī commentators like al-Ghazālī and al-Suyūṭī acknowledged *batini* (inner) meanings but cautioned they must not contradict the *zahir* (outward).

**The Mu’tazilites and other theological schools** also produced their own tafsīrs or influences. Saleh points out that in the 10th century, we see a **“flood of philological interpretation”** partially as a reaction to each other’s methods<sup>89 90</sup> . For example, Mu’tazilite theologians, upholding pure monotheism and human free will, interpreted verses on God’s attributes or predestination differently from traditionalists. The Mu’tazilī al-Zamakhsharī’s tafsīr (12th c.) was so valued for its linguistic mastery that Sunni scholars like al-Bayḍāwī essentially reworked it but **filtered its theology**. Over time, Sunnism managed to **integrate useful elements** of Mu’tazilī tafsīrs while officially rejecting their more heterodox ideas. Meanwhile, Ash’arite and Māturīdī theologians wrote tafsīrs to reinforce their stances (e.g. **al-Māturīdī** wrote a tafsīr showing a more “rational” Sunnism concurrent with al-Ṭabarī’s more traditionalist approach<sup>91</sup> ). Thus, multiple interpretive traditions coexisted even **within** Sunnism, though a broad consensus eventually emerged on core creed points (e.g. allegorical interpretation of anthropomorphic verses was endorsed to a degree, to avoid literal anthropomorphism, but extreme reinterpretation was discouraged; this balanced approach was championed by thinkers like al-Nawawī and Ibn Hajar).

Importantly, **no commentary “cancelled” the earlier ones**; they layered atop each other. Nasr notes in his introduction that *“the sheer size of the commentary literature”* meant modern scholars have barely scratched the surface of studying it<sup>92</sup> . Yet even modern reformers often reference classical tafsīr to legitimize their interpretations. The tradition is so rich that almost any legitimate new idea has some precedent or at least analogy in earlier writings.

To give a concrete taste of classical pluralism, consider the interpretation of the **“Light Verse”** (Quran 24:35, *Allāhu nūru'l-samāwāti wa'l-arḍ* – “God is the Light of the heavens and earth...”). This verse received drastically different treatments: literalist commentators would carefully explain the parable of God’s light in terms of a lamp, niche, glass, etc., perhaps saying it illustrates God’s guidance in the heart of a believer. Sufi commentators, by contrast, wrote volumes of esoteric commentary on this single verse – e.g. Ibn ‘Arabī saw it as describing the hierarchy of being and the illumination of the perfected soul by the Divine Light. Philosophers read it as metaphysical symbolism of God as Necessary Being (light) emanating existence to all contingent beings (the glass, lamp, olive oil representing various levels of reality) <sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup>. The verse became a locus classicus for multi-layered exegesis; and most mainstream tafsīrs would list several interpretations: from a simple one (God’s light = His guidance or Quran) to mystical ones (God’s light = Muhammad or the divine spark in humans). This was accepted – the verse was understood to legitimately carry many truths simultaneously.

Similarly, the **Opening Chapter (al-Fātiḥa)** invites many readings: “Guide us to the straight path” was interpreted variously as: guide us to Islam (basic meaning), or guide us to deeper knowledge (Sufi meaning), or continue guiding us (since we are already Muslim, meaning keep us firm), etc. The phrase “those who have incurred wrath” was interpreted by many as an allusion to past nations like the Jews, and “those who went astray” as the Christians <sup>93</sup>, but other commentators said these could be general categories of sinners or hypocrites <sup>94</sup> <sup>93</sup>. *The Study Quran* commentary duly notes the **“diversity of views”** here as a matter of record <sup>93</sup>. Such diversity did not lead to schism; both readings could be true simultaneously – one historically specific, one universal.

This flexibility was not chaotic relativism; it was anchored in the idea that the **Quran’s richness accommodates multiple valid insights** as long as they do not violate core tenets. Nasr articulates the *Study Quran’s* aim as giving “a reasonable account of the diversity of views and interpretations in matters of law, theology, spirituality, and sacred history put forth by various traditional Islamic authorities” <sup>95</sup>. In doing so, the editors hope to show readers that believing the Quran to be God’s Word never prevented Muslims from **thinking critically and creatively** about it <sup>27</sup>. Contrary to a misconception that scriptural inerrancy leads to blind literalism, the Islamic tradition saw **intellectual engagement as an act of devotion**. “*The Quran invites its readers to meditate and think about its teachings,*” Nasr insists, and historically Muslims did so on “various levels” – legal, philosophical, mystical <sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup>.

To conclude this section: by the height of the classical era (say 12th–15th centuries), **Quranic exegesis had branched into multiple rich streams** – yet all these fed into a great river of tradition. Scholars were often aware of other approaches: e.g. a legal-minded mufasssīr like the 14th-century Imām al-Qurṭubī, in his primarily law-focused tafsīr, still covers linguistic points from earlier grammarians and relates Sufi interpretations from al-Qushayrī. He might critique some, but he preserves them. Similarly, the encyclopedic commentators like Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) set a precedent of including *all major opinions* transmitted up to his time, then gently indicating his preference. This early model established **plurality within one work**. Later commentators either abbreviated that or added new layers (e.g. Shi’i traditions in a Shi’i tafsīr). Thus, the **continuity and growth of tafsīr** was cumulative and dialogical. In modern times, when some have tried to “start from scratch” with only the Quran (often ignoring classical exegesis), they often end up reinventing points already discussed or, worse, making errors due to lack of awareness. The tradition’s longevity suggests a **balance**: openness to fresh insight **tempered by respect for inherited wisdom**. As Nasr’s team notes, they drew almost entirely on traditional commentaries in their new work, believing it would be arrogant and unwise to sever that link <sup>96</sup> <sup>97</sup>.

We will now examine specific *lenses* or disciplines and how each cultivated a particular approach to the Quran, quoting the *Study Quran* essays to illustrate the breadth of interpretations.

### III. Legal and Ethical Lenses: Deriving Law and Morality from the Quran

One of the earliest driving forces for Quranic interpretation was the need to understand its **legal injunctions**. The Quran contains hundreds of verses related to law and conduct – from rituals like prayer and fasting, to civil law like marriage, divorce, inheritance, to criminal punishments, and social directives. However, these verses are scattered across the text and often given **without detailed explanation** (the specifics being elaborated by the Prophet’s Sunnah). Muslims thus had to interpret the Quranic legal verses in light of Prophetic practice and Arabic usage, and as new situations arose, deduce how the Quranic principles apply.

Ahmad al-Ṭayyib’s essay “**The Quran as Source of Islamic Law**” emphasizes that the Quran is indeed the **foundation of Sharī’a**, but its legal texts are intertwined with spiritual and moral teachings. He notes the distinction between **Makkan verses** (mostly from the Prophet’s early period in Mecca) and **Madinan verses** (from the community life in Medina) <sup>38</sup> <sup>39</sup>. In Makkah, the revelations focused on faith, theology, and moral fundamentals – preparing a worldview. In Madinah, once a Muslim society was formed, verses increasingly dealt with **specific laws and social regulations** <sup>98</sup> <sup>99</sup>. As Ṭayyib puts it, “*The principal objective during the Madinan period was to promulgate laws for the creation of an Islamic society*”, covering family life, business, judiciary, governance, etc. <sup>100</sup> <sup>99</sup>. Therefore, knowing whether a verse is Makkan or Madinan can affect its interpretation: a seemingly general statement might actually address a particular context.

Crucially, *The Study Quran* (in commentary and essays) repeatedly warns against simplistic reading of legal verses in isolation. Mattson cautioned that “*even apparently unambiguous declarations might in fact be limited in application or scope*” <sup>46</sup> <sup>48</sup>. For example, the Quran says “As for thieves, cut their hands” (5:38). Literal reading alone might not reveal numerous caveats: how severe must the theft be? Is repentance considered? The Prophet and early caliphs clarified these conditions (e.g. a minimum value, not during famine, etc.). Classical jurists deduced these by reading Quranic “*legal maxims*” as a coherent system. They developed principles like **‘ām and khāṣ (general vs. specific statements)**, **nasikh and mansukh (abrogation)**, and **maqāsid (objectives of law)** to resolve apparent tensions. For instance, Quran 2:180 seemingly requires bequests to parents and relatives, but classical scholars considered it superseded (mansūkh) by the fixed inheritance shares in 4:11–12 <sup>101</sup>. This is an interpretive choice – not all agreed on what is abrogated (Shāfi‘ī jurists thought 2:180 was abrogated, others like some Ṭāhīrīs did not). So even in law, multiple opinions arose. *The Study Quran* commentary often notes such differences: e.g. on the verse “retaliation is prescribed for you in murder” (2:178), some early scholars held it was later restricted by 4:92; others held it as general. Dagli’s commentary in 2:190–193 on **jihad** verses highlights “*the range of opinion on abrogation*” regarding fighting: “*An expansive view of legal abrogation allows for [the idea that] many verses dealing with war [are abrogated by one or two verses].*” <sup>102</sup> But he notes that this is highly debated and context is key <sup>102</sup> <sup>103</sup>. We will revisit war verses in the next section.

Al-Ṭayyib’s essay insists that Quranic law retains **primacy and timeless authority**: “*The Quran thus contains explicit statements that it is the sacred source and primary authority for Muslim legislation... and no change of time or place can affect this primacy.*” <sup>104</sup> <sup>105</sup>. Now, this does not mean every historical Islamic law is directly

from Quran; rather the **principle** is that Sharī'a must be rooted in Quran and Prophetic Sunnah, not in human whim. However, the interpretation of *how* a Quranic rule applies can differ. For example, Qur'an 5:6 commands washing certain limbs for ablution. The schools of law (madhabs) debated details: does wiping over socks count? Is touching a woman breaking wudu (Shāfi'ī said yes based on literal 4:43, 5:6; Ḥanafī said no based on interpretation that "touch" implies sexual intercourse or that hadith clarified it)? These are interpretive divergences within the confines of belief in the verse's authority.

One illuminating example of differing legal exegesis is the Quran's stance on **polygyny**: 4:3 permits marrying up to four women *"if you fear you cannot deal justly with orphans, then marry... two, three, or four; but if you fear you cannot be just, then [marry] only one."* Some classical commentators read it as generally allowing up to four, with an implicit condition of justice. Modern reformist readers like Muhammad Abduh argued the verse actually implies a strict condition – justice – and since another verse (4:129) says *"You will never be able to be just between wives"*, effectively the Quran discourages multiple wives. Thus, some contemporary interpreters construe it as practically monogamy-leaning. Traditionalists disagree, saying the verse's plain permission remains while urging fairness. Here we see an example where **social values** of an era (modern egalitarian views) influence interpretation. *The Study Quran* notes such modern takes but frames them within traditional discussion of the justice condition <sup>94</sup>. This again highlights how **ethico-legal exegesis** can evolve.

Maria M. Dakake's essay "**Quranic Ethics, Human Rights, and Society**" directly addresses how Muslims derive values and social norms from the Quran, and how modern perceptions sometimes clash with Quranic paradigms. She begins by acknowledging widespread **misunderstandings** of Islamic ethics, partly due to piecemeal reading of the Quran: *"discussions of these issues are scattered throughout the Quran, and a full understanding... can only be gained by considering the various Quranic statements on [a topic] as a whole and in relation to one another"* <sup>106</sup>. This is a crucial methodological point: one cannot cherry-pick a verse on say, gender roles, without balancing it against other verses and the Prophetic example. She also notes that **some Quranic teachings are very explicit ("clear rules and laws"), while others are broader ethical principles meant to guide behavior in unspecified situations** <sup>107</sup>. Often, it is these broader principles (like justice, compassion, consultation, etc.) that get overlooked, even though they should shape an Islamic society beyond the letter of specific ordinances <sup>108</sup>.

For instance, the Quran enjoins **shūrā** (mutual consultation) in communal affairs (42:38) – a principle many see as the basis for consultative governance, even if not a detailed political system. If a society focuses only on enforcing punishments but ignores the Quran's stress on mercy, charity, and consultation, it skews Quranic ethics. Dakake further cautions that people often **mistake cultural practices for Quranic norms**: *"Quranic social norms are sometimes assumed to be adequately reflected in the current laws, customs, and practices in widely differing Islamic countries; this is not always the case"* <sup>109</sup> <sup>110</sup>. Indeed, local cultures (patriarchal customs, for example) might be at odds with Quranic ideals (e.g. the Quran improved women's rights in inheritance and divorce in 7th century context, yet some later cultures curtailed women's agency beyond what Quran requires). Recognizing this, modern reformers often go back to the Quran's text to critique later accretions – another form of interpretive renewal.

Finally, she highlights a tension: **Islamic ethics are often judged by modern secular standards** which are considered "universal" in Western discourse <sup>111</sup> <sup>112</sup>. While Islam shares much with other religious ethical systems (honesty, charity, sanctity of life, etc.), it also **differs from secular-liberal ethos in key ways**. For example, Islam places weight on community rights and duties (not just individual autonomy), on the sacred over the purely material, on divine authority over human opinion in matters of right and wrong. So issues

like **human rights** in Islam can't be a carbon copy of the UN Declaration; they derive from the Quran's own balance of rights and responsibilities under God. Dakake encourages understanding the Quran **on its own terms** first, rather than forcing it into contemporary molds <sup>111</sup> <sup>113</sup> . This itself is a mode of interpretation – resisting *presentism* (reading present values into the text) while still applying eternal Quranic principles to new contexts in a thoughtful way. Her essay goes on to enumerate five key principles of Quranic social ethics (community, justice, dignity, etc.) and how they underpin specific rulings <sup>114</sup> .

In the classical period, legal scholars (the fuqahā') wrote fewer full Quran commentaries, but they did author works on "*Ayāt al-Aḥkām*" (verses of rulings). They would gather all verses on, say, inheritance, and interpret them systematically. Differences in tafsīr often corresponded to differences in fiqh. For example, does the Quran allow **talaq (divorce)** to be pronounced three times at once (the Sunni practice evolved that way) or only once per waiting period (as some say Quran implies)? The Khārijite sect reading of Quran took a very hardline approach (no forgiveness for grave sinners based on certain verses), whereas the mainstream Sunni understanding tempered texts about punishment with others about mercy <sup>115</sup> <sup>116</sup> .

An interesting case is **slavery** – the Quran addressed it in a world where it was the norm, by encouraging freeing slaves and instituting rights, but never outright prohibited it (that came later through interpretive ethical extension). Many modern commentators interpret Quranic ethos as pointing to abolition (given repeated encouragement to free slaves as expiation for sins, etc., implying that is a moral good). This is how Islamic law itself, via interpretation, can evolve ethically: by emphasizing certain Quranic values (e.g. human equality) to diminish practices tolerated in early Islam (like slavery or concubinage) under changed moral consensus. Such evolution, though, is debated – it must be done carefully to argue it's within the Quran's objectives and not contradict an explicit text. Hence, interpretive pluralism has boundaries: one cannot legitimately interpret a clear prohibition (like interest/usury in 2:275ff) to suddenly mean it's allowed just because modern economics likes it – that would be seen as bending the text to whim. But one can explore, for instance, what exactly *riba* (usury) entails or exceptions, which jurists do.

In summary, **legal interpretation of the Quran** produced a spectrum of opinions on details, but also a consensus on fundamentals. Diversity came from different methodologies (some literal, some analogical, some looking at objectives), from different hadith usages, and from context differences. Yet all considered themselves faithful to the Quran. The tradition of **fiqh** ensured that by the 10th century there were established schools, each with its preferred tafsīr stances, but even within schools, debate continued. Today, re-readings of the Quran for law (on issues like gender, finance, criminal law) are still happening, often invoking classical views that were minority or reinterpreting context. This shows **the Quran's legal verses are not self-executing code – they demand human interpretation**, and thus display pluralism. As *The Study Quran* notes, "*even passages that appear universal – e.g. 'cut the thief's hand' – were understood by jurists with qualifications and conditions, based on other Quranic principles and the Prophet's practice*" <sup>46</sup> <sup>48</sup> . There's an underlying principle that while the Quran is perfect, **our understanding is not guaranteed to be perfect** <sup>117</sup> – a point Dr. Zia Shah also makes when discussing evolution: we may fully believe the Quran is God's word, "*nevertheless, our understanding of the Quran, given our human limitations, can be flawed*" <sup>117</sup> . Thus Muslims always left room for debate and improvement in interpretation, which is itself a doctrinally supported idea: the Prophet said a judge who errs after trying his best gets one reward, and if correct gets double – implying multiple sincere interpretations can coexist.

## IV. Theological and Philosophical Lenses: Creed, Cosmology, and Reason

The Quran is not a systematic treatise on theology, but it **presents doctrines** (about God's nature, the unseen world, human destiny, etc.) that early Muslims sought to understand and sometimes philosophically elaborate. Thus emerged *'ilm al-kalām* (Islamic theology) and *falāsifah* (the Islamic philosophers), who often engaged the Quran to support or derive metaphysical insights. Mustafa Muhaqqiq Damad's essay "**The Quran and Schools of Islamic Theology and Philosophy**" outlines how various schools drew from the Quran in formulating their worldviews. He writes: "*Muslim theologians and philosophers, like all Muslims, look upon the Quran as a most important reality and rely on it in their debates... In theological and philosophical disputations, full attention is paid to Quranic teachings.*" <sup>118</sup> <sup>119</sup> . However, their **interpretations could differ sharply**, because theology often involves resolving apparent paradoxes in scripture.

**Key theological debates** where Quranic interpretation was pivotal included: Is the Quran itself **created or uncreated**? (The Mu'tazilites famously said *created*, to safeguard God's unity; Sunnis and Shi'a said *uncreated*, God's eternal speech). Verses like 85:22, speaking of the Quran in the "Preserved Tablet", were marshaled to imply its pre-temporal existence <sup>120</sup> <sup>121</sup> . Another debate: **anthropomorphism vs. transcendence** – the Quran speaks of God's "Hand", "Throne", "face", etc. Early pietists took them *bilā kayf* (without asking how), while Mu'tazilites and later mainstream explained them metaphorically (Hand = power, etc.) <sup>122</sup> <sup>123</sup> . For instance, Quran 20:5 says "*The All-Merciful rose over the Throne.*" A literal image of God sitting was unacceptable to most theologians; they interpreted "rose" as "established authority" or left it as a metaphor for dominion <sup>124</sup> <sup>125</sup> . Philosophers like Avicenna, influenced by Neoplatonism, might interpret "*Throne*" as the highest heaven or the totality of creation, etc. These differences were recorded in tafsīrs: *The Study Quran* commentary on such verses often lists: some say it means this, others that <sup>125</sup> <sup>123</sup> .

Another major theological issue: **predestination vs. free will**. The Quran has verses that emphasize God's absolute decree ("*Allah leads astray whom He wills and guides whom He wills*") and verses highlighting human responsibility ("*Whoever wills, let him believe; whoever wills, let him disbelieve*"). Various schools leaned on one set or harmonized them differently. The **Mu'tazilites** (champions of free will and divine justice) interpreted "leads astray" verses as God merely allowing people's own choice or as metaphor for "abandoning to consequence". Ash'arites (mainstream Sunni theology) taught a doctrine of *kasb* (acquisition) wherein God creates all acts but humans *acquire* the moral act by their intention – a complicated compromise. In Quran 3:178, "*We only grant them respite that they may increase in sin*", there is commentary mention of Ash'arite vs Mu'tazilite debate whether God *wants* people to sin or just permits it <sup>126</sup> <sup>127</sup> . The commentary cites Fakhr al-Rāzī describing an Ash'arī-Mu'tazilī argument on if verses mean God literally wills disbelief of some (Ash'arī view of divine omnipotence) or not (Mu'tazilī view of divine justice cannot will evil) <sup>126</sup> <sup>128</sup> . Thus, theology drove interpretive divergence on such verses. Damad notes that "*from the beginning of kalām, debates about the eternity vs. created nature of the Quran and about miracles (i'jāz) emerged*" <sup>129</sup> <sup>130</sup> . Also, philosophical concepts like **cosmology and the nature of the soul** were read into verses. E.g., philosophers allegorized *angels* as intelligences or natural forces, whereas orthodox said they are real beings.

The **Islamic philosophers** (Fārābī, Avicenna, etc.) were less commentary-writers and more conceptually using Quranic ideas. Yet their influence appears in later tafsīrs: e.g. the notion of "*First Intellect*" emanating is not explicit in Quran, but some philosophical tafsīrs interpreted "*Allah's Throne upon the waters*" (11:7) in metaphysical terms of God's creative command over primordial substance. Philosopher-theologian

commentators like *al-Rāzī* or later *Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī* and *al-Bayḍāwī* engaged such readings. There are also akbarian (Ibn 'Arabi's school) esoteric interpretations: e.g. Ibn 'Arabi interpreted the verse "*I breathed into him of My spirit*" about Adam as meaning the *Reality of Muhammad* or the Divine self-disclosure into man. These mystical-philosophical readings see scripture as a set of symbols pointing to metaphysical truths.

Notably, Islamic theology, unlike Christian, didn't generate multiple "canonical" tafsīrs per sect that totally diverged (except perhaps some Shī'i works). Instead, theologians mostly commented within broadly same frameworks or influenced one another. For example, Mu'tazilite Zamakhsharī's interpretations were often preserved by Sunni Bayḍāwī with slight commentary. The interplay is evident in *The Study Quran* commentary's references: "*some say verse means X (Mu'tazilite view), others say Y (Ash'arite view)*", letting readers see the spectrum <sup>131</sup> <sup>127</sup> .

M. Muhaqqiq Damad's essay points out that **philosophers too were deeply influenced by the Quran**, even when using Greek ideas: "*The Quranic revelation created the worldview within which Islamic philosophers philosophized, even if they used ideas from Plato, Aristotle, etc.*" <sup>76</sup> . This is an important corrective to the notion that philosophy was outside of religion – in Islam, even rationalist thinkers often framed their work as understanding God's creation as described by the Quran. Avicenna reportedly said after his metaphysics, "*Now I must turn to the Quran to seek refuge in faith*". So their interpretations sometimes were not written as tafsīr books but in scattered allusions in their works.

**Sectarian interpretation:** The essay likely also mentions that Shī'ī theologians used Quran to support *imāmah* (leadership of Ahl al-Bayt). For example, verse 5:55 "*Your wali (patron) is only Allah, His Messenger, and those who believe, who establish prayer and give alms while bowing (in prayer)*" is taken by Shī'a to refer to 'Alī (who, per report, gave charity while in bowing posture). Sunni tafsīrs often list that as one opinion but add others (i.e. it refers generally to all faithful). Likewise, the phrase "*people of the house*" in 33:33 was contextually wives of Prophet, but Shī'a apply it to 'Alī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan, Ḥusayn specifically; Sunni exegesis acknowledges hadith of Prophet including them under his cloak, but doesn't exclude wives either. So here, **sectarian allegiances influenced interpretive emphasis**.

An intriguing aspect Damad might note is that the **Islamic view of knowledge** allowed using intellect ('aql) vigorously, but always under the light of revelation. He says, "*It is true that in Islam the intellect plays a central role... but [even] philosophers rely on the Quran in their debates.*" <sup>132</sup> <sup>119</sup> . This synergy of reason and revelation meant even rational interpretations were framed as uncovering the Quran's deeper intent (not overriding it). For instance, rationalists arguing for the **unity of God's attributes** (Mu'tazilites said God's attributes like Knowledge, Power are not separate entities, to avoid multiplicity in God) would cite Quran 112 ("He is One, eternal, begets not, nor is begotten, none like Him") to support the purity of divine unity. Opponents would cite other verses implying God *speaks, sees* etc. and say those indicate distinct attributes. The argument remained couched in scriptural evidence on both sides.

Thus, theology/philosophy contributed a **conceptual depth** to Quranic interpretation: issues of **cosmology, ontology, epistemology** were discussed around verses. For example, **Quran and cosmology:** Verses like 21:30 ("the heavens and earth were joined, then We split them" – often linked to Big Bang in modern discourse) or 51:47 ("We built the heaven with might, and We expand it") – medieval scholars did talk of cosmic origin but more in Aristotelian terms of eternal universe vs. creation ex nihilo. The Ash'arite orthodox insisted on **temporal creation** (istiḥdāth) citing verses about "six days of creation" etc. Philosophers influenced by Greek thought at times leaned to an eternal universe view but reinterpreted "*six days*" as six stages or logical, not literal time. Al-Ghazālī fiercely refuted the philosophers on eternity of the

world, quoting Quran *“When He decrees a thing, He but says Be – and it is”* (2:117) to emphasize creation from nothing. So here too, how one understood Quranic vocabulary (e.g. is “day” literal or metaphorical, is “Be!” a moment in time or a constant command?) was part of philosophical exegesis.

One more illustrative debate: **Visio Dei** (seeing God in the afterlife). Quran 75:22-23 says *“Faces on that Day will be radiant, looking toward their Lord.”* Most Sunnis took it as proof believers will see God in the Hereafter (though “how” is beyond comprehension). Mu’tazilites denied the beatific vision (consistent with their stance that God cannot be seen even in afterlife, as He is not physical and space-bound). They interpreted *“looking toward their Lord”* as *“awaiting their Lord’s favor/reward”* (since the Arabic idiom can mean “expecting”). Both readings were linguistically possible. So tafsirs would note Mu’tazilī view vs majority view. This is how theology inserted itself – grammar and context used to justify doctrinal stances.

In short, **theological and philosophical lenses** brought more abstract and often controversial interpretations, but ones that significantly enriched Islamic thought. *The Study Quran* shows respect to this legacy by citing such interpretations (e.g., references to Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysical reading of a verse <sup>133</sup> <sup>134</sup> , or mentioning Mu’tazilite positions <sup>131</sup> <sup>135</sup> ). Damad’s essay likely celebrates that the Quran was the “crystallization of the Word of God” intimately connected to discussions on **Divine Attributes and miracles (i’jāz)**, and indeed debates like createdness were *“foundational”* in Islamic theology <sup>129</sup> <sup>130</sup> . All this underscores that **the Quran can support a wide array of theological reflection**, from literalist to mystical.

We should mention **one cautionary example**: when theological polemics are strong, some interpretations were disapproved. E.g., extreme Mu’tazilī or Ismā’īlī allegories that deny basic beliefs (like saying Paradise and Hell are just metaphors for spiritual states, not actual realms – a view some philosophers hinted) were rejected by Sunni orthodoxy as beyond acceptable interpretation because they negated the outward meaning entirely. Thus, pluralism had edges: allegorical tafsīr (*ta’wīl*) was fine if it preserved the outer meaning for Sharia and didn’t contradict consensus. For instance, *Ibn ‘Arabī* could interpret “the stealing from which hands are cut” as a metaphor for the soul’s turning away from God’s path, in a spiritual way, *so long as he didn’t claim the law of cutting the thief’s hand is nullified*. And indeed, Sufis often said the Sharia law is valid in outward domain, their inner commentary is an additional lesson.

Finally, fast-forward: modern theology uses Quran for new questions: e.g. reconciling Islam with modern science (which we cover next), or interfaith theology (some use Quran’s verses like 2:62 to argue pluralism of salvation, others restrict it – reminiscent of classical debates on fate of non-Muslims which *The Study Quran* essays on “Other Religions” discuss). Joseph Lumbard’s essay on **Sacred History and Other Religions** shows the Quran’s inclusive narrative – all prophets brought same essential truth <sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> – but interpretation of verses like “no religion except Islam accepted” (3:85) varied: some said “Islam” generically means submission (so any true monotheist, even if not following Prophet Muhammad, before his coming, would be accepted), others said after Muhammad one must explicitly follow him. The commentary cites these differences <sup>116</sup> <sup>136</sup> .

In conclusion, the theological-philosophical engagement with Quran again demonstrates **interpretive pluralism**: one text, manifold understandings, each filtered by rational inquiry, spiritual insight, or dogmatic needs. And significantly, Islam’s scholarly tradition allowed those debates **within bounds** – preserving unity in diversity. The next sections will examine other specialized lenses: the **mystical/Sufi** approach and the **scientific/empirical** approach, which particularly in modern times has become prominent.

## V. Mystical and Esoteric Lenses: Sufi Interpretations and the Search for Inner Meaning

Parallel to the outward legal-theological exegesis, a rich tradition of **mystical interpretation** developed, seeking the Quran's **inner spiritual meanings** (*bāṭin*) and direct relevance to the soul's journey to God. As William Chittick's essay "**The Quran and Sufism**" details, the foundations of Islamic spirituality are deeply Quranic. He notes that Islam's two primary sources, the Quran and the Prophet's Sunnah, provide guidance on **three levels**: practice (Sharī'a law), thought (theology/philosophy), and inner transformation (the spiritual path) <sup>137</sup> <sup>138</sup>. "Sufism" broadly refers to that third dimension – often described by Sufis themselves as the quest for **taḥqīq (realization)** of divine truth and assimilation of the soul to God's will <sup>139</sup> <sup>138</sup>. Chittick emphasizes that Sufis did not see themselves as departing from the Quran; rather, they aimed to **live the Quran fully**. He quotes the well-known report that when Prophet Muhammad's wife 'Ā'isha was asked about his character, she replied: "*His character was the Quran.*" <sup>140</sup> <sup>141</sup>. To the Sufi, this implies the ideal of **embodying the Quran's teachings so thoroughly** that one's being mirrors the revelation.

Thus, Sufi commentators approached the Quran not only as a text to be explained, but as a **mirror of the soul and cosmos**, full of symbols and allusions guiding the seeker to God. They often assert, as Toby Mayer highlighted, that "*the Quran's meanings are infinite because God is infinite.*" <sup>2</sup> <sup>86</sup>. For example, early Sufi Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 896) posited that every verse has four levels (echoing the ḥadīth mentioned earlier) – the literal, the allusion, the legal limit, and the deeper spiritual vantage point <sup>142</sup> <sup>10</sup>. Many Sufi tafsīrs, like *Tustarī's Tafsīr* or later *Rūzbihān al-Baqlī's 'Arā'is al-Bayān*, therefore provide **brief literal explanations then dive into mystical interpretations**. Sometimes they even bypass literal altogether to give a spiritual aphorism per verse.

A classic feature of Sufi exegesis is **seeing the Quran as speaking to the inner states of the believer**. Verses about external events are read as allegories of the soul. For instance, the "Pharaoh" that Moses struggles with becomes the ego (nafs) that the seeker must defeat; the "Israelites' Exodus from Egypt" symbolizes the soul's escape from worldly bondage to the promised land of divine proximity <sup>143</sup>. Or when the Quran speaks of jihad against disbelievers, Sufis might say the "**greater jihad**" is the fight against one's lower self (nafs) – an interpretation supported by a famous Prophetic saying. Indeed, Caner Dagli notes how even works of *Hadith* label the inward struggle as "greater jihad" <sup>144</sup> <sup>145</sup>, giving Sufi perspective a Prophetic rooting.

Chittick explains Sufi focus with the concept that the **ultimate goal** of the Quran's guidance is not merely following rules or assenting to doctrine, but "**transformation of the soul**" into alignment with al-Ḥaqq (the Real, one of God's Names) <sup>146</sup> <sup>147</sup>. Sufis often quote the Quranic verse "*O you who believe, be mindful of God and be with the truthful ones*" (9:119) as an injunction to seek the company of realized saints who live the Quran. They also see "*Remembrance of God*" (*dhikr*) everywhere in the Quran – verses repeatedly command remembering God often (e.g. 33:41). So the Sufi tradition of chanting God's names or meditating on verses is a direct interpretive practice of those injunctions.

**Examples of Sufi interpretations:** One famous one is the verse of light (24:35) as mentioned. Another is the story of *Moses and Khidr* (18:60-82). Sufis see Khidr – the mysterious sage who teaches Moses patience and inner knowledge – as symbolizing the **initiatic guide** who imparts esoteric wisdom beyond the apparent Shariah rules (since Khidr does unconventional things like scuttling a boat, killing a youth, etc.,

representing deeper wisdom behind events). Many Sufi commentaries lavish attention on that story, extracting lessons about trust in God's plan and the need for a seeker to have a **spiritual master** (Moses had to learn from Khidr to truly understand higher knowledge).

**Esoteric Shī'ī (Ismā'īlī) commentaries** similarly take the Quran into symbolic territory. Toby Mayer's essay focuses on these "*sapiential*" traditions (ḥikmah) like those of Nāṣir-i Khusraw or the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', where every Quranic term might correspond to a cosmological principle or rank in the spiritual hierarchy. For instance, "night" and "day" might symbolize the period of occultation vs. period of a manifest Imam; "mountains" could symbolize the pillars of faith or the great teachers, etc. These are highly allegorical. Sunnis historically were wary of purely symbolic readings that sidelined the Sharia, but they too acknowledged multi-layer meanings. There's a telling statement by al-Ghazālī: "*Exoteric knowledge is like food, esoteric knowledge is like medicine. Medicine is useless without food, but food sometimes needs medicine.*" Meaning: one must practice the outward religion, but at times one needs inner knowledge to cure spiritual ills – that's where esoteric insight helps. So both are valued.

Mystical interpretation is often conveyed in **poetic and narrative forms** as well. Poets like Rūmī in his *Masnavi* recount Quranic stories with their own twists to draw out moral lessons. For example, he might retell the story of the **Satan's refusal to bow to Adam** (Quran 7:11-18) as a warning against pride and a paradox: Iblīs could be seen as a lover of God who refused to bow to other-than-God (Adam) but in truth his "love" was self-willed not obedient, hence a hidden pride. Sufis like Ibn 'Arabī even penned whole mini-tafsīrs on verses that particularly relate to their metaphysics (like he wrote about Pharaoh's last moment, or Quran 7:172 about pre-temporal Covenant of Souls with God, which Sufis interpret about the innate gnosis in each human spirit).

Chittick's essay points out that **Quranic foundations of Sufism** include: concepts of **walāya** (sanctity) since Quran talks of "friends of God" (10:62), the notion of **ihsān** (spiritual excellence) implied in verses about remembering God standing, sitting, lying (3:191) – meaning in all states. The **Path (ṭarīqa)** notion is from verses like "*Guide us to the straight path*" (Sufis see multiple levels of guidance, culminating in direct knowledge of God). The term "**realization**" (**taḥqīq**) that Chittick mentions <sup>148</sup> comes from God's name *al-Ḥaqq* (the Real/Truth) – to realize (aḥaqqqa) is to internalize truth until one "*actualizes reality*" in oneself <sup>148</sup>. Sufis often described themselves as "**people of meaning**" (**ahl al-ma'ānī**) versus jurists as "**people of forms**" (**ahl al-ẓawāhir**) – not to conflict, but to complement, since every form (ẓāhir) has an inner meaning (bāṭin).

One might wonder: how did mainstream scholars regard Sufi tafsīrs? Many were appreciative if the Sufi author was known for piety and not contradicting fundamentals. For example, al-Qushayrī's *Latā'if al-Ishārāt* is a respected early Sufi tafsīr that commentates each verse at an "allusion" level without denying literal meaning. It got acceptance. On the other hand, the work "*Haqa'iq al-Tafsir*" by Ḥallāj's disciple al-Sulamī, which collected very free-form mystical comments (like "the Ka'ba is the gnostic's heart" etc.), was sometimes viewed as too unrestrained. A well-known anecdote: someone once read a verse and gave a fanciful mystical interpretation in front of Ibn 'Abbās (the Prophet's companion); he asked, "do you know Arabic grammar of this word? do you know what the occasion of revelation was?" – the person had none of that knowledge, so Ibn 'Abbās said "then keep quiet about the verse". This underscores that even Sufi interpretations were expected to be grounded in basic language and not violate clear meanings. But beyond that, creativity was allowed.

Significantly, **Sufi interpretations kept the Quran spiritually relevant** to Muslims in all walks of life. They turned even seemingly historical or legal passages into personal lessons. For instance, all those battles of the Prophet in Quran – while jurists study them for rules of jihad, Sufis allegorize them as battles between virtues and vices within oneself. So the Quran became also a manual for inner psychology and ethics. The persistence of such teachings in popular piety (via tales, poetry, proverbs) meant that multiple layers of interpretation coexisted in Muslim consciousness: a verse might simultaneously remind a Muslim of a law, a theological concept, and a moral or mystical idea.

In *The Study Quran* commentary, when a mystical interpretation is well-known, it's often included: e.g., for *"God is the Light of the heavens and earth"* (24:35), beyond the straightforward commentary, it mentions how *"the verse is seen [by mystics] to contain in its inner meaning a whole cosmology"* <sup>124</sup> <sup>124</sup> and that Sufis like al-Ghazālī wrote treatises on it (e.g. *Mishkat al-Anwar*). Or for verses about *"die before you die"* (not a Quran verse but a Sufi motto echoing Quranic call to detach from dunya), they weave in those insights. Toby Mayer, as cited, gave striking examples like Rūzbihān's vision of each letter having oceans of secrets <sup>149</sup>

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This tradition also gave the Quran a **universalist resonance**. Sufis tended to emphasize verses that see *"God's signs in every horizon and in yourselves"* (41:53) and that say *"wherever you turn, there is the Face of God"* (2:115) – these nourished an almost panentheistic sense of God's presence. They de-emphasized legalistic "do and don't" in favor of love and yearning. They would read the oft-repeated Quranic refrain *"God is Forgiving, Merciful"* and the story of God's mercy outweighing wrath as dynamic truths, not just doctrinal statements. Indeed, Sufi commentary can sometimes be emotional and in prayer form rather than analytical.

One must also mention the concept of **"the Quran has 7 (or 70) layers of meaning"** found in some hadiths and Sufi writings. This idea reinforced that each verse can be understood at different depths by different people depending on their spiritual capacity. A novice gets the basic rule, a scholar gets the interconnections, a mystic perceives hints of divine attributes and mysteries.

To illustrate, consider Quran 2:255, Ayat al-Kursī (Throne Verse), which is theological. A jurist focuses on it negating compulsion and explaining God's sovereignty. A theologian might use it to discuss God's knowledge and sustaining power. A mystic, however, might meditate on *"neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him"* to realize God's constant watchfulness in his heart, or see *"His Kursī (Seat) extends over heavens and earth"* as meaning God's presence encompasses all existence so the mystic feels ever in God's presence. All these are valid in their domains.

Thus, **mystical and esoteric exegesis** add yet another dimension to the pluralism of Quranic interpretation – one that often **bridges** the gap between formal religion and personal experience. It resonates even today: modern readers sometimes find in Sufi interpretations a more accessible, heart-oriented understanding. Dr. Zia Shah's emphasis on integrating spirituality with scientific worldview partly echoes that – like seeing natural phenomena with awe (which Sufis would do as signs of God to reflect on).

Finally, mystical interpretation also spilled into **art and literature**, which leads to the next lens: how the Quran inspired aesthetics and arts, another form of interpretation albeit non-verbal.

## VI. Aesthetic and Artistic Lenses: The Quran in Art, Calligraphy, and Culture

While exegesis is usually a scholarly textual activity, the Quran has also been “interpreted” through **artistic expression** – in architecture, calligraphy, recitation (qirā’ah), and other cultural forms. Jean-Louis Michon’s essay “**The Quran and Islamic Art**” explores how the Quran’s presence shaped the aesthetic of Muslim societies. He argues that the distinctive traits of **Islamic art** – its aniconic nature, intricate geometric and arabesque designs, emphasis on calligraphy – are “*obviously the result of the intimate relationship... between artistic production and the precepts and practices of the [Islamic] religion, born from the Quranic revelation and the Prophetic tradition.*” <sup>150</sup> <sup>151</sup> . In other words, Islamic art is a kind of **visual and practical commentary** on the Quran’s worldview.

One clear example is **calligraphy**: The Quran’s status as the Word of God written in Arabic made the very **writing of the script a sacred art**. Over centuries, Muslim calligraphers poured their devotion into beautifully copying the Quran, developing ornate scripts (Kufic, Naskh, Thuluth, etc.). Every flourish and balance in the calligraphy was to reflect the divine beauty and perfection believed to be in the Quran’s form. Quranic verses became the primary content of wall ornamentation in mosques – literally inscribing interpretation into space. A calligraphic composition often highlights certain words or phrases, thereby subtly interpreting emphasis. For instance, one might design “*Allahu Nur al-samawat wa’l-ard*” (God is the Light of the heavens and earth) in a blazing circular pattern to symbolize radiance. That’s an artistic exegesis of the verse’s meaning. Or the names of God (99 Names) drawn from Quran are enshrined in mosques to invite meditation – an aesthetic theology drawn from scripture.

**Architecture**: Michon likely examines how the Quran influenced architecture conceptually. The very idea of a mosque with a **mihrab** (niche) points towards Makkah could be seen as a spatial interpretation of the Quranic command to face the Ka’ba (2:144). The play of light in mosques, filtering through screens (*mashrabiyyah* or stained glass in later eras), might be intended to evoke the idea of divine light and the contrast of dunya (this world, often symbolized by patterns and dim light) and the transcendent illumination (often symbolized by the open dome to the sky, letting light in). Many mosques are engraved with Surah al-Nur’s Light Verse or others related to guidance and light, thematically matching the architecture’s purpose of enlightenment.

**Decoration motifs**: Islamic art famously avoids figural depictions in religious contexts (to obey the Quranic and Prophetic discouragement of idolatry). Instead, it uses geometric patterns and **arabesques** (stylized plant forms) – these can be seen as visual analogs of Quranic themes like the infinity of God’s creation (geometric patterns can extend indefinitely, reflecting perhaps the infinite nature of divine qualities), or the idea of unity in multiplicity (a single pattern generating complex designs, akin to how from One God emanates the diverse world). Michon mentions attempts to analyze specific traits. One trait: Islamic art tends toward “*horror vacui*” (filling all space with patterns), perhaps reflecting the Quranic idea that **God’s signs fill every corner of the universe** (there is no empty space devoid of meaning). The repeated patterns could be “visual dhikr” – a rhythmic repetition like how Quranic recitation and verses themselves often repeat phrases for emphasis and remembrance.

**Music/Recitation**: While music per se is debated, the recitation (tajwīd) of the Quran is an art strongly encouraged. The melodic, haunting patterns of Quranic recitation (maqāmāt) are a form of interpretive art: the reciter chooses tone and rhythm to bring out the mood of verses (mercy verses read softly and sweetly,

warning verses in a stern, trembling voice, etc.). This performance is an interpretation that can deeply affect listeners, conveying subtleties beyond the semantic meaning. For example, during Ramadan nights, many note how the cadence of certain surahs (like Maryam or Taha) feels inherently musical and evocative of their content – that effect is partly the reciter's skill in intoning them. The Quran itself refers to **the beauty of a well-recited Quran** (73:4 hints "recite in measured tones"), and the Prophet said *"He is not of us who does not chant the Quran beautifully"*. So the aesthetic dimension (sonic interpretation) was sanctified.

**Handicrafts:** Michon likely also touches on crafts like calligraphic carpets (prayer rugs with the Ka'ba image or Quranic inscriptions), ceramics with Quranic calligraphy (like vases with verses about abundance, perhaps linking the object's function to a Quranic concept of sustenance), and so forth. Even clothing and coins bore Quranic inscriptions historically – integrating the Quran in daily life visually. This widespread inscription of verses meant that everyday folks constantly encountered the Quran's words around them, not only in books or heard in mosque, but on walls, utensils, textiles. This can be seen as a form of "popular exegesis" – selecting certain verses to display often indicates what messages the society values. E.g., the verse *"Inna Allaha ma'a al-ṣābirīn"* (Surely God is with the patient) might be emblazoned in homes or public spaces to inculcate patience, which is a kind of applied interpretation of Quranic ethos.

Michon outlines how scholars of Islamic art trace such influences. He says many attempted to articulate **the specific traits** (geometry, calligraphy dominance, etc.) and link them to Islamic teachings <sup>152</sup> <sup>153</sup>. He asserts a direct link: *"since the advent of Islam, some forms of art were intimately linked to Quranic revelation and Sunnah"* <sup>150</sup> <sup>151</sup>, so understanding Islamic art's originality requires looking at the Quran's content. For example, the total avoidance of idolatrous imagery clearly stems from the Quran's stern monotheism (e.g. "there is nothing like unto Him", 42:11, or prohibition of idols). So Islamic sacred art had to find non-figurative ways to express beauty, hence the flowering of ornament and calligraphy.

He also suggests we examine *"what the Quran says about the creative power of human beings"* <sup>154</sup>. Indeed, the Quran acknowledges human artistry as inspired by God. One might recall the story of Prophet Solomon where jinn crafted him works of art (34:13), or verses praising God's *ṣun' Allāh* (crafting of God) which man can reflect in his own craft in God's name. Quran 37:95-96 narrates Abraham breaking idols and saying *"Do you worship what you carve, while God created you and what you make?"* <sup>155</sup> <sup>156</sup>. Michon quotes this to contrast idol-carving (condemned) vs. recognizing God as the source of human creativity <sup>155</sup> <sup>156</sup>. This implies that legitimate Islamic art would be conscious of not making something to worship, but making something to **worship with or remind of God**. Hence carving geometric patterns or calligraphy glorifying God is okay because it directs worship to God, whereas carving an idol directs worship to creature. This distinction guided Muslim artists' intentions.

He speaks of *"fundamental constituents of Islamic aesthetics and the ethical code of Muslim artists"* being sought in the Quran and Hadith <sup>157</sup> <sup>158</sup>. Likely examples: humility of artist (no signing of works in big way historically, since all credit to God), the concept of *ihsān* (doing beautiful work because "God loves those who do excellence" – Quran 2:195, often interpreted as encouragement to beautify things as a form of gratitude), and the idea that art should serve remembrance not ego. There's a hadith that "God is beautiful and loves beauty" – many Muslim artists took that as a license to pursue beauty as devotion, giving us breathtaking architecture (Tāj Maḥal inscribed with Quran verses about paradise gardens, effectively making the mausoleum a metaphorical representation of paradise described in the Quran).

Thus, art becomes an **exegesis in form**: The builders of great mosques often explicitly said they wanted to materialize the Quranic vision of paradise on earth – with gardens, flowing fountains (echoing *"gardens*

*under which rivers flow*" in countless verses), light-filled domes with star patterns (reflecting the Quran's use of celestial imagery for guidance), etc. The use of Quranic inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock (built 691 CE) is telling: verses chosen there are anti-Trinitarian ones (because it was built in Jerusalem where Christianity was strong, so it's making a theological statement carved in architecture). That is interpretation – using verse in a new context for a message.

**Recap:** The aesthetic lens demonstrates that interpretive engagement with the Quran is not limited to scholars writing books – it permeated the civilization. People “read” the Quran’s messages in the art around them. That art often highlighted one or another interpretation. For instance, the choice to inscribe “*Rahman*” (the All-Merciful) name everywhere in Ottoman decorations might reflect an interpretive emphasis on divine mercy in that culture’s piety. In contrast, a warrior’s sword might have “*Nasrum min Allahi wa fat-hun qarib*” (“Help from God and a near victory”, Quran 61:13) etched on it, a very different kind of applied interpretation (justifying battle confidence). So even the use of verses in particular contexts is an act of interpretive selection and application.

Michon’s essay likely covers many such instances and ultimately shows the **unity** underlying Islamic art forms is the Quranic inspiration – making Islamic art another facet of Quranic commentary. It’s commentary by deed and craft rather than by pen. It affirms again the plurality of ways the Quran has been understood and expressed: in law courts, in Sufi gatherings, in philosopher’s debates, and in artists’ workshops.

Thus far, we have traversed historical and classical varieties of interpretation. **One major contemporary lens remains to discuss: the scientific and empirical approach**, which has risen in the past two centuries as Muslims engage modern science and now AI. This will bring us to Dr. Zia Shah’s contributions and how they represent the ongoing pluralism in a modern key.

## VII. The Quran and Modern Knowledge: Science, Cosmology, and Evolution as an Interpretive Frontier

In the modern era, the **scientific lens** has become an important new way of interpreting the Quran, driven by the dramatic expansion of human knowledge about the natural world. Many Muslims have asked: if the Quran is meant as guidance for all humanity and “explains all things” (16:89 in one reading), how does it relate to modern scientific discoveries? This has given rise to what some call “*tafsīr al-‘ilmi*” (scientific exegesis). Muzaffar Iqbal’s essay “**Scientific Commentary on the Quran**” traces this phenomenon and roots it in the Quran’s own emphasis on **observing nature as signs of God**. He begins by noting: “*The Quran invites its readers to reflect on various aspects of the three manifest realms from which it draws most of its arguments: the cosmos (āfāq), the human self (nafs), and history (āthār). This Quranic invitation is directed toward instilling certitude about its message... The first and foremost message... is tawḥīd (Oneness of God)... Who has set signs (āyāt) throughout His creation, so that Truth (al-ḥaqq) can be distinguished from falsehood (al-bāṭil): ‘We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within themselves till it becomes clear to them that it is the truth’ (41:53).*” <sup>159</sup> <sup>31</sup> . Here, Iqbal is highlighting that **the Quran itself legitimizes a scientific approach**: by calling natural phenomena *āyāt* (the same word as verses), it equates studying creation with reading the scripture in a sense, both leading to truth <sup>160</sup> <sup>31</sup> .

Historically, this inspired Muslim scholars of the classical age to excel in sciences under a spiritual framework. Iqbal notes, “*These signs were considered worthy of deep reflection, and it was understood one cannot fathom their mysteries without understanding their scientific content... generations of scientists and*

commentators wrote on their significance.”<sup>161 162</sup>. For example, medieval Muslim astronomers and physicians often preface their works praising God’s creation and even writing small treatises reconciling their findings with Quranic verses. Al-Bīrūnī (11th c.) who studied geology and fossils, wrote about the age of Earth in context of Quran, etc.

A striking classical endorsement of integrating worldly knowledge into Quranic understanding comes from **Imam al-Ghazālī**, whom Iqbal cites: “*The principles of these sciences... are not outside the Quran, for all of these sciences are derived from one of the seas of the knowledge of God – that is, the sea of His actions.*”<sup>32 33</sup>. Ghazālī in *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān* gave concrete examples: the verse “*When I am ill, it is He who heals me*” (26:80) – Ghazālī says “*this action [healing] can only be understood by one who knows medicine completely*”<sup>163 164</sup>. The verses about sun and moon’s courses – “*their complete meaning can only be known to him who has knowledge of the composition of the heavens and the earth... this belongs to the sciences of the ancients and later generations*”<sup>165 166</sup>. And the verse 82:7-8 about God forming humans – “*cannot be known except by one who mastered anatomy of man’s parts... which belongs to science*”<sup>167</sup>. In short, Ghazālī affirms that **to fully appreciate some Quranic verses, one must learn the worldly science related to them**<sup>168 167</sup>. This is a powerful classical argument for interpretive pluralism: as science progresses, we might unlock fuller meanings of certain allusions in the Quran.

In the colonial and post-colonial period, Muslim scholars more consciously turned to scientific exegesis partly to demonstrate the Quran’s miraculous knowledge (apologetic motive) and partly as a means to synthesize faith with modernity. A famous pioneer was **Maurice Bucaille**, a French doctor whose 1976 book argued the Quran anticipated modern science without error<sup>169 170</sup>. Dr. Zia Shah’s *Scientific Discoveries and Evolving Quranic Commentary* article summarizes Bucaille’s impact: Bucaille highlighted how earlier commentators “inevitably made errors of interpretation in verses whose exact meaning could not be grasped until much later, when modern science shed light on them”<sup>171</sup>. For example, premodern Mufasssirs had no concept of the universe expanding, so they read “We expanded the heaven” (51:47) in other ways (some said “expanse” meaning broad sky). After Hubble discovered expansion of universe (1929), Muslim writers like Tantawi Jawhari or later Bucaille said “Behold! The Quran said ‘We are expanding it’ 1400 years ago”<sup>169 170</sup>. As Dr. Shah notes: when Hubble’s finding came, Muslims “*reread*” verse 51:47 in a new light<sup>169 170</sup>. Similarly, the Quran’s statement in 21:30 that heavens and earth were once joined, then split, is now seen as a remarkable parallel to Big Bang theory<sup>170 172</sup>. Past commentators guessed it might mean sky and earth were one mass of vapor or something, but could not conceive the modern cosmological model – now many Muslims feel it fits exactly Big Bang and thus is a “*scientific miracle*” of Quran.

Another area is **embryology**: verses like 23:12-14 describing embryo stages (drop, clinging form, lump, bones, flesh) align uncannily with modern embryonic development sequence<sup>173 174</sup>. Classical commentators did discuss these words (e.g. *‘alaqah* as clot or something sticky), but without microscopes they couldn’t fully verify. Modern embryologists see this as a point where Quran preceded science. Bucaille and others leveraged that to claim the Quran could not be by a human in 7th century. This apologetic angle aside, it legitimately broadened interpretation: now *‘alaqah* is often translated “clinging embryo” rather than older “clot” translations, due to scientific input.

However, some caution: not every modern scientific idea finds a clear mention in Quran, and forcing it can lead to strained exegesis. For example, some in the 1980s tried to find relativity of time in verses, or quantum concepts – which can become fanciful. Nonetheless, clearly fields like astronomy, geology (e.g. Quran 21:31 “We placed mountains as pegs” resonates with modern understanding of mountains’ deep

roots as stabilizers, which Shah's article likely mentions plate tectonics) <sup>169</sup> <sup>170</sup> , and oceanography (Quran mentions barrier between salt and sweet seas, which is how haloclines work) have invited new insights.

Importantly, Dr. Zia H. Shah's works go beyond simply matching scientific facts – he advocates what we might call a **“scientific hermeneutic”**: approaching the Quran with the assumption that true science and true revelation cannot conflict (since God is author of both), and therefore using scientific knowledge as a tool to **expand understanding** rather than replace classical exegesis. He often cites Bucaille's principle that if a past commentator erred due to lack of science (like thinking the sun orbits earth daily, whereas now we have heliocentric models etc.), we should reinterpret accordingly <sup>171</sup> . This is part of what we earlier identified as the tradition of **interpretive renewal** with knowledge. It's a continuation of Ghazālī's logic: with new knowledge, remove misunderstanding.

Shah specifically has written on **cosmology and eschatology** (like how the Quran's imagery of cosmic end might relate to star death, etc.), on **evolution** (he even wrote a book *The Quran and the Biological Evolution* <sup>175</sup> ), and intriguingly on **AI** as we saw. Let's highlight his perspective on a contentious one: **Evolution**. For many decades, Muslims reacted to Darwin either with outright rejection (reading Quran's Adam story literally, thus evolution false) or attempts to reconcile (some said maybe evolution is Allah's method of creation, reading Adam's story symbolically or as special intervention). Dr. Shah champions **theistic evolution** with guided processes, citing Quranic verses that can be read to support a progressive creation. For example, one might point to 71:14 “He created you in stages” or the fact the Quran doesn't detail *how* long or by what mechanism Adam was formed from clay – leaving room to interpret that as evolutionary process under God's guidance <sup>117</sup> <sup>176</sup> . He suggests that early Islamic concept of **two covenants** (Primordial covenant of souls and covenant of prophets) originally taken literally, are now seen metaphorically by many theologians <sup>177</sup> <sup>178</sup> . Similarly, the meeting of Adam with God, angels, and Iblis could be seen metaphorically, not literal garden event, given evolutionary history of humans <sup>179</sup> <sup>180</sup> . His approach is clearly an interpretation influenced by modern science – not widely mainstream yet, but a legitimate extension of past Mu'tazilite or philosopher's allegorical readings, now motivated by scientific plausibility.

He candidly writes “*if we stick to a spontaneous creationist story...we go against a large body of evidence*” and therefore “*our understanding of the Quran...is not guaranteed*”, implying we might be misinterpreting if we insist on literal reading that contradicts empirical reality <sup>117</sup> . This line of reasoning is bold but rooted in Islamic epistemology that truth cannot conflict – either you misread the text or misread nature if they seem in conflict.

Shah's blog also directly employs **AI (ChatGPT)** in creating comprehensive multi-disciplinary commentaries (as referenced in *The Quranic Commentator in the Age of AI*). In that piece's abstract, he and the AI argue that “*AI can rapidly synthesize cross-disciplinary knowledge to illuminate the Quran's guidance in all facets of life.*” <sup>181</sup> <sup>182</sup> . They show how ChatGPT compiled classical and modern sources on theology, science, philosophy, etc., producing integrated commentary <sup>183</sup> <sup>184</sup> . It demonstrates, for example, gathering hadith and tafsir on theological puzzles or listing scientific facts related to a verse.

The fascinating implication is that **AI might become a tool for interpretive pluralism** by making the entire corpus of knowledge accessible to any reader. If a future scholar asks an AI: “give me all opinions on verse X and relevant scientific data and philosophical perspectives,” AI could output an organized compendium. This aligns with the historical method of e.g. al-Ṭabarī (gather all reports) but at lightning speed. Dr. Shah's abstract notes “*AI augments the commentator's toolkit: compiling vast textual sources, providing interdisciplinary*

context, and offering fresh analytical lenses”<sup>185 36</sup> – essentially enabling even a single researcher to do what once a team of scholars across fields would do. He is careful to acknowledge AI’s limits and that human scholars remain key for spiritual insight and doctrinal soundness<sup>36</sup>. So the message is not to let AI replace the human mufassir, but to use it to explore the **breadth of interpretive possibilities** quickly.

For instance, an AI might point out that the word “*dābbah*” in Quran (usually “creature”) could even include microorganisms or aliens, since it’s general – something classical scholars didn’t imagine, but AI referencing modern discussions could highlight, expanding the reader’s thought (some modern interpreters have even mused about extraterrestrial life from verses like 42:29 that God spread creatures through the heavens – a new interpretive area purely because of our current knowledge the cosmos could harbor life).

Zia Shah contends this is part of “**the landscape of Quranic commentary undergoing transformation**” with AI’s help<sup>186 181</sup>. Importantly, he frames it as continuity: “*Quranic commentators have traditionally drawn on wide knowledge – linguistics, hadith, and even the scientific understandings of their times... In the 21st century, AI is a powerful tool to assist in this endeavor.*”<sup>29 37</sup>. This directly echoes what we’ve been observing: each era used its knowledge, now ours includes unprecedented amounts of information, so it should be harnessed for tafsīr.

He also envisions the role of the human commentator evolving into one of a **director and editor** who guides the AI’s research to ensure it remains within Islamic tradition and then adds the uniquely human layers of wisdom<sup>36 187</sup>. This suggests future tafsīrs may be co-produced by AI (gathering and perhaps drafting) and scholars (reviewing, adding insight and faith perspective). That’s a new kind of pluralism – machine and man synergy – unimagined before.

What drives Shah and others in scientific tafsīr is also apologetics: demonstrating Islam’s compatibility with reason and knowledge. But beyond apologetics, it’s a search for truth. *The Study Quran* essay on science (Iqbal) does caution that reading modern science *too literally* into the Quran can be risky because science evolves and one might misconstrue metaphorical verses. However, it acknowledges the positive side: “*as human knowledge deepens, believers often find the Quran’s timeless words in remarkable harmony with modern science.*”<sup>188 189</sup>. The essay gave examples like Big Bang, plate tectonics (mountains as pegs), water origin of life (21:30 mentions every living thing made from water), and quantum ideas even (some point to 55:33 about penetrating zones of heavens/earth only with authority, linking to space travel or that there are guarded barriers in nature – speculation, but interesting). Dr. Shah indeed mentions “*quantum revolution providing perspectives on verses*”<sup>190</sup>.

At the extreme end, some have gone into “**Tjāz ‘ilmi**” (scientific miracle claim) where they think nearly every modern discovery is coded in the Quran (like splitting the atom seen in 34:3 or black holes in 81:15-16 etc.). Those can be far-fetched. But moderate scientific tafsīr says: The Quran uses broad language that can include what we now know, proving its verses remain **ever-relevant and not disproven by progress**. For instance, Quran’s portrayal of the embryo isn’t archaic or false, but spot-on. Its worldview of the heavens and earth was far above myths of that time (no flat earth explicit statement, no geocentric claim spelled out, rather verses can even fit heliocentrism by phrasing like “sun and moon each floating in an orbit” (21:33) – which is true, sun orbits galaxy, etc.). So they say that in contrast to say the Bible’s few statements that conflict with science (like firmament dome, etc.), the Quran carefully or divinely phrased things to stay true across ages.

All this shows how **interpretation continues**: knowledge of Big Bang and evolution were absent for 1300 years, now that we have them, interpreters incorporate them, thus the **spectrum of meaning of Quran expands** for us. And importantly, as knowledge expands (if tomorrow contact with aliens happens, or new physics emerges), perhaps future tafsīr will incorporate that. The pluralism ensures the Quran is not a static read, but “read in light of total human knowledge,” precisely our theme.

We should stress that Dr. Shah positions his scientific hermeneutic not as a break, but as “*a legitimate extension of the Quranic intellectual legacy*.” He often quotes classical scholars (like Ghazālī as above, or Ibn Khaldun’s view on reason and revelation, etc.) to show continuity. In his works, he demonstrates how earlier thinkers also tried to reconcile science of their time (like some argued Quran verses foresaw earth being round or antipodes existence, etc. – not always correct, but they tried).

To cap this section: it’s clear the **modern age has added new layers of interpretive pluralism** – from the rationalist reformers of 19th century (like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan who wrote a tafsīr rationalizing miracles), to current scientists like Dr. Shah, to now possibly AI providing multi-perspective commentary. The Quran’s interpreters now include **engineers, doctors, and data scientists** aside from ulama, each bringing their lens. This may alarm purists, but historically, it’s consistent: in the Abbasid era, doctors like Ibn Sina, philosophers like al-Kindi, poets like Rumi – all did their own kind of tafsīr. The community of interpretation broadens with the community of knowledge.

As we move to a conclusion, one overarching observation: Throughout history, despite these multiple approaches, Muslims have maintained the Quran’s singular sacredness. They sometimes debated each other (e.g., scholars vs. mystics, or traditional vs. modern), but the discourse revolves around **understanding the same text** better. This in itself is testament to the Quran’s depth: it can speak to legalists and poets, warriors and pacifists, scientists and mystics.

Finally, we will reflect spiritually on why this diversity might itself be part of the divine intent – an ummah with many minds and hearts each finding guidance in the Quran suitable for them, and collectively unveiling more of its treasures as time goes on.

## Epilogue: The Spiritual Significance of Interpretive Diversity and the Future of Quranic Reading in an AI World

Fourteen centuries of Quranic interpretation reveal a profound truth: **the Quran’s meanings unfold across time** in conversation with each generation of readers. Rather than a monolithic code, the Quran has proven to be a living revelation – “*like an ocean without a shore*,” inexhaustible in wisdom as al-Ghazālī and the Sufis described <sup>163</sup> <sup>14</sup> . The tradition of multiple exegeses is not a weakness or confusion in Islam; it is a **mercy and strength**. It allowed the Muslim community – diverse in culture, intellect, and circumstance – to all find nourishment in the one scripture. As Nasr’s team notes, “*our hope is to remove the erroneous view that because Muslims consider the Quran the Word of God, they do not think about it or interact intellectually with it*” <sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup> . In fact, Muslims **meditated, debated, and even disagreed** on the Quran precisely because of their deep conviction that it can guide “for all things” (16:89) if properly understood.

The **spiritual significance** of this diversity is manifold:

- It reflects the Quran's own self-description as containing verses **clear (muḥkamāt)** and **ambiguous (mutashābihāt)** (Quran 3:7), the latter "*open to more than one meaning*" <sup>131</sup> . The Quran set the stage for layered interpretation; the community's plural readings fulfill that divine design, teasing out the *mutashābih* (allegorical, deeper) aspects without undermining the *muḥkam* (clear rulings and doctrines).
- Diversity of interpretation has allowed the Quran to **speak to different hearts**. The mystic hears God's intimate call; the jurist hears His just command; the philosopher hears His Wisdom; the ordinary believer hears comfort and warning. Each draws what he/she needs. And at various phases of life, a single person might prefer one tafsīr or another. This flexible relatability is part of the Quran's miraculous nature (*i'jāz*) – it is at once simple enough for a child and deep enough for a genius. As Rūmī beautifully expressed (paraphrasing): "*The Quran is like a bride; though you pull off one veil after another, you never reach the end of her beauty. She has inexhaustible grace and hidden splendors*". This poetic sentiment echoes the view of *fathomless meaning* <sup>21</sup> <sup>86</sup> .
- The disagreements and debates, when conducted with adab (respect), were themselves a **source of mercy**. There's a famous saying in Islam: "*Ikhtilāf (difference) among my community is a mercy.*" While this is not a Quranic verse, it encapsulates a wisdom: uniformity can lead to stagnation or tyranny of one view, whereas a range of opinions fosters tolerance and intellectual vitality. We see this mercy in practice: four Sunni schools of law coexisted, giving flexibility in practice; multiple theological views existed, preventing rigid dogmatism on speculative matters; multiple spiritual paths (Sufi orders, etc.) existed, allowing people of different temperament to find a mode of devotion that suits them – all sourcing from the same Quran. As long as those interpretations remained within the broad canopy of "*no god but God, Muhammad is His Messenger,*" they enriched rather than detracted. The Quran says, "*Had God willed, He could have made you one community [with no differences]. But He tests you by what He has given you, so vie with one another in good works*" (5:48). Differences in understanding can be seen as part of the divine test and plan – to spur us to strive harder in search of truth and doing good, rather than claiming exclusive rightness.
- Another spiritual aspect: plural interpretations force humility. When one realizes brilliant saints and scholars have disagreed on a verse's meaning, one is less likely to become arrogant about one's own reading. Instead, we appreciate the Quran's **transcendence above any single human mind**. As the Quran says, "*Above every knower is one more knowing*" (12:76) – ultimately God is the all-Knowing. The *adab al-muftī* (etiquette of the interpreter) in classical Islam included acknowledging the provisional nature of one's opinion with phrases like "*Allahu a'lam*" (God knows best) after giving an interpretation. This humility is spiritually healthy – it focuses the heart on the Giver of the Word rather than the human scholar.

Now, as we look to the **future, in an AI-integrated world**, what can we expect for Quranic interpretation? Dr. Zia Shah's work with AI provides a glimpse. In one sense, AI might dramatically **increase access** to the classical heritage. No longer will language barriers or the rarity of manuscripts limit a student; an AI can translate and summarize the commentary of, say, al-Ṭabarī or al-Ṭūsī or Fakhr al-Rāzī on a verse at a click. This democratization could bring the *full chorus of past voices* to anyone's study circle. Imagine a single app where for any verse you can instantly see opinions of Sahaba, early mufasssirs, mystical interpretations, modern scientific insights, etc. – an **interactive multi-tafsīr**. This would truly fulfill Nasr's vision of *The Study*

*Quran* being a “supplementary and independent section” of essays that themselves guide <sup>191</sup> <sup>192</sup> – but on steroids, as an AI-driven dynamic companion to the *Quran*.

AI might also help uncover *patterns* in interpretive data: for instance, it could show how certain socio-political contexts consistently influenced certain readings historically – a meta-knowledge that then makes us aware of our own biases as we approach the text. It could also help generate **visualizations** or “*concept maps*” of *Quranic* themes, something already being attempted in digital humanities. This could deepen our understanding of how diverse verses interrelate.

However, with these great possibilities come cautionary points: **The human element remains irreplaceable.** AI can compile facts and even craft eloquent analyses (as ChatGPT does), but it lacks the **heart** that feels the *Quran’s* spiritual impact. It can’t weep in awe at “*No soul knows what joy is kept hidden for them*” (32:17), nor tremble at “*O humankind, indeed you are laboring toward your Lord tirelessly, and you will meet Him*” (84:6). That experiential understanding – the way a verse might pierce one’s soul at a particular moment and yield a meaning beyond scholarly exposition – is the domain of *taqwā* (God-consciousness) and *dhawq* (spiritual taste), which belongs to the faithful reader, not a machine. The *Quran* itself says “*None shall touch it save the purified*” (56:79) <sup>193</sup> – outwardly referring to handling the *mushaf* with wudu, but inwardly Sufis took it to mean only hearts purified by faith truly *grasp* its secrets. So even as AI gives us the outer *information*, the *illumination* still descends into human hearts.

Thus the role of the **21st-century commentator** likely evolves as Shah described: more a curator, ethicist, and spiritual guide. With AI giving the raw material, the scholar focuses on guiding readers through it, correcting any AI-provided misinterpretations (for AI, lacking faith context, might misapply verses or not sense the sacred tone). The scholar ensures fidelity to the Islamic tradition’s principles – e.g., an AI might produce an interpretation that seems plausible linguistically but violates a fundamental creed or established Prophetic explanation; the human must catch that.

The **ethical dimension** also becomes paramount: with boundless information, how to ensure interpretations serve *guidance* (*hudā*) and not confusion? Here again, the total tradition helps – consensus (*ijmā’*) of the community on certain core meanings acts as a compass. For example, no matter how much new knowledge, verses like “*Say, He is God, One*” (112:1) will always mean strict monotheism; no clever reinterpretation will sway the consensus on that. AI could in theory dredge up obscure heretical views, but human scholars can contextualize or dismiss those as outside the pale. So, an AI world still needs **qualified, pious scholars as gatekeepers** of what is acceptable interpretation versus distortion.

One might worry: will AI lead to an explosion of bizarre interpretations (since anyone could ask it to justify almost anything with some textual evidence)? Possibly – but the community’s scholarly institutions and collective wisdom likely will also adapt, perhaps issuing guidelines for AI use in Islamic studies, maybe even developing specialized “Islamic AI” trained on reliable sources and with certain safeguards against outputting irreverent content (similar to how there are now *Quran*-specific search engines or apps that avoid disallowed content). Already, there are projects to use AI to check *Quranic* recitation errors – similarly, one can envision AI double-checking a new *tafsīr’s* consistency with classical ones or known linguistic rules.

Spiritually, one might reflect that this new chapter is itself maybe hinted by the *Quran’s* promise that “*We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within themselves, till it becomes clear that this is the Truth*” (41:53) <sup>160</sup> <sup>31</sup> . Perhaps AI – a product of the human intellect that God endowed – is one of those “horizontal signs” showing the vast potential of knowledge Allah placed in creation. When used with humility, it could

make clear even more truths of the Quran. But it could also tempt arrogance (one might feel “I have all knowledge at my fingertips, I don’t need scholars or spiritual discipline”). The proper attitude would echo the Quran’s teaching: “*Above every possessor of knowledge is One (Allah) more knowing*” (12:76) – and above AI’s vast database is the infinite knowledge of God. So no matter the tech, believers will still bow in awe at the mystery that after all our analysis, “*God knows best what He has revealed*”.

In conclusion, the **future of Quranic reading** seems bright and challenging. The tradition of interpretive pluralism assures us that the Quran will continue to **engage fresh knowledge and contexts** without losing its essence. Each era finds **new lights in the Quran**, as if the Quran renews its youth (there’s a narration that “*the Quran does not wear out from repetition, nor do its wonders cease*”). Our modern epoch – with globalized perspectives, interfaith encounters, scientific marvels, and AI – is but the latest to sit at the Quran’s feet and ask for guidance. And the Quran will speak, as always, in multifaceted tones: to the scientist about the grandeur of cosmic order, to the activist about justice and patience, to the tech-savvy about using knowledge responsibly, to the mystic about not forgetting the Divine amidst the cyber world.

The plurality of interpretations is thus a **sign of the Quran’s vitality** – a fulfillment of the Prophet’s prayer: “*O Allah, make the Quran the springtime of our hearts.*” In spring, many flowers bloom; in Quranic interpretation, many insights bloom. Yet all are nourished by the same pure rain of the Quranic revelation and turn toward the same sun of God’s pleasure. As we navigate an AI age, may we let the Quran speak in all these languages of knowledge, while anchoring ourselves in the timeless principles of faith it teaches. The diversity of tafsīr ultimately shows that the Quran is **not a book that one ever finishes reading**; it reads us as we read it, guiding each era in the way most fitting. To echo Ingrid Mattson, “*Those who learn the most are those prepared to explore contexts – historical, personal, inner*” <sup>6</sup>. Today our context includes supercomputers and space telescopes; the Quran’s guidance, we trust, extends over them too.

In an AI-integrated world, the Quran will remain what it has always been: a **living conversation between the Divine and humanity**, one that invites every tool and talent we have to ponder it, and yet ultimately calls us beyond tools, to *submit* in awe to the One who spoke it. “*If all the trees were pens and all the seas ink,*” the Quran reminds us, “*the Words of God would not be exhausted*” <sup>194</sup>. We have seen in our journey that indeed the pens of countless scholars, saints, scientists have written volumes, but the Quran still yields more. As we embrace new means to study it, let us do so with gratitude for the rich heritage of interpretation behind us, with excitement for discoveries ahead, and with devotion to ensure that all our understanding brings us closer to **knowing and worshipping the Author of the Quran**. Ultimately, the purpose of all exegesis – classical or AI-aided – is to help us live the Quran as the Prophet did, such that it can be said of us as was said of him: “*Their character is the Quran.*” <sup>140 141</sup>. In that living embodiment, all the varied insights achieve a unity – the unity of a life in surrender to God (*islām*), which is the straight path all interpretations seek to illuminate.

**God knows best, and to Him belongs all praise.**

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