Modern Qur’anic Hermeneutics: A Case Study on the Controversy of Shahrur’s thought of Religious Reform in Media

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Abstract: This article discusses the controversy of Muhammad Shahrur’s reform ideas documented in media. Shahrur’s proposal of modern Qur’anic hermeneutics which mainly falls on two points, documented off and online attracts different responses. Shahrur believes that there is no synonymise words in Arabic language of the Qur’an, and the second, Muhammad PBUH has roles and positions either as ordinary, prophet or as the messenger. Using descriptive-analytic method, this study discusses how scholars responed over Shahrur’s proposal of religious reform which are circulated in media. Shahrur also utilizes information technology by opening a question and answer column at www.shahrur.org as medium to discuss different kinds of issues. The study find that reader of Shahrur’s works can be grouped into two mind groups; those who appreciate Shahrur’s reform and the other are those who decline his modern hermeneutic reading of the Qur’an and the Sunnah.

1 INTRODUCTION

Muhammad Shahrur was a Muslim Reformist thinker, born on March 11, 1938 in Damascus, Syria. His father named Dayb Ibn Dayb and his mother Shiddiqah Bint Shalih Filyun. Shahrur married ‘Azi>zah. From his marriage he was blessed with five children. His first child, T{a>riq, had married ‘Azi>zah. From his marriage he was blessed with five children. His first child, T{a>riq, had married ‘Azi>zah. Shahrur continued his studies in civil engineering in Saratow, near Moscow, the Soviet Union (now Russia), in March 1957 on a local government scholarship until he obtained a diploma in civil engineering in 1964. Subsequently, in 1968 he was sent to the University College Ireland in Dublin to obtain a master’s degree and doctorate in the specialization of Soil Mechanics and Foundation, to obtain a Master of Science degree in 1969 and a doctorate in 1972.

Although the Shahrur study has a civil engineering background, his attention is very high to study Islamic studies. Starting in 1972, Shahrur intensely read books and discussed his ideas with colleagues. In 1980, precisely during the month of Ramadan, Shahrur managed to find a distinction between “al-’amal or ‘amalat” which has meaning in general action (work), and “al-fi’l or fa’ala” which refers to the meaning of specific actions (do).

The first person Shahrur invited to discuss his ideas about the meaning of the word al-Kitab was, a linguist Ja’far Dik al-Bab. The discussion lasted long enough, between 1980-1982. Precisely in May 1982, Shahrur managed to find two important elements of al-Mushaf al-Sharif, namely the book which has subjective elements, and al-Qur’an which contains the element of objective truth. Shahrur felt very surprised and happy. He also talked with his family. His father was the first person to understand the concept, he was very interested and asked some questions that were quite difficult to answer at that time. Then not only that, Shahrur also succeeded in placing the significance of the meaning of al-inzāl and al-tanzīl, the distinction between al-imām al-mubīn and al-lauh al-mahfūz, al-islām and al-imān. Shahrur also succeeded in placing tartīl meaning in al-Muzammil: 4 “uzūd’ alaihi wa ratīl al-Qur’ān tartīla”.

Tartīl is a derivation of the word rata’la which means composing and publishing. According to Shahrur, it is impossible for the verse to be understood with the meaning of beautifying it in
reading of the Qur’an (ta’annuq fi al-tilāwah). Because the following verse (inna sanulqi ‘alaika qaulan tsaqila) is completely unrelated to beautifying the reading. The sentence of “qaulan tsaqila (heavy words)” is more correctly interpreted as a difficulty in understanding the contents of the Qur’an. Thus, the verse “wa rattiq al-Qur’āna tartila” must be interpreted in the attitude of Shahrur, namely compiling the verses of the Qur’an which have the same topic, and sort it so that it is easy to understand the content. At the same time Shahrur did not have a computer, so all his hard work was written by himself in paper sheets, and told his son to keep the manuscript. Then Shahrur bought one computer and started the writing process again, it was completed in 1987. Only in 1989, all of the texts were corrected in the final. Shortly thereafter, the first magnum opus book was published in 1990.


And the writing in the form of articles which can be seen on the official website; http://www.shahrour.org, twitter, facebook, and others. For example, it can be seen on the newsyrian.net web site, and abwa>b. Almost all the themes of the discussion from the writings of the Shahrur article are just a development or elaboration further from the theme of the discussion in his book. It’s just more contextual, because it is related to various aspects of the reality of life.

Whenever a speaker at a scientific event, Shahrur often spoke of the defeat of the Arab world over a country as small as Israel, which occurred in 1967. At that time Shahrur was 29 years old. Shortly after the incident, he heard a Friday sermon delivered by Imam Masjid, that “in fact we suffered defeat because our women left home without head coverings and open clothes”. On the same occasion, there was one community group that said, “we lost because we fasted Ramadan”. Commenting on the case, according to Shahrur, Arab Muslims experience a crisis or a problem of inequality in thinking. At that time he was encouraged to express his urgency in carrying out contemporary readings. One of the starting points used as an answer to the defeat of the Arab world is the attitude towards tradition and modernity. Shahrur is a figure who always emphasizes critical and proportional thinking. For example, when a mufti said that “in fact Islamic fiqh has successfully completed hundreds of thousands of fiqh problems”. Then it is not taken for granted as truth without evidence of a clear and comprehensive construction of knowledge. Shahrur also made a counter by asking straightforwardly and critically, “have we all called it a religious teaching that has a mercy character for every human being?”

Through his comments, Shahrur stated that the fundamental problem of Muslims now is that they have left the Kitabullah, and cling to what the jurists have said. As a scientist, Shahrur greatly appreciated the hard work of the early thinkers, especially the sect imam (imam mazhab). According to him, they successfully interacted with religious sources well for their era. Indeed, it is the followers of the Imam of the School who often predicate as a freeze on the understanding of the Islamic Shari’a, especially towards the Qur’an, Sunnah, ijma’, and qiyas (the four components are also referred to as “sources of law”). The discourse of religion becomes static, what is used is the product of expert jurisprudence, not all the examples that are in the Messenger of Allah. For Shahrur, it is precisely we who have to take responsibility for the problem of the reality of the pace of life in which we live, not the people who have held ijithad in the first century and so on. Because none of them said, that all his words and statements were made equal to the sacred Qur’an. But on the contrary, they have explained, that what they say is the result of ijithad products, and their understanding in the context of the time that surrounds them. Therefore according to Shahrur, we are also obliged to do what they have done, namely we do ijithad as they do ijithad.
2 METHOD

The methodology is the epistemology section which examines the sequence of steps taken so that the knowledge gained meets scientific characteristics. Related to this, the methodology can also be seen as part of the logic that examines the proper rules of reasoning. Methodology is an expression of how the mind works so that it becomes directed, systematic, and objective.

This type of research is qualitative research, which is research that intends to understand the phenomenon of what is experienced by the subject of the study (read: factual history), for example the behavior of perception, motivation, actions, etc. holistically, and by way of description in the form of words and language, in a special natural context and by utilizing various scientific methods. The definition of qualitative research can be simplified as research data that is not numerical, or cannot be assumed. Because, in analyzing the data using words. What is clear, the main nature of qualitative research is to develop new concepts that are fundamental and theoretical.

From the author’s observation, it appears that quite a number of scholars are interested in responding to Shahrur’s thinking. So, the study of it is not new anymore. Already many thinkers are peeling his thoughts from various perspectives. However, those who tried to discuss the issue of various debates that occurred between the pros and cons of Shahrur’s thinking had not yet elaborated. In the process of collecting data, writing this article uses a literature study or text studies, whether in the form of books, or articles and videos in the media as the primary data source. After the data is collected, the data is analyzed to get conclusions. The analytical method used is descriptive analytical method, which is a method that describes the discussion then analyzed. Using descriptive-analytic method, this study discusses how scholars responed over Shahrur’s proposal of religious reform which are circulated in media.

2.1 The Method of Shahrur’s Modern Qur’anic Hermeneutics

One characteristic of Shahrur’s modern Qur’anic hermeneutics is to gather verses from the Qur’an that are still one topic or theme. Then the collection of Qur’anic verses which are still related to one object of the discussion is carefully analyzed using the “awareness nothing similar in language” of the Arabic language of the Qur’an, that the diction of the Qur’an is so unique that it does not have synonymy language. Because however, adheres to the synonymity of language, making an important thing from a language understanding to be untouched and neglected, which results in the loss of constructs of critical and philosophical religious understanding.


Shahrur’s book that specifically contains the principles of modern hermeneutics is, “Dalīl al-Qirā’āt al-Mu’āṣirah li al-Tanzil al-Hakīm: al-Manhaj wa al-Mustalahāt (2016)” This book can also be referred to as “a contemporary dictionary of terms”. Because, Shahrur explained more than eighty words in al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf.

Modern Hermeneutics initiated by Shahrur is a methodological offer in understanding the primary Islamic books, namely the Qur’an and Sunnah. This Shahrur methodology is supported by two basic aspects, namely belief and thought; in it includes philosophical, linguistic and Islamic law aspects. For example, Shahrur clings to his principle, that al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf is “kalāmulullāh”. As for the objective reality of life - both related to nature and humans - is the “kalāmātullāh” (read: the existing reality). Only through “kalāmātullāh” we can understand “kalāmulullāh” well. It’s just that we need to keep in mind, our understanding of the natural legal system and humans is subject to the context of development, from “conditions of process” to “conditions to” (becoming). Therefore, all our understanding of “kalāmulullāh” is manicured and always develops accepting change, in contrast to “kalāmulullāh” itself, which is constant as a text (Muhāammad Shahır, 2008, 2016).
Shahrur is also principled, that the important key to understanding al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf is actually inside (internal), it does not need to bring things from outside, because the key is not outside. As an objective reality in nature and humans which contains the secrets of the key to understanding it is automatically inside (internal). Based on this principle attitude, Shahrur addressed the Kitābullāḥ as understanding the structure of the human body. Because both have the same accuracy and detail. Every member of the human body has their respective roles, duties and functions. Likewise with al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf, each branch has its own role and function of knowledge (Muḥammad Shahrūr, 2015).

The main principles of modern hermeneutics in interacting understand the source of religion; 1) Kitābullāḥ as the primary source. Never assume the Kitābullāḥ is secondary. 2) The Book of Allah who controls the ḥadīth, not the ḥadīth that becomes the power and judge of the Book of Allah. 3) All ḥadīths other than those related to the moral system (which actually develop and duplicate the moral system in the Kitābullāḥ), and other than the ḥadīths related to the rites (such as prayer, zakat, fasting and ḥajj) are actually ijtihād from the Prophet that are relative and not final. So that it can be read again, or amended. In other words, ḥadīth besides the two things above are the “qānūn madani” (civil law) the Prophet used in his era in the Arabian peninsula. 4) Applying the principle “the text of divine verses interprets one another” consistently. The application of the method “text of divine verses interprets another” so that the product of interpretation is more objective or minimizes subjectivity. Let the verses of the Qur’ān talk about themselves “al-istinţāq”, we as readers or reviewers just catch the nomena (essence) behind the existing phenomenon (structure). And no less important for reading supports the spirit of objectivity, it is necessary to apply the reading principle “nazariyah al-nuẓūm” (the theory or principle of reading the text by observing the context of the language system that matches the text structure “siyāq al-kalām”).

3 RESPONSE ON SHAHRUR’S MODERN Qur’ANIC HERMENEUTICS: PROS AND CONS

Shahrur’s first book “al-Kitāb wa al-Qur’ān” was published in Arabic in Damascus and Beirut in 1990. The original edition was quickly sold out, requiring a reprinting three months later. The modern Qur’anic hermeneutic method contained in the book “al-Kitāb wa al-Qur’ān” makes its name famous in the world of Islamic thought. The book was written for a long time, which is 20 years, about 800 pages. Because, immediately received a response from religious experts and jurists. Apparently Shahrur chose not to respond too often, so as not to waste energy and time, even though sometimes Shahrur responded. Shahrur continued to work, criticisms from religious experts and jurists did not make him stop to write his ideas regarding modern hermeneutics (Muḥammad Shahrūr, 1996). Shahrur also utilizes information technology that is increasingly rapid, making various media such as Facebook and the Website to spread his thoughts widely and at the same time invite discussion by opening questions and criticisms against him.

Just because Shahrur expressed the main points of his thoughts in reinterpreting the divine verses in al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf, Shahrur was often reviled, blasphemed with harsh words, such as the devil, the dajjal, the infidel. There are quite a number of articles uploaded intentionally on the internet, with the aim of inviting Muslims to stay away from and be aware of Shahrur’s perverse and misleading thoughts, far from Islam, the “sunnah destroyer” or “mukir al-sunnah”. Among them: the article uploaded on 08-08-2004, 10:05 PM entitled “al-Takzīr min al-Ḍāl Munkir al-Sunnah Muhammad Shahrūr”, which means “Alert from the Misdirection of the Sunnah Rejection Muhammad Shahrūr”. Articles uploaded on 03-06-2008, 11:29 AM. by Mustafa on the Website Muntadayat Bawābah al-ʿArab - al-Muntadayat al-Syarʿiyyah – Muntadāt al-Ulim al-Islamiyyah al-Mutakhasiṣah entitled “al-Radd ‘ala Ba’di Kitabat Munkir al-Sunnah Muhammad Shahrūr”, Which means “Criticism of Some of the Books of Sunnah Rejection Muhammad Shahrūr”. The same-tone article was also uploaded on 01-11-2010, entitled “Dr. Shahrūr: Ankara al-Hadith al-Nabawi....wa al-Jins bayna al-ʿUzzāb Ḥalāl”, which means “Dr. Shahrūr: has denied the Prophet’s Hadith...and having sex with an unmarried person is permissible”.

Still in the same tone, in another article uploaded more recently on 04-05-2016, 09:49 PM., Written with the title “Tahzīr min Fikr al-Murtad Muhammad Shahrūr”, which means “Watch Out from the Thought of an Apostate Muhammad Shahrūr”. There is also an article entitled “Iḥżarū
al-Mad’u Dr. Muhammad Shahrūr.... Ya Banāt wa Ya Syabāb”, means “Be careful of the Da’wah of Dr. Muhammad Shahrur, Young Woman and Youth”. According to the author, the articles on the website were too hasty and rash in accusing Shahrur. One of the reasons is, reading the book of Shahrur partially.

Likewise, the counter view came from Syauqi Abū Khalīl and Gazi al-Taubah. According to both of them, the whole offer of Shahrur’s thoughts is deviant and heretical. His works did not provide a solution for the stagnation of Islamic thought, instead destroying all the foundations and pillars of Islam. The perspective of contemporary reading of Shahrur can “tear down or destroy the sunnah”. Because, Shahrur rejected the position of the Sunnah as interpretation, tāqyid and detail on the Qur’an. Whereas, based on Surat al-Hasyr verse 7, Muslims are required to take and practice the sunnah. Understanding the Qur’an without going through the hadith will produce strange interpretations. Maybe, after destroying and shifting it from a position as one of the basic sources of the Shari’ah, slowly Shahrur will begin to destroy the Qur’an (Syauqi Abū Khalīl, 1990) (Gāzi al-Taubah, 2012).

So, Wāḥībah al-Zuh[all in Studium Generale on Islamic Response to various Contemporary Problems, in the IAIN Sunan Kalijaga Postgraduate Program, May 2001, said that Shahrur was “dālūl wa muḍīl” (heretical and misleading). Due to, not mastering Arabic, lack of understanding of the proposals of jurisprudence, and not having adequate knowledge of classical Islamic discourse. Shahrur is also accused of being a person who often misreads divine verses.

In short, the view of the people that contradicts contemporary hermeneutics initiated by Shahrur is about the interpretation products that are considered deviant, strange and different from the existing and developing interpretations. According to them, contemporary hermeneutics like allowing khamr (that’s right, Shahrur doesn’t say “haram” to khamr, but is limited to “nahā”. That is, for cases of anesthesia before doing surgery for example, alcohol may be used, while for drunk, it is not allowed. “Khamr” to get drunk is in the category “īṣm bi gair al-ḥaq” as based on QS. al-A’ra‘f: 33, then this is haram. The khamr for anesthesia before performing the operation is “īṣm bi gair al-ḥaq”, so for that case it is permissible, because there are benefits as based on QS. al-Baqarah: 216. Foresight like this that is not understood by those who are against the modern hermeneutics Shahrur), allowing adultery, and allowing women to only dress in bikinis. The deviation does not get there, Shahrur’s hermeneutics make there are two words “al-Nisā‘” in al-Mushaf al-Sharī‘ which means men, as well as “the concept of Islam and Faith” (consider Muslims for people who simply believe in God who is the most single and absolute, final day and righteous deeds, without having to believe in the Prophet Muhammad). For further explanation, so as not to misunderstand, please see: Muhammad Shahrūr, al-Islām wa al-Insān: Min Natā‘īj al-Qirā‘ah al-Mu‘āṣarah, (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 2016).

What is clear, Shahrur cannot be said to be a sunnah destroyer, only because of his statement about the Prophet’s hadith which took past settings, and certain places (read: the Arabian peninsula). So many of the Prophet’s hadiths are no longer relevant, due to their temporal nature. In fact, in the book “al-Kitāb wa al-Qur’ān”, Shahrur asserted that he did not mean at all to reject the Sunnah. It’s just that it puts the Sunnah proportionally and critically.

Then Shahrur also never allows adultery, he only says that sexual relations between unmarried men and women are forbidden (haram), and the community cannot punish whips when there are no four witnesses at least. For bikini issues, need separate discussion and writing to discuss the issue of women’s clothing based on Shahrur’s interpretation. But clearly, Shahrur has no intention to allow naked women for example. And clearly, the local wisdom of the community is also a basis for legal consideration. Then for the problem there are two words “al-Nisā‘” which can mean the men, is in QS. al-Ahzāb: 55 and al-Nūr: 31. According to an Arabic grammar lecturer, Dr. Muḥammad ‘Inād Sulaimān, the interpretation of Shahrur can be justified. Because, etymologically, the word “al-Nisā‘” is indeed possible to designate the meaning of a men, and in the context of the divine verse structure it also demands to be given meaning as a men. See, facebook Muhammad ‘Inād Sulaimān on June 15, 2017.

Today, Shahrur became a famous reformist thinker. Often Shahrur is invited to attend scientific forums, in the electronic mass media such as newspaper or magazine, radio and television stations. Example, the TV program “la’alahu ya qilān” (so they can think) which was broadcast during the Ramadan month of 2018 is a continuation of a series of programs related to modern Qur’an Hermeneutics that was broadcast during the month of Ramadan in 2017 “al-Naba’ al-‘Azīm” (TV program “al-Naba’ al-‘Azīm” [great news] Dr. Muhammad Shahrur, broadcast by the Rotana Khalijia channel, was made into a book in three
do these early generations act with absolute divine revelations to be applied to relative reality. One of the goals of contemporary reading Muhammad Shahrour is to move the center of religion from the seventh century to be adjusted according to era, tools and epistemology. Traditional reading of religious texts keeps us away from reality.

4 CONCLUSION

Whatever and however type of text, it must be constructed by three patterns, namely the author of text, text, and the reader or listener. From this it is understandable, every time the reader examines the text, he will automatically use all the knowledge he has to understand the text being studied. If he does not do it, he has paralyzed his own reason, so that he cannot understand the meaning of the text being studied at all.

Based on research related to public acceptance of Shahrour’s contemporary reading in electronic media, the conclusion of this article confirms several things, that people begin to accept modern interpretations of the Qur’an. This is normal. Because, the method of reading the Shahrur is unique and rational. Shahrur’s method of interacting with divine verses seeks to take off subjectivity, and also attempts to capture the mind’s ideas objectively from the divine text. Even though later this interpretation will fall relatively, so it is still open to reinterpretation. But at least it can be able to allow the space of discourses in the divine texts to talk about themselves.

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