

# Hermeneutical Problems of Religious Language

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## ملخص

تبحث هذه المقالة القضايا الهرمينيوطيقية في الخطاب الديني، ومنها: ما هي الطريقة للوقوف على معنى النص الحقيقي حتى يتمكن القارئ من فهمه فهما صحيحا؟ فالدور الذي يلعبه التأويل هو دور التحويل أى تحويل " أشياء غير معروفة بعيدة خفية " إلى أن تكون "أشياء واقعية قريبة واضحة".

وفي هذا الصدد يستخدم الكاتب هرمنيوطيقا غادمر لما فيه من قدرة على فهم القرآن من منظور جديد أكثر معنى . بناء على هذه الطريقة فإن فهم القرآن يقتضى فهم اللغة : قواعدها وسمائيتها، وفهم تاريخية محمد صلى الله عليه وسلم وسيكولوجيته، وبالتالي لا بد للقارئ من التفاعل مع محتوى النص .

وهناك -على الأقل- أربعة أنواع من التأويلات : أولاً، التأويل باعتباره شرحاً للمعاني الفريدة. ثانياً، التأويل باعتباره شرحاً للمعاني الثانوية زيادة على المعاني الأولية الحرفية. ثالثاً، التأويل باعتباره شرحاً للنصوص التي تحتوى دائماً على المعاني المتعددة. رابعاً، التأويل باعتباره التقاطاً للمعاني لا شرحها.

## Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas masalah-masalah hermeneutik bahasa agama. Hermeneutik merupakan tradisi berpikir atau refleksi filosofis yang mencoba menjelaskan konsep pemahaman dengan medium bahasa berupa penjelasan, penerjemahan, atau pengungkapan kembali. Karena itu, salah satu masalah epistemologis dalam hermeneutik adalah bagaimana mengungkapkan arti sebenarnya dari teks dan para pembacanya dapat memahaminya dengan benar.

Peran interpretasi harus mengubah sesuatu yang tidak dikenal, jauh dan samar menjadi sesuatu yang nyata, dekat dan jelas. Tidak ada teks yang bebas dari bias sosiologis dan psikologis. Karena itu, salah satu masalah epistemologis adalah apa pembenaran bahwa suatu teks tertentu mengungkapkan kebenaran dan di sisi lain dipahami oleh para pembacanya?

Artikel ini menggunakan hermeneutik Gadamerian karena, pertama, pilihan subyektif penulis; kedua, teori hermeneutik dapat memahaman al-Qur'an dalam pandangan baru yang lebih kaya. Untuk memahami al-Qur'an, pembaca akan dituntun dulu oleh bahasa, termasuk tata bahasa dan semiotiknya. Tuntunan lain adalah peta historis dan psikologis Muhammad s.a.w.. Setelah itu, pembaca harus berinteraksi dengan kandungan teks. Hermeneutik menganjurkan antara "pikiran al-Qur'an" dan "pikiran pembaca" untuk saling mendengarkan, toleransi dan respek lalu dilanjutkan dengan tahap sintesis. Paling tidak ada empat jenis interpretasi: Pertama, interpretasi sebagai penafsiran makna yang unik. Kedua, interpretasi sebagai penafsiran makna kedua dengan menambah arti literal yang pertama. Ketiga, interpretasi sebagai makna tambahan, yaitu, menafsirkan teks yang selalu mempunyai makna yang beragam. Keempat, interpretasi yang bukan berupa menafsirkan tapi menemukan makna.

Memahami pemikiran Gadamerian bukanlah mengambil obyek dari luar diri kita tapi dari dalam diri kita. Bahasa dan tradisi adalah rumah eksistensi kita. Berdasarkan ini, kita dapat menyatakan bahwa al-Qur'an adalah penjelmaan pikiran Tuhan dalam sejarah, mengunjungi manusia dan mengajak mereka untuk mengadakan dialog dan menjelajahi sejarah. Pertanyaan dan jawaban dialektis menunjukkan hubungan timbal balik sebagaimana percakapan sebagai model fenomena hermeneutik. Teks berbicara seperti lawan bicara dalam dialog. Hal ini juga berlaku dalam memahami al-Qur'an. Untuk memahami al-Qur'an yang diturunkan pada masa lalu dan dalam budaya asing berarti mengundangnya ke dalam konteks kita dan kemudian membangun perpaduan atau berbagi pandangan untuk menatap masa depan.

## A. Defining the problem and the methodological approach

**T**his paper focuses on two problems, first, specifying the characteristics of religious language and, second, applying the hermeneutical approach to the understanding of scriptural language. It is said that the term

"hermeneutics" comes from a Greek myth. God had a messenger whose name was Hermes, who got a dilemma when God, who speaks in the language of heaven, ordered him to explain God's will to human beings. The problem faced by Hermes was this: if he repeated God's orders in the language of heaven no one would understand the message. But, if he used human language, the message would be distorted. More than that, Hermes was very much aware that some of his people would get angry with him if he was not very careful in articulating God's message. So, how should Hermes have translated and rephrased God's will using human language without distorting the words of God and, at the same time, to make the message intelligible for human beings? Here Hermes dealt with two worlds, that is the world of God and that of human beings. Furthermore, he was also faced with three different subjects with different manner and inclination. They are: God, Hermes himself, and the listeners/readers. Hermes main task was to transmute what is beyond human understanding into a form that human intelligence could grasp. Hermeneutics deals with the process of bringing a thing or situation from unintelligibility to understanding.<sup>1</sup> It pertains to the process of exposing hidden meaning. Basically, hermeneutics is a tradition of thinking or of philosophical reflection that tries to clarify the concept of *verstehen*, that is, understanding in which language is the medium par excellence.<sup>2</sup> The process of bringing understanding always assumes "interpretation," whether it takes a form of explaining, translating, or rewording. Interpretation, could refer to an oral recitation, a rational explanation, or a translation from another language. Therefore, one of the epistemological problems in hermeneutics is to demonstrate that the interpretation reveals the true meaning of the text and that its readers have correctly understood it. The role of interpretation must be to make something that is unfamiliar, distant, and obscure in meaning into something real, near, and intelligible. Such an interpretative effort has been so far applied especially in understanding scriptural language. However, the scope and problem of understanding then become broader when it is applied and directed to understand the complexity of human life. As a result, there have arisen many branches of hermeneutics; such as historical, phenomenological, theological, and mys-

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<sup>1</sup>Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1969, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient & Modern*, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 1.

tical hermeneutics. In all cases, the basic domain of hermeneutics is the same, that is, understanding an alien and traditional text, where the problem must always be how we can come to understand situation.<sup>3</sup> In interpreting the text, one thing that should be kept in mind is that no text is free from any sociological and psychological biases. Therefore, one of the epistemological problems is, what is the justification that a certain text reveals truth and, on the other hand, is it correctly understood by its readers? If we put the question in theological hermeneutics, it is, then, how do we know the mind of God when it is revealed in the language of human beings which is bound by the socio-historical context? Considering that the language of scripture is a human language, though its meaning is believed to be God's will, how do two different elements—divine/profane, absolute/relative, sacred/secular, God's words/messenger's words, meet and fuse into one another and then are written and codified in the Holy Book? Furthermore, since both authors and readers of any religious texts are always situated within psychological and sociological prejudices<sup>4</sup> or pre-judgments, can they liberate themselves from the given prejudices when they write or read the texts? To put the question in other words, can we transcend the boundary of prejudices in understanding a text in order to have an objective understanding of the text? If not, does not that mean that all understanding of the truth of scriptures is relative and intersubjective? This paper approaches the problem of scriptural interpretation from a hermeneutical point of view, using a Gadamerian paradigm but also applying Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology and Wittgenstein's theory of "language game."

Why Gadamerian hermeneutics? First, it is a matter of my subjective choice motivated by an intellectual curiosity to have a further understanding about Gadamer's hermeneutics. Second, my hypothesis is that his theory of hermeneutics would provide a richer understanding of the Qur'an in a new horizon, that is to avoid being trapped by dogmatic and fixed religious propositions which are resistant to a more liberal approach. His hermeneutical theory

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<sup>3</sup>Roger Trigg, *Understanding Social Science, Basic Blackwell, Oxford, 1985, p. 196.*

<sup>4</sup>The word "prejudice", is literally taken from Gadamer's idea, it means a judgment that it rendered before all elements that determine a situation have been finally examined. Thus "prejudice" certainly does not necessarily mean a false judgment, but part of the idea is that it can have either a positive or a negative value. Many prejudices are imposed into our mind by and through tradition (Truth and Method, p. 270).

is a criticism of the modern surrender to technological thinking, which is rooted in subjectivism and the certainties of reason based on it, as the ultimate point of references for human knowledge.<sup>5</sup> He views the scientific method which dominates the modern mind as monolithic, homogeneous, and fixed.<sup>6</sup> The approach used by Gadamer is closer to Socrates' dialectical methodology. In his view, knowledge is not something that is acquired as a possession, but rather something that requires participation, where you allow yourself to be directed, even possessed by the knowledge. Going further than Socrates, Gadamer says that to get a true understanding is like participating in a game. The idea of the game is that the subject should take leave of itself and that the games should take over. Here the dichotomy "subject-object" disappears, and the focus is on the excitement of playing, although there is still a rule of the game. So, when object and subject coalesce, that object is no longer object and that subject no longer subject. Yet there are still rules, the act of understanding always happens through language and within tradition. Such an approach to the understanding of truth, I think, is to a certain degree, compatible and applicable to an approach to the Qur'an, more particularly to liturgical language, for religious utterances are often performative and expressive rather than descriptive and explanative propositions. For example, when a Muslim says "Ya Allah" (My God), it is not a cognitive statement nor a meaningless word, but mostly it is what Ian Ramsey calls existential "disclosure."<sup>7</sup>

## B. Discussion

"Language is the house of Being," says Heidegger. "In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home".<sup>8</sup> Although the idea of language is always associated with words and speech, nevertheless words and speech are only a part of language since the deep root and place of language is in the mind rather than on the lips. "Language comes into being when expression and meaning are brought together. Separate them from each other, and you are left with mere sounds on

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<sup>5</sup>Richard E. Palmer, *Ibid*, p. 164.

<sup>6</sup>Joel C. Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics, A Reading of Truth and Method*, Yale University Press, 1985. p. 2.

<sup>7</sup>See Ian T. Ramsey. *Religious Language*, SCM Press Ltd., London, first Published, 1957.

<sup>8</sup>Martin Heidegger *Basic Writings*, edited and introduction by David Farrel Krell, Harper & Row, New York, 1977, p. 193.

the one hand and pure thought on the other. Language is the totality of its expressions together with the totality of their meanings".<sup>9</sup> But in the words "expression" we better be careful because in a philosophical analysis the term expression, according to Whitehead, is founded on-and its origin is in-the finite occasion, whereas there is nothing average about expression. Expression is essentially individual and, therefore, in so far as average dominates, expression fades.<sup>10</sup> This situational character of speech is very important because the psychological and sociological dimension of utterance and writing will also have a significant influence on the understanding and interpretation of texts and scriptural language.

There are at least three theories concerning the nature of language; naturalist theory, conventionalist theory, and revelationist theory.<sup>11</sup> The first theory is that language has its origin in a natural affinity between expression and the things they signify. It is born of a natural human inclination to imitate the sounds of nature. The second theory, conventionalist, is based on the idea that language is a social convention and it is basically arbitrary. The revelationist theory is that God created language and then taught human beings. These theories are speculative and it is not easy for us to verify which one is more legitimate than the others. However, one thing is certain. All humans are born within the given world of language(s). Discussion of the nature of language must take place while thinking in a language. But unlike fish searching for the nature of the ocean in which they live, man can transcend his nature to the level of human consciousness beyond the boundary of nature.

While putting aside the theory of the nature of language, it is an undeniable fact that the relations between words and what they signify are arbitrary or conventional. This means in part we have power to alter the relations between words and the world by adopting new conventions, new associations of words and object. It is indeed what has been happening in scientific business. But, again, here we have a worth-while observation to note. We have to differentiate between words and ideas. Ideas, said Berkeley, are images or conclude, they are not arbitrary nor natural symbols, while words, on the other hand, are conventional.<sup>12</sup> Words are just a part of language and language is

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<sup>9</sup>Bernard George Weiss, *Language in Orthodox Muslim Thought*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Dept. of Oriental Studies, Princeton University, 1966, p.2.

<sup>10</sup>Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, The Free Press, New York.

<sup>11</sup>Bernard George Weiss, *ibid*, p.8.

<sup>12</sup>Bernard George Weiss, *ibid*, p.8.

inseparable from thought. Without thought and concept we are not able to identify the world and, consequently, there would be no science and technology. If the world is not identified by human beings through concept and naming, how can we discuss and develop civilization? It may be the pragmatic meaning of Al-Qur'an when God says He already taught Adam "the names" of the phenomenal world when he was appointed to be God's *Khalifa* (Deputy) on the earth.<sup>13</sup>

All language can be described as social and cultural conventions. Religious language, however, has certain qualifications and characteristics. In this paper religious language includes three categories. One, the scriptural languages; two, liturgical language; three, religious discourse. Scriptural language, in this paper belongs to Al-Qur'an, which is believed by all Muslims as the Words of God verbatim revealed through Jibril to Muhammad. As the *verbum dei*, the Qur'an was spoken once and for all so that it is untranslatable, yet it is interpretable. Another category of religious language is liturgical language, that is religious utterance or expression in liturgy or prayer. When praying a Muslim uses passage from the Qur'an (in Arabic) as well as (in) the mother tongue. Religious discourse here refers to an activity of Islamic propagations and religious discourse within a social context, both in the oral and written form.

My concern here is not to discuss how and when the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad, but rather to analyze the position of the Qur'anic text and its relation with the readers within the ever-expanding textual webs in the written culture. In modern life, the notion of text, whether it is holy or not, is a written or printed document of reasonable length to which the basic access is through an individual's private, silent, reading and study. The scientific community tends to hold the idea that writing and reading are more important than speech and listening. This cultural trend brings about a changing role for the Qur'an. The Qur'an is still a "spoken text" for the people who know Arabic and Qur'anic Sciences. However, for others the Qur'an is "a dead sign" and alien to them. Instead of being an active subject who used to be seeking Muhammad, now the Qur'an as a written text becomes an object of literary and historical criticism since the Qur'an as scripture is a historical phenomenon.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Al-Qur'an, 2 : 33.

<sup>14</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, p. 68.

The concept of "holy" predicated to the Qur'an and any other holy scriptures is relational. A certain text is holy for a particular religious community but it could be nothing more than a common book for others. Therefore, one cannot understand the Qur'an, its role in social life and history, without knowing how Muslims respond to the Qur'an as the *ipsissima* verba of God Himself addressed to them. Borrowing Cantwell Smith's phrase, "It represents the eternal breaking through into time; the unknowable disclosed; the transcendent entering history and remaining here, available to mortals to handle and to appropriate; the divine become apparent".<sup>15</sup> In this regard, again to quote Cantwell Smith, the position of the Qur'an in Islam is analogous to the role of the figure of Christ in Christianity and, hence, for Christian, God's central revelation is in the person of Christ, where the Bible is a record of the revelation, more like the Hadith in Islam.<sup>16</sup> Since the Bible is primarily a book of history of God (Christ) dealing with men, that is why it is accepted in translation, while the Qur'an is not.<sup>17</sup>

The Qur'an and other holy scriptures have legitimately invited hermeneutical approach for many reasons. The Qur'an is indeed a living and influential text in the minds of millions. Muslim people in the world without textually any change within its historical tour during 14 centuries speaking to its readers. Interestingly enough, it is an alien as well as intimate text for every Muslim. It is alien, strange, ununderstandable when it is viewed from its precise contents and messages because it comes from "somewhere" in the past but beyond the historical realm. But it also intimate, close, even immanent within each Muslim's heart because the Qur'an is believed to be the speech of God addressed to every Muslim. No other scripture but the Qur'an has ever been recited and memorized every minute by its readers, for during Islamic prayer one has to recite some part of its verses where this part is the very core of the Qur'an, that is the chapter of al-Fatiha. Each day a practicing Muslim has to recite al-Fatiha seventeen times when praying. Therefore, due to the number of Muslim people in the world, every minute al-Fatiha is memorized and recited.

The phenomenon of the Qur'an as a living text leads to the hermeneutical discussion of how the Qur'an which was "written" in the past and "con-

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 70.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> Bernard George Weiss, *Ibid*, p. 4.

ceived" as God's Speech fits and matches our cognitive and historical situation in the twentieth century. The major aim of the hermeneutical method, according to Schleiermacher, is re-living and re-thinking the thoughts and feelings of an author.<sup>18</sup> But, how can we know the historicity of God as the Author of the Qur'an, for he is an ahistorical Being? This is an example of a hermeneutical problem which is how to bridge the gap between author, text and reader. In interpreting texts, we are faced with the permanent question in hermeneutics, that is: can we interpret the meaning of texts purely with reference to their language; or purely with reference to their authors' intention; or does textual meaning reside somehow in the inter-relation or interaction between both?<sup>19</sup> Gadamer suggests that a text is best read as a response to a question, so that the text is regarded as a "thou" who is contemporaneous with the readers and, hence, as we are reading a text we are engaged in conversation.<sup>20</sup> In doing so, however, one other hermeneutical problem arises, that is, to struggle against the cultural distance and historical alienation in which Gadamer and Ricoeur offer the concept of what so-called "appropriation," means to make one's own that was initially 'alien'.<sup>21</sup> Appropriation is, says Ricoeur, the concept which is suitable for the actualization of meaning as addressed to someone through which the reader has to be ready and open-minded to receive an enlarged self from the apprehension of proposed worlds which are the genuine object of interpretation.<sup>22</sup> As appropriation, the interpretation becomes an event. The nature of event will be easily observed when a Muslim reads the Qur'an, for reciting the Qur'an is for every Muslim both a liturgical event and a dialogue with God.<sup>23</sup>

Both Ricoeur and Gadamer agree that hermeneutics should not approach the text using a Cartesian model or the scientific method as it is applied in

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<sup>18</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, Zondervan Publishing House, Michigan, 1992, p. 204.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 206.

<sup>20</sup> Gary E. Aylesworth, *Dialogue, Text, Narrative: Confronting Gadamer and Ricoeur*, in *Continental Philosophy IV, Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, Routledge, London, 1991, p.64.

<sup>21</sup> Mario J. Valdes (edt). *A Ricoeur Reader; Reflection and Imagination*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1991, p.89.

<sup>22</sup> loc.cit.

<sup>23</sup> For writer reading, see William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word, Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*, Cambridge University Press, 1987; also in the journal of *Oral Tradition* Vol. 4., Numbers 1-2,1989, focusing on Arabic Oral Tradition.

natural sciences. The Cartesian model emphasizes the power of the reasoning of the subject. The criteria and justification of "truth-claim" is based on pure reason constructed and set by the alienated subject. Similarly, in the natural sciences the criteria of a "truth-claim" lies in the object, outside the subject, verified through experimentation based on logical-positivism.<sup>24</sup> Psychological and historical hermeneutics, for Gadamer, are very helpful in interpreting and understanding a text. But, says Gadamer, we cannot objectify the text because both text and ourselves are products of a given tradition which is shaped by given prejudices along the course of history. History and tradition always invite new interpretations. Tradition is our home, it is a dynamic situation in which the Qur'anic text and the Islamic tradition also remain there. We always find ourselves within such a dynamic situation which imposed prejudices upon us. The Qur'anic text, Muhammad, and all the interpretations of the Qur'an are historical and situational phenomena bound to time and place. Included in the concept of "situation" is implicitly the awareness that there is a limit of the possibility of vision.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the knowledge of history cannot be objective, because its "object" is always expanded by its interpreter. Objectivity, as it is very much understood in natural science, requires a static object in addition to a static subject.<sup>26</sup> With regard to the Qur'anic text there is a chain of tradition containing spirit and intentional truth, its meaning and truth are an unfinished process. The truth-claim in the Qur'an is continuously affected, brought about, enriched, and realized by the understanding of the readers and, indeed, all understanding is ultimately self-understanding. Using Gadamer's words, "In every case the fact is that whoever understands himself, projects himself on his own possibilities".<sup>27</sup> This notion implies that in the act of understanding there is always projectings of oneself on it. Accordingly, does it not mean that hermeneutics lead to relativism in understanding the Qur'an? It depends on what we mean by 'relativism'.

Believing that the Qur'an is God's Words *verbatim* implies the idea that

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<sup>24</sup>Gadamer's book, *Truth and Method*, sharply attacked the scientific method paradigm which tends to reduce the complexities of the existence and experiences of human beings.

<sup>25</sup>Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second revised edition, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshal, New York, Continuum, 1994, p. 302.

<sup>26</sup>Joel C. Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics, A Reading of Truth and Method*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 165.

the information written in the Qur'an is the absolute truth. But going back to the role of Hermes, the understanding of the Qur'an is relative because all human understanding is psychologically and historically situated within a finite perspective and horizon. We can distinguish between two kinds of relativism; foundationalistic of theistic relativism and nihilistic or atheistic relativism, both types of which are found in the hermeneutics tradition. The meaning of nihilism, according to Nietzsche, is the situation in which the human subject explicitly recognized that the lack of foundation is a constitutive part of its foundation-such a situation Nietzsche calls 'the death of God'.<sup>28</sup> Whenever all values have been secularized, all values must be said to stand in a relationship of universal equivalence, where each value is equal to all other values and can be converted into, or exchanged for, any other given value.<sup>29</sup> The implication of such a secular and nihilistic, world-view upon hermeneutics is that all interpretations of a text will have no end, and texts become an infinite game of intertextualities and interpretation. Texts are signifiers without having the absolute signified. Such a relativistic approach to a text is of course strongly refused by Qur'anic hermeneutics, although it is not easy to defend the absoluteness of the Qur'anic interpretation and understanding. Just like a game or festival, says Gadamer, every participant will have certain understanding and truth. The similar event is true when a Muslim participates in reciting the Qur'an, praying in the mosque or going on the Hajj (pilgrimage). In those situations an understanding of truth does not come out from a cognitive approach, but rather through a process of dialogue in which something is experienced within a (given) set of rules derived from the Qur'an or based on the Islamic tradition.

Using the Gadamerian paradigm, the Qur'an text is like a traveler who comes from "somewhere in time," encounters the readers and then invites them to engage in conversation or enter into discourse. Since both the text and the reader come from different times, cultures, languages, and ideological interests, they have to introduce themselves to each other and then have to share views. To know the Qur'an, the reader will be guided first by language (Arabic, or another language in case of Qur'anic Translation). Included in linguistics are grammar and semiotics which have very important roles in guiding

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<sup>28</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity. Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, Baltimore, The John Hopkin University Press, 1985, p. 118.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p.xx.

the reader when entering the garden of the Qur'anic treasure of meanings. Another guide is the historical and psychological map of Muhammad. After having visited the "cultured house" of the Qur'an, then the reader invited the Qur'an to come to his house. Hermeneutics encourages reciprocal listening, tolerance and mutual respect between "the mind of the Qur'an" and "the mind of the readers" followed by both of them moving to the synthetical stage, i.e. what Gadamer calls the fusion of horizons".<sup>30</sup> To have a horizon means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it. A person who has no horizon, says Gadamer, does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him.<sup>31</sup> In reading and interpreting the Qur'an, therefore, one needs an intrusion of intertextuality that constantly disseminates the text that is supposed to ever renew the limited and situated horizon of the reader and of the text. But, how far do we enlarge our horizons by interpreting the Qur'an? There are at least four types of interpreting; (1) interpretation as deciphering meaning, which means deciphering a meaning which is the correct or the unique meaning; (2) interpretation as deciphering a second meaning, which is furnished by the interpreter, a meaning added to, or substituted for a first literal meaning; (3) interpretation as supplementary meaning, that is to say, deciphering the permanent possibilities of the text which always has a plurality of meaning; (4) interpretation as something other than deciphering, namely inventing meaning.<sup>32</sup>

Understanding in Gadamerian thought is not "something we have" taken from the object we encounter, but rather it is what existing beings we are. Language and tradition are our house of being. To understand means to be related at once to a tradition out of which "the things" can speak to us, as well as those "things" themselves which necessarily come to us in language through tradition.<sup>33</sup> So we may justified to say that ontologically to be means to understand in which understanding and interpreting take a place in language whereas language needs a writing as a security house to store its meanings. Based on this line of thought, we could say that the Qur'an is the incarnation of God's

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<sup>30</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *ibid.*, p.306-307, 374-375, 397, 576.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>32</sup> Vincent Descombes, "The Interpretative Text", in *Continental Philosophy IV*, *ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Hollinger (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Praxis*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1985, p. 8.

mind in history, visiting human beings and inviting them to have a dialogue and make a detour in history. The dialectic of question and answer suggests the reciprocal relation of a conversation as a model for the hermeneutic phenomenon. As is stated by Theodore Kisiel, to say that a text strikes us in the form of a question is to say that it speaks like a partner communicating with us in a dialogue. Of course, the relation between interpreter and text is not really a communication between two person, but rather a communications in the common sphere of meaning. Conversation is obviously a linguistic process, that is language on the move.<sup>34</sup> The act of having conversation also holds true in interpreting the Qur'an. To understand the Qur'an which was born in the past and in a foreign culture, means to invite it into our context and then establish a fusion or shared view with which to face the future. Using Gadamer's phrase, in approaching the Qur'an we have to set up a double movement, backward and forward, along the text which remains and grows within the tradition; and the movement ceases when the text is perfectly understood.<sup>35</sup> This circular movement is neither subjective nor objective, "but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter". Related to this issue, rephrasing the words of Gadamer, Weinsheimer says, past and present are mediated and integrated by what is true, for the truth claim of the past concerns and addresses the present too. We have access to the past, therefore, only as mediated by its truth claim, and since that claim is a claim on us as well, our sole access to the past is through what the present shares or can share with it.<sup>36</sup> Every idea or tradition which has been stored in the form of writing and then transmitted from the past, like the Qur'an and Hadits, is contemporaneous with the present and for every present. The literary tradition has offered the opportunity of being here and there at the same time, providing a depth dimension to one's world and the possibility of widening one's own horizon. Understanding is first of all having come to a mutual understanding and the process and event of the act of understanding is never complete. Taking the Qur'an as a contemporaneous friend for dialogue, seems like a good approach to the Qur'an but it is also one way to explain why the Qur'an has a truth claim as the "perennial holy-book", revealed once for all times and places.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 9-10.

<sup>35</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 293.

<sup>36</sup> Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, 134.