

## **THE HERMENEUTICS OF KHALED M. ABOU EL-FADL AND ITS RELEVANCE WITH RELIGIOUS MODERATION IN INDONESIA**

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**Abstract.** *Hermeneutics is an interpretation method that develops in the study of texts. Its usage in the horizon of Islamic text study (Qur'an and Hadith) is not an exception. One figure who discusses different areas of Islamic law is Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl. Khaled has analyzed various texts in Islamic law and their relation to people's lives. This study attempts to explore the thoughts of Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl, especially regarding hermeneutics in analyzing texts and its relation with religious moderation in Indonesia. This study implements the literature review method, where the researcher reviews several works of Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl and other relevant articles. The results of this study reveal that the core problems of authoritarianism in interpretation are the methodological procedural errors of the three elements, namely: the author, text, and reader. The meaning of a text should occur from a complex, interactive, dynamic, and dialectical process between the three elements. Interpreters cannot avoid his subjectivity, therefore an interpreter should fulfill five conditions namely honesty, sincerity, thoroughness, rationality, and self-control. Khaled Abou el-Fadl's hermeneutics is very relevant as a concept of understanding religious teachings to foster and maintain religious moderation, namely mutual understanding between religions and between denominations within a religion.*

**Keywords:** *Hermeneutics; Religious Moderation; Authoritarianism; Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl*

### **Introduction**

Hermeneutics as a method to interpret texts has been mentioned by many contemporary Islamic thinkers as one of the religious thinking alternatives, especially in the field of *Tafseer*. The high number of publications in the forms of books, journal articles, mass media articles, and academic lectures on the study of hermeneutics proves the elevation of scholars' interest in discussing it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples of publications regarding the increasing discussion of hermeneutics in the *Tafseer* sciences include those written by Sulaiman Ibrahim, "Hermeneutika Teks: Sebuah Wacana Dalam Metode Tafsir Alquran?," *HUNAFa: Jurnal Studia Islamika* 11, no. 1 (2014): 23, <https://doi.org/10.24239/jsi.v11i1.338.23-41>; M. Ilham Muchtar, "Analisis Konsep Hermeneutika Dalam Tafsir Alquran," *HUNAFa: Jurnal Studia Islamika* 13, no. 1 (2016): 67, <https://doi.org/10.24239/jsi.v13i1.414.67-89>; Faisal Haitomi, "Menimbang Hermeneutika Sebagai Mitra Tafsir," *NUN: Jurnal Studi Alqur'an Dan Tafsir Di Nusantara* 5, no. 2 (2019): 45–69; Ummi Inayati, "Pendekatan Hermeneutika Dalam Ilmu Tafsir," *Falasifa* 10, no. 2 (2019): 68–88,

However, studying religious texts critically through hermeneutics is still not fully accepted by some Islamic scholars, some others openly avoid it. This antipathy attitude is partly motivated by the proposition that hermeneutics is considered a Western thinking tradition to criticize the Bible text. Therefore, hermeneutics is not considered compatible to be used in studying the Qur'an whose text is authentic. Unlike Bible, the Qur'an does not have the problem of originality.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, some contemporary Muslim intellectuals see that hermeneutics as a text interpretation method needs to be adopted. This is based on the assumption that, methodologically, conventional methods of interpretation (*tafsir*) is no longer developing to address the current problems of Muslims. The meeting point of traditional interpretation methods and hermeneutics is in the emphasis on the historical context of the meaning desired by the creator of the text, in the words of the *Tafsir* study is called *asbab al-nuzul*.<sup>3</sup>

One of the prominent Muslim thinkers who is triggered by the existing but slowly developing interpretation models is Khaled M. Abou el-Fadl. Khaled M. Abou el-Fadl himself has produced many writing works on the discussion of Islamic law.<sup>4</sup> Khaled's ideas about how one should understand the text of the Qur'an are contained in one of his works "Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority,

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<https://www.ptonline.com/articles/how-to-get-better-mfi-results>; Wely Dozan and Muhammad Turmudzi, "Konsep Hermeneutika Sebagai Metodologi Interpretasi Teks Al-Qur'an," *MAGHZA: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Tafsir* 4, no. 2 (2019): 205–19; Muhammad Padlan and Muhammad Naufal Khairi, "Hermeneutika Terhadap Tafsir Al-Qur'an," *MUSHAF JOURNAL: Jurnal Ilmu Al Quran Dan Hadis* 2, no. 2 (2022): 190–202.

<sup>2</sup> In Indonesia, one of the works that criticizes (does not agree with) hermeneutics as a method for interpreting the Qur'an, is the one written by Husaini, Adnan, and Abdurrahman Al-Baghdady, *Tafsir Al-Qur'an* (Jakarta: Gema Insani Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> A. Komarudin, "Hermeneutika Dalam Tafsir Al-Qur'an: Sinergitas Instrumen Penafsiran Al-Qur'an Dunia Islam Dan Barat," *At-Ta'wil* 1, no. 1 (April 16, 2019): 28–39, <https://ejournal.ibntegal.ac.id/index.php/takwil/article/view/31>.

<sup>4</sup> Some of Khaled M. Abou el-Fadl's works are Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, 1963); Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women* (London: Oneworld Publication, 2001); Khaled M Abou El-Fadl, *Atas Nama Tuhan: Dari Fiqh Otoriter Ke Fiqh Otoritatif* (Jakarta: Serambi, 2004); Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age* (New York & London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

and Women” which has been translated into Indonesian with the title ”*Atas Nama Tuhan: Dari Fikih Otoriter ke Fikih Otoritatif*”.

This study attempts to analyze the concept of Khaled M. Abou el-Fadl's hermeneutics which is mostly written in the book "Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women". In addition, this paper also tries to analyze how relevant the concept of Khaled M. Abou el-Fadl's hermeneutics is as a basis for fostering a moderate religious attitude.

## **Method**

The method used in this study is a literature review. A literature review was chosen as the method in this research because this method is a systematic method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing research works and ideas that have been produced by researchers and practitioners. A literature review aims to analyze and synthesize existing knowledge related to a particular topic. In addition, literature review is also used to find research gaps for a new research to fill. The more detailed objectives are described by Okoli & Schabram (1) to provide a theoretical background/base for the research to be carried out, (2) to study the depth and breadth of the existing research related to the topic being studied, and (3) to answer the practical questions with an understanding of what has been written by previous research.

In this study, a literature review method was used to analyze some of Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl's ideas in his book entitled ”Speaking in God's Name Islamic Law, Authority, and Women”. The book was analyzed to determine its contents and contextual values.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Overview of the Definition of Hermeneutics**

Etymologically, the word ”hermeneutics” comes from the Greek *hermeneuein* which means ”to interpret”. The word ”hermeneia” could literally be interpreted as ”interpretation”. In the Greek mythology, there is a figure whose name is associated with hermeneutics, it is ”Hermes”. According to the myth, Hermes was in charge of conveying divine messages to humans. In addition to conveying messages, Hermes is also tasked with interpreting messages from gods to humans<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Irwan Masdhuqi, *Kontekstualisasi Turats: Telaah Regresif Dan Progresif* (Kediri: tnp, 2005) page 15.

Originally, Hermeneutics was used to interpret the scriptures of the Bible. In the 20th century, the study of hermeneutics developed into the study area of humanities such as history, law, philosophy, literature and so on.<sup>6</sup> Although in its development, hermeneutics is applied in various studies (previously mentioned), hermeneutics can be defined as an interpretation method on a text that pays attention to the words' context and the cultural context of its thought.<sup>7</sup> Hermeneutics can also be defined as a method of interpretation that has the task of understanding the content and meaning of a word, sentence, text and to find instructions in symbolic forms.<sup>8</sup> However, once again, with the widening functions of hermeneutic methods, namely its usage as an interpretation approach in various branches of science, hermeneutics does not end with a single definition.<sup>9</sup>

In Islamic studies, hermeneutics was first introduced by Hasan Hanafi as an alternative to the existing method of interpretation, namely *Usul al-Fiqh*.<sup>10</sup> Many prominent Islamic thinkers subsequently followed including Fazlurrahman, Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, Faris Esack<sup>11</sup> and Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl.

## **The Hermeneutics of Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl**

### **Roots of Authoritarianism**

Authoritarianism is the act of locking the will of God and/or the text in a certain determination and then presenting that determination as something given, certain, absolute, and decisive. According to Abou el-Fadl, the phenomenon of authoritarianism in the interpretation of Islamic law is the result of methodological procedural errors related to the relationship between the three elements, namely; author, text, and reader.

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<sup>6</sup> See Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutika: Teori Baru Mengenai Interpretasi* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2005) page 38.

<sup>7</sup> Poespaprodjo, *Hermeneutika* (Bandung: Pustaka Setia, 2004) page 5.

<sup>8</sup> Josef Bleicher, *Hermeneutika Kontemporer* (Yogyakarta: Fajar Pustaka, 2007), page 5.

<sup>9</sup> Palmer posits that there are six definitions of modern hermeneutics. See Palmer, *Hermeneutika: Teori Baru Mengenai Interpretasi*, page 38.

<sup>10</sup> Muzairi, "Hermeneutik Dalam Pemikiran Islam," in *Hermeneutika Al-Qur'an Madzhab Yogya* (Yogyakarta: Islamika, 2003), page 53-54.

<sup>11</sup> Rahman's concept of hermeneutics can be read in among others: *Islam dan Tantangan Modernitas, dan Islam* (translated), Arkoun: *Rethinking Islam* (translated), Nasr Hamid: *Hermeneutika Inklusif* (translated), Farid Esack: *Membebaskan yang Tertindas* (translated).

Normatively, religious texts provide a wide space for and welcome various understandings and interpretations to get the meaning of the texts.<sup>12</sup> Those understandings and interpretations aim to reveal God's "will" in the texts. Since the texts are the authoritative medium that "stores" God's will, every interpreter tries to reach up to that authoritative truth. This is where an interpreter could be trapped in the puddle of authoritarianism. Once the interpreter goes out of the line by identifying the text into his own nature, he/she puts him/herself as a spokesperson for the text as if his/her voices are the voice of the text.<sup>13</sup>

The logical consequence is that he/she closed the possibility of other meanings because he/she positioned him/herself to represent the meaning that God intended. Here, the text has been silenced and is no longer able to speak. The readers have no reason to study the text any further because after all the text is frozen in its final state when it is interpreted. As a result, the text is seen as irrelevant, because the final meaning assigned to it has sealed the meaning of the text forever. Irrelevant, in the sense that the reader has no reason to return to the original text and interpret it.<sup>14</sup> The readers will refer to the established meaning and simply follow it.

Thus, authoritarianism is a behavior that does not adhere to the prerequisites of self-control and involves false claims that the result is an abuse of God's will. Authoritarianism is the neglect of the ontological reality of God and the takeover of God's will by God's "representatives" so that the representative effectively rejects integrity, then refers to himself. An authoritarian figure blurred the distinction between representatives and God. The saying of a representative and his God become one because a representative grafts his designation onto God's commandments. The dynamics of an authoritarian figure like this will deny the integrity of the text's instructions by closing the possibility for these clues to reveal themselves and hinder the development and evolution of the meaning of the interpretation community.

According to Abou el-Fadl, such an attitude is morally unacceptable. Sealing the meaning of a text is a form of intellectual arrogance. It implies that the

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<sup>12</sup> One thing to note is that although religious texts are open to various interpretation strategies, that does not mean that religious texts are open to all kinds of interpretation. In other words, the religious texts are open to all kinds of interpretation. In other words, the religious texts are able to accommodate a dynamic movement of interpretation. Abou El-Fadl, *Atas Nama Tuhan: Dari Fiqh Otoriter Ke Fiqh Otoritatif*. (Jakarta: Serambi, 2004), page. 212.

<sup>13</sup> Mun'im A Sirri, "Islam, Teks Terbuka Dan Pluralisme," *Jurnal Perspektif Progresif* Vol. 1, no. 1 (2005): 28.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* page 213.

interpreter claims to have knowledge identical to the knowledge of God. By claiming to have known the true meaning of a text, the interpreter seems to say; “My interpretation is very identical to the actual meaning of the text”.<sup>15</sup> The claim has actually juxtaposed the determination of the reader's meaning with the original text. As a result, the original text loses its autonomy, it becomes a text that depends on the meaning claimed by the interpreter. Besides being morally unacceptable, this is also theologically contradictory, especially with the concept of absolute knowledge of God. The Qur'an explicitly states that God's knowledge is absolute and that His knowledge cannot be equated with anyone's knowledge.

Furthermore, in addition to being caused by the interpreter, authoritarianism can also arise from the attitudes of the interpreter's readers. The process of sealing a meaning in this case is similar to that performed by the interpreter. When a reader struggles to understand an interpretation work he/she will eventually draw a conclusion based on his/her background of knowledge. The risk is that the reader could believe in one single meaning of the text and closed other alternatives. In this process, the text submits to the reader and effectively he/she becomes a substitute for the text. If the reader chooses a certain way of reading and claims that there is no other way, then the text will dissolve into his/her characters. If the reader oversteps and distorts the text, the danger is that he/she will also become authoritarian.

A simple example, a certain *tafseer* book is basically not authoritarian, it is open to any interpretation, but the reader during the reading process has an authoritarian character, so the interpretation that will appear for the reader is an authoritarian interpretation. At this very point, once again, according to Khaled Abou el-Fadl, the reader becomes a vulnerable place for the birth of authoritarian interpretations.<sup>16</sup>

Another cause of authoritarianism, apart from unifying the reader with the text being read, is a selective attitude in the use of evidence/postulates for a problem. This means an interpreter is selective in examining the existing arguments (*dalil*) so that he does not try to find God's commands, instead, he only seeks support from God's commands. This kind of attitude, according to Khaled Abou el-Fadl, is also seen as a violation of one of the requirements to be an interpreter namely a serious and thorough attitude in analyzing the arguments (*dalil*).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, page 213.

<sup>16</sup> Cited from Zuhairi Misrawi's interview with Khaled Abou el-Fadl in journal *Perspektif Progresi*, page 16.

<sup>17</sup> Khaled Abou el-Fadl, *Atas Nama Tuhan...*, page 264.

From the brief explanation above, according to Khaled, it appears that the abolition of authoritarianism must be based on an understanding: there is no finality of any form of interpretation. In other words “the text must remain open” to be understood and interpreted by individuals, institutions, and organizations.

### **Anti-Authoritarian Hermeneutics**

The problem of understanding and interpreting sacred texts, namely the Qur'an and *hadith* occupies a very important position in the discourse of Islamic thought at present.<sup>18</sup> It substantively gives a reevaluative and reinterpreted spirit to various understandings and interpretations that have so far been taken for granted among Muslims.

This understanding is based on an assumption that the text of the Qur'an and hadith and their circulating commentary and syarh is not a narrative that speaks in a historical vacuum. Instead, behind the revelation of a text there are events. Likewise, in the process of understanding and reconstructing the text, thinkers should consider the hidden variables and ideas accompanying it. Without a profound understanding of the various variables and situations behind the text (*e.g.* historical, sociological, psychological situations and so on), interpretation has a very high potential of becoming misleading, it could even lead to authoritarianism. This is because basically, humans do not have the ability to understand God's wisdom. So all forms of understanding and carrying out God's will must be imperfect, the perfection belongs only to God.

In relation to the discussion above, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid opposes the form of *talwinjyah* reading, namely ideological-subjective-tendencious reading (*qira'ah mughribah*), which in its mechanism forces the text to speak about what the reader wishes.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, Khaled Abou el-Fadl confronts the authoritarian form of interpretation. In fact, el-Fadl asserts that the problem of interpretation is authoritarianism. To that end, he offers a non-authoritarian interpretive procedure.

In explaining his anti-authoritarian hermeneutics, Khaled Abou el-Fadl starts from a question related to the complexity of the concept of meaning. The question

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<sup>18</sup> Aksin Wijaya, “Message to Mankind: Wise Attitude to Interpret Quran and Its Discourse,” *Talent Development and Excellence* 12, no. 1 (2020): 1407–19.

<sup>19</sup> M. Nur Ichwan, “A New Horizon in Qur’anic Hermeneutics: Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid’s Contribution to Critical Qur’anic Scholarship” (Leiden University, 1999), page 61.

that arises is who has the right to determine the meaning in an interpretation? At least, at a simplified level, there are three possible answers.<sup>20</sup>

First, meaning is determined by the author. The author of a text formulates his ideas (meaning) when he constructs a text. Then the reader tries to understand the author's ideas.

Second, meaning is determined by the text. Text with its meaning system is seen as the only means capable of claiming the authority to determine meaning. In this case, the text has its own reality and integrity, and the reality and integrity of the text has the right to be obeyed.

Third, meaning is determined by the reader. Every reader brings his subjectivity into the reading. The reader projects his subjectivity to the will of the author and the text. What the reader understands from a text, for example, largely depends on his own experience or intellectual universe, so meaning is determined subjectively.

According to Khaled Abou el-Fadl, the three possible answers above are based on his study on the academic works of notable linguists. It turns out that very few of them state that meaning is determined only by the author, the text, or the reader. In the process of interpreting, the extraction of meaning must be taken from the dialectical interactions between the author, the text, and the reader. There must be a continuing process of negotiation between the three components and that one should not dominate the process of defining meaning. In this case, the text needs not only to be free from the environment and the entanglement of the author's domination and power, but also to be free from the arbitrary actions of the readers. If the text does play an important role in life, then the dynamics of the democratic process of determining meaning must be maintained. Thus, meaning does not belong to any particular person who tries to handcuff and imprison the text in his own mind. This kind of paradigm causes the text to be closed, frozen, and dead.

In other words, the understanding of a text should be a product of the ever-living interaction between the author, the text, and the reader. Each of them must be respected and their individual roles must be seriously considered. Each component involved in the formation of meaning is not allowed to control, suppress, and dominate the others in meaning-making. As such, the process of searching for meaning will continue to be wide open at any time and there will be no finality that leads to arbitrariness.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Khaled Abou el-Fadl, *Atas Nama Tuhan...*, page 182-185.

<sup>21</sup> Amin Abdullah, "Pendekatan Hermeneutik dalam Studi Fatwa-fatwa Keagamaan", Preface, in Khaled Abou el-Fadl, *Atas Nama Tuhan...*, page xii.

Furthermore, in the dialectical process between the three components above, Khaled Abou el-Fadl is aware of the difficulties faced by interpreters (*mufassir*) to be free from his subjectivity having the fact that excessive subjectivity will inevitably lead to misinterpretations. For this reason, Khaled Abou el-Fadl provides five conditions to follow so that the interpreter does not fall into authoritarianism. The five conditions are honesty, self-restraint, diligence, comprehensiveness, and rationality. Violation of any of the five conditions will lead to an authoritarian interpretation.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Open Texts**

In presenting his idea of text openness, Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl, among others, cites the polemic between the *Khawarij* group and Ali bin Abu Talib. The *Khawarij* claimed “all laws belong to Allah alone (sovereignty belongs only to God)”. This statement is to accuse Ali of submitting to human decisions in ending the conflict with *Mu'awiyah*. In refuting the accusation, Ali gathered people and brought a copy of the Qur'an and then Ali touched it and said:

"O Qur'an, speak to people!" (that is, tell these people God's decree). The people gathered around Ali said angrily "what are you saying, Ali?! Are you mocking us? The Qur'an is just sheets of paper and ink, only humans speak in the name of the Qur'an." At that time Ali said "The Qur'an is written with scratches between two covers. He does not speak. (In order to speak) the Qur'an needs an interpreter and the interpreter is a human being."<sup>23</sup>

According to Khaled, this event in history proves that it is true that power belongs only to God. But God still gives space to his representatives (humans) to do creative reasoning in order to carry out His instructions.<sup>24</sup> Placing the text in a closed position, contradicts the function of the Qur'an itself as "hudan lin nas", which emphasizes a deep and wide dialogue between the Qur'an and humans continuously without any limitations by space and time. Humans as individuals and as groups must

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<sup>22</sup> Khaled Abou el-Fadl, *Atas Nama Tuhan...*, page 202.

<sup>23</sup> Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl, *Atas Nama Tuhan ...*, page 46 – 47.

<sup>24</sup> Khaled gave this example: If a person orders his representative to carry out actions that are "fair and balanced," then the representative is given the power to translate/define in detail to carry out the order from the representative.

Khaled, *Atas Nama Tuhan ...*, page 53 – 54.

be respected and given the opportunity to dialogue with the text (al-Qur'an) in order to socialize and cultivate the messages and values of the text.<sup>25</sup>

All in all, the process of interpreting a text ought to be a result of the consistently living connection between the writer, the text, and the reader. Every one of them should be regarded and their singular jobs should be genuinely thought of. Every part engaged with the development of importance is not permitted to control, smother, and rule the others in constructing meaning. Accordingly, meaning making should keep on being completely open at any time and there will be no finality that prompts discretion.<sup>26</sup>

The above authoritarian attitude or decision making is comparable to the takeover of the author's (Author/God) power over the text to justify the reader/interpreter's desire about the text. It also means that the reader takes over the position of the author as the only source of authority for truth.<sup>27</sup>

The concept of hermeneutics offered by Khaled can give birth to a development in the interpretation tradition or, at least, a change. This means that the meaning of texts (al-Qur'an) will possibly continue to appear or be brought to the surface in various places or times, so that there is no meaning that can be said to be exclusive, final, the most true and other similar claims.

### Who Owns the Authority?

According to Khaled, the problems faced by Muslims are, among others, the issue of the authority of religious sources or texts and who have the right to and is capable of representing, expressing and controlling them.<sup>28</sup> As stated earlier, the text (al-Qur'an and hadith) cannot speak without using its representatives and these representatives are humans. However, based on *surah al-Taubah* (9) verse 122 and *al-Anbiya* (21) verse 7, not all humans have the authority to interpret the text, only those who are knowledgeable (competent) that owns the authority.<sup>29</sup>

In describing who has the authority to interpret texts, Khaled gives an example of "authority" in the jurisdiction, who has the authority to understand legal texts. According to him, it is the jurists who have the authority to understand the text

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<sup>25</sup> M. Amin Abdullah, *Studi Agama: Normativitas Atau Historis?* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2002). Page 220.

<sup>26</sup> Amin Abdullah, "Pendekatan Hermeneutik dalam Studi Fatwa-fatwa Keagamaan", Preface, in Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl, *Atas Nama Tuhan...*, page xii.

<sup>27</sup> M. Amin Abdullah, *Islamic Sutides Di Perguruan Tinggi: Pendekatan Integratif-Interkonektif* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2006). Page 276.

<sup>28</sup> Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl, *Melawan Tentara Tuhan ...* page 47.

<sup>29</sup> Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl, *Atas Nama Tuhan...*, page 93

(legal texts). What needs to be considered in determining the criteria for the authority must be related to the ability to carry out objective analysis and avoid subjective points of view which are based on human lust (*nafs*).

Since not everyone has these requirements, the public (general group) could point out knowledgeable people (jurists/ulama/special group) to represent the authority for them. This special group (jurists/ulama) is seen as authoritative not because they hold the authority, but because they are seen as having competence in analyzing and understanding God's commands contained in the texts.<sup>30</sup> To avoid authority abuse and to keep the jurists/special group from determining arbitrary laws, Khaled offers five requirements: (1) honesty, (2) sincerity, (3) thoroughness, (4) rationality, (5) self-control.<sup>31</sup>

Someone who holds authority holders in interpreting texts must be honest with his abilities, must be honest about the extent to which his knowledge and abilities could understand the meaning of the texts. He is also expected to have sincerity in explaining the problems at hand, maximizing his potential in investigating, studying, and analyzing the commands (contents) contained in the text. This attitude of sincerity is often used as evidence of the claim of being honest in interpreting the text. However, this claim alone is not enough, it must also have a comprehensive, rational and controlled interpretation approach. Therefore, in understanding the text, one must consider all the relevant contents of the text as a whole,<sup>32</sup> not only finding certain lines of evidence.

The next requirement that needs to be met is rationality. Rationality according to Khaled is something that is considered true in general by certain communities and under certain conditions. In other words, when a person chooses a formula to interpret a text, he must consider whether or not the formula is well-understood by his community. That is because the results of the search for meaning are not only for himself but will be consumed by and internalized in his community.

The last requirement that frames the four requirements mentioned above is self-control. Self-control means that someone who has authority must know the limits of his role. Self-control in another way acts as a means to eliminate authoritarian attitudes.

In the tradition of classical interpreters (commentators/mufasssireen), this self-control is exemplified by Khaled with the phrase "wa Allah a'lam bi al-shawab"

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<sup>30</sup> Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl, *Atas Nama Tuhan...*, page 97-98.

<sup>31</sup> Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl, *Atas Nama Tuhan...*, page 100-103.

<sup>32</sup> According to the author, the embryo of this concept was already found in the literature of classic commentary science namely in the concept of *Ilmu Munasabah*.

at the end of each of his descriptions. This expression serves as an epistemological and moral claim. The idea in the expression is that someone who interprets the text must have vigilance to avoid deviation from the role he has by taking refuge in the name of his God.<sup>33</sup>

Self-control in the modern and postmodern era is not enough with the expression "wa Allah a'lam bi al-shawab". Actualization of self-control in the present time should be done by providing strong text evidence; opening doors of participation for other interpreters (*mufasssireen*); taking into account the humans' sociological, anthropological, and psychological conditions; observing philosophically fundamental values; and taking advantage of scientific advances.<sup>34</sup>

From the description above, Khaled's concept of who has authority over the text concludes that all humans have equitable opportunity to hold the authority as long as they possess the requirements as stated above. Authority is not a monopoly of an individual or a particular institution. So that no one is rightful to say "I am the only one who has authority" (to represent God or on behalf of Him).

### **The Relevance of Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl's Hermeneutics with Religious Moderation in Indonesia**

In the Indonesian context, a good understanding of religious moderation is very important. This is due to the fact that there are at least five different religions officially recognized by Indonesia. In addition, within each of these religions there are different religious communities, groups, and organizations. Therefore, a moderate understanding of religion is extremely needed.

The existence of various religions in Indonesia, in the view of Islam, is a necessity. This is mentioned, among others, in the Qur'an, Surah Yunus, verses 99-100:

“Had your Lord so willed 'O Prophet', all 'people' on earth would have certainly believed, every single one of them! Would you then force people to become believers? It is not for any soul to believe except by Allah's leave”.

The verses clearly state that one must be aware of the diverse beliefs adhered to by humans in this world. Therefore, while believing in the truth of his religion, one should also be aware that there are other people who have the right to believe in the truth of their religion other from his.

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<sup>33</sup> Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl, *Atas Nama Tuhan...*, page 103.

<sup>34</sup> Amin Abdullah, “Pendekatan Hermeneutik ....”, page xvi.

Religious diversity does not happen only in the macro-scale (between religions), it happens in the micro scale (within a religion) too. In the internal context of Islam, for example, different religious understandings and practices are an unavoidable necessity. The emergence of various concepts or methods of interpretation is one form of this diversity. The emergence of various religious schools both related to faith (*aqidah*) and worship (*'ibadah*), after the death of the Prophet is also a reality that gives rise to various kinds of religious understandings among Muslims.<sup>35</sup>

The concept of "open text" *i.e.* texts can be interpreted by anyone who is competent offered by Khaled M. Abou el-Fadl will eliminate the monopoly of truth on the interpretation of the verses of the Qur'an and Hadith. Likewise, the concept of "no one has the right to claim to be God's representative" can eliminate the attitude of closing the possibility of truth to others. When someone opens up the possibility of the truth of another's understanding, he/she distances himself from the attitude of one-sided truth claims or feels that he is the most right while the others are wrong. In terms of morality, the concept of "self-control" which is reflected in the expression "wa Allah a'lam bi al-shawab", forms a person's attitude to be willing to understand others who have different understandings, because he is aware of that the ultimate truth belongs only to Allah and only He knows.

Disproportionate fanaticism, intolerance, blaming other understandings, judging others as infidels, judging others' worships as *bid'ah* (heretical practices), according to the author's view, can be eliminated or at least minimized by Khaled's hermeneutics above. On the other hand, if a Muslim or Islamic institution and organization is allergic to the offer of dynamics of thought that gives rise to alternative concepts (new methods), and has a status quo attitude, then the attitude of blaming each other among Muslims will continue, anarchist attitudes in the name of religion will continue to emerge.

Such attitudes, once again, when viewed from Khaled's hermeneutics, emerge from the paradigm of "as the most correct" interpretation or, borrowing Amin Abdullah's term, "which is what God wants" interpretation. This attitude in the name of God's power then gives birth to an arbitrary, exclusive attitude, and will further distance it from moderate and tolerant attitudes between or within religious communities.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>35</sup> Abou El-Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age*.

The core reason for authoritarianism in interpretation is a methodological procedural error that happens between the three elements of interpretation, namely: the author, the text, and the reader. These procedural errors are characterized by a very subjective and selective reading model. Subjective in the sense of unifying the interpreter's attitude to the text and unifying the reader's understanding to the author's intent. Selective in the sense that an author only uses arguments that support his interpretation so that his analysis is not comprehensive. The concept of hermeneutics introduced by Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl suggests that the meaning of a text is not determined by any of the three elements of hermeneutics. The formation of the meaning of a text occurs because there is a complex, interactive, dynamic, and dialectical process between the three elements. Each element occupies its respective role with no domination of one over the others. That way, the process of searching for meaning will continue to be wide open at any time and there will be no finality that leads to arbitrariness.

An interpreter cannot escape his subjectivity, so Khaled Abou el-Fadl provides five conditions so that the interpreter does not fall into the pit of authoritarianism. The five conditions are honesty, sincerity, thoroughness, rationality and self-control. Violation of any of the five conditions will lead to an authoritarian interpretation. Khaled Abou el-Fadl's hermeneutics is very relevant to be used as a concept of understanding religious teachings to grow and maintain religious moderation, namely mutual respect and understanding of the diversity of beliefs between religions or within a religion.

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