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Theological Bias in Qur'anic Interpretation: An Analysis of the Relationship Between Kalam and Tafsir

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between *kalam* and *tafsir* by focusing on the role of theological bias in the production of exegetical meaning. Although *tafsir* is often regarded as an objective effort to uncover the meaning of divine revelation, the diversity of interpretations throughout Islamic intellectual history indicates that exegesis is inseparable from the theological assumptions of the interpreter. This study argues that theological bias is not merely an external influence upon interpretation but an inherent dimension of the exegetical process itself. Employing a qualitative library-based approach, the article combines conceptual analysis of hermeneutical theories with a historical examination of the interaction between *kalam* and *tafsir*. Particular attention is given to the interpretive debates between Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite exegetes concerning Qur'anic verses on predestination and human agency. The study finds that theological doctrines concerning divine justice, omnipotence, free will, and the relationship between reason and revelation function as epistemological foundations that shape exegetical choices and interpretive conclusions. Consequently, *tafsir* should be understood not only as a linguistic explanation of scripture but also as a reflection of competing theological worldviews. The article concludes that the production of Qur'anic meaning is inseparable from the theological horizons through which interpreters engage the sacred text.

Kata Kunci:
Bias teologis; Tafsir; Kalam; Mu'tazilah; Asy'ariyah.

Abstrak: Artikel ini mengkaji hubungan antara kalam dan tafsir dengan menyoroti peran bias teologis dalam produksi makna tafsir. Meskipun tafsir sering dipahami sebagai upaya objektif untuk mengungkap makna wahyu, keragaman penafsiran yang muncul sepanjang sejarah intelektual Islam menunjukkan bahwa proses penafsiran tidak pernah terlepas dari asumsi-asumsi teologis mufasir. Penelitian ini berargumen bahwa bias teologis bukan sekadar pengaruh eksternal terhadap tafsir, melainkan merupakan dimensi inheren dalam proses interpretasi itu sendiri. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan, penelitian ini menggabungkan analisis konseptual terhadap teori-teori hermeneutika dengan kajian historis mengenai interaksi antara ilmu kalam dan tafsir. Analisis difokuskan pada perdebatan penafsiran antara *Mu'tazilah* dan *Asy'ariyah* terkait ayat-ayat tentang takdir dan kebebasan manusia. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa doktrin-doktrin teologis mengenai keadilan Tuhan, kemahakuasaan Tuhan, kehendak bebas manusia, serta relasi akal dan wahyu berfungsi sebagai fondasi epistemologis yang membentuk pilihan dan kesimpulan penafsiran. Dengan demikian, tafsir tidak hanya merupakan penjelasan linguistik terhadap teks Al-Qur'an, tetapi juga cerminan dari pandangan dunia teologis yang saling berkompetisi. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa produksi makna dalam tafsir tidak dapat dipisahkan dari horizon teologis yang melatarbelakangi proses interpretasi.

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INTRODUCTION

Tafsir is often perceived as an objective intellectual activity concerned solely with uncovering the meaning of the sacred text (Rippin, 2009). Within the classical Islamic scholarly tradition, tafsir has frequently been positioned as an authoritative explanation of divine revelation and a direct representation of God's intent (McAuliffe et al., 2003). Such a perception is particularly evident in the privileged status often accorded to tafsir bi al-ma'thur, which has traditionally been regarded as the most authentic and objective form of *Qur'anic* interpretation because of its reliance on transmitted reports from the Prophet, the Companions, and the Successors. Recent studies have questioned this assumption, however, by demonstrating that even tafsir bi al-ma'thur cannot be entirely free from the subjectivity of the exegete (Apandi, 2023). The selection, evaluation, and application of transmitted reports inevitably involve interpretive judgments shaped by particular intellectual and theological orientations.

The long history of *Qur'anic* exegesis further demonstrates that interpretation is never entirely neutral or detached from the interpreter (Robinson, 1997). The emergence of diverse and even contradictory interpretations of the same verses indicates that tafsir is deeply intertwined with the subjectivity of the exegete, as meaning is produced through the interaction between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter. In Gadamerian terms, understanding emerges through a fusion of horizons in which prior assumptions and historical situatedness inevitably shape the interpretive process. Rather than being a neutral recovery of an original meaning, interpretation is influenced by the exegete's intellectual background, historical circumstances, and theological commitments (Rahmatullah, 2019). Consequently, questions regarding the role of ideological orientation, intellectual tradition, and theological assumptions in shaping interpretation remain central to contemporary *Qur'anic* studies.

The diversity of tafsir traditions demonstrates that *Qur'anic* interpretation is influenced not merely by linguistic analysis but also by broader theological and ideological horizons. The same Qur'anic verse may produce significantly different interpretations among *Mu'tazilite, Ash'arite, Shi'ite, Sufi*, and modern exegetes (Adam, 2001; Arifin et al., 2024; Barani et al., 2020; Kurniawan et al., 2026). Comparative studies of *Qur'anic* interpretation further demonstrate that exegetical differences frequently correspond to underlying theological commitments. Discussions on divine justice, for instance, reveal substantial divergences among *Mu'tazilite, Ash'arite*, and Twelver *Shi'ite* scholars, each of whom interprets affliction, human responsibility, and divine will through distinct theological frameworks (Barani et al., 2020). Such findings suggest that exegetical conclusions are often rooted in prior doctrinal assumptions regarding the nature of God and the relationship between divine action and human agency.

This tendency is particularly evident in interpretations of *Qur'anic* verses concerning predestination, divine guidance, and human agency. Throughout Islamic

intellectual history, such verses have generated competing theological readings regarding the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. *Muʿtazilite* exegetes such as al-Zamakhshari tended to emphasize divine justice and human freedom, whereas Ashʿarite scholars such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī stressed divine omnipotence and the doctrine of *kasb* (Barani et al., 2020). Theological debates surrounding guidance (*hidāyah*), misguidance (*iḍlāl*), and predestination further demonstrate how identical textual passages may yield divergent interpretive conclusions (Afif & Riyani, 2025). While some readings appear to support a deterministic understanding of human action, other exegetical traditions interpret these verses as affirmations of moral responsibility and accountability. As several studies have shown, such differences do not arise directly from the text itself but emerge through distinct theological frameworks that mediate the exegete's engagement with the Qur'an (Afif & Riyani, 2025).

In this regard, theological doctrines function as interpretive lenses through which *Qur'anic* meanings are selected, prioritized, and justified. These differences cannot therefore be explained solely through philological considerations; rather, they reflect broader theological paradigms that shape how exegetes conceptualize God, revelation, humanity, and religious authority. Tafsir thus becomes not merely a linguistic enterprise but also an arena in which theological doctrines are articulated, negotiated, and defended through engagement with the sacred text.

In the Indonesian academic context, studies on *tafsir* have developed considerably over recent decades. Many scholars have focused on exegetical methods, interpretive typologies, hermeneutical approaches, and the intellectual biographies of mufassirs (Mustaqim, 2017; Syamsuddin, 2022). Previous discourse in Qur'anic studies has increasingly emphasized thematic tafsir, contextual interpretation, and contemporary hermeneutics. Concurrently, scholarship highlights the impact of ideological, sectarian, and theological factors on exegetical variation, revealing these differences as manifestations of broader intellectual commitments. Prior research has predominantly focused on specific exegetical works, doctrinal disputes, or interpretive outcomes. In contrast, the epistemological role of kalam as a foundational framework shaping and legitimizing interpretive orientations remains insufficiently addressed. This lacuna is significant, given that theological assumptions often constitute the epistemic basis underpinning exegetical reasoning. Consequently, investigating the interaction between kalam and tafsir is crucial to understanding how Qur'anic interpretation operates within the broader structures of Islamic thought.

Accordingly, this article addresses two questions: (1) how does *'ilm al-kalam* shape the epistemological foundations of *Qur'anic* interpretation, and (2) how do theological commitments produce divergent exegetical readings of the same *Qur'anic* text? To address these questions, this study employs a qualitative library-based approach that examines the epistemological relationship between ʿilm al-kalam and

Qur'anic exegesis through a comparative analysis of *Muʿtazilite* and *Ashʿarite* interpretations of selected verses on predestination.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative library research design to examine the relationship between *kalam* and *tafsir*. Library research is appropriate for this study because its primary objective is to investigate theological concepts and exegetical arguments as they are articulated in classical Islamic texts rather than to generate empirical data through fieldwork. The study approaches tafsir as an intellectual product situated within broader theological discourses and therefore examines exegetical writings alongside theological literature to explain how doctrinal commitments shape interpretive reasoning.

The analysis centers on two Qur'anic passages, *Q.S. al-Kahf [18]:29 and Q.S. al-Ṣāffāt [37]:96,* chosen for their direct engagement with divine action and human agency, their presence in both exegetical treatments, and their theological complexities enabling comparative interpretive analysis. This study emphasizes analytical depth rather than a broad selection of verses.

The primary sources consist of two classical Qur'anic commentaries representing contrasting theological traditions: *al-Kashshāf ʿan Ḥaqāʾiq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl wa-ʿUyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Taʾwīl* by al-Zamakhsharī, which reflects the *Muʿtazilite* theological tradition, and *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, one of the most influential representatives of *Ashʿarite* theology. These commentaries were selected because they explicitly engage with major theological questions concerning divine justice, predestination, human freedom, and divine guidance while interpreting many of the same Qur'anic passages. Their contrasting theological orientations provide an appropriate corpus for examining how differing epistemological commitments generate divergent exegetical conclusions.

To contextualize these primary texts, the study also draws upon classical and contemporary scholarship on *kalam*, *tafsir*, and philosophical hermeneutics. Works discussing the development of Islamic theology, the relationship between theology and *tafsir*, and modern hermeneutical theory provide the conceptual foundation for interpreting the exegetical differences identified in the primary sources. Rather than treating theological doctrines merely as historical background, this study treats them as epistemological frameworks that structure the process of interpretation.

The analytical framework of this study is informed by philosophical hermeneutics, particularly Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of the *fusion of horizons* (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Gadamer argues that interpretation is not the objective recovery of a fixed meaning embedded within the text but a dialogical process in which meaning emerges through the encounter between the historical horizon of the text and that of the interpreter. Every act of understanding is therefore mediated by *pre-understanding* (*Vorverständnis*), namely the assumptions, intellectual traditions, historical experiences, and conceptual categories that precede interpretation.

Consequently, interpretation can never be entirely detached from the interpreter's historical and intellectual situation.

This hermeneutical framework recognizes theological subjectivity as inherent and unavoidable in Qur'anic exegesis. Exegetes interpret the Qur'an not as neutral observers but through specific theological traditions that shape their conceptions of God, revelation, human agency, reason, and religious authority. Here, subjectivity is understood not as an arbitrary interpretation or a methodological flaw but as an epistemological horizon that guides the selection, prioritization, and justification of exegetical meanings. The analysis centers on Qur'anic verses addressing predestination *(qadar)*, divine guidance *(hidāyah)*, misguidance *(iḍlāl)*, and human responsibility—core theological topics that the *Muʿtazilite* and *Ashʿarite* schools have historically debated. Comparative examination of these texts reveals how identical scriptural evidence yields divergent exegetical conclusions when interpreted within differing theological frameworks.

The study employs a comparative close reading of exegetical debates on two passages, focusing on identified textual problems, interpretive alternatives, supporting arguments, and resulting conclusions. Six textual markers reveal theological commitments: explicit theological terms, appeals to theological principles, rational/doctrinal arguments, preference for certain semantic or grammatical readings, *taʾwīl* (reinterpretation), and rejection of alternatives on theological bases. The analysis explores how these commitments influence interpretive strategies and outcomes while considering congruences to avoid deterministic assumptions. Gadamer's fusion of horizons frames the interpretation, illustrating how theological presuppositions shape exegetical meaning. The goal is not to adjudicate doctrinal correctness but to examine how theological epistemologies direct exegetical scope, justification, and conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Human Agency and Divine Will in Q.S. al-Kahf [18]:29

Q.S. al-Kahf [18]:29 presents a significant theological problem concerning the relationship between human agency and divine will. The verse states:

فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيَكْفُرْ

"So whoever wills—let him believe, and whoever wills—let him disbelieve."

The juxtaposition of *shāʾa* with belief and disbelief foregrounds human willing in religious action, while the broader Qur'anic discourse on divine guidance, divine will, and human responsibility raises the question of how human choice relates to divine sovereignty. The interpretations of al-Zamakhsharī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī illustrate different ways of organizing this relationship.

In *al-Kashshāf*, al-Zamakhsharī gives prominence to the human subject as the locus of choice and responsibility. By connecting *shāʾa* directly with *al-īmān* and *al-kufr*, the verse establishes a semantic relationship between human willing and the resulting

religious action. Belief and disbelief are therefore presented through the category of human choice rather than as actions devoid of agency. This emphasis becomes particularly significant in relation to the consequences of belief and disbelief in the surrounding passage: human willing is not merely an abstract capacity but the basis of accountability for the chosen course of action.

The theological significance of this reading lies in the explanatory priority given to human agency. Al-Zamakhsharī need not explicitly reject divine sovereignty for human agency to become the dominant interpretive concern; it emerges from the way *mashīʾah* is connected to choice, moral action, and accountability. Such an interpretation is compatible with the Muʿtazilite concern with divine justice and human responsibility, although theological affiliation alone should not substitute for textual analysis. What is directly observable is the exegetical prioritization of human willing as the category through which the verse's theological meaning is articulated.

Al-Rāzī, by contrast, interprets *mashīʾah* through its relationship with divine agency. Human willing cannot, within his theological reasoning, be understood independently of God's encompassing power and sovereignty. The presence of human choice therefore does not imply that human willing constitutes an autonomous source of action outside divine agency. Human agency is retained, but its ontological and causal status is qualified by its dependence on divine power. The interpretive problem thus becomes one of reconciling meaningful human choice with comprehensive divine agency.

The distinction between the two exegetes is therefore not a simple affirmation versus denial of human agency. Both acknowledge the semantic presence of human willing in the verse, but they assign it different theological functions. Al-Zamakhsharī gives greater explanatory weight to the relationship between choice and moral responsibility, whereas al-Rāzī situates human choice within divine sovereignty and dependence.

Dimension	**Al-Zamakhsharī**	**Al-Rāzī**
Central concept	*Mashīʾah* as human willing	*Mashīʾah* in relation to divine will
Interpretive emphasis	Choice and responsibility	Human agency within divine sovereignty
Theological problem	Grounding moral accountability	Reconciling human willing with divine agency
Interpretive trajectory	Willing → choice → responsibility	Willing → divine dependence → sovereignty

Interpretive divergence occurs not merely at the doctrinal level but within the structure of exegetical meaning. A single *Qur'anic* expression serves as the basis for varying configurations of the relationship between human agency and divine sovereignty. The theological horizon operates by selecting and prioritizing specific semantic dimensions rather than replacing textual interpretation with explicit doctrinal imposition.

This nuance refines the concept of theological subjectivity: it does not entail arbitrary interpretation nor disregard for textual constraints. Both *al-Zamakhsharī* and *al-Rāzī* engage rigorously with the *Qur'anic* semantic structure, yet their theological questions shape which semantic aspects receive explanatory emphasis. Thus, interpretation is mediated by historically situated theological frameworks, embodying neither total objectivity nor unrestricted subjectivity.

The case of *Q.S. al-Kahf* [18]:29 exemplifies the epistemological interplay between kalam and tafsir. Theological inquiries regarding divine will, human agency, and moral responsibility provide conceptual frameworks that condition the interpretation of the text. Consequently, kalam functions not merely as an external doctrinal backdrop but as an epistemological horizon informing the organization and evaluation of exegetical meaning.

Divine Creation and Human Action in Q.S. al-Ṣāffāt [37]:96

Q.S. al-Ṣāffāt [37]:96 states:

وَاللَّهُ خَلَقَكُمْ وَمَا تَعْمَلُونَ

"And Allah created you and what you make."

The verse constitutes a significant site of theological reflection on the relationship between divine creation and human action. The expression *mā taʿmalūn* is particularly consequential because it may be understood in relation to the acts performed by human beings or to the objects produced through those acts. This semantic question acquires theological significance when considered alongside the broader problem of divine agency and human responsibility. The interpretations of al-Zamakhsharī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī demonstrate how grammatical, contextual, and theological considerations interact in determining the meaning of the verse.

Al-Zamakhsharī situates the verse within Abraham's confrontation with his people. The preceding question, **أَتَعْبُدُونَ مَا تَنْحِتُونَ**("Do you worship what you carve?"), establishes a semantic relationship between the objects of worship and the act of carving. Within this context, al-Zamakhsharī connects *mā taʿmalūn* with the objects fashioned by the people addressed rather than with human actions in general. The interpretation thus distinguishes between the act of producing an object and the object produced through that act.

The theological significance of this reading emerges through the contextual specification of *mā*. The attribution of creation to God is maintained, while the referential scope of *mā taʿmalūn* is restricted to created objects. The theological consequence therefore emerges through an exegetical operation of contextualization and semantic specification rather than through an explicit doctrinal assertion. This provides a textual indicator of the theological horizon at work, without reducing the interpretation simply to al-Zamakhsharī's Muʿtazilite affiliation.

Al-Rāzī, by contrast, gives more extensive attention to the grammatical and semantic possibilities of *mā taʿmalūn*. He considers interpretations in which *mā* relates

to the verbal action itself as well as those in which it refers to the objects or products of human action. The theological significance depends on this semantic distinction: if *mā* denotes human acts, the verse appears to attribute their creation to God; if it denotes produced objects, the theological implication differs.

Al-Rāzī therefore approaches the theological problem through linguistic analysis. Rather than reducing the verse to a simple opposition between divine determination and human freedom, he examines how different syntactic and semantic possibilities affect the attribution of creation and action. His theological reasoning becomes visible in the evaluation of linguistically available meanings and their implications for divine agency.

The two exegetes thus converge in treating the linguistic and contextual structure of the verse as central to the interpretation of *mā taʿmalūn*, while differing in how they organize its semantic possibilities. Al-Zamakhsharī gives greater weight to the immediate narrative context and its specification of the referent, whereas al-Rāzī foregrounds grammatical alternatives and evaluates their theological implications.

Dimension	**Al-Zamakhsharī**	**Al-Rāzī**
Central exegetical expression	*mā taʿmalūn*	*mā taʿmalūn*
Primary interpretive operation	Contextual and semantic specification	Grammatical and semantic differentiation
Key contextual/theological problem	Human production and divine creation	Attribution of creation and human action
Interpretive trajectory	Context, referent, theological implication	Grammar, semantic possibilities, theological evaluation
Epistemological implication	Contextual meaning mediates theological interpretation	Linguistic possibilities mediate theological evaluation

The comparison shows that theological differences can become visible through the organization of exegetical reasoning: which semantic possibilities are foregrounded, how contextual evidence is weighted, and how linguistic alternatives are related to theological questions. Both exegetes engage the linguistic structure of the verse, so their difference cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between "*Muʿtazilite*" and *"Ashʿarite"* interpretations. Rather, theological orientations become relevant in the ways available meanings are evaluated in relation to divine agency and human action.

From the perspective of this study, theological subjectivity is therefore observable in the selective organization of textual possibilities within a theological problem. The exegete need not distort the lexical or grammatical structure of the Qur'anic text; instead, a theological horizon can influence which semantic possibility receives explanatory priority and how it is integrated into an account of divine and

human agency. Q.S. al-Ṣāffāt [37]:96 consequently demonstrates the epistemological relationship between *kalam* and *tafsir*: theological questions concerning divine creation and human action enter *tafsir* through the analysis of language, context, and semantic reference. *Kalam* thus functions not merely as an external doctrinal background but as a framework within which exegetical possibilities acquire different theological significance.

Kalam as the Epistemological Foundation of Tafsir

Historically, the emergence of *kalam* was inseparable from theological controversies within the early Muslim community (Haleem, 2001). Debates concerning divine attributes, human freedom, predestination, faith and unbelief, and the status of grave sinners gradually developed into systematic theological discourses that shaped the intellectual landscape of Islam (Van Ess, 2001; Wolfson, 1976). From its earliest formation, *kalam* relied heavily upon the interpretation of *Qur'anic* verses as textual evidence for doctrinal arguments. Verses concerning the attributes of God (*ayat al-sifat*), the nature of divine justice, and the relationship between faith and action became central arenas of theological contestation (Frank, 2020). Consequently, tafsir and kalam evolved interdependently: theological doctrines influenced exegetical reasoning, while exegetical practices provided legitimacy for theological positions. In this sense, *tafsir* cannot be separated from the broader theological debates that shaped classical Islamic thought.

The comparative analysis of Q.S. al-Kahf [18]:29 and Q.S. al-Ṣāffāt [37]:96 demonstrates that the relationship between *kalam* and *tafsir* cannot be reduced to a simple movement from theological doctrine to predetermined exegetical conclusions. In both cases, al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī engage linguistic, grammatical, and contextual dimensions of the Qur'anic text, yet assign different theological significance to the available textual possibilities. The divergence therefore concerns not only exegetical conclusions but also the questions, semantic possibilities, and explanatory priorities through which the text is approached.

One of the clearest examples of the relationship between theology and *tafsir* can be seen in differing conceptions of God within Islamic theological schools. The Muʿtazilites emphasized divine justice (*al-ʿadl*) and rational coherence, arguing that God must act in accordance with justice and wisdom (Frank, 2020; Hourani, 1971). Since injustice is considered incompatible with divine perfection, *Muʿtazilite* theologians maintained that humans must possess genuine freedom and responsibility for their actions. In contrast, the *Ashʿarite* tradition stressed the absolute omnipotence and sovereignty of God, asserting that nothing occurs outside divine will and creation (Legenhausen, 1988). This theological distinction produced significant differences in interpreting *Qur'anic* verses concerning destiny and human action. *Muʿtazilite exegetes tended to interpret such verses in ways that preserved human agency, whereas Ashʿarite*

exegetes emphasized divine determination and the doctrine of kasb (Abrahamov, 1989). Thus, differing concepts of God directly shaped the production of exegetical meaning.

The relationship between revelation and reason also constituted a major point of divergence between theological schools and deeply influenced *Qur'anic* interpretation. *The Muʿtazilites granted a prominent role to reason* in understanding religious truth, maintaining that rational inquiry could independently discern moral values and recognize divine justice even prior to revelation (Frank, 2020). Consequently, *Muʿtazilite* exegetes frequently employed rational and metaphorical interpretation *(ta'wil)* when encountering anthropomorphic or ambiguous verses.

Expressions describing God's *"hand," "face,"* or *"sitting on the throne,"* for example, were interpreted symbolically in order to preserve divine transcendence (al-Zamakhsharī, 2009). *Ashʿarite scholars, while not rejecting reason altogether, imposed stricter limitations* upon rational speculation in matters of theology (al-Rāzī, 1999). They generally accepted metaphorical interpretation only when it was deemed strictly necessary and remained more cautious toward excessive rationalization of revelation. As a result, theological assumptions regarding the proper relation between reason and revelation significantly affected how exegetes approached difficult or ambiguous *Qur'anic* passages.

Another central theological issue influencing tafsir concerns the nature of human freedom and agency. Classical Islamic theology persistently debated whether humans possess genuine free will or whether all actions are ultimately created by God. *The Muʿtazilites defended the doctrine that humans are the creators* of their own acts in order to safeguard divine justice and moral accountability (Hourani, 1971). According to this view, reward and punishment would lose their meaning if humans lacked real freedom of choice. Conversely, *Ashʿarite* theologians argued that all acts are created by God, while humans merely "acquire" (*yaksib*) them through the doctrine of *kasb* (Abrahamov, 1989). These competing theological doctrines profoundly shaped interpretations of verses concerning sin, reward, punishment, moral responsibility, and predestination. *Qur'anic* passages discussing guidance and misguidance, for instance, were interpreted differently depending on whether priority was given to divine determination or human autonomy. Therefore, the debate over free will was not merely an abstract theological dispute but a fundamental epistemological framework for understanding the Qur'an itself.

From these discussions, it becomes evident that tafsir is far more than a purely linguistic or philological activity. *Qur'anic* interpretation reflects the broader epistemological and theological structures within which exegetes operate. Every mufassir approaches the text through a network of doctrinal assumptions regarding God, revelation, reason, and humanity; these assumptions inevitably shape interpretive outcomes (Arkoun, 2003). Consequently, *tafsir* should be understood not only as an effort to explain the meaning of the Qur'an but also as a manifestation of competing theological worldviews within Islamic intellectual history. The production of meaning in tafsir is therefore inseparable from the theological horizon of the interpreter.

The two cases examined above make this epistemological difference observable. In Q.S. al-Kahf [18]:29, al-Zamakhsharī gives explanatory priority to the relationship between *mashīʾah*, human choice, and responsibility, whereas al-Rāzī situates human willing within divine sovereignty (al-Rāzī, 1999; al-Zamakhsharī, 2009) In Q.S. al-Ṣāffāt [37]:96, al-Zamakhsharī gives particular weight to contextual and semantic specification, especially the relationship between *tanḥitūn* and *taʿmalūn*, while al-Rāzī examines grammatical and semantic possibilities in relation to divine creation and human action (al-Rāzī, 1999; al-Zamakhsharī, 2009). These differences represent distinct configurations of textual evidence and theological reasoning rather than arbitrary interpretations of identical textual material.

Muʿtazilite and *Ashʿarite* on the Verses of Predestination

The theological relationship between tafsir and *kalam* can be observed clearly in exegetical debates surrounding verses on predestination and human action. Several *Qur'anic* passages became central references in classical theological controversies, including QS al-Insan [76]: 3, QS al-Kahfi [18]: 29, and QS al-Saffat [37]: 96. Verses such as "*Indeed, We guided him to the way, whether he be grateful or ungrateful*" (QS al-Insan: 3) and "*Whoever wills let him believe; and whoever wills let him disbelieve*" (QS al-Kahfi: 29) appear to affirm human choice and moral responsibility.

Meanwhile, QS al-Ṣāffāt: 96, "Allah created you and what you do," was frequently cited to support divine determination over human acts. These verses became highly significant within kalam debates because they concern one of the most fundamental theological questions in Islam: whether humans possess genuine freedom or whether all actions are entirely determined by God (Gimaret, 1980). Consequently, interpretations of these verses often reflected broader theological commitments rather than merely linguistic considerations.

Within the *Muʿtazilite* tradition, *Qur'anic* verses concerning human action were generally interpreted in ways that emphasized free will and divine justice. *The Muʿtazilites argued that humans must possess genuine autonomy* because moral accountability would otherwise become meaningless. God, being perfectly just, cannot punish humans for acts for which they are not truly responsible (Hourani, 1971). This theological principle strongly influenced *Muʿtazilite* exegesis, particularly in al-Zamakhshari's al-Kashshaf. In interpreting QS al-Kahfi: 29, for example, al-Zamakhshari emphasized the verse as evidence that belief and disbelief are matters of human choice rather than divine coercion (al-Zamakhsharī, 2009). Likewise, verses concerning guidance and misguidance were interpreted within the framework of divine justice, whereby God provides guidance but humans themselves determine whether to accept or reject it. For the Muʿtazilites, humans are effectively the creators of their own acts (*khaliq afʿalihi*) through the capacity granted by God. Thus, the Qur'an is interpreted in a manner consistent with the rational and ethical coherence of divine justice.

In contrast, *Ashʿarite* exegetes interpreted the same verses within the framework of divine omnipotence and the doctrine of kasb. *The Ashʿarites maintained that all acts are ultimately created by God*, while humans merely "acquire" these acts through intention and participation (Abrahamov, 1989). This doctrine sought to preserve both divine sovereignty and human accountability simultaneously. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, for instance, frequently emphasized the absolute power and will of God in his Mafatih al-Ghayb (al-Rāzī, 1999). In interpreting QS al-Saffat: 96, Ashʿarite exegetes regarded the verse as explicit evidence that human actions are created by Allah. Human beings may possess volition, but their actions ultimately remain dependent upon divine creation and determination. Al-Baydawi similarly interpreted verses concerning guidance and misguidance as manifestations of God's sovereign will over creation (al-Bayḍāwī, 1998). Consequently, Ashʿarite tafsir prioritized the preservation of divine omnipotence even when addressing questions of moral agency and responsibility.

A comparison of these interpretations demonstrates that exegetical differences cannot be reduced merely to grammatical or philological disagreements. Rather, the divergent interpretations emerge from fundamentally different theological assumptions regarding God, justice, free will, and the relationship between divine power and human agency. *The Muʿtazilites began with the premise that divine justice necessitates human freedom, whereas the Ashʿarites prioritized* divine omnipotence and the absolute dependence of creation upon God. These theological premises shaped how each school selected, emphasized, and interpreted *Qur'anic* meanings. The same verse therefore yielded distinct exegetical conclusions because it was approached through different epistemological and theological frameworks. In this sense, tafsir becomes a reflection of deeper doctrinal structures embedded within Islamic intellectual traditions.

The case of *Muʿtazilite* and *Ashʿarite* ultimately reveals that theological bias is not merely an external influence upon tafsir but an active mechanism in the production of meaning itself. Both exegetical traditions attempted to preserve the internal coherence of their respective theological systems by interpreting *Qur'anic* verses in ways consistent with their doctrinal commitments. The Qur'an thus functioned not only as a sacred text to be explained but also as an authoritative arena through which theological doctrines were legitimized and defended (Goldziher, 1971). This does not necessarily imply deliberate distortion of the text; rather, it demonstrates that interpretation is inseparable from the theological horizons of the interpreter. Consequently, tafsir can be understood as a dynamic site of contestation in which competing visions of God, humanity, and religious authority continuously shape the production of *Qur'anic* meaning.

Epistemological dimension	**Muʿtazilite orientation**	**Ashʿarite orientation**
Conception of divine agency	Divine justice and rational coherence	Divine omnipotence and sovereignty
Human agency	Meaningful human agency as	Human action situated within

	basis of responsibility	divine creation and *kasb*
Role of reason	Strong role in establishing theological coherence	Rational argument operates within a more qualified relation to revelation
Interpretive consequence	Greater priority to meanings compatible with human responsibility and divine justice	Greater attention to meanings compatible with comprehensive divine sovereignty
Observable exegetical operation	Semantic/contextual emphasis on choice, responsibility, and human action	Evaluation of human action in relation to divine agency and sovereignty

This comparison should not, however, be understood deterministically. Such an approach would risk circular reasoning by classifying an interpretation as Muʿtazilite or Ashʿarite solely because of the exegete's theological affiliation. The present analysis instead identifies theological horizons through observable interpretive operations: the selection and prioritization of semantic possibilities, treatment of grammatical alternatives, formulation of theological problems, and connection of textual evidence to claims concerning divine agency and human responsibility (al-Rāzī, 1999; al-Zamakhsharī, 2009)

Tafsir and the Subjectivity of Interpretation

Contemporary hermeneutical theory emphasizes that understanding a text is never a purely objective activity detached from the interpreter (Afaki, 2009). Every act of interpretation necessarily involves the subjectivity of the reader, including historical experience, intellectual background, language, and prior assumptions. Friedrich Schleiermacher argued that interpretation requires attention not only to grammatical aspects of the text but also to the psychological and historical dimensions of the author and reader (Schleiermacher, 1998). This perspective was further developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer through his concept of the "fusion of horizons" *(Horizontverschmelzung),* which explains that meaning emerges through the encounter between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter (Gadamer, 2013). In this framework, interpretation is not the mechanical recovery of an original and fixed meaning but an active dialogical process shaped by historical consciousness. Consequently, no interpretation can be entirely insulated from the historical situation and intellectual horizon of the interpreter.

This hermeneutical perspective is highly relevant to the study of *Qur'anic* exegesis. Mufassirs do not approach the Qur'an as neutral or empty subjects; rather, they interpret the text within specific social, historical, political, theological, and intellectual contexts. Every exegete is situated within a particular school of thought, cultural environment, and scholarly tradition that shapes their interpretive orientation (Arkoun,

2003). Classical exegetes, for instance, were often deeply connected to theological schools such as the *Muʿtazilites,* the *Ashʿarites*, or the *Shiʿites*, whereas modern interpreters may be influenced by reformism, nationalism, feminism, or contemporary humanism. These orientations not only shape contemporary Islamic thought but are themselves reshaped by it as they respond to the challenges of modernity (Ali, 2018). These contexts form what hermeneutical theory describes as "pre-understanding," namely the set of assumptions and conceptual frameworks that precede interpretation (Gadamer, 2013). Therefore, *mufassirs* never encounter the *Qur'anic* text in a vacuum; interpretation always occurs through historically conditioned horizons.

However, the acknowledgment of subjectivity in tafsir should not be understood as a flaw or epistemological weakness. Subjectivity does not necessarily imply arbitrariness or invalidity in interpretation. On the contrary, hermeneutics demonstrates that subjectivity is an inevitable condition of understanding itself (Ricoeur, 1976). Every interpretation requires the active participation of the interpreter in constructing meaning from the text. The crucial issue, therefore, is not how to eliminate subjectivity altogether but how to cultivate methodological awareness and epistemological transparency within the interpretive process. Exegetes who are conscious of their theological assumptions, methodological limitations, and historical position are better placed to produce critical and accountable interpretations. In this sense, recognizing the inevitability of subjectivity can encourage a more reflective, dialogical, and self-critical approach to *Qur'anic* interpretation.

While hermeneutical theory provides a useful framework for understanding the inevitability of subjectivity in interpretation, the specific horizons that shape interpretation vary according to intellectual traditions and historical contexts. In the case of *Qur'anic* exegesis, one of the most influential horizons is theology. Unlike literary texts that may be approached from multiple perspectives without prior doctrinal commitments, the Qur'an has historically been interpreted within communities structured by competing theological doctrines concerning God, revelation, human agency, and religious authority. Consequently, theological assumptions do not merely accompany interpretation; they often determine the conceptual boundaries within which interpretation becomes possible. For this reason, understanding the relationship between tafsir and *kalam* is essential for explaining how different exegetical meanings emerge from the same scriptural text.

Among the many horizons influencing *tafsir*, theological orientation constitutes one of the most dominant and decisive factors. Theology fundamentally shapes how an exegete understands the nature of God, divine will, revelation, human agency, reason, and religious authority (Wolfson, 1976). Different theological assumptions inevitably produce different interpretive tendencies when reading the Qur'an. Exegetes who emphasize divine justice and rationality, for example, may interpret verses differently from those who prioritize divine omnipotence and absolute predestination. Likewise, differing conceptions regarding the relationship between reason and revelation affect how ambiguous or anthropomorphic verses are understood. Thus, theological

commitments function not merely as external influences upon tafsir but as epistemological foundations that structure the production of meaning. This theological dimension becomes particularly visible in the historical relationship between *kalam* and *tafsir*, which is examined in the following section.

Tafsir as an Arena of Contestation of Meaning

The discussions throughout this article demonstrate that no *Qur'anic* interpretation can be regarded as entirely neutral or free from ideological influence. Tafsir is always situated within broader networks of theology, ideology, sectarian affiliation, intellectual tradition, and relations of power. Every mufassir inevitably approaches the Qur'an through particular assumptions concerning God, revelation, authority, morality, and the nature of religious truth (Arkoun, 2003). These assumptions shape not only the conclusions of interpretation but also the questions considered important, the methods employed, and the meanings prioritized within the exegetical process.

Consequently, tafsir should not be understood merely as a passive explanation of scripture but also as an active arena in which competing theological and intellectual worldviews interact. Historically, interpretive authority has often been closely connected to broader struggles over orthodoxy and legitimacy within Muslim societies. Different theological schools, such as the Muʿtazilites, the Ashʿarites, the Shiʿites, and the Sufis, used tafsir as a means of defending and institutionalizing their doctrinal positions (Goldziher, 1971; Van Ess, 2001). In this sense, *Qur'anic* interpretation operates within a complex structure of religious authority, ideological interests, and social influence.

Recognizing the theological dimension of tafsir is therefore essential for developing a more critical and reflective engagement with the exegetical tradition. Readers of tafsir must recognize that every interpretation carries particular epistemological and theological assumptions, whether explicitly acknowledged or implicitly embedded within the interpretive framework. Such awareness is important in avoiding excessively dogmatic attitudes that treat specific interpretations as completely final or absolutely objective.

Hermeneutical consciousness encourages readers to approach tafsir more critically by examining the intellectual context, theological orientation, and methodological assumptions underlying an interpretation (Gadamer, 2013; Ricoeur, 1976). At the same time, this awareness also promotes a more dialogical understanding of *Qur'anic* interpretation, in which diversity of meaning is viewed as part of the dynamic interaction between revelation and human understanding. A reflective approach to tafsir does not seek to eliminate theological commitments altogether but rather to cultivate epistemological transparency and openness toward interpretive plurality.

The issue of theological bias in tafsir remains highly relevant within contemporary *Qur'anic* studies. Modern interpretations of the Qur'an continue to reflect particular

ideological, ethical, and theological orientations in responding to contemporary social issues. Feminist interpretations, for instance, frequently emphasize gender justice and equality in rereading verses related to women and family relations (Wadud, 1999). Pluralist interpretations highlight themes of coexistence and religious inclusivity, while ecological tafsir focuses on environmental ethics and humanity's responsibility toward nature (Esack, 1997).

Political interpretations of the Qur'an likewise continue to emerge in discussions surrounding state authority, democracy, social justice, and religious identity. These contemporary trends indicate that tafsir remains deeply connected to the intellectual and social concerns of its interpreters. Thus, theological and ideological horizons continue to shape the production of *Qur'anic* meaning across different historical periods. The persistence of these dynamics confirms that tafsir is not a static body of interpretation but an ongoing arena of contestation in which Muslims continuously negotiate the meaning of revelation in changing historical contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the relationship between kalam and tafsir functions at an epistemological level in Qur'anic interpretation. A comparative analysis of *al-Zamakhsharī's al-Kashshāf* and *al-Rāzī's Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* on key verses (*Q.S. al-Kahf* [18]:29; *Q.S. al-Ṣāffāt* [37]:96) demonstrates that theological commitments fundamentally shape not only exegetical conclusions but also problem framing, textual prioritization, and interpretations of divine and human agency. Differences in interpretation reflect broader theological horizons rather than solely lexical choices or affiliations. Theological bias emerges as a form of directional selectivity within the interpreter's epistemological horizon, operating under linguistic and contextual constraints rather than constituting error. This conceptualization avoids reducing tafsir to either absolute objectivity or relativism. Tafsir is understood as a dynamic arena in which differing theological perspectives engage the same text, structuring interpretive possibilities in unique ways. *Qur'anic* interpretation is inseparable from the interpreter's historical, doctrinal, and theological context, with kalam providing epistemological foundations concerning God, revelation, reason, and human agency. The comparative study of *Muʿtazilite* and *Ashʿarite* views on predestination exemplifies how exegetical differences stem from deep theological frameworks rather than mere philological distinctions. Ultimately, tafsir reflects the interpreter's theological worldview and intellectual context, mediating the sacred text through situated human understanding. Recognizing this theological dimension enhances, rather than diminishes, the exegetical tradition by highlighting its dialogical and evolving nature throughout Islamic intellectual history.

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