

The Violent Verses of the Qur'an in Comparison between the Classical and Modern Interpretations

Azis Anwar Fachrodin

Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), Yogyakarta

aafachrudin@gmail.com

Abstrak

Salah satu tantangan sarjana Muslim ketika berbicara perdamaian dalam Islam adalah terkait ayat-ayat yang terlihat mendukung kekerasan dalam Alquran. Tidak bisa dipungkiri, terdapat beberapa ayat Alquran yang bahkan mendukung peperangan dan pembunuhan kepada mereka yang dianggap kafir atau orang musyrik. Ketika dibaca atau diartikan secara harfiah, tentu dapat menimbulkan kebencian terhadap non-Muslim. Itulah mengapa, ayat-ayat kekerasan sering kali dikutip oleh beberapa kelompok dalam perdebatan isu ini untuk memojokkan Islam dan menunjukkan bahwa Islam adalah agama kekerasan ketimbang perdamaian. Artikel ini mengkaji tentang beberapa ayat-ayat kekerasan yang ada dalam Alquran khususnya dalam QS. al-Baqarah [2]:191, an-Nisâ' [4]:89, dan at-Tawbah [9]:5. Ketiga ayat-ayat ini berisikan kalimat yang hampir berbunyi "Bunuh mereka di mana kamu bertemu dengan mereka". Artikel ini memperhitungkan antara dua penafsiran yaitu tafsîr klasik dan modern. Buku-buku tafsîr klasik yang dibahas di sini yaitu tentang penafsiran dari al-Ṭabârî, al-Râzî, al-Qurṭûbî dan ibn Kathîr sedangkan penafsiran modern meliputi Rashîd Riḍâ, al-Sha'rawî, al-Zuhaylî dan Quraish Shihab. Artikel ini menarik beberapa perbandingan dan perbedaan antara penafsiran klasik dan penafsiran modern dengan mengacu pada ayat-ayat tersebut.

Kata Kunci: Ayat-ayat Kekerasan, Tafsîr Klasik, Tafsîr Modern.

Introduction

Among the challenges Muslims face when they are engaged in the recently overwhelming debate on whether Islam is a religion of violence/peace is the fact that the Quran contains many verses which, at least when seen at a glance, promote violence. Indeed, there are verses in the Quran that even encourage fighting and killing, addressed to those considered unbelievers/infidels (*kuffâr*) and/or polytheists (*mushrikîn*); and when they are read and interpreted literally, they can be seen as preaching hatred toward non-Muslims. Moreover, some of those verses have been picked by the Islamic State (of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS) to justify its atrocities toward those having different beliefs. On the other hand, those “violent verses” are often cited by many involved in the debate, particularly by Islamophobias in the West, to discredit Islam and to show that Islam is a religion of violence, instead of peace.

This paper is going to examine those “violent verses”; not all, but some of them that have similar redaction. That is, those verses which read, more or less, “kill them wherever you find them”. There are three verses which are like that: (1) QS. al-Baqarah [2]:191; (2) QS. al-Nisa’ [4]:89; and (3) QS. al-Tawbah [9]:5. It is to examine both the classical and the modern interpretations of those three verses. By classical interpretations I mean the interpretations and commentaries of those verses as in classical books of *tafsîr* written by medieval, pre-modern Muslim scholars of exegesis, to which very often many Muslims today still refer. By modern interpretations I mean the interpretations and commentaries that are written by modern Muslim exegetes. Along this line of elaboration, I shall compare both in order to know to what extent there has been a change in interpretations of the abovementioned verses.

This paper shall therefore be intended to convey three things. First is to show both classical and modern interpretations of those verses. Second is to point out what we will get when we compare those two types of interpretations and how the verses have been interpreted differently. Third, this paper shall be finished by some hermeneutical reflections resulting from the examination of both the classical and the modern interpretations. As for the classical interpretations, the books of

tafsîr that shall be mostly referred to in this paper are that of al-Ṭabârî¹ (839-923), Al-Râzî² (1149-1209), al-Qurṭûbî³ (1214-1273), and Ibn Kathîr⁴ (1301-1373). While for the modern interpretations, the books of *tafsîr* that shall be referred to are that of Rashîd Riḍâ⁵ (1865-1935), al-Sha‘râwî⁶ (1911-1998), Al-Zuhaylî⁷ (1932-2015), and Quraish Shihab⁸ (1944-...). All these books of *tafsîr* contains exegeses that are elaborated in chronological, chapter-based way, or verse by verse conforming to the way the verses are serially organized in the Quran. (This way is technically known as *al-tafsîr al-tajzî‘î* or *tafsîr* based on chapters or partitions of the Quran, as compared to *al-tafsîr al-mawdû‘î* or *tafsîr* based on themes/topics.) In this paper, when I mention a name of a *mufasssîr* (exegete) of them, it means I refer to his interpretations/commentaries that come after the verse being discussed.

¹ Muḥammad ibn Jarîr al-Ṭabârî, *Jâmi’ al-Bayân ‘an Ta’wîl Ay al-Qur’ân*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shâkir, 24 volumes (Beirut: Muassasah al-Risâlah, 2000).

² Abû ‘Abdillâh Muḥammad bin Umar (most commonly known as Fakhr al-Dîn al-Râzî), *Al-Tafsîr al-Kabîr* a.k.a. *Mafâtîh al-Ghayb*, 32 volumes (Beirut: Dâr Ihyâ’ al-Thurâth al-‘Arabî, 2000).

³ Abû ‘Abdillâh Muḥammad bin Aḥmad al-Qurṭûbî, *Al-Jâmi’ li Ahkâm al-Qur’ân*, ed. Aḥmad al-Burdûnî & Ibrâhîm ‘Aṭfish, 10 volumes (Cairo: Dâr al-Kutub al-Miṣrîyah, 1964).

⁴ Abû al-Fidâ’ Ismâ‘îl bin ‘Umar bin Kathîr, *Tafsîr al-Qurân al-‘Aẓîm*, ed. Sâmî bin Muḥammad Salamah, 8 volumes (Beirut: Dâr Ṭaybah, 1999).

⁵ Muḥammad bin Rashîd bin ‘Alî Riḍâ, *Tafsîr al-Qurân al-Ḥakîm* a.k.a. *Tafsîr al-Manâr*, 12 volumes (Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Miṣrîyah, 1990).

⁶ Muḥammad Mutawalli al-Sha‘rawî, *Tafsîr al-Sha‘rawî*, 20 volumes (Damascus: Maṭâbi’ Akhbâr al-Yawm, 1997).

⁷ Wahbah bin Muṣṭafâ al-Zuhaylî, *Al-Tafsîr al-Munîr fî ‘l-‘Aqîdah wa ‘l-Sharî‘ah wa ‘l-Manhâj*, 30 volumes (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr al-Mu‘asir, 1998).

⁸ Muhammad Quraish Shihab, *Tafsîr al-Misbah: Pesan, Kesan, dan Keserasian al-Qur’an*, 11 volumes (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2002).

QS al-Baqarah [2]:191

1. Classical Interpretation

Before coming into the interpretation of the verse, it should be noted that the verse cannot be read in atomistic way, that is, by just picking it without taking into account the context of the discussion where the verse occurs. Thus, looking at the verses that come before and after the verse being discussed is a must. It is also worth noting that the Quran, unlike the Bible, is a holy book whose verses are often not organized in a chronological way in which the topic discussed seems on the surface not always related to each other. The verse discussed here, for example, talks about war, but the second verse before the verse is talking about the times for hajj or pilgrimage. Later at the verse number 196, the Quran talks again about the hajj and ‘umrah. We can say that, at least if seen at a glance, the Quran seems to be a mumble-jumble book in which verses are apparently organized incoherently. And on the verse discussed here, the verses number 190-195 are one package as they talk about one topic, that is, the reason or justification for Muslims to conduct a war (in the study of war, this is technically termed as *jud ad bellum*). We must therefore interpret the verse 191 in light of this series.

By looking at the verse coming before the verse 191, even in a literal way of reading, it is actually already clear that the verse 191 cannot be understood as applicable universally; the “kill them wherever you find them” of the verse 191 cannot be implemented arbitrarily. This is because the verse 190 states, “Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress. Indeed, Allah does not like transgressors.” Keywords here are “fight only those who fight you” and “do not transgress” (*lā ta’tadū*). This, at least according to modern exegetes, counts as universal Islamic *jus ad bellum* (justification of war), that is, not to start war unless Muslims are fought or under oppression, and the principle of not doing transgression must always be adhered. In the light of this verse, modern interpreters would later say that war in Islam is conducted defensively—therefore, the notion of “offensive jihad”, they say, is a violation of the very principle stated in the verse 190. And this is why, the verse 192 says, “And if they cease, then indeed, Allah is forgiving and merciful.” In other words, if those who fight you

(Muslims) cease fighting, then you have also to cease war against them. The later verse (i.e. number 193) says more explicitly, “Fight them until there is no more fitnah and until worship is [acknowledged to be] for Allah. But if they cease, then there is to be no aggression except against the oppressors.”

This last verse clearly states that aggression is only for fighting against oppression. And this is supposed to be universally applicable, even when Muslims are fought against in the sacred months or at the Masjid al-Haram (the sanctuary of Mecca). In the Arabian society before and during the time of Prophet Muḥammad, there was a consensus among Arabs not to do war at the Masjid al-Haram and during the sacred months (that is, Rajab [7] and the three consecutive months of Dhu al-Qa‘dah [11], Dhu al-Ḥijjah [12], and Muḥarram [1]—all are of the Hijri calendar). But again, this consensus can only be violated if it is the oppressors who begin fighting against Muslims—this is what is stated in the verses 191 and 194.

In short, from QS. al-Baqarah [2]:190-195, we can derive at least three conclusions. First, war is conducted for defensive reason. Second, war is for fighting against oppression and hence for the sake of justice. Third, war must not violate the principle of no transgression, that is, not to exceed the limit of equal retribution of assault. These conclusions can be understood, once again, even by literally reading those verses. Yet the questions that remain are two: (1) how then we should understand the sentence “kill them wherever you find them”; and (2) whether those who are applying this sentence literally and out of context do not know the abovementioned explanations. If we look at the classical interpretations of those verses, the answer is not as simple as what I have elaborated earlier. To some degree, those who literally implement “kill them wherever you find them” have precedence and justification from some classical interpretations. In fact, we would find out diverse interpretations among medieval Muslim exegetes toward those verses.

Al-Ṭabârî mentions two major interpretations of those verses. One says that the verse 2:190 is abrogated. Another says no abrogation of the verse. Abrogation (known technically as *naskh* in the Quranic sciences [*‘ulûm al-Qur’ân*]) basically implies that the verse abrogated does

no longer prevail and/or is not applicable anymore because there is another verse saying about the same topic that comes after and is considered more suitable for the more recent context. (Remember that the Quran is not revealed in one single book at once, but piece by piece and sometimes verse by verse during more than 20 years of the prophetic ministry of Muḥammad. As such, verses revealed were very often responding to the circumstances the early Muslims were facing at the time.) For those saying there is abrogation, the verse [2]:190 is abrogated by the “barâ’ah”, that is, the Quranic chapter more commonly known as chapter of al-Tawbah (9), particularly from verses 1-5. “Al-Tawbah” literally means repentance; “barâ’ah” literally means impunity or disassociation. The chapter was meant to be a kind of proclamation where the peace treaty between the Muslims in Medina and the Mushrikûn in Mecca has been violated (for Muslims, it is surely the Mushrikûn who have violated the peace treaty); and as such war was declared. The verse 9:5 then states, “And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the polytheists wherever you find them and capture them and besiege them and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush.” (I shall discuss this verse ([9]:5) more deeply later in its section).

As being abrogated, this first group says that the verse 2:190 do not prevails anymore and as such war can be conducted in offensive way, that is, to eliminate all the polytheists (Mushrikûn) wherever Muslims find them until—as the verse [9]:5 states— “they repent, establish prayer, and give *ḥakab* (alms/tithe).” We may say here that the so-called Muslim ‘terrorists’ rely on this way of interpretation. Furthermore, on the sentence “fitnah is worse than killing” of the verse [2]:191, the word “fitnah” is interpreted by the first group as shirk, that is, the biggest unforgivable sin in Islamic theology, commonly translated as the practice of idolatry or polytheism, i.e., the deification of anyone or anything other than the singular God, Allah. Shirk literally means ascribing “partners” placed beside God. When Mushrikûn (those practicing shirk) is mentioned in the Quran, it generally refers to the idolaters/pagans of Mecca, yet for the Muslim ‘extremists’ the word refers to all non-Muslims, including the Jews and the Christians (since for Muslim ‘extremists’, the Christians have elevated the status of Jesus into the

divine level, becoming “partner” [shârik] of God). This is why, in its extreme way of interpretation, the verse [2]:191 along with [9]:5 can be used as justification by the Muslim ‘terrorists’ to declare war against anything or any groups considered practicing shirk/idolatry.

Yet the second group, as al-Ṭabârî elaborates in his tafsîr, says that there is no abrogation of the verse [2]:190. The verse [2]:190 is therefore universally applicable and the verse [9]:5 must be understood in light of the verse [2]:190. In line with this interpretation, any verse in the Quran that contains “kill them wherever you find them”-like sentence must be implemented only to those who are oppressing and waging war against Muslims; and as such it is conducted only for defensive reason. Furthermore, the sentence after the “kill them wherever you find them” sentence in the verse [2]:191 states “turn them out from where they have turned you out” upon which, it is clearly indicated, the addressees of this verse were the Meccan pagans, not all Mushrikûn.

As for another classical interpretation, we have al-Râzî. He derives many long-explained points from his interpretations of the verses [2]:190-195. I cite briefly some of his important interpretations, aside from the points al-Râzî made that are similar to that of al-Ṭabârî. First, al-Râzî states that the verse [2]:190 was revealed in the context after the peace treaty of Hudaibiyah was violated by the Meccan pagans. Second, for al-Râzî, the verse [2]:190’s sentence “fight those who fight you” is a clear statement that fighting can only be directed against those who begin fighting Muslims. In other words, fighting prescribed in the verses is only for defensive effort. Third, al-Râzî rejects the notion that the verse [2]:190 is abrogated, as of the first group outlined earlier on al-Ṭabârî’s tafsîr. Fourth, the verse [2]:191 was dictated upon the Prophet and his followers to wage war against the Meccan Mushrikûn as the Meccans have oppressed and expelled Muslims out of Mecca. Fifth, al-Râzî pointed out some interpretations of the word “fitnah”, and among them, apart from being interpreted as shirk, the word is interpreted as the practice of oppression and injustice (*ẓulm*) committed by the Meccans against Muslims to the extent that Muslims have been turned out of Mecca and emigrating toward Medina.

Al-Qurṭûbî did not convey any new interpretation except on affirming the interpretation that the [2]:190's words "do not transgress" (*lâ ta'tadû*) means "do not fight those who do not fight you." But al-Qurṭûbî seems to belong to the first group of al-Ṭabâṛî's two major interpretation I have outlined earlier, that is, those who argue that the verse [2]:190 is abrogated by the verses 1-5 of the barâ'ah chapter. In other words, al-Qurṭûbî agreed with the interpretation that after the barâ'ah chapter was revealed, war can be declared for offensive reason, that is, to eliminate all Mushrikûn wherever Muslims find them until the Mushrikûn repent. On the other side, Ibn Kathîr—while he narrated reports from some early scholars of the Quranic exegesis that say that the word *fitnah* means *shirk*—critically questions the view that the verse [2]:190 is abrogated by the verse [9]:5. Ibn Kathîr inclined to the group that says the verse [2]:190 is universal (*muḥkamah*, not *mansûkhah* or abrogated) so that fighting is allowed for Muslims only when they are oppressed, or their enemy started fighting them first.

2. Modern Interpretation

Among the characteristics of Quranic modern interpretations is that, unlike the classical ones, they are less burdened with traditional narrations. Modern interpretations tend to be finding a more logical explanation as to the series of the verses as well as the connection between the context of revelation (*asbâb al-nuzûl*) and the verses. They are to some extent responding to the questions posed by modern people and trying not to pick traditional *riwâyat* that are considered problematic for modern sense. For certain degree, modern interpretations also try to interpret verses in a coherent, thematic way by taking into consideration other verses that talk about similar issues.

These are exemplified in Rashîd Riḍâ's interpretations for the verses [2]:190-194. He said firmly that the verse [2]:190 cannot be separated from the previous verse talking about times for pilgrimage, though at a glance they seem not to be related to each other. For Rashîd Riḍâ, they are connected, as the *asbâb al-nuzûl* for the verses 190-194 is the peace treaty of Hudaibiyah signed during the trip when the Prophet together with his followers were intending to perform 'umrah from Medina to Mecca. Under the peace treaty of Hudaibiyah, the 'umrah was

cancelled and the Muslims were guaranteed to perform it next year. But the Meccan Mushrikûn were betraying the peace treaty, by waging war against Muslims after Mushrikûn's ally was attacking Muslims' ally. Besides, the Muslims were hindered from entering Mecca. At this point, Muslims, while they have been expelled from their homes in Mecca, felt being treated unjustly. The war was then declared. The Muslims were allowed to fight against those who began fighting them.

In line with this context, the verse “kill them wherever you find them” was revealed. For Rashîd Riḍâ, the word “them” in the sentence refers only to the Meccan Mushrikûn who fought against Muslims. And the word “them” does not refer to the Mushrikûn who did not fight Muslims, as this is indicated by the principle of “no transgression” (*lâ ta'tadî*), that is, not to attack the Mushrikûn that did not wage war against Muslims. Further, Rashîd Riḍâ translates *fitnah*, unlike the classical interpretations (which tend to translate it as shirk or idolatry), as all the oppressions and injustice committed by the Meccan Mushrikûn: first by expelling Muslims from their Meccan homes; second, by betraying the peace treaty; and third by hindering Muslims to perform 'umrah and hajj to the Meccan Haram. (All these misconducts are what Rashîd Riḍâ states in regard to the notion of *fitnah*, which is said in the verse to be worse than killing.) In other words, Muslims' religious freedom was violated. Further, as *fitnah* is interpreted as these oppression, injustice, and betrayal of peace treaty, the word would have different implication in a hugely significant way compared to classical interpretation of the word as shirk. Among the main implication is that Muslims were not fighting because of different beliefs between Meccan Mushrikûn and Medina Muslims, but rather because the *fitnah* committed by the Mushrikûn. By this line of argument, Rashîd Riḍâ addresses those who say that Islam was spread under sword (i.e. by coercion)—and at this point we see how modern people's question has been reflected in his tafsîr.

Among the important points noteworthy of this modern interpretation is that it is concerned more with what the series of the verses say coherently with the verse that come before and after being discussed. And this way is different from that of classical interpretation

that tend to be more focused on what traditional *riwâyat* say about the verse. In other words, there is a shift of emphasis in the modern interpretation. Modern interpretation as exemplified in Rashîd Riḍâ's tafsîr can firmly say and coherently state that fighting is only allowed when Muslims are fought. The notion of defensive war is strongly argued in Rashîd Riḍâ's tafsîr. This is why, according to Rashîd Riḍâ, every verse in the Quran that say about killing others, is accompanied by another verse, either before or after, that says more or less "if they fought you, fight them". This is logical when we look at the subsequent sentence coming after the "kill them wherever you find them" sentence, that is, "if they attack you, then kill them", i.e. in the battlefield. The subsequent verse ([2]:192) also says, "And if they cease then indeed Allah is forgiving and merciful." In short, Muslims are not allowed to begin fighting, let alone killing any non-Muslims arbitrarily wherever they are found.

The similar way of interpretation as Rashîd Riḍâ is also elaborated by al-Sha'râwî. Al-Sha'râwî emphasizes on the notion that the verse cannot be understood in atomistic way, i.e. by picking it out of context. Aside from interpreting the verse [2]:191 by taking into account the verses that come before and after the verse, al-Sha'râwî states that all the Quranic verses on war must be understood in light of the retributive principle as stated in QS. al-Naḥl [16]:126 and al-Shûrâ [42]:40. Al-Zuhaylî was also saying the similar thing. The only difference is that he shows an interpretation from classical books of tafsîr that says that *fitnah* is interpreted as *shirk*. Yet Al-Zuhaylî also states that another interpretation says that *fitnah* is the oppression and expelling committed by the *Mushrikûn* against the Muslims. Besides, Al-Zuhaylî says that the phrase "do not transgress" (*lâ ta'tadhû*) means "do not start fighting".

Before going into the next verse, several points are worth to conclude here as a comparison between the classical interpretations and the modern ones. The classical tends not to be burdened to say that the verse is abrogated by the verse [9]:5 and the word "fitnah" in the verse [2]:191 is interpreted as *shirk*. This is because the classical relies heavily on what the traditional narrations from early scholars of the Quran said about the verse being discussed. On the other side, the modern

interpretations tend not to be concerned with that notion of abrogation and the word “fitnah” is interpreted as oppression and expelling Muslims from their homes. The modern puts emphasis on the apparent message the verses try to convey in coherent way with the verses that come before and after the verse being discussed, by not overlooking its context of revelation (*asbâb al-nuzûl*). Besides, it is apparent that the modern interpretations have been reflecting the questions posed by modern people, that is, among others, whether or not Islam was spread by sword. These are the extent to which we can see how much a change of interpretation has occurred from the classical interpretations to the modern ones.

QS. al-Nisâ’ [4]:89

1. Classical Interpretation

While the verse [2]:191 concerns the Meccan Mushrikûn, the verse [4]:89 addresses the so-called Hypocrites (*Munâfiqûn*). The previous verse (i.e. [4]:88) indicates it quite clearly, as it says, “What is [the matter] with you [that you are] two groups concerning the Hypocrites, while Allah has made them fall back [into error and disbelief] for what they earned. Do you wish to guide those whom Allah has sent astray? And he whom Allah sends astray—never will you find for him away [of guidance].” And those Hypocrites are those who are addressed with the sentence “seize them and kill them wherever you find them” in [4]:89. Yet noteworthy is that the subsequent verse (i.e. QS. Al-Nisâ’ [4]:90) mentions an exception for the implementation of that “kill them wherever you find them” stipulation, that is, “those who take refuge with a people between yourselves and whom is a treaty or those who come to you, their hearts strained at [the prospect of] fighting you or fighting their own people.” From this exception the QS. Al-Nisâ’ [4]:90 states, “If they remove themselves from you and do not fight you and offer you peace, then Allah has not made for you a cause [for fighting] against them.” Therefore, interpreting the QS. Al-Nisâ’ [4]:89 can certainly not be separated from the verses that come before and after it. They are one package.

The intriguing part of interpreting the series of these verses is that there were disputes as to where and to whom the verses are revealed and addressed. Classical scholars of Quranic exegesis report different narrations (riwâyat) as to what the context of revelation (asbâb al-nuzûl) of these verses exactly is. From al-Ṭabârî, for example, we get at least three different narrations. First, the verses were on the context after the Battle of Uḥud from which the Medina Hypocrites who were previously following the Muslim army were escaping. Second, the verses were talking about a group of people that came to Medina; they professed to be Muslim, but then they came out of Medina and they back to their previous beliefs, becoming apostates. Third, the verses were addressing some Meccans who claimed to be Muslims; they came to Medina, and then back to Mecca to report to the Meccans what they got from Medina. In other words, they were spies: their Muslim-ness was a lie, as they did not want to emigrate to Medina while this is obligated by the Prophet to all Muslims. This is why the QS. Al-Nisâ' [4]:89 stipulates, "do not take from among them allies until they emigrate". Migration (hijra) to Medina was demanded to prove that they are really Muslims.

The point of agreement is that the verses are concerning the Hypocrites and their betrayal, as they were undermining the Muslim unity and the social harmony of the Medina society. The dispute was on which Hypocrites whom the verses are addressing. Yet what is clear is that the verse [4]:89 mentions one of their features, that is, "They wish you would disbelieve as they disbelieved so you would be alike."

Al-Ṭabârî seems to be favoring the third narration (i.e. the Hypocrites in Mecca) as to the revelation context of the verse. So does Al-Râzî. Al-Râzî emphasizes on the interpretation that the verse commands all who claimed to be Muslims to emigrate to Medina, to make sure that no Meccans who claimed to be Muslims but actually lying (being Hypocrites), gaining from the Medinan Muslims' power, and helping the Meccan Mushrikûn to combat the Muslims.

On the other side, al-Qurṭûbî seems to be affirming the first narration, that is, about the Hypocrites in Medina who returned home when Muslims were still preoccupied in the battle at Uḥud; the Medinan Hypocrites were escaping from war, being among the causes of Muslims'

defeat. This is because al-Qurṭûbî prefers the narration of Saḥîḥ al-Bukhârî. Ibn Kathîr did not clearly mention which position he stands for, yet he shows in his tafsîr that the third narration is supported by more narrators (râwî) than that of the first and second narrations.

We can conclude here that the implementation of the “kill them wherever you find them” sentence of the verse 4:89 highly depends on which narration on the context of revelation an exegete is favoring. As it has become a characteristic of classical interpretations, they put emphasis on which narration is more reliable and supported by previous scholars. Coherent, logical argument is less showed. And they did not bother with the “kill them wherever you find them” stipulation, as if killing for the betrayal and hypocrisy is normal, so that this is not elaborated in long explanation by them. Nevertheless, overall, we should remember again that the “kill them wherever you find them” stipulation is limited; it does not address those—as the subsequent verse states— “who take refuge”, “has treaty”, “do not fight you”, and/or “offer peace.”

2. Modern Interpretation

Rashîd Riḍâ firmly stands for the third narration (i.e. the Hypocrites addressed are those in Mecca) as the context of revelation of the verse. The arguments he took are more logical, and he got them from his teacher, prominent modernist Muslim, Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905). There are two main arguments for him to argue for the third narration. First, it has been clearly indicated by a sentence in the verse itself, “do not take from among them allies until they emigrate”. In other words, the Hypocrites did not emigrate, and this suggests that they were not in Medina, but rather still in Mecca. Second, while criticizing the first narration saying that the revelation context of the verse was on the battle of Uḥud, Riḍâ states that the Prophet did not kill any Medinan Hypocrites after the battle. Instead, when some companions of the Prophet wanted to kill ‘Abdullâh bin Ubay bin Salûl, who was considered the leader of the Medinan Hypocrites, the Prophet prohibited them and said, “Do not kill him. I am afraid people would later say that the Prophet has killed his companion.”

By this line of arguments, Riḍâ firmly states that the Hypocrites addressed in the verse were those in Mecca, not Medina. This distinction matters because, first, there are other verses long describing the Medinan Hypocrites in many other chapters, and, second, it would determine to whom the “kill them wherever you find them” stipulation would prevail. Riḍâ, relying on his teacher Muḥammad ‘Abduh, says that the verse must be read in light of other verses that talk about similar topic, that is, the betrayal of Meccan Mushrikûn over the Meccan-Medinan peace treaty. Therefore, the “kill them wherever you find them” stipulation of this verse cannot be separated from other verses that have similar sentence, and from the context of war that has been waged between the Meccan Mushrikûn and the Medinan Muslims.

Further, Riḍâ argues that among the message from the series of these verses is that God wants to convey that the main characteristic of Hypocrites is betraying treaty, while the opposite, which is the Believers (Mu’minûn), is those who “fulfill the covenant of Allah and do not break the contract” (QS ar-Ra’d [13]:20). In addition, Riḍâ argues that the verse must be understood in light of the verse [8]:76 that says similar thing on the same issue and states again on the stipulation that the “kill them wherever you find them” command cannot be implemented arbitrarily—it has an exception and is limited to certain circumstances. QS. Al-Anfâl [8]:76 says,

“Those who have believe and emigrated and fought with their wealth and lives in the cause of Allah and those who gave shelter and aided—they are allies of one another. But those who believed and did not emigrate—for you there is no guardianship of them until they emigrate. And if they seek help of you for the religion, then you must help, except against a people between yourselves and whom is a treaty.”

As for another modern interpretation, al-Sha‘râwî, interestingly, did not elaborate which Hypocrites addressed by the verse. He talked more about the debates on theological disputes over the verse [4]:88. Unfortunately, he said only a bit about the verse [4]:89 which is more crucial for the discussion of this paper. He only said that the “kill them wherever you find them” was stipulated addressing the betrayal of the peace treaty. Al-Zuhaylî, on the other side, shows different narrations on

the revelation context of the verse, as I outlined earlier. However, Al-Zuhaylí seems to be confirming to the third narration. So does Quraish Shihab; he states that the verse was addressing the Meccan Hypocrites, yet he appears not to be bothered with the “kill them wherever you find them”—this sentence is not elaborated deeply by Shihab. And one thing relatively new in Al-Zuhaylí’s interpretation is that he locates the verse in the context after the Hudaibiyah treaty (see my elaboration on the previous section [Q. [2]:191]). After the treaty was violated by the Meccan Mushrikûn, war was declared between the Meccans and the Medinan Muslims. This is the context of most “war verses” in the Quran. The verse [4]:89 which contains the “kill them wherever you find them” stipulation, thus, is in line with other verses that say similar things; the only difference is that the verse [4]:89 addresses specifically the Meccan Hypocrites while other similar verses concern the Meccans in general.

Before going to the next section, one thing worth to conclude here is that, once again, we see there is a difference between the classical and the modern interpretations. They differ as to the emphasis and the awareness on the questions posed by respective eras. The classical tends to give emphasis on traditional narrations and fell not burdened with the fact that the “kill them wherever you find them” stipulation would be quite problematic for the sense of people of later times, i.e. today’s people. The modern interpretations have been aware of this, and they put emphasis on how to make a coherent, logical explanation over the verses that talk about war by taking into account the sensitivity of modern people on the connection between religion, especially Islam, and violence/peace.

QS. al-Tawbah [9]:5

1. Classical Interpretation

Before discussing the verse, two things are worth noting. First, the chapter where the verse occurs, Surah al-Tawbah, has specific characteristic. It is the only chapter in the Quran that is not started with *basmalah* (reciting “in the name of Allah, the Merciful, the

Compassionate); and in fact some classical Muslim scholars argued that reciting *basmalah* before reciting this chapter is not allowed. This is because the chapter is mostly talking about war. The first verse of the chapter has clearly indicated that it talks about declaration of war between Muslims and Mushrikûn after the peace treaty had been violated. The first verse says, “[This is a declaration of] disassociation, from Allah and His Messenger, to those with whom you had made a treaty among the polytheists (Mushrikûn).” It should, therefore, be taken into consideration that all the verses in this chapter must be read in light of this context. Second, as this is also the case of the verses discussed in the two previous sections, the verse [9]:5 has an exception of implementation. This is actually quite typical for the Quran to make a general rule and then followed by circumstances in which the rule has an exception.

The verse [9]:5 is preceded by the verse saying, “Excepted are those with whom you made a treaty among the Mushrikûn and then they have not been deficient toward you in anything or supported anyone against you; so complete them their treaty until their term [has ended]. Indeed, Allah loves the righteous [who fear Him]. And it is followed by the verse saying, “And if any one of the polytheist seeks your protection, then grant him protection so that he may hear the words of Allah. Then deliver him to his place of safety. That is because they are a people who do not know.” Therefore, the verse being discussed here, which contains the “kill them wherever you find them” sentence, is surrounded with limitations; it cannot, once again, be implemented arbitrarily.

As for the revelation context of the verse, there is almost no dispute among classical Muslim exegetes on its *asbâb al-nuzûl*. Al-Ṭabârî mentions some narrations that contain a bit difference among them on several details; yet basically they reported the similar thing: The verse was certainly revealed after the peace treaty of Hudaibiyah had been violated, so that Meccan Mushrikûn and Medinan Muslims were at war. This is followed in the next year by the conquest of Mecca (Fath Makkah) by Muslims in which most of those who were previously Meccan Mushrikûn were given amnesty by the Prophet and many of them subsequently converted to Islam (this happened in 8 AH, and after this

conquest, Muslims had been powerful and at least a third of Arabia had been under the rule of Muslims). Muslims then came back to Medina; and in 9 AH, precisely after the battle of Tabuk, a group of Muslims did pilgrimage (hajj) but without the Prophet so that it was led by Abu Bakr. It was at the hajj of that year that the *barâ'ah* chapter was revealed; and the *barâ'ah* declaration was issued during the hajj by 'Alî bin Abî Tâlib sent by the Prophet from Medina. The *barâ'ah* declaration states that all the remaining *Mushrikûn* of Mecca were given opportunity until four months (corresponding to the sacred months) to come. During these months the remaining *Mushrikûn* were given times to think whether or not they wanted to make peace treaty again. And if not, then *barâ'ah* is addressed to those who still wanted war against Muslims. At this context goes QS. Al-Tawbah [9]:5, "When the sacred months have passed, then kill the polytheists (*Mushrikûn*) wherever you find them and capture them and besiege them and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush."

In the terminology of Quranic sciences, this verse is famously known as "the verse of sword" (*ayah al-sayf*), which according to some classical Muslim scholars abrogates the verse on religious freedom, i.e. "no compulsion in religion" (QS. Al-Baqarah [2]:256). Precisely at this point is the intriguing part of interpreting the verse. This verse of sword can be easily used to say that Islam is spread under sword. Moreover, as I said earlier in the previous section on QS. Al-Baqarah [2]:191, QS. Al-Baqarah [2]:190 which prohibits transgression was interpreted by some classical exegetes to have been abrogated by this verse of sword. To this extent, the Muslim 'extremists', who sometimes say that the "no compulsion in religion" verse has limitation, have precedence from the Prophet's story and some sort of justification for their acts in imposing the religion upon people of other faith. In the following passage, let me slightly elaborate what classical interpretations say about this verse of sword, though some of them may give justifications for those Muslim 'extremists'.

Al-Ṭabârî narrates from Qatâdah that the verse concerns the remaining *Mushrikûn* who were involved in the peace treaty of Hudaibiyyah. It was only for them: if they did not want to renew peace

treaty, then they must be killed wherever they are found until they are willing to make shahâdah, i.e. convert to Islam. Another narration from Ibn ‘Abbas states that it was only concerning a demand to make a new peace treaty; hence no coercion to convert to Islam. Al-Ṭabârî seems to be favoring the first narration, as it is, for al-Ṭabârî, supported by the words of the verse, “But if they repent, establish prayer, and give zakah, let them [go] on their way”. Implicitly, the verse seems to state that those Mushrikûn must be killed until they convert to Islam. As for another classical tafsîr, Al-Râzî appears to be affirming al-Ṭabârî. Al-Râzî even states that the verse in the interpretation of al-Shâfi‘î (one of the founders of the four major Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence) has become one of the textual proofs (dalîl) that those who do not establish prayer nor give zakah must also be killed. Al-Qurṭûbî even goes further by saying that the phrase “kill the polytheists” can be done in many ways, including stoning or burning them alive since this, according to al-Qurṭûbî, has been exemplified by Abu Bakr and Ali during war against the apostates (murtaddûn). Ibn Kathîr also says that the verse was being justification for Abu Bakr during his reign of caliphate to wage war against those unwilling to pay zakah.

It is quite clear that the classical interpretations of the sword verse were not bothered with the notion of coercion in religion. They were certainly unaware of the fact that this verse has become sensitive for modern people, even for today’s Muslims themselves, as their interpretations were not exposed yet to the crucial modern issue of religious freedom. They seem to be naturally saying so, without any burden that in the later centuries there would be some Muslims who use their tafsîr to justify their intolerant or even violent actions against people of other faith.

2. Modern Interpretation

As modern interpreters have been exposed to the sensitive issue of religious freedom, certainly this notion has been reflected in their interpretations. Some re-interpretations and critiques toward the classical interpretations appear in the modern ones.

Rashîd Riḍâ has a long explanation on the verse of sword in order not to confirm what the classical interpretations have suggested. Riḍâ states that all the verses in the barâ'ah chapter must be read in light of the context of Meccan Mushrikûn's break of the Hudaybîyah peace treaty, marking the all-out war between them and the Muslims. Besides, Riḍâ argues that all the war verses must be interpreted in consultation with other verses under the same theme such as QS. Al-Baqarah [2]:190 ("Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress") and QS. Al-Anfâl [8]:67 ("If they incline to peace, then incline to it [also]). Riḍâ, thus, certainly rejects the view that the verse of sword has abrogated the QS. Al-Baqarah [2]:190. Moreover, for Riḍâ, the "no compulsion in religion" verse (QS. Al-Baqarah [2]:256) is universal, so that every interpretation of the war verses must consult this verse as general principle. In addition, Riḍâ states that, even though there is the "kill them wherever you find them" sentence in the verse, it can be understood fairly after a reader has been aware of the series of stories preceding the revelation of the verse (that is, from violation of the Hudaybîyah peace treaty, amnesty after the conquest of Mecca, and four months given to think of renewing peace treaty). More interestingly, Riḍâ firmly argues that the verse applies only to the Meccan Mushrikûn who, after four months, still insisted to have war against the Muslims. Riḍâ states that those Mushrikûn must be distinguished from the Jews and the Christians (known also as People of the Book or Ahl al-Kitâb). In other words, for Riḍâ, the People of the Book are not included in the category of the Mushrikûn. Riḍâ explains his arguments in long elaboration, filled with other Quranic verses and many hadiths to criticize the classical interpretations that were not aware of this distinction between the Mushrikûn and the Ahl al-Kitâb.

Three things we see from Riḍâ's interpretations. First, he has been exposed to the issue of religious freedom, which in turn leads him to interpret the verse of sword in light of the QS. Al-Baqarah [2]:256 saying "no compulsion in religion". Second, as being typical to modern interpretations, he tries to find coherent logical interpretations by taking into account other many verses that talk about similar topic, so that an interpreter must not pick a verse in an atomistic way of reading. Third,

Riḍâ provides arguments to criticize the classical interpretation, a critique that can show that the classical view of abrogation is problematic, at least in the perspective of modern Muslims.

The similar case as Rashîd Riḍâ happens to al-Sha‘râwî. In his tafsîr, al-Sha‘râwî even gave many passages to specifically address the question concerning the verse of sword and its contradicting connection with the notion of religious freedom (he explicitly says it: “ayna ḥurriyah al-dîn?”), where is freedom of religion?). Because of this, several times al-Sha‘râwî must cite the “no compulsion in religion” verse in his interpretation of the verse of sword, as if he wants to always remind the readers that Quranic verse that guarantees religious freedom. Overall, al-Sha‘râwî’s interpretation is similar with that of Riḍâ to the extent that it tries to put emphasis on the context of revelation in order for reader to be able to fairly understand why the verse can come up with killing the polytheists wherever they are found. On the other side, Al-Zuhaylî seems to be only citing what the classical interpretations have said: al-Zuhaylî confirms the interpretation that all the remaining Mushrikûn must be eliminated except they are willing to accept Islam. Furthermore, Al-Zuhaylî affirms the view that the phrase “if they repent, establish prayer, and give zakah” means the three requirements for the Mushrikûn to be hindered from being killed. For Al-Zuhaylî, these three, if neglected by a Muslim, can make him become disbeliever (kâfir) so that he is worth killing as well.

Contrary to Al-Zuhaylî, Quraish Shihab provides long arguments from the first verse of the chapter to the verse of sword to argue against any notion that relates these verses to coercion of religion or that Islam is spread by sword. For summary, there are briefly three things noteworthy from Shihab’s interpretation. First, these verses ([9]:1-5) were revealed around 15 months before the Prophet passed away. In other words, declaration of war happened in the last phase of his prophetic ministry and is much less compared to 20 years of the Prophet’s effort to preach Islam peacefully or to conduct war defensively. Second, the Mushrikûn addressed by the verses are limited to the Meccan Mushrikûn who previously broke peace treaty with the Muslims, and they have been given times to renew it. Additionally, there

were several Mushrik tribes outside Mecca that were left away and not fought by the Muslims after the verse of sword was revealed—this adds emphasis on the view that the verse was addressing only those Meccans. Third, Shihab stresses on the fact that the verse of sword is surrounded by the verses before and after that bear limitations for its implementations. Shihab insists, after long elaboration, that the verse of sword only addresses the Mushrikûn that began oppressing, attacking, and doing unfairly against Muslims. In the end, as he often suggests in his interpretation of other verses on war, Shihab says that, after all, war in Islam is conducted only for defensive reason.

Conclusion

By comparing the classical and the modern interpretations of the three “violent verses” discussed in this paper, several differences appear. I conclude here that both are different at least in three aspects. First is on emphasis or priority of sources of interpretation: the classical tends to interpret the verses by giving priority to the traditional narrations (*riwâiyât*), while the modern gives emphasis on the coherence between the verses under interpretation and other verses that talk about similar topic. Second is on “intra-textuality”: the modern—as it tries to make coherent interpretation with other verses—tends to give priority to intra-textual interpretation (i.e. interpreting a verse by another verse) and it generally seeks to come up with general rule for the verses under the same topic; while the classical is less intra-textual and more inter-textual, as it quite often interprets the verses in light of the traditional narrations or the prophet’s sayings (*hadith*), which are actually secondary for Islamic teachings. Third, and the most important, the modern has been exposed to modern issues such as questions on religious freedom and human rights, so that this awareness brings about new consciousness and has been reflected in modern interpretations—while these are relatively absent in the classical interpretations.

The case of QS. Al-Baqarah [2]:191 and its surrounding verses shows that, for the classical interpretations, the verses have been abrogated by the QS. Al-Tawbah [9]:5 and the word “*fitnah*” in it was

interpreted as *shirk* (polytheism). This happens because the classical interpretations give emphasis on what traditional *riwáyât* have said about the verses under interpretation. The modern, on the other side, says that there is no abrogation, and the word “*fitnah*” tends to be translated as oppression and expelling one from his/her home as that from which early Muslims have suffered. This happens because the modern interpretations seek to build a general rule of Islamic justifications for war (Islamic *jus ad bellum*) and, more importantly, they have been exposed to the issue of religious freedom so that they tend to criticize the view that Islam was spread by sword, and insist that war in Islam is allowed only for defensive reason.

The similar case also happens to the other two verses discussed in this paper, i.e. QS. Al-Nisá’ [4]:89 and QS. Al-Tawbah [9]:5. Both cases show that the classical interpretations just easily cite the traditional narrations without being bothered with modern sensitivity—for sure, they were in the pre-modern era. This, to some extent, brings about difficulty for the later modern interpretations when they seek to reject the view that Islam, as proven by those verses, did impose the religion upon people of other faith, and even command killing them wherever they are found. The classical interpretations of the verse [9]:5 (known also as “the verse of sword”) were not burdened and certainly unaware of the fact that this verse would become critical for modern people, even for today’s Muslims themselves, as their interpretations were not exposed yet to the modern issues the modern Muslims face. The classical interpretations seem to be naturally saying so, without any consciousness that in the later centuries there would be some Muslims who use their *tafsír* to justify their intolerant or even violent actions against people of other faith. This different tendency of interpretations happens because each type of interpretation faces different questions. Problems of pre-modern centuries are certainly different from those of modern era. Simply speaking, each interpretation reflects and is affected by the discourse of respective eras.

These all would remind us of the idea Friedrich Schleiermacher built on hermeneutics, concerning the question on what underpins an understanding and interpretive activity. Schleiermacher argued that

understanding takes place in the coherence between two moments of both grammatical and psychological explications. By grammatical explication he meant a reconstruction of the historical context, linguistic discourse and word-meanings of an author or speaker. This procedure, in turn, delves into the *zeitgeist* or the spirit of the period in which the utterance occurred: the intellectual, emotional and personal stage of the author; the literary genre the author adopts; and the semantic possibilities of the words the author employs.

By this awareness from Schleiermacher's hermeneutics we can understand why the Quranic classical interpretations were coming up with exegesis that is considered problematic by modern people, while the interpretations were just saying it naturally, without being bothered with what later people in more developed era would perceive. From Schleiermacher's hermeneutics we can see also what the classical interpretations did not see, as we in the modern era may find out some problems in them. From Schleiermacher we got grammatical explication procedures to determine claims, insights, and underlying assumptions in the classical interpretations, and at the end put them in the way the classical exegetes communicate with the audience they were facing.

We may also get deeper reflection from Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, particularly concerning his idea on what is operative in the process of understanding (or, for this case, interpretation). His concept of "horizon" is useful here to make us aware that the classical *tafsîrs* were interpreting the verses through the "horizon" of the *zeitgeist* of their times. To be more precise, the term used by Gadamer is "effective historical consciousness". It is not difficult for us, modern people, to feel that those classical interpretations were influenced by their "effective historical consciousness", as proven by the fact that they were not concerned with whether or not their interpretations would result in a perception that Islam is a violent religion, a concern which is highly sensitive for modern Muslims. For modern people, having been able to see the pre-modern *tafsîrs* with "distanciation" (to use Paul Ricoeur's term), the classical interpretations were highly affected by their "prejudice", as a result of their being within their tradition, their being influenced by their fore-meanings and fore-structure of thoughts. All

these should be taken into account when we read the classical books of *tafsîrs*, while at the same time we must of course be aware that our understanding cannot escape from our own prejudices and horizon affected by the *zeitgeist* or our time today. This hermeneutical reflection from Gadamer is also useful to make us conscious that the classical interpretations were not coming out of a vacuum, or empty from contexts and not shaped by their being within history. This is a consciousness that not few Muslim ‘extremists’ are lacking, as they quite often consider classical interpretations to be a kind of sacred things that cannot be criticized, as if history, tradition, and prejudice are absent in them.

Bibliography

- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer & Donald G. Marshall; second, revised edition. London & New York: Continuum, 2006.
- Ibn Kathîr, Abû al-Fidâ Ismâ‘îl bin ‘Umar. *Tafsîr al-Qurân al-‘Azîm*, ed. Sâmî bin Muḥammad Salamah. Riyâḍ: Dâr Ṭaybah, 1999.
- Al-Qurṭûbî, Abû ‘Abdillâh Muḥammad bin Aḥmad. *Al-Jâmi’ li Abkâm al-Qur’ân*, ed. Aḥmad al-Burdûnî & Ibrâhîm Aṭfish. Cairo: Dâr al-Kutub al-Miṣriyah, 1964.
- Al-Râzî, Fakhr al-Dîn, a.k.a. Abû ‘Abdillâh Muḥammad bin ‘Umar. *Al-Tafsîr al-Kabîr* a.k.a. *Mafâtîh al-Ghayb*. Beirut: Dâr Iḥyâ al-Thurâth al-‘Arabî, 2000.
- Riḍâ, Muḥammad bin Rashîd bin ‘Alî. *Tafsîr al-Qurân al-Hakîm* a.k.a. *Tafsîr al-Manâr*. Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Miṣriyah, 1990.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, trans. & ed. Andrew Bowie. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Al-Sha‘râwî, Muḥammad Mutawallî. *Tafsîr al-Sha‘râwî*. Cairo: Maṭâbi’ Akhbâr al-Yawm, 1997.

Shihab, Muhammad Quraish. *Tafsir al-Misbah: Pesan, Kesan, dan Keserasian al-Qur'an*. Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2002.

Al-Ṭabârî, Muḥammad bin Jarîr. *Jâmi' al-Bayân 'an Ta'wîl Ay al-Qur'ân*, ed. Ahmad Muḥammad Shâkir. Beirut: Muassasah al-Risâlah, 2000.

Al-Zuhaylî, Wahbah bin Muṣṭafâ. *Al-Tafsîr al-Munîr fî 'l-'Aqûdah wa 'l-Sbarî'ah wa 'l-Manhâj*. Damascus: Dâr al-Fîkr al-Mu'aşîr, 1998.

The translations of the Quranic verses rely on the versions of Sahih International and Yusuf Ali; they can be accessed at the website www.quran.com