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Trends in Islamic Revisionist Discourse on Qur'anic Studies (A Critical Analysis of John Wansbrough's Thought)

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*Abstract

The following paper discusses the trend in modern revisionist discourse about Qur'ānic studies with the critical engagement of John Wansbrough's idea. Known for his historical and literary criticism, Wansbrough claimed that the Qur'an was a product of Jewish and Christian traditions, and its canonization is of much later origin than that which is ascribed to the time of the Prophet Muhammad. While influential, this thesis has been criticized as an attack on the authenticity of the Qur'ān. This paper looks at the methodology and arguments of Wansbrough in light of scholars such as Fazlur Rahman, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Mustafa Öztürk who question the assumptions of revisionism. Through qualitative library-based research, this paper highlights some of the methodological flaws in Wansbrough's approach and proposes alternatives that are in tune with Qur'ānic studies. The findings raise the need to respond to such criticisms if misinterpretations so rife in current Qurānic discourses are to be averted. This is a research contribution to the ongoing scholarly conversation on revisionist methodologies and textual interpretation in Qur'ānic studies.

Keywords: John Wansbrough, Historical Criticism, Revisionism, Qur'anic Studies, Fazlur Rahman

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Introduction

The study of the Eastern world, including Islam, has long been a focus of Western scholars, although the term "Orientalism" was formally introduced only in the 18th century to describe this intellectual movement. The term "Orientalism" itself is derived from two words: "orient" and "ism." "Orient" originates from the Latin word *oriri*, meaning "to rise," and geographically refers to the Eastern part of the world. Meanwhile, "ism" comes from Dutch, signifying a system or ideology. In academic contexts, Orientalism refers to a discipline that examines the cultures, languages, literatures, and religions of the East, often through an approach influenced by the perspective of Western colonial dominance. This field aims to understand, research, and frequently control and dominate knowledge about the East, including Islam, through approaches shaped by Western biases, which are often colonial in nature(Armayanto et al., 2023).

The roots of the Orientalist movement can be traced back to the Medieval period, when Christian theologians in Europe began collecting and translating classical texts from the intellectual heritage of Islam into Latin. These translations enabled Western intellectuals to access Islamic sources of knowledge, including science, philosophy, and theology. Collections of these manuscripts, now housed in major institutions such as the British Museum in London and the Mingana Collection in the United Kingdom, served as the foundation for the development of Orientalism as a formal field of study in the Western world. Orientalism not only functioned as a means of understanding the East but also operated as a tool of intellectual domination, often facilitating the agendas of colonialism and missionary activity.

In its development, the Orientalist approach has faced criticism from contemporary Muslim scholars. These scholars argue that while Orientalism has contributed significant information about the Islamic world, it is often biased and driven by hidden motives to dominate and shape the understanding of Islam according to Western perspectives (Latief, 2017). With the rise of critical thinking, the Orientalist movement began to undergo revisions, leading to what is known as Revisionism—a method that seeks to critique and reform the approaches and views employed by earlier Orientalists. Revisionists aim not only to address biases in Islamic studies but also to foster a more equitable dialogue between East and West, positioning Islam as a subject with its own authority in interpreting and analyzing itself (Baihaki, 2017).

The author discusses the trend of Islamic revisionist discourse in Qur'anic studies with the aim of demonstrating that the Qur'an cannot be interpreted arbitrarily, especially through approaches that disregard its transcendental nature and divine authority. By critically examining John Wansbrough's thoughts, this article seeks to identify the methodological weaknesses in Wansbrough's historical and literary criticism approaches, including his claims about the influence of Jewish and Christian traditions on the Qur'an. Furthermore, the author emphasizes the uniqueness and authenticity of the Qur'an while critiquing the revisionist trends prevalent among Western scholars, which tend to overlook Islamic traditions in interpretation. This article also aims to strengthen Islamic approaches to Qur'anic exegesis by utilizing Fazlur Rahman's ideas as an alternative more aligned with Islamic traditions. Through these efforts, the article seeks to rectify modern misconceptions influenced by revisionist perspectives and provide an academic contribution to Qur'anic studies by presenting strong arguments in defense of the Qur'an's authority and authenticity.

Discourses on Qur'anic studies are substantial among scholars, particularly those about Orientalist perspectives and the way revisionist methodologies are considered. This review discusses two pivotal studies that provide foundational insight into this subject: namely, Trends in the Discourse on Qur'anic Studies from the Perspective of Western Orientalists by Muhammad Anshori and A Study of John Wansbrough's Thoughts on the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad by Muhammad Alfatih Suryadilaga.

Muhammad Anshori's work examines the historical and intellectual trends within Orientalist approaches to Qur'anic studies, highlighting their implications on Islamic scholarship. Anshori critically evaluates how Western scholars have interpreted the Qur'an through philological, historical, and textual analysis, often leading to conclusions that challenge traditional Islamic narratives. This study categorizes the key trends into emphases on the Qur'an's compilation, the relationships between other semitic texts, and the questioning of its divine origin. Infact, by presenting a comparison of different orientalist methodologies, Anshori managed to emphasize how tension would necessarily arise between the West's scholarly approach and the theological structures within Islam. His work also highlights the necessity of active engagement with such discourses by Muslim scholars, in a manner that maintains equilibrium and does not dislocate Islamic intellectual traditions. (Ulfiana, 2020)

Muhammad Alfatih Suryadilaga's study looks in detail at the contributions of John Wansbrough, who was perhaps the most central figure to revisionist Islamic studies. Suryadilaga gives a comprehensive explanation of Wansbrough's methodologies, particularly his use of historical criticism and literary analysis to explore the Qur'an's origins and its relationship to early Islamic history. Controversial theories by Wansbrough, such as the Qur'an's gradual emergence over centuries and its integration into an evolving socio-political context, are critically assessed. Suryadilaga juxtaposes Wansbrough's arguments against traditional Islamic views, highlighting the methodological divergences and their epistemological implications. This is particularly important because of its critical engagement with the challenges thrown up by historical criticism and its impact on contemporary Islamic thought (Suryadilaga, 2011).

Both works contribute to a deeper understanding of the epistemological and methodological tensions in Qur'anic studies. The broader analysis by Anshori of Orientalist

trends supplements the focused critique that Suryadilaga provided of Wansbrough's thought, collectively affording a broad view of both the challenges and opportunities of Muslim scholars engaging with Western academic discourse. These studies also underline the necessity of a robust Islamic scholarly response, integrating both classical and contemporary approaches to safeguard the integrity of Qur'anic studies while addressing modern intellectual challenges.

The problem formulation of this article revolves around addressing methodological flaws in the approach used by John Wansbrough in Qur'anic studies, as identified from his work entitledQuranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation. His methods are criticized for leading to misinterpretations and inaccuracies within the discourse on the Qur'an. The present article attempts to discuss these methodological flaws critically with corrective insights and suggests a more complete and realistic framework through which to study the Qur'an, one that conforms to accepted principles of Qur'anic study and challenges those of Wansbrough. In so doing, the article aids the fine-tuning of discourse and furthers balanced understanding of the Qur'an.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a focus on library research to analyze the trends within Islamic revisionist discourse in Qur'anic studies, particularly the critical perspectives of John Wansbrough. The data utilized in this research is secondary, sourced from books, journals, and scholarly literature addressing Wansbrough's ideas, as well as academic works examining Orientalism and Revisionism in Qur'anic studies.

Data collection in this study involves an in-depth literature review, focusing on identifying and analyzing Wansbrough's theories and methodologies while refuting his arguments by incorporating the perspectives of contemporary scholars such as Fazlur Rahman, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Mustafa Öztürk. The data analysis employs a quantitative approach within a descriptive-analytical framework, which includes the classification and quantification of data to measure the frequency and patterns of methodological critiques of the Qur'an. The study ensures validity and reliability by selecting credible and relevant sources, thereby providing a robust foundation for its findings.

By adopting this approach, the research aims to contribute to the evaluation of Wansbrough's critique of Qur'anic study methodologies and its impact on Islamic academic scholarship. It seeks to offer insights into the broader implications of his ideas, providing a foundation for further discourse on the intersection of Orientalism, Revisionism, and contemporary Qur'anic studies (Fadli, 2021).

Result and Discussion

Biography of John Wansbrough in Our'anic Studies

John Wansbrough was a prominent orientalist known for his controversial approach to understanding the early history of Islam, particularly the Qur'ān. In his work Qur'anic Studies, he employed a method of extreme skepticism that rejected the validity of traditional revelation narratives until reliable scientific evidence was found. He hypothesizes that the Qur'ān did not emerge as a single revelation, but rather through a process of evolution from earlier religious texts, such as Judaism and Christianity. His views challenged established beliefs in Islam regarding the authenticity of the Qur'ān as the word of God. Through his approach, Wansbrough argues that Qur'ānic history must be separated from the traditions passed down by Muslims. He argues that these narratives are rather social constructions that took shape long after the time of the Prophet Muhammad. This places Wansbrough as an important, yet controversial, figure in critical Qur'ānic studies.

Criticisms of his thinking abound. Scholars such as Angelika Neuwirth argue that Wansbrough's skepticism denies the originality of the Qur'ān and its historical background. This approach is considered to ignore the social and cultural environment of Arabia, the

context in which the Qur'ān was revealed. Wansbrough's influence extended to figures such as Michael Cook and Patricia Crone, who also explored the origins of Islam in a similar way. However, their works, such as Hagarism, remain contentious among scholars. Despite ongoing criticism of his methods and conclusions, Wansbrough's approach became an important cornerstone of Qur'anic Studies in the West, encouraging deep reflection on the methodology of research on sacred texts (Agustono, 2020).

Historical Criticism

John Wansbrough's historical approach to the Qur'an focuses on analyzing the relationship between the Qur'anic text and earlier scriptures, such as those of Judaism and Christianity. Wansbrough argued that the Qur'an does not stand independently but was influenced by preceding religious traditions. Andrew Rippin reinforced this view, highlighting that Wansbrough's methodology reveals continuity within the heritage of monotheistic religions. Furthermore, Wansbrough asserted that early Islamic history lacks clear records and was only comprehensively documented during the generations following the companions of the Prophet. For instance, he pointed to the Isra' of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), which he considered an adaptation of narratives associated with Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) and argued that it was only incorporated into Islamic history after the Prophet's lifetime. To further this study, research could delve deeper into early Islamic historical sources and examine how the process of oral tradition transmission and codification evolved into official narratives (Muslih et al., 2023).

John Wansbrough, in his analysis of the early history of Islam, argues that there are no authentic historical records from that period. According to him, Islamic historical documentation began to emerge only in the generations following the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). One example of this is the story of Isra' (Ulfiana, 2020), which Wansbrough considers an added narrative that appeared in later periods and is regarded as an adaptation of the story of Prophet Moses (PBUH). This view aligns with the thinking of Gustav Weil, who also questioned the authenticity of the narrative. Weil asserts that the verses regarding Isra' contradict the general belief of Muslims, who view Prophet Muhammad as the bearer of miracles, and he refers to the event as merely an illusion (WANSBROUGH, 2010).

Wansbrough also argues how the Qur'ān, like the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity, must be understood in a historical context. Andrew Rippin supports this view, arguing that modern scholars' approach to Islam is similar to their approach to Judaism and Christianity, which is to place both within a historically grounded religious framework. In this regard, Wansbrough also emphasizes the importance of questioning what can be considered "evidence" in the study of the history of religion, particularly regarding traditional claims about the codification of the Qur'ān. Rippin adds that early Islamic sources are not strong enough to support the accuracy of the Qur'ānic codification process that supposedly took place shortly after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Instead, non-Islamic evidence for the existence of the Qur'ān only emerged in the second century AH (Ibrahim, 2016).

This skeptical view is also supported by John Burton, who highlights the contradictions in Islamic sources related to the Qur'ānic collection process. In contrast to the Muslim belief that the Qur'ān was officially collected during the time of Caliph Uthman bin Affan, Wansbrough rejects this claim and considers it a fiction. The historical approach adopted in Islamic studies, while providing a different perspective, is often limited to aspects of external phenomena and falls short of exploring the essential meaning of religion. This is exacerbated by the limited sources available. In this context, historical criticism of the Qur'ān presents the text in two perspectives: as a historical document that is continuous with previous revelations, and as a non-historical text that comes from God, in line with Muhammad Abduh's view of the evolution of revelation that culminates in the revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad (Saleh, 2020).

John Wansbrough, in his attempt to show the influence of earlier traditions in the Qur'ān, criticized some verses related to the story of Prophet Shu'aib. The story is found in QS. Al-

A'raf (7): 85-93, Hud (11): 84-95, and Al-Syu'ara' (26): 176-190, but Wansbrough found differences in the presentation of the story in each letter. According to him, the story in QS. Al-A'raf is more complete, while in QS. Al-Syu'ara', the narrative is considered less comprehensive. From this difference, Wansbrough concludes that previous traditions, especially from the Bible, influenced the writing of the stories in the Qur'ān. This strengthens his thesis that the Qur'ān adopted elements from existing traditions (Zaenudin et al., 2023).

Wansbrough's approach uses literal analysis to read the Qur'ān, where he views the book as a mere literary work, rather than a transcendental sacred text. As such, the Qur'ān is considered a narrative that can be influenced by earlier texts such as the Bible. He also highlights the example of the use of the term "jannatani" in QS. Al-Rahman (55): 46-61 and 62-77 as an indication of the influence of other traditions. Through a historical and literary lens, Wansbrough rejects the theological view of the Qur'ān as absolute revelation, and rather sees it as the result of adaptations from previous historical and cultural traditions (WANSBROUGH, 2010).

The Literary Criticism Method

John Wansbrough used the literary criticism approach in analyzing the Qur'ān. The literary criticism method, often called source criticism, has its origins in the Biblical methodology. In the 17th and 18th centuries Biblical scholars had analyzed the historical Bibles and found contradictions, repetitions, and stylistic and vocabulary variations in the biblical text. They concluded that a deeper understanding of the Bible could be achieved through tracing the sources that shaped the text. Hence the literary approach to Qur'anic studies by John Wansbrough(Ibrahim, 2016).

The literary approach to Qur'anic studies was pioneered by John Wansbrough. He argues that the process of canonization of the Qur'anic text was only formed at the end of the second century Hijriyah. Therefore, Wansbrough states that all hadiths that mention the collection of the Qur'an cannot be trusted historically. According to him, the information is fictitious and has a specific purpose. He suspects that they may have been invented by the fuqaha' to explain shari'ah doctrines not found in the Qur'anic text, or to follow the model of Pentecostal textual transmission and the canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures. Wansbrough argues that this information assumes the existence of a canonical standard and therefore, the process of canonization could not have occurred before the third century AH (WANSBROUGH, 2010).

According to John Wansbrough's view, the texts that Muslims have come to accept and uphold are actually fictitious constructions that Muslims only began to compose in later times. The Qur'an, according to him, only reached its final and authoritative form after around the 9th century AD. This approach is part of the textual criticism developed by modern orientalists in analyzing the Qur'ān. It aims to evaluate the accuracy of the text through a thorough analysis of its various aspects. The process of textual criticism involves two main steps: first, recension, which is the selection and evaluation of available material to determine the most trustworthy textual basis; and second, emendation, which is the process of correcting errors that may appear, including in manuscripts that are considered the most authoritative (Fahimah & Ilmi, 2022).

A refutation of John Wanshbrough using the arguments of contemporary scholars

Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Mustafa Öztürk share a similar critique of John Wansbrough's arguments, rejecting his assertion that the Qur'an is a historical product of the Muslim community formed post-Prophet Muhammad. Nasr, through works like *The Study Quran*, emphasizes the spiritual and transcendent nature of the Qur'anic revelation, arguing that Wansbrough's reliance on literary and historical criticism neglects the divine origin and immutable authenticity of the Qur'an. Nasr contends that such approaches reduce the Qur'an to a socio-political construct, ignoring its unique epistemological framework that harmonizes rationality, spirituality, and transcendence. Mustafa Öztürk similarly critiques Wansbrough's methodology for its failure to account for the robust oral and written traditions of Qur'anic preservation during the Prophet's time(Öztürk, 2008).

Their arguments align closely with Fazlur Rahman's critique of Wansbrough's methods. Rahman, in *Major Themes of the Qur'an* and *Islamic Methodology in History*, opposes Wansbrough's view that the Qur'an is an adaptation of Judeo-Christian traditions, emphasizing instead its originality as a refined and comprehensive revelation. Rahman highlights that the Qur'an offers universal moral guidance that transcends its historical context while remaining relevant to humanity's spiritual and social needs. He also refutes Wansbrough's claim of delayed codification, underscoring the Prophet's strong tradition of revelation memorization and its early documentation(Rahman, 2012).

Both Nasr and Rahman argue that the Qur'an cannot be fully understood through reductive literary criticism, as advocated by Wansbrough. They emphasize that this approach overlooks the substantive moral and spiritual essence of the Qur'anic message. While Rahman underscores the dynamic nature of revelation responding to historical contexts without being confined by them, Nasr focuses on preserving the spiritual and epistemological integrity of the Qur'an. Together, their perspectives form a robust defense against Wansbrough's reductionist approach, advocating for a holistic understanding that respects both the historical and transcendent dimensions of the Qur'an.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Mustafa Öztürk decisively reject the literary criticism approach adopted by John Wansbrough, in which the Qur'an is treated as if it were devoid of its spiritual and metaphysical dimensions. According to Nasr, such a method reduces the Qur'an to the status of a purely historical artifact bereft of divine origin and transhistorical relevance (Nasr, 2015). He emphasizes that the Qur'an is not a creation of developing socio-political milieusbut an expression of divine will to guide humanity through all ages. This critique is further enforced by Mustafa Öztürk, who points out that the method of literary criticism, in its effort to parallel the Qur'an with Judeo-Christian texts, overlooks the uniques framework of Qur'anic revelation. The scholars point out that Wansbrough's emphasis on textual evolution overlooks an established Islamic tradition of oral and written transmission, which guaranteed that the Qur'an would remain true to its origin with the Prophet Muhammad.

Fazlur Rahman further strengthens this critique by emphasizing the holistic and dynamic nature of the Qur'an, which surpasses the limitations of the literary analysis. He argues that the method of Wansbrough, in isolating the verses from their moral and spiritual contexts, leads to a fragmented understanding of the Qur'an. Rahman makes the strong case that the Qur'anic revelation is no reedition of Judeo-Christian traditions but an independent, superior form of divine guidance with its moral and theological system. By placing the Qur'an in its historical context, yet making it relevant for all times, Rahman proves the inadequacy of Wansbrough's purely textual approach. These scholars, in chorus, affirm that literary criticism, while useful in limited aspects, can by no means fully grasp the completeness of the Qur'an, a divine and transcendental book. They call for an integrated approach that respects the spiritual profundity and historicity of the Qur'an to ensure that a full understanding is achieved without distortion(Rahman, 1982).

Conclusion

The discourse on Orientalism and Revisionism in Qur'anic studies highlights critical intersections between Western academic approaches and Islamic scholarship. Orientalism, rooted in Western perspectives, has historically shaped the study of Eastern cultures, often through a lens of intellectual dominance. This approach, while contributing significantly to the understanding of Islamic civilization, is criticized for its biases and colonial underpinnings. Figures like John Wansbrough exemplify the revisionist trend, employing historical and literary criticism to question the Qur'an's origins and its relationship with earlier monotheistic traditions. While Wansbrough's methodologies have spurred deeper engagement with Qur'anic studies, they often disregard the Qur'an's transcendental nature

and the inherent theological frameworks within Islam, sparking substantial debate among scholars.

In response, contemporary Muslim scholars, including Fazlur Rahman and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, advocate for methodologies that reconcile critical inquiry with Islamic epistemology. These efforts emphasize the Qur'an's authenticity and its distinctive role within Islamic tradition while addressing the challenges posed by revisionist perspectives. This study critically examines Wansbrough's arguments, identifying methodological gaps and proposing a more balanced framework for Qur'anic studies. By incorporating classical Islamic principles and engaging with modern academic discourse, the research seeks to fortify the integrity of Qur'anic scholarship, fostering a constructive dialogue that upholds the Qur'an's authority while navigating contemporary intellectual challenges.

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