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## Epistemological Distinctions between the Living Qur'an Methodology and Hermeneutics: A Theoretical Study in Contemporary Tafsir Studies

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### Kata Kunci :

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### Abstrak

Dinamika penafsiran Al-Qur'an di era kontemporer melahirkan berbagai metodologi, di mana hermeneutika filosofis dan Living Qur'an mencuat sebagai dua pendekatan yang sering dibicarakan namun memiliki landasan epistemologis yang berbeda dan berpotensi menimbulkan ketegangan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis secara teoritis perbedaan epistemologis fundamental antara metodologi Living Qur'an dan hermeneutika filosofis dalam studi tafsir kontemporer, mengidentifikasi titik-titik perbedaan krusial terkait konsep teks, otoritas, dan peran pembaca, serta mengontekstualisasikan perbedaan tersebut untuk mencegah relativisme hermeneutis yang mengancam otoritas wahyu. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain library research, penelitian ini menganalisis literatur primer dan sekunder dengan teknik analisis isi dan pembacaan kritis. Hasil penelitian menyimpulkan bahwa kedua metodologi ini bersifat paradoks: hermeneutika filosofis berakar pada tradisi sekuler Barat yang melihat teks sebagai produk sejarah dengan makna yang cair dan relatif, sementara Living Qur'an lahir dari epistemologi Islam yang memandang Al-Qur'an sebagai wahyu transenden (kalāmullāh) yang absolut dan mengkaji manifestasinya dalam praktik empiris komunitas Muslim. Implikasi teoretis dari penelitian ini adalah pengayaan metodologi studi Al-Qur'an dengan mempertegas batas-batas epistemologisnya, sedangkan implikasi praktisnya adalah memberikan kerangka kritis bagi akademisi dan praktisi untuk memilih metodologi yang tidak menggerus otoritas dan kesucian wahyu.

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**Abstract**
**Keywords :**Epistemology; Living  
Qur'an; Hermeneutics

*The dynamics of Qur'anic interpretation in the contemporary era have given rise to various methodologies, among which philosophical hermeneutics and the Living Qur'an emerge as two approaches that are frequently discussed yet rest upon different epistemological foundations and potentially generate tensions. This study aims to theoretically analyze the fundamental epistemological distinctions between the Living Qur'an methodology and philosophical hermeneutics in contemporary tafsir studies, to identify crucial points of divergence concerning the concepts of text, authority, and the role of the reader, and to contextualize these differences in order to prevent hermeneutical relativism that threatens the authority of revelation. Employing a qualitative approach with a library research design, this study analyzes primary and secondary literature using content analysis and critical reading techniques. The findings conclude that these two methodologies are paradoxical: philosophical hermeneutics is rooted in the secular Western tradition, viewing the text as a historical product with fluid and relative meanings, while the Living Qur'an arises from Islamic epistemology, perceiving the Qur'an as transcendent revelation (kalāmullāh) that is absolute, and studying its manifestation within the empirical practices of the Muslim community. The theoretical implication of this research is the enrichment of Qur'anic studies methodology by reaffirming its epistemological boundaries, whereas the practical implication is to provide a critical framework for academics and practitioners in choosing methodologies that do not erode the authority and sanctity of revelation.*



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**INTRODUCTION**

The Qur'an constitutes the central orientation of Muslim religiosity, occupying an authoritative position as a source of law, moral guidance, and direction for life. Its presence has always been inseparable from the continuous efforts of understanding and interpretation (*tafsīr*) throughout the history of Islamic civilization. This is due to the fact that, while the Qur'an is final in its textual form (*taẓwīfī*), its meanings remain dynamic as they interact with the ever-changing realities of human life. The progression of time, scientific advancements, social changes, and cultural transformations have continually generated new issues that demand answers grounded in divine guidance. Qur'anic interpretation has never taken place in a vacuum; it has always been shaped by the epistemological, methodological, and socio-cultural frameworks employed by exegetes (*mufasssīrūn*) (Supandi and Agustono 2024). For instance, classical exegetes relied primarily on the sciences of language, transmitted reports (*riwāyāt*), and the circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), whereas modern exegetes often integrate the social sciences, philosophy, and interdisciplinary approaches. According to Saeed (2006), the contemporary context has

given rise to a variety of exegetical approaches, ranging from scientific exegesis and thematic exegesis to *adabī-ijtima'ī* interpretation and hermeneutical readings. This methodological diversity represents a natural response to the challenges of the age, yet it simultaneously raises serious questions concerning the authority, legitimacy, and validity of interpretation. Therefore, epistemological inquiry into tafsīr methodology becomes crucial in ensuring that the dynamism of interpretation does not obscure the fundamental values of the Qur'an as the transcendent *kalāmullāh* (Supandi 2025).

One of the contemporary approaches that has attracted considerable attention as well as controversy is hermeneutics. Rooted in the Western philosophical tradition, with key figures such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer contributing significantly to its development, hermeneutics offers a set of theories and methods for understanding texts. It emphasizes the role of pre-understanding, the hermeneutic circle, the openness of meaning, and the reader's involvement in the construction of textual meaning. Gadamer (1975), for example, argued that understanding results from a "fusion of horizons" between the text and the reader, whereby meaning is never static but remains open to ongoing historical and cultural dialogue (Faiz 2018). When imported into Qur'anic studies, hermeneutics is viewed by some as a fresh paradigm capable of expanding the horizons of Muslim understanding. This approach is seen as creating a dialogical space between the sacred text and the modern context, thereby maintaining the Qur'an's relevance to contemporary dynamics. On the other hand, many Muslim scholars regard hermeneutics as potentially generating serious epistemological problems. Critics argue that the method originates in a Western philosophical tradition that is often secular and not grounded in the framework of faith. As a result, its application in Qur'anic interpretation has sparked debate: on one side celebrated as an intellectual opportunity, yet on the other suspected as a threat to the Qur'an's authority.

The fundamental critique of hermeneutics in Qur'anic interpretation is both epistemological and theological. Many Muslim scholars worry that this approach, with its philosophical roots steeped in relativism, may undermine the core belief in the absoluteness of the Qur'an. Within the framework of Islamic epistemology, the Qur'an is understood as *kalāmullāh*—absolute, authentic, and transcendent. Hermeneutics, however, tends to emphasize the relativity of meaning, the subjectivity of the reader, and the boundless openness of interpretation. Such a conception risks shifting the authority of the sacred text into merely a product of negotiation between text and reader, thereby blurring the distinction between the sacred and the profane.

According to Syamsuddin (2020), the most immediate danger lies in the possibility of arbitrary and overly liberal interpretations that move beyond the established discipline of *tafsīr*. For instance, the doctrine of "unlimited meaning" may encourage the rise of uncontrolled interpretations that actually divert the community away from the spirit of revelation. Epistemologically, such an approach carries the grave risk of reducing the Qur'an's authority as an absolute source of guidance,

replacing it with the relative authority of human interpretation. If left unchecked, this process of deconstruction not only weakens the epistemology of Qur'anic exegesis but also threatens the purity of Islamic faith itself. Therefore, it is crucial to build critical awareness of the epistemological dangers posed by hermeneutics, so that Muslims are not ensnared by radical relativism that could erode the continuity of the *tafsīr* tradition.

As a response to these challenges, an alternative approach emerged, known as the *Living Qur'an* methodology. The *Living Qur'an* is not a philosophical theory of textual interpretation but rather a sociological-anthropological approach that focuses on how the Qur'an is lived among Muslims. In other words, the *Living Qur'an* examines how Muslims internalize, practice, interpret, and enliven the Qur'an's message in their daily lives. This approach places religious experience (*lived experience*) at the center of inquiry, so that what is studied is not merely the text itself but the dynamic relationship between the text and the Muslim community. According to Rafiq (2021), the *Living Qur'an* seeks to answer questions about how the sacred verses of the Qur'an shape social behavior, cultural traditions, and religious rituals. Its strength lies in being rooted in the Islamic tradition while at the same time employing the tools of modern social sciences (Rafiq 2021). Epistemologically, the *Living Qur'an* rejects the extreme relativism of philosophical hermeneutics, yet it still allows space for methodological enrichment through interaction with sociology, anthropology, and ethnography. In this way, the *Living Qur'an* offers an alternative paradigm more aligned with the Islamic tradition, as it does not negate the authority of the Qur'an but instead investigates its manifestations within the lived realities of Muslim communities.

Although both are used in contemporary Qur'anic studies, philosophical hermeneutics and *Living Qur'an* have fundamental epistemological differences. Hermeneutics, in its radical philosophical form, is often seen as carrying a deconstructive agenda that has the potential to relativize the truth of revelation. It tends to place the reader at the center of meaning production, thereby causing the sacred text to lose its absolute authority. In contrast, the *Living Qur'an* is more oriented toward phenomenological study, that is, examining how the sacred text is understood and lived by Muslim communities within the framework of faith. Hidayatullah (2022) emphasizes that the *Living Qur'an* is not intended to challenge the epistemology of classical *tafsīr*, but rather to document and analyze religious practices that originate from the Qur'an. Thus, the *Living Qur'an* is relatively safer from the threat of extreme relativism. However, epistemological tension remains because these two methodologies are often misunderstood or used interchangeably. This confusion can have serious consequences, namely the blurring of boundaries between research rooted in Islamic tradition and research that has the potential to weaken the basic beliefs of the faithful. Therefore, it is important to clearly distinguish between philosophical hermeneutics and the *Living Qur'an*, so that Qur'anic studies do not become trapped in dangerous methodological simplifications.

Based on this background, this study was designed to formulate several key questions that need to be answered scientifically. First, what are the fundamental epistemological characteristics of the Living Qur'an methodology and philosophical hermeneutics in contemporary Qur'anic studies? This question is important because the two are often used together without epistemological clarity. Second, at what points do the crucial epistemological differences between the two lie, particularly regarding the concepts of text, authority, the role of the reader, and the objectivity of understanding? Answering this question will help clarify the boundaries between methodologies that align with Islamic tradition and those that carry epistemological risks. Third, why is this epistemological distinction important to prevent the danger of radical hermeneutical relativism in Qur'anic interpretation? Fourth, how can the Living Qur'an be offered as an alternative paradigm that is more in line with the Islamic tafsir tradition? By formulating these questions, this research aims not only to conduct a methodological comparison but also to construct a more robust epistemological framework to safeguard the authenticity of Qur'anic studies from the threat of deconstruction.

The main objective of this study is to conduct an in-depth theoretical analysis of these two methodologies. First, this study aims to elaborate on the epistemological foundations of the Living Qur'an and philosophical hermeneutics, which have greatly influenced contemporary Qur'anic studies. Second, this study seeks to identify the crucial epistemological distinctions between the two, while systematically explaining these differences. Third, this study contextualizes these distinctions within the discourse of contemporary tafsir studies, so that the unique positions and contributions of each methodology become clearer. Fourth, this study also strengthens the argument regarding the relevance of the Living Qur'an epistemology as a methodology rooted in the Islamic context. In terms of benefits, this study is expected to provide theoretical contributions by enriching the methodology of Qur'anic studies, methodological benefits by providing a critical framework for choosing methodologies, and practical benefits by providing a foundation for academics and practitioners to avoid falling into hermeneutical relativism. Ultimately, this research is expected to serve as an epistemological bulwark in safeguarding the authenticity of Qur'anic interpretation from the dangers of radical deconstruction that could potentially weaken the authority of revelation.

## METHODS

This research methodology employs a qualitative approach with a *library research* design. The primary focus of the study is to examine relevant primary and secondary literature sources, including classical, modern, and contemporary works of Qur'anic exegesis, as well as academic writings on hermeneutics and the *Living Qur'an* methodology. The analytical techniques applied are critical reading and content analysis, with the aim of identifying, examining, and comparing the epistemological foundations of both approaches (Sugiyono 2019). Thus, this research does not rely on

empirical field data, but rather on theoretical inquiry into the ideas, arguments, and conceptualizations that have developed within the discourse of contemporary Qur'anic interpretation.

In addition, this study emphasizes the reconstruction of epistemological frameworks by referring to the methodology of the philosophy of science and theories of tafsir. The literature sources are analyzed descriptively and analytically, and then positioned within a critical comparative framework in order to highlight both the convergences and the fundamental differences between hermeneutics and the *Living Qur'an*. The analysis is carried out systematically through three main steps: first, identifying the epistemological foundations of each method; second, elaborating the key differences related to the concept of the text, authority, and the role of the reader; third, drawing the epistemological implications of these differences in the context of contemporary Qur'anic studies. Through this strategy, the study is expected to make a theoretical contribution by clarifying the methodological distinctions that have often remained blurred in Qur'anic scholarship.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### The Living Qur'an Methodology

The *Living Qur'an* methodology represents a significant paradigm shift in Qur'anic studies, moving from an approach that focuses solely on textual-historical aspects toward one that emphasizes sociological and anthropological dimensions. Unlike classical exegesis, which centers on the authority of scholars and the authenticity of the text, the *Living Qur'an* focuses on how diverse Muslim communities interpret, experience, and integrate their sacred scripture as a living part of everyday reality (Ghoni and Saloom 2021). Its object of study is no longer the ideal text within the mushaf, but the text as it has been actualized in practices, beliefs, arts, culture, and social interactions. This methodology rests on the assumption that the meaning of the Qur'an is not only embedded within the text itself, but is also continuously created and negotiated through dynamic interactions between the text and the social context of its readers. In this way, it opens a wide space for observing the plurality of meanings, not by judging which is normatively most correct, but by seeking to understand how a particular meaning comes to be regarded as true and functional within a given community (Turmuzi 2022).

The theoretical foundation of the *Living Qur'an* methodology derives from the intersection of multiple disciplines, particularly the sociology of knowledge, anthropology, and philosophical hermeneutics (Khodijah and Monang 2025). The concept of the "life-world" (*lebenswelt*) developed by Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz provides a framework for understanding how social reality, including the comprehension of sacred scripture, is constructed intersubjectively. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's sociology of knowledge, with its processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization, is highly relevant for tracing how

the Qur'anic text is externalized into social practices, crystallized into an objectified body of knowledge regarded as real, and eventually internalized back into individual consciousness. Furthermore, philosophical hermeneutics, particularly as articulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer, emphasizes that understanding always takes place within a "hermeneutical circle," wherein the horizon of the reader's understanding (with all its preconceptions) fuses with the horizon of the text. In the context of the *Living Qur'an*, the "reader" is not merely an individual but a community shaped by its unique traditions, culture, and collective experiences.

A central pillar of *Living Qur'an* research is the use of ethnographic methods, which allow researchers to deeply immerse themselves in the lived world of their subjects. This method requires intensive engagement with a community over a certain period of time through participant observation, in which the researcher not only observes but also participates in various activities involving the Qur'an. This may include attending Qur'anic study circles (*pengajian*), participating in communal gatherings or *selamatan* initiated with Qur'anic recitation, witnessing the process of *tahfiz* (Qur'an memorization), observing the use of amulets inscribed with verses, or joining in collective *dhikr* rituals that incorporate specific Qur'anic passages. Through such observations, the researcher is able to document not only what is practiced but also how it is performed, in what context, and by whom (Ahimsa-Putra 2012). Detailed and reflective field notes thus become invaluable raw data, capturing the atmosphere, emotions, interactions, and conversations surrounding these practices, thereby providing a rich contextual basis for analysis.

In addition to observation, in-depth interviews constitute another crucial technique within the *Living Qur'an* methodology. These interviews are not designed to elicit normatively "correct" answers, but rather to uncover personal narratives and subjective experiences of individuals in their interactions with the Qur'an. Questions are generally open-ended and narrative in nature, such as: "Can you describe your first experience of learning to read the Qur'an?", "What do you feel each time you listen to Qur'anic recitation?", or "Why do you choose to recite certain verses during times of difficulty?" Such interviews aim to reveal the emotional, spiritual, and psychological meanings that the text holds for respondents. Frequently, it is through these narratives that researchers uncover the deeper reasons behind a particular practice, beliefs about the *barakah* (blessing) associated with certain verses, or how a recitation is perceived as bringing *sakinah* (tranquility) (Rafiq 2021). In this way, interview data complement observational findings by providing the voices and perspectives of the practitioners themselves.

Although the *Living Qur'an* methodology places strong emphasis on context, textual analysis is by no means abandoned. What distinguishes it from philological or exegetical approaches, however, is its orientation toward understanding why certain texts are chosen for specific contexts and how those texts are presented (Zakiyah 2023). Researchers may, for instance, ask: Why is *Surat Yasin* so commonly recited for individuals at the point of death or on Friday evenings? Why are certain verses related

to commerce displayed in shop windows? Such analysis requires not only a close reading of the text itself (for example, examining the themes addressed in *Surat Yasin*) but also an exploration of the social functions attached to its recitation (such as easing the moment of death by serving as a means of intercession) (Rafiq 2021). Moreover, the researcher considers the form in which the text is presented: Is it recited in *tartil* or with melodic intonations (*nagham*)? Is it inscribed in ornate calligraphy for decorative purposes, or printed in miniature for use as an amulet? Each of these modes of presentation carries its own meanings and distinct social functions, adding layers of interpretation to the text in practice.

Building on this, the strength of the *Living Qur'an* methodology lies precisely in its interdisciplinary character. It fluidly draws upon and integrates analytical tools from a wide range of disciplines. From the arts and musicology, for example, researchers may analyze the melodies and rhythms (*nagham*) of Qur'anic recitation, how specific variations evoke particular emotional responses, and how *nagham* itself functions as a marker of group identity (such as the distinct recitational styles of Egypt or Indonesia) (Aji, Hilmi, and Rahman 2021). From the fields of architecture and visual arts, they may examine the role of Qur'anic calligraphy in shaping sacred spaces within mosques or homes. From communication studies, they can investigate the circulation and consumption of Qur'anic content in digital media, such as viral videos of renowned *qari* or the widespread use of mobile applications for recitation. This interdisciplinary approach allows the phenomenon of the *Living Qur'an* to be seen from multiple perspectives, producing a richer, more holistic, and multidimensional understanding of the complex relationship between the sacred text and its adherents.

As an illustration, the application of this methodology can be seen in research on the tradition of *khataman al-Qur'an* in pesantren or urban communities. Researchers engage in participant observation throughout the event, paying close attention to the program structure, the participants present, the atmosphere, and the emotional responses expressed (Arifianto 2017). Interviews are conducted with memorizers (*hafiz*), teachers (*ustadz*), and congregants to understand what the *khataman* means for them: is it regarded as an intellectual achievement, a spiritual accomplishment, or perhaps also as a social value, such as elevating the family's status and honor? Researchers also analyze the supplicatory texts recited after the completion of the Qur'an, linking them to the hopes and aspirations invested in the ceremony. Similarly, studies of Qur'anic memorization (*tahfiz*) do not only examine the techniques of memorization but also the social world surrounding the memorizers: the discipline of the body, the economy of *tahfiz* institutions, the relationship between students and teachers, and the ways in which the title of *hafiz* transforms an individual's social trajectory. All of these aspects form part of the "life" of the Qur'an (Munawar et al. 2024).

Nevertheless, the *Living Qur'an* methodology is not without methodological and ethical challenges. The foremost challenge lies in the high degree of subjectivity — both on the part of informants and the researchers themselves. Researchers must



engage in constant reflection to minimize bias and their own preconceptions of what should constitute a “proper” practice. Another challenge arises in translating deeply personal and sacred religious experiences into the analytical language of academia without diminishing their depth and authenticity (Assingkiy 2019). A further ethical issue concerns how researchers safeguard the confidentiality of informants, especially when documenting practices that might be labeled as *bid'ah* or deviant by the majority community. This requires heightened cultural and religious sensitivity, ensuring that the research neither exploits nor demeans the beliefs of its subjects. In this respect, informed consent and the principle of *do no harm* are crucial at every stage of the research process (Ningsih, Basri, and Suhartini 2022).

The contribution of the *Living Qur'an* methodology to contemporary Islamic studies is highly significant. First, it has democratized Qur'anic studies by shifting attention from religious elites (*ulama*) to ordinary believers, thereby amplifying voices that have long been marginalized in the grand narratives of Islam. Second, it provides a far richer, more dynamic, and more colorful map of Muslim religiosity, which has often been oversimplified. Third, it demonstrates that religious authority is no longer monopolized by a single group but is instead dispersed—and at times contested—by various actors, including renowned *qari*, social media religious celebrities, and local communities. Fourth, this methodology helps bridge the gap between normative doctrine and empirical reality, making Islamic studies more relevant in addressing pressing socio-contemporary questions (Yakub et al. 2023). Ultimately, the *Living Qur'an* reminds us that the sacred text is a living and breathing reality, not merely a dead monument of the past.

The future of the *Living Qur'an* methodology remains wide open in tandem with the progression of time. The digital sphere and social media have emerged as fertile new arenas for the manifestation of the *Living Qur'an*. Future research may focus on how platform algorithms such as YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok shape the consumption and distribution of Qur'anic content, foster new virtual communities, and even produce new forms of religious authority born out of digital popularity. In addition, neuroscientific approaches have begun to be employed to examine the neurological and psychological impacts of listening to Qur'anic recitation, for instance by scanning listeners' brain activity. Comparative studies across countries and cultures will also become increasingly important in understanding similarities and differences in Qur'anic practice across the Muslim world (Nurani, Shinta, Luthfi Maulana I 2022). By continually refining and expanding its methodological scope, *Living Qur'an* studies will remain a vital field for grasping the heartbeat of Muslim religiosity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Hermeneutics Methodology**

Hermeneutics is a scientific discipline that has always been oriented toward the theory and methodology of interpretation, particularly in relation to written texts. Etymologically, the term derives from the Greek words *hermeneuein*, meaning “to

interpret,” and *hermēneia*, meaning “interpretation.” Both terms are inseparable from the mythology of Hermes, the god who served as a mediator of messages between the gods and humans. This reflects the fact that interpretation has always been viewed as a communicative activity that connects a message with its recipient. Historically, hermeneutics was initially used to interpret sacred texts as well as classical texts in the fields of law and philology. Its primary focus was on uncovering the objective meaning or *intentio auctoris* (the author's intent), which is often hidden behind the text. Therefore, hermeneutics was not only positioned as a technical tool but also as an epistemological bridge between the text, the author, and the reader (Paterson and Higgs 2015).

The important development of hermeneutics as a modern philosophical discipline was pioneered by Friedrich Schleiermacher, a German theologian and philosopher. He shifted hermeneutics from being merely a technique of interpretation to a universal “art of understanding” (*Kunstlehre des Verstehens*). His key concept was the hermeneutic circle, the idea that the whole text can only be understood through its parts, while the parts of the text can only be understood in light of the whole (Faiz 2018). This gives rise to a methodological dialectic between detail and totality. Schleiermacher even stated that interpreters, armed with historical distance and different perspectives, can understand a text better than its author. Thus, hermeneutics shifts from a technical method to a reflective epistemic art that allows for creativity in understanding.

Wilhelm Dilthey then continued this transformation by placing hermeneutics as the methodological foundation for all *Geisteswissenschaften* or humanities. He emphasized the fundamental distinction between natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*), which explain (*erklären*) phenomena through causal laws, and humanities, which aim to understand (*verstehen*) expressions of human life. In his view, texts, works of art, laws, and cultural institutions are forms of objectification of human life experiences that can only be interpreted historically (Sidik and Sulistyana 2021)vv. Thus, hermeneutics functions as a scientific instrument that connects individual experiences with broader historical structures. This position provides strong scientific legitimacy for the humanities to stand on equal footing with the natural sciences, despite their different methodological paradigms.

A radical change in the direction of hermeneutics was introduced by Martin Heidegger. Through his work *Being and Time* (1927), he rejected the view of hermeneutics as merely a method of text interpretation, instead articulating it as an ontological analysis of human existence (*Dasein*). Heidegger argued that humans are beings who constantly interpret reality; understanding is not an additional activity, but rather the fundamental existential structure of their being in the world. Within this framework, the concept of the hermeneutic circle is no longer seen as a methodological problem but as an inescapable ontological condition (Rasuki 2021). Hermeneutics then shifts from the realm of interpretive epistemology to existential philosophy that reveals the structure of human understanding.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, expanded the horizons of hermeneutics into a comprehensive philosophy of understanding through his magnum opus *Truth and Method* (1960). Gadamer rejected the notion that interpretation can be entirely objective, because every understanding is always influenced by the historical horizon and tradition of the interpreter. According to him, the process of interpretation is a fusion of horizons, that is, the meeting between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter, which produces new meaning. Prejudice (*Vorurteil*), tradition, and authority are not obstacles, but rather conditions that enable understanding to take place. Thus, Gadamer emphasizes the dialogical nature of hermeneutics, where the process of interpretation always involves creative interaction between the past, the present, and the possibilities of meaning that are open.

However, not all hermeneutical schools emphasize reconciliation with tradition as Gadamer does. Three major figures, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud, emphasize hermeneutics of suspicion. This approach seeks to uncover the latent meaning hidden behind surface representations. Marx highlights the ideology at work behind economic structures, Nietzsche uncovers the hidden will to power within morality, while Freud reveals the unconscious dynamics manifested in dreams and psychological symptoms. Thus, hermeneutics is not merely understood as a process of understanding but also as a critical practice for unmasking power relations, ideology, and latent drives that often obscure reality.

In recent developments, hermeneutics has transcended the boundaries of philosophy and been adopted in various fields, ranging from theology, law, history, literary criticism, psychology, to information technology. Within the hermeneutical framework, texts and socio-cultural phenomena are understood as a field of dialogue between tradition, the interpreter, and the dynamic historical context. Contemporary hermeneutics not only emphasizes the aspect of understanding (*verstehen*) but also integrates the dimension of social criticism, as demonstrated by Habermas and critical theory. This position establishes hermeneutics as an epistemological foundation that asserts that human understanding is always historical, open, and constantly in the process of formation (Alimov 2023)vv. Thus, contemporary hermeneutics is able to offer a reflective, critical, and relevant scientific approach to both academic challenges and social praxis in the modern era.

### **Epistemological Differences: The Concepts of Text, Authority, and the Role of the Reader in Interpretation**

The Living Qur'an approach and Western hermeneutics do indeed intersect in their material object, namely the interpretation of texts, but epistemologically the two are like oil and water. Their paradigmatic foundations are paradoxical and irreconcilable, rooted in three main pillars: the ontology of the text, the source of authority, and the role of the reader's subjectivity. The Living Qur'an emerged from the epistemology of Islam, which views the Qur'an as the transcendent Word of God,

eternal (azali), and a verbatim revelation (tanzīl). In contrast, Western hermeneutics, which is the offspring of modernity and secular philosophy, views all texts without exception as products of human history that are ḥādīth (contingent) and context-bound. Prof. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas clearly distinguishes between these two worlds. He states that the Islamic worldview (taṣawwūr Islāmī) is built on the concept of an absolute God, revelation as an authoritative source of knowledge, and the concept of man as a servant. Meanwhile, the secular Western worldview is based on the supremacy of human reason, secularization, and the desacralization of everything. The implication is that incorporating hermeneutics into the body of the Living Qur'an is not an elegant synthesis, but rather an epistemological violence that has the potential to give rise to disorientation and a fatal metaphysical reduction of the sacredness of the text of revelation.

First, the most fundamental difference lies in the ontology of the text. In Gadamerian hermeneutics, the text is a mirror of human historical consciousness; it is a human creation whose meaning is fluid and always dependent on the interpreter's 'horizon of understanding', which is also historical (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*). Conversely, in the study of the Living Qur'an, the text of the Qur'an is divine revelation. Prof. Ismail al-Faruqi, in his monumental work *Islamization of Knowledge*, emphasizes that any approach to the Qur'an must begin with recognition of its absolute validity as revelation. It is not a passive historical object to be deconstructed, but an active subject that transforms history. Dr. Adis Duderija, despite being known for his contextualist approach, still acknowledges that radical hermeneutical claims equating the ontological status of the Qur'an with other texts are a form of reductionism that cannot be accepted by Muslim faith consciousness. The Living Qur'an examines how this trans-historical text "lives" and influences empirical reality, without ever questioning its divine nature.

Second, this difference has direct implications for the source of interpretive authority. Philosophical hermeneutics, post-Gadamer and Derrida, have thoroughly deconstructed the concept of singular authority. Truth is the result of dialectical negotiation within the "hermeneutic circle," where the author's intent is already "dead." Contemporary scholars such as Prof. Muhammad al-Ghazali in *A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'an* explicitly reject this approach. He argues that the highest authority lies with Allah as the Speaker of the Word, and the task of the interpreter is to explore the objective murād Allāh (will of Allah), not to create new meanings. The authority of the tradition of interpretation (such as asbāb al-nuzūl, ḥadīth, and ijmā') functions as a discipline that maintains objectivity and prevents taḥrīf (falsification of meaning). Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi in *Kayfa Nata'āmal ma'a al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm* emphasizes that contemporary ijtihād, though creative, must adhere to the strict methodological framework of ulūm al-Qur'ān. This stands in stark contrast to hermeneutics that liberate the interpreter from all authority outside of themselves.

Third, the role of reader subjectivity becomes an equally sharp dividing line. For hermeneutics, subjectivity ("prejudice" or Vorurteil) is the driving force behind

interpretation. Conversely, in Islamic epistemology, subjectivity is a potential source of deviation that must be disciplined. Dr. Shabbir Akhtar in *The Quran and the Secular Mind* highlights the danger of projecting modern prejudices onto sacred texts, which he calls “ideological projection” that betrays the original message of revelation. Prof. Fazlur Rahman in *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, while proposing a “double movement” hermeneutics, strongly emphasizes that the first step (understanding the message within its historical context) must be undertaken with objective discipline to avoid unrestrained subjectivity. The ultimate goal remains to understand the volition of the Divine Speaker. In *Living Qur'an*, the subjectivity of the community is acknowledged, but it operates within the framework of “obedient creativity,” which is framed by the values of ḥalāl-ḥarām, ṣaḥīḥ-bāṭil, derived from the text and sharia (Khodijah and Monang 2025).

Based on these three diametrically opposed pillars, imposing hermeneutics as the primary analytical tool for the Living Qur'an is a dangerous methodological error. Prof. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, a student of al-Attas, in *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas*, strongly criticizes this tendency as a form of “epistemic colonialism.” Hermeneutics, with its relative and historical nature, will reduce the Qur'an to merely a cultural text, equating it with the *Iliad* or *Hamlet*, and ultimately eroding belief in its absolute and universal truth. The Living Qur'an, on the other hand, demonstrates that the universality of revelation is manifested in the particularity of local culture without losing its transcendental essence (Al-Attas 1993). Using hermeneutics would actually kill the “spirit” of “life” (the living) itself, as it replaces the soul of faith with philosophical doubt and substitutes the authority of revelation with the radical autonomy of the human subject.

Therefore, the main criticism of the implementation of hermeneutics is not merely a rejection of the West, but an affirmation of the epistemological autonomy of Islam. The Living Qur'an does not need legitimacy from a Western framework. Instead, it already has a solid methodological foundation in the Islamic scholarly tradition. Dr. Nur Khalidah Khalid, in her writing on the Living Qur'an, emphasizes that concepts such as *sunnah*, *ijma'*, *ijtihad*, *maqasid al-shari'ah*, and *fiqh al-waqi'* are far richer and more relevant tools for analyzing the dynamic interaction between the transcendent sacred text and the reality of society. Our challenge is not to import hermeneutics, but to revitalize, modernize, and formulate a more rigorous internal methodology faithful to Islamic ontology and epistemology, so that it can explain the phenomenon of the Living Qur'an without compromising the purity and authority of revelation as an absolute guide for life.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the theoretical analysis conducted, this study concludes that the Living Qur'an methodology and philosophical hermeneutics have diametrically opposed epistemological foundations, despite both being present in the field of contemporary exegesis studies. The main differences lie in the ontology of the text, the

source of authority, and the role of the reader's subjectivity. Philosophical hermeneutics, rooted in the tradition of secular Western philosophy, views the text as a historical product whose meaning is fluid, relative, and the result of negotiation between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter. In contrast, the Living Qur'an stems from an Islamic epistemology that positions the Qur'an as a transcendent revelation (kalāmullāh) that is eternal and absolute, while its object of study is the manifestation of the sacred text in the empirical practices of the Muslim community. Thus, hermeneutics tends to deconstruct the authority of the text, while the Living Qur'an affirms that authority by demonstrating its vitality in social reality.

The implications of this epistemological distinction are crucial for the future of Qur'anic studies. Blurring the distinction between these two methods has the potential to lead to dangerous methodological simplification, whereby hermeneutic relativism can creep in and undermine the fundamental belief in the absoluteness of revelation. Therefore, the Living Qur'an cannot and need not be legitimized by a philosophical hermeneutical framework. Instead, the Living Qur'an should be developed as an autonomous alternative paradigm, enriching its methodological framework from the Islamic scholarly tradition itself, such as Qur'anic studies, maqāṣid al-syarī'ah, and fiqh al-wāqī'. Thus, contemporary Qur'anic studies can remain dynamic and relevant in addressing the challenges of the times without compromising the authenticity and authority of the sacred text as an absolute source of guidance for life.

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