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SPIRIT OF LIBERATION AND JUSTICE IN FARID ESACK'S HERMENEUTICS OF QUR'AN

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Abstract: Farid Esack is an Islamic thinker from South Africa who proposes Liberation hermeneutics in comprehending the Qur'an from the perspective of Liberation Theology to realize justice**.** This article examines Esack's hermeneutical method in interpreting Qur'an and analyses how he applies the spirit of liberation and justice as principles of Liberation Theology in his interpretation. This study shows that Esack's hermeneutics differs from others because, as a liberation theologian, he puts liberative-praxis as the main objective of his liberation theology. His method does not only revolve around textual understanding but also push practical implication. He moves forward from praxis (experience) to texts and then goes back to experience. To him, interpretation must be able to encourage changes within society. Therefore, as the second feature of this method, in Esack's hermeneutics, interpretation is not just scholarly speculative exercise which has no implication. It has a specific aim, namely is to establish a better life for society in which justice is a fundamental prerequisite.

Key Words: Farid Esack, hermeneutics, the Qur'an, liberation and justice

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Introduction

IN A PLURAL society, it is not appropriate to marginalize other particular groups of people based on their religious beliefs. For Muslims, the 'other' refers to 'infidels' (*kāfir*) – those who do not share Islamic beliefs, follow a different faith or who are not religious and who may be seen as the enemy and should be opposed. In a pluralistic society, one of the responsibilities of religious communities is not to promote differentiation, but rather, to stimulate communication and sharing of knowledge and promote tolerance, cooperation and unity between people of different faiths. Moreover, it is undeniable that there are many factors influencing the goals, objectives and problems faced by varying religious communities not only in social realm**,** but also in politics as well. For example, problems faced by Indonesian nation and many third world nations such as poverty, greed, and exploitation must be elevated by all citizens in food mutual cooperation.

In face of problems of humanity or nationality all elements within the nation must work together to tackle them. The coalescing of all societal elements will facilitate solution of the problems. However, problems may arise if a particular religion refuses to cooperate because interreligious cooperation is inappropriate from their religious perspective. As we may have seen, radical groups always oppose such interreligious effort. Such refusal is not an exception in among Muslims. To resolve this problem, we need conceptual reformation of Qur'anic hermeneutics for religious pluralism and inter-religious cooperation as theoretical bases and foundation religious coexistence.[1] This task can be fulfilled by theologians who have expertise in the interpretation and exegesis of the Qur'an.

Muslim and western scholars have proposed these inclusive opinions. From the Muslim circle, this includes Hossein Nasr, Frithjof Schoun, Abd Aziz Sachedina, and Farid Esack. From the western scholars, they include Hans Kung, John Hicks, John B. Cobb Jr, and Raimundo Panikar. The opinions of the Muslim

[1]Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (England: Oneworld, 1997), 14.

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figures, are generally represented by the idea that exoteric aspects of religions are variant, but there are esoteric equalities among them, so that they have to promote openness and understanding among them.[2] The western thinkers argue the belief that each religion has its own fundamental beliefs, so that no religion is superior over others theologically. They are classified as pluralist thinkers.[3] For example, Hicks states that "Other Religions are equally valid ways to the same truth". In consequence, like Sunardi wrote, in the effort for building dialogue among religious communities, the target is not merely learning to coexist in peace by letting other religions exist (co-existence), but also to participate actively for the existence of other religious communities (pro-existence).[4]

Thus far, the idea of inclusivity or even pluralism of religion described above is still at the level of conception and theory. Farid Esack is the figure that has stepped out about this. Esack, based on his hermeneutics theory, is not only trying to explain the problem of inclusivism or pluralism in Islam but also build up a theoretical framework for the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. Furthermore, Esack orients his interpretation to the sacred text (the Qur'an) and promotes Muslim-non-Muslims collaborative work. Therefore, in comprehending the text of Qur'an, Esack has introduced liberation hermeneutics from the perspective of Liberation Theology's evolving praxis of Liberation. It emerges from

[2]For further elaboration of these ideas please refer to Abd Aziz Sachedina, *Kesetaraan Kaum Beriman*, terj. Wahono (Yogya: Serambi, 2002), 71; Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 31; and Budy Munawar-Rahman, *Islam Pluralis*, 49.

[3]Hans Kung (ed), *A Global Ethic*, (New York: Continuum, 1993), 7; John Hicks, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, (Oxford: One World Publications, 1993); John Lyden, *Enduring Issues in Religion*, (San Diego: Greenhaven, 1995), 74-90.

[4]St. Sunardi, *Dialog: Cara Baru Beragama, Sumbangan Hans Kung Bagi Dialog Antar Agama* In Seri Dian I, *Dialog: kritik dan Identitas Agama,* (Yogyakarta: Dian/ Interfidei, t.t), 74-77. See also Komaruddin Hidayat and Ahmad Gaus AF (ed.), *Passing Over: Melintasi Batas Agama, (*Jakarta: Gramedia, 1999), xv.

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theological reflection, which take root in praxis; consequently to reformulate praxis based on the result of reflection.[5]

Farid Esack has received much international attention through his involvement and masterpiece in praxis movement, pushing the exclusive truth claims of certain religions, afterward offering the idea that Islam is inclusive and liberal. For Esack, authentic Islam is inclusive, liberative and just. This articles aims to elucidate Esack's qur'anic hermeneutics as the basis for justice in society.

Esacks's Life and Education

Farid Esack is one of contemporary Muslim thinkers from South Africa. He was born in 1959 in Cape Town, outskirts of Weinberg, South Africa. Along with his family he moved to Bounteheuwel due to apartheid politics by the regime to a dusky skin community and colour people. The law, in fact, has been specified since 1952.[6] Esack grew up in a poverty-stricken, working class background, and faced extreme racism. Since he was 7, he had wanted to be a teacher and religious leader (cleric or *Mawlānā*). In consequence, even in a difficult condition, he tried to get better education. Esack finished his elementary and intermediate education in a school that applied Christian National Education curriculum with an ideology which was aimed to form society way of thinking which obedient and God-fearing of apartheid governance at Bounteheuvel.[7] Sociologically, Bounteheuvel consists of multi-religious culture, and ethnic, and Esack associated with them. In 1974, Esack won scholarship to study in a seminary (Islamic College) in Pakistan. He spent nine years (1974-1982) in this college. He did his undergraduate studies in Sociology and Islamic theology and law

[5]Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism,* 8.

[6]Bounteheuvel was an arid area in the country and was intentionally put aside as *black, color and Indian people*'s settlement. Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Inter-religious Solidarity Against Oppression* (England: One Workd, 1997), 2

[7]Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism, An Islamic Perspective of Inter-religious Solidarity against Oppression*, (England: Oneworld, 1997), 4

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at *Jamī'ah Ulūm al-Islāmiyyah*.[8] Afterwards, he returned to South Africa because wanted to struggle against oppression of the apartheid regime.[9]

In 1990, Esack returned to Pakistan, continuing his study in *Jami'Ah Abi Bakr*, Karachi. Here, he did post-graduate research in the Qur'anic Studies. In 1994, Esack completed a Doctoral degree in Qur'anic Hermeneutics at Centre for the Study of Islam of and Christian-Muslim Relations [CSIC]) University of Birmingham (UK), England. In 1995, he was a research fellow in Biblical Hermeneutics at *Philosophische Theologische Hochschule, Sankt Georgen, Frankfrut am Main*, Germany. In 1996, Esack succeed to reach a Doctoral degree in Qur'anic Studies by dissertation entitled *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: an Islamic Perspective of Inter-Religious Solidarity against Oppression*.

Esack's Ideas on the Qur'an and Its Exegesis

According to Esack, the argument among Muslims, nowadays, regarding the Qur'an, is not related to the nature of the Qur'an, but relates to its role and the way to comprehend it. Esack has never doubted the authenticity of the Qur'an as a book of Allah's revelations; however, in his opinion, the acceptance of the Qur'an should be contingent upon the temporal causality behind it. Revelation is always a response toward the condition and attitude of a certain community.[10] Nevertheless, it does not mean that it was 'that event which has caused the coming of the revelation'; rather, it has occurred as result of the acceptance to God's involvement in humans' lives.[11]

About the Qur'an

According to Esack, to explain the definition of Qur'an, we should refer to its base word, that is, *qara'a* (to read) or *qarana* (to be together or gather). The word *qur'ān* in the Qur'anic

[8]Simon Dagut, *Profile of Farid Esack*, http: www.HomepageFaridEsack.com.

[9]Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism,* 6

[10]Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, & Pluralism*, 52.

[11]Ibid., 56.

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verses has the meaning of 'to read' (Qs. al-Isrā', 93), 'to promulgate (Qs. al-Qiyāmah, 18), and a collection (Qs. al-Qiyāmah, 17). Meanwhile, related to its function, the Qur'an describes itself as 'the guidance for human', 'the criterion between the good and the bad', 'the reminder', 'the cure', 'the warning', 'the light', 'the truth', and 'the direction from God'. From the literal meanings and the ways the Qur'an mentions itself, it is to Esack that the word *qur'ān* does not always refer to the Holy Book as it is normally understood; on the other hand, it is a revelation meant to be God's response toward the social problems happening during the twenty-three years.[12]

The gradual process of the Qur'an revelation, in Esack's term 'progressive revelation', is one of God's ways to show His involvement in worldly matters and among human beings. Further, Esack considers that the Principe of *tadrij* (gradual), which says that a teaching revealed gradually reflects the creative interaction between God's will and social reality, and this is the way the Qur'an should be used by Muslims—in a way that it interacts actively and creatively with the existing social reality.[13] Besides being gradual, the revelation of the Qur'an is not the same in length —sometimes, the verse revealed is only a short sentence, but at another time, it consists of a number of long sentences— which shows the varied response of God toward the various problems faced by the Prophet Muhammad and his Muslim followers at that time.[14]

The Qur'an states frankly the reason for the progressive revelation. *First,* it is to make Muslims easy to understand and practice the Qur'an. *"(It is) the Qur'an Which We have divided (Into parts from time to time). In order that thou mightiest Recite it to men At intervals: We have revealed it by stages."* (Qs. al-Isrā', 106). *Second*, it was meant to support the Prophet Muhammad during his fights for upholding Islam. *"(It is) the Qur'an Which We have divided (Into parts from time to time). In order that thou mightest Recite it to men At intervals: We have revealed it by stages."* (Qs. al-Furqān, 32).

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[12]Esack, *The Qur'an: a Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002),30.
[13]Ibid., 101-102; see also, *Liberation, & Pluralism*, 54
[14]Ibid., 45.

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The application of the principle of *tadrij* in the exegesis is actually not novel. Esack admits that in the traditional study of the Qur'an, it is already manifested in the disciplines of *asbāb al-nuzūl* and *naskh*. Nevertheless, the traditional study of Qur'an has reduced *asbāb al-nuzūl* (events behind the coming of revelations) into merely a story, and *naskh* into a definition of the scope of law only.[15] According to Esack, an acceptance that the Qur'an is a text revealed progressively on the circumstances of the believers should lead us to read it in such a framework. It is a principle that the Qur'an demands a contextual reading. *Naskh* on the other hand is relied upon various situations. What is relevant for us here, according to Esack, is that *naskh* is used to abrogate earlier verses in favour of the later ones, to abrogate prophetic practice through a specific Qur'anic injunction and finally to abrogate or clarify the Qur'anic injunction through prophetic practice.[16]

Shifting to the subject of the revelation process to the Prophet Muhammad, Esack's view seems to be somewhat similar to the general opinion, that the Qur'an came to the Prophet Muhammad through Gabriel, who says God's direct statements to the apostle's hearing and heart, so that he could repeat the words in good and correct manner. Referring to the word *tanzīl* as another word used in the Qur'an to express the process of revelation (Qs. al-Isrā', 106), and the fact that today, Qur'an is the Muslims' Holy Book, Esack has, even, the opinion, that the Qur'an can be described as a letter from God, written by Him for His messenger.[17]

In several points, Esack's opinion is different from thoses of most Muslim philosophers. Rahman, for example, thinks that the language of the Qur'an comes from the Prophet Muhammad itself although it is recognized to be God's revelation. In his analysis, based on al-Shūrā, 51-52, which states that Allah never speaks directly to a man, and al-Mu'min, 15, as well as al-Shūrā,

[15]Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, & Pluralism*, 55

[16]Sanjay Kabir Bavikatte, "Promises of a Brave New World: Competing Visions of Islamic Liberation Theology" http://www.google.com (search: Islamic Liberation Theology), 20.

[17]Esack, *The Qur'an: A Short Introduction*, 42

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193, which hint that the messenger of the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad is *Spirit* or spiritual messenger, it can be inferred that the process of revelation cannot possibly have happened physically. And so the process was spiritual, and took place in the heart of the Prophet.[18] He listened to the revelations with his heart, not his ears, because the voice and the spirit were within him. The analysis is in accordance with the analogy that if the revelation came from God, it was undoubtedly closely connected to the Prophet's deepest soul. It is stated in the Qur'an that the God's Prophets receive extra-ordinary power radiated from the Source of every existing things, filling their hearts with a kind of light, so that they can see and have knowledge on things common people could not.[19]

The Exegesis of the Qur'an

Esack's view on the Qur'anic exegesis closely relates to his idea that every single product of exegesis is bound to the subjectivity of the interpreter. He assumes that every person approaches the text carrying his personal perspective, so that it would be impossible to have the interpreter completely free from his subjectivity and interpret something without interference from his preliminary questions and understanding.[20]

The Qur'an as a subject of interpretation is contextual and should be contextualized. Therefore, in Esack's opinion, Muslims should not simply inherit the past results of exegesis, because the results were historical products related to the context, both linguistically and culturally, which is very unlikely to be appropriate with the present context.[21] In this case, Esack agrees with Gadamer, who places more emphasis on the importance of significance or the re-contextualization of a text

[18]For further information, see Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, translation edition *Tema-tema Pokok Qur'an,* (Bandung: Pustaka, 1995), 139-153

[19]Ibid., 144-145

[20]Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, & Pluralism*, 51

[21]Ibid., 76, this is in line as well with Syahrur's opinion. Syahrur even says: "We must act as if we just received Qur'an from the Prophet. See Syahrur, *Al-Kitāb wa Qur'an: Qirā'ah Mu'asirah* (Damaskus: Dar al-Ahali, 1990), 44.

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in the present life. For him, the process of interpretation is a 'fusion of horizon, namely the horizon of the text and that of the interpreter'.[22]

Related to Esack's choice of contextualizing the Qur'an, Gadamer is of the opinion that it is necessary for Muslims to see the Qur'anic text in the present context because its revelation happens gradually, in line with certain historical and material situations. In that scheme of revelation, God's ways to deal with human beings is like a doctor writing a different prescription for his patient at different stages of medical treatment. Therefore, getting stuck in the past context of the Qur'an, especially in the past works of exegesis, is similar to treating current illness with an expired prescription.[23] Nevertheless, Esack still appreciates the past works and uses them as a means of reflection or comparison in understanding the verses of the Qur'an. This is indicated by his commitment to always display the opinion of the past interpreters before presenting his own ideas. Esack's interest is also to learn the methods applied by the interpreters although he does not let them away without criticism.

An example of Esack's critical analysis of classical exegesis is concerned with his assessment of the interpretations of al-Rāzī, Zamakhsharī, and Ṭabarī on the verses relating to inter-faith relations. According to Esack, these interpreters have been subjective and misinterpreted text that is deemed clear in meaning. When interpreting the verses which clearly admit religious pluralism (Qs. al-Mā'idah, 48; al-Baqarah, 148; al-Ḥajj, 67), or the acceptance of and the right for safety of other religions (Qs. al-Baqarah, 62; al-Mā'idah, 69), they avoid taking the explicit meaning of the text. They employ or even create various means of exegesis to arrive to a final result which support their exclusive view on other religions.[24]

For example, to deny the clear meaning of the verse *"Those who believe (in the Qur'an), And those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians, -Any who believe in God And the*

[22]Grant R. Orsbone, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1991), 369.

[23]Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, & Pluralism*, 55.

[24]Ibid., 162-163

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Last Day, And work righteousness, Shall have their reward With their Lord: on them Shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve." (Qs. Al-Baqarah, 62), they apply two approaches. *First*, they state that that verse has been abrogated by Qs. Āli 'Imrān, 85, *"If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to God), Never will it be accepted of him." Second*, that the Jews, Christians, and Sabians referred to in the verse are the people who have converted to Islam.[25] In addition, they refused to acknowledge other religions by using the supercessionism doctrine, which states "the rules of any religion are still legal to the time when new rules come to replace them; the latter abrogates the previous".[26]

According to Esack, the efforts of the interpreters to reject the explicit meaning of the verse are useless. The first argument using the abrogation theory is in contrast with the idea that God will not possibly abrogate His promises, nor will He deny them because it is utterly contrastive with His nature of justice. Furthermore, the word of *Islām* in Qs. Āli 'Imrān, 85, considered the abrogating verse does not refer to Islam as a religious institution; rather a religious attitude meaning 'submission to God', of which all religious followers are capable.[27] Meanwhile, the second argument is a moot one in that new believers are covered by the first argument, namely *'Those who believe (in the Qur'an)'*, and there will be no excuse for categorizing them into Jewish, Christians, and Sabi'in, nor will there be doubt of the safety of the new Muslims when they truly have faith and do good deeds.[28]

Esack's Liberation Hermeneutics

According to Esack, Muslims today are divided into three groups in relation with their understanding of the Qur'an in responding to the contemporary problems of humanity. They include (1) those who reproduce the classical exegesis for the past generation to be applied in the present context; (2) those

[25]Ibid., 162-164.

[26]Mahmoud M. Ayoub, "Roots of Muslim-Christian Conflict", in *Muslim World* 79, (1) 1989, 27.

[27]Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, & Pluralism*, 163.

[28]Ibid., 164.

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who creatively and selectively take the traditional understanding in order to reinterpret the Qur'an in the attempt of reconstructing the society, and (3) those who try to understand and interpret the Qur'an by themselves using their own skills of understanding texts and their contexts in an effort to bring forward a new exegesis of the Qur'an relevant for the Muslim generation of this time.[29]

Esack himself prefers the third group, who try to interpret the Qur'an by themselves, taking their skills of understanding the meaning of the text, its context, and the present context, as the basis of interpretation. Nevertheless, Esack has never really interpreted the Qur'anic verses by himself without referring to the previous methods or exegeses. He explores them, from the perspective of both the tradition of classical exegeses and the contemporary philosophers of Islam. However, Esack does not totally agree with them nor blindly follows their methods; rather, he develops his own method of exegesis based on his life principles and experiences. In addition, Esack seems to be closer to contemporary Islamic philosophy rather than the classic one. In his opinion, among the present figures of contemporary Islamic philosophers, there are Fazlur Rahman and Mohammed Arkoun, who are representative of the contemporary scholars who search the meanings of the Qur'an to fit them with the modern context and period. Esack has, in fact, taken Rahman's theory of double movements to relate "the past meaning" of the Qur'an to the present context, and also, Arkoun's regressive-progressive theory to enable the Qur'an to speak and answer the real problems of the Ummah.

As a foundation for his theological ideas, Esack uses the "hermeneutics of liberation".[30] According to him, in the context of oppression and tyranny of the apartheid regime in South Africa, the employment of hermeneutics as the means of reading the text and context of South Africa is inevitable. There are four things that Esack wishes to promote through his hermeneutical method. The *first* is to show that it is very likely for Muslims to

[29]Ibid., 50.
[30]Ibid., 82.

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live in the faith of the Qur'an as well as to live side-by-side and work together with the followers of other religions in order to develop a more humane society. The *second* is to put forward the idea on the hermeneutics of the Qur'an so as to contribute to the construct of pluralist theology in Islam. The *third* is to re-examine the way the Qur'an examines itself and other people (both those who have faith and those who do not) to give a room for people in the pluralistic theology for liberation. The *fourth* is to find the relationship between religiously exclusive attitudes, which tend to support the status quo, and inclusive attitudes, which progressive (supporter of liberation) proponents.[31]

Principally, the construct of Esack's hermeneutics theory is not very different from other theories on hermeneutics. In his hermeneutical construct, Esack has placed three basic elements of exegesis, or critical analysis in a form of circle, known as *hermeneutical circle*.[32] The three elements are the text and its writer, the interpreter, and the activity of exegesis. In this pattern of relationship pattern, the existence of a text in its context (the locus of exegesis) is determined by "quasi transformation", which is capable of shifting the paradigm or the model with which a text is read.[33] However, Esack adds a new element to the design, so that the method has become quintessentially Esack's theory. He places the prior texts and their response toward the context and the audience's reaction in the centre of the exegesis. In addition, he emphasizes the importance of the text relevant to the contemporary text, so that "the new meaning" can be discovered which fits the particular needs and contexts (social-political-religious) in South Africa Muslim life and beyond.[34] This is the aspect of Esack's hermeneutics, which is not found in other theories of hermeneutic.

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[31]Ibid., 14.

[32]According to Esack, the use of "hermeneutics circle" referred to be similar to that in the liberation theology proposed by Juan Louis Segundo. See Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, & Pluralism*, 11. See also, Juan Louis segundo, *The Theology of Liberation*, (New York: Orbit Books, 1991), 9.

[33]Esack, *Qur'an*, *Liberation, & Pluralism,* 73.

[34]Ibid., 63.

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According to Esack, the construct of hermeneutics is based on the non-prophetic experiences of human beings, which are, basically, interpretative, and constantly mediated by cultural and personal contexts that cannot be transcended. Therefore, a single exegesis, which is universal, static, and free of value, is very unlikely. On the contrary, exegesis is always contextual-particular, temporary, and biased.[35] The view refers to the dialectical relation pattern among the process of revelation, the language, the substance of the text, and the locus-tempus of the audience who receive it, which Esack termed "progressive revelation".[36] In the view, a text from the Holy Book is always there and greets its people in particular contexts (limited linguistically, geographically, situational, and contextually). In the discussion on *'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, the particular context of revelation is shown in the studies of *asbāb al-nuzūl* and *naskh wa al-mansūkh*.[37]

Next, in order to support his theory of hermeneutics, Esack elaborates Arkoun's approach called the regressive-progressive technical procedure.[38] The regressive procedure looks upon the past continuously, not only to calculate the present needs and wants for the text but more to reveal the historic mechanism and the factors that have brought about the texts and assigned them certain functions. The aspect considered in this procedure is what develops in the tradition of the study of exegesis, namely, the genre of *naskh*, *asbāb al-nuzūl*, and *'ilm al-makkī wa al-madanī*.[39] The progressive procedure works to bring new meanings to life (production) in terms of the present context. A contemporary context is inevitable since the existence of the text is inseparable from the identity of the South African Muslims, and is active in their system of ideology. Therefore, it is essential that a very careful examination on the transformation process of the old contents and functions into the new ones be conducted

[35]Esack, *Contemporary*, 222-223
[36]Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, & Pluralism*, 54
[37]Ibid., 54-59
[38]Esack, *Contemporary*, 218-219
[39]Ibid. See also Esack, *Spektrum Teologi*, 215

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in this procedure.[40] In regard to this, Esack suggests the inclusion of a number of concepts of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, such as, *istiḥsān* and *maṣlaḥah al-mursalah*.[41]

Another technical procedure employed by Esack to complete his theory on liberation hermeneutics is borrowed from Rahman's theory of double movements. The theory is a study of comprehension which operates in the pattern of back and forth movements. The first movement tries to understand the overall content of the Qur'an through the injunctions and prohibitions revealed specifically in response toward particular situations. It consists of two stages: (1) learning the historic situations and the ethical-moral requirements before studying the Qur'anic text in specific situations, and (2) generalizing the specific answers (conclusion) and framing them into general moral-social questions taken from the specific texts by looking at the socio-historical background as well as the reasons behind the implementation of law.[42]

The second movement applies the general values obtained in the first movement to the contemporary socio-historical context. Concerning this point, a deep study on the present to change and implement the Qur'anic values in a more concrete way is necessary.[43] Esack describes the method of double movements he used as follows:

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[40]Ibid.

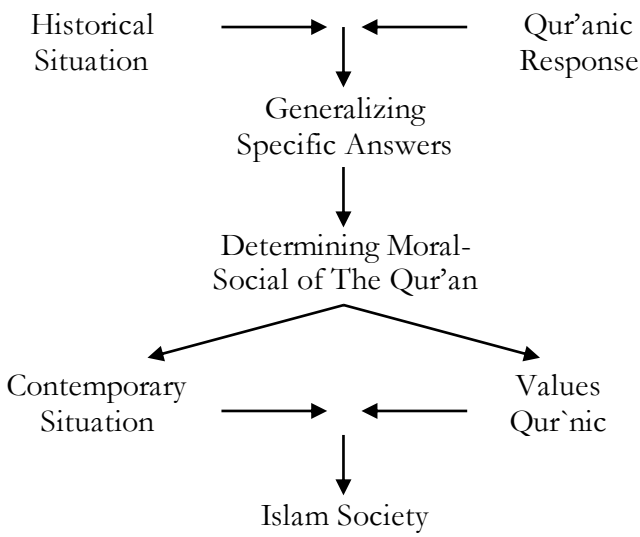
[41]Esack, "Qur'anic Hermeneutics: Problem and Prospect", in *The Muslim World*, Vol. 83, no.2 (April 1993) : 138

[42]Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, & Pluralism*, 67. For more complete explanation, see Rahman, *Islam dan Modernitas,* 7-10; Taufik Adnan Amal (ed), *Metode dan Alternatif Neo Modernisme Islam Fazlur Rahman,* (Bandung: Mizan, 1993), 26-28. Taufik Adnan Amal, *Islam dan Tantangan Modernitas: Studi atas Pemikiran Hukum Fazlur Rahman*, (Bandung: Mizan, 1993), 195-196; Samsurizal Panggabean, "Fazlur Rahman dan Neomodernisme Islam", *Bangkit*, No. 8/III/1994, 36-37.

[43]Esack, *Liberation, & Pluralism*, 67

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***Double Movements* Method**



With such stipulations, it is clear that Esack's hermeneutics is practical and functional. Esack attempts to orient his exegesis toward answering the challenges of social reality developing in the context of South Africa. If compared to other approaches, Esack's hermeneutics is almost the same as that proposed by Ḥasan Ḥanafi.[44] Both are oriented toward a practical, transformative, and functional perspective of exegesis, meaning that it is capable of attempting to answer the social problems that are temporal-particular, not absolute-universal.

[44]Social Hermeneutics of Hasan Hanafi has the methodology characteristics as follows: 1) Specific exegesis (*al-tafsir al-Juz`i*), 2) thematic exegesis (*al-tafsir al-maudhu'i*), 3) temporal exegesis (*al-tafsir al-zamani*), 4) realistic exegesis (*al-tafsir al-waqi'*), 5) an objective and meaning-oriented exegesis, not the letter or word-oriented one, 6) exegesis corresponding to the interpreter's life experiences, 7) doing prior exploration of the problems in life, 8) in line with the social status of the interpreter. Ḥasan Ḥanafi, *al-Yamīn wa al-Yasār fi al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, (Kairo: Maktabah Madbuli, 1989), particularly the discussion on *"Maza Ta'nī Asbāb al-Nuzūl", al-Tafsir am Ikhtilaf fi al-Masalih" and "Manahij al-tafsir wa masalih al-Ummah"* (related to methodology), 102-111.

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In the discourse on Western hermeneutics, Esack's hermeneutics is comparable to the model of reception hermeneutics well known in the tradition of the Bible. In the study of contemporary hermeneutics, reception hermeneutics is usually defined as the ideology of text functionalism, which means that the existence of a Holy text is based on the text's functional and pragmatic dimensions.[45] In other words, the highest truth of a Holy text is indicated by the degree of capability it has to overcome the existing problems of humanity. This view is completely different from the repertoire of the revelationists, which focuses on the Holy Book text with the discourse on God and the ways He is present in the real life.[46]

As in Esack's approach, reception hermeneutics, according to Fiorenza, also focused on the study of the interpretation process and how it is undertaken by individuals and groups in different contexts. This model of hermeneutics does not only see the text and the preliminary audience; rather, it sees further, including the transformation process of understanding, which has lasted up to now. It has brought about various understandings and interpretations arising from a different space and time.[47] This is the area of basic difference between Esack and the functionalists on one side, and the classical traditionalist Muslim scholars with their hermeneutics, who always prefer the permanent and certain meaning of a text on the other.

Esack's Principles on Liberation Hermeneutics

In the process of implementing his hermeneutics, Esack forms keys of exegesis. He deliberately relates the keys to the context of South Africa, which was filled with oppression, injustice, and exploitation, since hermeneutics are meant to be the tools for members of society who suffer oppression and

[45]A more comprehensive discussion on the ideology of text functionalism, as quoted by Esack, see Buckley, "The Hermeneutical Deadlock Between Revelationists, Textualists, and Functionalists" in *Modern Theology* 6:4 (1990): 330

[46]Ibid., 325-337

[47]Francis Schussler Fiorenza, "The Interpretation of Scriptural Authority: Interpretation and Reception," in *Interpretation*, XLIV: 4 (1990): 23.

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struggle for justice and freedom to understand the Qur'an. The keys are supposed to show how the liberation hermeneutics of the Qur'an works as the shift of the text and context continuously takes place and affect each other.[48] The keys are *taqwā* (the integrity and awareness of God's presence), *tawḥīd* (the Oneness of God), *al-nās* (human), *al-mustaḍ'afun fi al-arḍ* (those suffering from oppression on the earth), '*adl and qisṭ* (justice and balance), and *jihād* (struggle and praxis).[49] These keys also express Esack's working toward his Islamic liberation theology.

Furthermore, the keys of Esack's hermeneutics have a number of structured objectives. The first two keys, *taqwā* and *tawḥīd*, are meant to develop the moral and doctrinal criteria to be the theological lens in reading Qur'an, especially the texts on pluralism and inter-faith solidarity. The next two keys, *al-nās* and *al-mustaḍ'afun fi al-arḍ*, are the affirmation of the context and location of the exegesis activity, while *adl qisṭ* and *jihād* are the reflection of the methods and ethics which produce and form the contextual understanding of God's revelation coming to the society that suffers from injustice.[50]

Esack's keys of hermeneutics are explained in detail in the following:

Taqwā: The Ethical Base of Exegesis

Taqwā, from the base word *w-q-y*, means 'to prevent', 'to keep from', 'to notice', and 'to protect'.[51] According to Esack, the term is the most commonly used in the Qur'an as well as the most inclusive, and is the most comprehensive in meaning because it combines into one the responsibility to God and human beings.[52]

[48]Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, & Pluralism*, 86

[49]Ibid., 83

[50]Ibid., 86-87

[51]E.W. Lane, *Lane's Arabic-English Lexicon*, (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1980), 153. The word *taqwā* and its various derivatives are mentioned 242 times in al-Qur'an. I02 verses are the Makkiyah and the rest are the Madaniyah. Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, & Pluralism*, 112

[52]Esack, Ibid., 87

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> "So he who gives (In charity) and fears (God), and (in all sincerity) Testifies to the Best,-We will indeed Make smooth for him The path to Bliss. But he who is A greedy miser And thinks himself Self-sufficient, And gives the lie To the Best,-We will indeed Make smooth for him The path to Misery." (QS. al-Lail, 5-10)[53]

> "O mankind! We created You from a single (pair) of A male and a female, And made you into Nations and tribes, that Ye may know each other (Not that ye may despise (Each other). Verily The most honoured of you In the sight of God is (he who is) the most Righteous of you. And God has full knowledge And is well acquainted (With all things)." (QS. al-Hujurat, 13)[54]

Qur'an frequently relates *taqwā* to the social interaction and care for others, such as, sharing to one another (Qs. al-A'rāf, 152-3), keeping promises (Qs. Āli 'Imrān, 76; al-A'rāf, 52), and doing good deeds (Qs. Āli 'Imrān, 172; al-Nisā', 126; al-Mā'idah, 93; al-Naḥl, 127).

In the activity of exegesis, *taqwā* as one key of liberation hermeneutics has several important implications, namely: a) An exegesis has to be free from prejudice (*ẓann*), and the passion of activity (*hawā*), which in turn leads to freedom from the theological obscurantism, political reaction, and purely subjective speculation. In other words, as Ebrahim Rasool (the national secretary of the Call of Islam) contends, *taqwā* will keep the interpreter from using the Qur'an and quoting its texts arbitrarily to legalize unknown doctrines in the Muslim world. Second implication is *taqwā* that produces the ethical and spiritual balance within the interpreter, so that he is kept away from the socio-political influence and pressure, which may generate a misleading interpretation. The third strengthens the interpreter's commitment in the personal dialectical process as well as the socio-political transformation. There will be balance between the active participation of the society and the self-transformation. In this case, Esack agrees with the statement of the *Call of Islam* which views transformation –based on the spirit

[53]A. Youssef Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Arabic Text Meanings in English*, (Beirut: Dar Al Birun, 2001),

[54]Ibid., 847

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of the Qur'an— as a dialectical process together with the change of soul and structure.[55]

The commitment in *taqwa*, according to Esack, also has significant implication toward the praxis of struggle. It protects the fighters of progressive Islam from the revolutionary falseness and the activist's arrogance, which might lead them to forget their commitments to freedom, equality, and fairness, and could turn them into a mere shadow of the tyrannical mirror they fight.[56]

Tawḥīd : The Principle of Intactness of Message and Unity of Humanity

Tawḥīd , from the base word *w-ḥ-d*, means 'alone', 'one', and 'who unites'. Although the word does not appear in the Qur'an, it functions as the synonym for the Oneness of God. The faith in *tawḥīd* serves as the basis of the Qur'an's view of life.[57] *"Say: He is God, The One and Only, God, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth nor, Nor is He begotten; And there is none Like unto Him."* (QS. *Al-Ikhlash*, 1-4).

According to Esack, many verses —either directly or not— talk about the Oneness of God, and *tawḥīd* is considered the foundation, the center, and the end of the whole Islamic tradition. The idea that *tawḥīd* is the heart of the comprehensive view of Muslim socio-politics has developed rapidly in the last decade, particularly in a number of ideologies in Iran, which then triggered the revolution of 1979. In South Africa, *tawḥīd* has been widely used by the interpreters to fight against the separation between religion and politics, and, also against, the apartheid.[58]

In the context of South Africa, according to Esack, besides as the theological dogma, *tawḥīd* has two specific applications. At the existential level, it indicates refusal against the dualistic concept of human existence, namely the secular and the spiritual, the sacred and the profane. Religion, thus, becomes a legal media, and even, an important means to the political

[55]Esack, *Qur'an*, *Liberation, & Pluralism*, 87-90
[56]Ibid., 89-90
[57]Ibn Manzur, *Lisān al-Arāb*, VI, (Mesir: Dar al-misr, tt), 4761
[58]Esack, *Qur'an*, *Liberation, & Pluralism*, 91

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unfairness. At the socio-political level, *tawḥīd* symbolizes the rejection against the segregation of human based on ethnicity, which means the same with *syirk*, the antithesis of *tawḥīd* . Apartheid is blemished because it explicitly denies the *tawḥīd* characteristic of the human race as stated in the Qur'an, *"human is a single nation"*.[59]

Related with the process of exegesis, *tawḥīd* , as another key of hermeneutics, denotes that the various approaches to the Qur'an –the philosophical, spiritual, legal, or political ones— have to be seen as part of a chain. Each one of them is needed in order to grasp the whole message as no single approach can complete the work by itself. It should be noted, therefore, that every approach, especially the political one, is grounded on the principle of *tawḥīd* . Otherwise, the Qur'an will merely be used as a means to support one specific view separated from its basic ethics. Nevertheless, it does not imply that the whole dimension of the Qur'an has to receive the same attention and expression, both publicly and personally, since it is incomprehensible in empty space.[60] The comprehensive nature of Islam does need a total leadership; however, it also carries a demand for a specific political leadership in South Africa.[61]

And so is in Esack's construct of liberation hermeneutics. *Tawḥīd ,* in his view, means demanding for resistance against the concept based on *syirk*, that is, the dualism which segregates theology from social analysis. Uncovering the theological element of certain historic and socio-political situations indicates the understanding of the latter. The understanding does not come out of neglect of worldly matters, and neither does it help to discover the theological element of all men's works. Ideal Islam is an integrated entity that believes in one God and in unity. In relation with hermeneutics, *tawḥīd* is the principle of intactness of message and unity of humanity.[62]

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[59]Ibid., 92

[60]Ibid., 93

[61]Muslim Youth Movement (MYM), "Minutet and Report on Proceedings and Recommendations of First Islamic Worker's." (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa Forum, October 21-23).

[62]Esack. *Qur'an, Liberation, & Pluralism*, 94

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Al-Nās: Human as the Determiner of Truth

Nass, from the base word of *n-w-s* or *'-n-s*, refers to human as a social group and is commonly used to represent some meanings in the Qur'an, for example, in QS. *Al-Nas*, 5-6; QS. *Al-Jinn*, 6. The Qur'an sets human in the world of *tawḥīd* , in which God, men, and nature, perform in meaningful and purposeful harmony.[63] According to the Qur'an, men live on earth to be the agent of God (*khalifah*), and to carry His messages on the earth. *"I will create on vice-regent on the earth."* (QS. *Al-Baqarah*, 30). In the context of liberation hermeneutics, Esack states that the human role as *khalifah* implies two points. First, the Qur'an must be interpreted in a way that gives special support to the people's interest at large, or the majority of them, not the minority. Second, the exegesis has to form from men's experiences and aspirations as being contrastive with the specialized aspiration of the minorities.[64]

The statement that human is one key of hermeneutics creates two theological problems: (1) the problem concerning the human value as measurement of truth, (2) the problem regarding the authenticity. *First*, accepting the understanding and function of human as mentioned will lead to the acceptance of the idea that God's interest is identical with human's. Next, the concept also signifies a way to raise *humanum*, the true man, as qualification of truth, even, the only truth with which Islam itself is measured. Placing human as one key of hermeneutics is in the frame of *tawḥīd* , and is based on the absolute. If no man could speak, there would be no concept of God's talking, and neither would there be His interference in the history. For Muslims, if there were no revelation, there would not be real meaning for human as *humanum*. Even so, it does not mean that the criteria of truth are on the absolute *humanum*; rather, it is on the *humanum* coming from *tawḥīd* . Furthermore, setting humanity as one key of hermeneutics means providing a balance for its role in the entire process of interpretation.

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[63]Ali Syariati, *Merxism and other Western Fallacies*, (Berkeley: Mizan, 1980), 86

[64]Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, & Pluralism*, 96

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Second, the problem of authenticity, this part concerns the legitimacy problem of exegesis. When somebody's traditional legitimacy on the interpretation of a text is no more acknowledged, then who is going to guarantee that the Holy text will not be interpreted freely? For Esack, those holding the legitimacy are the weak and the oppressed people. Esack says that the Qur'an has (always) taken their side and opposes neutrality on one side, and the authority and oppressor on the other. The oppression toward the weak begins with the idea that every interpretation needs to be objective-oriented, not merely rough speculation. The objective arises out of very deep sense of humanity, confirmed with no doubt in the text. In the context of South Africa, in the context of injustice, if the concepts of the Holiness and theological legitimacy of the text are not relevant with the struggle for justice, then they will be no more than an extra weapon of injustice. What happens afterward is what is called "the prostitution of hermeneutics".[65]

Mustaḍ'afin: The Authenticity of Exegesis

Mustaḍ'af, from the base word *ḍa'if* refers to the oppressed people, those considered weak and meaningless, and treated arrogantly. *Mustaḍ'afin* represents those with inferior social status, who are susceptible, isolated, and socio-economically oppressed. The Qur'an mentions *mustaḍ'afin* in three categories: Muslim, *Kāfir*, and both,[66] and the Qur'an promises to inherit the earth to them.

> "And We wished to be Gracious to those who were Being depressed in the land, To make them leaders (In faith) And make them heirs,to establish a firm place for them in the land, And to show Pharaoh, Haman, And their hosts, at their hands, The very things against which They were taking precautions." (Qs. Al-Qaṣaṣ, 5)

The activity of exegesis takes the side of *mustaḍ'afin* due to their prominent position in God's and the prophetic judgment. It is then that they work consciously to find out the new meanings, which respond creatively to the suffering of *mustaḍ'afin* and hold firmly to the truth and justice. In the

[65]Ibid., 97.
[66]Ibid., 98.

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context of oppression such as in South Africa, the interpreter is called on to be God's witness. It is to display the effective contribution of the Qur'an to the struggle for the social justice of the oppressed people regardless of race, religion, and ethnicity.[67]

Justice: The Principle of Opposition

The Qur'an uses two terms to refer to justice: *qisṭ* and *'adl*. *Qisṭ*, from the word *q-s-th* denotes equality, justice, and giving someone his share, while *'adl*, from the word *'a-d-l* means to behave equally, fairly, and accurately.[68] The two are used interchangeably in the Qur'an (Qs. Al-Baqarah, 282; al-Ḥujurāt, 9; al-Jāthiyah, 22), and this idea is postulated as the basis for life. Justice is the parameter of life. The order of the universe, which includes the arrangement of human life, is based on the principle of justice. Therefore, the society is required to uphold justice as the basis for its socio-political life. Injustice will produce disharmony, chaos, and destruction.[69]

Related to the process of exegesis, justice as one key of hermeneutics implies that the context of struggle should be able to give new views to the text. In the context of life in South Africa, the reality of injustice must provide the exegesis with new ideas. Nevertheless, the text also has its own view of the context, so that the Qur'an can serve the ideological means of comprehensive rebellion against the oppression in all its forms.[70] According to Esack, the mutual relation implies two points: (1) one cannot apply the objective approach to the Qur'an when he is in an environment of oppression, either institutionalised or not, without looking for ways to use the Qur'an to oppose the oppression. Neutrality in the context of injustice is a sin which will exclude him from the group of true Muslims. (2) The approach to the Qur'an as a means of rebellion requires the presence of theological commitment in the common struggle of

[67]Ibid., 103

[68]Lane, *Lene's Arabic-English Lexicon*, (Beirut: Liban, 1980), the section of *q-s-th*

[69]Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, & Pluralism*, 104

[70]Ibid., 106

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human race and the oppressed people for the creation of the *tawḥīd* and justice-based system.[71]

Jihād: Praxis Movement of Liberation

Jihād literally means to struggle, to urge somebody to contribute one's energy or wealth.[72] In the Qur'an, *jihad* has various meanings, from war (Qs. Al-Nisā', 90; al-Furqān, 52) to spiritual struggle (Qs. Al-Ḥajj, 78; al-'Ankabūt, 6), and even force (Qs. Al-'Ankabūt, 8; Luqmān, 15). Esack himself views *jihād* as struggle and praxis. The praxis may be defined as 'conscious action undertaken by a human community that has the responsibility for its own political determination based on the realization that humans make history'.[73] This praxis receives a lot of legitimacy from the Qur'an, which also explicitly states that a theory is based on praxis, *and those who strive In Our (Cause), - We will Certainly guide them To Our Paths*. (Qs. al-'Ankabūt, 69).

Jihad as one key of hermeneutics assumes that the life of human beings is basically praxis and realistic, so that theological assumptions are in line with that praxis action. The verse stating *Verily never Will God change the condition Of a people until they Change it themselves (With their own souls)* (Qs. Al-Ra'd, 11) confirms this basic assumption. In fact, in the midst of continuous suffering and confrontation in South Africa, faith and understanding do not arise out of ideas or dogma; rather it finds its shape through the concrete programs of resistance against the suffering and dehumanization.[74] This fact, for Esack, also serves as refusal against the traditional idea that theology and interpretation take place before and outside history, a statement which assumes that the reading and understanding of a text provides an absolute certainty.[75]

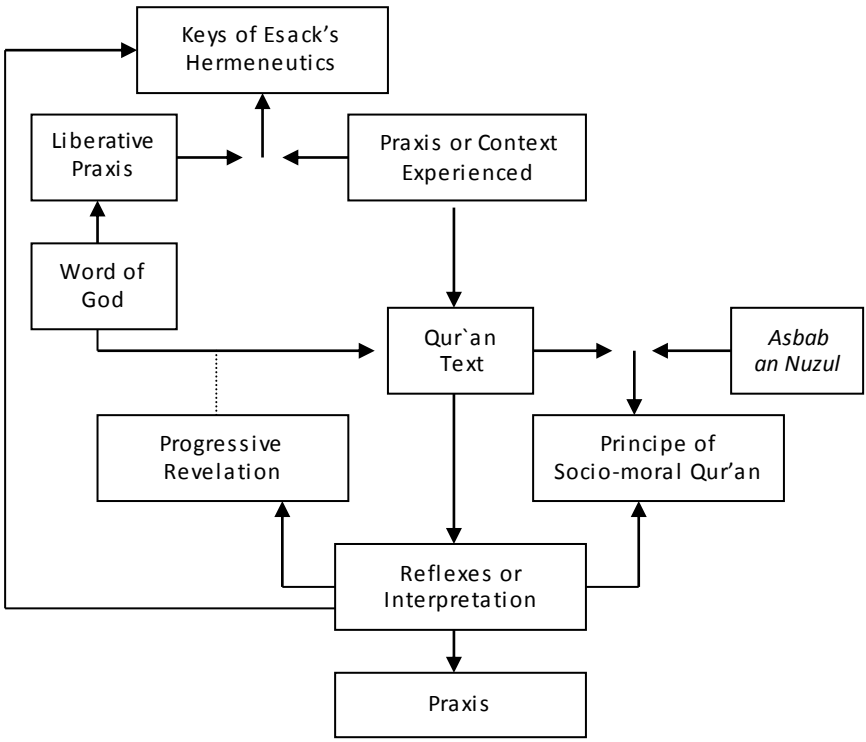
Based on these aforementioned description, Esack's interpretation of the Qur'an, liberation hermeneutics, and keys of hermeneutic, can be formulated in schema as follow:

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[71]Ibid.
[72]Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-Arab*, I, (Mesir : Dār al-Miṣrī, tt), 709
[73]Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, & Pluralism*, 107
[74]Ibid., 108
[75]Ibid., 109

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Esack's Liberation Hermeneutics Method



Esack's liberation hermeneutics method starts from the comprehending of praxis or contexts experienced and the analyzing of the problems and resolving them by referring to the Qur'anic text. Furthermore, to comprehend the Qur'anic text which is relevant to the problem, Esack considers *asbāb al-nuzūl* of verses to get the Principle of socio-moral of the Qur'an, and also considers primary principe of revelation which aims to praxis of liberation.

Based on the comprehension of praxis or contexts experienced and liberation spirit of the Qur'an, Esack proposes keys of hermeneutic as reference in understanding texts of the Qur'an. The keys are *taqwā* (the integrity and awareness of God's presence), *tawḥīd* (the Oneness of God), *al-nās* (human), *al-mustaḍ'afun fi al-arḍ* (those suffering from oppression on earth), *adl and qisṭ* (justice and balance), and *jihād* (struggle and praxis).

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These keys also express Esack's working toward Islamic Liberation Theology.

Finally, the result of Esack's interpretation to the texts of Qur'an is applied in the praxis to evaluate whether praxis is appropriate with the Qur'anic values or not, to revolutionize the praxis in order to engage in the right conduct of the Qur'an.

Conclusion

In comprehending and understanding the Qur'an, Farid Esack proposed his method of interpretation that he called "Liberation Hermeneutics". The Principles of Esack's hermeneutics, in fact, is not far different from other hermeneutics theories as he elaborated the hermeneutics theory advanced by Arkoun and Fazlur Rahman. However, Esack's method differs and has special value because as a liberation theologian, he includes the main goal of liberation theology: liberative-praxis as matrix in his hermeneutics. Esack's Hermeneutics does not only rotate around the discourse and comprehension of a text, either objective or subjective, but praxis. In this case, Esack also seems to follow the hermeneutics circle raised by liberation theologians: praxis (experience) to text (reflection) to praxis (experience). For Esack, the important thing is not in form of analysis or argument but how an interpretation can bring and change society into better life. A discourse can be very excellent, but if it creates no change, it means less useful. In this context, Esack is nearer to Hasan Hanafi than Arkoun and also Rahman. Esack's Hermeneutics is not only a speculative interpretation but instructive to a specific purpose, which is the progress toward a better life for society through justice.

In context of South Africa, Esack hermeneutics is concerned with the oppressed and weak, without seeing colour, tribe, or religion, to work together against the domination and unkindness of the apartheid regime. Esack's concern for the poor and the oppressed does not get out of main slogan of Liberation theologians ' preferential option for the poor and the oppressed'. Besides, Esack also has strong foundational theology from the Qur'anic texts. In consequence, he proposes keys of

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hermeneutics as follow: *taqwā, tawḥīd, nās, mustaḍ'afin, 'adl* and *qisṭ,* and *jihād,* which is typically based on the context of South Africa that is oppressed and in the struggle against the power of the apartheid regime. In addition, Esack's hermeneutics is universal; it means that he does not differentiate factions and groups. For Esack, when all parties try to uphold justice and uproot murder, there is no more difference between Muslim and non-Muslim. All have rights and obligations, and each has to confess the positive role of the other group.

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