

# Unity and Diversity in Contemporary Muslim Thought



# Unity and Diversity in Contemporary Muslim Thought

Edited by

Abbas Poya and Farid Suleiman

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



Unity and Diversity in Contemporary Muslim Thought

Edited by Abbas Poya and Farid Suleiman

This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2017 by Abbas Poya, Farid Suleiman and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-4316-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4316-4

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Abbas Poya and Farid Suleiman	
<b>Section 1: Pathways in Sunni Theology</b>	
Chapter One.....	12
The Turkish Qur'ānic Exegete Süleyman Ateş and His Contemporary Commentary of the Qur'ān Abdullah Takim (Frankfurt)	
Chapter Two .....	47
Faith, Policy and Theology: The Theological Stance of the Syrian Scholar Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī (1929-2013) Abbas Poya (Erlangen)	
Chapter Three .....	63
A Call to Unity: Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī's <i>Middle Way Approach</i> to the Interpretation of the Divine Attributes Farid Suleiman (Erlangen)	
Chapter Four.....	85
Between Unity and Diversity: Rāshid al-Ghannouchi's Concept of Pluralism Benjamin Jokisch (Berlin)	
Chapter Five .....	98
The Theory of <i>Imāma</i> according to Sa'īd Ḥawwā Samir Suleiman (Hebron)	
Chapter Six .....	121
Ş. Maḥmaşşānī: The Philosophy of Jurisprudence in Islam. The Evolution of Laws Rana Alsoufi (Erlangen)	

## **Section 2: Concepts and Methods in Shiite Theology**

Chapter Seven.....	134
The Twelver Shia: Theological Characteristics Reza Hajatpour (Erlangen)	
Chapter Eight.....	150
Authority and Rituals in the Shia Ismaili Tradition: An Interpretative Analysis Yahya Baiza (London)	
Chapter Nine.....	174
<i>Prophetic Philosophy</i> and the Renewal of Islamic Intellectuality in the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr Ruggero Vimercati Sanseverino (Tübingen)	
Chapter Ten .....	208
How the Prophet Saw the World: On the Qur'ānic Exegesis of Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari Abbas Poya (Erlangen)	
Contributors.....	228
Index.....	231

## INTRODUCTION

### ABBAS POYA AND FARID SULEIMAN

Not only Islamic theology, but theology in general, is widely understood as a field of knowledge that occupies itself with religious questions whose validity transcends time and place. A closer inspection, however, reveals that the emergence and development of (Islamic) theology is not only inextricably linked with disciplines like philosophy, mysticism, jurisprudence and natural sciences, but must also be examined against the historical backdrop of social, economic and political conditions. Thus, it is not surprising that Islamic history has witnessed a vast range of divergent theological understandings up until the present time. There are diverse theological understandings within different Islamic historical contexts, religious schools, philosophical threads and epistemological developments.

In the summer term of 2014, an international lecture series held at the Department of Islamic-Religious Studies of the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg gave a glimpse into these developments and verities. One major question raised by the lecture series was that of the limits and boundaries of (Islamic) theology and how they have constantly been re-defined. To ensure relevance for today's world, the scope of the lectures was limited by two criteria: First, each contribution had to focus on the thought of a contemporary Muslim theologian, whose creative period came after the year of 1950. Second, besides a purely theological examination, the contribution also had to consider the interdependence between theological debates and the larger context in which they took place. The volume here largely follows this conceptual framework and has brought together articles by European and Middle Eastern scholars. While some of the contributions are based on the series of lectures others have been added to the volume at a later stage.

Inter alia, this volume seeks to contribute to discourses on the *self* and *the other* in Islamic thought. Islamic theology like any other form of theology, cannot avoid defining an image of the *self*, drawing thereby a line that separates it from *the other*. In that it follows a symbolic order within specific historical contexts. This defining of what can be counted as *Islamic* always entails a moment of exclusion and, at the same time, also a

space where transition and shifting of meanings can ensue. We regard this space for the negotiation of discourses and meanings as a dynamic and open process of enabling for the future development of new reconfigurations within encompassing understandings of (theological Islamic) belonging. In traditional theological debates, the negative question about who does *not* belong to Islam was considered to be crucial. Muslim theologians of all shades tried to (re-)formulate the framework of *acceptable* belief. Labels such as *kufr* (unbelief), *irtidād* (apostasy), *zandaqa* (heresy), *fisq* (iniquity) and *ḍalāl* (aberrance) have been and are still being used to delegitimise beliefs that supposedly fall outside this framework. The literary genre of heresiography evolved around a Prophetic tradition which states that the ‘Muslim community’ will be divided into seventy-three sects, of which only one will be saved. This tradition has been narrated in many different versions,<sup>1</sup> including one that condemns only one sect to hell and promises to the remaining seventy-two the reward of paradise.<sup>2</sup> One of the narrations that is commonly cited is to be found in the *ḥadīth*-collection *al-Mu‘jam al-kabīr* of Abū l-Qāsim al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971) and will be quoted in Arabic and then translated into English in the following:

Iftaraqat al-Yahūd ‘alā ihdā wa-sab‘īna firqa, wa-ftaraqat al-Naşārā ‘alā thnatayni wa-sab‘īna firqa, wa-l-ladhī nafsī bi-yadihi, la-taftariqanna ummatī ‘alā thalātha wa-sab‘īna firqa wāḥida fī-l-janna wa-thnatāni wa-sab‘ūna fī-l-nār. Qīl: Yā rasūl Allāh, wa-man hiya? Qāl: Al-Jamā‘a.<sup>3</sup>

“The Jews have divided into seventy-one sects, the Christians have divided into seventy-two sects, I swear by Whom Who carries my soul in His hand, my community will divide into seventy-three sects, one of which will be in Paradise and seventy-two in Hell.” It was said: “O Messenger of God, who are they?” He said: *Al-Jamā‘a*.<sup>4</sup>”

<sup>1</sup> See Josef van Ess, *Der Eine und das Andere*, 2 vols. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 1:7–64.

<sup>2</sup> In that version, the Qadariyya are identified as the group that is doomed to hell. However, Muslim scholars considered it to be a fabricated narration. See e.g. Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Jawraqānī, *al-Abāṭil wa-l-manākīr wa-l-ṣiḥāḥ wa-l-mashāḥīr*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Faryawā‘ī (Riyadh: Dār al-Ṣumay‘ī, 2002), 1:459–60, Ḥadīth number 277 and the author’s subsequent comment.

<sup>3</sup> Abū l-Qāsim al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu‘jam al-kabīr*, ed. Ḥamdī ‘Abd al-Majīd (Riyadh: Dār al-Ṣumay‘ī, 1994), 18:70, Ḥadīth number 129.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388) cites five different opinions in regard to what is intended by the term *al-Jamā‘a* in this *ḥadīth*. He himself defines it as the community that adheres to its leader who acts in accordance with the Qur’an and the *sunna* (*al-Jamā‘a rāji‘at ilā l-ijtimā‘ ‘alā l-imām al-muwāfiq li-l-kitāb wa-s-sunna*). See Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī, *al-I‘tiṣām*, ed. Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Shuqayr, Sa‘d

Scholars over the centuries have attempted—albeit with little success—to write a history of the Islamic schism that accords with the predicted number mentioned in the *ḥadīth*. The vast quantity of heresiographical literature that is structured around this tradition should however not obscure the fact that its authenticity has been and still is disputed. For example, Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī (b. 1926) bases his understanding on prior acknowledged scholars like Ibn Hazm (d. 456/1064), arguing against its reliability from the standpoint of both its *isnād* (chain of transmitters) as well its meaning.<sup>5</sup> Another contemporary scholar, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shanqīṭī (b. 1963), considers only the first part of the *ḥadīth* that talks about the inner divisions of the three monotheistic religions to be acceptable. Rejecting the latter part allows al-Shanqīṭī to suggest a complete re-interpretation of the Prophet's saying. The division into seventy-three Muslim sub-groups, he argues, should be understood as a prediction that the Muslim *umma* will outnumber the Jews and the Christians. Therefore, the *ḥadīth* is not—as has often been said—rebuking but in fact praising the Muslim community.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of the authenticity of the afore-mentioned *ḥadīth*, defining and establishing 'correct' belief has been considered one of the main tasks in theology. Great theologians of the past tried to formulate a universally valid framework of proper beliefs.<sup>7</sup> But history has proved that the dividing line between orthodoxy and heresy has been permanently renegotiated and adapted to fit the changing political, social and religious contexts.<sup>8</sup>

---

ibn 'Abd Allāh Al al-Ḥumayd, and Hishām ibn Ismā'īl al-Ṣīnī (Riyadh: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 2008), 3:209–16, quote on 216.

<sup>5</sup> Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī, “Ḥadīth iftirāq al-umma ilā thalāth wa-sab'īna firqa,” Personal Website of Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī, accessed April 2015, <http://www.qaradawi.net/new/library2/282-2014-01-26-18-52-49/3339->

<sup>6</sup> Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shanqīṭī, “al-Shaykh al-Dadaw: Ḥadīth al-iftirāq ilā thalāth wa-sab'īna firqa lā yadullu alā l-dhamm. Wa-ghāyatuhū kathrat hādhihi al-umma,” Saudi Arabian daily newspaper 'Ukāz, accessed April 2015, <http://www.okaz.com.sa/okaz/osf/20070802/Con20070802129518.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) insisted in his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* that believing in the eternity of the world constitutes *kufr* (heresy). However, many later theologians, among them the famous *mutakallim* Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), who belonged to the same school of thought as his predecessor al-Ghazālī, have rejected this claim. Al-Rāzī argued that the problem of whether the world is eternal or not is insoluble on both theological and philosophical grounds. See Muammer İskenderoğlu, *Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Thomas Aquinas on the Question of the Eternity of the World* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> For example, the political conditions of the fifth/eleventh century heavily influenced the Ash'arite concept of belief and disbelief. See Frank Griffel,

This volume does not seek to answer the question of what forms of theology can be *justifiably* labelled as *Islamic*. The answers to this question may vary greatly, but what they have in common is that they are grounded in an examination of different existing theological positions and are looking into the possibilities of, and for, future epistemologies. And it is precisely here that this volume aims to make a contribution. These different questionings and approaches to the subject-matter allow one to firstly see the diversity in a constantly changing discourse which, although it relates to former, older arguments, nevertheless generates an understanding of Islamic Theology that goes beyond these texts. What can be seen here is also intertextuality, as well as the praxis of negotiating in theological matters from very different angles and also with different theological ways of argumentation. This shows on the one hand how much theology is part of an ongoing process as well as how much it currently matters and seeks to develop different positions. It all also sheds light on the historically driven, socio-political reasons behind what is perceived as true Islamic Theology. This is even more so the case when, as is mirrored in this book, the discussions also encompass perspectives from different Muslim Diasporas.

Interestingly, not only the content of the contributions, but also the different approaches of the lecturers confirm the existence of a great measure of diversity in the field of Islamic theology. There is currently a certain amount of hype around the word ‘diversity’. That involves issues of racism and racialization in white societies and forms of exclusion on the basis of gender, dis/ability, sexuality, religion and age, in specific areas of public space in Western society which perceives itself to be ‘multi-cultural’. We use and understand the word ‘diversity’ around the historically driven socio-political forms of exclusion and inclusion along the constructions of a centralized ‘self’ and marginalized ‘others’ in discourses of Islamic Theology and its establishment in different disciplinary Islamic traditions and schools of thought. This volume is presented as a contribution to this subject, a subject which is far from being exhausted.

The following will be a brief tour through the volume, providing the reader with a synopsis of each article.

Abdullah Takim deals mainly with the new exegetical approach of the famous Turkish Qur’ān commentator Süleyman Ateş (b. 1933). One of the most respected, as well as controversial Islamic theologians of modern-day Turkey, Ateş is among those who argue for a new understanding and

---

*Apostasie und Toleranz im Islam: Die Entwicklung zu al-Ġazālī's Urteil gegen die Philosophie und die Reaktionen der Philosophen* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 206–15 and 468–69, esp. 214–15.

interpretation of Islam and the Qur'ān. Süleyman Ateş's intention in writing his commentary on the Qur'ān was, according to Abdullah Takim, to liberate it from the various interpretative additions and accretions of the exegetes and to present what he considers to be a more authentic form of exegesis. Takim describes this attempt as a return to the Qur'ān. Through this, Ateş believes, Islam can be rethought and reconceptualised. One very important result of his exegesis is, according to Takim, that Jews and Christians are also potentially held to go to paradise, provided they meet certain criteria. Generating a great deal of public and theological discussion within Turkish society, Takim shows that this thesis has resulted in various critiques and diatribes aimed at defending the true Islam against propagated claims by Ateş which have been seen as a threat to Islamic thinking. Unlike the major intellectual and hermeneutical shifts introduced and elaborated by Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), Mohammed Arkoun (d. 2010) and Naşr Hāmid Abū Zayd (d. 2010), Takim argues that Ateş's approach, in fact, has been more fruitful for the specific Turkish context and has led to new discussions on the Qur'ān, its understanding and possible approaches towards it.

The recent assassination of the renowned Muslim scholar Shaykh Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī on 21 March 2013 marked a new peak of intensity in the current Syrian conflict. Despite the wide recognition of al-Būṭī as a religious authority, and in spite of his intellectual influence which extends beyond Syria's borders, he received little attention from Western academics and researchers. Abbas Poya's contribution to this volume highlights the works of al-Būṭī, pointing out that in a number of studies al-Būṭī is presented as having contributed to an Islam that is a 'modern', 'rational', 'enlightened' and 'self-confident' religion. However, Poya argues against this portrayal. After providing a short biography of al-Būṭī the article first offers a selection of al-Būṭī's theological statements and contextualises al-Būṭī within conventional Islamic theology. This is followed by a discussion of al-Būṭī's theological understanding and his positions in a number of socio-political questions. In conclusion, the possibility of categorizing al-Būṭī's theological stance is questioned, what the meanings of a 'modern', 'rational' and 'enlightened' Islam would be and how far and in which sense this can be seen as 'enlightening'.

Farid Suleiman engages with the texts and figure of Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (b. 1926) who is considered to be one of the most influential Muslim scholars of today. Research has focused mostly on his works on Islamic jurisprudence and has identified his overwhelming desire for intra-Muslim unity as its common theme. By examining al-Qaraḍāwī's positions in the hotly debated issue of the correct understanding of the divine attributes,

Suleiman's article shows that the preservation of unity can also be considered the driving force in his theological thought. Suleiman demonstrates how al-Qaraḏāwī made every effort to convince his readership of the validity of all three of today's most common approaches to the interpretation of God's attributes (*tafwīd*, *ithbāt* and *ta'wīl*), arguing that they should not be the source of discord within the Muslim community. The article concludes that al-Qaraḏāwī has not only subordinated internal coherence to this aim, but that he has also selectively cited the works of acknowledged Muslim scholars of the past.

Benjamin Jokisch focuses on the works of one of the most prominent scholars and politicians in the contemporary Islamic world, the Tunisian Rāchid al-Ghannouchi. Al-Ghannouchi developed a number of modern concepts in the field of political theory, one of which concerns the issue of pluralism, which he treats in the context both of Islamic tradition including relevant Qur'ānic verses and more recent Western views. Jokisch focuses in his contribution on the ways in which al-Ghannouchi tries to reinterpret the holy text and to harmonise the tension between unity as emphasised by the concept of *tawḥīd* on one side and diversity as represented by the Western concept of pluralism on the other. Jokisch argues that al-Ghannouchi's concept of pluralism goes beyond classical Islamic views, but nevertheless is limited with regard to the Western idea of pluralism.

Sa'īd Hawwā's (1935–1989) works are the central theme of Samir Suleiman's contribution. His article asks whether Sa'īd Hawwā's writings still exert an influence on the thinking of political activists in many Muslim countries. Suleiman's article gives an insight into this Syrian Sunni scholar's political thought in general, as well as into his theory of the *imāma* in particular. Hawwā considered the establishment of an Islamic state an urgent need (*ḍarūra*). Besides presenting the qualities of the *imām*, the article shows the procedures of his installation, his rights and his duties, as well as the possibilities of his deposition under certain circumstances. In conclusion, Suleiman argues that the position of the *imām* is presented largely in isolation in Hawwā's writings, as his approach does not consider a political system as a whole and that as a result it leaves many questions unanswered. Moreover, Suleiman holds that Hawwā's writings remain conservative with regard to the possible use of *ijtihād* and views his approach as rather fragmentary.

Rana Alsoufī seeks to shed light on the principle of the evolution of legislation in Islamic law (*sharī'a*) in the writings of the Lebanese jurist Ṣubḥī Rajab Maḥmaṣṣānī (d. 1986). After presenting a brief biography of Maḥmaṣṣānī, there follows an overview of Maḥmaṣṣānī's classification of the authoritative sources in Islam. Alsoufī focuses her approach on the

questions of what Maḥmaṣṣānī understands as the extraneous sources and what the influence of these sources upon Islamic law might be. She also addresses the question of whether Muslim scholars have tried to reconcile such influences with their treatment of the legal methods applied in Islamic law. In the course of her article, Maḥmaṣṣānī's views on the extent to which the extraneous sources influenced the very evolution of Islamic jurisprudence are reflected upon.

Reza Hajatpour's article focuses on the concept of the Imāmate as one of the central distinguishing components of the Twelver Shia. After presenting the major theoretical premises that underlie the concept, the article primarily seeks to shed light on the question of whether the Shiite theologians considered the dominion of the Imāmate to be all-encompassing or restricted to the spiritual sphere. It is argued that there is on the one hand no unified concept of the Imāmate, and that on the other hand, the theory behind it becomes imprecise when it comes to questions of detail. Hajatpour argues that the quietist position of the Shia does not stand in the way of the creation of a secular or democratic state. Yet it is stated that this does not rule out the Shiite clergy retaining a partial right to interfere with legislation and judicial concerns and that those scholars who advocate such a position generally believe that religious legal understanding is privileged over civil and political legislation.

In his article "Authority and Rituals in the Shia Ismā'īlī Tradition: An Interpretative Analysis" Yahia Baiza shares the findings of an exploratory interpretative analysis of religious authority and rituals in the Shia Ismā'īlī context. Baiza underlines and demonstrates that authority and rituals have a mutually connected and interdependent circularity. The authority legitimises rituals, whereas the rituals routinise and internalise the acceptance and obedience of authority. This paper argues that the notions of authority and religious rituals in Islam as well as in all other religions are not isolated from other socio-historical events. Rather they are considered to have been developed and have evolved over a long period, during which political, historical, theological and socio-economic factors and discourses have played decisive roles. This study concludes that changes in understanding and interpretation of the notion of authority, and in the practices of religious rituals, are inevitable.

There are few contemporary Islamic thinkers whose biography and thought reflect so deeply the crucial issues of contemporary Islam as does the life and thinking of the Iranian scholar and philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933). According to Ruggero Vimercati Sanseverino, Nasr's thought distinguishes itself from the ideas of other contemporary Islamic thinkers in his attempt to defuse the opposition between tradition

and renewal, unity and diversity or historical reality and theological ideality in contemporary Islam with the help of the very resources of the Islamic tradition. Vimercati Sanseverino argues that Nasr postulates the existence of an alternative way which enables Islam to escape the dilemma of having to choose between what he considers an uncritical imitation of the modern West or succumbing to fundamentalism. Vimercati Sanseverino traces how Nasr has engaged with this fatal dilemma, reinforced by the dramatically problematic political, cultural and social situation of Muslim populations throughout the world, by arguing that it can only be solved by a renewal of Islamic intellectuality through the revivification of Islamic philosophical thinking which he describes as the concept of *prophetic philosophy*. The experience of being (ontology) and the meaning of the term intellect (epistemology) are shown to be the central issues of Nasr's prophetic philosophy and which he considers to be the core issues with regard to the current crisis of Islamic thought.

The final article is again by Abbas Poya and has Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari's (b. 1936) works as its central theme. Shabestari is a controversial thinker and the most renowned contemporary Iranian scholar to have developed new methodological approaches to Qur'ānic exegesis. Poya discusses in his paper the development of Shabestari's approaches to exegesis, as well as the elaboration of his theories on other subjects such as democracy and human rights. Furthermore, Poya's contribution attempts to show the coherence of Shabestari's thought. Shabestari's work on freedom and politics is in alignment with his open approach to Qur'ānic exegesis. His most recent view of the Qur'ān as a contextually-bound narrative is the logical extension of his assumption that the Qur'ān is the speech of the Prophet Muḥammad. This assumption, in turn, stands in direct relation to his hermeneutic convictions that every text/oration is influenced by prior knowledge, interests, and expectations of the author/speaker.

## References

- Ess, Josef van. *Der Eine und das Andere*. 2 vols. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010.
- Griffel, Frank. *Apostasie und Toleranz im Islam: Die Entwicklung zu al-Ġazālī's Urteil gegen die Philosophie und die Reaktionen der Philosophen*. Leiden: Brill, 2000.
- İskenderoğlu, Muammer. *Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Thomas Aquinas on the Question of the Eternity of the World*. Leiden: Brill, 2002.

- Jawraqānī, Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-. *al-Abāṭīl wa-l-manākir wa-l-ṣiḥāh wa-l-mashāhīr*. Edited by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Faryawā’ī. Riyadh: Dār al-Ṣumay‘ī, 2002.
- Qaradāwī, Yūsuf al-. “Ḥadīth iftirāq al-umma ilā thalāth wa-sab‘īna firqa.” Accessed April 2015. <http://www.qaradawi.net/new/library2/282-2014-01-26-18-52-49/3339->.
- Shanqīṭī, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-. “al-Shaykh al-Dadaw: Ḥadīth al-iftirāq ilā thalāth wa-sab‘īna firqa lā yadullu alā l-dhamm. Wa-ghāyatuhū kathrat hādhihi al-umma.” Accessed April 2015. <http://www.okaz.com.sa/okaz/osf/20070802/Con20070802129518.htm>.
- Shāṭibī, Abū Ishāq al-. *al-Iṭīṣām*. Edited by Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Shuqayr, Sa‘d ibn ‘Abd Allāh Al al-Ḥumayd, and Hishām ibn Ismā‘īl al-Ṣīnī. Riyadh: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 2008.
- Ṭabarānī, Abū l-Qāsim al-. *al-Mu‘jam al-kabīr*. Edited by Ḥamdī ‘Abd al-Majīd. Riyadh: Dār al-Ṣumay‘ī, 1994.



**SECTION 1:**  
**PATHWAYS IN SUNNI THEOLOGY**

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE TURKISH QUR'ĀNIC EXEGETE SÜLEYMAN ATEŞ AND HIS CONTEMPORARY COMMENTARY OF THE QUR'ĀN<sup>1</sup>

ABDULLAH TAKIM

### **1. Qur'ānic exegesis in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a means of renewing the Islamic world**

The Qur'ān plays a central role in the lives of Muslims. Over the centuries, numerous commentaries of the Qur'ān have been written. Their main purpose was, and still is, to make the Qur'ān more accessible as well as understandable. The exegetes' aim, in particular, is defined by the task of explaining the divine words to their potential readers. While the exegete him- or herself operates within a particular horizon of knowledge and experience, no interpretation of the Qur'ān can claim exclusive authority. In other words, the interpretation of the Qur'ān is a highly contextual enterprise and, as such, not identical with the *Word of God*. Thus, entangled with the limitations and particular socio-historical position of the exegete in significant ways, each interpretation turns out to be not only limited in scope and hence relative, but is considerably practice-oriented and therefore always in accordance with the needs of its time and age.

---

<sup>1</sup> Translated from German into English by Zubair Ahmad, revised and enlarged by Abdullah Takim. This article was first published in the journal *Cibedo* under the title: Abdullah Takim, "Eine neue Koranexegese. Der bekannte türkische Koranexeget Süleyman Ateş und sein zeitgenössischer Korankommentar," *Cibedo-Beiträge* 2 (2009). Zubair Ahmad was kind enough to translate this article from German into English. Afterwards I made modifications (such as the biography of Süleyman Ateş) and revisions and compared the translation with the original and authorised it. Therefore, this text is not an exact translation of its first publication in the journal *Cibedo*. Finally, I am greatly indebted to my former colleague Dr Rainer Brömer, who was kind enough to read the translation very carefully and to make important corrections, suggestions and comments concerning its content.

The same applies also to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when a paradigmatic shift occurred regarding Muslim commentaries on the Qur'ān. Confronted with European colonialism, Muslims had to deal with the social, cultural, technological and scientific hegemony of the West. In doing so, it was seen as important not only to keep pace with most of these developments, but to demonstrate the harmony between Qur'ānic content and modern scientific knowledge in a continuous manner—a harmony generally contested by Western thinkers. This development can be seen as a kind of modern apology from the perspective of nineteenth and early twentieth century Muslims. This kind of apology was directed against those, primarily non-Muslim and Western individuals who characterised Islam as anti-progressive and backward. One of the consequences of such an encounter was the emergence of modern commentaries on the Qur'ān.

Significant for the Qur'ānic exegesis of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is its deep connectedness as well as engagement with so-called modern achievements of Europe. New ways of exploring and interpreting the Qur'ān, therefore, were influenced by the scientific, political, cultural and technological hegemony of Europe. In other words, modern commentaries of the Qur'ān display apologetic characteristics which result from the reactions of Qur'ān commentators to the West. Thus, the influence of the West on modern commentaries of the Qur'ān is unmistakable.

Modern exegetes of the Qur'ān claim that the *true message of the Qur'ān* has not yet been understood. For this reason, they argue, the Qur'ān must be interpreted in a rationalist manner with little attention to the traditions invented and attributed to the Prophet (e.g. weak *ḥadīths*). In this sense, the motto of modern exegetes of the Qur'ān can be described as *back to the sources*, meaning back to the Qur'ān and the authentic *ḥadīths* of the Prophet. They argue that this re-orientation will eventually liberate both the Qur'ān and Islam from being tainted by any kind of superstition. The addressees of the modern Qur'ānic commentaries were no longer, as before, primarily other scholars but now included the general population. Hence, a simple language had to be used to explain and communicate the message of the Qur'ān. In parallel, the commentaries on the Qur'ān were written in languages other than Arabic and consequently dealt to a much greater extent than previously with local issues and the problems of Muslims and their respective communities. Finally, modern commentaries on the Qur'ān were also used as a means of spreading reformist ideas.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. Rippin, "Tafsīr," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 14, ed. Mircea Eliade, 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 242; A. Rippin, "Tafsīr," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Vol. X*, ed. P. J. Bearman et al. (Leiden:

It is clearly not possible to elaborate on all of the modern commentaries and approaches to the interpretation of the Qur'ān, but one can mention here the commentary written by Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) and Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935),<sup>3</sup> whose work is perceived as prototypical for the modern exegesis of the Qur'ān as well as instrumental in forging the link between traditional exegesis and modernity.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. The enlightening Qur'ān or: *Anew to Islam*

According to many Islamic modernists or innovators, the Qur'ān is a book that has always enlightened people and still should do so. For the modernist Shakīb Arslān (1869-1946), for example, the Qur'ān, provided that one understands and interprets it in the right way, is “an enlightened book” and consequently “Islam an enlightened religion”.<sup>5</sup>

In a short article, Naṣr Hāmid Abū Zayd (d. 2010) equally advocates enlightenment through the Qur'ān by using a new method of interpretation. Entitled *Interpretations of the Qur'ān towards an Islamic Enlightenment*, Abū Zayd tries to break with traditional readings, interpretations and approaches to the Qur'ān and argues for a “universal dimension” in the interpretation of the Qur'ān.<sup>6</sup>

Another exegete whose approaches to and perspective on the Qur'ān resonate with Abū Zayd's interest in promoting enlightenment through the Qur'ān is Süleyman Ateş (b. 1933 in Elazığ, Turkey). One of the most respected as well as controversial Islamic theologians of modern-day Turkey, Ateş is among those who argue for a “new understanding and interpretation” of Islam and the Qur'ān. Ateş was educated according to the classical Islamic educational system and by the age of ten, he had committed the entire Qur'ān to memory. Then he learned Arabic in Elazığ

---

Brill, 2000), 87–88; J. J. G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 18–19.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Charles C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muḥammad 'Abduh* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), 18–103, 177–204; Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798–1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 222–44.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jane I. Smith, *An Historical and Semantic Study of the Term 'Islām' as Seen in a Sequence of Qur'ān Commentaries* (Montana: University of Montana Press, 1975), 183–84, 187.

<sup>5</sup> Stefan Wild, *Mensch, Prophet und Gott im Koran: Muslimische Exegeten des 20. Jahrhunderts und das Menschenbild der Moderne* (Münster: Rhema, 2001), 38.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Naṣr Hamid Abu Zaid, “Koraninterpretationen für eine islamische Aufklärung,” *Orient Journal* 2, no. 1 (2001): 14–15.

from Hacı Muharrem Sırrı Hilmî Efendi,<sup>7</sup> who was also his spiritual guide on the mystical path of the Naqshbandiyya.<sup>8</sup> In 1952 he was married and a year later he decided to enrol in the *Prayer Leader and Preacher School* (İmâm-Hatip Okulu) in Elazığ where, in 1960, he completed his training as a prayer leader and preacher (*imâm*) with distinction. In the same year, he graduated from high school in Elazığ. Then he enrolled at the Faculty of Islamic Theology in Ankara, where he completed his studies in 1964. For one year, he worked as a teacher at the *Prayer Leader and Preacher School* in Elazığ. During his studies, he served as an *imâm* in a number of mosques for four years. After graduating from the Faculty of Islamic Theology, Ateş became affiliated with the same faculty in 1965. He served as an assistant to his previous teacher, Prof. Tayyib Okiç,<sup>9</sup> the outstanding *hadîth* scholar who held the chair of *tafsîr* (Qur'anic interpretation), *hadîth* (Prophetic Traditions) and *fiqh* (Islamic law). Okiç supported Ateş both in his student years and during his time as his assistant. Another professor giving Ateş his attention was Hilmi Ziya Ülken, a specialist in Islamic philosophy. Ateş corrected the notes and proofs of Ülken's works which were written in Ottoman Turkish.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For his biography, see Hacı Muharrem Hilmî Efendi, *Dîvan-ı Sırrı: Notlarla neşreden Süleyman Ateş* (Ankara: Pars Matbaacılık, 1976), 13–23.

<sup>8</sup> The Naqshbandiyya, a group which is very widespread in Central Asia and in Turkey, is a mystical path initiated or founded by Bahâ' ad-Dîn Naqshband (d. 791/1389) in Bukhara (Uzbekistan). This path attempts to achieve by means of the silent remembrance of God and deep meditation a purification of the soul which on the other hand leads to the illumination of the inner heart. Worldly affairs should not be neglected in this spiritual development because the balance between mind and body is very important in order to reach God and to experience his love. Irina Tweedie (d. 1999) has shown in her book *Daughter of Fire: A Diary of a Spiritual Training with a Sufi Master* (Inverness, CA: Golden Sufi Center, 1986) which spiritual stages you have to go through in the Naqshbandiyya in order to reach God. For details, see: Itzchak Weismann, *The Naqshbandiyya: orthodoxy and activism in a worldwide Sufi tradition* (London: Routledge, 2007); Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, *The Naqshbandi Sufi way: history and guidebook of the Saints of the Golden Chain* (Chicago: Kazi Publ., 1995); Omar Ali-Shah, *The rules or secrets of the Naqshbandi order* (Paris: Tractus Books, 1998); Hamid Algar, "The Naqshbandi Order: A Preliminary Survey of its History and Significance," *Studia Islamica* 44 (1976): 123–52.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. İsmail Baliç, "M. Tayyib Okiç (1902–1977)," *İslâm Tetkikleri Enstitüsü Dergisi* 7, 1–2 (1978): 330–36; Süleyman Ateş, *Makaleler* (İstanbul: Yeni Ufuklar Neşriyat, 1996), 119–23.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Hamit Can, "Süleyman Ateş'le yarım yüzyıllık yolculuk," *Yeni Şafak Gazetesi* 767–769 (7.1.1997–9.1.1997): 2.

Ateş received his doctorate in Islamic theology from the University of Ankara in 1968 with a study on *Sülemi ve tasavvufî tefsiri*<sup>11</sup> (*al-Sulamî and his Sufi commentary on the Qur'ân*). In 1969 he did his military service in Adana and in 1971 returned to the faculty in Ankara and studied English. In 1973 he undertook a study tour to Iraq and Egypt and was appointed as an Associate Professor of Islamic Theology, again at the faculty in Ankara as a result of his work on *İşârî Tefsir Okulu* (*The allegorical [mystical] school of interpretation*),<sup>12</sup> which is still a standard work on this subject in Turkey and has also been translated into Persian.<sup>13</sup>

At this time, to be awarded the degree of Associate Professor in Turkey, a further academic work was required. Ateş gave a lecture, entitled *Kur'ân'ı Kerîm'e göre Evrim Teorisi* (The theory of evolution according to the Qur'ân)<sup>14</sup> in the presence of Professors Nihat Keklik, Nihat Çağatay, Tayyib Okıç and Meliha Anbarcıoğlu, which had important consequences for his career. This lecture was subsequently published, and when Ateş became President of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (*Diyanet*)<sup>15</sup> on 16 April 1976, the work was attacked politically and is still today exploited for certain non-academic purposes.<sup>16</sup> The academically untenable main allegation is that in this article the author is committed to Darwinian ideas and claims that humans are descended from apes.

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Süleyman Ateş, *Sülemi ve tasavvufî tefsiri* (Istanbul: Sönmez Neşriyat, 1969).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Süleyman Ateş, *İşari Tefsir Okulu* (Ankara: Ankara Üniv. İlahiyat Fak., 1974).

<sup>13</sup> Sulaymân Âtash, *Maktab-i tafsiir-i Ishâri "İşârî Tefsir Okulu"* (trans. Tawfiq H. Subhânî; Tehran: Markaz-i Nashr-i Dānīshgāhī, 1381 [2002]).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Süleyman Ateş, "Kur'ân'ı Kerîm'e göre Evrim Teorisi," *Ankara İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 20 (1975): 127–46.

<sup>15</sup> A general overview of this institution is given by İsmail Kara, "Eine Behörde im Spannungsfeld von Religion und Staat: Das Präsidium für Religiöse Angelegenheiten," in *Turkish Islam and Europe: Europe and Christianity as reflected in Turkish Muslim discourse & Turkish Muslim life in the diaspora; papers of the Istanbul Workshop October 1996 = Türkischer Islam und Europa* (ed. G. Seufert and J. Waardenburg; Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999), 209–40; see also İ. Yücel, "Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı," *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* 9:455–460.

<sup>16</sup> See for example İsmet Miroğlu, "Kur'ân Bilimleri Araştırma Vakfı'nın düşündürdükleri," *Türkiye Gazetesi* (10.8.1996). This newspaper article is discussed by Ateş in his book *Yeniden İslâma: Kur'ân-ı Kerîm'in Evrensel Mesajı* (2 vols.; Istanbul: Kur'an Okulu, 1997), 2:270–79", in which many untrue allegations made by Miroğlu are corrected.

Ateş served as President of Religious Affairs for one and a half years, and in 1979 he was appointed Professor of Islamic Theology at the Theological Faculty in Ankara. In the same year, by a decision of the Faculty, he was sent to Germany where he undertook academic studies at the Ruhr-Universität-Bochum and took German language courses. While there, in the same year (1979) he received an invitation from the Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University and went as a guest lecturer to Saudi Arabia (Riyadh). There he taught the Qur'ân and its exegesis at various faculties. In 1982 he returned to the Faculty of Theology in Ankara, but in the following semester he again went to the Islamic University in Riyadh, where he taught until 1987. Between 1987 and 1988 he gave lessons in *tafsîr* (Qur'anic exegesis) and *taşawwuf* (Islamic mysticism) at the Emir Abdelkader University of Islamic Sciences in Algeria.

In 1988 Ateş moved to the 19th May University (19 Mayıs Üniversitesi) in Samsun (Turkey), teaching *tafsîr* and *hadîth* until 1995. From 1995 to 1999, he lectured at the Theological Faculty of the University of Istanbul (İstanbul Üniversitesi). In 2001 and 2002 he taught Islamic theology in the Netherlands, where he became one of the founders of the Islamic University of Europe (Islamitische Universiteit van Europa) in Rotterdam. From 2002 to 2011 he wrote a daily column for the Turkish newspaper *Vatan Gazetesi*, contributing more than 3000 articles on Islamic theological issues, addressing a whole variety of questions asked by the readers.<sup>17</sup> Since June 2011, Ateş has provided answers to readers' questions on his website.<sup>18</sup> He has received various awards and prizes for his books and receives frequent invitations to appear on Turkish television, offering his expertise as well as opinions concerning Islam. In Europe, America and in the Islamic world, he has delivered numerous lectures that have been attentively and critically received. His main research areas remain *tafsîr*, *taşawwuf* and *fiqh*.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Articles by Ateş in this newspaper can be accessed at the following internet address: <http://home.gazetevatan.com/vatan2013/yazarlar-detay.asp?wid=31&@@=121&kelime=> (12.07.2014).

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.suleyman-ates.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=section&id=13&Itemid=61](http://www.suleyman-ates.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=section&id=13&Itemid=61) (last accessed 12.07.2014)

<sup>19</sup> This biography is a summarised translation of: Süleyman Ateş, *Yeni İslâm İlmihâli* (Istanbul: Yeni Ufuklar, [1997]), 5–6. For details, see: Süleyman Ateş, *Kur'an-ı Kerim'in Evrensel Mesajına Çağrı* (Istanbul: Yeni Ufuklar, 1990), 243–44; Hamit Can, "Süleyman Ateş'le yarım yüzyıllık yolculuk," 2; Hikmet Selçuk, "Prof. Dr. Süleyman Ateş ile Söyleşi," *Kur'ân Mesajı—İlmî Araştırmalar Dergisi*

Ateş has written and translated more than 100 publications on various theological topics in Islam that continue to be re-printed. Originally in Turkish or Arabic, they have a didactic, apologetic and descriptive style. As to the content, almost all Islamic disciplines are represented, with a focus on *tafsîr*, *taşawwuf* and *fiqh*. His most important and best-known work is *Yüce Kur'an'ın Çağdaş Tefsiri* (*The Contemporary Interpretation of the Sublime Qur'an*) in 12 volumes, which he completed over a period of twenty years. His life's work, *Kur'an Ansiklopedisi: Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (Istanbul 1997-2003), consists of 30 volumes. Perhaps for the first time in the history of Qur'anic exegesis, in this *Encyclopaedia* Ateş interprets the Qur'an according to selected terms focused on individual themes. From 1997 to 2000, he published a journal entitled *Kur'an Mesajı* (*Message of the Qur'an*), in which he tried to present his ideas in a simple way and position himself vis-à-vis current Islamic issues and questions. Two of Ateş's works have been translated into German, and one of these also into English.<sup>20</sup> He has also written a detailed autobiography.<sup>21</sup> It is worth investigating whether this autobiography is the first to have been written by a Muslim theologian in Republican Turkey since 1923. Ateş's novel exegetical approaches have been analysed in a dissertation by Abdullah Takim.<sup>22</sup> Some of these results are presented here.

In his 12 volume commentary of the Qur'an, titled *Yüce Kur'an'ın Çağdaş Tefsiri: The Contemporary Interpretation of the Sublime Qur'an* (Istanbul 1988-1992), he rejects superstition and advocates a Qur'anic enlightenment.<sup>23</sup> In his book *Yeniden İslâma: Anew to Islam* (Istanbul 1997) he brings together many of his original thoughts which he portrayed in detail in his commentary on the Qur'an. Subtitled *Kur'an-ı Kerim'in Evrensel Mesajı* (*The universal message of the Sublime Qur'an*), this book, according to Ateş, has been written "to show the truths of Islam, the

---

1 (1997): 66–75; Süleyman Ateş, *Bir ömür böyle geçti* (2 vols.; Istanbul: Yeni Ufuklar Neşriyat, [2007]).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Süleyman Ateş, *Die geistige Einheit der Offenbarungsreligionen* (trans. Abdullah Takim; Istanbul: Yeni Ufuklar, 1998). This book has also been translated into English: Süleyman Ateş, "The Spiritual Unity of the Revealed Religions: İlahî Dinlerin Ruhbirliği," (trans. Abdullah Takim and Holger Brune), *Journal of Religious Culture* 117 (2008): 1–19; Süleyman Ateş, *Die Ziele des Korans* (trans. Abdullah Takim; Istanbul: Yeni Ufuklar, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Ateş, *Bir ömür böyle geçti*.

<sup>22</sup> Abdullah Takim, *Koranexegese im 20. Jahrhundert: islamische Tradition und neue Ansätze in Süleyman Ateş's "Zeitgenössischem Korankommentar"* (Istanbul: Yeni Ufuklar, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Süleyman Ateş, *Yüce Kur'an'ın Çağdaş Tefsiri* (12 vols.; Istanbul: Yeni Ufuklar, 1988–1992), 4:489 ff.

spiritual unity of the revealed religions, and the enlightened path of the Qur'ân". Everybody who has made use of his 30-volume *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ân* and has read some of his articles concerning revival in Islam is in no doubt that here, too, Ateş advocates enlightenment through the Qur'ân. In an interview, he stated:

At a certain point I noticed that the Qur'ân has not been fully understood. The Qur'ân still remains unexplored. I admit there is a living religion, but this lived religion is basically not a religion of the Qur'ân. What is hereby understood as religion is not what is dealt with as faith in the Qur'ân itself. I, on the contrary, am more interested in strengthening and highlighting the faith of the Qur'ân against superstition as well as demonstrating the pure religion of the Qur'ân, which is based on the Qur'anic faith itself.<sup>24</sup>

## 2.1. The dynamic spirit of the word of God and the universal message of the Qur'ân

Süleyman Ateş's intention in writing his commentary on the Qur'ân was, in simple terms, to liberate it from the various interpretative additions and accretions of the exegetes and to present it authentically as it is.<sup>25</sup> Far from innovative, this approach has also been taken by many other Islamic scholars in modern times.<sup>26</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, for example, voices the concern of Islamic reformers in the following way: "The reformers—beginning with Shah Wali Allah—knew that among the countless comments, super commentaries and scholia, which had been placed around the Qur'anic text during the previous centuries, the dynamic spirit of the word of God was stifled and congealed so that the believer had no direct

<sup>24</sup> Selçuk, "Prof. Dr. Süleyman Ateş ile Söyleşi," 68.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Ateş, *Yüce Kur'an'ın Çağdaş Tefsiri*, 1:59.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt*, 97; Navid Kermani, *Offenbarung als Kommunikation: Das Konzept wahy in Naşr Hâmid Abū Zayds Maḥmū an-naşş* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1996), 16, 23. In relation to this, Rotraud Wielandt for example, states the following: "What once was originally meant by the testimonies of the book of revelation is often buried under later interpretations and has to be reconstructed by historical research" (Rotraud Wielandt, *Offenbarung und Geschichte im Denken moderner Muslime* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1971), 13). Wielandt's view is also shared by Naşr Hâmid Abū Zayd (cf. Naşr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Islam und Politik: Kritik des religiösen Diskurses* (trans. Chérifa Magdi, introduction by Navid Kermani; Frankfurt a. M.: dipa-Verlag, 1996), 194 ff.).

access to it.”<sup>27</sup> In addition, Ateş supports the idea that one should develop a critical attitude towards Islamic religious culture. Through this, Ateş believes, Islam can be rethought and reconceptualised. In this way, principles universal with regard to time and location and hence the universal message and dimension of the Qur’ân would be revealed. The Qur’ân is thus reinterpreted; and it is demonstrated that from the standpoint of the Qur’ân there are no problems with accepting human rights and democracy. In other words, an adjustment might be possible through a proper reading and understanding of the Qur’ân. Before attempting this, it is necessary to find one’s way to the true message of the Qur’ân, which has been obfuscated by classic commentaries. That is why Süleyman Ateş criticises the classical discourse among scholars of religions, which actually obscures the true light of the Qur’ân.<sup>28</sup> Only by liberating the Qur’ân from the shackles of tradition, while simultaneously appealing to a new understanding of the text, its true face can be revealed. Hence, the true objectives (*amaç*) and intentions of the Qur’ân must be determined, because it is through these that the good can be differentiated from the bad or forbidden. For Ateş, terms such as renewal (*tajdîd*) and independent reasoning (*ijtihād*) are in the foreground of this process, while he rejects blind imitation (*taqlîd*), exaggeration and fanaticism in religion.<sup>29</sup>

According to Ateş, the erroneous interpretation of Islam by scholars of religion is one of the reasons for the Islamic world’s backwardness. It is

---

<sup>27</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Muhammad Iqbal: Prophetischer Poet und Philosoph* (Munich: Diederichs, 1989), 81–82.

<sup>28</sup> Süleyman Ateş criticises a particular political-theological discourse tradition in Islamic intellectual history, which has led to the emergence of various schools of law and theology. Early in Islamic history, religious movements have emerged because of political and theological disagreements. This led to divisions of the religious community. As a result, various schools of theology were created later. In the genesis and development of the schools of law political and theological movements also played an important role. If we look more closely into the various schools of theology (e.g. Ash’arîtes, Mâturîdites, Mu’tazilites, Shiites), schools of law (e.g. Hānafîs, Shafî’îs, Mālikîs, Hānbalîs, Dja’farîs, Zaydis), philosophical schools of thought and various mystical movements, it becomes, according to Ateş, quite obvious that the biased interpretation of the Qur’ân by these various schools has obscured the true light of the Qur’ân.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Ateş, *Yüce Kur’ân’ın Çağdaş Tefsîri*, 1:278–79; 3:40–41, 211, 530; 7:84; 11:215–476. See also Süleyman Ateş, “Modernleşme ve Haram Anlayışı,” in *İslam ve Modernleşme. II. Kulu Doğum İlmî Toplantısı* (ed. A. Topaloğlu; İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1997), 143–44; Süleyman Ateş, *Kur’ân Ansiklopedisi* (30 vols.; İstanbul: KUBA, 1997–2003), 7:220–27.

the narrow, hair-splitting and contradictory interpretation of the Qur'ân by these scholars of religion in particular which is partly responsible for the limitations that Muslim individuals as well as Muslim societies are struggling with. Consequently, this has contributed to stifling of the spirit of the revelation and the inhibition of progress.<sup>30</sup> This position is shared by other Islamic modernists as well. Annemarie Schimmel summarises the approach of these modernists as follows:

Any reform movement in Islam has to be oriented towards the Qur'ân. [...] [The modernists] came to the conclusion that it was the Muslims themselves who over the centuries had piled up a plethora of second- and third-hand literature, commentaries as well as super commentaries around the simple core of the Qur'ân, and by doing so almost choked the living and creative breath of the Holy Book. According to modernists of all strands, it is high time to return to the Qur'anic revelation as the only basis of Islam [...]; interpreted correctly, the Qur'ân instructs the believer in regards to every possible case concerning the private and the political, the religious and social realm.<sup>31</sup>

## 2.2. Returning to the Qur'ân and the actualization of the original Qur'anic message

Ateş's proposition can be summarised in the following way: In order to develop intellectually, in all social fields, sciences and disciplines, particularly in the natural sciences and the humanities, Muslims must return to the pure Qur'anic message. But before they can rely on the Qur'anic message, the revelation has to be understood in a correct manner. This can be described as a *return to the Qur'ân*.<sup>32</sup> From this argument follows a need both to translate the Qur'ân into other languages and to produce commentaries on it. In the Turkish context, this "return to the Qur'ân" was initiated by Süleyman Ateş and it is precisely this approach that has engendered criticism and praise at the same time.

Süleyman Ateş's approach, investigating the relevance of the Qur'anic message for Muslims as well as for the whole of humanity in our present time, places the Holy Book at the heart of his theological study. He begins from the Qur'ân alone and not from any other intellectual approach. In other words, Ateş neither reads any kind of modern achievements into the

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Ateş, *Yüce Kur'an'ın Çağdaş Tefsîri*, 4:534; 7:84. See also Ateş, "Modernleşme ve Haram Anlayışı," 140–41.

<sup>31</sup> *Der Koran* (trans. Max Henning, introduction and commentaries by Annemarie Schimmel; Stuttgart: Reclam, 1992), 21–22.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Ateş, *Yüce Kur'an'ın Çağdaş Tefsîri*, 2:425; 4:98; 6:243.

Qur'ān nor does he endeavour to find these within the Qur'ān as some other exegetes, and also Muslim engineers, doctors and scientists, have tried to do.<sup>33</sup> This latter approach has been criticised by Ateş since, if understood as absolute, this would entail the very possibility of harming, as well as misleading Muslims. Precisely by dint of the changing nature of scientific knowledge, there exists the risk that previous interpretations of Qur'ānic verses might be subject to over-hasty reformulation. Ateş gives the following example to highlight this crucial point: At one stage in the Middle Ages Muslims, with the help of the Qur'ān, tried to prove that the world was flat. After it was scientifically proven that the world was spherical, Muslims applied the same method to search for verses in the Qur'ān which would indicate that the world is round. According to Ateş, people—influenced by the age they live in—try to demonstrate that the knowledge of the times can also be found in the Qur'ān. Instead of doing this, one should understand the original message of the Qur'ān and, by so doing, give the modern Muslims a *vade mecum* by which they can adapt to their environment. A strong Muslim personality should therefore receive help from a new understanding of the Qur'ān rooted in its original message in order to cope with modern-day requirements. Being of divine origin, the Qur'ān as a message will never lose its radiance. That is why, according to Ateş, it should not be misused as an ideological instrument for certain purposes, be they political or scientific.<sup>34</sup> Exactly this has been done for centuries.<sup>35</sup> The meaningfulness and purpose of the Qur'ānic revelation has been forgotten. What kind of book is the Qur'ān? For which purpose has it been revealed? Is the Qur'ān, as many claim, a book in which you can find everything you are seeking? In relation to this, Ateş reiterates the following:

Everyone found in the Qur'ān what he was looking for, thus the Qur'ān in the hands of the philosophers was a book of philosophy, in the hands of the 'Brethren of Purity' (*Ikhwān aş-Şafā'*) and the Esoterists (*Bātinīs*) a book of riddles, or even a book (full) of secrets; in the hands of the *Sufīs* a

---

<sup>33</sup> This method of interpretation, which is not only practiced by exegetes of the Qur'ān, but commonly applied and advocated by scientists, doctors and engineers, has many supporters in Turkey. For this particular approach to the Qur'ān, named *tafsīr 'ilmī* (scientific exegesis), see: R. Wielandt, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Early Modern and Contemporary," *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* 2:129–31; Wild, *Mensch, Prophet und Gott im Koran*, 37–38; Celal Kırca, *Kur'ân-ı Kerîm ve Modern İlimler* (Istanbul: Marifet Yayınları, 1982); Celal Kırca, *Kur'ân-ı Kerîm'de Fen Bilimleri* (Istanbul: Marifet Yayınları, 1984).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Ateş, *Yüce Kur'ân'ın Çağdaş Tefsiri*, 3:448–49; 5:132–33.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 4:147.

mystical book in which every single verse carries seven meanings independently of one another; in the hands of the extreme Shi'is a book of the denomination that extols the sanctity of 'Alī and his sons; in the hands of the sects like the *Hurūfīs* and *Baktāshīs* a diviner's book from whose verses future events can be read through the practice of onomancy (*jafr*), which is based on calculating characters, which in turn has its roots in the Jewish kabbala; and in the hands of the modernists who have emerged in the last century, it is a book of astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology. [...] These are all extreme approaches and practices. The aim of the Qur'ān is not to teach the people astronomy and physics or to re-narrate history, but to give them examples from their current surroundings and from the past in order to guide them to the right way.<sup>36</sup>

### 2.3. Searching for support in one's own spiritual heritage (*Rückhalt im Eigenen*)

The above comment by Ateş can be seen as an attempt to explain the true message of the Qur'ān as well as to incorporate Islam into the modern era or rather to islamise modernity to a certain extent through the Qur'ān. However, one must also note that there is a “large number of interpretations of Islam” available,<sup>37</sup> all of them explicitly articulating a claim to truth.<sup>38</sup> In writing the commentary, Ateş not only attempts to propose a more contemporary interpretation of the Qur'ān, but he is also interested in conceptualising a modern comprehension of Islam itself, which, in turn, claims to represent a more coherent understanding of the primeval Islam. This approach can be interpreted and explained by Grunebaum's thesis which defines “modern Islam as a search for cultural identity”.<sup>39</sup> Thus, Ateş is searching for the *cultural identity* of Muslims in the Qur'ān. According to Ateş, it is through the true doctrine of the Qur'ān that Muslims should regain strength and thus resolve their contemporary problems.<sup>40</sup> Walther Braune probably would say if he was to describe the approach of Ateş that it is precisely through the Qur'ān that Ateş is searching for “support in one's own spiritual heritage” (*Rückhalt im Eigenen*), and that this is why he wants to understand the primary sources

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 1:55. See also ibid., 5:132–33.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Waardenburg, “Islam studied as a symbol and signification system,” *Humaniora Islamica* 2 (1974), 284.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Jane I. Smith, “Continuity and Change in the Understanding of ‘Islām’,” *Islamic Quarterly* 16 (1972), 121–39; J. Waardenburg, “Mustashrikūn,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 7:750b.

<sup>39</sup> Waardenburg, “Mustashrikūn,” 7:750a.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Ateş, *Yüce Kur'an'ın Çağdaş Tefsiri*, 1:252–53; 5:132–33.

of Islam correctly.<sup>41</sup> However, this return to the primary sources of Islam, meaning primarily the Qur'ān, is not a return that stops at the age of the Prophet, which is to say that it is not a “return to the Middle Ages”.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, one can illustrate this approach in the words of Asaf A. A. Fyzee, an Indian scholar of Islam. On this point, Fyzee argues:

Therefore, to me it is clear, that we cannot go ‘back’ to the Koran, we have to go ‘forward’ with it. I wish to *understand* the Koran as it was understood by the Arabs of the time of the Prophet only to *reinterpret* it and apply it to my conditions of life and to believe in it, so far as it appeals to me as a 20th century man.<sup>43</sup>

## 2.4. Qur'ānic rationality as a means of criticism of religious tradition

Ateş uses the traditional method of exegesis to discuss the different approaches of the exegetes of the Qur'ān. He wants to defeat them with their own weapons. In this way, Ateş develops a *Qur'ānic rationality* which, though not presented as a clear-cut theory, is developed along the lines of Qur'ānic study itself, based on the notion that in the Qur'ān there are no contradictions. Hayri Kırbaçoğlu, a well-known theologian from Turkey, discusses Ateş's lecture on *Why one should write a new interpretation of the Qur'ān* and argues that it is in his comments that Ateş has *developed a rationality based on the Qur'ān*. Furthermore, according to Kırbaçoğlu, Ateş has carried out pioneering work, most notably in the Turkish context, and remains an example for theologians. Ateş's method should be refined in order to develop fruitful results within the Islamic sciences so as not to contradict reason.<sup>44</sup>

According to Ateş and other Muslim theologians, there is an inherent logic to the Qur'ān that is free of contradictions. This logic can be determined by an analysis of the Qur'ān but is also pointed out by the Qur'ān itself. The Qur'ān reminds us of this rationality in the following

---

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Fritz Steppat, “Die politische Rolle des Islam,” in *XXI. Deutscher Orientalistentag: vom 24. bis 29. März 1980 in Berlin* (ed. F. Steppat; Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1983), 24.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>43</sup> Asaf Ali Asghar Fyzee, *A modern approach to Islam* (Bombay: Asia Publ. House, 1963), 94. See also Wielandt, *Offenbarung und Geschichte*, 159.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Süleyman Ateş, “Kur'an-ı Kerim Tefsirinin Yeniden Yapılmasını Gerektiren Sebepler,” in *Kur'anı Nasıl Anlamalıyız?* (ed. KURAV; İstanbul: Rağbet Yayınları, 2002), 157–61 [contribution to a discussion].