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Modern Qur'ānic Hermeneutics in Turkey

1 Terminology and Delimitation

Before we really start, let us clarify three conceptual issues raised by the chapter's headline. "Modern" means here that late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century reflections will be presented.¹ The term "Qur'ānic hermeneutics" works on several levels. Three distinctions may be helpful. First, between 'explicit' and 'implicit' hermeneutics. What the interpreters say they do when interpreting is 'explicit' hermeneutics. It may be quite different from what they actually do: their implicit hermeneutics. A second distinction is that between the Qur'ān as 'object' and as 'subject.' The 'object' branch of Qur'ānic hermeneutics reviews what *interpreters* of the Qur'ān do and claim they do. The 'subject' branch of Qur'ānic hermeneutics studies how the *Qur'ān* interprets itself. Again, the 'implicit/explicit' distinction is helpful.² A third dis-

1 Cf., on this and the following themes: Akif Koç and İsmail Albayrak, eds., *Tefsire Akademik Yaklaşımlar* (Ankara: Otto, 2013); and by the present author: Felix Körner, *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkish University Theology. Rethinking Islam* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2005) (used here throughout the article); Körner, "Turkish Theology Meets European Philosophy. Emilio Betti, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur in Muslim Thinking," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 62 (2006): 805–9; Körner, "When Islam Receives Criticism. Historical Koran Exegesis in Today's Turkey," *Rosenzweig Jahrbuch* 2 (2007): 153–69; Körner, "Bibelhermeneutik. Islamwissenschaftlich," "Geschichte und Geschichtlichkeit. Islamwissenschaftlich," and "Historizität. Islamwissenschaftlich," in *Lexikon der Bibelhermeneutik. Begriffe – Methoden – Theorien – Konzepte*, ed. Oda Wischmeyer (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 209–10, 266, 306–7. Further literature in the following footnotes.

2 Since this is less widely seen, we need to explicate it briefly. Studying the Qur'ān's own ('subject') implicit hermeneutics is to uncover the Qur'ān's *de facto* intertextual strategies. Two examples may be adduced. First, how does the text later *explain* an unclear expression used previously? A marker at the beginning of such explicatory passages can be *yas'alūnaka 'an*, "they ask you about . . ." or the didactic question *mā adrāka mā*, "how can you know what . . . is?" Second, how does the text later *re-interpret* motifs which were used differently before (*interpretative Fortschreibung*, Nicolai Sinai). For example, how is the understanding of the figure of Ibrāhīm updated in light of the hijra? On this, cf., Angelika Neuwirth, *Koranforschung – eine politische Philologie? Bibel, Koran und Islamentstehung im Spiegel spätantiker Textpolitik und moderner Philologie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), and already her dictum that the exegesis of the Qur'ān begins while the genesis of the Qur'ān is still on the way: Neuwirth, "Koran," in *Grundriß der arabischen Philologie*, vol. 2, *Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. Hartmut Gätje (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 1987), 96–135, 121; further: Nicolai Sinai, *Fortschreibung und Auslegung. Studien zur frühen Koraninterpretation* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 59. The Qur'ān's own ('subject') explicit hermeneutics is what the Qur'ānic text itself says about its usage. We might call that the meta-textual rules: clarification is up to God (Q 75:19); and interpretation is not up to human opinion, Q 3:7:

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tion needs to be applied when different ‘object’ hermeneutics are being studied: namely, the difference between ‘descriptive’ and ‘normative’ hermeneutics needs to be seen. Descriptive Qur’ānic hermeneutics *portrays* endeavors of other interpreters, e.g., exegetes who are considered classical. Normative Qur’ānic hermeneutics *proposes* models of understanding the Qur’ān today. The restriction to Turkey means that we will present authors who live and work in the country thus called. Sometimes, however, the linguistically ‘Turkic’ world, or the Ottoman empire, or emigrant authors with a primarily Turkish academic career, will also be taken into consideration.

With these clarification in mind, we can now draw this chapter’s delimitation: it focuses on “explicit,” “object,” “normative” Qur’ānic hermeneutics in Turkey. For the other areas brief indications may suffice:

“Descriptive” Qur’ānic hermeneutics is quite common, also among Turkish authors.³

The “subject” branch of Qur’ānic hermeneutics is, in Turkey, a new area of research.⁴

“Implicit” Turkish Qur’ān hermeneutics can be observed, e.g., in the various Tefsir/Meâl works or in popularizing modernists.⁵

2 Historical, Socio-political, Intellectual, and Academic Contexts

In Turkey, most producers of explicit Qur’ānic hermeneutics are professional academics; they may be working at centers for Qur’ānic studies – e.g., Kur’an Araştırmaları Merkezi (KURAMER), İslam Araştırmaları Merkezi (İSAM) – or, typically, at the universities’ divinity schools. The paradoxical history of the establishment of these schools deserves attention. They are simultaneously traditional – and they are a novelty; They continue Ottoman lines, and take up Western structures; their foundation puts into action a specifically Kemalist agenda – and may be relevant for global Islam.

“Some of its verses are definite in meaning (*muḥkam*), these are the mother of the Scripture – and others are ambiguous (*mutashābih*). The perverse at heart eagerly pursue the ambiguities in their attempt to make trouble and to pin down a meaning (*ta’wīl*); but only God knows the true meaning.”

3 İsmail Cerrahoğlu, *Tefsir Tarihi* (Ankara: Fecr Yayınevi, 2009); Cerrahoğlu, *Tefsir Usûlü* (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2016); Muhsin Demirci, *Tefsir Tarihi* (İstanbul: MÜİFAV, 2014); Demirci, *Tefsir Usulü* (İstanbul: MÜİFAV, 2016).

4 Esra Gözeler, “Surelerin Mekkiliği ve Medeniliği. 22/el-Ḥacc Suresi Örneği,” *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 58 (2017): 69–108.

5 Cf., on Salih Akdemir: Felix Körner, ed. and trans., *Glaube in Gesellschaft. Ankaraner Stimmen zur Politischen Theologie. Ausgewählte Texte übersetzt und kommentiert von Felix Körner SJ* (Freiburg: Herder, 2019): 229–63; on Yaşar Nuri Öztürk: Felix Körner, ed. and trans., *Alter Text – Neuer Kontext. Koranhermeneutik in der Türkei heute. Ausgewählte Texte, übersetzt und kommentiert von Felix Körner SJ* (Freiburg: Herder, 2006, 2015²), 209–43, and Kathrin Eith, *Koranexegese bei Yaşar Nuri Öztürk. Ein traditionskritischer Entwurf des Islams in der Türkei* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2013).

2.1 From Istanbul to Ankara

The Ottoman Ministry of Education, established in 1847/1263, inaugurated a European-style educational system designed to replace the traditional Islamic school (medrese).⁶ In 1900/1318, a Department of Theology (*‘ulūm-i ‘āliye-i dīniye shu‘besi*) was created at the University (*Dār ül-fünun*, Istanbul). In 1910/1328, a twelve-year pre-university course of theology was established. It included only traditional subjects and textbooks, with one exception: in the seventh grade, “modern physics” (*hikmet-i cedide*) was to be studied. In 1914/1332, the university department was replaced with a specialists’ school at Istanbul’s Süleymāniye Mosque. The school consisted of the three traditional departments: Tefsīr and Ḥadīth; Fiqh; Kelām and Hikmet (the latter covered the classically philosophical disciplines from cosmology to ethics). A law from 1917/1335 added a fourth department, namely, Literature.

In 1923/1341, the Republic of Turkey was founded. Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) was the key figure in the process. He epitomized his project programmatically with the declaration, “We will turn ourselves into the most modern nation.” As a consequence, all medreses were brought under the authority of the Ministry of Education, which ultimately led to their closure.

In 1924/1342, the Great National Assembly (in Ankara) made three decisions relevant to our topic. First, the caliphate was abolished. Second, the foundation of *İmām Ḥatīp Mektepleri* was decreed: schools for prayer leaders and Friday preachers. Soon, Turkey saw twenty-nine such schools. The Istanbul school’s director had an “enthusiastic belief in the possibilities of reforming Islam to become a vital and inspiring force in the life of new Turkey.”⁷ But with a continuous decline in attendance, by 1932/1351 all *İmām Ḥatīp* (from 1928/1346 on, spelled “İmam Hatip”) schools were closed. The only surviving, indeed thriving, type of junior theological education was the *dār ül-qurrā* (school for Qur’ān recitation).

Third, the establishment of a Faculty of Theology at the University (of Istanbul) was decided upon. It was to be structured according to “modern scientific principles.” But its students’ numbers were decreasing rapidly, together with those of the İmam Hatip schools. In 1929/1347, a decree by the Ministry of Education abolished Arabic and Persian classes from the high school curriculum. Subsequently, knowledge of these languages was no longer a prerequisite for admission to the Faculty of Theology. In 1933/1352 and 1934/1353, laws regulated a reform of the University. The Faculty of Theology was turned into the “Institute of Islam Researches” (İslām Tedkikleri Enstitüsü) and was now considered a department of the Literature Faculty’s Oriental Institute.

6 Cf., Gotthard Jäschke, “Der Islam in der neuen Türkei. Eine rechtsgeschichtliche Untersuchung,” *WI* 1 (1951): 1–174; corrections and additions: *ibid.* 2 (1953): 278–87; Howard A. Reed, “The Faculty of Divinity at Ankara. Part I,” *MW* 46 (1956): 295–312; Reed, “The Faculty of Divinity at Ankara. Part II,” *MW* 47 (1957): 22–35; Körner, *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics*, 48–62.

7 Jäschke, “Der Islam in der neuen Türkei,” 122.

In 1938/1357, Atatürk died. In 1947/1366, Turkey became a multi-party democracy. The demand for better training of Islamic religious staff was voiced. Private seminaries were opened, but students had to graduate from a secular school before being admitted to them. Less than a year later, however, parliamentarians demanded a re-opening of state-run preachers' schools. The atmosphere was heated. Two contemporary voices⁸ illustrate the argument and the tensions:

We have to save from extinction, or rather, to train anew, a generation of religious staff, both knowledgeable (bilgili) and patriotic (vatansever). (M. Tuncer)

Not in the least shall we verge from the principle of laicism. Religion however is not only the bond between the individual and God. It is also a social fact, a matter of the community (cemaat işi). In the countryside, there are often no more religious representatives (hocalar) to bury the dead. If we do not educate religious staff, superstition will prevail. Already, we hear about heavenly letters (semavî mektublar) passing from hand to hand. Religious fanaticism is bad. But fanatic irreligion does not match with our tolerant society, either. It was not in order to ban Islam from Turkey that we accepted the principle of laicism. Against the Soviet advance, we have to utilize the force of the Islamic Belt, stretching from Java to the Atlantic Ocean. (Cihat Baban)

In 1948/1367, the reinstitution of İmam Hatip schools was decreed. Unlike before, they would no longer be under the jurisdiction of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), but under the Ministry of Education. This decision aimed to prevent a resurgence of the dualism of religious and secular education, of medreseli/mektebli mentality "still existent in oriental countries," as noted by Minister of Education Hasan Tahsin Banguoğlu (1904–1989/1322–1409).

Also in 1948/1367, the People's Party decided to establish a School of Islamic Theology in Ankara; since Turkish university structures follow German models, it was not named "School" but "Faculty (fakülte)". In 1949/1368, the Great National Assembly issued the relevant law. It was Banguoğlu again who spoke programmatically at the occasion. He demanded that the Faculty should counter reactionary movements: "It is a torch which the fabulists flee like bats." He suggested that on top of the classical canon, the Faculty should offer courses in psychology, sociology, general and comparative religious studies. In addition to Arabic and Persian, European languages should be taught; and alongside teachers from the former Istanbul Faculty, some lecturers from other Islamic countries should be employed, e.g., from Pakistan. Perhaps, Banguoğlu said, it was due to the revolutionary atmosphere that the old Faculty had been unable to find a sufficient number of students; with more than one hundred young men following the İmam Hatip courses in 1949/1368, things seemed to have changed. When Ankara University's president Hikmet Birand (d. 1972/1392) welcomed the new Faculty to the 1949/50/1368/69 winter term, he said: "The re-

⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, the following quotes are from Jäschke, "Der Islam in der neuen Türkei", 125 and 124f., my translation from Jäschke's German. He marks out the mention of the Atlantic Ocean with: "[!]".

ligious spirit can be a great power for Enlightenment (aydınlatici). [. . .] Religious reforms accomplished in past centuries by individuals are today being brought about by life itself, by society. To observe and record these events and, if necessary, take the leading role is the task of an alert institute of religion.”

The Ankara Faculty saw immediate resistance in the country, both from the traditionalist and the secularist/revolutionary wings of the (ruling) People's Party. The traditionalists lamented subordination to the government. The secularists wanted to see religion confined to the private realm. We can identify those tensions also in light of the Ankara Faculty's name: İlahiyat Fakültesi. The designation *ilâhiyyât* appears in many classical works of theology. But Arabic does not use the word for the whole discipline of ‘theology’; it can, however, be used to mean parts of it: ‘metaphysics,’ ‘doctrine of God,’ or ‘speculative theology.’ In Turkish, by contrast, the name itself was used for the whole of theology, and as a marker of the new agenda – already for the short-lived 1924/1342 Istanbul institution. The 1949/1368 project explicitly wanted to avoid extremes. Neither did the founders have in mind another *kullîyyat ash-shar‘a* in a closed-in *madrasa* atmosphere, nor a mere philosophical, let alone sociological reflection on religion. Their intention was, rather, explicitly “Garptaki örneklerine benzer bir ilâhiyat fakültesinin kurulmasını – to establish a Divinity School similar to models in the West”;⁹ that is, a Faculty of Theology, just like a “Katolik Fakültesi, Protestan Fakültesi.”¹⁰ That meant that it needed to be “ilmî”: scholarly, scientific. What is “scientific” theology? The pedagogue and writer İsmail Hakkı Baltacıoğlu (d. 1978/1368) explicated this in parliament: “Faculties, because they are houses of science, strive for comparison, empirical knowledge, and eventually, if possible, for explanation. So, as much as the [medrese] is subjective, the [faculty] is objective. This is the government's notable will: to create a Faculty of scientific dignity, of scientific character.”¹¹

9 İsmail (İsmayıl) Hakkı Baltacıoğlu published several titles in the field of religion, too; most notably, an article “Towards Religion,” in which he argues that religion is not only the source of social institutions but also lives within these institutions, and life is therefore as impossible without religion as it is without blood (“Dine Doğru,” *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 6 (1957): 44–59. The above quote is from what he said in Turkish Parliament on June 4, 1949: *T.B.M.M. Tutanak Dergisi*, Dönem: VIII, Cilt: 20, Toplantı: 3, 101. Birleşim (4. VI. 1949): 279, accessed online on April 24, 2020, <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanaklar/TUTANAK/TBMM/d08/c020/tbmm08020101.pdf>. Baltacıoğlu was in this very sentence quoting the justification (gerekeçe) of the bill that proposed the foundation of an “İslâm İlahiyatı Fakültesi,” as he called it (278).

10 Ibid., 278.

11 Ibid., 278. To give a live impression of the era's thinking in sharp contrast, a fuller quote is given here: The intention (Maksat) to establish a Divinity Faculty “is not to resurrect the medrese. For the difference between Faculty and medrese is quite fundamental. It is this: medrese studies are text-positivist and a priori. Faculties, because they are houses of science, strive for comparison, empirical knowledge and eventually, if possible, for explanation. So, as much as the first is subjective, the second is objective. This is the government's notable will: to create a faculty of scientific dignity, of scientific character. – Medreseyi diriltmek değildir. Çünkü fakülte ile medreseyi ayıran çok temelli bir karakter vardır. O da şudur: Medresenin çalışması nassi, apriori, kablettécübüdir. Fakülteler, ilim evleri olduğundan, bunlar

2.2 From Ankara to Turkey and to Europe

Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi (AÜİF, Ankara Divinity School) became the model for many analogous foundations in Turkey. Between 1959/1378 and 1982/1402, eight Higher Islam Institutes were established to train religious education teachers and employees of the Presidency of Religious Affairs. In 1982/1402, seven of the eight institutes were converted into İlahiyat Faculties. Beginning in 1987/1407, many more Faculties of Theology were founded in Turkey. By 2005/1426, there were twenty-five such schools, all at public universities. Under the rule of the AK Party, in 2008/1429 private universities were also allowed to establish İlahiyat Faculties. By 2020/1441, more than 110 such schools had been founded in Turkey.

Kemal Atatürk's project was nothing less than a cultural revolution. Present-day Turkey seems to be undergoing a second such revolution. Especially after the 2016/1437 coup d'état attempt, Turkish state action and social atmosphere interfere with academic freedom. Theologians, like other academics, perceive the transformation of Turkey as having led them into "a society of fear." Not only for that reason, several leading figures in Qur'anic hermeneutics have moved to European universities. This helps spread the previously rather local impact of Turkish theological approaches internationally. Ideas on Qur'anic hermeneutics developed by Turkish authors are, however, also disseminated through other channels:

- a. participation in international conferences;
- b. creation of specialized theological degree programs for students of Turkish descent who have grown up in countries such as Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, or the U.S.;
- c. invitation of foreign interlocutors to the Turkish Faculties;
- d. publication in other languages (especially English and Arabic);
- e. involvement in multinational research projects (e.g., those initiated by Eugen-Biser-Stiftung);
- f. academic visits to other places of learning (e.g., the AÜİF – Pontifical Gregorian University scholarly exchange program, which goes back to 1986/1406).

3 Intellectual influences

The various approaches and authors draw from different sources, but ten factors can be seen as fairly common.

mukayeseye, müşahadeye ve en sonunda da, mümkün olursa, izaha çalışmaktadırlar. Yani birinci sübjektif olduğu kadar, ikincisi objektiftir. O halde Hükümetin şayanı dikkat olan isteği şudur; bütün mânasıyla ilim haysiyeti ve ilim karakteri taşıyan bir fakülte meydana getirmektir."

- a. Inner-Turkish exchange, debate, mutual challenging and cross-fertilization are, of course, a key factor.
- b. The Ankara Faculty was from its beginning a place where internationally renowned scholars from different backgrounds taught together, thus creating an atmosphere of free research and exchange.¹²
- c. Many of today's leading authors in Turkish Qur'ān hermeneutics mention as their own masters two Ankara theologians, namely Hüseyin Atay (1930–2023/1349–1445)¹³ and Mehmed Said Hatiboğlu (born 1930/1349).¹⁴
- d. The self-understanding of Turkish religious thought was already classically more open towards adaptation and philosophical reflection, thus contrasting itself against the Ḥanbalī legal school and Ash'arī *kalām*, both of which were considered more typically “Arab.” The Ottoman empire's majority legal school was, conversely, Ḥanafī, and its theology was inspired by the elegant syntheses of Abū Maṣnūr al-Māturīdī (893–941/280–329). Being an Uzbek, he is happily accepted as a “Turk.”¹⁵
- e. Today's hermeneutically interested theologians can draw from an autochthonous Turkish tradition of Islamic thought responsive to modernity. Notably the Ottoman Empire's last decades had seen several reform thinkers;¹⁶ above all, Filibeli Ahmed Hilmi (1865–1914/1282–1332 from Plovdiv/Philippopolis, now Bulgaria), İzmirli İsmail Hakkı (1869–1946/1286–1365 from İzmir/Smyrna, Anatolia), and Musa Carullah Bigiyef (1875–1949/1292–1368, a Kazan Tatar).¹⁷
- f. Authors writing in Arabic are systematically read and received by today's Turkish theologians: both the classical exegetes and twentieth century figures (notably, Amīn al-Khulī, 'Ā'isha 'Abd ar-Raḥmān/Bint ash-Shāṭi', Ḥasan Ḥanafī, Naṣr Ḥamīd Abū Zayd).

12 Among the first professors were Muhammed Hamidullah (d. 2002/1423) from India, M. Tayyib Okıç (d. 1977/1397) from what is today Bosnia-Herzegovina, Annemarie Schimmel (d. 2003/1423) from Germany, and Muhammed Tanci (aṭ-Ṭanjī, d. 1974/1394) from Morocco.

13 Şaban Ali Düzgün, “Hüseyin Atay,” in *Çağdaş İslâm Düşüncüleri*, ed. Cağfer Karadaş (İstanbul: Ensar, 2009), 265–300; German translation and commentary in: Körner, *Glaube in Gesellschaft*, 23–80; Hüseyin Atay, *Kur'ana Göre Araştırmalar*, 7 vols. (Ankara: Atay ve Atay, 2013).

14 İhsan Işık, “Mehmed Said Hatiboğlu Hoca,” in *Türkiye Edebiyatçıları ve Kültür Adamları Ansiklopedisi*, ed. İhsan Işık (İstanbul: Elvan Yayınları, 2007²); Mehmed Said Hatiboğlu, *Müslüman Kültürü Üzerine* (Ankara: Kitâbiyât, 2004); Hatiboğlu, *Hz. Peygamber ve Kur'an Dışı Vahiy* (İstanbul: Otto, 2009).

15 Many books celebrate him as “the great Turkish thinker,” e.g. Ahmet Vehbi Ecer, *Büyük Türk Alimi Mâtürîdî* (İstanbul: Yesevi Yayıncılık, 2006), or the six-hundred-page congress volume, İsmail Kurt and Seyit Ali Tüz, eds., *Büyük Türk Bilgini İmâm Mâtürîdî ve Mâtürîdilik* (İstanbul: Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Vakfı Yayınları, 2012). A selection of Mâtürîdî's work has been translated into Turkish by the AÜİF theologian Sönmez Kutlu, *İmâm Mâtürîdî ve Maturidilik* (Ankara: Kitabiyat, 2011; Otto, 2018⁸).

16 Seminal is Rotraud Wielandt, “Main Trends of Islamic Theological Thought from the Late Nineteenth Century to Present Times,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: University Press, 2016): 707–64, especially: 727–32.

17 The *Ankara Okulu Yayınları* (cf., next section) provide 10 volumes of his work in modern Turkish.

- g. A marking influence was left among Turkish theologians by Fazlur Rahman, who visited Turkey for the first time in 1977/1397.
- h. Research periods abroad are also regularly mentioned as important inspirations by the authors, especially in Austria, France, Germany, the U.K. and the U.S., but also in Arab countries, Indonesia, or Malaysia.
- i. Western European scholars of Islam can have effects on Turkish theologians simply because their books are read in Turkey (in the original languages or in translation). So, a scholar of the Qur'ān such as Rudi Paret is sometimes mentioned as an inspiring challenge.
- j. Twentieth/twenty-first-century Western philosophers are being used by Turkish specialists in Qur'ānic hermeneutics. Names frequently mentioned in this context are Hans-Georg Gadamer,¹⁸ Paul Ricœur,¹⁹ and Jürgen Habermas.²⁰

4 The School of Ankara?

In Western perception, several of the authors to be discussed here are members of the “Ankara School” – if such a school can be said to exist. The name is now widely used, but it has also led to misunderstandings and rejections. An Ankara Ekolü did actually exist; however, that was a sociological movement of the early 1940s. The hermeneutical approach of the 1990s was never sufficiently homogenous to understand itself as one school; but the exegetes to be presented here were founding members of the books series named Ankara Okulu Yayınları: “Publications of the Ankara School.” The series has flourished since 2002/1423. It now numbers well over four-hundred volumes. So, is there a theological Ankara school after all? It was the publisher who chose the name of the series; and he was not thinking of a “school” in the sense of a tradition of thought (Turkish, *ekol*). He rather used the word *okul*, which (just like “school” in English) can also mean “faculty” in the sense of “authorized university department.” Furthermore, the members of Ankara University’s İlahiyat Fakültesi (i.e., Divinity School) never comprised “the” Ankara school. Rather, like any lively academic institution, its members have different, even opposing presuppositions, agendas, approaches, and intuitions.

¹⁸ Burhanettin Tatar, “Kur'an'ı Yorumlama Sorunu,” in *Kur'an ve Dil. Dilbilim ve Hermenötik Sempozyumu, 17–18 Mayıs 2001*, ed. Bekir Tileklioglu (Van: Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi, 2001), 493–508, German translation and commentary in: Körner, *Alter Text – Neuer Kontext*, 103–28.

¹⁹ Ömer Özsoy, “Kur'an hitabının tarihselliği ve tarihsel hitabın özgün anlamı sorunu,” in Ömer Özsoy, *Kur'an ve tarihsellik yazıları* (Ankara: Kitâbiyât, 2004), 77–101.

²⁰ Tahsin Görgün, *Anlam ve Yorum. Dini Metinlerin Anlaşılması ve Yorumlanması* (İstanbul: Gelenek Yayıncılık, 2003; Külliyyat Yayınları, 2019²); Görgün, *İlahi Sözün Gücü. Varlık ve Bilgi Kaynağı Olarak Kur'an* (İstanbul: Gelenek Yayıncılık, 2004; Külliyyat Yayınları, 2013²).

Beyond the question of its name, however, there is something like a hermeneutical Ankara School or, more precisely, there used to be. The authors designated themselves the “İslâmiyât Circle,” after the theological journal they founded in 1998/1419: *İslâmiyât*. In 1999/1420, some of the circle’s protagonists were still referring to themselves as a tradition of modernism.²¹ Soon, they would no longer use that self-designation; and ten years later, in July 2009/1430, they closed their platform, the *İslâmiyât* journal.²² Some authors have now parted ways in terms of habitation, profession, and opinion.

There are many presently active Turkish authors worth discussing, for example a faithful transmitter of Fazlur Rahman’s methodology: Adil Çiftçi (born 1963/1383), sociologist of religion by training;²³ or the profound and original exegete of the Qur’ân Halis Albayrak (born 1955/1374).²⁴ His Qur’ānic hermeneutics situates the process of understanding within a dynamic triangle: the Qur’ân, its addressee, and. All three are interwoven, each making its presence felt within the other – creating a dynamic of “witnessing” that allows the present-day reader to engage in “perceiving” the Qur’ân.

In what follows, however, we will study only the hermeneutical theories of four authors whose approaches are, each in his own way, marked by a reception of the Islamic exegetical tradition and of twentieth-century philosophy.

4.1 Mehmet Paçacı (born 1959/1378): Back to History

Mehmet Paçacı’s agenda might be condensed in the slogan “back to history.”²⁵ It should be taken, in Paçacı’s case, as a triple imperative:

- 1 Hark back to classical Islamic receptions of the Qur’ân: there, the recipients’ own historical situation played a highly relevant – and reflected – role.

²¹ Mehmet Paçacı and Yasin Aktay, “75 Years of Higher Religious Education in Modern Turkey,” *MW* 89 (1999): 398–413, 412.

²² A nine volume (7412 pp.) reprint makes the journal’s lively history accessible again: *İslâmiyât Dergisi. Koleksiyon* (Ankara: Otto, 2013).

²³ Körner, *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics*, 109–34.

²⁴ Halis Albayrak, *Tarihin İçinden Kur’an’ı Algılamak* (Istanbul: Şule, 2011).

²⁵ The present author has provided translations and evaluations of five articles by Paçacı in German:

- a. *The Qur’ân and I: how historical are we?:* “Kur’an ve Ben Ne Kadar Tarihseliz?,” originally in: *İslâmi Araştırmalar* 9 (1996): 119–34, edited version in the book of the same title: Mehmet Paçacı, *Kur’an ve Ben Ne Kadar Tarihseliz?* (Ankara: Ankara Okulu Yayınları, 2000), 53–79; German translation and commentary in: Körner, *Alter Text – Neuer Kontext*, 31–76.
- b. *What happened to the Qur’ân and its exegesis in modernity?:* “Çağdaş Dönemde Kur’an’a ve Tefsire Ne Oldu?,” *İslâmiyât* 6, no. 4 (2003): 85–104; German translation and commentary in: Körner, *Alter Text – Neuer Kontext*, 129–63.
- c. *An exegetical essay on Sura 110 from the point of view of the Semitic religious tradition:* “De Ki Allah ‘Bir’dir”: *ahad/ehâd*. Sami Dini Geleneği Perspektifinden İhlas Sûresi’nin Bir Tefsiri Denemesi,” *İslâmiyât* 1 (1996): 49–71, edited version in the book, *Kur’an ve Ben Ne Kadar Tarihseliz?*, 155–84; German translation and commentary in: Körner, *Alter Text – Neuer Kontext*, 165–207.

- 2 Similarly today, Islam should discern the present historical situation and its role in it, in order to become the historic agent it used to be.
- 3 For that, use historical methodology in reading the Qur'ān, so that you can distinguish what is contingent (contextually conditioned) in it from its absolute (ever-valid) message.

Mehmet Paçacı's approach is influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer's program of "rehabilitating tradition," and his analysis of the "historically effected consciousness" (taken by Paçacı as interest in the text's effects and efficacy throughout history). Also influential for Paçacı was Fazlur Rahman's description of the hermeneutical process as transposing a concrete Qur'ānic regulation – abstracted as a general rule – into a new situation. Like Fazlur Rahman, he wants to see that method not as something specifically modern but as something which classical Islamic authors have done, too. Paçacı, however, develops Fazlur Rahman's relatively conventional hermeneutics in three noteworthy directions. More than Fazlur Rahman,

- 1 he wants to see the contingent part of each Qur'ānic regulation as still meaningful: it is the Qur'ān's way of providing, alongside each revealed norm, a rule of how to apply it;
- 2 he is interested in the history of the Qur'ān's *de facto* reception, therefore studying especially its role in the decisions of judges (*quḍāt*): of all people, an exegete of the Qur'ān claims that rather than canonical Arabic *tafsīr*, the place that shows us how to bring back the Qur'ān to world relevance, is the Ottoman legal court;
- 3 he treasures Islam's classical eras (especially the Ottoman Empire) as models for today: of how Islam can prove to be the dynamic alternative to Western modernity.

Paçacı deploys his approach against three adversaries: European Christianity (copying Islam's historical consciousness, though claiming to be its creator), Western Orientalism (depriving Islam of its power to shape history), and the Qur'ānic revisionisms of Muḥammad 'Abduh and his disciples (modernizing Islam by jettisoning tradition).

Problematic in Paçacı's approach may be

- 1 his tendency to contrast two blocks – Islam and the West – in a "clash of civilizations" as two clear-cut identities, two given entities in rivalry, rather than seeing their interaction as an entangled history of collaboration, interpenetration, and development;

d. *What was classical Qur'ān exegesis?*: "Klasik Tefsir Neydi?," in *Klasığı yeniden düşünmek Sempozyumu*, ed. Halit Özkan (İstanbul: Klasik, 2006); German translation and commentary in: *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 58 (2007): 127–45.

e. *Critique of the modernist interpretation of "the woman in the Qur'ān"*: "Çağdaşçı 'Kur'an'da Kadın' Yorumunun Eleştirisi," in *Tarihten Günümüze Kur'an'a Yaklaşımlar*, eds. Bilal Gökkır et al. (İstanbul: İlim Yayma Vakfı, 2010), 559–85; German translation and commentary in: Körner, *Glaube in Gesellschaft*, 178–227.

- 2 his inclination to idealize life in past empires more than to ponder the problems of pre-modern social realities;
- 3 his undertone of providing arguments for an interventionist policy to recreate an Ottoman identity, rather than describing (and perhaps relying on) processes of historical growth.

The strengths of Mehmet Paçacı's work in Qur'ānic hermeneutics are

- 1 his interdisciplinary approach of broad technical, linguistic, philosophical, and historical scope;
- 2 his capacity to incorporate – felicitously deviating from ideologies of contrast – methods and insights from various eras and backgrounds;
- 3 his innovative look at the hermeneutical problem, re-contextualizing it in Muslims' present-day responsibility to shape the world.

4.2 Ömer Özsoy (born 1963/1383): Qur'ān as Interaction

Ömer Özsoy's approach marks a new step in historicizing the Qur'ān.²⁶ His core insight is that the Qur'ān cannot be read as a book. A book should, to some extent, be

- 1 complete in itself,
- 2 arranged according to a meaningful structure,
- 3 comprehensible in itself.

By contrast, Özsoy says, the Qur'ān can be understood only by a listener who is aware of witnessing a communication between God and the first Muslims, the verses being only one half of that communication. The other half is what the first Muslims – Muḥammad and his adherents – said (asked, criticized, etc.) and did (rightly or wrongly). In short, the Qur'ān is an event of interaction. Özsoy's term for that is “discourse” (hitap, söylem). Since the Qur'ān is an interactive discourse between God and human beings,

²⁶ Since 2004, many of Özsoy's publications are in German. The present author has provided translations and evaluations of two earlier articles by Özsoy in German:

- a. *Present-day Muslims' problems of renewal, and the Qur'ān*: “Çağdaş Müslümanların Yenilenme Sorunları ve Kur'an,” in Ömer Özsoy, *Kur'an ve tarihsellik yazıları* (Ankara: Kitâbiyât, 2004), 87–95, originally published as “Kur'an ve Müslümanların Yenilenme Sorunu,” in *Değişim Sürecinde İslam Sempozyumu. 20–22 Nisan 1996, Ankara* (Ankara: Turkey Diyanet Vakfı, 1997), 7–14; German translation and commentary in: Körner, *Alter Text – Neuer Kontext*, 15–30.
- b. *The historicity of the Qur'ānic discourse, and the problem of a historical discourse's original meaning*: “Kur'an hitabının tarihselliği ve tarihsel hitabın özgün anlamı sorunu,” in Ömer Özsoy, *Kur'an ve tarihsellik yazıları* (Ankara: Kitâbiyât, 2004), 53–66, which is a heavily edited version of “Kur'an hitabının tarihselliği ve tarihsel hitabın nesnel anlamı sorunu,” *İslâmî Araştırmalar* 9 (1996): 135–43; German translation and commentary in: Körner, *Alter Text – Neuer Kontext*, 77–101.

- 1 each verse needs to be heard together with its original historical situation;
- 2 the message for today is not in one verse or all verses but is the result of the Qur'ān's reaction to the first Muslims' behavior: what is criticized and what is approved of; and therefore,
- 3 the first Muslims' behavior that went uncriticized by the Qur'ān is also a message for today: a model to be followed;
- 4 a reading of the Qur'ān today, thus understood, can become a new interaction with God and a believer, who draws new conclusions for new situations.

Özsoy's approach is indebted to Paul Ricœur's conceptual proposal (le discours), to orality/literacy research, and to the scholarship of Mehmed Said Hatiboğlu. Three problems in his approach might be noted:

- 1 it is a methodological proposal that, so far, has not produced many concrete exegetical results;
- 2 it is highly speculative when it claims that what is not mentioned in the Qur'ān but can be reconstructed as practiced by Muḥammad and/or his followers can be taken to be divinely approved behavior;
- 3 while the Qur'ānic text is an objective given,²⁷ we have hardly any access to the first Muslims' actions beyond the Islamic traditions. They are historically dubitable. Critical research provides a fairly reliable account of what happened, but at the same time reminds us of its uncertainty.

These reservations do not thwart Özsoy's project; they rather shed a different light on it. In fact, his approach is interactive also in the sense that it is an invitation to scholars from several disciplines – history, philology, *tafsīr*, and hadith studies – to collaborate in reconstructing the second half of the Qur'ānic event: the history of the first community.

Inspired by Fazlur Rahman, Özsoy and Paçacı – each in his own way – look for the Qur'ān's meaning in its history. The following author holds a contrary position.

4.3 Burhanettin Tatar (born 1965/1385): God's Guidance on the Way

The Qur'ān's promise is to offer God's guidance (*hudā*), and that is what Muslims expect from the Qur'ān. So how to get it? By interpreting it; but according to Tatar,²⁸ interpre-

²⁷ Özsoy is well aware that such a statement is an exaggeration. There is much debate on the heterogeneity of the textual traditions and on the genesis of the *muṣḥaf*. Ömer Özsoy has in fact written his own book on this problematic "An introductory essay to the history of the making of Qur'ān's text": *Kur'an'ın Metinleşme Tarihi. Bir Giriş Denemesi* (Ankara: İlâhiyât, 2002).

²⁸ The present author has provided a translation and commentary of an article by Tatar on "The problem of interpreting the Qur'ān": "Kur'an'ı Yorumlama Sorunu," in *Kur'an ve Dil: Dilbilim ve Her-*

tation of the Qur'ān cannot presuppose that each particular Qur'ānic word has a particular meaning. Nor does its meaning subsist in relation to other Qur'ānic words; nor in its relation to a historical event. With this, Tatar rejects a Fazlur Rahman-like hermeneutics that can be sensed even behind Paçacı's and Özsoy's approaches. What does the Qur'ān mean then? "Where" is its meaning, if neither in itself, nor in its historical context, nor in its classical receptions? Tatar observes what Muslims actually do. He finds that the Qur'ān is their field of consensus, their space of communication. For the Qur'ān is not an objective text, dualistically in front of its interpreters. Rather, the Qur'ān is a "symbolic text." It serves as a mirror: in it, Muslims see what is actually in themselves. Meaning is, according to Tatar, in the interpreters' understanding; consequently, interpretation is not the discovery of meaning but its creation. As the word *hudā* implies, what the Qur'ān provides is guidance; and guidance happens dynamically, on the way. We need to transform our relation with the Qur'ān from hierarchy to partnership, from ideology to interaction, from violence to dialogue.

Tatar's hermeneutical proposal is a radical application of a metaphysics of relation (rather than of substance) to the interpretative process. The objection that one might raise is whether his relational hermeneutic is not relativistic. If Tatar's view is correct, then it would be impossible to misunderstand the Qur'ān. Might Muslims not have good reasons for expecting from the Qur'ān more than a mirror; to find in it an alterity; to discover in the Qur'ān meaning the readers are precisely not producing by themselves?

Tatar is, however to be credited for his originality and openness; and what is manifest in his work is his intimate knowledge of Gadamer. It should also be noticed that more than a decade after his proposal, Tatar found a late ally from the other end of the world. Shahab Ahmed's definition of what it means to be a Muslim, or indeed to be Islamic, strikes the same chord when he famously says, Islamic is what is meaningful through hermeneutical engagement with Revelation to Muḥammad as Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text.²⁹

4.4 Mustafa Öztürk (born 1965/1385): The Three Qur'ānic Universals

Mustafa Öztürk³⁰ sees two camps in Qur'ānic hermeneutics, "universalism" and "historicism." Historicists allow the Qur'ān to refer only to that particular time and cul-

menötik Sempozyumu, 17–18 Mayıs 2001 (Van: Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi, 2001), 493–508; German translation and commentary in: Körner, *Alter Text – Neuer Kontext*, 103–28.

²⁹ Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 364.

³⁰ The present author has provided a translation and commentary of an article by Tatar on "The Qur'ān's character as historical discourse": Felix Körner, "Türkisch-islamische Theologie im Aufbruch. Mustafa Öztürk, 'Der Koran als geschichtliche Rede'," *Lebendiges Zeugnis* 63, no. 2 (2008): 84–108;

ture whose expressive means it uses. Universalists, by contrast, claim that the Qur'ān addresses all people, civilizations, and conditions. Rather than opting for one or the other camp, Öztürk offers a new road. The Qur'ān is for seventh-century Arabs; but it is relevant today, too. How? Rather than accepting a mere either/or, he says that the Qur'ān's material needs to be sifted. Much of it is "historical" (*tarihsel*, bound to the past, obsolete); but some of it is "superhistorical" (*tarih üstü*): its proclamation of the oneness of God, the Day of Judgement, and the ethics of virtue. These three are the Qur'ān's universal (*evrensel*) messages. They coincide with what other prophets and sages proclaimed in world history; which proves that the three messages are universal.

Öztürk thus uses "universality" in a double sense: what is *valid* for all cultures, and what is *present* in all cultures. His position gives immediate rise to an objection. If the only Qur'ānic message valid today can be found elsewhere as well, what do we need the Qur'ān for? That objection, however, springs to mind only if one studies the Qur'ān in a non-Muslim atmosphere. Öztürk, by contrast, has only Muslim readers in mind. He does not want to convince non-Muslims to read the Qur'ān. He rather writes for Muslims, whose fundamental religious reference point is the Qur'ān anyway. He simply wants to liberate them from the influence of those who preach seventh-century rules as if they had to be followed today.

5 Evaluation and Perspective

The structural, cultural, and personal constellations in Turkey have proven to be fertile ground for innovative, sometimes impressive approaches to the challenges of Qur'ānic hermeneutics. In conclusion, three questions should be discussed, namely, whether modern Qur'ānic hermeneutics in Turkey is historical-critical, whether it is influential beyond Turkey, and what future developments of the theories studied above would be desirable.

First, then, are endeavors in Qur'ānic hermeneutics in Turkey historical-critical? The question is often posed as if historical criticism were the one and only key for Islam's "opening up" towards modernity. Much depends on what is meant by 'historical-critical.' If only that interpretation is considered historical-critical which presupposes that God does not act in history, hardly any of the hermeneutics studied here can be seen as historical-critical. If, on the other hand, consideration of the historical context of a text suffices for an approach to be called historical-critical, all Islamic Qur'ān exegesis is such.

in Turkey, that publication caused much debate; Öztürk's seminal article is also discussed in Felix Körner, "Modernistische Koranexegese in der Türkei. Eine Diskussion mit Mustafa Öztürk," in *Im Dienst der Versöhnung. Für einen authentischen Dialog zwischen Christen und Muslimen*, ed. Peter Hünseler (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2008), 14–22.

Serious historical-criticism is today also critical of its own past excesses.³¹ A list of nine criteria of historical criticism would be this:³² an interpretation of a text is historical-critical in so far as the interpreter is aware that

- (1) the text refers to a particular historical context
- (2) the text is limited by it;
- (3) there is a distance between text and interpreter;
- (4) the interpreter is also conditioned by a particular consciousness, and
- (5) the text had an influence on that consciousness;
- (6) text and interpreter principally refer to the same reality;
- (7) the distance between text and interpreter can be productive;
- (8) historical research can to some degree establish the credibility or spuriousness of the text's claims;
- (9) the text needs to be interpreted within the whole of history and interpretations of history.

If evaluated according to such a catalogue, Turkish exegetes go quite far in what may be called historical criticism.

The second question can be answered with one sentence: are Turkish approaches to Qur'ānic hermeneutics influential beyond Turkey? Yes, in the German-speaking world, several of the aforementioned authors are well-known, while in other parts of the world, reception depends often on the reputation that Turkish (religious) culture has.

Our final question is the invitation to present desirable future developments of Turkish hermeneutical theories. Since Qur'ānic hermeneutics is no longer only an intra-Islamic theme, but a point of exchange and debate also in non-Muslim contexts, themes that seemed self-evident before need new attention and new arguments.

- 1 Is the Qur'ān God's revelation? Before, Muslim exegetes either simply presupposed this, or they thought they could prove it in view of its formal characteristics (its "miraculous character, perfection"). Where such arguments are rejected as arbitrary and thus inconclusive, Qur'ānic hermeneutics needs to offer today new, convincing justifications why this of all texts should be accepted as God's revelation to humanity. After all, the Qur'ān sometimes transmits ethically problematic particulars and some-

31 Samuel Vollenweider, "Die historisch-kritische Methode – Erfolgsmodell mit Schattenseiten. Überlegungen im Anschluss an Gerhard Ebeling," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 114 (2017): 243–59, and Knut Backhaus, "Aufgegeben? Historische Kritik als Kapitulation und Kapital von Theologie," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 114 (2017): 260–88.

32 Cf., by the present author: "Historisch-kritische Koranexegese? Hermeneutische Neuansätze in der Türkei," in *Krieg der Zeichen? Zur Interaktion von Religion, Politik und Kultur*, eds. Görges K Hasselhoff and Michael Meyer-Blanck (Würzburg: Ergon, 2006), 57–74, 59, and "Kritik der historischen Kritik. Eine neue Debatte in der islamischen Theologie," in *Der Islam in Europa. Zwischen Weltpolitik und Alltag*, eds. Urs Altermatt, Mariano Delgado, and Guido Vergauwen (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006), 127–42.

- times conveys convictions which can also be otherwise known (the “universal contents”).
- 2 Another point that has so far been taken for granted and is now seen as worth a dispute is the claim that the Qur’ān’s core message refers to what people should do and which moral attitude they should take. A tendency – which can also be identified in liberal Christian theology³³ – becomes visible: an “ethical reductionism.”³⁴ By contrast, it would certainly be worth refocusing the Qur’ān’s elucidation of the meaning of life, its originality in presenting and representing God, its debates with Judaism and Christianity, and its poetic power.
 - 3 Finally, the claim that religion loses its identity if it does not take its foundational text “literally” should be taken seriously. One can argue from the Qur’ān itself for the possibility and necessity of interpretation: according to the Qur’ān, instead of simply using force to bring about the state of affairs God wants, God is communicating with human beings linguistically and is thus indeed calling humanity to contemplate and reflect (Q 45:13).

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33 Cf., Adolf von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1900).

34 Körner, *Revisionists Koran Hermeneutics*, 84.

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