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SUMÁRIO

ADELINO ASCENSO Editorial	151
ADELINO ASCENSO A literatura de Ficção como Discurso Teológico Shūsaku Endō e Flannery O'Connor	153
AIRES A. NASCIMENTO Celebrar a liberdade religiosa Nos 1700 anos do Edito de Milão	181
FELIX KÖRNER Gadamer Receptions Among Turkish Theologians Movements in Muslim Koran Hermeneutics	205
GUILHERME D'OLIVEIRA MARTINS Desfazer-nos dos ídolos e das coisas vãs...	225
Livros novos	237

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GADAMER RECEPTIONS AMONG TURKISH THEOLOGIANS Movements in Muslim Koran Hermeneutics

Felix Körner

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy has had an important resonance in Christian theology; but is there a Muslim reception of his thought, too?¹ Here, Turkish University Theology will be studied in some of its hermeneutic movements.

1. Keywords

a) Theology

Turkey counts more than two dozen academic places which call themselves *İlahiyat Fakültesi* (<Faculty of Divinity>). Is such a designation

¹ Edited version of a paper presented at the meeting *Gadamer at the Gates. Hermeneutics in the Religious Tradition of Western Christianity, Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam in Comparative Perspective* organized jointly by the Nijmegen Institute for Eastern

justified? The first of those Faculties was established in 1949 at the newly founded *Ankara Üniversitesi*. One of the Faculty's chief designers was the great linguist Tahsin Banguoğlu, then Minister of Education. He envisioned an institution where Islam be taught to future religious staff, but, at the same time, a space where European languages be acquired alongside Arabic and Persian; psychology and sociology, general and comparative religion should likewise be studied: Islamic reflection got a new framework.

Following Banguoğlu's proposals, the Turkish parliament had decided that a Faculty be erected, and that, within a state university; clearly there was fear that Muslim groups out of the reach of the state's ordering hand might construct or conserve differing readings of what authentic Islam is. The Faculty became a model for the creation of similar institutions elsewhere in Turkey.

From its start, the Ankara Faculty has had an interest in new approaches to religious traditions; famously, Annemarie Schimmel taught History of Religions there since 1954 and showed her students the phenomenology she herself had acquired from Friedrich Heiler. In several ways, however, this was an exception. Both teaching staff and student body is now generally Muslim. The academics see their research and teaching as part of the process of Islamic self-understanding. It is, therefore, justified to speak of <Divinity> Faculties and of Muslim <Theologians>.

b) **Movements**

In what is to follow, <movements> will be studied; this calls for a double inquiry: Are there *groups* of some thinkers moving in the same direction?; and: Which *changes* are the members undergoing?

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c) Hermeneutics

«Hermeneutics» is a notoriously ambiguous word;² what is looked for in the following lines are Turkish reflections on what interpretation of the Koran has been and should be—and we are focussing on authors with explicit reference to Hans-Georg Gadamer.

2. Ankara School?

In the past decade, the present author offered a series of studies in English and German on the «Ankara School».³ Subsequently, several

² One of the best ways to express this was shown by Glenn W. Most in 1981: *Many people especially in America think that hermeneutics is a German philosopher whose first name is Hermann and whose last name they didn't quite get*. Quoted after Odo Marquard, «Das Fiktive als ENS REALISSIMUM», in: Dieter Henrich and Wolfgang Iser (eds.), *Funktionen des Fiktiven*, München 1983, pp. 489–95, pp. 491–2.

³ *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkish University Theology. Rethinking Islam* (Mitteilungen zur Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte der islamischen Welt, Band 15), Würzburg 2005; *Alter Text – neuer Kontext. Koranhermeneutik in der Türkei heute*. Ausgewählte Texte, übersetzt und kommentiert, Freiburg 2006. «Historisch-kritische Koranexegese? Hermeneutische Neuansätze in der Türkei», in: Görge K. Hasselhoff and Michael Meyer-Blanck (eds.), *Krieg der Zeichen? Zur Interaktion von Religion, Politik und Kultur*, Würzburg 2006, pp. 57–74. «Turkish Theology Meets European Philosophy. Emilio Betti, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricœur in Muslim Thinking», in: *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 62 (2006), pp. 805–809. «Kritik in der Krise – Koranhermeneutik in der Türkei», in: *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 58 (2007), pp. 139–145. «When Islam Receives Criticism. Historical Koran Exegesis in Today's Turkey», in: *Rosenzweig Jahrbuch* 2 (2007), pp. 153–169. «Modernistische Koranexegese in der Türkei. Eine Diskussion mit Mustafa Öztürk», in: Peter Hünzeler (ed.), *Im Dienst der Versöhnung. Für einen authentischen Dialog zwischen Christen und Muslimen*, Festschrift for Christian Troll, Regensburg 2008, pp. 14–22. «Türkisch-islamische Theologie im Aufbruch: Mustafa Öztürk, «Der Koran als geschichtliche Rede», in: *Lebendiges Zeugnis* 63 (2008), issue 2, pp. 84–108.

observers of contemporary Islam used this designation.⁴ The scholars thus designated, however, have started to reject the name. This had various motives. Firstly, they noticed that everybody who worked at the Ankara Faculty was suddenly celebrated as an interesting thinker and got invitations from Western institutions. Secondly, they said that Ankara is only one centre of gravity for the movement, but other important figures work at Divinity Faculties in Samsun or Izmir. A more appropriate designation would therefore be ‹the *İslâmiyât* circle›, i.e. the movement behind the journal of that name, founded in 1998; but thirdly, and sadly, neither the journal nor the group exists any more. Internal dissent—a normal, indeed promising sign of academic life—and career changes brought the scholars apart. *The Publications of the Ankara School*, the series of books at the basis of the ‹school's› designation, is, however, thriving with more than 120 titles out, and counting.⁵

Characteristics of that type of theology are conceptually demanding reflection on what Koranic exegesis was, is and should be; the readiness to take up approaches from contemporary Western philosophers; and the application of historical methods to the understanding of the Koran and its interpretation throughout the centuries.

3. Contexts

21st century Turkish theology is taking place under challenging circumstances with prejudice and expectation from various sides. In order to sketch the scene, some introductory remarks will be made in an impressionistic and suggestive manner, rather than by means of a well documented and argued analysis.

⁴ Cf., e.g., Wolfgang Günter Lerch, ‹Der Islam in der Moderne›, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschehen* 28/29 (2006), pp. 11–17, p. 15.

⁵ <http://www.ankaraokulu.com>. Here, however, ‹Ankara School› does not designate a particular group of thinkers but the academic institution, the Faculty.

a) State: Kemalist and Ottoman heritages

A first context for any Turkish theologian is the Turkish state. Its foundation was an attempt to create, in a cultural revolution, a unified, rather uniform nation state with modern secularism (*laiklik*, i.e. the French *laïcité*), breaking off from the Ottoman tradition. The Turkish population, however, has been rediscovering and re-imagining the Ottoman heritage, both as cultural root and as political aspiration in several waves. Presently, both heritages, the Kemalist and the Ottoman ones, are in competition whenever decisions are to be taken that concern the state as a whole.

b) Society: pluralisation, polarisation, power

Theology is always interacting with society; it has, in the first years of the AK party government, after 2002, undergone a phase of pluralisation. Contemporary art scenes are flourishing and delicate subjects can be discussed with increasing openness, like the Armenian massacres of the 1915's or Christian mission today. In the public space, various expressions of life—also of religious life—are accepted, according to private choice, as living side by side; on the other hand, the government tries to force, patriarchally, a conservative value system onto the population, and camps define themselves over against each other. There are secular prophets who attack the new Muslim tendency to work with the hidden agenda of turning Turkey into an intolerant sharia state: now the veil is accepted, soon it will be expected. On the other hand, there are new Muslim critics attacking the Kemalists for having unjustly, indeed, brutally blocked any opening of the country towards what the majority wants, i.e., the possibility to lead a Muslim life—whatever that means. Cultural preoccupations notwithstanding, there is a widely shared pride in the achievements of the recent economic boom, which everyone perceives in a greatly improved infrastructure and living

standard. In such a situation of growth, the rhetorics of leadership in the area is no surprise. While Europe wants Turkey to be a bridge, Turks offer more ambitious visions for their own future. They see their future as a super power.

c) Diyanet: expected harmony

Part of the construction of the Turkish Republic was, after the abolition of the Caliphate, the institution of a public office dealing with Religion. What in the first months was a Ministry, already in 1924 became the ‹Directorate of Religious Affairs› (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*), with its director nominated by the Prime Minister. The authority was designed to serve as a tool safeguarding a non-Islamist type of Islam against all other readings of Islamicity; so in fact, the ‹Diyanet› is not in charge of Religious Affairs at large but only of what the Directorate considers to be Muslim life, that is, all Koran based legal schools (*madāhib*, denominations) including the Alevites. For Christians and Jews, however, it is the Foreign Ministry that is in charge. The Diyanet has no *de iure* control over the Theological Faculties. They are, like any other University Faculty, accountable to the Higher Education Commission (YÖK: *Yükseköğretim Kurulu*). Still, there is a lively, and constructive, collaboration between the Diyanet and many university theologians; the major expectation from the Directorate's side can perhaps be expressed as follows: Theologians should help believers to live their faith today, facing the challenges of enlightenment reason, secularity and materialism, by quality research and by proposing a harmonious view that allows one to be at the same time faithful and modern.

d) University: theology as unscientific, or irreligious

A university, with its wealth of disciplines, approaches and presuppositions, poses a particular challenge to theology. This has often

proven productive.⁶ Part of a university scenario is that some colleagues will consider the whole attempt to deal with questions like the reality of God or the meaning of a faith tradition for today as misbegotten or at least not scientific, unscholarly. Another criticism is that theology as studied at University Faculties damages true belief; both views may share the common presupposition that reason and faith are mutually exclusive. In Turkey, Muslim theologians can face a similar two side attack.

e) Faculties: activism and internationality

What is it like to work as a university theologian in Turkey? The various expectations and objections mentioned, but also media interest or personal ambition lead, in many a Turkish Faculty, to an atmosphere of activism; patient, long term scholarship is a relatively rare phenomenon, the ‹publish or perish› pressure makes for quick productions. A culture of interaction with scholars from other countries has evolved impressively in the last decades. Many of the younger professors have spent months, if not years in the Arab world and in Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain or the U.S. Furthermore, young scholars are able to find Turkish funding in order to invite top Islamic scholars from Europe to speak in Ankara or Istanbul.

f) Ankara: Rahman—Rome

Ankara is the oldest Theological Faculty working according to the new model and it has attracted the attention, even hope, of Muslim reform figures like Fazlur Rahman; he was born in what is today Pakistan and had

⁶ Cf. the evaluation of the German *Wissenschaftsrat* in its 2010 document *Empfehlungen zur Weiterentwicklung von Theologien und religionsbezogenen Wissenschaften an deutschen Hochschulen* (<http://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/9678-10.pdf>).

a remarkable influence on Muslim reform thinkers, envisioning a synthesis of Islam and Modernity, as professor in Chicago. He died in 1988, and his visits to Turkey as well as his writings marked a whole generation of reflecting Turks.⁷ Even the word «Rahmanism» is used, sometimes critically, to designate Muslim modernists that appeal to his work. His primary intuition, when it comes to Koran interpretation, was that the ethical norms exemplified in the Koran's rulings, need to be transposed and re-applied in every generation. Important figures among the *emeriti* at Ankara marked their successors by encouraging them to study, partly, at Western Universities and in promoting new questions and answers beyond what was seen as politically correct then. Three names should be mentioned: the systematic theologian Hüseyin Atay, Mehmet Said Hatiboğlu, a renowned *hadîth* scholar, and Beyza Bilgin; she introduced the discipline of religious pedagogy into Muslim Theology. Ankara is celebrating the 25th anniversary of a lecturers' exchange programme with the Gregorian University, Rome; among its other collaborations one needs to be recorded: funded by *Eugen Biser Foundation*, Munich, Christian and Muslim scholars have written a dictionary of basic theological vocabulary appearing in both German and Turkish⁸.

⁷ *Lexikon des Dialogs. Grundbegriffe aus Christentum und Islam*, Freiburg 2013.

⁸ It is precisely the *Ankara Okulu* publisher that provides Turkish translations of Fazlur Rahman's oeuvre: *İslam*, translated by Mehmed Aydın and Mehmed Dağ, Ankara 1999. *Ana Konularıyla Kur'an*, translated by Alparslan Açıkgenç, Ankara 1996. *İslam ve Çağdaşlık*, translated by Alparslan Açıkgenç and M. Hayri Kırbasoğlu, Ankara 1996. *Tarih Boyunca İslamî Metodoloji Sorunu*, translated by Salih Akdemir, Ankara 1995. *İslamî Yenilenme. Makaleler I*, translated by Adil Çiftçi, Ankara 1997. *İslam Geleneğinde Sağlık ve Tıp*, translated by A. Bülent Baloğlu and Adil Çiftçi, Ankara 1997. *İslamî Yenilenme. Makaleler II*, translated by Adil Çiftçi, Ankara 1999. *İslamî Yenilenme. Makaleler III*, translated by Adil Çiftçi, Ankara 2002. *İslamî Yenilenme. Makaleler IV*, translated by Adil Çiftçi, Ankara 2003. *İslam'da İhya ve Reform. Bir İslam Fundamentalizmi İncelemesi*, translated by Fehrullah Terkan, Ankara 2005.

g) Tradition: classical vs. modern

One final contextualisation of Turkish Koran hermeneutics needs to be remarked. There are two different traditions of Muslim Koranic exegesis. On the one hand there is the classical tradition, which was methodologically sharp and productive; and there has been, on the other hand, since the late 19th century, a modern re-discovery of the Koran. It led to a Muslim self-criticism forwarded by authors like Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905); they claimed that precisely because Muslims had not been reading the Koran attentively, Islam had run off the track of faith and success. Scientific discoveries and technological achievements of modernity had been mentioned already in the Koran, they say; and what may sound like odd miracles is easily explained by modern science. The approach is called *tafsīr ‘ilmī* (scientific exegesis), but it rather proved to be an *eisegesis* of what the interpreters needed in order to demonstrate their own modernity.⁹ The classical tradition of Koranic exegesis can be called, by contrast *‘ilm at-tafsīr*, that is, the scholarship of (Koran) interpretation (cf. Hebrew *pašāʿar*). It comprises many methods that modern historical critical exegesis of the Bible would count in its canon of disciplines as well. Among the fields of research of classical *tafsīr* are: *qira’āt*, that is, a presentation of variant readings in many ways similar to textual criticism; *nağw*, philological researches into Koranic vocabulary and grammar; *asbāb an-nuzūl*, the ‘occasions of the sending down’, that is, the study of messages on the original context of individual Koran verses within the life of Muḥammad, as a relevant tool for understanding their message correctly; *Isrā’īlīyāt*, the explication of Koranic allusions to figures and events from the history of Israel or the Church; *balāġa*, the study of rhetorical forms and construction principles of Koranic language;

⁹ Cf. Rotraud Wielandt, ‘Exegesis of the Qur’ān: Early Modern and Contemporary’, in: Jane D. McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, vol. 2, Leiden 2002, pp. 124–42.

and in a discipline called *uṣūl at-tafsīr*, sometimes even meta-reflexion on the practice of exegesis was conducted. So, if Koran exegetes today want to examine the historical context of the Koranic text, they are not starting at point zero but find themselves in a vast and never vanished tradition.

4. Authors

Two authors will be discussed here.¹⁰ One is from the Black Sea, from Samsun, where he also teaches at the Theological Faculty: Burhanettin Tatar (b. 1965). On top of his theological studies there, he wrote a doctoral thesis at the *Catholic University of America* in Washington, D.C.¹¹

The other is Mehmet Paçacı (b. 1959 in Bolu). Paçacı conducted most of his studies in Ankara; he was, however, able to spend a term at Manchester University, where he specialised in New Testament and intertestamental studies under Barnabas Lindars; and he attended classes of the well-known philosopher Ahmet İnam at *Middle East Technical University*, Ankara.

¹⁰ At least two other Turkish voices deserve mentioning, both theologians at the Theological Faculty of *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi*, Izmir: (i) Adil Çiftçi, now working in the Faculty's department of sociology of religion; he discusses Gadamer in his dissertation, *Fazlur Rahman ile İslam'ı Yeniden Düşünmek [Rethinking Islam with Fazlur Rahman]*, Ankara 2000, pp. 109–140. An English presentation of the section can be found in Felix Körner, *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkish University Theology. Rethinking Islam*, Würzburg 2005, pp. 122–126. (ii) Osman Bilen, who is a philosopher of religion; his doctoral dissertation was published as *The Historicity of Understanding and The Problem of Relativism in Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Washington, D. C., 2000.

¹¹ Published as: Burhanettin Tatar, *Interpretation and the Problem of the Intention of the Author. H.-G. Gadamer vs. E. D. Hirsch*, (Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change Series IIA, Islam V) Washington, D. C., 1998.

a) **Tatar**

Burhanettin Tatar, in a programmatic article of the year 2001,¹² offers an interpretation theory of the Koran. His view can be summarised as follows.

(1) Interpretation of the Koran is a form of life.

Therefore, it is a vivid process, which one will not be able to understand and practice if only seen as a textual event. A question like: <How do Muslims *de facto* interact with the Koran?> is more relevant and answerable than <Which of two given interpretations is correct?>.

(2) The Koran has different modes of existence.

This finding is a consequence of looking not only at what Islamic exegetes are saying about themselves and their text, but at observing what Muslims are really doing with it. Tatar gives three examples of modes in which the Koran is a given.

(a) Written. The fact that the Koran exists as a codified ensemble of words should not be taken as self evident. It requires further reflection (cf. below, thesis 3).

(b) Actual. Tatar points out that Muslims *are* constantly referring to the Koran, even though many would hardly feel any need to reflect, let alone justify, their text reference.

(c) Symbolic. This is Tatar's most original point. The Koran, he observes, is not in itself giving the answers. One might, rather, compare it to the Ka'ba, the Mecca sanctuary to which Muslims turn for prayer. Here, the question <What does the Ka'ba say?> would evidently be odd, or, even

¹² Burhanettin Tatar, <Kur'an'ı Yorumlama Sorunu>, in: *Kur'an ve Dil. Dilbilim ve Hermenötik Sempozyumu*, May 17 and 18, 2001, Van 2001, pp. 493–508. Translated as <Das Problem der Koranauslegung> in *Alter Text – neuer Kontext*, pp. 104–124.

more so, a study on <What will or decision making be like, if we want to live according to the Ka‘ba?>. Symbols can be understood in many more senses than only this or that regulation.

(3) Fixation in writing opens the text.

This thesis is surprising. Is it not precisely the transition from the living interaction to the immovable codex that closes liberty down? No; a particular discursive situation, through its possibility to communicate in gesture, tonality and word, reacting to the circumstances, audience and previous events still conscious to the listeners: such a particular situation is nearly unambiguous. The written text, however, is meant to become relevant in different situations, for different people throughout history, and therefore is now empowered and liberated to convey, each time, a different message.—But surely the meaning of each Koranic sura can be pinned down? No, says Tatar. Such an objectified concept of meaning pretends that we can isolate and possess bits of meaning that make interpretation controllable, even unnecessary. What is needed, is, in fact a change from a metaphysics of substance to a one of relationship. Thus, he can go on to say:

(4) In metaphysics of relation, meaning is no substance.

It rather comes into being through interaction and has no existence outside of lived relationships. So, for other readers of the Koran who stand in active communication with their text one has no right or indeed knowledge to judge their interpretation. It is the experience of the person’s encounter with the text while reading it now that lets its now-meaning shine forth.—But isn’t this going against the Koran’s self designation as the book about which there is no doubt (2:2), i.e., as provider of clarity, unification and trust?

(5) Interpretation is creating meaning.

The Koran is calling itself, even in the verse just quoted (2:2) a *hudā*, that is, <a guidance>. Now, rightly considered, what a guide does

is not giving once-for-all instructions; the guide, rather, accompanies the wanderer, and, at every intersection or other situation of doubt, gives a new instruction. For each person's questions in this moment, the Koran offers a guiding answer; not one that simply needs to be read, though. The Koranic answer is, rather, the product of the serious process of trying to understand and find the solution for now.

This is, in sketch, Tatar's view. Is it Gadamerian?

Tatar is strongly inspired by Gadamer's observation that interpretation is an active production. Gadamer was convinced that <only in interpretation the meaning that is to be understood receives its concretion and completion>.¹³ This is probably the strongest impulse Tatar got from Gadamer; and it is an important point to make.

He seems, however, to criticise Gadamer for believing in objective entities of meaning.¹⁴ In that, Tatar is differing from Gadamer. One might also ask whether there are in his approach points in need of criticism; criticised by explicit Gadamerian concepts, or by a new argument. Three remarks can be made.

(i) The first is a philosophical argument which seems to be also in the background of Gadamer's observation that the interpreter feels <bound to the text's meaning>. If, as Tatar seems to say, the Koran is really only a symbolic text and all instances of interpretation are unpredictable, unrestricted, uncontrollable, one might lose the possibility of judging some interpretations as *definitively false*. Surely, one might object against Tatar,

¹³ In the German original he writes that <sich in der Auslegung der zu verstehende Sinn erst konkretisiert und vollendet>. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, vol. 1, Tübingen 1990, p. 338 (1960 edition: p. 315).

¹⁴ Gadamer continues the sentence just quoted by saying that the interpretation is still always trying to keep to the text's meaning: <daß aber gleichwohl dieses auslegende Tun sich vollständig an den Sinn des Textes gebunden fühlt> (ibid.).

no serious interpreter of the Koran would hold that I can read passages like 5:151¹⁵ as an encouragement to kill my children (or at least one of them, or one of my brother's) for material worries. This example may show that the production of meaning which is always happening in the process of application—inseparable from interpretation and comprehension—is nothing arbitrary.

(ii) Gadamer introduces the awareness of effective history as a category for understanding interpretation.¹⁶ What the classical Islamic exegetes methodologically tried to do was to find out what the first Muslims understood when they heard the Koran. Surely, the first hearers' understanding is not an immediate answer to today's questions, but it will—if it can be established in an historically reliable way—give important clues for the interpretation now and exclude many misunderstandings.

(iii) Again in the vein of effective history, it should be at least interesting (though not immediately decisive) to see what Muslims were actually doing with the Koran in times that can be considered as Islamic heydays. What, for example, was the role of the text, in the Ottoman empire's classical years? It is along these lines that our second author has come to inquire in search of a solid ground for truly Muslim Koran hermeneutics.

¹⁵ In Pickthall's rendering: Say: Come, I will recite unto you that which your Lord hath made a sacred duty for you: that ye ascribe no thing as partner unto Him and that ye do good to parents, and that ye slay not your children because of penury. We provide for you and for them and that ye draw not nigh to lewd things whether open or concealed. And that ye slay not the life which Allah hath made sacred, save in the course of justice. This He hath commanded you, in order that ye may discern.

¹⁶ *Wahrheit und Methode*, vol. 1, p. 346: <Analyse des wirkungsgeschichtlichen Bewußtseins> (1960 edition: p. 324).

b) Paçacı

With a formation in the history and modern methodology of exegesis of both the Koran and the Bible, it is not surprising that Mehmet Paçacı has presented to his readers important findings. One example may suffice here. A famous *crux interpretum* is encountered in the Koranic sura *al-ihlâş* (112). It is a short sura, so it may be worthwhile presenting the whole text in scholarly transcription.

qul huwa llāhu aḥad / Allāhu ş-şamad / lam yalid wa-lam yūlad / wa-lam yakun lahū kufuwan aḥad.

In the translation of M. Marmaduke Pickthall (d. 1936), a convert from Christianity to Islam and poet, the meaning can be rendered thus:

Say: He is Allah, the One! / Allah, the eternally Besought of all! / He begetteth not nor was begotten. / And there is none comparable unto Him.

What Pickthall translates <the eternally Besought of all> is, in Arabic, *aş-şamad*. The dictionaries and commentaries are notoriously helpless when trying to explain this Koranic *hapaxlegomenon*. In a paper of the year 2000, Paçacı offers a convincing solution.¹⁷ His translation is <the rock.> Not that this rendering would be unknown among the—many—explanations provided by the dictionaries; but he can also furnish a contextual explanation which sheds light on the Koran's earliest environment.

He looks at 7th century Judaism on the Arabian peninsula.¹⁸ Jews would have met in their synagogues and have listened to Torah and other

¹⁷ <De Ki Allah Bir'dir: ahad/æhâd. Sami Dini Geleneği Perspektifinden İhlas Sûresi'nin Bir Tefsiri Denemesi>, in: *Mehmet Paçacı, Kur'an ve Ben Ne Kadar Tarihseliz?* (Ankara Okulu Yayınları, vol. 23), Ankara 2000, pp. 155–184.

¹⁸ Paçacı's view may be influenced by the remarks of Rudi Paret, *Der Koran. Kommentar und Konkordanz*, Stuttgart 2005, *in loc.* (p. 530), which refers to a 1961 article by Raimund Köbert.

Biblical readings. Recitation language was most probably Hebrew; but since the population had less than complete grasp of the holy language, a—presumably oral—translation was given; in such translations, one can observe that a standard vocabulary is, in the course of the time, being established. Thus, a certain Hebrew word is almost mechanically rendered by a vernacular expression (‹*Ersatzwort*›). Those expressions show a tendency towards abstraction, especially when it comes to metaphors for God. One wants to avoid the impression of adoring objects. So, when the Hebrew text says God is *šûr*, ‹rock›, the Arabic standard translation would automatically go for ‹God is massive›: *šamad*. Behind the imagery of ‹massive› is ‹rock›, which again stands for his reliability, uniqueness, and: oneness. That is, in fact, where Paçacı wants to get; his aim is, he says, equally visible in the grammatically peculiar *aḥad* for ‹one›, which does not so much reflect Arabic phonetics or mere rhyme compulsion but the Jewish background. Israel’s creed starts with *Šema’ Yiśrā’el*, ‘*Adônay ’elohênû* ‘*Adônay ’aḥād*. The sura’s first line ends in *aḥad*, rather than the expectable *waḥīd*, and evidently recalls the Jewish creed’s first line, which ends in *aḥād*. These are, for Mehmet Paçacı, proofs of what he calls the ‹Semitic religious tradition›, i.e., the pure monotheism, which, in his view, was lost by hellenized Christianity.¹⁹

After such scholarly contributions, both provocative and promising, Paçacı has made a turn; once he had called himself a modernist,²⁰ and now?

He first expressed his new view in a paper published in 2003.²¹ In what follows, a summary will be attempted.

¹⁹ For documentation and discussion, cf. *Alter Text – neuer Kontext*, pp. 166–207.

²⁰ Mehmet Paçacı and Yasin Aktay, ‹75 Years of Higher Religious Education in Modern Turkey›, in: *The Muslim World*, 89 (1999), pp. 398–413, p. 412.

²¹ ‹Çağdaş Dönemde Kur’an’a ve Tefsire Ne Oldu? [What have the Koran and its Exegesis become in Modernity?], in: *İslâmiyât* 6 (2003) 4, pp. 85–104. Translated in: *Alter Text – neuer Kontext*, pp. 129–159.

(1) Historicity

One should enter such a presentation with a thought Paçacı presented already in 1996.²² Muslims fail, according to his analysis, to interfere in today's world, because of an odd dogmatic view. They think they can only act in the world if it corresponds to what the Koran prescribes. If, however, the Koran and Muslims are <historical>, that means for the Islamic believer to get involved in his or her world, whatever it is like. The whole point of being a Muslim is to transform the world in the sense of the Koran; but what is that to say?

(2) Classical Islam

Here comes in an important methodological shift in Paçacı's work. If one wants to know what authentic Islamic life is, it is not enough to read the Koran. That is, however, the trap into which both fundamentalists and modernists have fallen. A far more promising approach is to first see how Muslims were dealing with their holy text in times when they were not shaken by inferiority complexes. Which role did the Koran have in, say, Ottoman 17th century cities? Everyday life of such an era can e.g. be studied through court rulings, which are found in the archives. Now, the result of such researches is that Muslims of those days considered the Koran to be historical and normative; historical in that they did not pretend their own time was identical with — and their own action should be imitating — that of the first Muslims. According to Paçacı, such a historical view was in fact much easier to hold for Islam than for Christianity, which was concerned with transhistorical truth—dogma—rather than with practice: *hudā*. For classical Islam, then, the Koran was normative in that it gave guidelines for Muslim life. Is that to say that exegesis was the key discipline in classical Islam? No.

²² In his famous article <Kur'an ve Ben, Ne Kadar Tarihseliz [The Koran and I: how historical are we?]>, in: *İslâmî Araştırmalar* 9 (1996), pp. 119–134.

(3) Jurisprudence and Systematics

The leading disciplines that shaped Muslim life in classical Islam were *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *kalām* (philosophical theology). They were normative; it is precisely these two disciplines which have not only a scholarly methodology but, at the same time, a normative way of self-expression. They make truth claims and answer the questions of what is just and who is just; they inform court ruling and belief. What, however, was the role of Koran exegesis in those days? As in any epoch before modernity, exegesis played a merely preparatory role, says Paçacı. It is only able to say what this or that word or verse meant in its original context; what it means for today, is a question exegetes cannot answer in Paçacı's view. Is not, one might object, the call 'back to the Koran' the slogan of those who want to return to an Islam that has a decisive power today?

(4) Textualism

It is only in modernity that exegesis got a key role in the life of religions. The Muslim Modernists, late 19th century Egyptians to begin with, believed that what they considered to be traditional Islam had failed because it had not been faithful to the Koran; tradition had, they thought, covered and blocked the reformist power of Islam's holy book. Through new exegesis, however, the Koran and thus also Muslims can be set back to their old influence. For Paçacı, this modernist reading of history is false. It is not traditional Islam's fault that the Muslim world became second to the West—rather, economic factors and accidental constellations were responsible; it is not authentically Muslim to give such importance to exegesis—rather, a Christian reformation hierarchy of disciplines was unwittingly imported. Textualism started to govern Muslim life. What remedy will be suggested by Paçacı? He gives a classical answer: The richness of Islam's tradition has to be re-instituted.

This short presentation of Mehmet Paçacı's new view must suffice.²³ Can it be seen as part of the effective history of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*?

There are four Gadamerian motifs that have come to bear, it seems, in Paçacı's <classicist turn>. They have, not surprisingly, all to do with historicity.

(a) First of all, Gadamer's awareness of the historicity of any interpretative situation²⁴ is creatively applied and transformed by Paçacı's analysis that Muslims who do not get involved because they find their time non-Koranic are in fact a-historic; historicity means to *make* history.

(b) Secondly, and along the same lines, Paçacı's ability to see not only the Koran as something historical but to see also the history of exegesis in perspective, and himself in it, is a remarkable move in self-consciousness and self-criticism.

(c) Furthermore, Mehmet Paçacı calls for a new appreciation of the time, culture and achievements that lie between us as 21st century readers and the Koran's 7th century proclamation. He is, in this, not only following the Neo-Ottoman fashion to be observed in many cultural strata of today's Turkey, e.g. in novels.²⁵ He is apparently also backed up, and possibly encouraged, by Gadamer's plea to rehabilitate factors loathed by revolutionary modernity, especially authority and tradition.²⁶

(d) Finally, Paçacı's sharp criticism of his own home discipline and its modern inflation is an impressive example of awareness of effective

²³ Cf. also a later article developing these views: Mehmet Paçacı, <Klassische Koranexegese – was war das?>, in: *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 58 (2007), pp. 127–139.

²⁴ <Erhebung der Geschichtlichkeit des Verstehens zum hermeneutischen Prinzip>, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen 1990, p. 270 (1960 edition, p. 250).

²⁵ Cf., e.g., Orhan Pamuk, *Cevdet Bey ve Oğulları*, Istanbul 1979.

²⁶ <Rehabilitierung von Autorität und Tradition>, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen 1990, p. 281 (1960 edition, p. 261).

history; Gadamer was, by drawing the interpreters' attention to a text's effective history, trying to make visible, so to speak, the glasses through which we are reading our key texts. Paçacı is in fact pointing out that the exegetical optics have become unduly monopolistic.

Two points of discussion and possible future development may be added in conclusion.

In Paçacı's reading of history, there seems to be, at the moment, a tendency towards what could be called *territorialism*. That would mean an isolation of civilisational areas in order to consider each of them as self-sufficient rather than interactive and mutually stimulating, indeed penetrating. A plea to return to a more classical Islam should, rather than undoing a so-called Westernisation, take into account that there has never been an independent <Orient> or, for that matter, a <West> standing on its own feet. Territorialism will be in danger of constructing stagnant entities in the past, and stagnant zones today.

The self-reduction of exegesis to a subordinate discipline without normative power may cut off Muslims from the innovative force that lies in any contemporary reading of the Koran. Certainly, the Catholic Church and Islam cannot be compared easily, but 50 years after the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), it is worth remembering its fundamental dynamics. Its inspiration drew at the same time on a rediscovery of the Church Fathers' creative and human theology; and on a rediscovery of Scripture, read both scholarly, with state-of-the-art methodologies, and spiritually.²⁷

²⁷ Dei Verbum, no. 8; Pontifical Biblical Commission, *L'interprétation de la Bible dans l'Église*, Rome 1993.