

## When Islam Receives Criticism

### Historical Koran Exegesis in Today's Turkey

›I grasped the open book. It was the Koran. I read, in order to legitimize myself, the first Sura.«

Franz Rosenzweig has visited both *habam* and *hamam*, that is, the Rabbi and the Turkish bath. Now some boys – and his curiosity – have drawn him into what proves to be a *medrese*, a Muslim school. We are in 1917 Skopje<sup>1</sup>, Macedonia; it is Friday afternoon.<sup>2</sup> Rosenzweig's unexpected inter-religious dialogue, as he reports it to his parents,<sup>3</sup> has all the ingredients interfaith experts of today will recognize as typical: The desire to learn, the language problem, the concern that one might be misinterpreted, and the tea.

What is the point of such encounters? One possible answer is that attempts at understanding someone living, thinking and speaking on the basis of different presuppositions than my own helps me to understand myself better. Another answer is this: When I listen critically to the other's attempts at expressing his worldview, he might be able to sharpen or deepen it. The present author is in contact with Muslim theologians in Turkey. Giving an account of their recent moves is not just talking about them. It is, rather, part of that critical listening. Some Muslim thinkers have come to be interested in such an exchange precisely if it goes beyond a search for common

---

<sup>1</sup> Or ›Üsküb,‹ as Rosenzweig writes, using the town's Ottoman name.

<sup>2</sup> Is it April 4, 1917?

<sup>3</sup> April 11, 1917, quoted after Franz Rosenzweig, »*Innerlich bleibt die Welt eine*«. *Ausgewählte Texte zum Islam*, ed. by Gesine Palmer and Yossef Schwartz, Berlin and Vienna 2003, pp. 53 sq.

elements. Critical observation might lead to a judgment published in a way the Muslim thinker cannot access. But one might also feed one's own critical questions into a new encounter. This second type of criticism might be a service.

We shall proceed in four steps. Each step will take the title ›When Islam Receives Criticism‹ in a different sense.

1. Firstly, Islam has been criticized as too open towards violence and too closed towards rationality. Such a criticism should be reconsidered.
2. Secondly, some contemporary Turkish theologians who are doing something like historical criticism of their basic texts will be presented. ›When Islam Receives Criticism‹ thus announces a Muslim reception of historical-critical methodology.
3. Thirdly, historical criticism of the Koran has recently been criticized, from among these critical theologians themselves, as being a dead-end street. ›When Islam Receives Criticism‹ refers, then, to Muslims criticizing Islamic Modernism.
4. Fourthly, a critical question will be asked concerning the theological basis of exegesis. ›When Islam Receives Criticism‹ is, consequently, a suggested discernment addressed at contemporary Muslim thinkers, whom I consider capable of accepting my point creatively.

### 1. When Islam Receives Criticism, *sive*: Violence and Rationality

Before entering into an interfaith debate on violence and reason, four foundational remarks may be in place.

Any inter-religious statement should be counter-checked by the question: *And we?* If a Christian warns that Islam has a tendency towards violence, he is well advised if he also mentions that the history of the church is a history of violent irrationalities, too.

The New Testament offers less material suitable for a justification of violence than the Koran. The basic New Testament proclamation is that Jesus was raised from the dead, after having suffered a violent death – a death he suffered without defending himself.

Even if the Koran calls Muslims, partly very bluntly, to use vio-

lence against unbelievers (4:121), that does not condemn Muslims to violent acts till the end of time. Such Koranic rulings place Muslims of each generation again before the task of tackling the topic of violence and of processing their foundations' potential for violence. The history of the church poses a similar challenge to Christians.

Muslims have not solved that task by simply declaring Islam to mean peace. Rather, such declarations also require a statement on the Koranic passages that seem to encourage violence. If such verses are simply silenced, they can create evil in an uncontrolled way. Non-Muslims might consider those declarations as dishonest; and Muslims might consider such declarations to be unfaithful to the Koran, which – they might say – calls for armed action.

Therefore, a methodology of interpreting the Koran is vital. The most frequent objection to this insight is: But Muslims must not interpret the Koran; it has been revealed and transmitted literally. If you have God's own word undistorted in your hands, you should not tamper with it – and you needn't, since it is ›clear‹ (26:195). Does revelation really dispose of human thinking? One may have different views on that, but the Koran's view is that it came, not to end but to encourage people's reflections.<sup>4</sup> The Koran is more aptly designated a pro-rationality message than otherwise.<sup>5</sup> One might find at least four of its characteristics to corroborate this. The Koran calls its hearers to do their own thinking (e. g., 34:46). It presents the world as full of ›signs‹, which help people to discover the divinity of God (e. g., 17:12). It often endorses people's moral sense, thus implying they already know what is good (e. g., 16:90). And the Koran uses concepts in a rational, sharp way; e. g., a radical distinction between creator and creation is prevalent.

But if the Koran is really so much in favour of individual think-

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the four ›Koranic arguments for interpreting the Koran‹ I suggested in my *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkish University Theology. Rethinking Islam*, Würzburg 2005, pp. 188–90: The Koran is (i.) a message, (ii.) a general legislation, (iii.) supposing, not imposing, (iv.) respective.

<sup>5</sup> According to Josef van Ess, too, the Koran is ›not only instruction to act, but also to think rationally‹. *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra. Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*, vol. 4, Berlin 1997, p. 605.

ing, why is historical-critical exegesis of the Koran such a problem for Muslims? This brings us to our second step.

## 2. When Islam Receives Criticism, *sive*: Historical Criticism among Muslim Theologians

Hardly ever is it wise to answer a question without pausing to think whether it is a good question, what its assumptions are, and what the consequences of its being posed and answered may be. So here too, a short reflection seems in place.

- (i) One should specify: What is historical-critical exegesis?
- (ii) If Western observers ask for historical-critical exegesis of the Koran, the question is likely to be understood by Muslims as an imposition.
- (iii) Therefore the counter question ›Why should there be any?‹ is apt.
- (iv) Consequently, it would be wise to ask right away whether Muslims are permitted to use that method, in other words, does the Koran allow for historical-critical exegesis?
- (v) Finally, one might go on and ask whether there is really no such thing as a Muslim historical-critical exegesis of the Koran.

A consideration of what qualifies as historical critique is not to be taken lightly. This is true for two reasons. Firstly, an *overly simple* definition would deprive the question of its constructive challenge. Secondly, a *radical* definition may ask Islam to handle its sources and traditions in ways theologians of other religions – e. g., Christian Old Testament scholars – would not accept for themselves.

Overly *simple* definitions of ›historical-critical,‹ cutting off the question's reformatory potential, are the following four. They are too simple, because each time one can immediately respond ›That is what Muslims have been doing all the time.‹

- a. *Historical criticism is testing a prior speech act by questioning the claims its form and contents make.* Such critique is already reflected in the Koran itself. Some passages clearly react to objections made against what the Koran claims to be, or what the Koran claims to happen. Verses like 17:88 are taking the chal-

lenge (*taḥaddī*) of a questioning about the Koran's divine origin: ›Proclaim: (Even) when human beings and the *ǧinn* allied to produce something similar to this Koran: they will not be able to!‹<sup>6</sup> – Sura 70:1 announces that it is responding to ›Someone inquiring about an imminent punishment.‹

- b. *Historical criticism is the philological, linguistic study of a text, viz., textual criticism including all accessible variants, etymological and semantic analysis of the vocabulary, study of individual passages' literary forms, rhetorical qualities and intertextual relations, and the consideration of the text's structure as a whole.* This is what already classical Muslim exegetes were doing. After all, Arabic philology was set in motion expressly for the study of the Koran.<sup>7</sup>
- c. *Historical criticism is the methodologically controlled study of the general and particular context of a text.* Early *sīra* works (biographies of Muhammad), *ḥadīth* collections and Koran commentaries already apply reflected methods to reconstruct the original situations of Koran verses and to record the circumstances of Muhammad's life.
- d. *Historical criticism is the transposition of the text's contents into a new context.* That has always been the self-understanding of Islamic jurisprudence.

A *radical* definition of historical criticism would be: Historical-critical is the study of a religion, if any discussion of the truth value of concepts like ›act of God‹ and ›revelation‹ is avoided. Such an *a priori* exclusion would lead to a prejudiced procedure. Those truth questions should not be evaded; this is, *nota bene*, not the same as presupposing the reality of God's acts and revelation. Historical criticism is applied in a plausible way only if the question of the truth of religious claims is neither prohibited nor taken for granted. Rather it should be taken as an open question.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Matthias Radscheit, »I'ǧāz al-Qur'ān« im Koran?,« Stefan Wild (ed.), *The Qur'an as Text*, Leiden 1996, pp. 113–124. (Here and elsewhere in the above article translations from the Koran are F. K.'s.)

<sup>7</sup> Angelika Neuwirth, ›Koran«, Helmut Gätje (ed.), *Grundriß der arabischen Philologie*, vol. 2, *Literaturwissenschaft*, Wiesbaden 1987, pp. 96–135, p. 123.

So what would be a reasonable characterization of historical criticism? Here, a catalogue of criteria will be suggested. Each criterion will be justified philosophically by pointing out what it has to do with history; and it will be justified within the Koran's own theology. Such a list will allow us, then, to look at some contemporary Muslim theologians and ask: In how far is their approach historical-critical?

Any dealings with a text can be designated as historical criticism if they are aware that the text is ...

1. *situational*. Historical criticism is aware that individual passages are linked to individual circumstances. Every sentence is said at a particular point in history. Even a sentence that makes a general claim is proclaimed at a particular time and place. Unambiguously *particular* are Koranic passages like ›May the hands of Abū Lahab be corrupted!‹ (111:1). Here, a particular person is being addressed, although the whole of the text is meant to be ›direction for (sc., all) human beings‹ (2:185).
2. *limited*. Historical critique is aware that formulations are limited by the situation they refer to. History has, since then, gone on; patterns of expression change within history. A simple re-issue of the old proclamation today is inappropriate. The fact that rulings are limited to certain situations can be demonstrated by a Muslim solution to a Koranic problem. The principle of *nāsīḥ/mansūḥ*, ›abrogation‹ had to be developed. This happened in response to the problem that the Koran, if read synchronically, displays contradictions. The solution was this: A passage of the Koran that was proclaimed later deprives any earlier, contradictory one of its validity. Thus the consumption of wine was first restricted (4:43) and then prohibited (5:90). What counts now, according to this exegetical rule, is the latest relevant Koranic proclamation, i. e., prohibition.
3. *at a distance from the reader*. As a consequence of the first two aspects of historical-critical awareness, one can see that history separates different points in time. The claim of the text's pre-existence wants to overcome the Koran's historical limitation and distance. But already the early Muslim efforts in reconstructing the meaning of Koranic vocabulary through the study

of linguistic documents contemporary with the Koran's proclamation attest to such an awareness. In different linguistic or cultural contexts the same idea must be expressed differently. Here is an example: *Ummī* means ›illiterate‹ in modern Arabic. But the *nabī ummī* of 7:157 does not say Muhammad is an illiterate prophet; it rather says that he was a gentile.<sup>8</sup>

4. *read within a particular situation.* Every encounter with the Koranic text is historical in that it happens within an individual moment of time with its own questions and standards. We always start our listening or reading from a certain pre-understanding. One might already see the attempt of the Koran to address different hearers in a different manner, as a hint at an awareness that everyone comes to hear the text from a different perspective: Believers, unbelievers, men and women, hypocrites, Muhammad himself – they all get different words.
5. *having its effects on the readers even before they start reading it.* What is between the reader and the text is normally a history of interpretation; and this history shapes the reader's pre-understanding. Here, Muslim interactions with the Koran betray a lack of awareness in that the predominant way of approaching the Koran is asking it for moral guidance. The Koran lends itself to such a reading (cf., e. g., 2:2); but if one reduces the Koranic objective to the improvement of man's manners, the sincerity of its original impulse, Muhammad's experience of vocation, and the monotheistic vision of unity it sets out will be underrated. Precisely because the Koran can be easily misunderstood as a rulebook for right behaviour, it calls for a critical view on how it has so far been interpreted. What will then become visible is that the Koran has largely been read within a framework of ›ethical reductionism.‹<sup>9</sup>
6. *confronted with the same reality as the reader.* Both are standing within the one history. The Koran stresses that believing is to accept the invisible (*ġayb*). Is it thus advocating a type of revelation positivism that requires blind acceptance? That may be a

<sup>8</sup> Josef Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, Berlin 1926, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> *Rethinking Islam* (cf. above, footnote 4), p. 84.

misunderstanding. When a prophet speaks about the invisible, he does so from an apocalyptic perspective. It is *not yet* visible to all; but it will be. The Koran's readiness to share in the perspective of humanity can be established by its appeals to ›signs‹ nature provides to be discovered (30:17–25) and by its appeals to reasoning (e. g., 3:65).

7. *productively reread by its recipients.* The growing temporal distance between text and interpreter is nothing to be lamented. Rather, if new bits of history come into sight, new implications of the text become visible. Koranic evidence for an awareness of the fruitfulness of temporal distance is provided by the ›punishment legends.‹<sup>10</sup> The Koran uses stories of previous prophets as a warning example for the present audience. What happened long ago acquires a new meaning now.
8. *making a historical truth claim.* History is ›what happens.‹ So, the exclusion of all factuality questions can hardly claim to be historical. The distinction between fictional and actual may be modern; and historical criticism can help us in distinguishing different literary genres and their different types of truth claims. A text's truth claim may be an indirect one, to be induced from evidence the text itself provides. But when the Koran gets explicitly involved in questions like whether Jesus was actually or only apparently crucified (4:157), the area of historicity cannot be avoided.
9. *to be situated in the whole of history.* Any claim at the relevance of a text must be established in view of humanity as a whole. The Koran addresses all human beings (2:21 und passim).

We have thus circumscribed what historical-critical exegesis means, and we have given Koranic bases for each element of such a methodology. While we have argued for the ›historical,‹ have we not forgotten the ›critical‹ part of it? Historical-critical interpretation is not divided into two sets of criteria, the historical and the critical ones. Rather, it uses the historical approach for its critique. In other words, historical-critical interaction is happening when claims

---

<sup>10</sup> Horovitz (cf. above, footnote 8), p. 10.

made by and through texts or traditions are critically evaluated in the light of history, rather than dogmatically posed.

Is there no such thing among Muslims? We might point at scholars like Naṣr Hāmid Abū Zayd now famous in Europe.<sup>11</sup> He is a remarkable thinker, but he is neither a theologian, nor is he accepted in his home country. Rather, he was declared a non-Muslim in Egypt and now lives in Dutch exile. There is a region however where one can do quite courageous things with the Koran, and still be considered a Muslim, even a theologian, and, indeed, train future religious staff or write the textbooks for religious education. That region is Turkey. Its Muslim theological scene may be understood better if the backdrop of its history is considered first.

The Turkish Republic was proclaimed in 1923. A decline of theological formation ensued. Only in 1948, when Turkey had moved to a multi party system, was it possible in parliament to demand – *horribile dictu* – a theological faculty again. In order to avoid any suspicion that such a foundation might undo the achievements of the Kemalist project, viz., secularism, the faculty was immediately declared to be one where history and other ›critical sciences‹ should be studied, too. Rather than a place of religious conservation, such a faculty was meant to become an instrument of enlightenment, ›a torch that the fabulists flee like bats.‹<sup>12</sup> In order to ensure its modernity, it was integrated into the newly created university of the Republic's capital, Ankara.

Today, 23 theological faculties operate at Turkey's state universities. The faculties are in charge of the formation of the state's reli-

<sup>11</sup> His hermeneutics are succinctly presented by Rotraud Wielandt in ›Exegesis of the Qurʾān: Early Modern and Contemporary‹, Jane D. MacAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, vol. 2, Leiden 2002, pp. 123–42, pp. 135–7: God wanted to speak to 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabs through the Koran; since he wanted to be understood, he used their particular ›code.‹ If one wants the Koran to speak for today, it has to be translated into a new code.

<sup>12</sup> These are the words of the famous grammarian and then Minister of National Education Tahsin Banguoğlu on June 4, 1949, when the Turkish parliament ruled a theological faculty should be erected. Quoted after Gotthard Jäschke, ›Der Islam in der neuen Türkei. Eine rechtsgeschichtliche Untersuchung‹, *Die Welt des Islams*, N.S. vol. 1 (1951), pp. 1–174, p. 127.

gious staff, including imams and preachers.<sup>13</sup> Certainly the expectations of the state, the government, the Directorate of Religious Affairs and various strands of the Turkish society exert palpable pressure on these academic institutions; but *de iure* the faculties are not accountable to anyone but the state's Council of Higher Education. The oldest faculty of the new model, Ankara, still claims the leading position in some focal questions, especially in Koran hermeneutics. In 1996, a group of then young theologians founded a scholars' movement called the ›Ankara School.‹<sup>14</sup> Most of them had spent parts of their theological formation in the West – in England, France, Germany and the U.S. – or at non-theological departments such as sociology or philosophy.<sup>15</sup> Let us review the approaches of two Ankara Koran exegetes.<sup>16</sup>

ÖMER ÖZSOY (born in 1963, now Professor of Islamic Religion in Frankfurt/Main, Germany) surprisingly claims that the Koran is no text. It is, as he says – taking up an expression of Paul Ricœur's – ›discourse‹ (*söylem*). In an autonomous text one passage is interpreted through other passages. The Koran however can only be understood as one part of a larger interaction, namely of what happened between God and the first believers. Their reactions to the first Koranic proclamations became occasion for new proclamations. If one does not know what the first believers said and did, one cannot understand the Koran.

MEHMET PAÇACI (born in 1959, professor of Koran exegesis in Ankara) has been re-reading the Koran with his knowledge of Bib-

---

<sup>13</sup> In 1999 a governmental ruling stipulated that imam posts should be given to university graduates; only if there are more imam positions than academic candidates, graduates from vocational high schools can be hired. The regulation is published in *Resmi Gazete* 23885, 45a. I am grateful to Doç. Dr. Nurullah Altaş, Ankara, for this reference.

<sup>14</sup> The ›School‹ runs two academic series of books and a quarterly journal called *İslâmiyât*.

<sup>15</sup> Felix Körner, ›Turkish Theology Meets European Philosophy. Emilio Betti, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricœur in Muslim Thinkings,‹ *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, vol. 62 (2006), pp. 805–809.

<sup>16</sup> Detailed discussion in *Rethinking Islam* (cf. above, footnote 174); my *Alter Text – Neuer Kontext. Koranhermeneutik in der Türkei heute*, Freiburg 2006, offers German translations of some articles under review here.

lical and intertestamental material in mind. For a transposition of the Koranic rulings into an evidently different modern situation he was, like his colleague Özsoy, inspired by a Muslim scholar born in 1919 in what is today Pakistan: FAZLUR RAHMAN (d. 1988 in Chicago). Fazlur Rahman started from the presupposition that the Koran is a book of ethical principles rather than a law book of individual rules. Exegesis has, therefore, to be a three-step process, he said. Firstly, one has to move back into the time when the text was first proclaimed. Secondly, one has to induce the ethical principle that lies behind an individual ruling we find in the Koran. Thirdly that principle has to be re-applied today. Paçacı enhanced this model by pointing out that the present reader's ability to understand his own situation is limited; still he has to take the risk of applying the Koranic inspiration by getting involved in today's events, even though they may be disappointingly un-Koranic. Through his linguistic skills Mehmet Paçacı was also able to solve an old Koranic *crux interpretum*. According to 112:2, God is ›solid.‹ But what is that to say? Paçacı dug up the Diaspora Jews' habit of delivering an oral vernacular translation after the Biblical recitation. Such translations had the tendency to render Biblical metaphors in a more abstract way, as can be observed in the Septuagint and Peshitta renderings. Thus, the Biblical expression ›God, the rock‹ became ›God, the solid one‹ among Arabic speaking Jews. If the Koranic verse is read as an allusion to Biblical rock imagery, the Surā's monotheist thrust becomes an expression of trust.

Surveying the Ankara School's hermeneutical work in the light of the nine criteria offered above we find the following situation: The Koran exegetes are doing courageous work; they are well aware that the Koran *refers* to particular historical situations and is, on the literal level, *limited* to the time of its proclamation. Furthermore, they see well that there is a *distance* between today's Muslim and the text that requires historical research and transpositions. Also, reflections on the particularity of the modern *readers' situations* come into discussion. According to the first four criteria, the Koran exegesis of the Ankara School deserves the designation ›historical-critical.‹<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Established in detail by my ›Historisch-kritische Koranexegese? Hermeneutische

Felix Körner

There is no dogmatic reason why the other criteria could not also be seen fulfilled soon.<sup>18</sup> But the School has come into a crisis.

### 3. When Islam Receives Criticism, *sive*: A Muslim Post Modernism

While an author like Mehmet Paçacı used to designate historical criticism as part of traditional Islamic methodology,<sup>19</sup> he now attacks the exegetical interest in the text's original meaning as ›textualism‹ (*metinselcilik*) and a bad copy of the Reformation's *sola scriptura*.<sup>20</sup> The main object of his critique is ›Islamic Modernism‹ – a label he used to apply to himself some years ago.<sup>21</sup>

Three reasons for the Ankara School's hard times may be pinned down.

The first one is inner-theological. While the Ankara theologians' approaches have already been able to stand the test concerning a historical orientation towards the past – admitting that the Koran is not automatically and identically speaking to all times – another question seems to remain unanswered. Why should, of all things, the Koran be the reference point? Are there other arguments for that than ›this is our tradition,‹ or, ›it is miraculously revealed,‹? Questions like these might be answered by an Islamic fundamental theology, so far not established.

Secondly, an impulse from philosophy is at work. One of the great names the Ankara School used to quote was HANS-GEORG GADAMER. Elements of his hermeneutics can obviously be rediscovered in the nine criteria above. But it was also Gadamer who

---

Neuansätze in der Türkei, Michael Meyer-Blanck and Görg K. Hasselhoff (eds.), *Krieg der Zeichen? Zur Interaktion von Religion, Politik und Kultur*, Würzburg 2006, pp. 57–74.

<sup>18</sup> The explication of each criterion in the above presentation includes a reflection on how it may be justified on the basis of the Koran.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. my *Rethinking Islam* (above, footnote 4), p. 67.

<sup>20</sup> *Alter Text – Neuer Kontext* (above, footnote 16), p. 148.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. my *Rethinking Islam* (above, footnote 4), p. 60.

pleaded for a ›Rehabilitation of the Tradition.‹<sup>22</sup> Paçacı's new call could be designated identically.

A third reason for a growing self-critique of the ›Ankara School‹ might originate in Turkey's socio-political situation. Many Turks sense the application of the Copenhagen criteria and other EU measurements as an offensive re-edition of heteronomy.<sup>23</sup> Theologians, like other opinion makers, react to what they feel to be a colonialist attitude by re-asserting ›original Turkishness,‹ ›genuine Islamic tradition‹ and ›our own approach.‹

Thus the idea of a Turkish renewal is born. Paçacı, e.g., envisages a Neo-Ottoman model; it includes an Islamic theology which produces values and worldviews, rather than descriptive statements of the type: ›What the Koran then meant, was ...‹<sup>24</sup> In the eyes of such critics, the crucial but neglected question is neither ›Koran‹ nor ›then,‹ but Islam and now. They do not simply call for a return, but the uniform nation state and its dictatorial rationality has become a major target. The critique of Islamic Modernism thus proves to be, to some degree, a post-modern phenomenon. Such critiques had to be expected, they are understandable, and they can be productive, if they find solutions to the problems the Modernists were unable to crack. Since they criticize the tradition of Modernism from a historical perspective, they are, indeed, historical-critical. If, however, such a revision builds up opposed camps of ›Western methodology‹ and ›our tradition,‹ it delimits territories unnecessarily; and if it calls for a new courage in producing truly Islamic ideologies, that does not absolve the Muslim theologian from the responsibility to justify them.

---

<sup>22</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen 1990, p. 281.

<sup>23</sup> Certainly, one might also feel the usage of a list of nine criteria in the present article to be intrusive.

<sup>24</sup> *Alter Text – Neuer Kontext* (above, footnote 16), p. 150.

#### 4. When Islam Receives Criticism, *sive*: The Eclipse of History

Has the hopeful shoot of historical-critical Koran exegesis in Turkey already died? If one of its most productive and inspiring proponents is now declaring the exegetical approach to be misconceived, such a concern is in place. In the history of Christianity, new movements were often inspired by a fresh look at the textual *fontes*. The Koran's power to revive barren systems was just being discovered. Now, one hears neo-traditional voices among those who live closest to the source of renewal. But if some critical exegetes themselves question the significance of critical exegesis, that should not be seen as the final word on all new readings of the Koran. It should, rather, be understood as the indication of a problem. We are now ready to formulate it by asking a question. Before doing this, a warning to the non-Muslim readers is in place. They will now become witnesses of one side of a dialogue. In this article, the question is being asked. If no answer from Muslim thinkers will be found here, one should not jump to the conclusion that there was a telling silence on the other side of the dialogue. It is going on.

The question is this: What is the theological basis of historical criticism? The question may surprise because the nine criteria, as proposed above, provided Koranic arguments for each element of historical criticism; but theological foundation ought to be more fundamental than individual Koranic observations. What is supposed here is that the theological basis of historical criticism is the answer to the question, what is history?

I recently taught a course in philosophical anthropology at an Ankara university. When we reached the subject *history* I introduced it with an analysis of Ezekiel 36. The prophet addresses exiled Israel. He explains to them the past and the future. Thus, the meaning of the whole of history becomes his theme. Israel's 'ways and deeds' had defiled the Land, Ezekiel enounces. Therefore, God had scattered them. And now, Ezekiel reports God to promise he would lead them back, thus proving himself holy; and he would make them live in a country similar to the Garden of Eden. Ezekiel, like many other prophets and authors of ancient Israel, has a parti-

cular view on the course of events.<sup>25</sup> What happens is brought about by the free, and often evil, acts of human beings. They seem to be the agents of history, thwarting God's plans. But at the same time it is, according to this Biblical view of history, true to say: What happens is God's story; he is the agent. This view is the origin of the concept of history as both contingent and meaningful.<sup>26</sup> The Babylonians led Israel into exile, *and* God scattered Israel. Israel will regain, rebuild, re-inhabit the Land, *and* God will turn it into an Eden-like place. This is not a description of co-operation, with people and God each doing half the job. Rather, people behave or misbehave, as they deem good; and with hindsight all the human efforts, defeats, mistakes and successes can be discovered to be one story of wisdom, in which God has realized his own holy reality.

When I presented this view of history – free acts that will in the end make sense – at a Turkish university, one of the students objected. She identified herself as ›a believer, not belonging to any religion.‹ Hearing the passage from Ezekiel she was disappointed: ›Even in the Bible people claim to speak in God's name, and what they say is misogyny!‹ She disliked the comparison between Israel's evil way and ›the uncleanness of a woman in her impurity‹ (Ez 36:17). In class we discovered that the Biblical view of history allows even for the prophet to be a part of history. Let him, then, have his limitations, his downside. Still, he will not hinder God's story from happening. The prophet is, rather, a part of the great course of events, in which every detail, evil as it may be at some time, will get its meaningful place. If that can be accepted, if God can be seen as acting through human acts, then the role of prophecy can be re-evaluated. What the prophet's mouth proclaims is, then, an element of God's acting, just as anything else is.

Muslim lawyers have always been transposing Koranic stipulations into new contexts. What gave them the right to do so? Were

<sup>25</sup> Pioneers in describing this were G. E. Wright, (*God Who Acts*, 1952) and G. v. Rad (*Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. 1, 1957). Cf. also Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theologie und Philosophie. Ihr Verhältnis im Lichte ihrer gemeinsamen Geschichte*, Göttingen 1996, pp. 119–123.

<sup>26</sup> This was already proposed by Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History* in 1949; cf. Pannenberg, *Theologie und Philosophie* (cf. above, footnote 25), p. 120.

they not working with the implicit theology of history claiming that God wants to act through the prophetic proclamation and their own reasoning? A similar reflection can be made concerning historical criticism of the Koran. The events of history shed light on God's intention, and the Koran is part of history. Therefore the Koranic and the present events have to be brought into interaction.

The relevance of this concept<sup>27</sup> of history can hardly be overrated. If history will in the end turn out to be meaningful, the concept also gives us a yardstick to assess the value of different prophecies. Among several proposed revelations those deserve more attention that can make more sense of the whole in its apparent disorder.

Inquiry about the theological foundation of historical criticism led us to a consideration of the concept of history. If history is the Creator's acting through creatures' acts, then events, with their historical limitations, can be of radical religious interest. But can one seriously propose to Muslims they might understand the event of the Koran along these lines? Is this not *Biblicizing the Koran*? Is that view of history not opposed to the Koran, which sees revelation as vertical, verbal and self-verifying? The Koranic view of history and revelation should not be diametrically opposed to the Biblical one outlined here. The Koran can see signs in nature as being of revelatory value and human reason as capable of comprehending its truth, as mentioned above.<sup>28</sup> On top of that, the Koran can in fact see human action as divine intervention. After the Muslims' victory at Badr (642), the Koran interprets to the believers their success over the unbelievers: »It was not you who killed them, it was God« (8:17). Clearly, the Koran offers points of departure for a theology that sees the Creator's acts and the creatures' actions as going together. If that is the case, why should a Muslim theologian not see the whole of history as revelation?

---

<sup>27</sup> One can hold such a view of history without using a word meaning »history.«

<sup>28</sup> Cf. above, p. 155. On the last point in the text above, see also David Marshall, *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers. A Qur'anic Study*, Richmond (U.K.) 1999.

When Franz Rosenzweig returns to the Turkish quarter of Skopje the next day, on Saturday, the Turkish bookseller there claims he had run out of Koran copies. Rosenzweig does not believe him. He rather understands: »Of course! He would not sell one to *me*.«<sup>29</sup> A non-Muslim glance at the Koran may cast doubt on many an old Islamic conviction, but it might also make that old book shine in a new light.

---

<sup>29</sup> Letter to his parents of April 13, 1917, Palmer (ed.; cf. above, footnote 3), p. 55. I am grateful to Dr. Martin Brasser, Lucerne, and Dr. Peter Starr, Ankara, for their remarks on earlier versions of this text. If I had followed all their suggestions, this would no doubt have become a better article.