

Turkish Theology Meets European Philosophy: Emilio Betti, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricœur in Muslim Thinking

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Have European philosophers anything to contribute to Muslim theology? Where do Western and Islamic thinkers meet? What happens to Islamic thought when it takes in Western ideas, and what happens to these ideas?

There are some attempts by *Arab* thinkers to use Western philosophy for a reconstruction of Koranic theology. The Syrian engineer Muhammad Shahrur,¹ e.g., has tried to demonstrate that the Koran is dialectical in a Hegelian sense of the word. Shahrur's attempt, however, is unconvincing because it betrays a lack of familiarity with both philosophical and philological method. In an idiosyncratic and far-fetched way, he forces the Koranic vocabulary to fit his pre-conceived ideas.

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, an Egyptian scholar of Arabic literature, developed an approach inspired by 20th century communication theory to re-interpret the Koran.² He considers God as the sender who wanted to make himself understood to 7th century Arabs. God therefore had to convey his message in the recipients' "code". If the Koran is to be understood today, its message has to be re-expressed in today's code. Abu Zayd was declared an unbeliever by Muslim authorities in Egypt and had to leave his country.

Modern Islamic thinking has difficult living conditions in the Arab world. The quality of philosophical reflection at Arab universities is not always satisfactory. And when it comes to religious thinking, reformist ideas are felt by the men in power as rocking the boat. New interpretations of the Koran are considered as assaults on the everlasting truth of the text, as assaults on the positions of traditional religious scholars, whose influence has long been challenged by developments of structural secularisation, and as assaults on the governments, which try to legitimate themselves through the unifying power of an erratic religion which would not allow for a plurality of views.³

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¹ Muhammad Shahrur, *al-Kitab wa-l-Qur'an*. Damascus, 1990.

² Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Ma'fhum an-nass*. Cairo, 1990.

³ Cf. Rotraud Wielandt, "Die Wurzeln der Schwierigkeiten innerislamischen Gesprächs über neue hermeneutische Zugänge zum Korantext". In: Stefan Wild (ed.), *The Qur'an as Text*. Leiden, 1996, pp. 257-282.

Turkey offers a different climate for critical reflection, especially in Islamic rethinking. In 1847, the Ottoman Ministry of Education decided to set up in Istanbul a Theological Faculty similar to academic institutions in the West. The Faculty did not get very far, but the founding idea was not forgotten. A century later the right constellation was given. On the one hand, Atatürk's spirit of Westernisation was conducive to modern scholarly institutions; on the other hand, the introduction of a multi-party system made it possible for politicians to voice in parliament the call for quality formation of religious staff. Thus, in 1947 a modern Faculty of Theology was set up in the Republic's capital, Ankara. Classical Islamic disciplines were to be taught there as well as modern philosophy and comparative religious studies. The Ankara Faculty was to be the first of two dozen theological faculties now in operation throughout Turkey. They are in charge of the formation of prayer leaders, preachers, religious education teachers and the specialised staff of the State Directorate of Religious Affairs.

Ankara's Theological Faculty claims a leading position among its fellow Turkish theologates in questions of theological method. A group of Islamic modernist thinkers, "the Ankara School", has launched several series of books and an academic quarterly.⁴ Several staff members of the Ankara Theological Faculty have, after graduation from Ankara, studied at European or North American universities. The atmosphere at Ankara's Faculty, and at many other Turkish theologates, allows for an open scholarly discourse. This is reflected in the discussions published in Turkish congress volumes and academic journals as well as during visits by foreign scholars, especially by non-Muslim theologians. They are received with a genuine interest in scholarly exchange, rather than apologetics. The present author and other Jesuits visiting theological faculties in Turkey have never been treated as members of adversary camps but as scholars welcome for learning together and from each other.

The theologians of the Ankara School share a common interest. They want to be rational, modern-minded people, *and* they want to take the Koran seriously as an expression of God's will. The Koran, however, contains passages to which critical thinkers of today would not want to subscribe. Therefore, these Turkish theologians find themselves challenged by the question of how a 7th century book can be relevant for today. Thus hermeneutics is in the centre of the Ankara School's discussions. Three hermeneutical positions held by Ankara graduates will be presented here. Each illustrates a different type of reception of European ("Continental", as British observers would say) philosophy. The first represents a classical methodology; the second is a revision of the classical approach; the third, finally, is an example of an approach from a slightly different angle.

⁴ *Islâmiyât*. Ankara, 1998-.

Adil Ciftci, who teaches Sociology of Religion at the State University in Izmir, is trying to revisit the Koran with a hermeneutic model taken from lawyers' applications of laws.⁵ Ciftci draws heavily on the work of the Pakistani Muslim thinker and University of Chicago professor Fazlur Rahman (died 1988). Fazlur Rahman explicitly sides with Betti in the Gadamer-Betti controversy.⁶ (Betti's hermeneutics explained understanding as reproducing the author's ideas. Gadamer called Betti's model Romantic psychologism and proposed this counter-model: Dealing with texts cannot be split up into three separate acts of understanding, interpreting and applying. Just as in the case of a musician, actualising the text is identical to "interpreting" it. Interpreting a text is to understand its truth claim in the interpreter's own perspective. This sounds too arbitrary for Fazlur Rahman, who is looking for a solid grounding of his Islamic reformism.) Fazlur Rahman proposes an interpretation of the Koran which works in three steps. First, a correct understanding of the Koranic formulations requires a mental return to their original contexts; secondly, the historical rulings must be understood as concretisations of general ethical principles, which are to be abstracted from the Koranic formulations; finally, those ethical principles have to be translated into courses of action in today's context. In fact, says Fazlur Rahman, this is not a new method, but the way the best Muslim lawyers have always brought the Koranic message to life for their own times.

This model is valuable for an Islam which wants to be true to tradition and true to modern rationality. Looking for ethical principles in the Koran liberates the interpreter from having to apply particular historical rules literally. And still, the model can claim to be traditionally Islamic. The model's problems should, however, be noted. (a) It does not question – let alone argue for – the ethical truth of its basic text, the Koran. In that sense, it is positivist. (b) The model's abstracting step produces rather uninspiring principles. One wonders whether one needs the Koran for that. (c) The model claims that an objective ascertaining of the past is in principle possible. It rejects as subjectivism Gadamer's observation that human knowledge of history changes. Thus, the model is unnecessarily suspicious of the help critical historical studies can provide for the re-reading of a tradition. (d) Finally, the model refuses to accept Gadamer's idea of effective history, because it misunderstands effective history as determinist. (Gadamer called for an awareness of how the text I want to interpret has already influenced me before I even start interpreting.) Awareness of effective history could, however, have played an important role in the reflection on Muslim methodologies. Traditional ways of

⁵ Adil Ciftci, *Fazlur Rahman ile Islam'i Yeniden Düşünmek*. Ankara, 2000.

⁶ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

interpreting the Koran primarily as a handbook of ethics influence Muslim theologians even today. Awareness of that effective history can lead Muslims to wonder why the Koran is seen as telling us only what we are to do, not also who God is and who we are.

Another theologian of the “Ankara School” is taking up Gadamer’s idea of effective history, viz., Mehmet Pacaci, Professor of Koran Exegesis at Ankara University. A collection of Pacaci’s articles has appeared under the witty title “The Koran and I: How Historical are We?”⁷ Here, Pacaci improves Fazlur Rahman’s afore-mentioned three-step model of contextual reading, abstraction and re-application with two ideas, both inspired by Gadamer. Firstly, Pacaci says that before you can enter into the triple movement, you must come to an awareness of your own situation from which and into which you want to understand, interpret and apply the Koran. The point that correct interpretation presupposes, or includes, an analysis of the interpreter’s present situation is a helpful contribution to Muslim – and any – exegesis. It serves to adapt the historical findings consciously and in a controllable manner; it opens up the possibility to pose new questions rather than only trying to answer the traditional ones with more modern methods; and it can serve to discover the interpreter’s own prejudices and their causes. This last point could have led Pacaci to question the conviction that the Koran must be understood as a merely ethically relevant text. So far, however, it hasn’t.

Secondly, Mehmet Pacaci reflects on a type of fundamentalist exegesis which claims that Muslims can act only in a situation similar to the times of the proclamation of the Koran in the 7th century A.D. If the situation is not Koranic now, it is Satanic, and believers should not, indeed cannot, interfere. Against that attitude, Pacaci holds the Gadamerian concept of *Geschichtlichkeit*, historic(al)ity. If human beings are historical, says Pacaci, they have to begin acting precisely from the situation in which they are. This is, of course, a very creative application of Gadamer’s philosophy, but one that sheds light from a foreign tradition on the hidden potential of a philosophical concept.

Ömer Özsoy, now Professor of Islamic Religion in Frankfurt (Germany), was formerly Koran exegete at Ankara’s Theological Faculty, too. He appeals to Paul Ricœur when he offers a new grounding of Koranic exegesis.⁸ To Ferdinand de Saussure’s triplet of “*langue*, *langage* and *parole*”, Ricœur had added a fourth linguistic category viz. *discours*, speech. It is this category which Özsoy uses to make his point. According to Özsoy, it is a mistake to treat the Koran

⁷ Mehmet Pacaci, *Kur’an ve Ben Ne Kadar Tarihseliz?* Ankara, 2000.

⁸ Ömer Özsoy, “Kur’an Hitabinin Tarihselliği ve Tarihsel Hitabin Nesnel Anlami Üzerine.” In: *İslâmî Araştırmalar*. 9 (1996), pp. 135-43; reprinted in: Idem, *Kur’an ve Tarihsellik Yazıları*. Ankara: Kitabiyat, 2004.

as a text. In a text, each bit can be seen in reference to any other. The Koran, however, was, when it happened, speech. The book of the Koran we have today is, as Özsoy puts it, the transcript of a 23-year process: God's commentary on human reactions to his will. Özsoy pleads for treating the Koran as speech (*discours*) again. That implies understanding each Koranic passage as God's reaction to a particular human act. Özsoy's approach liberates the interpreter from the burden of levelling the textual tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions; and it calls to mind that we are lacking vital information, which is automatically transmitted in "speech" (but not in "text"): situational context, intonation and other non-verbal elements of communication. Özsoy's approach is an original contribution to the hermeneutical discussion. It should, however, be remarked that we have no other access to the Koran today than a textual one; and even the reconstruction of the proclamations' historical contexts must use texts.

The three Turkish theologians presented here represent not only three different types of reception of European philosophy *materialiter*, i.e., by using different authors; the Turkish thinkers' receptions are also *formaliter* different. Ciftci's "reception" of Betti is hardly worth the name, since it is in fact siding with an author (Fazlur Rahman) who rejects an author (Gadamer) who criticises Betti. Betti is for Cifti the enemy of his friend's enemy. Pacaci's reception of Gadamer, in contrast, is immediate, terminological and creative. Özsoy's reception of Ricoeur, finally, is, in the case presented here, restricted to an application of a conceptual distinction.

The cross-fertilisation presently taking place in Turkish Islamic reflection is exciting. It is exciting for Western philosophers, who can observe their own tradition being used in a new framework of questions; and, hopefully, also for Muslim theologians outside Turkey, who can see their religious tradition reconsidered, by fellow Muslims, in a new light.⁹

⁹ Cf. Felix Körner, *Revisionist Koran Hermeneutics in Contemporary Turkish University Theology: Rethinking Islam*. Würzburg: Ergon, 2005; Idem, *Alter Text – neuer Kontext: Koranhermeneutik in der Türkei heute*. Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2006.