An Interview with Ekrem Demirli, Turkey's Leading Scholar of Ibn ʿArabi and Qunawi

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Ekrem Demirli (www.ekremdemirli.com/) is Professor of Sufi Studies at Istanbul University (Faculty of Theology, Department of Tasawwuf), and Turkey's foremost scholar of Ibn ʿArabi and Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi. Below is the edited transcript of an interview which I conducted with him concerning his life and work. Professor Demirli's responses were given in Turkish and translated into English by Sultan Adanir Salihoglu.

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Thank you Professor Demirli for taking the time out of what I am sure is a very busy schedule in order to conduct this interview. This is a great honor for me to have the opportunity to ask you some questions.

It is a pleasure for me to talk to a dear friend. I thank you for giving me this opportunity to meet new friends and express my views.

Allow me to begin by asking you to give us some details on your early religious and academic training, and any major, formative influences upon your life.

I was born in 1969 in a small city called Rize, which is in the Eastern Black Sea region. I went to primary school there. Then my family moved to Istanbul for business. I completed my secondary and high school training at the İmam-Hatip high school in Istanbul. The İmam-Hatip high schools are unique to Turkey; they are something of a synthesis of traditional madrasa education and modern high school education. Thus, in high school,

I learned Arabic and the Islamic religious sciences (i.e. Quranic exegesis, Hadith literature, theology, Islamic history, etc.) alongside the core subjects delivered in the curriculum at any other Turkish high school.

I then set out for my post-secondary training. This led to my obtaining the BA (Faculty of Theology) in 1993 from Marmara University. The Faculty of Theology holds a five-year undergraduate program which, alongside teaching the standard religious sciences, also allows students to delve into more complex topics in Islamic philosophy, Islamic art, etc.

Following my undergraduate study, I went on to do an MA in the same faculty. Apart from the official curriculum, I pursued my own course of study, taking private lessons in, and independently reading contemporary works on, a variety of different topics. I also followed some Sufi leaders and got a first-hand experience of Sufi life and thought by visiting the various dervish lodges throughout the country.

As strange as it may sound, I followed the Pan-Islamic movement very closely and was for some time involved in it. It can be noted here that Turkey in many ways has an intense, one-way relationship with the Islamic world. Almost every movement in the Islamic world is followed by Turkey, and every major work is translated into Turkish. Many authors are known and appreciated in Turkey, and in some cases, they are perhaps more appreciated in Turkey than they are in their own countries! Indeed, there is almost no author from Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Syria, or North Africa whose works have not been translated into Turkish.

Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb are particularly beloved. Authors such as Muhammad Iqbal, Mohammed Abed al-Jabri (whose *Critique of Arab Reason* I co-translated into Turkish), and Fazlur Rahman have also been very popular, as have the works of René Guénon and other traditionalist writers. The latter have had a major impact on Turkish intellectual circles, and I for one was particularly impressed with Guénon. It is also important to note that many contemporary Turkish intellectuals are influenced by Sufism in one way or another. For example, such major figures as Mehmet Akif, Necip Fazıl, Sezai Karakoç, and Nurettin Topçu

are deeply involved with Sufism, and it has exercised a formidable influence upon them. During this period of my studies, therefore, I read the works of the main representatives of modern and contemporary Islamic thought.

For my MA, I studied the *Varidat* of Shaykh Bedreddin Simavi, a prominent figure in Ottoman intellectual history. Work on the *Varidat* also allowed me to closely study an important commentary upon this text by Abdullah İlahi, who was one of the first people to introduce the Naqshbandi order to Anatolia. Simavi, in many ways, had certain views that aligned him with the great philosophers of Islam, such as Ibn Sina. He holds a position, for example, to the effect that religious texts, particularly in the realm of eschatology, are highly symbolic in nature. This is because the prophets who have been sent by God clothe abstract, philosophical truths in imaginative and symbolic forms so that these truths may be understood by the masses in a concrete manner.

Immersed in the world of Sufism and Ottoman intellectual history during this period of my studies, I was quite naturally led to the work of Ibn ʿArabi and Qunawi, and went on to do my PhD on Qunawi's understanding of being and knowledge.

Tell me about your philosophical and intellectual influences. Who amongst the great authors in traditional Islamic civilization – apart from Ibn ʿArabi and Qunawi – would you say shaped your own thinking and interests?

Apart from Ibn ʿArabi and Qunawi, I have been most influenced by Farid al-Din ʿAttar, Jalal al-Din Rumi, and Yunus Emre. The latter is one of the most well-known Sufis in Turkey. Indeed, everyone in Turkey knows a few of Yunus Emre's poems. People in Turkey also love Rumi a great deal, and most of them know at least a story or two from the *Masnavi*. I have a great love for Junayd and Bayazid Bastami too, and came to appreciate Bastami more through my engagement with Ibn ʿArabi, who holds him in such regard, as is well-known. Saʿid al-Din Farghani, and to some extent Molla Fanari, both of whom were followers of Qunawi, have also influenced me.

Before Ibn ʿArabi, it was Abu Hamid al-Ghazali who played an important formative role upon my thinking. Yet I do think that Ibn ʿArabi and Qunawi completed what one can call the unfinished business of Ghazali. I should add that Farabi and Ibn Sina have been great sources of inspiration as well.

Who amongst writers in the Western philosophical tradition, past or present, would you say shaped your thinking and interests?

Ever since my student days I have engaged with European literature and philosophy, including pertinent scholarship centered around these topics. The texts I am particularly attracted to include the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers and playwrights. Thus, I have read Plato, Aristotle, and some Greek tragedy like Homer and Sophocles. I also have spent a good deal of time reading the medieval scholastic philosophers, as well as the standard histories of philosophy. Since many of the key works by the founding thinkers of the modern world have been translated into Turkish, such as Hobbes, Hume, and Kant, I have also read their writings.

Tell me about your translation of the Futuhat in particular. Anyone who has tried to read it has surely struggled with it. The thought of translating even small sections is a very daunting task, let alone the entire work. How long did it take you to translate the text, and what kinds of difficulties did you encounter along the way?

I started to read the *Futuhat* in 1994, before I began my doctoral studies – I read most of the book then. While writing my thesis, I read it more comprehensively and intensely. The thought occurred to me at that time to translate it, but it was more of a dream at that point. After many years of preparation and having translated a number of other related books into Turkish, I took a step toward realizing this dream in 2004. It took eight years to complete the translation, and as of 2006 the translation began to appear in print as I went along. During these eight years, I spent most of the day translating the *Futuhat* without getting side-tracked. The book is of course voluminous and

involved. Those issues which were more interesting to me were easier to get through, whereas other parts of the work which were relatively less interesting to me took a much longer time to translate.

Of course, any endeavor to translate the Futuhat would require heavy annotation in order to make the translated text comprehensible to readers. Did you employ such an apparatus in your translation?

Annotating the translation was unfortunately not an option for me. For starters, there was no such guarantee that I would find a publisher for the translation, and adding detailed notes would have taken the project twice as long, and also made it twice as large.

Tell us about your translation of the Fusus into Turkish and your other important work, namely the Turkish commentary that you have done upon the text, which is the first complete work of commentary upon the Fusus in Turkey in at least the last hundred years if I am not mistaken. More specifically, is your commentary in the line of the traditional Fusus commentaries (i.e., Jandi, Qaysari, etc.), or is it somehow different?

In my opinion, the *Fusus* is Ibn ʿArabi's most important work. As is well-known, the teachings of Ibn ʿArabi were shaped through the commentaries written upon this book, which led to a lot of controversy in different periods. During the Ottoman period, two commentaries were written upon the *Fusus* in Ottoman Turkish. Afterwards, another commentary was written by Ahmet Avni Konuk, who lived in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire and the first years of the Turkish Republic. Drawing on other commentaries, he also translated it into Ottoman Turkish. It is not really a scientific translation, and is quite flawed in many ways.

As for my translation of the *Fusus*, which is the first translation of this work into modern Turkish, it too is accompanied by a commentary. My commentary is premised on the idea that the *Fusus* is a metaphysical text. In this respect, I approach the

Fusus from the perspective of Qunawi. My method was to first write explanatory notes on the translation in the form of footnotes. These mainly amount to citations from the classical commentaries with some explanations from the *Futuhat* and Ibn ʿArabi's other works. In a sense, these annotations are similar to Caner Dagli's notes to his English translation of the *Fusus*.

Then, I wrote the commentary proper, which was almost twice the length of the *Fusus* itself. My inquiry is structured around basic questions which guide each chapter. The *Fusus* of course cannot be understood without taking into consideration the traditions of Islamic theology and philosophy. In this regard, I tried to make the text more comprehensible by drawing attention to its connection with key issues and concepts in classical Islamic theology and philosophy. The manner in which my commentary differs from the mainstream Akbarian commentaries upon the *Fusus* is that it is issue-based rather than being a commentary that proceeds line-by-line or passage-by-passage. Since it has been over a decade since this commentary has come out, I do intend a second edition, which will augment many of the points raised in the text and add some new explanatory material along the way.

You have also written some books on Ibn ʿArabi. Please give us an idea of what they are about, that is, your central argument in these works?

Essentially, my books on Ibn ʿArabi assume two things: that the best commentator upon Ibn ʿArabi is Ibn ʿArabi himself, and that Ibn ʿArabi is to be situated within the long line of metaphysical speculation that goes back to many of the great Islamic thinkers, ranging from al-Kindi and Farabi to Ibn Sina and Ghazali. Based on that, I attempt to show, in various ways, how Ibn ʿArabi can be said to inaugurate a new kind of theoretical thinking in conversation with, but improving upon, the tradition of Islamic metaphysics which preceded him.

Now allow me to move to Qunawi. Your doctoral work was on Qunawi, and your first book on Qunawi grew out of that. You have written others books on him as well. How are your books on Qunawi different from already-existing scholarship on him?

Before I took up the study of Qunawi, there were few works on him in Turkish scholarship. One of the only studies was written in the late 1950s. It has its merits, but the author erred in trying too hard to situate Qunawi within the general worldview of Ghazali, and to read him as an opponent of metaphysical thinking. No doubt the reason why Qunawi has largely been ignored in modern scholarship is because his terminology is so difficult, and his ideas can be a bit abstruse. The best way to make sense of him is to engage his works on their own terms, which is what I set out to do, primarily by focusing on his *Miftah al-ghayb*, *I'jaz al-bayan*, and *Murasalat*. What I discovered is that if Ibn 'Arabi inaugurated a new system of Islamic metaphysics, it was his step-son and foremost student Qunawi who expanded upon it, taking it in new and creative directions in a totally unprecedented manner.

As for European-language scholarship, while I was working on Qunawi there was next to nothing on him. Since then, things have improved somewhat, although some of the more recent studies have failed to properly take modern Turkish-language scholarship on Qunawi into account.

One of your other remarkable achievements is your translation of the entire Qunawi corpus. Please give us an idea of how these translations have been received in Turkish intellectual circles.

I have to admit that I was expecting the translation of the Qunawi corpus to have made a greater impact in Turkish scholarship. Nevertheless, it has been well-received, and has raised critical awareness among prominent intellectuals in Turkey. It has also somewhat shattered the false perception in Turkish academia that 'metaphysics' is the exclusive purview of Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi. Now, it is

commonplace in Turkish intellectual circles to rank Ibn ʿArabi and Qunawi as among the foremost metaphysicians in Islam.

Now that I have asked you several questions about your books and translations, let me ask a more general, theoretical question concerning the art of translation itself. What is your philosophy of translation in general?

Even though I have translated many books, I do not consider myself to be a professional translator per se. Nevertheless, I devote my energies to producing translations that are both linguistically and conceptually accurate. Translating an Arabic text into Turkish is relatively easy in comparison to translating an Arabic text into other languages. For starters, the entire Turkish language is rooted in the Sufi tradition. This is why some scholars consider Yunus Emre to be the founder of the Turkish language. Consequently, many Sufi terms and concepts are commonplace, even in modern Turkish. For example, words such as *tajalli*, *zuhur*, *wahdat*, *fardiyya*, *wujud*, and *tahaqquq* are all used in Turkish daily parlance. Nevertheless, it was not an easy task to translate a book like the *Futuhat* into modern Turkish since I had to cross over many conceptual and linguistic worlds.

You have also translated Ibn Sina's Metaphysics (Ilahiyyat), namely the last section of his famous Kitab al-Shifa' (The Book of Healing), a text which was very important for the development of later Islamic philosophy, from India to Iran. Why did you undertake this translation, given how different Ibn Sina's perspective is from that of Ibn ʿArabi and Qunawi?

Qunawi famously said that the Sufis rarely agree with the theologians, but they often agree with the philosophers. This claim alone drew me to study the work of Ibn Sina and the Peripatetic Islamic philosophical tradition. Indeed, many issues in Qunawi's *Miftah* are closely related to Ibn Sina's *Metaphysics*. Sufi metaphysics and Peripatetic Islamic philosophy thus share some common ground, particularly with respect to certain

issues in cosmology, the God–world relationship, and the possibility and attainment of human perfection, etc. However, there are some major differences as well, particularly with respect to the nature of essential causation.

Do you see both Ibn ʿArabi and Qunawi as 'Sufi metaphysicians' and Ibn Sina as just a 'metaphysician'?

In truth, any denotation in this context would be insufficient. Take, for example, a word like 'Sufi.' It is not so easy to define. And look at the term 'metaphysics.' That, too, is not so easy to pin down. But if we mean by 'metaphysics' universal knowledge, the arranging of the principles of other sciences, and most importantly proving the existence of God, we can call Ibn Sina a 'rational' metaphysician. That is, he argues that reason or human intelligence can know absolute reality, and that humans can achieve felicity by perfecting their theoretical and practical faculties. Metaphysics in this sense is concerned with these problems with reference to human intelligence and reason alone, and not to religion or religious belief as such. I believe that Ibn Sina and like-minded Islamic philosophers could not entirely extricate themselves from the fundamentals of this kind of metaphysics, and thus their philosophical worldview could not provide a strong enough foundation for religion and revelation. This was precisely Ghazali's contention. On the other hand, Ibn ʿArabi and Qunawi had pretty much the same concerns as Ibn Sina vis-à-vis metaphysics, but insisted that revelation was indispensable to realizing the goals of the science of metaphysics.

What, then, in your view is the subject matter of metaphysics, and how is it contemporarily relevant?

In our age, metaphysics is considered to be quite meaningless to most people. This is unfortunate, and can be traced back to Descartes, who ostensibly glorified metaphysics but in actuality directed our attention to physics proper. Since metaphysics is no longer seen as having real, explanatory force, it is no wonder

that religious thought has weakened and become quite untenable among many of today's leading intellectuals.

For me, the subject matter of metaphysics is being/existence, and in this respect I am in fundamental agreement with Ibn Sina. But, I also side with Ibn ʿArabi and Qunawi, who maintain that immersion into metaphysics necessarily entails immersion into the content of revelation. It would not be possible, in other words, to understand metaphysical thinking without grasping the nature and scope of revelation. And this would, in keeping with Ibn ʿArabi's fundamental insight, naturally lead to a more detailed study of man as such, or anthropology. It is also my position that the insights of the great Islamic metaphysicians can be brought into conversation with today's most significant advances in the human sciences. Such an approach should offer some promise to our contemporaries, who are often disillusioned with simple-minded theological approaches to revelation and the content of religion.

By way of closing, please tell us something about your current and future research, particularly with respect to the Akbarian tradition.

I am currently in the process of writing a commentary upon Qunawi's *Miftah* and publishing editions of two pre-modern commentaries upon it, both of which have heretofore not been critically edited, let alone studied. I am also working on a translation and edition of the *Tibyan* by Haririzade Kemaleddin, which is a voluminous work dealing with the various Sufi orders' methods and chains of transmission.