

Ekrem Demirli, *İslâm Metafiziğinde Tanrı ve İnsan: İbnü'l-Arabî ve Vahdet-i Vücûd Geleneği [God and Human in Islamic Metaphysics: Ibn al-Arabî and the Wahdat al-Wujûd Tradition]*, İstanbul: Kabalcı Yayınevi, 2009, (Second Edition: 2012), 344 pages, ISBN: 978-605-5272-23-4

## Hacı Bayram Başer\*

Although it is asserted that studies on Islamic thought in Turkish have recently reached a high level of sophistication, the interaction points between the research disciplines of theology, philosophy, Sufism studies and the bases for Islamic metaphysical thinking in these disciplines have not yet been brought to light. The first studies in this area, which observed the Akhbârî tradition that developed after Ibn al-Arabî, examined the *wahdat al-wujûd* (unity of existence) and the sources of this school in pre-Islamic traditions of thought. Disabled by reductionism, this approach frequently caused an ambiguity that prevents determination of the kind of contributions Muslim thinkers provided to metaphysical thinking at any point in the history. The present study by Demirli, first, claims to offer a step toward eliminating this ambiguity.

This study identifies the level of metaphysical thinking attained in the thirteenth century and the theoretical sources of this thought (p. 7), putting the *wahdat al-wujûd* tradition founded by Ibn al-Arabî and al-Qunawî at the center of this development. Demirli focused on Fârâbî, Ibn Sinâ, Ibn al-Arabî, al-Qunawî, and the commentators on Ibn al-Arabî in the process that led to this work. Following his doctoral study, published under the title *Sadreddin Konevî'de Bilgi ve Varlık* (İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 2005),<sup>1</sup> he wrote an original *Fuşûs* commentary, *Fuşûs al-Hikem* (İstanbul: Kabalcı Yayınevi, 2006). Moreover, he translated *Futûhât al-Makkiyyah* into Turkish in eighteen volumes (İstanbul: Litera Yayıncılık, 2006–2012), thereby, enabling the entire *Futûhât* to be read in a language other than Arabic. One of the most important aspects of *İslâm Metafiziğinde Tanrı ve İnsan*, which focuses on central problems of Islamic metaphysical thought in an introduction and four main sections, is that it serves as a guide offering an integral

1 A summary of this work for the general reader was published under the title *Nazarî Tasavvufun Kurucusu Sadreddin Konevî: Hayatı, Eserleri, Düşüncesi*, İstanbul: İSAM Yayınları, 2008.

\* Res. Assist., Yalova University Faculty of Islamic Sciences.

view of the literature for those who want to enter into this extensive theoretical corpus.

In the introduction, the author discusses his preferred methodology and states that he aims to indicate the dimensions of the idea that unite these thinkers, namely the idea of *wahdat al-wujūd*. In this framework, the book focuses mainly on *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikem* by Ibn al-Arabī and *Miftāḥ al-ghayb* by al-Qunawī. Demirli asserts that these two works should be considered the most important products of metaphysical thinking in the thirteenth century for their theoretical language and the new perspective they brought to discussions of existence and knowledge in different cultures and geographies.

The author's main suggestion in the first part of the first section, which examines perceptions of time according to the *wahdat al-wujūd* tradition, is that Muslims cannot be considered simply as carriers of pre-Islamic philosophy; rather, they developed original metaphysical thinking. The author makes this assertion based on the perception of time expressed by Ibn al-Arabī. According to Demirli, the interpretation of time by Ibn al-Arabī entails two distinct periods: the period of time until the Prophet, and the maturation phase since the coming of the Prophet. Ibn al-Arabī associates the second phase with Muslims' transformation of the Greek heritage through their translation activities (pp. 42–45). According to the author, one consequence of this approach to history is that Ibn al-Arabī and al-Qunawī introduced a "Sufi metaphysics" in which the theoretical method is also accepted along with consideration and deduction as used in the disciplines of philosophy and theology.

According to Demirli, the ideas of Ibn al-Arabī and al-Qunawī indicate that, Sufism put aside its defensive attitude over against jurisprudential and theological disciplines and acquired an identity as a "superior science" and entered into a new period in which Islamic metaphysical thinking went through its maturation phase. He supports this assertion by indicating (in the first part of his first section, and then also in the second section of the study) the points where the main problems of theology and philosophy are answered in the *wahdat al-wujūd* tradition. This interdisciplinary approach gives the author the opportunity to assert that Ibn al-Arabī and al-Qunawī not only affected the further development of Sufism, based on the divine names theory, but also offered a framework for interpreting the traditions of thought before them (pp. 61–166).

The third section, which focuses on the perception of existence by Ibn al-Arabī and his followers, is the most important part of the book. Here, the author reviews the consequences of the fact that Ibn al-Arabī and his followers transformed the statement imposed by Ibn Sinā as the subject of metaphysics, "existence *qua* exist-

ence (*al-wujūd min haythu huwa huwa*), into the statement “existence *qua* existence is God” (*al-wujūd min haythu huwa huwa ḥaqqun*), thereby making God the subject matter of metaphysics. The author indicates that it is not important how Ibn al-Arabī and his followers arrived at this conclusion, but he believes that this approach has two important consequences. First, the preference for treating existence as the primary subject of metaphysics, as in Ibn Sinā, was changed. Second, Ibn al-Arabī and his followers put forward a theory of existence and creation called “*vesileci sudur*” (occasionalist emanation), according to which they limit the area of effect Ibn Sinā’s causality theory by taking a God-centered approach to the idea of existence. According to Demirli, this turn away from “existence *qua* existence,” while bringing many opportunities for Sufis, became the first reason for criticism of the idea of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Demirli further indicates that the second most important assertion of this school, the idea of *al-a’yān al-thābita* (the immutable entities), was criticized by the idea of *waḥdat al-shuhūd*, of Imam al-Rabbani. However, rather than considering *waḥdat al-shuhūd* as an equivalent of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, he emphasizes that it can be only an interpretation of *al-a’yān al-thābita* (pp. 199–202) and believes that it is wrong to see *waḥdat al-shuhūd* as an alternative. Furthermore, the author underscores that one of the factors of the idea of metaphysics of Ibn Sinā as modified in Ibn al-Arabī and al-Qunawī is language. Drawing attention to changes in the required-possible distinction, the wealthy-poor distinction, and the destiny-divinity concept, Demirli states that these changes reflect the conscious preferences of Ibn al-Arabī. Another example given in his discussion of the existence-essence relationship in God and possible beings is that Ibn al-Arabī used the concept of “non-existence of non-existence” to correspond to the concept of *al-imbkān* (possibility) (pp. 183–189).

In the fourth section, entitled “Humans in Metaphysical Thinking,” the author discusses the eternity of human beings, the problem of freedom, and the perfect human being. According to the author, the entire effort of Ibn al-Arabī focuses on understanding humans. In this respect, humans are both the beginning and the purpose of Sufi thinking. The author does not provide any footnotes in this section. Although this omission can cause difficulties for the reader who wants to follow the topic by referring to the primary sources, it is possible to do so by relying on references provided in previous sections, as this section functions as a summary of the book’s first three sections. The important value of this section is that it demonstrates the points where the tradition of *waḥdat al-wujūd* falls into incoherence or ambiguity while criticizing or transforming the perspectives of earlier Muslim thinkers with regard to human beings.

In his conclusion, Demirli proposes revising our view of the history of metaphysical thinking, contending that the golden era of philosophical thought in Islam

cannot be limited to Fārābī, Ibn Sinā, and Ibn Rushd. Rather, metaphysical thinking introduced a brand new phase in the hands of Ibn al-Arabī and al-Qunawī, and this process cannot be understood completely if we consider these central thinkers separately from each other (p. 313). In this respect, the work invalidates approaches that consider the idea of Ibn al-Arabī as a continuation of Neo-Platonism, as observed especially in Abu al-Alā al-Afifī, and it offers a response to the common suggestion that philosophical thinking in Islam was interrupted by al-Ghazālī. Therefore, the book suggests that the idea of *waḥdat al-wujūd* functioned as a criticism of perceptions of existence and knowledge by Islamic thinkers and theologians, but more importantly as complementary to these other approaches. The author's most important contribution is his demonstration that it is not possible to study the idea of *waḥdat al-wujūd* independently from the approaches of previous Muslim thinkers. In this respect, Demirli's work could possibly change the direction of studies specifically on *waḥdat al-wujūd* and generally on Sufism. Although the author concludes that the tradition of *waḥdat al-wujūd* was a foundational factor in the Seljuk-Ottoman thought, he could have asserted this idea more convincingly by using more literature from that era.

The presence of headings that reflect the main themes of every section is an important feature that helps the reader to gain an overall understanding of the book. The work has a smooth and plain style, and the glossary at the end enables the reader to review the idea of *waḥdat al-wujūd* as found in various texts.

*İslām Metafiziğinde Tanrı ve İnsan* is the most important work written in Turkish for those who want to follow the development of the idea of Sufism generally and the idea Ibn al-Arabī specifically within the scope of Ibn Sinā's metaphysics and Ash'arite theology.