‘Ayn al-A‘Yān
The First Prominent Qur’ānic Commentary in Ottoman History

Halim Calis

To cite this article:
‘AYN AL-A‘YĀN: THE FIRST PROMINENT QUR’ĀNIC COMMENTARY IN OTTOMAN HISTORY

Halim Calis*

Abstract: Muḥammad ibn Ḥamza Shams al-Dīn al-Fanārī (1350–1431) was a prominent early Ottoman scholar. After years of education in Anatolia and Egypt, he served as a mudarris (professor) and judge in the Ottoman lands and was later promoted to the post of Shaykh al-Islām, the highest office in the Ottoman religious bureaucracy. ‘Ayn al-a‘yān, al-Fanārī’s partial commentary on the opening chapter of the Qur’ān, is an outstanding tafsir work, in which al-Fanārī presents his exegetical theory. In his theory, the Qur’ānic text is assessed as having multi-layered meanings, including an esoteric sense, and as being open to endless attempts at interpretation. Al-Fanārī connects the multiple layers of Qur’ānic meaning with the hierarchical structure of existence theorised in Akbarī metaphysics. Since the text encodes the secrets of existence at an esoteric sense, the task of the commentator involves spiritual experience beyond intellectual enquiry. Therefore, in al-Fanārī’s commentary, the Qur’ānic text functions as an epistemological medium that connects Akbarī ontology to spirituality. The appropriation of Akbarī hermeneutics led al-Fanārī to question the nature and authority of tafsir and to redefine the Qur’ān and its exegesis.

Keywords: Shams al-Dīn al-Fanārī, Akbarī hermeneutics, Ottoman tafsir tradition, Sufi ḥisārī tafsir, Ibn al-‘Arabī

INTRODUCTION

It is pleasing to observe, in recent years, increasing scholarly attention to the intellectual history of the Ottomans, aside from its political history. Ottoman ‘ulamā (scholars), including tafsir scholars and commentators, have received their fair share of this attention.¹ The Ottoman tafsir tradition cannot be discussed without mentioning Muḥammad ibn Ḥamza Shams al-Dīn al-Fanārī (1350–1431), because he was one of the early Ottoman scholars who produced the first outstanding tafsir work in Ottoman history. Al-Fanārī was a notable

---

* Lecturer of Islamic studies at the Respect Graduate School, USA.

¹ For a recent study on the Ottoman tafsir tradition, see Talha Boyalik and Harun Abaci (Eds.), Osmanlı’da İlim-i Tefsir [The Science of Tafsir in the Ottomans] (İstanbul: ISAR, 2019). For a discussion of why Ottoman tafsir works have received only limited attention from Western and Arabic-language surveys, see Samuel J. Ross, “The Importance of Ottoman Tafsir,” in Osmanlı’da İlim-i Tefsir, ed. Talha Boyalik and Harun Abaci (İstanbul: ISAR, 2019).
scholar who lived in Anatolia at a time when the Ottoman dynasty was on the rise. He contributed to the fields of Islamic jurisprudence, logic and Arabic grammar through his writings, but he is best remembered for his contributions to Akbarî teaching. In particular, he contributed to the Akbarî exegetical tradition with his partial commentary on the opening chapter of the Qur’an titled ‘‘Ayn al-a’yân: Tafsîr al-Fâtiha.’’

‘Ayn al-a’yân consists of two parts. The first part, titled Muqaddima, is a long prologue and can be considered a self-contained work on the ‘‘ulûm al-Qur’ân (Qur’anic studies). In this prologue, al-Fanârî discusses the meaning and value of Qur’anic exegesis (tafsîr), as well as its status among the Islamic sciences. This discussion is noteworthy, given the context of the ‘‘Ayn al-a’yân. It was written in the period when several important works on ‘‘ulûm al-Qur’ân were completed, including al-Zarkashi’s (d. 1392) al-Burhân fi ‘‘ulûm al-Qur’ân and al-Suyûtî’s (d. 1505) al-Igân fi ‘‘ulûm al-Qur’ân. Although not as comprehensive as either of these, as I discuss below, ‘‘Ayn distinguishes itself as a work that questions the nature and authority of Qur’anic exegesis.

There are numerous modern studies on al-Fanârî, some of which deal with his thoughts concerning Qur’anic exegesis. Most of the studies in the Turkish language repeat the

2 The word Akbarîyya (the Akbarî school or tradition), derived from Ibn al-‘Arabî’s (d. 1240) epithet al-Shaykh al-akbar (the Greatest Master), has been used to refer to writers who were influenced by Ibn al-‘Arabî’s Sufi doctrines.

3 This title may mean many things. The most appropriate translation is “the water spring of the notables.” Al-Fanârî’s exposition can be seen as part of a popular Sufi tradition, similar to Akbarî commentary on the Fâtiha authored by al-Qûnawî. See Şadr al-Dîn Muhammad ibn Ishâq al-Qûnawî, Ijâz al-bayân fi ta’wil Umm al-Qur’ân [The Inimitability of the Divine Exposition in the Interpretation of the Mother of the Qur’ân], ed. ‘Abd al-Qâdir Ahmad ‘Aţâ (Cairo: Dîr al-Kutub al-hadîthâ, 1969). This tradition was perhaps rooted in the belief that the whole Qur’ân was summarised in the Fâtiha. Al-Fanârî quotes a statement attributed to al-Hasan al-Brûrî (d. 728) that expresses this belief. According to al-Hasan, God has placed the knowledge of all the scriptures in the Qur’ân, then the knowledge of the whole Qur’ân is in the Fâtiha. Therefore, “whoever knows the interpretation of the Fâtiha knows the interpretation of all the Holy Scriptures.” See Shams al-Dîn al-Fanârî ibn ‘Amâza, ‘‘Ayn al-a’yân: Tafsîr al-Fâtiha [The Water Spring of the Notables: Interpretation of the Fâtiha] (İstanbul: Rıfat Bey Matbaası, 1907), 8.

4 In English, one of the works is the dissertation I submitted to the University of Chicago in 2018: Halim Câlis, “Akbarî Hermeneutics in Shams al-Dîn al-Fanârî’s Qur’ân Commentary on the Chapter al-Fâtiha” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2018). In addition, Richard Cooper Repp has written an extensive biography of al-Fanârî; however, he provides no information about the scholar’s works or thoughts because he is primarily interested in al-Fanârî because of his relationship with the Ottoman institution of Shaykh al-İslâm. See Richard Cooper Repp, The Mufît of Istanbul: A Study in the Development of the Ottoman Learned Hierarchy (N.J.: Ithaca Press London, 1986), 73-98.

assertion that al-Fanārī aimed at a synthesis among Islamic theology, Islamic philosophy and Islamic mysticism partly based on his ideas presented in the ‘Ayn.\(^5\) Some even claimed al-Fanārī adopted syncretism in his commentary,\(^6\) probably due to superficial readings of ‘Ayn, where he uses Qur’ānic phrases as a pretext for raising many different points in several fields, such as linguistics, rhetoric, theology, jurisprudence and spirituality, to the extent that the ‘Ayn goes beyond being a commentary and, with its many pages, starts to look like a book of grammar, theology or Islamic law. In most of the commentary, he brings together opinions from many sources in these fields. In the current study, I argue that al-Fanārī’s aim was not to synthesise; rather, his main concern was Akbarī teaching and he primarily attempted to justify Akbarī exegetical approaches in the ‘Ayn’s prologue by employing the terminology of the classical Islamic scholarly tradition, including the ‘ulūm al-Qur‘ān. More specifically, I argue the appropriation of the Akbarī school scriptural hermeneutics led al-Fanārī to question the nature and authority of taṣfīr and eventually to develop an exegetical theory that emphasises the multilayering of Qur’ānic meanings, including their esoteric sense, and the openness of the Qur’ānic text to inexhaustible attempts at interpretation, not just interpretation based on traditional narrations. In the following pages, I will first give al-Fanārī’s brief life story and describe his works in print. Then I will discuss the major characteristics of the ‘Ayn and al-Fanārī’s approaches to Qur’ānic exegesis, emphasising hermeneutical ideas presented by Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240) and Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnāwī (d. 1274), which become clearer when they are considered together with al-Fanārī’s comments.

---


\(^6\) For example, Tahsin Görgün makes these claims in an entry he wrote on al-Fanârī’s thoughts in TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi, an encyclopedia influential in research in Islamic studies, in the Turkish language. Tahsin Görgün, “Molla Fenari (Düşüncesi),” in TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi, accessed March 21, 2018, www.islamanziklopedisi.info.

AL-FANÀRĪ’S BRIEF LIFE STORY

Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ḥamza, better known as Mulla al-Fanārī, was born in 1350.
His birthplace is not clear. He spent most of his life in Anatolia at a time that coincided with


8 Some sources mention a village named Fanār as al-Fanārī’s place of origin, accepting his epithet fanārī as a nisba to a place. See Tāshkibzāzda, al-Shaqqā‘iq al-nu’mānīya, 17; Tāshkibzāzda, Miḥṭā‘ al-sa‘āda, 2:109. However, Fanār’s location is not certain in the sources; some point to Transoxiana, while others locate it in Anatolia. See Süleyman Şā‘ed-din Müştaḵimizade, Mecelletül-nisâb fi n-niseb ve l-‘künâ ve l-elkâb (facsim.) [The Book of Origins in Epithets, Titles and Nicknames] (Ankara: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 2000), 241; Beli, Güldeste, 239; Tahir, Osmanlı Müəlliflərî, 1:391; İsmail Hayku Üzunçarşılı, Osmanlı Devletinin İnimie Tişkili [The Class of Scholars in the Ottoman State] (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basmevi: 1988), 228. The epithet fanārī has other possible meanings. Al-Suyūṭī states he heard from al-Kāfiyyah that fanārī indicates an occupation, because it denotes “lantern maker” or “lantern seller” in old Turkish, whose speakers acquired the word fanar or fanār, which means “lantern,” from the Greeks. Al-Suyūṭī, Buḥyat al-wu‘āḥ, 39. However, this would be Shams al-Dīn’s ancestor’s job, not his occupation, because he was a silk merchant. See Tāshkibzāzda, al-Shaqqā‘iq al-nu’mānīya, 19. According to another story, when Shams al-Dīn’s grandfather came to Anatolia, he was given a lantern as a gift, then the family came to be known by the epithet “ibn al-Fanārī.” See Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Sakkāhī, al-Daw’ al-lāmi‘ li-ahl al-qarn al-lāsī [The Shining Light for the People of the Ninth Century] (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyya, 2003), 3: 115. Another story has it that Shams al-Dīn was given this name after he gave an
the extension of the Islamisation and Turkisation process in Anatolia and the Balkans at the hands of the Ottomans. The Turkoman principalities in Anatolia, known as Beyliks, still existed, but they would be soon ended, one by one, by the Ottomans. After he received his early education from his father, who was a Sufi affiliated with the School of Ibn al-ʿArabi,9 al-Fanārī attended several Ottoman madrasas and studied under prominent ʿulamāʾ of his time, such as Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Maʿarrī (d. ?), ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn ʿAlī al-Aswad (d. 1397) and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Aqṣārāyī (d. 1370s).10

Al-Fanārī then travelled to Egypt to study under Akmal al-Dīn al-Bābartī (d. 1384),11 an eminent scholar of Ḥanafī jurisprudence and Māturīdī theology.12 It is reported that al-Bābartī also believed in the Akbara teaching of the Unity of Beings (Waḥdat al-wujūd).13 In this sense, the intellectual interests of al-Fanārī and al-Bābartī perfectly overlapped; as Ḥanafī and Akbarī, al-Fanārī found an excellent ground for cultivating Sufi ideas at his young age under the tutelage of such an eminent figure as al-Bābartī. Along with al-Fanārī, some other well-known names from Anatolia, including Shaykh Badr al-Dīn ibn Qāṭī Simawna (ex. 1420), were also part of al-Bābartī’s circle.

When al-Fanārī returned to the Ottoman lands, he was appointed as a mudarris (professor) in Bursa, the capital of the Ottomans.14 Then he was promoted to the post of qāḍī (judge) in Bursa,15 where he was serving as chief judge when Timur (Tamerlane) (r. 1370-1405), the powerful Turco-Mongol conqueror, decisively defeated the Ottomans at the Battle of Ankara in 1402. Al-Fanārī and other notables were captured when Timur invaded and sacked the city. He was eventually released and took refuge in the Karamanids, one of the Anatolian principalities that had been suppressed by the Ottomans and restored by Timur.16 Al-Fanārī migrated to Konya, the Karamanids capital in central Anatolia, and stayed there during the civil war that put the Ottoman dynasty in an interregnum period.17 Al-Fanārī eventually returned to Bursa when Mehmed I (Çelebi) (r. 1413-1421), an Ottoman sultan, ended the civil

---

9 Tāshkubrızāda, al-Šaqaʿi ʿal-ʾnuʾ māniṣyya, 18.
11 Ibid., 3:465.
14 Tāshkubrızāda, al-Šaqaʿi ʿal-ʾnuʾ māniṣyya, 18.
war, which had lasted for 11 years. He was welcomed with great respect and honour then appointed as a mudarris and qāḍī again.\(^{18}\)

Several years later, al-Fanārī set out on pilgrimage in 1419 during the well-known rebellion led by Shaykh Badr al-Dīn ibn Qāḍī Simawna, which disturbed Western Anatolia.\(^{19}\) When al-Fanārī was in Jerusalem on his way back from Arabia, Sayf al-Dīn al-Mu’ayyad (r. 1412-1421), the Mamluk sultan of Egypt, invited him to Cairo to ask him for news about the Ottomans. Al-Fanārī arrived in Cairo in 1420 and was treated with extreme hospitality by the Sultan.\(^{20}\) Ibn Ḥajar records an interesting anecdote about al-Fanārī’s visit to Cairo:

He (al-Fanārī) was a man of good character and extreme generosity, but he was being criticized because of his affiliation with Ibn al-‘Arabī and that he used to teach *Fusūṣ al-ḥikam* and lecture on it. When he came to Cairo, he displayed nothing about [his interest in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teaching]. He performed pilgrimage in the year 822 (1419). When he came back, Sultan al-Mu’ayyad invited him, and al-Fanārī arrived in Cairo and met its notables. He made no remark about the above-mentioned teaching [of Ibn al-‘Arabī], which might be criticized. Some who respected him requested him to keep silent on this issue.\(^{21}\)

Ibn Ḥajar’s words give us a hint about the Egyptian scholars’ opinion regarding Ibn al-‘Arabī. In such an environment, al-Fanārī normally made no mention of al-Shaykh al-Akbar and his school, but he had a chance during his visit to Egypt to teach his own works,\(^{22}\) give lectures on Islamic law,\(^{23}\) and debate with Egyptian scholars on Arabic grammar.\(^{24}\) After a two-week stay, al-Fanārī left Cairo in great glory, bearing priceless presents from the Sultan and statesmen.\(^{25}\)

When al-Fanārī returned to the Ottoman lands after his pilgrimage and visit to Egypt, the rebellion led by Badr al-Dīn had already been suppressed.\(^{26}\) Upon his return, al-Fanārī was appointed as the muftī of Bursa in the time of Sultan Murād II (r. 1421-44 and 1446-51).\(^{27}\)

---

27 Hüsameddin, “Molla Fenār,” 19, 150.
Many Ottoman historians, following Sa’deddin Müstakîmzade (d. 1787), an 18th century Ottoman biographer, took this to mean that al-Fanārī became the first Shaykh al-Islām.28

Near to his death, al-Fanārī went on his second pilgrimage in 1430 to express his gratitude to God for his recovery from temporary blindness.29 Shortly after his return to Bursa in the spring of 1431, he died30 and was buried there in the graveyard of the mosque he had built.31

**AL-FANĀRĪ’S WORKS**

Brockelmann and Baghdādī attribute to al-Fanārī more than 20 works in several fields.32 Most of them are found in libraries in manuscript form. In addition to ‘Ayn al-a’yān, the following are his works in print, all of which were written in Arabic.

- *Asās al-taṣrīf*: A short treatise on morphology in Arabic (ṣarf).33
- *al-Fawā’id al-Fanārīyya*: Sharḥ al-Īṣāghūfī: A commentary on Athīr al-Dīn al-Abhari’s (d. 1264) famous treatise on logic, *al-Īṣāghūfī*.34 This is a well-known work in the Indian Muslim territories35 and Ottoman madrasas.36
- *Fuṣūl al-badā‘i‘ fi uṣūl al-sharā‘i‘*: A lengthy work on Islamic legal theory (uṣūl al-fiqh). It was first published in 1872 in Istanbul,37 then in 2006 in Beirut.38

---

28 Repp, “Shaykh al-Islam (in the Ottoman Empire),” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Brill Online, 2010), accessed March 21, 2018, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2. Despite the fact the term *Shaykh al-Islām* was not used as a bureaucratic title and no post equivalent to this rank was clearly defined during al-Fanārī’s time, it seems he took some of the functions of this “later-to-be-established” office on himself. Regarding the question “Was al-Fanārī the first Ottoman Shaykh al-Islām?” Repp concludes that Sultan Murād II’s conscious policy to create “a religious authority alongside of the secular power” was partly realised in al-Fanārī. See Repp, *The Müftü of Istanbul*, 123-124.


30 Historical and biographical sources give different dates for al-Fanārī’s death. For an assessment of them, see Repp, *The Müftü of Istanbul*, 93-97.


36 Mehmət Yalara lists 14 glosses on *al-Fawā‘id* that are mentioned in the bibliographical sources. See Mehmət Yalara, “Molla Fanārī’nin İsığuci Şerhi ve Şark Medrese Gelenegindeki Yeri” [Mulla al-Fanārī’s Commentary on the Isagoge and Its Place in the Eastern Madrasa Tradition], in *Uluslararası Molla Fenârî Sempozyumu: International Symposium on Molla Fanârî*, ed. Tevfik Yucedogru (Bursa: Bursa Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2010), 566-8. This number would be much higher if it included manuscripts in libraries not listed in the sources. The most popular glosses are Āḥmad ibn Maḥmūd ibn Khadir’s (d. 1543) *Qawl Ahmad* and Būhrān al-Dīn al-Bulghārī’s *al-Farā‘id al-Burhānīyya*. 38
• Mişbāh al-uns bayn al-ma’qāl wa-l-mashhūd fī sharḥ Mişfāh ghayb al-jam’ wa-l-wujūd li-l-Qūnawi: A long commentary in Arabic on al-Qūnawi’s key work, Mişfāh al-ghayb, which focuses on metaphysics and has been subjected to many commentaries in Arabic and Persian. Mişfāh has been taught to advanced students in the madrasas of Iran, along with al-Fanārī’s Mişbāh. 39

• Risāla fī al-Ṭaṣawwuf: A short treatise in which al-Fanārī briefly explains the principles of Akbarī ontology. 40

AL-FANĀRĪ’S QUR’ĀNIC COMMENTARY AND SCRIPTURAL HERMENEUTICS

‘Ayn al-a’yān: Ta’ṣīr Sūrat al-Fātiha is the title of al-Fanārī’s partial Qur’ānic commentary on the Fātiha chapter. It was published in 1907 in Istanbul41 and it is possible to find many manuscripts in world libraries. Considering that Fātiha is only seven short verses, ‘Ayn al-a’yān amounts to a fairly large partial commentary, with 376 pages in its published version. It consists of two parts, a prologue and a commentary on Fātiha. The first part, the prologue, makes up approximately one-fourth of the work and is divided into four chapters.

41 al-Fanārī, Ayn al-a’yān. This version contains a lot of errors, poor punctuation and misleading subdivisions. Some parts are misprinted so badly they are illegible. The manuscripts that formed the basis of this edition are not identified. I am currently working on a critical edition of the Ayn.
The commentary, which follows in the second half of the work, contains standard hermeneutic discussions of language, ritual practices, narratives, theology, etc., as well as Sufi exegesis grounded in “allusion” (ishāra). In this section, I will discuss the outstanding features of the ‘Ayn and outline al-Fanārī’s approach to scriptural hermeneutics.

**The Layers of Qur’ānic Meaning**

The most outstanding feature of al-Fanārī is his emphasis on “layers of meaning” (or “marāṭib al-ma’na,” as he puts it), which include, but are not reducible to, esoteric meaning. The idea that Qur’ānic interpretation cannot be reduced to its literal sense because it contains hidden meanings beneath its outward expression has stood out in many Sufi writings since the early period of Sufism. According to Sufi hermeneutics, the esoteric meaning is not accessible to everyone; only the spiritually elite can detect the inner sense of the Qur’ān. Al-Fanārī, following the Sufi writers before him, reads the Qur’ān as a text that has an esoteric meaning besides its literal one. However, the simple dichotomy of esoteric and exoteric meanings in Qur’ānic interpretation does not adequately explain al-Fanārī’s exegetical approach. He embraces a fourfold interpretational system based on a Prophetic tradition that was well known, especially in Sufi circles: “The Qur’ān was sent down in seven readings. Each letter of the Qur’ān has an exterior (zahr) and an interior (batn). Each letter has a limit (ḥadd) and each limit has an observation point (matla’/muṭṭala).”

Following Ibn al-‘Arabī and al-Qūnawī, al-Fanārī takes the abovementioned ḥadīth as the basis of his scriptural hermeneutics. Ibn al-‘Arabī was the first Sufi who associated the ḥadīth with the Akbarī theory of ontological levels. According to him, the notions of the ḥadīth (zahr, batn, ḥadd and matla’/muṭṭala) refer to ontological depths, all of which are understood in Akbarī metaphysics as hierarchical manifestations of the divine essence. Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, as the first Akbarī writer to systematise the ontological levels, identifies five, which are famously referred to as the “five presences” (al-ḥaḍarāt al-khams). In his commentary, al-Qūnawī explains these levels through the notions of ḥadīth: zahr represents the physical forms (al-ṣuwar al-maḥṣūsa) in existence; batn refers to a deeper form of existence, where heavenly spirits (al-awrāḥ al-qudsiyya), which are hidden from the eyes, reside; ḥadd is the intervening level and pertains to the intervening world (‘ālam al-mithāl), which marks the boundary between the visible and invisible worlds; and matla’/muṭṭala refers to the level of the divine names, where the other three levels have their origin. Al-

---

45 Ibn al-‘Arabī might have been influenced by Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī, who interpreted the ḥadīth, for the first time, as indicating that one of the layers of the Qur’ānic meaning is the spiritual experience of witnessing God. See Calis, “Four Aspects of the Qur’ān,” 11.
47 Al-Qūnawī, Ijāz al-bayān, 378.
Qūnawī further developed this idea and extended the semantic scope of the notions to cover the ontology of the divine speech and the multiple layers of the Qur’ānic meaning, besides the ontological levels.\textsuperscript{48} In other words, he understands all these levels as stages where the divine attribute of speech (kalām) and the divine name of the speaker (mutakallim) manifest. For example, zahr refers to the physical form of divine speech we call the Qur’ān. As a result, these levels are different forms of the same reality. To complete the number of ontological levels, al-Qūnawī invented another term – mā ba’da al-muṭṭala’ (“what is beyond transcendence”).\textsuperscript{49} This refers to the first manifestation of the divine essence in existence, which would be the first ontological level that differentiated from the essence before the divine names.\textsuperscript{50} Al-Qūnawī also attempted to interpret the Fāṭiḥa chapter according to layers of meaning based on the notions of the hadīth; that is, he understands the verses of Fāṭiḥa as having various meanings, each of which points to a different ontological level of existence.

In a further step, based on the hadīth, al-Fanārī connects all the elements of his scriptural hermeneutics by juxtaposing his understandings of epistemology, ontology, spirituality and exegesis. When he lists the dimensions of Qur’ānic meaning a qualified commentator can extract from the text, he states,

If I clearly mention the levels of meaning in any place, I do not exceed the four because these are the principles (kulliyāt) of the meanings. For what is comprehended (mudrak) is either perceptible (ḥissī) which would be zahr, or spiritual (rūḥānī) which would be baṭn, or metaphysical (ma’nawī) and nominal (asmā‘ī, i.e., pertaining to the divine names) which would be muṭṭala‘, or imaginal (khayālī and mithālī) which would be limits (huḍūd). These are the levels according to the five divine presences (al-ḥadārāt al-khamṣ). As for divine absolute unity, it would be beyond transcendence (mā ba’da al-muṭṭala‘). God knows best.\textsuperscript{51}

In this passage, al-Fanārī takes the concepts he mentions as the names of ontological levels of existence and divine speech, as the names of multiple Qur’ānic meanings, and as the names of what can be comprehended by a human being. What he suggests is that the gradual manifestation of the divine essence in existence and in divine speech results in a multiplicity of meanings in the Qur’ānic text. These meanings can be grasped by a qualified commentator; however, grasping the hierarchically varied meanings of the text goes beyond being an intellectual activity and involves spiritual experience, which is needed to make sense of what lies beyond the physical world. In other words, a commentator not only understands the meaning of the text on an intellectual level, but also experiences, according to their spiritual capacity, what the depths of the text correspond to the realities of the divine manifestation that passes through the ontological levels. Therefore, according to al-Fanārī, exegesis has not only an epistemological aspect, but also a spiritual aspect.

Al-Fanārī applies the theory of marāṭib al-ma‘nā in the ‘Ayn. When he comments on the phrases of the Fāṭiha chapter, he establishes a clear connection between spirituality and

\textsuperscript{48} Calis, “Four Aspects of the Qur‘ān,” 15.
\textsuperscript{49} Al-Qūnawī, I’jāz al-bayān, 498.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 378; al-Fanārī, ‘Ayn al-a‘yān, 10.
\textsuperscript{51} Al-Fanārī, ‘Ayn al-a‘yān, 90.
ontology, both of which have hierarchical levels. In his commentary on the phrase “taking refuge in God” (*istiʿādha*), for example, he associates the layers of meaning with the notions mentioned in the ḥadīth by stating that *zahr* is the oral pronunciation of the *istiʿādha, baṭn* is emancipating the self from all connections other than God by internalising these words, *muṭṭalaʿ* is annihilating the self, and *mā baʿda al-muṭṭalaʿ* is transcending self-annihilation.\(^5\)

What attracts our attention in this comment is that the various levels of advancement in spirituality occur in accordance with the ontological depths, which are taken by the Akbarī school as a gradual manifestation of divine essence. Namely, as the wayfarer advances in their spiritual journey, they pass through steps where they experience the depths of existence. The final and highest point of the spiritual journey is to realise that God is the only real existence, because He is the only source of all existence and there is only God at the first ontological level. The wayfarer who has reached this point must be unaware of even their annihilation, because otherwise this would be a claim to have existence. In another interpretation of the *istiʿādha*, al-Fanārī associates the layers of meaning at the levels of *baṭn, muṭṭalaʿ* and *mā baʿda al-muṭṭalaʿ* with divine actions (*afʿāl*), divine attributes (*ṣifāt*) and divine essence (*dhāt*), respectively.\(^6\) This interpretation also emphasises a hierarchical order among *dhāt, sifāt* and *afʿāl*, as well as the phases of spiritual experience related to them. As seen in the examples, in al-Fanārī’s exegetical practice, the connections among spirituality, ontology and layers of Qur’ānic meaning are established through the notions of the ḥadīth.

**Wahy (Revelation) as the Process of Divine Manifestation**

In the ‘Ayn, al-Fanārī deals with the question of the nature of revelation. More specifically, he tries to find an answer to the question of how eternal divine speech can manifest in limited human language. In answering this question, al-Fanārī emphasises there are several types of speech. He states,

This [revelation] is like the meanings taking the appearance of the imaginal images (*ṣuwar khayāliyya*) that contain parts (*ajzāʾ*) freed from chronological order (*min ghayr taqaddum wa-taʿakkhur*).\(^7\) Since the imaginal (*khayāli*) speech is not like the perceptible (*ḥissī*) one, it would also not be like the mental (*ʾaqīlī*) or the spiritual (*maʿnawi*) speeches for sure.\(^8\)

Al-Fanārī means to say there are various levels of divine speech on a line from divine essence to human language, just like the ontological levels of existence discussed earlier. Here, the stages of *khayāl* (the imaginal realm that represents an intervening stage between the levels of existence), *ḥissī* (the perceptible realm), and *ʾaqīlī* and *maʿnawi* (the spiritual realm) indicate the levels of existence and levels of divine speech. Al-Fanārī implies that divine revelation is the process of transformation of divine speech through ontological phases, from divine essence to the scriptures expressed in different languages. The level of *khayāl* (imagination) is the stage where divine essence potentially manifests as the plurality of meanings.

---

5\(^{2}\) Ibid., 123.

5\(^{3}\) Ibid.

5\(^{4}\) “Without any chronological order,” seems to mean “the potentiality” (not actuality) of the speech parts.

5\(^{5}\) Ibid., 45.
of creation. The composite nature of Qur’ānic language appears potentially at the same level. The actual plurality of creation appears in the physical world, whereas the verbal expression of the Qur’ān is the manifestation of divine speech eventuated at the level of sensible speech. According to al-Fanārī, this means all these different phases of speech are different forms of the same reality.

However, why do the physical forms of the same reality differ, as there are many divine scriptures in different languages? Al-Fanārī answers this question by drawing on the theory of “connections” (muta’allaqāt) he learned from al-Qūnawī. Accordingly, every divine attribute has two aspects: (1) from the perspective of its relationship with the divine essence, it is possessed of absolute singularity (ahādiyya); and (2) from the perspective of its relationship with existence, it accommodates plurality. It is like the relationship between an eye and the plurality of sight. Divine speech (kalām), as a divine attribute, also has two sides: its compositiveness in the level of sensible speech is due to its connections. In other words, the “connection” between God and human prophets gives the divine revelation its distinctive characteristics, such as its language and content. In sum, divine speech emanates from divine essence and metamorphoses into different forms at different levels, such as at the levels of hissī, khayālī, aqlī and ma’navī, as they are designated by al-Fanārī. The final “verbal” form of speech takes on a specific shape according to its collocutor.

**The Qur’ān: A Physical Manifestation of Divine Speech**

Al-Fanārī defines the Qur’ān as a physical manifestation of divine speech, expressed in Arabic. This definition is in keeping with the ideas he embraces regarding the ontological levels of divine speech and he takes pains to tailor the definition in such a way as to not go beyond the idea of the Qur’ān’s being the manifestation of divine speech in the physical world. Therefore, al-Fanārī insists the definition of the Qur’ān must refer only to what is manifested through the Prophet as “the Qur’ān” and should not include eternal speech. In this regard, he criticises other definitions that do not seem to offer complete exclusivity because of the terms they use, such as nuzūl (coming down), which associate them with eternal speech or the angel’s recitation. In his opinion, dissociating the definition from eternal speech is much more fitting to the limitations of our knowledge, because human beings cannot define an eternal concept that is beyond their limited knowledge; they can define only what they comprehend. Therefore, the eternal form of speech that is beyond human capacity should not be subjected to definition. More important, al-Fanārī’s main concern is to emphasise that the Qur’ān is no more than the physical manifestation of divine speech at the level of zahr, so the definition of the Qur’ān should be isolated from the other levels.

---

56 Ibid.
57 Al-Fanārī emphasises the difference by calling this eternal form “al-Qur’ān al-qadīm” (eternal Qur’ān).
58 See al-Fanārī, 'Ayn al-a’yān, 42-43.
59 Ibid., 43.
Tafsir: Indecisive Comments on the Meaning of the Qurʾān

Al-Fanārī opens the prologue of ‘Ayn al-a’yān with a discussion on tafsir, the Islamic discipline whose subject is the Qurʾān (but in this case, not referring to a method of interpretation). The discussion consists of several subsections, which include the definition of tafsir, its subject, and its relationship with the other Islamic sciences. Al-Fanārī formulates his own definition:

Tafsir is the knowledge of the states of God’s speech in terms of its Qurʾānness and in terms of its indication to God’s intention that is known or assumed according to the human capacity.

First of all, tafsir, in al-Fanārī’s opinion, should be defined as “knowledge” (or study) (ma’rifa), rather than a systematic science (‘ilm), which it is defined as by many scholars, such as Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 1390). Al-Fanārī wants to point out the fact that tafsir has no authority to determine God’s intention in most of the Qurʾān by preferring ma’rifa over ‘ilm. As epistemological notions, ‘ilm and ma’rifa literally mean “knowledge,” but they have been treated as different concepts in the Islamic literature. The two most common differences discussed by Muslim scholars are: ‘ilm refers to the comprehension of universals (kulliyat) and is pertinent to assent (tasdiq), whereas ma’rifa refers to the comprehension of particulars (juz’iyat) and concerns conceptualisation (tasawwur). ‘Ilm is also used to refer to systematic sciences that have methodologies and principles (al-usul wal-qawā’id); ma’rifa lacks these characteristics. Al-Fanārī emphasises, since tafsir has neither methodology nor universal principles, except in a few cases, it cannot be defined as ‘ilm, unlike other Islamic sciences that are bound to syllogistic logic, such as the Islamic philosophy of jurisprudence (uṣūl al-fiqh). The following example, which is given by al-Fanārī when he mentions some of the principles discussed by commentators, reveals what he understands of the principles (qawā’id): every address in the Qurʾān that begins with “Yā ayyuhā al-nās!” (O people!) is directed to Meccans, with “Yā ayyuhā alladhīna āmanū!” (O believers!) to Medinans, and with “Yā ahl al-Kitāb!” (O people of the Book!) to Jews and Christians. In this regard, a “principle” refers to a systematic method that always gives the same result.

---

59 Ibid., 4-13.
60 Ibid., 5. “‘Ilm al-Tafsir ma’rifat abwāl kālām Allāh ta’ālā min haythu wa-min haythu dalālatuh ‘alā mā ya’lam aw yazān annahā murād Allāh bi-qadar al-tāqat al-insāniyya.”
61 Ibid., 4. Al-Taftāzānī defines tafsir as: “It is the science (al-‘ilm) that investigates the states (abwāl) of the words of God’s speech in terms of their indication (al-dalāla) to the intention (al-murād).” Al-Fanārī cites al-Taftāzānī’s definition from the latter’s super-commentary on al-Zamakhshari’s al-Kashshāf, which has not yet been published. Al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (d. 1414), who also wrote a super-commentary on al-Kashshāf and criticised al-Taftāzānī on many points, adopted his rival’s definition. See ‘Ali ibn Muḥammad al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī, al-Hāshiya ‘alā al-Kashshāf li-l-Zamakhshari [Annotation on al-Zamakhshari’s the Discoverer] (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2016), 110.
64 Ibid., 5.
65 Ibid., 79.
The description of *tafsir* as related to either assent (*taṣdīq*) or conception (*taṣawwur*) has been debated in several works in Qur’anic studies. For example, ‘Abd al-‘Azīm al-Zurqānī, a prominent contemporary Egyptian scholar of Qur’anic studies, reports that ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm al-Siyalkūṭī (d. 1656), a notable Mughal gloss writer, asserts that *tafsir* is a science of concepts because its only function is linguistic delineation (*al-ta’ārif al-laṣṭiyya*). Conversely, al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī treats *tafsir* as a science that produces assent because it becomes a determining factor (*yataḍāmmman ḥukm*) for the language of the text by assigning meanings to the words.66 Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Kāfiyajī (d. 1474), al-Fanārī’s pupil, agrees with al-Jurjānī that the outcomes of *tafsir* should be considered assent, in consequence of his idea that *tafsir* has principles (*qawā’id*).67 Al-Kāfiyajī then attempts to enumerate and explain these *qawā’id* in his work on the Qur’anic sciences, but it cannot be said he succeeds, for his brief work falls far short of providing principles that satisfactorily respond to needs. Several of the principles he identifies concern only the subjects of *muhkammutashābih* (obvious/unclear verses) and *naskh* (abrogation in the Qurʾān).68 As a matter of fact, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, al-Kāfiyajī’s student, expresses his dissatisfaction with his teacher’s work in the introduction of his *al-Itqān*.69

The characterisation of *tafsir* as *ma’rifā* rather than as *’ilm* inevitably results in the acceptance of the idea that a multiplicity of interpretations of the same text should be considered valid, an idea favoured by Sufis, especially Akbarīs. For to say that *tafsir* has neither methodology nor principles makes its outcomes (most of its outcomes, according to al-Fanārī) inconclusive (*zannī*). If we consider that methodologies and principles are established through inductive reasoning, i.e. through analysis of individual comments leading to general conclusions, again we face the fact pointed out by al-Fanārī that most of the comments are conjectural because they are based on either reason or singular *ḥadīth* (*aḥād*).70 That is, (a) *tafsir* does not have the authority to produce certain knowledge because it lacks universal principles, or (b) most comments provide only conjectural knowledge, so *tafsir* is not able to derive principles from them; either way, *tafsir* does not deserve to be called *’ilm* rather than *ma’rifā*. With this well-considered detail, not only does al-Fanārī question the authority of *tafsir* to determine God’s intention in the words of the Qurʾān, but he also validates interpretive efforts based on means other than narration by placing them on equal terms. Otherwise, *tafsir* would be reduced to “exegesis by tradition,” by which static interpretation is continuously passed down.

However, when we accept that commentators only presume to know God’s intention in most cases, are we subordinating God’s intention to the commentators’ conclusions for most

---

68 Ibid., 51-72.
70 According to the Hanafī school with which al-Fanārī was affiliated, singular *ḥadīth* provide conjectural knowledge.
of the Qur’ān? In other words, are we accepting as many divinely intended meanings as there are numbers of comments on a given Qur’ānic verse? The question “Can we know God’s intention with certainty?” is an important topic of debate in Islamic jurisprudence.\textsuperscript{71} Al-Fanārī, who transfers this discussion into the context of 	extit{tafsīr}, seems to embrace a partial relativism, saying, “Multiplicity is not in a generic truth (\textit{al-ḥaqīqa al-naw‘īyya}); rather, in its different particulars (\textit{al-juz‘ īyyāt al-mukhtalīfā}) due to diversity of perceptors (qawābīl).”\textsuperscript{72} What are generic truths? Al-Fanārī does not explain this, but I think he means the foundational principles in the Qur’ān upon which the Muslim community have agreed. These are absolute and do not differ with respect to different perceptions; however, apart from these universal principles, particulars are open to diverse interpretations. Another important point is that al-Fanārī does not argue with the monosemy of parts of the Qur’ān whose meanings are agreed upon through self-evidence or through a consensus of transmitted reports. As we saw above, al-Fanārī accepts layers of Qur’ānic meaning, which means a commentator can understand meanings other than the apparent ones. This means even unambiguous verses of the Qur’ān are open to exegetical searches for deeper meanings; namely, the “known” intention of God in any part of the Qur’ān does not negate the possibility of other “assumed” intentions in the same part. Therefore, not only does al-Fanārī place meanings extracted from the text into two categories, certain and uncertain, but he also concludes that attempts at interpretation in certain and uncertain areas are equally valid. Al-Fanārī paraphrases al-Qūnawī here:

All interpretations of the Qur’ānic text based on either sound narration (\textit{riwāya saḥīha}) or sound rational deduction (\textit{dirāya saḥīha}) are God’s intention. But this is according to the levels (\textit{marātib}) and receivers (qawābil), not [binding] for everyone.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{71} Al-Fanārī informs the reader that a similar debate on the definition of Islamic jurisprudence (\textit{fiqḥ}) occurred between al-Taflāzānī and Ṣadr al-Shārī‘a ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd. See al-Fanārī, ‘Ayn al-‘a‘yān, 5.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid. Al-Fanārī quotes al-Qūnawī with considerable difference. Al-Qūnawī states: “Among the words of the Qur’ān, there is no word that has many meanings in the language but all its meanings are meant by God. If a commentator comments on God’s speech [i.e., the Qur’ān] according to the requirement of its language and in a way that does not violate the indubitable religious principles (\textit{al-ṣūl al-shar‘īyya al-maḥaqqqaq}) this [comment] is true and God’s intention. [The accuracy of the comment] is with respect to the commentator and those who share his state, taste, and understanding.” See al-Qūnawī, \textit{Ijāz al-bayān}, 334. As can be seen, al-Fanārī sounds his opinion more than quoting or paraphrasing al-Qūnawī. In fact, al-Qūnawī makes this statement in line with Ibn al-‘Arabi’s ideas about literalist esotericism. Ibn al-‘Arabi displays extreme loyalty to the etymology of Qur’ānic words. When he interprets the text, he sometimes produces alternative interpretations focusing on the cognates of words. Consequently, he adopts a hermeneutical principle that can be epitomised as: “If a cognate of the word supports an interpretation, that interpretation must be accepted as valid.” Ibn al-‘Arabi clarifies this, stating, “Every sense (\textit{wajh}) which is supported (\textit{ihtimal}) by any verse in God’s Speech (\textit{kalām}) – whether it is the Koran, the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel, or the Scripture – in the view of anyone who knows that language (\textit{lisan}) is intended (\textit{maqṣūd}) by God in the case of that interpreter (\textit{mutaawwil}). For His knowledge encompasses all senses… Hence, every interpreter correctly grasps the intention of God in that word (\textit{kalima}). This is the truth, ‘[a Mighty Book:] to which falsehood comes not from before it nor from behind it; a sending down from One Wise, Praiseworthy’ (41:42) upon the heart of him whom He chooses from among His servants. Hence no man of knowledge can declare wrong an interpretation, which is supported by the words (\textit{lafz}). He who does so is extremely deficient in knowledge. However, it is not necessary to uphold the interpretation nor to put it into practice, except in the case of the interpreter himself and those who follow his authority.” See Muhyy al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabi, \textit{al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya} [Meccan Openings] (Republic of Yemen: Wizārat al-
In this statement, al-Fanārī lays down two conditions for the validity of any interpretation of scripture: (a) it must be based on sound narration or sound rational deduction, and (b) it should not claim to bind anyone other than the commentator. If these conditions are met, any comment is considered legitimate and true. The detail of adding the word “assumed” to the definition of tafsīr indicates all comments, even different or opposing ones, are equally valid. Al-Fanārī also links the multiplicity of valid comments to differences among the commentators as he explains differentiations of divine speech according to the different collocutors. In this sense, what commentators experience when commenting on scripture is similar to what prophets experienced during the revelatory process. The scriptural text manifests as various interpretations by the commentators, just like divine speech, which is manifested by the prophets. In short, there may be more than one true comment on the text. However, we can speak of different degrees in the preferability of the comments, according to the various capacities of the commentators.

Therefore, al-Fanārī adds another detail to the definition with the phrase human capacity (al-ṭāqat al-insāniyya) regarding the knowledge of God’s intention. This detail implies a gradation in exegesis (and in exegetes), which is the fundamental aspect of Sufi Qur’ānic hermeneutics. The more a commentator increases their scholarly and spiritual capacity, the nearer they draw to knowing God’s intention; that is, the more acceptable are the comments they offer.

AL-FANĀRĪ’S LEGACY IN QUR’ĀNIC STUDIES

Al-Fanārī made an impact on discussions within Qur’ānic studies regarding the nature and authority of tafsīr as an Islamic discipline. His ideas entered the discussions through several channels, one of which was his student Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Kāfiyajī, who established himself in the Egyptian Mamluk madrasas as a leading scholar and who was a prolific writer on many religious and non-religious subjects.74 One of al-Kāfiyajī’s treatises, al-Taysīr fī qawā‘id ‘ilm al-Tafsīr, which was about the Qur’ānic sciences, won recognition as one of the early examples of this genre.75 Al-Kāfiyajī does not cite al-Fanārī in his al-Taysīr, but he evidently follows the latter’s line of argumentation in many places. A large part of the treatise

---


75 The most recent publication of al-Taysīr is al-Kāfiyajī, al-Taysīr fī qawā‘id ‘ilm al-Tafsīr. Al-Kāfiyajī believed that no one preceded him with a work in this class, but al-Suyūṭī states his teacher, al-Kāfiyajī, was not aware of al-Zarkashī’s al-Burhān and al-Buṣānī’s Mawāqīf al-‘ulūm. See al-Suyūṭī, Bughyat al-wuṣūl, 48. Al-Suyūṭī also wrote one of the most important works in the field, titled al-Iṣqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān.
obviously summarises or paraphrases from the ‘Ayn. The difference seen in al-Kāfiyyājī’s Taysīr is his discussion of the principles of tafsīr, because he, unlike al-Fanārī, believes tafsīr has principles (qawā‘īd) and he explains these principles, albeit unsatisfactorily, because his short treatise only briefly discussed the topics of muḥkām/mutashābih (obvious/unclear verses) and naskh (abrogation) in the Qur’ān and identified a few principles regarding them. However, we would not be wrong to suggest al-Fanārī influenced him, even in the originality he manifested. Al-Fanārī’s emphatic insistence on the lack of principles and methodologies in tafsīr probably prompted al-Kāfiyyājī to attempt to identify principles and methodologies. As a result, al-Taysīr was treated with admiration; however, al-Kāfiyyājī’s heavy dependence on the ‘Ayn has remained unnoticed.

One of the items al-Kāfiyyājī took from the ‘Ayn was the definition of tafsīr. He formulated the following statement by actually integrating two definitions made by al-Taftāzānī and al-Fanārī, both of which are discussed in the ‘Ayn: “[Tafsīr is] a science in which the states of God’s speech are investigated, commensurate with the human capacity, in terms of their indication to the divine intention.” This definition won great popularity, especially in modern works of Qur’ānic studies. However, since al-Kāfiyyājī did not discuss the parts of the definition, as al-Fanārī did, the latter’s intention – by including the detail “human capacity” – to point out that commentators only “presume” to know God’s intention in most cases, was not fully apprehended in the later works.

In addition, al-Kāfiyyājī adopted the list of sciences that was to be employed in exegesis of the Qur’ān, which had first been itemised by al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1108 or 1109) then expanded by al-Fanārī, with minor differences, to 16 sciences. Al-Kāfiyyājī’s list, which enumerates 15 sciences, became widespread after being included by al-Suyūṭī, along with explanations, in his famous al-Īṭqān. The list also contains the God-inspired knowledge (‘ilm al-mawhiba) that al-Fanārī calls ‘ilm al-haqā‘iq (science of truths). By this, he obviously means esoteric mystical knowledge. However, al-Suyūṭī treats ‘ilm al-mawhiba as

---


77 Al-Kāfiyyājī, al-Taysīr fi qawā‘īd ‘ilm al-Tafsīr, 30.


ordinary piety. Being at pains to explain this inclusion of God-given knowledge among the other sciences “accessible” to human effort, al-Suyūṭī underlines the importance of pious practices to understanding the Qur’ān more thoroughly. In the pages that follow, he completely rules out esoteric interpretation and quotes antithetical, and even antemathematising, opinions against Sufi esoteric exegesis. Al-Suyūṭī’s efforts to isolate the ‘ilm al-mawhiba from Sufi esoteric knowledge did not escape the notice of Abū al-Thanā al-Ālūsī (d. 1854), a notable thinker and commentator who was the mufti in Ottoman Baghdad. He states ‘ilm al-mawhiba is for the cognisance of esoteric secrets (al-asrār), not for seeking to explain the textual meanings of the Qur’ān.\(^{82}\)

Al-Fanārī’s ideas also found a way into scholarship through Kātib Chalabi (d. 1657), the great Ottoman historian, bibliographer and geographer. In his monumental bibliographical dictionary, Kashf al-zunūn, Kātib Chalabi places al-Fanārī’s explanations of the definition of tafsir at the beginning of the section he reserves for ‘Ilm al-tafsir, accentuating the importance of the discussion.\(^{83}\) After a long quotation, he refers readers who want to learn the subtleties of the science of tafsir to the ‘Ayn. Šiddīq Ḥasan Khān al-Qannawjī (d. 1890), an Indian scholar and statesman who is considered one of the founders of the reformist Ahl-i Ḥadīth movement in India, includes the same discussion in his Abjad al-‘ulūm, an encyclopaedic work on the sciences and outstanding representatives of the sciences in the history of Islam.\(^{84}\) He also approvingly mentions al-Fanārī’s definition in the introduction to his voluminous Qur’ānic commentary, Fath al-bayān.\(^{85}\)

**CONCLUSION**

Al-Fanārī’s ‘Ayn al-a’yān stands out in the history of Qur’ānic exegesis mainly because of two important features. First, its prologue includes a critical discussion regarding the nature of Qur’ānic exegesis and the limits of its authority to know God’s exact intention in Qur’ānic text. Here, al-Fanārī justifies interpretive methods on other bases besides narration, including esoteric exegesis. Accordingly, a commentator can extract meanings not voiced by tradition, including esoteric ones, which are not certain to be God’s intention. In this study, I argue that al-Fanārī questions the authority of tafsir to know God’s exact intention in the text to make possible his Sufi hermeneutics, which favour fluidity instead of unilaterality and stasis. Second, the commentary section of the ‘Ayn contains outstanding examples of esoteric exegesis presented through the theory of “marātib al-ma’nā.” Al-Fanārī’s esoteric interpretation, which does not disregard literal meaning, makes multiple meanings of the same Qur’ānic text possible. These multiple meanings are analogous to the “layers”


\(^{83}\) Kātib Chalabi, Kashf al-zunūn, 1:427-8.


hierarchically lined up to correspond to the hierarchy of ontological and spiritual levels expounded upon by the Akbarī school. At the level of esoteric sense, the text encodes the secrets of existence, which the commentator who has reached a certain spiritual level can decipher. In this regard, in al-Faṅārī’s commentary, the exegesis of the Qur’ān has an epistemological function to connect Akbarī ontology to spirituality.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


