Ottoman Heritage and Modern Challenges
Recep Sentürk

INTERVIEW BY HAMZA KARAMALI

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Dr. Recep Sentürk is a sociologist, a traditionally trained scholar, and Founder and Director of the Istanbul Foundation for Education and Research (ISAR), a charitable endowment (waqf) that seeks to breathe new life into the curriculum of the traditional Ottoman madrasa by reviving its teaching, integrating it with the modern social sciences, and placing it within its traditional context of Sufism. Hamza Karamali talks to him about kalam, modernity, tradition, and Sufism.

Hamza: Dr Recep Sentürk, we are delighted to be interviewing you for the first issue of the *Kalam Journal*. Given your expertise on both the traditional religious sciences and modern thought, how would you describe the differences between the Islamic sciences and the modern sciences? How are the Islamic sciences different from the modern sciences?

Dr. Sentürk: This is a very important question facing Muslim scholars since the last two centuries, who, before that point, lived under the Islamic civilization, and their interaction with the outside world was limited. Of course, Islam was from the very beginning an open civilization, in the sense that Muslim scholars were open to learning from other civilizations, like the Greeks, Hindus, Iranians, and Egyptians. They translated the major works of these civilizations into Arabic and benefited greatly from them. However, they were very careful to preserve the Islamic worldview, which constitutes the foundation of Islamic disciplines and sciences. This worldview is represented by an Islamic ontology, an epistemology, and a methodology. Islamic ontology is a multiplex ontology, meaning it accepts multiple layers of existence; namely, the worlds of *mulk*, *malakut*, and *lahut*. In turn, *mulk* and *malakut* may further be divided into other levels.

So how would you translate *mulk and malakut*?

Mulk is the physical world, the observable physical world, and *malakut* is the unseen world, the special world of ᶜalam al-ghayb, and then there is the *lahut*. The *lahut* is the divine world, or the level of existence in which Allah Most High exists, wherein there is only Him. The Sufis say, "There is no existent save Allah (*la mawjud illa Llah*),"—at the level of divine existence, for denying the existence of other levels is unbelief (*kufr*), as Allah Most High states that He created the *mulk* and the *malakut*. To deny them therefore is not acceptable, but at the level of divine existence, there is

none but Allah. From the very beginning, Muslim scholars upheld this multiplex ontology even when they interacted with other civilizations. They did not take this ontology from the Greeks.

The same thing is at play today when one compares the Islamic sciences with the modern Western sciences. This comparison has to start at the level of ontology. How different is the view of existence of the modern Western sciences from that of the Islamic sciences? Modern western sciences are mostly materialistic and reductionist. They try to reduce everything to the material level, whereas in the social sciences they are idealist. The materialism versus idealism debate is a very old one that goes back to Aristotle and Plato, but continues even today. For Muslims, the Islamic sciences are not reductionist, in the sense that they see the material level as only one level of existence. They don't deny this level, nor do they say that it is everything. The same applies to the ideal level of existence. This level is accepted but not everything is reduced to it.

Moreover, the Islamic sciences accept divine existence. In the Islamic sciences, then, parallel to a multiplex ontology, there is a multiplex epistemology. For each level of existence, one needs a different type of epistemology that allows one to study and understand any given level. One cannot use the same epistemology to study both stones and the angels because these are different levels of existence, so one has to have a different kind of epistemology for the study of different levels of existence. That is why, in the Islamic tradition, one has a multiplex epistemology, termed *maratib al-ʿulum* (degrees or levels of knowledge). Knowledge has multiple levels: rational knowledge is accepted, empirical knowledge is accepted, and revealed knowledge is accepted; as is experiential knowledge, such as *kashf* (unveiling), *ilham* (inspiration), *ru'ya* (dream vision), and *hads* (intuition). All these are acceptable sources of knowledge. Of course, this is ordered in a hierarchy, and nothing can contradict reason. Furthermore, the subjective sources, such as *kashf*, *ilham* and *ru'ya*, cannot contradict the objective sources of knowledge such as revealed knowledge, empirical knowledge, and the rational knowledge. In this multiplex system, the relationship that ties these different knowledges is also defined so that they work in harmony with each other. And as a result of this multiplex epistemology, there is a multiplex methodology, such that there is a methodology for each epistemology. For empirical knowledge, one has a different methodology; for rational knowledge, another type of methodology; and for revealed knowledge, yet another; just as *kashf*, *ilham*, and *ru'ya* each have a different methodology. This is *maratib al-usul* (the levels of first principles) used in the Islamic tradition by the Islamic sciences.

Now, when one looks at Western sciences, one notices that they adopt one methodology. They want to solve all the problems of these sciences with this methodology. So if they are empiricists, they only use empirical methods; if they are rationalists, they just use rational methods; and if they are religious people, they just rely on traditional religious knowledge and reject rational and empirical knowledge. On the other hand, if they are of a mystical bent, like the Buddhists and the Hindus, they soley rely on mystic knowledge and reject all other types of knowledge. By contrast, Islamic epistemology and methodology accommodate all different types of knowledge and methodologies without exclusion. The same thing may be said regarding hermeneutics. Islamic hermeneutics accepts *maratib al-maʿani* (levels of meanings),

which is like multiplex meanings (*maʿani*). So there is the explicit or external meaning (*al-maʿna al-zahir*), the implicit or internal meaning (*al-maʿna al-batin*), and also the meaning of the meaning (*maʿna al-maʿna*).

So the internal *and* external meaning?
Yes correct, and also there is the meaning of the meaning (*maʿna al-maʿna*). Let me explain what I mean by the meaning of the meaning with an example. Someone knocks on the door, and then the person inside says, "There is no one inside." What is the meaning of this? The literal meaning is that there is no one inside. But what is the meaning of the meaning? The meaning of the meaning is, "I don't want you to come in." This is *maʿna al-maʿna*, the meaning of the meaning, which is understood from the context.

Is the "meaning of the meaning", in other words, the higher point that is being made?
Yes, exactly. The Qur'an, for example, has endless meanings (*maʿani*). It has *maratib al-maʿani* (degrees or levels of meanings), and there is also *tafsir bi al-diraya* (exegesis through sound opinion), *tafsir bi al-riwaya* (exegesis through transmission), and *tafsir bi al-ishara* (exegesis through allusion). So you cannot say that the Qur'anic text has just one single meaning. You can see that there are many types of meaning, which do not exclude or negate one another. This is like *maratib al-maʿani* and also like *al-maʿna al-haqiqi* (the real meaning), *al-maʿna al-majazi* (the metaphorical meaning), and *al-maʿna al-ʿurfi* (the conventional meaning). There are different ways of understanding the Qur'anic text. Eventually, there is what one may call *maratib al-haqa'iq* (the degrees or levels of reality). The truth at each level of existence is different. What is considered truth in this world is not truth in the unseen world (*ʿalam malakut*), or in paradise. One cannot say that there is gravity in paradise. You see what I mean? There may well be a totally different system over there. One should not project the facts of one level of existence onto other levels of existence. The facts and the truth vary from one level of existence to another. These are the fundamental principles of the Islamic sciences.

One can see, then, that the approach is multiplex, diverse; unity within diversity is achieved, and reductionism is rejected. I call this "open science". I call multiplex epistemology "open epistemology", multiplex ontology "open ontology", multiplex methodology "open methodology", and multiplex hermeneutics "open hermeneutics", in the sense that it does not try to reduce everything to a particular level. It is open: it accepts different types of existence, epistemology and methodology, and the social consequence of such a multiplex approach is that it accommodates different communal discourses. If there is a community that focuses only on empirical knowledge, then there is room for it; if there is a community that focuses on rational knowledge, then there is room for it; and if there is a community that focuses on experiential knowledge, then there is room for it too. One can see that this paradigm accommodates different communal discourses.

By contrast, if one has a reductionist, uni-layered, monolithic ontology, where one accepts only one type of existence, let's say the materialistic one, then anyone who has a different worldview is excluded. This is what happened in the ex-Soviet Union. Millions of people were killed there because a closed science leads to authoritarianism. Open science,

however, leads to a pluralistic, open civilization. The same thing happened in China. Forty million people were killed. Why? Because they did not accept this closed science. They had different views about existence, truth, and hermeneutics. Modern science is very dangerous from this perspective because it allows no room for people who have different views, since it claims to represents the truth while its opponents are swamped by superstitions. Islamic science is different from modern positivist science regarding its basic principles as well as its social and political consequences. It prevents intellectual, academic, and theoretical differences from turning into social and political conflicts. That's why Muslims have different schools of thought in law, theology, and Sufism. Muslims accommodate all these different views as well as the views of non-Muslims due to the perspective of this open science.

You have argued that there is a relationship between fiqh and sociology. What is this relationship?
In the Islamic civilization, human action (ʿamal) is studied by *fiqh*. In the Western civilization, human action is studied by the social sciences. We have one subject matter, which is human action, and two disciplines, *fiqh* and the social sciences, studying the same subject matter. But as I mentioned, *fiqh* and the social sciences are based on two different ontologies, and two different methodologies. Historically, Muslims have studied ʿamal from the perspective of *fiqh*. They used *fiqh* to solve their social, economic, and political problems. The normative system of Islam is derived from *fiqh* while this normative system, in Western civilization, is derived from the social sciences. As I say this, an objection is likely to be raised. People say that the social sciences are objective sciences. They provide answers to "what is it?" type of questions. *Fiqh*, on the other hand, is a normative science which offers answers to "what should it be?" type of questions. This is something repeated as a cliché but when one looks at the reality, one realizes that this is not really so. One cannot point to any leading sociologist in the West, or in the Muslim world, who answers only "what is it?" type of questions. Take for instance Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924), who introduced sociology to the Ottoman world and was the ideologue of the Union and Progress Party. Look at Emile Durkheim, who was the ideologue of the Third Republic. Take for instance Karl Marx, who was a socialist and yet had a plan for a revolution. Today, take for instance Antony Giddens, who was the ideologue behind Tony Blair. Look at Michel Foucault or Jurgen Habermas. All these thinkers had ideas that answer both "what is it?' and "how should it be?". But in the introductory books of sociology and other social sciences, it is repeated as a cliché that sociology is a discipline that answers only "what is it?" type of questions. But in reality, it is just the opposite.

On the other hand, logically thinking, to be able to answer "what it should be?" one has to first know the answers to "what is it?" type of questions. So if a mufti is presented with a question about, let's say, a medical point or an economic procedure, he has to understand first what it is about. Only then can he give a fatwa regarding it. A normative answer requires an objective understanding. Also, an objective answer prepares the ground for a normative decision about a given social problem because when one answers the "what is it?" type of questions, one is somehow framing the issue, and a normative decision is based on this framing.

Muslims have used *fiqh* throughout the centuries, and the *fuqaha'* or jurists played the role of economists and political scientists—one

can only consider the likes of al-Mawardi and Ibn Taymiyya and their *siyasa shar'iyya* books. Many *fuqaha'* wrote on these issues as well as on international relations. Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybani wrote *Kitab al-siyar al-saghir* and *Kitab al-siyar al-kabir*. *Siyar*, as you know, means international relations. Likewise, Imam Abu Yusuf wrote *Kitab al-kharaj* to regulate the economy and tax system. One can see that Muslims used *fiqh* to solve their social, economic, and political problems. As a result, when the Western social sciences were introduced in the Muslim world, they were not introduced to a vacuum, for *fiqh* was already in the hands of Muslims doing the same job and serving the same function. The introduction of the Western social sciences in the Muslim world, rather, triggered a serious clash between these sciences and *fiqh*. The Western social sciences then succeeded in taking over the space that was traditionally occupied by *fiqh* in the educational system and became the decisive factor in policy making. An intense debate ensued between the defenders of *fiqh* and the defenders of importing such social sciences in the last period of the Ottoman state. Some intellectuals wanted to import a Western sociology system. (Actually, I think it is not accurate to say "Western" because there are in the West so many sociological traditions. There is Emile Durkheim, there is Karl Marx, there is Max Weber, and they are all different from one another. It's not right to lump all of them in one basket.) Essentially, these intellectuals called for the importation of positivist sociology and combining it with *fiqh*.

The leading figure who promoted this call was Ziya Gökalp. He wanted to establish a new social scientific *fiqh* in order to combine the Islamic social sciences with the Western social sciences. In his view there was a pressing need to combine Islamic and Western civilizations. This was his strategy. But some scholars like Sait Halim Paça (1865–1921) and others opposed this view. They argued that, first, there was no need for this as Muslims already have *fiqh*, which is still functional and serving the same purpose. Even today, some people claim that *fiqh* is frozen; *fiqh* is this and *fiqh* is that. I ask these people, can you show me a single case whereby someone goes to a mufti to ask a question and the mufti retorts, "I am sorry, *fiqh* is frozen. I can't give you any answer!"? Has anyone come across an incident like this? *Fiqh* is very active and dynamic, and it still provides answers. It serves its purpose. But there is this floating notion that *fiqh* is frozen, backward, and so forth. Of course, there may be some problems that *fiqh* cannot answer, but which discipline can answer all the questions? Take medicine, for instance, it still has no cure for the flu. Flu is a simple disease and yet medicine has no cure for it. It has no cure for cancer or AIDS either. Can anyone claim that medicine is frozen or that one must get rid of it?

The relationship between *fiqh* and the social sciences is that they are alternatives to each other, and because of this there has been an immense tension in the Muslim intellectual world since the beginning of the modernization period. Let us take economics as an example. How does one regulate it? Does one accept interest or not? Here, there is tension between *fiqh* and the social sciences because *fiqh* tells one, "don't use *riba*, don't take interest!" while the social sciences tell one, "there is no economy without interest." This tension is between two paradigms: economics, which is part of the social sciences, and *fiqh*. The same thing is also true in other areas, in political science, international relations, as well as in many others.

Eventually, the revival of the Islamic civilization depends on the revival of *fiqh*. Suppose that, in Cambridge, they teach *fiqh* in all the social science departments, let's say in the economics department. They abandon Western economics and teach *Kitab al-buyu^c* and proclaim interest to be unlawful (*haram*). In the psychology department, they teach *tasawwuf*, and so on. Does one think there would be any Western civilization left? It will turn into an Islamic civilization. The same thing happened to us. *Fiqh* is not taught in our universities today and in its place Western social sciences are taught. But we are accustomed to this; we don't feel how strange this is. But when you think about it, like in Oxford or Cambridge, if they were to teach the Islamic sciences instead of the Western social sciences and philosophy, then one will realize how strange this truly is. So the relationship between *fiqh* and the social sciences is that both study the same subject matter, which is human action, but from different perspectives using different methodologies. They serve the same function, but from different perspectives.

You have also written on the sociology of religion. What comes to my mind when I think of the subject is that it is an investigation into the human origins of religion or, in other words, the social factors that led humans to "invent" religion. What does the sociology of religion mean from an Islamic perspective and why is it important for us to study?

The classical sociology of religion in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century concerned itself with the human origins of religion. The sociologists of religion of that period wanted to explain away religion. Later, after World War II, sociologists of religion came to the conclusion that no one can provide a scientific explanation based on empirical facts about the origin of religion, because this is a grand question, a big question, and there is no empirical data about it; it cannot be proven that religion came from this or that source. So they abandoned trying to explain the origin of religion. They started concerning themselves with how religion influences social action, such as economic action, political action, voting behavior, and how much this is influenced by one's religion. How much is economic behavior, for instance, influenced by one's faith? They started studying these kinds of social manifestations of religious faith and how they shape societies, relations, actions, and the like.

Still in positivist sociology, there is a problem that the sociologists of religion cannot acknowledge as a category of social action, namely, religious action. They tried to reduce religious action to economic action, political action, or psychological action. To the question, "what is praying?" they say, "a person prays because he has an economic interest." To say this is to reduce religious action to economic action. Or they might say, "people are doing this or that kind of religious action because they have a political interest." They reduce religious action to political action. The wearing of the headscarf by Muslim women, they claim, is a political and not a religious action because these positivist sociologists don't believe in religion. They cannot sympathize with religious people, therefore there is no category of religious action in their thinking. They only consider political action, economic action, or psychological action, like Freud and other psychologists. They explained away religious action as some sort of psychological ailment.

One can clearly see that these positivist sociologists have a problem accepting religion and religious action. Moreover, these sociologists and other social thinkers made a big mistake when they accepted evolutionary schemes like social evolution: as society and science evolve, religion will disappear. But did this happen? Quite the opposite: religion is back and it is getting stronger. Today, in the West, America is the most developed society and the most religious. The percentage of people who believe in some kind of God is about 90 to 95%. One can see that religious faith did not disappear with scientific and technological developments. Most sociologists of religion have abandoned the linear, evolutionary approach, which states that religion would disappear with the development of science.

The conclusion now is that that religion and science are not rivals but serve different purposes. The existence of one does not exclude the existence of the other. Science answers empirical questions while religion answers grand questions. What is the meaning of life? Science cannot answer this empirically. How can one answer the question "what is the meaning of life?" in the lab or using the empirical methods adopted by science? It is for religion to answer questions such as this. There are empirical and practical questions for science to answer. Religion and science do complement each other. This is the conclusion that sociologists have eventually reached.

So what would an Islamic sociology of religion look like?
An Islamic sociology of religion is *fiqh* as I mentioned in the beginning. Our social science is *fiqh*. We study human action from the perspective of *fiqh*. But when I say *fiqh*, I don't mean just the legal rulings, the *akham*, because the legal rulings are not *fiqh*. Legal rulings are provided by *fiqh*. It is like law and jurisprudence. The laws that you find in the law books are not science. They are just rulings, produced by jurisprudence, just as their philosophical underpinning is provided by jurisprudence. When I say *fiqh*, I understand it the way the great *mujtahid*s like Imams Abu Hanifa, Shafiʿi, Malik, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal understood it. There is what is called *al-fiqh al-akbar*, which is kalam and philosophy. This *fiqh al-akbar* provides the conceptual and philosophical foundation of *fiqh*. It answers questions regarding existence, epistemology, and other broad questions. Then one has *usul al-fiqh* and then *furuʿ al-fiqh*, which deals with practical questions. Then one has *al-fiqh al-wijdani*, or *tasawwuf*, dealing with the inner dimension of human action. This is what I mean when I say *fiqh*. In essence, it is equal to *ʿilm*, Islamic knowledge. *Fiqh* is served by auxiliary disciplines (*ʿulum al-ala*). When one says *ʿulum al-ala*, one means they are tools. But they are tools of what? They are tools of *fiqh*.

This is why *fiqh al-akbar (al-ala)* is like the highest science in the Ottoman madrasa.
Not just in the Ottoman madrasa, but the whole Islamic civilization. All the other disciplines serve *fiqh*. Hadith, *tafsir*, *ʿulum al-ala* (*sarf*, *maʿani*, *balagha*, and *mantiq*), all serve *fiqh*. *Fiqh* uses all these disciplines and extracts from them norms for life to regulate human action (*al-ʿamal al-insani*). *Fiqh* is a very sophisticated and developed science. It uses a multivalue logic. In the West, law and ethics use a binary logic: right and wrong. This is binary logic: one and zero. But in *fiqh*, there is halal and haram, and then many other things in between: *wajib*, *sunna*

mu'akkada, *sunna ghayr mu'akkada*, *mustahab*, *mandub*, and then *makruh tahriman*, *makruh tanzihan*, and then the haram. One sees here many shades of value used as a normative value attached to action. Let's say we have action x. A Western expert of ethics has only two values by which to judge x: right or wrong. On the other hand how many values can a Muslim *faqih* attach to x? Nine if he is Hanafi, five if he is Shafiʿi. One can therefore see that *fiqh* uses a multivalue logic. It is a very sophisticated system that we have in *fiqh*. And I believe one has to utilize the *fiqh* paradigm when one wants to study society and religion rather than using Durkheim, Marx, Weber, or anyone else.

As for the relationship between *fiqh* and these social sciences, if there is anything empirically proven as fact, one should embrace it and use it. But we should not accept the *interpretation* of these facts that is provided by Western sociologists as we have our own interpretation of facts. When it comes to the interpretation of data, the worldview and values of the interpreter play a role. If a sociologist is a materialist, then he interprets it in a materialistic way; if he is a capitalist, he interprets it in a capitalistic manner to support the capitalistic worldview; if he is a socialist, then he interprets it in a way that supports the socialist worldview. We have our own Islamic worldview and we should interpret sociological data from our own perspective. We don't reject and abandon the Western social sciences completely. We accept only empirically proven facts from them, and we produce our own interpretation.

You have argued that Ottoman social culture was open and pluralistic and that the social cultures that replaced it all over the world were closed and exclusivist, and that this openness and pluralism stemmed from its religious outlook. Can you explain your argument?

I called Islamic civilization an open civilization for several reasons. First, let me explain what I mean by an open civilization. I categorise civilizations according to their outlook and relationship with "the other", the other civilizations. If a civilization respects other civilizations, I call it an open civilization. But if a civilization does not respect other civilizations, seeing itself as the only civilization in the world, and tries to eliminate and assimilate all the other civilizations and dominate the whole world, then I call it a closed civilization. From this perspective, Islam has been an open civilization from the very beginning. The Messenger of Allah (upon whom be blessings and peace) established an open civilization in Medina as the first model. Later generations of Muslims and Islamic states adopted this model. When he established the first state, the Messenger of Allah (upon whom be blessings and peace) recognized the Jewish and Christian communities and brought them together under one state. This was very important at a time when religions tried to eliminate each other and did not recognize one another. But the Messenger of Allah (upon whom be blessings and peace) established an open civilization. Islam is open because it recognizes other civilizations. It also tries to learn from them because Muslims from the very beginning made translations from the Greek, Iranian, and Hindu civilizations. They tried to benefit from all of the existing civilizations of that time. In this sense, Islam is an open civilization. This openness comes from *fiqh*.

And therefore this openness comes from the Qur'an and hadith because, paradoxically, it is a religion that grants rights to people who

reject it. The Messenger of Allah (upon whom be blessings and peace) recognized freedom of religion for people who denied that he was the Messenger of Allah. How and why can somebody give right to other people to deny his own message? This is a really important question, and our *fuqaha'* have answered it as follows. They say, what is the purpose of Allah in creating humanity? It is to test them. The purpose of the Islamic state, law, and politics is to ensure that a free and genuine test of humanity takes place, and not force them to accept Islam. A genuine and free test can take place only if people are free to make choices, and are also free to make mistakes. People must have the option or freedom to make mistakes. But, of course, they shall face the consequences of their choices or mistakes as well. The Messenger of Allah (upon whom be blessings and peace) showed that people who lived in Medina had the freedom to choose, whether they made the right decision or the wrong one.

Later generations of Muslims also tried to achieve the purpose of God, the purpose of Allah Most High, which is testing humanity. In the same way, if people don't make free choices, then there is no room for any of us in the hellfire, as paradise is the reward for people who make free choices or freely choose to do the right things. Hellfire, on the other hand, is the punishment for people who freely choose to do the wrong things. If people have no freedom in the social and political system, then there will be no meaning for paradise and hellfire. One can see that the openness of the Islamic civilization stems from *fiqh*. That's why I call the Islamic civilization a civilization of *fiqh*, which is its distinctive feature. What distinguishes the Islamic civilization from other civilizations are two things: *fiqh* and *isnad*. These are exclusively Islamic.

Is this an accurate expression of your view: "Intolerance is a result of natural essentialism, and the emphasis of the Ashᶜari and Maturidi schools on the contingency of the universe prevented them from falling into intolerance"?
Yes. Essentialism assumes that there is a single truth, and it is the essence of the matter, and if you've discovered it, everyone must accept it. So this leads to authoritarianism and closed science. But if you accept a relationalist view, then people may have different approaches to the same issue. This will allow accommodating different perspectives and communal discourses. For instance, the essentialist view of the Muᶜtazila led to authoritarianism.

What are social networks and why are they important? What do you argue in your book *Narrative Social Structure*?
In that book I argued that the network of teachers and students through which Islamic knowledge was transmitted across the ages is a continuous network. It is not broken. It is a reliable network, and its reliability is proven through statistical analysis and social network analysis. I discovered that there are patterns in the distribution of relations that repeats itself in every generation. And the people who are part of the network were not aware of these patterns. Those patterns were discovered for the first time in this research. Essentially, there is a wave graph that shows the relations distributed to earlier and later generations like a wave. There is a normal distribution graph, like a wave, regarding the relations to early generations. The relations become less when it comes to in-layer connections within the same generation. And then

they increase again when it comes to the relations to later generations. This is like a wave coming like this and then going like that. So this pattern repeats itself in each generation.

I analyzed the network of 1,376 *huffaz*, top hadith scholars, and also jurists, who had about 14,000 connections among themselves. I produced a data set derived from *Tabaqat al-huffaz* of Dhahabi and also of Suyuti's book, and created this huge data set. This social network is accepted as the longest social network in human history. No such recorded network exists in other civilizations. That's why I call the Islamic civilization the civilization of *isnad*. Muslims innovated this *isnad* system, and they used it to ensure the reliability of the transmission of the Qur'an and the Sunna, as well as their practice and interpretation. Allah Most High says: "It is We who have sent down the Remembrance, and We watch over it" (Qur'an 15:9). The protection of the Qur'an is not just the protection of its utterance, not just its *lafz,* because the Sunna is the commentary of the Qur'an, which implies that the Sunna is also protected. For without commentary, one cannot understand the Qur'an correctly. The Sunna is also protected, Allah willing. Likewise, if one has the text but misunderstands it, this is not protection. Allah Most High will also protect the correct understanding of the Qur'an. This miraculous promise was realized through the *isnad* system. The *isnad* system, still continues, and our duty is to maintain and revive it.

You are the director of Istanbul Foundation for Research and Education (ISAR), where you give scholarships to Turkish university students to study the curriculum of the traditional Ottoman madrasa. Why is it important for university students to study such curricula? Can you relate some of your experiences?

First of all, we don't give scholarships, we just give *ʿilm*. We used to give scholarships to students in the beginning, but we stopped. We don't ask money from them, but we don't give money either, unless they are in a very bad shape and need money, because this makes their relationship with the institution more sincere. The purpose of ISAR is to produce ulema or scholars, and we have two types: Muslim scholars and scholars of Islam. Scholars of Islam are those who specialize in Islamic studies. A Muslim scholar, in contrast, refers to a scholar in any field who applies his Islamic education to his field. We need that because, today, Islamic education is paralyzed and academicized, and the academicization of Islamic education has many negative consequences. That system does not produce Muslim scholars. First, there is no *isnad* in that system, which is the distinctive quality of Islamic education. It is not there, so it is a mass production of students and there is no care given to their *taqwa* (godfearingness), *akhlaq* (character), and *ʿamal* (spiritual works). So anyone can come there and study and get grades and graduate, but there is no quality assurance of the students. That's why people are not happy with their level of knowledge, their *adab* and *akhlaq* or their attitude towards society.

The university produces academics. But we want ulema. The role of the ulema is very different from the role of academics. The purpose of ISAR is to raise ulema. To this end, we emphasize the importance of languages, like modern Arabic, classical Arabic, Persian, and then the study of the traditional madrasa curriculum, because it gives a solid grounding in Arabic as well as in traditional Islamic disciplines. We also

teach the social sciences, but not in a way that replicates the social sciences and humanities education in the universities, but from a critical perspective, linking the debates in the field of the social sciences and humanities with debates in the Islamic disciplines. We also emphasize giving our students a spirit of *taqwa*, *akhlaq*, and *adab*, and make sure that they practice what they learn, and also nourish in them a spirit of *futuwwa* by serving others and being involved in socially responsible projects.

If Ebussuud Effendi was alive today and we charged him with the task of creating a modern institution for the study of the Islamic sciences, what you think he would do?

Yes, probably he would do something like ISAR. He would give emphasis to Arabic as a language of scholarship as well as to English because it's the lingua franca of the modern world. Persian is also needed to access another source of major Islamic literature. He would give great emphasis to learning *fiqh* and analyzing social issues and problems from a *fiqh* perspective as opposed to a social sciences perspective, and also to the *taqwa* dimension of *ʿilm*. He would emphasize, I think, practicing what one learns. Of course, we cannot know for certain what he would do, but this is what we can guess he would do. One of the things that he would do, moreover, is to make education a one-to-one endeavor, because this was the madrasa system. Education was individualized and customized, so perhaps today we should also go back to that system. Ebussuud Effendi would probably defend that system again, and he would defend the *ijaza* system and the revival of the *isnad*. I think he would do these things.

You have spoken on the importance of reviving the traditional madrasa science of dialectics (*ʿilm al-bahth wa al-munazara*). Why is this important?

Because *bahth* and *munazara* (speaking and debating), or dialectics, is something very common. It was a required discipline in the Ottoman madrasa system because the students should learn how to make an argument, how to defend it, how to disagree with other people, and how to carry out their objection and develop a counterargument. If the students have the *adab* of disagreeing with other people and raising objections towards them, then these disagreements will not turn into conflicts. They will remain just scholarly disagreements. But if people don't know how to respectfully disagree with each other, if they have not been taught the *adab* of disagreeing, questioning, objecting, then their objection may easily lead to conflicts and fights. This is very much needed by scholars as well as by all human beings because in our lives, we always disagree with other people and argue with them. We need to know the correct way of going about this.

I think this discipline should be made a required course in all high schools and universities. All people from different occupations should be taught the basic principles of that discipline because we always talk to each other and discuss, debate, and argue, and if we don't know the *adab* of how we do it, then we will have many problems in our society. For instance, the most basic principle of *al-bahth wa al-munazara* is that when someone tells you something, the *adab* requires that if you disagree with what he is saying, you should tell him why you disagree. If you say, for instance, that Cambridge University is the best university

in the world and I disagree, the adab for me is to ask, "Why?" I am giving you the right to explain yourself fully and outline the reasons why you think the case to be so. But if I don't give you this right by asking you why, and instead say, "No! It is not Cambridge. It is Oxford which is the best university," this is called *ghasb*, usurpation. What I did was to steal your right to fully explain yourself and to defend your position by jumping to the counterargument. In effect, I silenced you. Even if we practice just this single principle in our life, it would save us from many conflicts and fights. Your wife tells you something, don't object and give the opposite view. Give her the chance to explain herself. If your child, father, mother, or an employee comes and tells you something, don't jump and usurp their right to fully explain themselves. Just give them the right to fully express themselves. After that, you can object. This is just one simple example.

Also, as Imam Ghazali said, if someone comes to you and asks you a question, first figure out whether he is sincere in his question or not. If he is not sincere then you give him an *ilzami* (compelling) answer, just to get rid of him and to silence him. You don't get into argumentation with him because he's not sincere. His purpose is not to learn, his purpose is not to discover the truth of the matter he is asking about. He is just asking this question to create an argument for the sake of argumentation. Second, if he is sincere, check whether he is intelligent enough to understand the proper answer to his question. Maybe he is not intelligent or educated enough to understand if you give him the proper answer for his question. Then *kallimu al-nas ʿala qadri ʿuqulihim* (speak to people according to their level of understanding); you give him an answer which will make sense to him. See what I mean? These are some examples for *adab al-bahth* and *al-munazara*.

Why is kalam important today?
Yes, kalam is extremely important today because this is the age in which atheism (*ilhad*) has spread more than in any other century in human history. It's a phenomenon in human history. More than this, materialism, which like positivism, modernism or post-modernism, has become the official view of the educational system. Our educational system is against religion, and there is no room for religion in modern secular universities. No room for theology or God. Today, we need to defend the Islamic ʿaqida, the Islamic position vis-à-vis these currents, modernism, or post-modernism. Some people, even some Muslims, like post-modernism because it criticizes modernism. But before soon, they will realize that post-modernism is also dangerous because it leads to total relativism. How are we going to assess and criticize, whether it is modernism or post-modernism? These are not religious currents, but they are adopted by people as a religion and they contradict the Islamic view.

Today, there is another difference: atheism does not come as a result of seeking answers to metaphysical questions. It comes through social questions like, let us say, 'There are no human rights in Islam.' If someone accepts this, he has a big problem with his ʿaqida. The same is true in relation to women's rights. If someone thinks that the Qur'an, Sunna, and Sharia do not give equal rights to women, this person has a serious problem with his ʿaqida. Do you see what I mean? Or like in economics: if someone thinks that an economy cannot develop without interest, this person too has a serious problem with his ʿaqida. You

can see that the attack on the Islamic ʿaqida is no longer through metaphysical issues but through social issues. ʿIlm al-kalam should change its strategies in its defence of Islamic ʿaqida and in removing doubts about it. That's why it is more needed today than before.

You have been trained in the Sufi tradition of Imam al-Rabbani Ahmad al-Sirhindi and I was surprised to discover that many of his *Maktubat* are essays in kalam. Why was a Sufi like Imam al-Rabbani concerned with questions of kalam?

Because Imam al-Rabbani is a *mutasharriʿ* Sufi (a Sufi who follows the Sharia), who upheld that the first thing in the Sufi path is to correct one's ʿaqida. If you have an incorrect ʿaqida, you cannot progress in the spiritual path. The first thing to correct is your ʿaqida, then you correct your ʿamal, including your *fiqh*. You correct your ʿaqida according to ʿilm al-kalam, and you correct your ʿamal according to *fiqh*. Ahmad Sirhindi states that learning these disciplines is an important prerequisite to learning other things. He also states that the Sharia is based on ʿilm (sacred learning), ʿamal (applying that knowledge), and *ikhlas* (sincerity). If you don't have ʿilm, you cannot have ʿamal, and ʿamal requires *ikhlas*. He states that "the *tariqa* and *haqiqa* are both servants to the Sharia in improving sincerity". *Ikhlas* is part of a considerable constituting element of the Sharia, and the *tariqa* and *haqiqa* help the Sharia so that Muslims can have *ikhlas*. ʿIlm, ʿamal, and *ikhlas* are all required. We need the *tariqa* and the *haqiqa* so that we have pure *ikhlas*. *Ikhlas* requires that you are saved from hidden and manifest *shirk* (polytheism). Manifest *shirk* is when people worship some idols, stones, human beings, and the like. Hidden *shirk* is following one's own whims and caprice (*hawa*): "Hast thou seen him who has taken his caprice to be his god?" (Qur'an 25:43). If you have *hawa*, you can't have *ikhlas* because you are worshipping your *hawa* internally in your heart and externally you are worshipping Allah Most High. Today, some Muslims are very much concerned with external *shirk*, the *shirk zahir*, but they neglect the internal *shirk*, which is the worship of one's *hawa*. *Tasawwuf* teaches the cleansing of the soul (*nafs*) from *hawa*, which is the *shirk al-batin*, which also consists of coveting things such as money, desires, passions, and other things, thus turning them into gods. The heart needs to be cleansed from all blameworthy and vile qualities. This is the *tasfiya* and *tazkiya*. Then comes the *tahliya*, which is inculcating and implanting good ʿaqida and good *akhlaq* in the heart. Imam al-Rabbani emphasizes these things, and he says that one should not deviate one iota from the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad (upon whom be blessings and peace) or from the Sharia.

Some of our scholars have warned that a kalam that is bereft of Sufism can be religiously dangerous. Would you agree? Why is that the case? How does Sufism enrich and/or complement kalam? How do the two sciences work together?

The purpose of all our disciplines, whether it is *fiqh*, kalam or *tasawwuf*, if they are to teach us Islam, is to teach us how we follow our master Muhammad (Allah bless him and give him peace), and practice his Sunna. All these disciplines are derived from the Qur'an and the Sunna. *Fiqh* is derived from the *Kitab* and the Sunna. Kalam is derived from *Kitab* and the Sunna. In the same way, *tasawwuf* is derived from the *Kitab* and the Sunna. All these are ʿulum nafiʿa that help us to practice

Islam in the same way that the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace) practiced it. These three branches of learning focus on different dimensions of Islam. Kalam focuses on ʿaqida; fiqh focuses on the zahir, the external side of the Sharia; while tasawwuf focuses on the internal side of the Sharia (fiqh al-batin). That's why tasawwuf is called fiqh al-batin or al-fiqh al-wijdani. The totality of these three branches of learning is Islam. You cannot simply focus on the zahir of ʿamal and claim that you are a good Muslim or you are practicing the Sharia. No, you have to focus both on the zahir and the batin, together and at the same time. We have to combine kalam, fiqh, and tasawwuf together because these disciplines are systematized by the ulema to teach us more easily. But Islam in itself is not divided into zahir, batin, ʿaqida, tasawwuf and fiqh. No, all these disciplines are the same thing. They are all integrated and complement one another. Can you imagine Islam without tasfiyat wa tazkiyat al-nafs? Tazkiyat al-nafs is an individual obligation (fard ʿayn) on all human beings. They have to cleanse their hearts, as I mentioned, from the shirk al-khafi and also from the akhlaq dhamima (vile character traits). Everyone has to cleanse his soul, this is a fard ʿayn upon everyone. How can you reject tasawwuf or have a concept of Islam without tasawwuf? Kalam on the other hand deals with ʿaqida. It's such an important matter; so how can anyone say, "I deal with tasawwuf and don't have any need for ʿaqida"? No, this is impossible. Or how can anyone dispense with fiqh or the furuʿ (ancillary sciences)? These are all like parts of a whole which we call Islam. One has to learn and practice all of them.

The Ottoman kalam heritage is understudied, particularly Ottoman scholarship towards the end of the Ottoman period, when the Ottoman mutakallimun critically engaged modern thought from an Islamic perspective. Who are the most important figures of this period? What did they write? Why are their books important?

Yes, not only Ottoman kalam but, in general, Ottoman scholarship is neglected, and the Ottoman civilization is neglected too. In my view, the Ottoman period in Islamic civilization represents something comparable to the Renaissance in Europe. The Islamic civilization reached its peak in architecture, music, philosophy, statecraft, and in all areas. This is the most developed period of Islamic civilization. The classical Ottoman period is very important but the late period of the Ottoman experience is more important for us today because, for the first time, the ulema faced the challenges posed by the rise of the West. This is after the Tanzimat, the second part of the nineteenth century. What happened is that they reformed the madrasa system. They introduced Western languages as part of the madrasa curriculum. Sociology was taught for the first time in the madrasa. They faced this challenge, and under Abdul Hamid II, they established Madarasat Dar al-Khilafa. It was a modernized madrasa system that prepared its graduates to face the challenges posed by modern science and Western civilization. This is a very important period. At that time, there were some changes made in Islamic law. For instance, the dhimmi system was abolished. The jizya and slavery were also abolished. A constitutional system was adopted which paved the way for multiparty elections. There were five multiparty elections in the Ottoman period. Today we think that democracy was introduced to the Muslim world after the collapse of the Ottoman

Empire. In fact, democracy was there under the caliphate. It was a Sharia democracy under the supervision of the caliph with the approval of the Sheikh al-Islam and the ulema of that time. As I said, there were five elections with many parties under the Ottoman system. This is true for ʿilm al-kalam as well.

The Ottoman scholars faced challenges coming from the West and were closely observing what was happening in Europe. For instance, the famous French philosopher Ernest Renan delivered a talk in one of the universities in Paris. As a reaction, several scholars in the Ottoman Empire wrote responses, rebuttals, and critiques. They were closely observing what was going on in Europe, and were engaged in an active dialogue with the West. Today we are very much behind. One of the people who wrote a rebuttal of Renan's views was Namik Kemal (1840–1888). He is considered one of the young Ottomans. He was in prison when he wrote a response to Renan. Look at this man! He is in prison but following what was going on in Paris, and writing a rebuttal against Renan. The likes of Namik Kemal represent good examples for us today. I think we learn today more from the example of the *Tanzimat* scholars of the nineteenth century than from the scholars of the classical period because during the time of Ebussuud Effendi there was no West. But during the time of Ahmed Cevdet Pasha, who produced the *Majella*, the West was there. A student of Islamic law learns more from the example of Ahmed Cevdet Pasha than from Ebussuud Effendi because Ahmed Cevdet Pasha learned French, studied Western law, and then developed a strategy to face the challenges posed by westernization and modernization. He also prevented the Ottoman statesmen of the Empire from adopting the system of the French civil court. You can see that people from that period represent good role models for the young scholars and students of today. All of them learned Western languages. Young Ottomans were sent to Paris. They published a magazine in French. Then they were exiled to London and there published another magazine in English. When they were exiled to Egypt, they published a magazine in Arabic. Also, they were very familiar with developments in the West, so they maintained the Islamic intellectual tradition, they learned Arabic and Persian, in addition to French, German, English, and others. Rather than disengaging with the Islamic tradition, they held fast to it but, at the same time, opened themselves up to the West. This was an expansion of their intellectual interest. Rather than leaving Islam and fully embracing the West, they expanded themselves.

Today, the same thing is true for Muslim scholars. Muslim scholars today must work twice as much as their counterparts in the West because they must learn Islam and also the West. But if a Muslim scholar in Cambridge or Oxford learns just the Western side of issues, he's finished. But we, as Muslim scholars, have to learn our own tradition in addition to the Western side of the story. So we have a huge challenge, and the scholars of the late Ottoman period provide a very good example for us, in particular, scholars like Muhammad Zahid al-Kawthari (1879–1951) and Mustafa Sabri (1869–1954); these are great scholars from that period.