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Defense of *Ta'wīl* in Sufi Exegesis

This study critically examines the theoretical foundations and methodological justification of *ta'wīl* within Sufi scriptural hermeneutics, focusing on its articulation by Shams al-Dīn al-Fanārī (d. 1431), the first Ottoman *shaykh al-Islām* and a prominent Akbarī scholar. While *ta'wīl* —interpreted in this study as non-narrative-based exegesis— has been a subject of controversy in Islamic scholarly traditions, the Sufi School of Ibn al-'Arabī, particularly through al-Fanārī, has advanced compelling arguments for its legitimacy and necessity in uncovering the Qur'an's multifaceted meanings.

Through a meticulous analysis of Akbarī works, primarily al-Fanārī's Qur'anic commentary *'Ayn al-a'yān*, the paper analyzes the sophisticated hermeneutical framework developed to legitimize non-traditionalist readings of the Qur'an including esoteric interpretation. The study posits that al-Fanārī's advocacy for *ta'wīl* stems from the Qur'an's intricate linguistic features and the limitations inherent in purely narrative-based exegesis. Significantly, al-Fanārī's discourse on the epistemological boundaries of divinely intended Qur'anic meaning led him to critique existing definitions of the Qur'an as divine scripture and propose a novel conceptualization. He also proposed a new definition of *Tafsīr* as an Islamic discipline and challenged its capacity to definitively ascertain divine intent in the Qur'anic text. Moreover, al-Fanārī's interpretive method was greatly enhanced by Akbarī philosophical concepts, especially the notion of "ontological levels," which allowed him to practice *ta'wīl* with greater equilibrium, enabling him to avoid the pitfalls of overly literal or overly abstract interpretations. This is especially evident in his treatment of Qur'anic verses that deal with theological matters. These innovative ideas significantly influenced subsequent discussions in Qur'anic studies regarding the nature and authority of *Tafsīr*.

This research argues that al-Fanārī's defense of *ta'wīl* represents a culmination of the Sufi Akbarī hermeneutical tradition, offering a nuanced approach that expands the horizons of Qur'anic interpretation while claiming adherence to the mainstream Islamic scholarship. In this sense, al-Fanārī's work represents a sophisticated attempt to balance traditional and rational approaches to Qur'anic exegesis, contributing significantly to the development of Qur'anic hermeneutics. The paper concludes by considering the lasting influence of al-Fanārī's ideas on later generations of exegetes and its relevance to contemporary discussions on exegesis.

Keywords: *ta'wīl*, *tafsīr*, Shams al-Dīn al-Fanārī, Ibn al-'Arabī, Akbarī School, Sufi hermeneutics, Qur'anic exegesis



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Dr Halim Calis is a scholar of Islamic studies with expertise in Qur'ānic studies, Sufism, Islamic theology, and interfaith dialogue. He earned his PhD from the University of Chicago's Divinity School, where his dissertation focused on Akbarī hermeneutics in Shams al-Dīn al-Fanārī's Qur'ānic commentary. He also holds Master's degrees in World Religions from the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago and in Islamic Theology from Marmara University in Turkey.

Dr Calis has extensive teaching experience and has served as a lecturer in Islamic studies at Respect Graduate School in Bethlehem, PA, since 2015. He has also held leadership roles, including serving as Dean of Academics and Director of Certificate Programs at the institution. His research explores Qur'ānic exegesis, Sufi thought, and Ottoman intellectual history.

A prolific author, Dr Calis has published extensively in academic journals, including *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies and Religions*. His forthcoming works include *The Oneness of Being: Interpretation, Reception, and Implications* (AMI Press, 2025) and a critical edition of *Muqaddimat 'Ayn al-A'yān by al-Fanārī*. He has also contributed to the Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Women and other reference works.