The first interview was conducted by Dale F. Eickelman who in 1996 met Muhammad Shahrur in Damascus to ask him about his personal and intellectual biography. Professor Eickelman was one of the first Western academics to discover the significance of Muhammad Shahrur’s writings within the context of the emergence of a Muslim public space in the Arab and Islamic world.\(^1\) The interview took place at Dār al-Istishârāt al-Handasiyya, the engineering firm in which Shahrur is a senior partner and where he does his writing. Professor Eickelman told me that the interview was conducted in a combination of English and Arabic, with the choice of language left to Muhammad Shahrur. In practice, he switched to Arabic in discussing theology and technical points in Qur’anic interpretation, using English to discuss the more general aspects of his life and career. The language switching was facilitated by the presence of Ṣādiq Jawād Sulāmān (‘SS’ in the interview transcript), an Islamic activist, who accompanied Dale Eickelman to Damascus. Sulāmān, a former journalist and senior official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Sultanate of Oman, was also interested in Shahrur’s work, although from the vantage point of a fellow participant in Islamic reform. I wish to thank Dale Eickelman for allowing me to include in this volume his interview which has not yet been printed or published elsewhere.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Publications on MS by D. F. Eickelman are listed in the Bibliography.

\(^2\) Dale Eickelman wrote: ‘Travel to Damascus to interview Muḥammad Shahrūr and others associated with religious book publishing in Damascus (March 14–24, 1996) was funded by the Humanities Program of the Rockefeller Foundation, New York, under a grant awarded to Dartmouth College for the project “Print, Islam, and Civic Pluralism: New Religious Writings and their Public.” The author also wishes to thank Colin S. O. Grey, a Presidential Scholar at Dartmouth College, and Christine Eickelman for transcribing the English sections of the interview’. (Transcript of the original interview, p. 1.) The footnotes were provided by Dale Eickelman and left unchanged (except where some updates seemed necessary) as they are in the original manuscript.
DFE: When we first spoke about your family and youth in Damascus, you mentioned an occasion when your father took you past the shrine of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī, in the Sāliḥiya quarter of Damascus where you were born and raised. Why did you begin with this episode?

MS: The episode took place after the 1967 Six Day War. My father and I were passing by the shrine. He pointed to it and asked me, ‘Do you know who defeated us?’ ‘No,’ I replied. He said, ‘The man who is buried under this shrine’. He told me that Ibn ‘Arabī ruined our ability to reason. He turned our focus away from the physical world to a hallucinatory one existing only in our minds.

DFE: How old were you in 1967?

MS: I was born in 1938, so I was twenty-nine. I had graduated from the university in 1964, three years earlier.

I: Is your father religious?

MS: He’s a conservative. People call us conservative. He prays and fasts. He went on the pilgrimage in 1946, and I went with him, when I was eight years old.

DFE: Did he speak with you often about religion?

MS: No. He talked mostly about how to be honest and truthful. He thought that to worship God is good, as was honesty with people, work, and following the objective laws of nature.

DFE: How would he say ‘the objective laws of nature’ to a young child? This sounds like a phrase you might have learned later in Russia.

MS: Objective knowledge? He used the example of a stove. If you want to warm yourself, don’t recite the Qur’an, but light a fire in the stove. This is how he explained the idea to us. Anyone could understand his example. He still explains things this way.

DFE: What role did your mother play in your early life?

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3 Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240), the influential Sufi mystic and scholar who lived in Damascus from 1230 until his death.