

An Introduction to Contemporary Islamic Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION TO
CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC
PHILOSOPHY

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British
Library.

ISBN: 978-1-907905-02-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-907905-03-2 (pbk)

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This edition first published in 2012

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MIU Press

Premier House, Unit 8, 11th Floor, 112 Station Road, Edgware,
London HA8 7BJ

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work would not have been possible without the support of the Islam and West Research Centre, affiliated to Al-Mustafa International Research Institute, Qum, Iran.

PREFACE

The present work is an introduction to Islamic philosophical thought in contemporary Iran and some of the most significant philosophers of this era. It must be noted that not all philosophers discussed here have initiated an innovative philosophical system; rather, most of them are regarded as interpreters and expounders of Mulla Sadra's philosophy. Furthermore, the present writing does not intend to enumerate the inventions of the philosophers in question. Its purpose, however, is to introduce current, prevailing philosophical discussions and to expand and enrich the philosophical scope of those who engage in philosophical study and research. There has been, therefore, an emphasis upon diversity of subjects chosen as well as analysis and criticism of discussions.

I deem it necessary here to express my appreciation and gratitude to the respected scholars *hujjat al-Islam* Dr Ahmad Ahmadi and *hujjat al-Islam* Ghulam Rida Fayyazi who kindly studied this work and embellished it with their genuine and elegant points. It must be mentioned, however, that positions taken in these discussions are those of the author and not necessarily of these respected scholars, and the author alone is responsible for any errors or shortcomings in the work. I would also like to thank the text compilation section of the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute for their efforts in publishing the Persian text of the book. I would like to thank Mostafa Huda'i for translation of the book and Dr Muhsin Miri, Head of Institute of Islam and West in the al-Mustafa University for selecting this book for translation and facilitating its translation and publication. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the efforts of David Burrell, Professor of Comparative Theology at Tangaza College in Nairobi and Hesburgh Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Theology at the University of Notre Dame, in editing the final work.

Mohammad Fana'i Eshkevari, Qom

TRANSLITERATION

In general, the following transliteration system has been employed. However, in deference to common conventions, throughout the text, 'e' and 'o' have been used in lieu of 'i' and 'u' in proper names of Persian (non-Arabic) origin (such as the suffix '-zadeh'), although 'i' and 'u' have been retained in transliteration of all titles and non-English words as well as Iranian names of etymologically Arabic origin (such as 'Murtada') and proper names in bibliographic references.

ء	'	ر	r	ق	q	—	a
ا	a	ز	z	ك	k	—	u/o
ب	b	ژ	zh	گ	g	—	i/e
پ	p	س	s	ل	l	آ	a
ت	t	ش	sh	م	m	ی	a
ث	th	ص	s	ن	n	و	u
ج	j	ض	d	ه	h	ی	i
چ	ch	ط	t	و	w/v	و	aw
ح	h	ظ	z	ی	y	ی	ay
خ	kh	ع	'	ة	h/t		
د	d	غ	gh				
ذ	dh	ف	f				

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Philosophy and its History

Etymologically, philosophy means 'love of wisdom' and 'search for knowledge', but technically it encompasses a multitude of applications with different extensions.

In its broadest sense, philosophy includes all sciences. Philosophy in this sense is not one science, so Avicenna referred to it as 'philosophical sciences' – in the plural. It is divided into theoretical and practical branches. Theoretical philosophical sciences, including logic, theology, mathematics, and natural philosophy, seek the perfection of the theoretical faculty of the human soul through acquiring knowledge and belief, while the practical philosophical sciences seek the perfection of the theoretical faculty of the human soul through acquiring knowledge of practical affairs, so that the practical faculty of the soul can be perfected through ethics in the next phase.¹

In its second sense, philosophy is a particular science which discusses properties common to all existents or, in other words, the existent as such,² so it is called *philosophia prima* or metaphysics.

In the third sense, which is prevalent nowadays, philosophy includes all sciences which intellectually, critically, and more or less systematically investigate fundamental questions touching everything.³ *Philosophia prima*, epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of religion, ethics, and philosophy of science are among the various philosophical sciences in the third sense. By 'philosophy' in this work, we mean this third sense.

Wherever man and civilized society have existed, they have exhibited a kind of philosophy. Different philosophies have existed in civilizations as varied as Persia, India, China, and Greece. Greek

philosophy is one of the most recognized among ancient philosophical traditions; its beginning goes back to about the sixth century BCE. A great number of Greek philosophical works have been preserved and have entered into other communities. Many Greek works in the sciences, including philosophy, were translated into Arabic and introduced to Muslims beginning in the second and third centuries *hijri*.

Muslims were hardly strangers to philosophical thought prior to acquiring knowledge of Greek philosophy; rather, intellectual and philosophical thought in various fields had been prevalent amidst this community. Due to the encouragement of the Qur'an and the Sunnah to elaborate its intellectual teachings on various subjects as God, creation, and man, critical thinking entered Muslims' lives from the beginning of Islam. Discussion of various doctrinal issues gradually intensified leading to the emergence of different theological schools as well as diverse views in Qur'anic commentary and *fiqh*. The Muslims' acquaintance with Greek philosophy opened new doors in this field, and Islamic philosophical thought entered a new phase.

Following the translation of many works of Greek philosophy, Muslims began to learn and teach Greek philosophy as well as produce works to explain and interpret it. Chief among Muslim philosophers' concerns after encountering Greek philosophy was determining its relationship with Islamic beliefs. Hence, they always studied Greek philosophy from a critical and comparative standpoint.

In those cases where they encountered elements incompatible with Islamic belief, they amended them to bring the appropriate Islamic perspectives into various philosophical topics. This act of negation and affirmation, as well as elimination and absorption, brought philosophy out of its original Greek form to give it a new shape as Islamic philosophy.

Doubtless there are many common elements and similar aspects between Islamic and Greek philosophies; but their fundamental differences in various philosophical fields, especially in theology and anthropology, suffice to grant Islamic philosophy a new identity. Although Greek philosophy was no stranger to the concept of God, the Islamic interpretation of God was sufficiently different from that of Greek philosophy to distinguish the Muslim philosophers' view on man and existence as well. The Islamic interpretation of God introduced three fresh concepts into Islamic philosophical thought –

namely, creation, revelation, and resurrection. These notions substantially differentiated it from its Greek background. This new philosophy or new phase of philosophy, created by Islamic thinkers by integrating Greek philosophy with Islamic sciences, is what we call 'Islamic philosophy'.

Islamic philosophy has taken various forms throughout its history. The three main schools of thought in Islamic philosophy are the peripatetic, illuminationist, and transcendental. Aristotle's intellectual and logical method is dominant in the peripatetic movement, though suffused with Platonic and neo-Platonic elements. Farabi (836-918) and Avicenna (949-1007) are among the pioneers of Islamic peripatetic philosophy. The illuminationist movement, founded by Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi (1128-1166), combines theoretical thought and intuition, though the illuminational element is of greater significance. Using various sources of cognition including the intellect, intuition, and revealed teachings as well as experiences of philosophers, mystics, and theologians, Mulla Sadra (1558-1629) endeavoured in the 17th century to establish a new system which he called 'transcendent philosophy'. It is noteworthy that all forms of Islamic philosophy have been influenced in one way or another by Islamic teachings.

Philosophical thought in the Islamic world has been present in fields beyond what we call philosophy. One of those fields is theology, reflected in well-known schools of theology. Shi'a theology acquired a philosophical tone especially by Khwajah Nasir al-Tusi (1176-1251).

Another domain connected to philosophy and philosophical thought is Sufism, or mysticism. Ibn 'Arabi (1139-1217), in particular, gave Islamic mysticism a systematic theoretical shape, also profoundly influencing the formation of Mulla Sadra's transcendent philosophy.

Indeed, one cannot come to a full recognition of philosophical thought in the Islamic world without studying all these trends of thought. All of them have influenced one another as each has played some role in forming philosophical thought. Yet while Islamic teachings have been the common source and inspiration for all of these movements, traces of Greek philosophy can also be found in most of them.

From a geographical standpoint, Persia became the centre of philosophical, theological, and mystical activities. Generally,

however, works on the Islamic sciences were written in Arabic, although some were written in Farsi. The western part of the Islamic world, particularly Andalusia, was also a significant region for philosophical and mystical thought. Among the most notable philosophers of that area were Averroes (1099-1174) and Ibn 'Arabi.

Philosophy has had its ups and downs in the Islamic world. Just as many Muslims welcomed philosophy and played a significant role in its advancement, many others regarded it from the very beginning as incompatible with Islamic teachings and resisted it. So philosophy came to be regarded as a marginal trend in many Islamic countries, so for much of Islamic history, controversy regarding philosophy as well as rejection and repudiation of philosophers has prevailed. The dominance of Ash'arite thought over many Sunni scholars was always a major obstacle to welcoming philosophy. At the forefront of all those who were against philosophy stands Imam Muhammad Ghazzali (1029-1048) who, by writing the book *Tahafut al-Falasifah* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*) and excommunicating all philosophers, launched an all-out attack on philosophy in such a way that philosophy failed to emerge among the majority of Sunnis of the Islamic world. Another opponent of philosophy was Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1139) whose negative influence can be observed till this very time in the emergence of phenomena of Salafism and Wahhabism, which have boycotted philosophy and intellectual thought by excommunicating philosophers. Also, in the Shi'a world, extreme Akhbarism has always been in conflict with philosophy.

Contemporary Islamic Philosophy

With the efforts of such figures as Sayyid Jamal al-Din Asadabadi (1833-1893), who graduated from the Iranian *hawzah* and was a follower of Mulla Sadra's philosophy, philosophy, and intellectual thought was gradually revived in some Islamic countries in recent centuries. Sayyid Jamal engaged in reviving philosophy in Egypt in such a way that this country became a centre for intellectual and philosophical activities, as several Egyptian researchers sought to revive the Islamic philosophical legacy. Among them, one may mention Muhammad 'Abduh (1845-1902), Mustafa 'Abd al-Razzaq, and more recently 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi. Nevertheless, Islamic philosophy failed to find its proper position in the Arab world. Many

of those engaged with philosophy in Arab countries today are influenced by Western rather than Islamic philosophy.

Philosophy has also been alive for several centuries in the Indian subcontinent, with many enthusiasts of philosophy throughout the subcontinent in recent centuries.⁴ The philosophy of Mulla Sadra was spread in India from the 17th century, and the philosophers of that country wrote some commentaries on it. Works of Mulla Sadra like *Sharh al-Hidayah* became textbooks in some Indian Islamic seminaries. Among the influential thinkers of that country were Shah Waliullah Dehlavi (1693-1755) and Sayyid Ahmad Khan Bahaduri (1811-1894). Influenced by Western modernist trends, Sayyid Ahmad Khan reviewed the Islamic legacy as well. Doubtless, the most influential philosopher of the region was Muhammad Iqbal Lahuri (1868-1936) who is still the centre of philosophical attention and study in the Indian subcontinent. Through his familiarity with Western philosophy and thought on the one hand and Islamic philosophy and sciences, especially that of Mawlawi on the other, he managed to present his thoughts in a modern form focusing on the return to the self and revival of the Islamic thought on the basis of harmony among intellect, religion, and spiritual experience. Iqbal's skills in composing Farsi and Urdu poetry and presenting his ideas in versified language have contributed to his legacy as a genuine thinker.

Nevertheless, Islamic philosophy has begun to capture the attention of Muslims in the contemporary age. Many Muslim thinkers in the Islamic world are engaged in philosophical thought, and the various philosophical activities taking place in some Islamic countries are worthy of separate study and research.

It is noteworthy that contemporary philosophical research in the Islamic world, whether in the Indian subcontinent, east Asia, or the Arab world, is for the most part influenced by Western modernism, so the presence of the Islamic philosophical tradition in such research is quite minimal. In order to determine the modern relationship between Islamic and Western philosophy, one has to consider the influence of Western thought on Muslim countries during the colonial era. Most of those engaged in philosophy in these countries were either been educated in Western countries or in universities in the Islamic world which based their programs on the Western model.

In Iran, however, the case has been different. Compared to other Islamic countries, Islamic philosophy in Iran has enjoyed a privileged

position, due perhaps to a vigorous philosophical tradition prior to Islam, as well as its more than thousand-year-old history of continuous philosophical tradition in the Islamic era; a focus on the intellect in Shi'a thought; and the fact that Iran was not colonized by the Western powers. Although the wave of modernism and Westernization reached Iran as well and had some influence, due to the Iranian historical and cultural background, it failed to overshadow Islamic philosophical thought.

So a long-lasting Islamic philosophical tradition must be sought in Iran; which, as in the past, remains the heart of philosophical activity in the Islamic world – and hence the centre of discussion in this work. Iran has enjoyed a continuous master-disciple chain for centuries, as the Islamic-Iranian philosophical legacy has been transferred from one generation to another while continuing its evolutionary course. Although the torch of philosophy has been kept alive amongst Iranians, and figures such as Farabi, Avicenna, Suhrawardi, Khwajah Nasir al-Tusi, and Mulla Sadra have emerged within this culture, philosophy has never enjoyed the privilege and popularity it does today.

In addition to global transformations which have been sources of fundamental changes in all sciences and branches of knowledge, including philosophy, this novel transformation in Iran is indebted, more than anything else, to two great figures: Imam Khomeini and 'Allamah Tabataba'i, who were the inheritors and bearers of the Islamic intellectual and spiritual tradition, its teachers and the mediums for transferring it to the next generation. They were two significant philosophical, mystical poles whose wisdom stimulated, directly or indirectly, most philosophers and students of philosophy in contemporary Iran. Almost all of the figures discussed here have been their students, directly or indirectly, or have been influenced by their thoughts and works.

The present research deals with the status of Islamic philosophy in contemporary Iran, with a brief glance at the works and ideas of the most influential philosophers of the age. Clearly it is not possible to demarcate between different periods. Nevertheless, all figures discussed here are thinkers whose personalities and thoughts took shape, and part of whose activities took place, before the Islamic Revolution of Iran; yet they continued to flourish after it. Some have since passed away, while others continue to benefit Iran. In the

interest of economy, philosophers who passed away before the Islamic Revolution, as well as the younger generation of scholars who flourished and bloomed after it will not come under our scrutiny.

The philosophers we will discuss are Imam Khomeini, 'Allamah Tabataba'i, Murtada Mutahhari, Mahdi Ha'iri Yazdi, Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr,⁵ Muhammad Taqi Ja'fari, Sayyid Jalal al-Din Ashtiyani, Hasanzadeh Amuli, Javadi Amuli, and Misbah Yazdi. The figures mentioned are all religious scholars who have studied at the *hawzahs* of Qom and Najaf, while the first seven have passed away though the last three are still teaching at the *hawzah* of Qom. In addition to these figures, the present work will also address two other influential philosophers with different backgrounds and intellectual tendencies: Sayyid Ahmad Fardid and Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

While I have tried not to neglect the more prominent figures, the sheer number of philosophers in this era demands we select among them. In some cases names have only been mentioned, and some figures may have been neglected. I apologize for this beforehand and hope, God willing, to compensate for this shortcoming in a more detailed work. We shall have to discuss twelve philosophers in a limited space, requiring the present discussion to be very brief, so will not be able to present a detailed analysis of all the works and thoughts of those philosophers. Most contemporary philosophers have been prolific authors – some having produced over a hundred works – making it impossible to summarize their thought in a brief book. Moreover, most of these philosophers have not been presented together in one book, and this alone makes it difficult to speak about them. So this discussion can at best provide a brief acquaintance with contemporary Islamic philosophy, an indication of their thought, and an introduction to more comprehensive research in this field.

The main purpose of this discussion is to reflect the present condition of philosophy in contemporary Iran and to introduce the most significant figures engaged in it. Due to the limitations mentioned above, the present discussion will not proceed via the usual method in the history of philosophy by presenting a brief report of the specific and innovative views of each philosopher. In most cases, a general outline of each figure's philosophical background, role, and method will first be briefly presented, and then one or more samples of discussions presented by that philosopher will be surveyed, so that the reader will become acquainted with the

favourite subjects of that philosopher as well as his outlook and approach. Our approach will differ in the case of some figures, due to characteristics specific to them. In this way, the reader will become aware, to some extent, of the kinds of discussion presented by each figure as well as their philosophical trend and method of presentation, and hence will obtain a reasonably accurate image of contemporary Islamic philosophy.

As will be seen, the present work does not intend merely to present a report of philosophers' views, for its main purpose is to pave the way for developing philosophical thought by becoming acquainted with their ideas.

Presenting contemporary Islamic philosophy is necessary and beneficial for various reasons. Contemporary Islamic philosophy is a part of the history of Islamic philosophy and its presentation would be of special benefit in addition to benefits of presenting the general history of Islamic philosophy. The present discussion indicates that philosophical thought continues in the Islamic world and that the age of Islamic philosophy has not come to an end; rather, this tradition advances with greater vivacity towards unfolding new horizons in the realm of philosophical thought.

The present research indicates the diversity of subjects and outlooks in Islamic philosophy, expands the perspectives of philosophical students and researchers, and prevents them from remaining within restricted frames and neglecting the diversity of philosophical thought.

By presenting contemporary philosophy, the latest findings of Muslim philosophers as well as current philosophical issues will become available to a new generation of thinkers. Through the perusal of such discussions, the caravan of thought should move on at a rapid pace.

Notes

¹ Avicenna writes, 'Philosophical sciences...are divided into the theoretical and the practical...The theoretical is the one in which perfection of theoretical faculty of the soul through actualization of Actual Intellect is sought, and this happens through conceptual and assertive knowledge of those affairs which are not our deeds and [mental or spiritual] states. Its end, therefore, is actualization of an opinion or a belief which is not concerning the mode of an act or that of

the source of an act as such...And the practical is the one in which perfection of theoretical faculties through actualization of conceptual and assertive knowledge of those affairs which are our deeds is sought first in order for the practical faculty of the soul to be perfected secondly.' (*al-Shifa'*, p. 3)

² Avicenna, *al-Shifa'*, p. 13 (the second chapter (*fasl*) of the first treatise (*maqalah*)).

³ The following definition cited in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* is closest to the third application of philosophy: 'The study of the most general and abstract features of the world and categories with which we think: mind, matter, reason, proof, truth, etc.' S. Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 286.

⁴ Unfortunately the colonial dominance of Britain over the ancient, rich land of India with its multilateral and long-lasting cultural invasion, caused the Farsi language and Islamic culture to be replaced by the English language and culture in that region. One of the unfortunate consequences of that cultural invasion is that Western philosophy is currently more popular in the scholarly centres and universities of India and Pakistan than Islamic philosophy. The same situation can be seen in the Arab world.

⁵ Sadr is the only non-Iranian philosopher discussed in this work. Though not an Iranian himself, he is of Iranian origin and belongs to the Iranian, Shi'ite philosophical realm.