

Why "Islamic" Science?

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Category:

Philosophy [4]

Journal:

Vol. 9 No. 1 [5]

The identity of the 'Islamic sciences', philosophy, and modern science.

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Vol IX No. 1

The Islamic world today is the inheritor of an intellectual tradition which stretches back to the time of the Qura'nic revelation and beyond. Although we lack a comprehensive account in modern literature of a history of this tradition, situating it in the framework of the general history of ideas, this is not because the idea for such a project is a novelty.

We find references to this continuity of thought in and beyond the Islamic context in all the great works of the Islamic tradition. While some philosophers (in metaphysics and certain natural sciences) trace their origins back through the lens of the revelation to the ancient Greeks, others find their ancestors in ancient India, Iran and Egypt, among other places.

Even the more strictly theological sciences can trace their development by way of the prophets who preceded Muhammad.

The Qur'anic revelation was the point in time and consciousness at which all these different rays of thought were refracted into a new and shining beam. This beam has seemed to diminish in intensity, and many Muslims today have found themselves asking why this should have happened. Anxious to re-instate the "Islamic sciences", they have first tried to find out why they were eclipsed by their Western counterparts or why, in some cases, they just disappeared.

In a more mystical vein, some authors have suggested that, like bottled sunshine, this wisdom is protected from desecration within the depositories of the true guardians of Islam. Our intention here is not to investigate these whys and wherefores; we shall take off in a different direction in the hope of finding new horizons.

We shall begin by examining the identity of the "Islamic sciences", and in the process we shall become aware that this identity lies not within the sciences themselves, but in something more fundamental.

As an example of a science that is still practised in Islamic centres of learning, "Islamic philosophy" provides us with a good starting point. What is it about this philosophy that makes it "Islamic"? It could be one of three things: either its subject matter is Islamic, or its practitioners are, or its methodology is. Now the odd thing about its subject matter is its surprising lack of specificity as regards religious affiliation.

There is, of course, a large part of it which is concerned with matters either entirely, or, at any rate, partly, theological in character: the Oneness of God and the nature of His attributes (particularly His knowledge) in metaphysics, and the source of authority in the "practical" philosophy of ethics and politics are witnesses to this.

In a more indirect way, many of the problems which were taken up by the early philosophers of this tradition, and which have become conventional topics in the literature, owe their conception to the fact that they were originally subjects of debate among the kalam theologians which the philosophers tried to settle by their own methods.

But this in itself makes their philosophy no more "Islamic" than similar considerations would make contemporary Western philosophy "Christian", and we would do well to note that when "Western philosophy" investigates matters of theology this is referred to as philosophy of religion, not "Christian philosophy".

It is perhaps more revealing, in this context, that Western authors have given us “Buddhist philosophy”, “the philosophy of the Veda”, and so forth despite the fact that they have given us no “Christian philosophy” (unless they can restrict it to such things as Neo-Thomism, for example), nor do we find any reference to “atheistic philosophy”.

It seems on this score, then, merely a convenience for bracketing up “alien” philosophies, for apparently rather dubious motives, and relegating them to other areas of research – anthropology, history, sociology, etc. – and leaving the field of “true philosophy” (or “philosophy per se”) to contemporary Western philosophy.

There is, of course, a large part of “Islamic philosophy” which does not directly concern itself with the kind of subject matter we have so far mentioned. Logic is not regarded as part of philosophy as such in so far as it remains purely within its own bounds and stays formal, so to speak, but whenever logic raises questions outside this boundary, questions which involve the notions of existence or knowledge, for example, such questions become a part of “metaphysics in its more general sense” (*al-ila-hiyat bi 'l-ma'na 'l-'amm*), and it would be difficult to see how anyone could have thought this to be “Islamic” in subject matter.

Indeed its practitioners have thought it to apply well beyond the bounds of any theological considerations to all human thought. There would seem to be little of a sectarian nature about discussions of the law of the excluded middle, for example.

What is true about this section of philosophy, however, is its Aristotelian nature, and there can be no doubt that it should properly be regarded as one of the streams flowing from the First Teacher (*al-mu'allim al-awwal*). (The intention here, it must be pointed out, is not to claim that this part of the philosophy is non-Islamic, as will become clear later; we are merely innocently asking what it means to call it “Islamic”, and specifically as regards its subject matter.)

It used to be the fashion to use the term “Arabic philosophy” until it was protested that many of the practitioners were not Arabs. This really is beside the point, as “Arabic” refers almost exclusively to the language, and, while many works have been written, especially latterly, in non-Arabic languages, the main vehicle for the philosophy can justifiably be claimed to be Arabic.

However, this is certainly an accidental feature, and to specify the subject by its language only panders to a far from scholarly preoccupation with the undesirable connotations of nationalism. Both the adjectives “Arabic” and “Islamic”, however, and more importantly, must be regarded with suspicion since their only function seems to be to direct attention away from the variety within the philosophy and the serious compatibility between the subject matter of this philosophy and that of other “non-Islamic philosophies”.

When we move on to consider the practitioners of the science, and whether their being Islamic or not is the reason for calling their philosophy “Islamic”, it becomes even clearer that motives other than the

purely scholarly are involved. Now it is perfectly true that nearly all “Islamic” philosophers have been Muslims, and the exception are those earlier Christian and Jewish philosophers who, because of geographical and social factors, found themselves in a tradition which was almost entirely practised by Muslims.

It is also unquestionably the case that practically all of these Muslim philosophers considered they were following the Islamic injunction to pursue knowledge, when they studied, taught and wrote about the science. So much for history.

But while it may be of interest, often of great interest, to know the religious beliefs of a philosopher, it is very often a red herring if his work is considered entirely from this point of view; and, especially when he claims a degree of universality for his ideas, the philosopher deserves to be given the benefit of the doubt, at least when his claim so made is being examined.

The point is that when a philosopher is discussing, let us say, the nature of human knowledge, and as long as he restricts the method of his discussion to philosophical reasoning, whatever that may be and however it may be understood, we are more likely to understand him if we also restrict our reading of him to the same topic and analysis.

The distractions that are bound to accompany our constantly being reminded of his religious affiliations in this context are more than likely to result in non-comprehension. These considerations may be important elsewhere, when, for example, it is of great relevance to consider Copernicus' neo-Platonic affinities in the context of the evolution of his ideas; but it can hardly be of much help in understanding the mathematics of his astronomical tables.

Again, if, having read a philosopher on his own grounds, we can seriously claim that he has written nonsense or is incomprehensible, it is then of some interest to ask if this is the result of his religious beliefs, at least as far as the discipline of the history of ideas is concerned.

Up to now, we have refrained from anything more specific than hinting at the true reasons for the popularity of the term “Islamic philosophy”. It is time we were more direct. The reader so far may think that he is in for another diatribe against the wicked ways of the orientalists, but we think that quite enough has already been said about their motives to give them a rest for the time being.

The problem we have is both more general and more specific than could be meaningfully dealt with by attacking them. Moreover, the use of the term “orientalist” is now encouraging the same kind of distractions as we have found associated with the use of the term “Islamic philosopher”.

The more general aspect of the problem does concern the person steeped in Western culture. We can notice, on the one hand, an awareness that the increasing specialization of Western science is rendering it literally meaningless; its mystification by the scientists themselves demands a long period of “initiation” for anyone who would attempt to understand some part of it, an “initiation” which, it is increasingly being

understood, does not lead the acolyte along a path of careful reasoning, slowly unfolding intricacies to him, as his initiators would like him to believe, but which employs a wide variety of other techniques designed to ensure that he accepts ways of looking at things without subjecting these ways to profound scrutiny.

This is a necessary initiation, for it is quite impossible for a human being to assimilate the conclusions of any modern science without accepting many steps uncritically; modern sciences are that complex.

This is all very good for modern science, but should the acolyte get lost, or decide that he would prefer not to accept something he is required to accept uncritically, he will no longer be treated as a co-researcher, entitled to all the sympathy a fellow traveller could expect to receive; other techniques are at hand, besides that of patient critical re-examination, to determine whether he should be allowed to continue his journey.

On the other hand, a dissatisfaction with the results of modern science (and note the irony of this, for it is with the claim that modern science shows its superiority by its unparalleled results that its practitioners construct their first line of defence) leads more and more people to look elsewhere for answers to the problems created by these results.

Now this rebellion can be contained as long as the search by the dissatisfied results only in indigestion from the intake of too much cross-cultural ice-cream, for it can be ascribed to the weakness of the human soul which, finding the complexities of "science" too much to take in, indulges itself in the luxuries of irrational but comforting exotic alternatives on the menu. The more exotic, the more this "argument" seems to hold out.

Our intention is not to claim that anything with the adjective Islamic added to it is the correct antacid for the indigestion; far from it. But it is surely a great advantage that an adjective which has such alarming connotations for the Westerner can be attached to a whole scientific tradition, thus effectively striking centuries of human thought off the menu with one stroke of the pen, even putting it on the list of prescribed drugs, and effectively out of the reach of any but the most intrepid dietary sleuth.

To round things off, and just in case anyone wishes to raise the objection that philosophy is not science, let us now come to our third suggestion for why the term "Islamic" has been used. This third suggestion concerns the methodology of "Islamic philosophy".

What has been said so far as regards subject matter and practitioners took philosophy as its example; but there is nothing which could not equally well have been applied to natural science or any other brands of learning, say law or history, just to take two examples. And this generalizing step can equally well be applied in the case of methodology.

Although it is no longer current practice in the West to call philosophy a science (or history and law for that matter), this is not the case in other traditions, especially in Islam. Here science and knowledge

each share the same Arabic word (*ilm*), and each area in which knowledge is thought to be acquired becomes a science.

We need not concern ourselves here with why philosophy is not considered in science in the West, let alone with what it might be if it is not one, but since within the tradition we are considering philosophy is a science, we can, for our present purposes, use this fact to justify our generalization from philosophy to all forms of knowledge, particularly as far as methodology is concerned.

And here there does seem to be an element in the way in which knowledge is pursued which is so particular and so applicable to all the sciences as to justify the use of the term “Islamic” .

It may be thought that we are speaking here of no more than the Aristotelian scheme of deductive science, which, starting from first principles seeks to derive in its special way all that can be known (perhaps we should say known with certainty), but we must stress that this is not so.

It is quite true that the Aristotelian system for classifying the sciences is the preferred methodological starting point of the “Islamic philosophers”, so that even law and history become classified according to it; and it is also true that besides metaphysics and logic (are the Western versions of these Aristotelian?) perhaps the only surviving example of what we might call a rigorously Aristotelian science, namely that of jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*), is to be found within the present Islamic educational system; but this is not the feature which makes these sciences “Islamic”.

It is rather something else within the Islamic tradition as a whole which finds a special affinity with the Aristotelian approach.

If any Muslim is asked what the central belief of his faith is, he will undoubtedly reply: *tawhid*. Even before he speaks of prophethood or Muhammad. The outsider may see the decisive distinguishing feature of Islam to be the declarer of the revelation, but the Muslim sees not this but the belief in *tawhid*—“making one”. He believes that this is the real message not only of Islam, but of all religions, but that it was conceived in its perfection for the Islamic revelation.

It is sometimes translated as “monotheism”, and this is contained within its meaning, but a look at its grammatical form discloses its active aspect of making unity. It is this aspect of bringing together into a oneness that justifies the affinity which Islamic scholars have for the Aristotelian scientific system, and helps to explain the degree to which it was elaborated by them.

We said earlier that there was a specific aspect to our problem, as well as the more general one which concerned the West, and the specific aspect concerns the Muslim. For the Muslim has taken to neglecting his own scientific tradition.

The campaign of Western science has been largely successful in suppressing competition not only in the West but also elsewhere, perhaps nowhere more successfully than in the Muslim world. In which

universities in Muslim countries, or anywhere else, are the Islamic sciences practised, not as a historical discipline, but as “living” sciences?

It is perhaps true that a large factor in this transformation has been the idea that since Aristotelian science has been the foundation of the “Islamic sciences”, it is necessary for anyone who wishes to pursue the tradition to accept the Aristotelian system as a dogma, but we have tried to show that this is a mistake.

There is nothing dogmatic about the Aristotelian system; it is chosen because of its great affinity to the idea of *tawhid*. It must therefore be, and is, open to examination, and if it is found to be unsatisfactory as a principle of knowledge, appropriate steps should be taken to rectify the situation.

We do not wish in any sense to imply that there is something wrong with the Aristotelian world view, and it seems that there is good reason to suppose that many of the criticisms directed at it in the West are not founded on the “rational” principles that have been claimed to support these criticisms.

However, this matter is an area of research which has scarcely been opened up, and is one which should engage the attention of any true, dare we say, Islamic philosopher. When such a study is undertaken, proper attention will have to be paid to the reasons for which this Aristotelian system has proved so attractive to Muslim thinkers, but the belief that such a system is intrinsically “inferior” should be rejected at the beginning – no *petitio principii*!

The problem, then, is one of penetrating behind labels, especially labels not chosen by oneself, to see whether they did not in fact carry with them unwanted subliminal messages in the way of uncritically accepted ideas which hamper healthy growth.

The thinker should not be frightened out of exploring new (or old) territory simply because others have tried to convince him by dubious strategies either that he is entering upon an illicit venture or that what he intends to do is a waste of time.

Few things in the history of ideas receive fatal blows from the onslaught of scientists and philosophers; they have a habit of reappearing. So before we all do what we are supposed to do and confess that the Islamic contribution to science has had its day, we should examine whether there are any good reasons for such a recantation.

It goes without saying that the history of the sciences in the Islamic lands is not an unbroken chain of one “discovery” following upon another, any more than is that of modern science; within them too there is an abundant wealth of ideas, sometimes taken up and developed, sometimes rejected and forgotten, but never lost for ever.

A serious study of these (by which we mean something more than a historical study) can, side by side with a serious study of new ideas, bring renewed vigour into the sciences in the Islamic world and

enable solutions to be found to the increasing problems facing man which have resulted from his monomaniacal obsession with what has now become official science, the child he thought he had brought into the world unaided, and which now threatens to smother him under its own weight.

“Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth”. (24:35)

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