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INTERACTION OF ISLAMIC AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHIES

I. What is Contemporary Islamic Philosophy?

In contemporary Muslim territories we can find a great diversity of attitudes towards Philosophy. Hence, before dealing with the particular situation of contemporary Islamic Philosophy, we would like to enumerate a few trends in the context of which the special identity of contemporary philosophical activity can be recognized. We shall then try to explain the main characteristics of Islamic philosophy as it is practiced in Iran. In the first place, however, we must deal with the fact that the different approaches to Philosophy in the Islamic world have essentially to do with different interpretations of the relation between Islam and Philosophy. Among these interpretations we find the following:¹

1. The rejection of philosophy and of any rational approach to religious teachings with the emphasis placed on the literary meaning of Quran and *hadīth* (the *Wahhābī* approach).

2. The Ghazzalian approach, i.e., the one that we might call the philosophical rejection of philosophy. This is a common view in Malaysia and Indonesia, but with important similarities to the *tafkiik* (separation) movement in Iran.

3. The mystical approach in Turkey and countries of North of Africa like Morocco and Tunisia.

4. The revival of the Islamic philosophical heritage as it was instituted during the period from the 9th to the 13th centuries CE. The thinkers interested in this revival are more commentators than philosophers in their own right. This position is particularly strong in schools and departments of Islamic philosophy in the Arabian countries that reject the *Wahhābī* approach.

5. The westernized contemporary approach to philosophy in Islamic countries and other parts of the world. Among the representatives of this approach we find thinkers like Muhammad Arkun, Hassan Hanafi, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, Ali Mazroui, Abdolkarim Soroush. They all have in common a rather secular approach based on different Western concepts of philosophy.

6. The more ideological approach represented by thinkers that attempt to find solutions for the practical problems affecting the Muslim world based on the prem-

¹ Hamidreza Ayatollahy. «Philosophy in Contemporary Iran», Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia. 2006. Vol. 62. № 2—4. April—December.

ise that the best way of proceeding is to promote the return to the traditional doctrines of Islam.

7. The approach of traditionalist thinkers like Genon, Schuon, and Nasr.

8. The approach of the Sadraean transcendental philosophy (philosophy of Mulla Sadra) in Iran, as well as in Pakistan and India.

II. The background of contemporary Islamic philosophy

In the past, the interest of the Western world in learning about Islamic Philosophy was mainly centred on the question regarding the active influence of Muslim thinkers upon the historical formation of Christian scholasticism in the Middle Ages. For example, it is clear that in order to study the philosophical contribution of thinkers like Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus in their correct historical perspective we must also become acquainted with the thought of at least Avicenna (980—1037) and Averroes (1126—1198). Any adequate history of medieval Western philosophy should include, in consequence, an important chapter on the history of Islamic philosophy.¹

This distance between the western intellectuals and Islamic Philosophy may have to do with the rather common view in the West that Islamic Philosophy came to an end with the death of Averroes and/or ceased to exist when Ghazzali (1058—1111) produced his major attack against philosophical thinking in his influential book *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*. But in reality what came to an end was nothing more than what shall be considered the first phase in the development of the history of Islamic Philosophy. It is true that with the death of Averroes, Islamic Philosophy ceased to be alive in the West,² but this does not mean that it ceased to be alive in the East. It is also true that the Islamic philosophy did not develop in all Muslim countries after Ghazzali and Averroes, particularly among Sunni Muslims, so that in the Arabian countries there was no longer a large interest in developing philosophy. The fact that the Sunni Muslims were the majority in terms of population and the Arabian countries were the ones with closer ties to the West explains why the generalized assumption grew in the West that there was no longer Philosophy in the Muslim countries. Moreover, this assumption became necessarily an obstacle for the deepening of any relations between Islamic and Western Philosophy.

We must also add that even “histories” of Islamic philosophy written not as a chapter in the history of Western philosophy but independently and for its own sake were largely shaped by the idea that the golden age of Islamic Philosophy is to be found in the period of three centuries extending from Farabi to Averroes, and that after Averroes, in the ages subsequent to the Mongol invasion, and with the exception of a few isolated prominent figures (like Ibn Khaldun, for example), the Muslim world did not produce, when it comes to Philosophy, anything more

¹ Mehdi Mohaghegh, *Izutsu T. The Metaphysics of Sabzavari*. Tehran: Tehran University Press, 1969. P. 3.

² i. e., the western part of Muslim world (*ed.*).

than commentaries and commentaries of commentaries in a long and tedious series of “lifeless and mechanical repetitions, without any spark of real creativity and originality”¹.

That this is not a true picture of the historical facts has amply been made clear by the remarkable work done by scholars like Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr concerning the intellectual activity of the Safavid Dynasty. At any rate, it is only very recently that Orientalists have begun to realize that philosophical thinking in Islamic context did not irretrievably fall into decadence and fossilization after the Mongol invasion, as it was commonly believed.

Indeed, we think that the kind of philosophy that deserves to be regarded as typically and characteristically Islamic developed much more after Averroes death than before it. We are talking about the typically Islamic philosophy that arose and matured in the periods subsequent to the Mongol invasion and found the culmination of its vigorous creativity in the Safavid period in Iran. This peculiar type of Islamic philosophy, which grew up in Iran among the Shiites, has come to be known as *hikmat* or “wisdom”. We can trace the origin of the *hikmat* back to the very beginning of the above-mentioned second phase of the history of philosophy in Islam.

Hikmat is structurally a peculiar combination of rational thinking and Gnostic intuition, or, we might say, rationalist philosophy and mystical experience. It is a special type of ontological philosophy based on existential intuition of Reality, a result of the philosophizing applied on the Gnostic ideas and visions attained through intellectual contemplation. Historically speaking, this tendency toward the spiritualization of Philosophy finds its origin in the metaphysical visions of Ibn ‘Arabi and Suhrawardi. In making this observation, however, we must not lose sight of the fact that *hikmat* is also endowed with a solid and strictly logical structure and as such it goes beyond Ibn ‘Arabi and Suhrawardi and comes back to Avicenna and the first stage of development in the history of Islamic Philosophy.

Hikmat, having as it does these two distinctive aspects, must be approached from two different angles, if we are to analyze properly its formative process: (1) as a purely intellectual activity, and (2) as something based on trans-intellectual, Gnostic experience — *dhawq* “tasting” as the mystics like to call it — of the ultimate Reality.

The most famous and important philosopher of the second phase of Islamic philosophy is Mulla Sadra (1572—1640). He had many innovative ideas in the realm of Philosophy (especially ontology) and became one of the brightest stars in the sky of Islamic philosophy. As a matter of fact, his novel ideas mark a turning point in Islamic Philosophy so that the philosophers that came after him were significantly affected by his views.

The appearance of an intellectual figure like Sadr al-Din Shirazi during the Safavid period is a clear indication of the presence in his own time of a strong

¹ *Mohaghegh, Iztsu. The Metaphysics of Sabzavari. P. 3.*

intellectual tradition whose deepest currents he was able to so brilliantly bring to the surface. Mulla Sadra is a metaphysician and sage of outstanding stature who cannot be taken in isolation and separated from the tradition that produced him.

Something to be mentioned, however, is the revival of Islamic intellectual life in the eastern lands of Islam, especially in Iran. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, this was made possible by the establishment of new intellectual schools by Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi, followed by the resurrection of Ibn Sina's teachings during the middle decades of the thirteenth century by Khwajah Nasir al-Din Tusi. The background of Mulla Sadra must be sought in these schools as well as in the Sunni and Shi'ite schools of *kalām* as they developed from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries¹.

The four classical schools of the post-Mongol period, namely, the Peripatetic (*mashshā'ī*), the Illuminationist (*ishrāqī*), the Gnostic (*'irfānī*) and the Theological (*kalām*), with all the inner variations contained in each of them, developed extensively during the four centuries preceding Mulla Sadra and also approached each other, preparing the ground for the major synthesis brought about by Mulla Sadra. Therefore, in order to understand the background of Mulla Sadra, it is necessary to delve into the development of each one of these schools as well as into the interactions that occurred between them during this very rich and at the same time most neglected period of Islamic intellectual life, from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries.

III. The Characteristics of Sadraean Philosophy

The Sadraean Philosophy can be characterized by the recognition of the following aspects:

1. Intrinsic compatibility between Religion and Philosophy;
2. Necessity of a serious rational study of the religious doctrines to the point of bringing together the views of Reason and the views proper to Religion;
3. Need for a combination of the four traditional schools present in the Islamic world, namely mysticism, Peripatetic philosophy, Illuminationist philosophy and *Kalām*;
4. Importance of studying Western approaches to Philosophy as well as other sources of human thought;
5. Need to proceed to a comparative study of the different philosophical views in order to explain the strengths and the weaknesses of Transcendental Philosophy;
6. Evolving character of Islamic Philosophy as a whole;
7. Philosophical primacy of ontology over epistemology and of reason over experience;
8. Influence of theoretical philosophy on other dimensions of human thought and activity, namely politics, economy, education, aesthetics, ethics etc.;

¹ *Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Šadr al-Don Shorūzo and His Transcendent Theosophy: Background, Life and Works. Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 1997. P. 16.*

9. Importance of the attention to Quran and of the *hadīth* and prayers — as an important source of knowledge — for a philosophy that tries to argue her own views based on reason alone and not on revelation;

10. Importance of the dialogue among philosophers from different perspectives in order to achieve better ideas of how to promote the future of the human family.

IV. The difficulties of having a comparative philosophy

Although we confront a lot of topics that have been studied in different philosophical schools and have been discussed by various philosophers and it seems that there are different answers to the same questions, there are some difficulties in accounting for similarities between them. Therefore the comparative philosophy has been hard and far reaching. Some of these difficulties are the following ones.

The historical and geographical background of philosophical problems and solutions make problematic the mutual understanding of two different philosophical schools which belong to two paradigms in question. At first glance, we encounter one topic that is translated in two cultures and it seems that they are the same; but the deep meaning of that topic is connected to those cultural backgrounds that differ significantly one from another. The hermeneutical situation of a word or a text is an obstacle for understanding them in another culture. Therefore there are some doubts that we can understand similarities between two words in two cultures. Thus most of critics of some philosophical views from the perspective of another philosophical paradigm can not be sound.

The epistemological approach of modern philosophy and its subjective view based on a kind of humanism bring in a sphere that is different from other intellectual and ontological attitudes. It is difficult to criticize another philosophical tradition from the modern Western point of view.

It is also difficult to understand from a non-western philosophical perspective the Western one without having the necessary knowledge about Western culture. In my view, the Christian background of Western philosophy (for both theistic and atheistic philosophies) is one of the most important paradigms of modern philosophy. The important idea of Nietzsche that “God is dead” is misunderstood in non-western philosophies. Nobody may have a correct understanding of “God is dead” without understanding the Christian doctrine of God incarnated in Christianity. Without understanding the importance of history in Christian doctrine it is difficult to understand many philosophical approaches in Western philosophy.

It is also difficult to understand contemporary Islamic philosophies from an empiricist or pragmatist approach in philosophy that is the dominant philosophical method in Western philosophy. The rational attitude of Islamic philosophy differs from the rational attitude Western philosophy.

The orientalist in Western countries are guilty of this confusion. For them, the oriental culture must be understood carefully but from a Western point of view and must be judged in accordance with Western values. But some useful attempts testify to the realistic awareness of this gap, seeking a solution for building some

bridges between cultures. In a globalised world, philosophy needs more mutual understanding than philosophical theories.

V. The possibility of comparative philosophy

However, it does not mean that it is not possible to have comparative philosophy. If it were so, dialogue and negotiation would be meaningless. All philosophical attempts for understanding other thoughts in all over the world and in all periods of time in history (or historical study of philosophical schools) presupposes admitting the possibility of understanding others — at least the main part of their thoughts. Therefore, although it is possible to understand others, there are many considerations regarding the translation of a certain thought of a certain culture into another culture.

These considerations provide the most important reason to think of comparative philosophy as a difficult but possible study that must undergo a long process to bring the other thought nearer.

VI. The method of comparison

I believe that, for a best comparative study in philosophy, the comparison must pass through four stages of four hermeneutical rules as postulated by Emilio Betti (1890—1968). These rules are: ¹

- 1) the principle of hermeneutical autonomy of subjects,
- 2) the principle of totality or the rule of coherence of meaning,
- 3) the rule of actuality of understanding,
- 4) the compatibility of meaning in understanding or the rule of hermeneutical correspondence of meaning.

I hope I will be able to discuss this method in more detail in another research.

VII. The advantages of attempting for a comparative philosophy

There are some factors that make comparative study in Western and Islamic philosophies necessary nowadays. First, the penetration of globalization in all dimensions of our life makes it necessary to see each other as men living in a same tent. The global awareness which conflicts local thoughts and the necessity of interaction between cultures require a kind of mutual understanding. All various cultural representations point to a deep variety that is caused by different foundations of those thoughts. Philosophy that has the task of analyzing the basic foundation of all cultural representations has a very important role in any interaction between cultures. This is what necessitates comparative philosophy.

Second, we can know ourselves not from an inner insight but from the contrast with others. In otherness we understand the boundaries of selfness. There is a joke that can make this truth clearer. A child showed his father a quite white paper and

¹ *Betti E.* Allgemeine Auslegungslehre als Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften / Trans. in J. Bleicher. Contemporary Hermeneutics. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980. P. 57—85.

said to him “Oh, father, look at my painting. Isn’t it nice!” Father said: “There is nothing on your paper!” The child replied: “Why can’t you see the painting? It is a white bear on the snowy surface of the North Pole, pursuing a white rabbit!”

This is a joke but if it were correct how could somebody confirm it? Without the boundaries of bear and rabbit nobody can find any of them. In the contrast of rabbit and bear one can distinguish them; the more distinct the contrast the better discernible they are.

Every thought needs others to clear itself. We can understand ourselves more and more through a better understanding of the others. In comparative philosophy we can learn to know selfness and otherness.

VIII. Necessity of comparative Western and contemporary Islamic philosophy and its position nowadays

The philosophy of Mulla Sadra must be considered as one of the most important contributions of contemporary Islamic Philosophy, especially in Iran. This philosophy has been continued and matured by scholars like Sabzavari, Tabataba’i and Motahhari. In fact, due mainly to its compatibility with the Islamic tradition a very honorable place within the context of Shiite Islamic thought was granted to this kind of philosophizing, so much so that it became a part of the official learning and teaching in religious seminaries (*hawzeh ‘ilmiyyeh*). Moreover, we also would like to say that Shiism has been a good context for all kinds of rational thinking. We can say, therefore, that understanding and confronting every kind of rational and philosophical thinking has been a major duty of Islamic scholars in Shiite countries like Iran. Islamic philosophy has become a strong foundation of Iranian culture. It constitutes a strong factor in promoting Iranian culture. For example, it was due to the Iranian Islamic philosophical background that the people of Iran were preserved from Marxism and atheistic positivism.

I also would like to add that philosophical research in Iran is not focused on Islamic philosophy only. For more than 50 years, there is an ongoing acquaintance of the Iranian culture with Western schools of thought, which are studied side by side with Islamic philosophy. The number of works of the Western philosophical tradition translated into Persian is already quite significant. But it is also true that Islamic philosophy represents the major interest of this domain in Iran. On the other hand, the comparative study of philosophy has become a major topic for academic dissertations, lectures, books and conferences. In Iran, the majority of scholars believe that Islamic Philosophy has the potential to seriously contribute for the solution of many contemporary problems.

IX. Conclusion

We suggest, therefore, that Philosophy is crucial for the furthering of any kind of positive dialogue between Iranian culture and the culture of other peoples and nations. In other words, we are convinced that Philosophy must play a very important role in the furthering of international peaceful relations. As we know very

well, there are many historical backgrounds that constitute serious obstacles for the achievement of peaceful relations between countries. Moreover, the flood of false news and deficient political analysis, together with all possible difficulties attached to the differences in the corresponding system of values, are abundant causes for conflict and misunderstandings. Accordingly, we advocate the recognition of the extraordinary role of reason and of rational thinking in order that differences and misunderstandings may not remain serious obstacles to peace and the mutual understanding of different cultures and civilizations.