

First Contemporary Muslim Philosophers Conference

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Early Saturday morning on 16 May 1998, fifty people made their way into the conference room of Georgetown University's Salaam Intercultural Center for the first annual conference of the Association of Contemporary Muslim Philosophers. Looking into their eyes, one could see a glimmer of hope and the fire of enthusiasm. Clearly, this was not going to be a run of the mill encounter of Muslim minds. Some of the greatest intellects of the Muslim world were present, among them Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Dr. Ṭāhā Jābir al 'Alwānī, and Dr. Kamal Hassan. Young students with fresh countenances and effervescent comments waited to deliberate upon such issues as the difference between public and private philosophy, the role of postmodernism in the Muslim world, and why and in what condition does the Muslim intellectual tradition find itself.

Ironically, this occurred in view of an immense Jesuit Crucifix heralded by the Greek letters *alpha* and *omega*, which symbolize Christ. While for some this signified the contradiction and turmoil present within current Muslim philosophical discourse, for others it embodied a promising message. For those who saw it as a positive symbol, including myself, the cross served to illustrate the universe, marking the four cardinal directions of space, and the surrounding *alpha* and *omega* symbolized the all-encompassing nature of the Qur'an. On a terrestrial level, it verified the resilient nature of the Muslim intellect for, quite obviously, we were a group of Muslims meeting in a Jesuit institution to talk about reviving Islamic philosophy. Nevertheless, the universal significance of that symbol was realized by the spirit of the gathering and in the profound discussions afforded by all those present.

The conference started with a moment of reflection upon the verses of the Qur'an found in Ṣūrat al 'Alaq:

Recite, in the name of thy Lord who created! Created man from a congealed drop. Recite, and thy Lord is Most Generous! Who taught by the Pen; taught man that which he knew not.

These verses defined the vertical center and horizontal boundaries of the discussion that day. Vertically, they oriented our perspective heavenward; horizontally, they drew us from the periphery in toward the center. In reality, our entire endeavor was contained within those few lines. Elegant, thought-provoking and transforming, they served as the firm foundation upon which those present built ornate and functional philosophical frameworks that could penetrate layers of nuanced intellectual complexity and remain loyal to the simple, unadulterated a priori encounter with the truth embodied in Islam. The realization that Islamic philosophy was a sacred science emanating from the Qur'an was soon to follow.

Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Professor of Islamic Studies, George Washington University), a scholar who has been involved in the project of reviving Islamic philosophy for over forty years, delivered the keynote address. He began his discussion by clarifying the terms defining the bounds of his presentation. The philosophical discourse of Muslims, he stated, was better represented by the term *Islamic philosophy* than by the idiom *Muslim philosophy*. This assertion was based on his view that Islamic philosophy is much more than just a collection of what was conceptualized abstractly in the mind of someone named al Kindī or al Fārābī who just happened to be Muslim; it was a perspective that grew out of the Qur'an. The influences of Hellenistic Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism were limited to the development of its expression and were wholly integrated into the Islamic perspective.

In other words, Islamic philosophy was inherently Islamic and not just a passive acceptance of foreign categories of thought. Furthermore, the incorrect view that traditional Islamic philosophy was just Greek thought translated into Arabic was perpetuated by the Muslim world's perception of its own philosophical tradition. Inasmuch as Muslims adopted Orientalist historiographies of such people as Guizot and Rénan, they looked upon themselves from the viewpoint of the other. This was compounded by the attempt of the Westernized Christian founders of Arab nationalism to redefine Islamic philosophy as a product of a spectral Arab genius. These errors stemmed from the European view that saw Islamic thought, and on a broader level Islamic civilization as a whole, as a hyphen linking the intellectual heritage of Greece to Renaissance humanism. Muslim thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

adopted this view through European colonialism and sought to disown Islamic philosophy.

While it is true that classical Islamic heritage contained critiques of philosophy carried out by jurists and theologians of no less stature than al Ghazzālī, and that in the thirteenth century Islamic philosophy as a separate discipline seemed to disappear, it must be noted that the river of Islamic philosophy flowed into the two seas of doctrinal Sufism and philosophical *kalām*. The revival of Islamic philosophy, therefore, would involve an in-depth study of the legacy of the other two disciplines coupled with a profound insight into the nature of current dilemmas in thought.

Dr. Nasr concluded his discussion by illustrating the need to revive Islamic philosophy. He stressed that such an attempt required dealing with factors of time and space, and that those involved must be aware of the intellectual, social, and spiritual factors influencing their own patterns of thought. In closing, he emphasized the need to revive Islamic metaphysics and warned those present of the subtle hubris of sentimental attachments to the Faustian conditions of the age. All things considered, his message can be summed up in the idea that while the revival of Islamic philosophy takes place in time and space, its origin resides in the pursuit of a timeless and absolute truth.

The second presentation was that of Dr. Ṭāhā Jābir al 'Alwānī (President, Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences) on the topic of *ijtihād* in the modern age. In many ways, his discussion echoed the sentiments expressed in Dr. Nasr's discussion from the point of view of *uṣūl al fiqh*. It began with a historical analysis of the meaning and usage of the term *ijtihād* in the classical Islamic tradition. *Ijtiḥād*, he explained, was much more than a technical method by which to derive legislative interpretation; it served as a fundamental method by which human beings could attain knowledge of the presence of God. It preceded the revelation of the divine text itself, inasmuch as it embodied the intellection of primordial and *a priori* encounters with the sacred. Nevertheless, with the descent of revelation, this intellection became reified through a direct encounter with the Qur'an. The Qur'anic verse found in Ṣūrat al Mā'idah: "...judge between them by what Allah hath revealed, and follow not their vain desires diverging from the Truth that hath come to thee, to each of thee have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way," he explained, enjoins human participation in the interpretive implementation of the divine law contained in the Qur'an. This was partially due to the fact that Islamic law was based on the realizable principles of *'ilal*, *asbāb*, and *maqāṣid*, respectively.

In a few cases, the Qur'an's legislative verses themselves identified the jurisprudential principle behind a ruling. But, the usual manner of identifying those principles was through the *ijtihād* of qualified scholars. Moreover, in the classical sense, *ijtihād* embodied the quest for certitude in an uncertain world. It did not involve the relegation of absolute truths to the mercurial consideration of ephemeral accidents, but rather integrated mercurial considerations into consequential realities. Even in such clear issues as prayer, fasting, and tithing, the intellectual quest for certitude was integrated via human volition by virtue of the formulation of one's intent (*niyyah*). In other words, the command to pray and recite litanies was coupled with the command to formulate intellectually the intention to pray in cognizance of the full meaning of prayer and the relationship between the human being and God. Thus, *ijtihād* was fundamental and normative.

Dr. al 'Alwānī concluded his discussion on *ijtihād* in the modern world by critiquing the works of 'Alī 'Abd al Rāziq and Muhammad Arkoun. These two scholars, he explained, in their attempts to modernize Islam fell short of the rigorous undertaking of *ijtihād*. 'Abd al Rāziq's claim that Islam was essentially apolitical and thus outside the realm of real-world concerns of governance led to the conclusion that Islamic law could be changed and reinterpreted to fit the times. Arkoun's claim that the Qur'an was a "mythic" text through which people interpreted symbolism of their own manufacture led to a similar conclusion. Both interpretations were rejected by Dr. al 'Alwānī as invalid forms of *ijtihād*.

Discussants, panelists, and conference participants then turned to the interpretation of the two presentations. Rhetorical questions posed by such key participants as Dr. Abdul Karim Crowe (Nonviolence International) and Dr. Waseem Khan (Harvard University) called for a reexamination of the need to revive Islamic philosophy and elicited heated debates. Still others posed the idea of integrating an "Islamic metaphilosophy" into the Muslim intellect through and from which Islamic philosophy would grow.

M. A. Muqtedar Khan (Georgetown University), the conference's organizer, introduced a cartography of contemporary philosophy outlining the role of a Muslim philosopher in public and private spheres. An inquiry into whether or not a contemporary Muslim philosopher was to be little more than an ideologue identified his contention that the revival of Islamic philosophy in time and space entailed its resuscitation in the public and private spheres. The panel following his discussion sought to demonstrate a method by which the tension between ideology and philosophy in the Muslim mind could be resolved.

Dr. Kamal Hassan chaired the session entitled "Islam and the Philosophy of the Present." Ejaz Akram (Catholic University) discussed

evolution, relativism, and Islamic theocentrism. He focused on critiques of the Darwinian conception of change, the Marxian conception of absolute dialectic, and Wagner's relativity of art. Dr. Robert Crane (Center for Civilizational Renewal) argued for the revival of *maqāṣidī* thought as an answer to the question of civilizational renewal. Dr. Khan spoke of the contemporary Muslim philosopher as a "rational Sufi" discussing the problem of agent/structure dichotomy, and Faizan Haq compared the political thought of al Ghazzālī and Machiavelli. These relatively short discussions raised many questions as to the present status and role of Muslim thought.

The third panel, "Traditional Islamic Philosophy in the Modern World," was perhaps one of the most interesting. Dr. Majid Fakhry (Georgetown University), Dr. Abdul Karim Crow, and Dr. Mehdi Aminrazavi (Mary Washington College) presented thought-provoking commentaries. The first presentation by Dr. Fakhry dealt with the postmodern challenge to Islamic philosophy, wherein he equated the early threat of the Sophists to philosophy with the current dilemmas in Muslim thought. Giving up the quest for truth as such, he claimed that postmodernist thinkers echoed Sophist denials of true knowledge in the name of pragmatism, edification, and deconstructing texts to get at meaning.

Essentially, inasmuch as Islamic philosophy embodied the quest for truth, it also was threatened by postmodernism's grumblings. Dr. Fakhry described the theories of several postmodern theorists, among them Gadamer, Lyotard, and Baudrillard. He defined postmodernism as a rebellion against modernity and, in particular, Cartesian rationalism by citing the works of Husserl and Heidegger. He ended his commentary strikingly, by advocating a split between human wisdom and divine wisdom as in the tradition of Latin Averroism.

Dr. Abdul Karim Crow spoke on "Islamic Philosophical Wisdom and the Present." He opened his discussion by critiquing Dr. Fakhry's discussion on the postmodern challenge to Islamic philosophy by asserting that Islamic philosophy was different than the Occidental notion of the academic discipline of philosophy. He affirmed that Islamic philosophy was more than the discursive resolution of obscure questions; rather, it embodied a wisdom tradition resonating with spiritual undertones. His discussion hinged on the viability of that wisdom tradition in the modern age.

Dr. Mehdi Aminrazavi's "Traditional Islamic Philosophy and the Challenge of Modernity" centered on the early Muslim thinkers' use of reason and the acceptance of foreign categories of thought. He concluded the session by forwarding a most-interesting proposition of building a rapprochement between modern philosophy and traditional Islamic philoso-

phy through dialogue in specific realms of inquiry and avoiding such difficult issues as ontology and the philosophy of science.

The final panel, "Contemporary Muslim Philosophers," featured Dr. Waseem Khan, Ahmad Iftheqar Hussain, and Afra Jalabi, a journalist from Canada. Dr. Khan spoke of the role of the contemporary Muslim philosopher as being one who pursues perennial virtue. Ahmad Hussain presented an introduction to the pragmatism of Jamāl al Dīn al Afghānī, and identified his thought with the current dilemma of the Muslim intellect and identity. Afra Jalabi reflected upon the discourses of Muhammad Iqbal, Malik Bennabi, and Ali Shariati. All things considered, there was a sense that more in-depth probing was needed to place each of the Muslim thinkers about whom presentations were delivered.

As the conference drew to a close, there was an air of promise that hung in the minds of its participants. In a sense, there was a hope that the free exchange of ideas that occurred in those few hours would permeate into the different Muslim communities in the United States and abroad. A promise that similar exchanges would occur in the future was welcomed by all.

The conference was successful because of the support of many institutional and individual supporters, among whom were the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, ICNA Washington, Saima and Muhammad Naeemuddin, Dr. Waseem Khan, Dr. Anas Abbas, Usama Khalidi, and Reshma Khan.