

The Importance of Studying Iranian Islamic Philosophy

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The Western world's interest in learning about Islamic philosophy was, in the past, centered on the active influence of Muslim thinkers upon the historical formation of Christian scholastic philosophy in the Middle Ages. In order to study the philosophical ideas of such thinkers as Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus in their historical perspectives one must become acquainted with a detailed and accurate knowledge of the thought of at least Avicenna (980-1037) and Averroes (1126-1198). Any adequate history of medieval Western philosophy, in consequence, should include an important chapter on the history of Islamic philosophy¹.

This distance can be because of one assumption in the view of Western thinkers that Islamic philosophy came to an end with the death of Averroes and/or it ceased to exist by what was written by Ghazzali (1058-1111) against philosophical thinking in his important and influential book, namely *Tahafut al-Falasifat*. In reality, what came to an end was only the first phase of the whole history of Islamic philosophy. With the death of Averroes, Islamic philosophy ceased to be alive for the West, but this does not mean that it ceased to be alive for the East. In fact, Islamic philosophy did not develop in all Muslim countries after Ghazzali and Averroes specially among Sunni Muslims and in Arabian part of these countries there was no longer a large interest in developing

philosophy. Since these Muslims were majority in population and had more relation to the West, the assumption that there is no new philosophical views in Muslim countries grew in the West; and this assumption was an obstacle between Islamic philosophy and Western philosophy, therefore there have not been any active relation between their ideas.

It is important in this connection to remark that even those "histories" of Islamic philosophy written not as a chapter in the history of Western philosophy but for their own sake, have largely been dictated by the idea that the golden age of Islamic philosophy is the period of three centuries extending from Farabi to Averroes, and that after Averroes, in the ages subsequent to Mongol invasion, except for few isolated prominent figures (like Ibn Khaldun, for example), the Muslim world produced nothing but commentators and super-commentators-a long series of lifeless and mechanical repetitions, without any spark of real creativity and originality.

That this is not a true picture of the historical facts has amply been made clear by the remarkable work done by scholars like Henri Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr concerning the intellectual activity of the Safawid Dynasty. It is at any rate quite recently that the Orientalists in general have begun to realize that philosophical thinking in Islam did not fall irretrievably into decadence and fossilization after the Mongol invasion.

We must thank Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Professor Oliver Leaman that their attempts lead to publication of a valuable book in this respect in 1996, namely "History of Islamic Philosophy"

In fact, the truth of the matter is that we can go to the extent of asserting that a kind of philosophy which deserves to be regarded as typically and characteristically Islamic developed not so much before the death of Averroes as after. This typically Islamic philosophy arose and matured in the periods subsequent to the Mongol invasion, until in the Safawid period in Iran it reached the apex of vigorous creativity. 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 philosophizing the Gnostic ideas and visions obtained 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, a rationalist philosophy having a solid and strictly logical structure. And in this latter aspect, it goes beyond Ibn 'Arabi and Suhrawardi back to Avicenna in the first phase of 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 call it - of the ultimate Reality.

The most famous and important philosophers of the second phase of Islamic philosophy is Mulla Sadra. He had very new ideas in philosophy (especially ontology) that makes him the brightest star in the sky of Islamic philosophy. His new ideas mark a turning point in Islamic philosophy so that the other philosophers after him were affected by his viewpoints.

The appearance of an intellectual figure of the dimensions of Sadr al-Din Shirazi during the Safavid period indicates the presence of a strong living intellectual tradition whose deepest currents he was to bring so brilliantly 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.

What remains much less known, however, is the revival of Islamic intellectual life in the eastern lands of Islam, especially in Persia. 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 *kalam* as they developed from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries².

The four classical schools of the post-Mongol period, namely, the peripatetic (*mashshai*), the Illuminationist (*ishraqi*), the gnostic (*'irfani*) and the theological (*kalam*), 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. To understand the background of Mulla Sadra, it is necessary to delve into the development of each of these schools as well as 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.

However, Mulla Sadra's philosophy is a very important heritage for Iranian Islamic philosophy. This philosophy has been matured by some scholars like Sabzavari and Tabataba'ii. Because of the advantages of this philosophy that is compatible with Islamic traditions, this kind of philosophizing could find a very honorable situation in Islamic thought in Iran, so that it became as an official learning and teaching in religious seminaries (*hozeh elmiyyeh*). Shiism has been a good context for all rational thinking and allows and also persuades this kind of learning and thinking. Therefore, understanding and confronting with every kind of rational and philosophical thinking has been a major duty of Islamic scholars in Iran. Islamic philosophy has been a strong and hidden foundation of Iranian culture and has influenced on other dimensions of thought. This has been Islamic philosophizing that built an obstacle in front of every kind of foreign

opposite attacking thought that wants to penetrate in Iranian culture. That it was wholly successful or not is another subject of research. However, it was Iranian Islamic philosophical background that succeeded in protecting Iranian people from some foreign unknown thoughts like Marxism and atheistic positivism. Although all problems are not philosophical problems, they have some roots in philosophical views. One of the major efforts of scholars and philosophers in Iran has been in finding and showing these roots and criticizing them. Some research centers allocated for this matter. There are a lot of problems and new perspectives in other kinds of thought like sociology, psychology, economic, culture, politics, management, and so on that need solution. These solutions based on previous philosophical views. Accordingly, some of the major efforts of scholars are in discussing about these philosophies like philosophy of sociology, philosophy of economic and so on from the point of view of Islamic philosophy and thought. Therefore, there are a lot of tendencies toward philosophy and philosophizing, because literate people believe that the kind of construction of their country is based on these foundations that might have their structures in their cultural and therefore philosophical backgrounds.

The tendency toward philosophy is from both kinds of view, negative and positive points of view. In negative point of view the efforts are allocated to refining of alien thoughts or criticizing them. In positive point of view, they try to introduce a kind of life and construction of the country that not only give them a native structure of thought for management of their country, but also it can be as a model for every society.

Based on above mentioned perspective from philosophy in Iran, it is obvious that the philosophy must be a common interested branch of thought and dispute among Iranian literate people. Philosophical researchers are active, and philosophy is very lively. The philosophical studies, in both Islamic and Western views, occupy some parts of amusements among many students of universities as well as graduated people. Although the major fields of study of these young students are industrial or medical studies, for example, they try to learn philosophical views or participate in philosophical classes or read and understand philosophical disputes. Some Institutes are established for feeding these increasing tendencies.

There are a lot of journals that allocated directly or indirectly to philosophy, for both special and general uses, like *Arghanon*, *Qabasat*, *Kian*, *Naqd va Nazar*, *Nameh Farhang*, *Kalame Eslami*, *Hozeh va Daneshgah*, *Farhang*, *Ketabe Naghd*, *Namaye Pagoohesh*, *Kheradname Sadra*, *Keyhan Farhangi*, *Nameh Elm va Din*, *Keyhan Andisheh*, *Ma,arefat*, and so on. Some of important newspapers have often one article about philosophical views. In some periods of time, philosophical books are the most published books in Iran. There are nineteen governmental universities and equal nongovernmental universities in Iran that have one or two departments for philosophy and offer B.A and M.A. programs and a few of them Ph.D. degree. Learning and teaching Philosophy is also a main subject in seminaries that is scattered all over the country. In some cases the period of teaching philosophy is more than 10 years in these seminaries. There are also more

than 40 important institutes for philosophical researches. All of these show that rationalistic thought plays an important role among now-a-day Iranian lives.

It must be noted that these philosophical researches are not, only, focused on Islamic philosophy. After confronting seriously with Western philosophy in Iran, since fifty years ago, the efforts directed toward understanding Western philosophy along with Islamic philosophy. Translation of Western philosophical books and articles is a large interested work. But it is not the only learning in philosophy. Islamic philosophy is being learned as well as Western philosophy. The comparative studies in philosophy are the main subject of philosophical researches and conferences. Many scholars specially religious men of seminaries believe that Islamic philosophy have enough power for the solution of many contemporary philosophical problems, and this strength is unknown for the West. Imam Khomeini mentioned this matter in his historical letter to Gorbachev. This letter was as a message from Islamic civilization to one of the most important ideologies that could attract a lot of people in the world. The board of giving the letter was constituted from two men and one woman, and two of them were philosophers. Imam Khomeini wanted from Gorbachev and the leader group of The Soviet Union and all of their people to study carefully in Islamic philosophy and mysticism specially Mulla Sadra's view and Ibn Arabi's doctrine as an alternative for updating Marxism. These matters show that other dimensions of thought in Iran are based on Iranian Islamic

heritages of philosophy, and philosophy is a determining factor in other aspects of Iranian thought, like economy, politics, culture and also religious attitudes.

Therefore, this matter must be considered in every kind of dialogue between Iranian culture and other cultures. Since philosophical thinking has intellectual method, and reason is the judgement of philosophical disputes, and it is most common realm for mutual understanding, therefore philosophy can play an important role in international relations of thought. There are a lot of historical backgrounds in every relationship that can be obstacles in peaceful relation between two countries. False news, unreal political analysis, incompatibility of two cultures, different systems of value and so on, make some presuppositions that cause naturally conflicts and misunderstandings. It is only reason and rational thinking that can go beyond these boundaries and make mutual understanding possible without regarding those backgrounds and can lead to some better kinds of life in both cultures. Besides, because many misunderstandings are based on confliction of two thoughts and this confliction are influenced by cultural views and philosophy is an important root of some cultures like Iranian cultures, therefore it is important for every relation with Iranian thought to understand philosophical heritages of this civilization.

As a result, I think, It is important for the West to study Iranian Islamic philosophy as a kind of worldview that claims that it can make available some other philosophical viewpoints and solution for philosophical problems. If Iranian Islamic philosophy were

understood at least like Indian or Buddhist philosophy it would cause a fruitful mutual understandings.

¹ Mehdi Mohaghegh and Tsihiko Izutsu, *The Metaphysics of Sabzavari*, P. 3, University of Tehran Publication.

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sadraddin Shirazi an His Transendantal Theosophy*,
Institute for Cultural and Humanistic Studies, 1997 , P. 16