

# *Philosophy in Contemporary Iran*

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The practice of Philosophy in the Islamic world is a very diverse activity. In contemporary Muslim territories we can find a great diversity of attitudes towards Philosophy. Hence, before dealing with the particular situation of Philosophy in Iran, we would like to enumerate a few trends in the context of which the special identity of Iranian 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 itself between Islam and Philosophy. Among these interpretations we find the following:

1. The rejection of philosophy and of any rational approach to religious teachings with the emphasis placed on the ordinary meanings of Quran and *hadith* (*vahhabi* approach).
2. The Ghazzalian approach, i.e., the one that we might very call the philosophical rejection of philosophy. This is a common view in Malaysia and Indonesia, but with important similarities to the *tafkik* (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 going from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. 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 *vahhabi* 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 Hamed 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 premise that the best way of proceeding is to promote the return to the traditional doctrines of Islam.
7. The approach of traditionalist thinkers like Rene Genon, Schowan, and Nasr.

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

### **Background of Iranian Islamic Philosophy**

In the past, the interest of the Western world in learning about Islamic Philosophy was mainly centered 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, in consequence, should include an important chapter on the history of Islamic philosophy<sup>1</sup>.

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 (1126-1198) and/or ceased to exist when Ghazzali (1058-1111) produced his major attack against philosophical thinking in the *Tahafut al-Falasifat*, his most important and influential book. But in reality what came to an end was nothing more than what shall be considered the first phase in the development of the whole history of Islamic Philosophy. It is true that with the death of Averroes, Islamic Philosophy ceased to be alive in the West, 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 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Mehdi Mohaghegh; Tsihiko Izutsu, *The Metaphysics of Sabzavari*. Tehran: University of Teheran Press, p. 3.

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. At any rate, it is only very recently that the 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 Safawid 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, as such, 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 philosophers 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 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 that remains 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 centuries<sup>2</sup>.

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. 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.

### **The Characteristics of Sadraean Philosophy**

The Sadraen 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 religious teachings of Quran and *hadith*;
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.;
9. importance of the Quran and of the *hadith* and prayers for a philosophy that tries to argue her own views based on reason alone and not on revelation;

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<sup>2</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sadraddin Shirazi an His Transendantal Theosophy*.

Teheran: Institute for Cultural and Humanistic Studies, 1997, p. 16.

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.

### **Philosophy in Contemporary Iran**

The philosophy of Mulla Sadra, therefore, must be considered as one of the most important contributions of Islamic Philosophy in Iran. This philosophy has been continued and matured by scholars like Sabzavari and Tabataba'ii. In fact, due mainly to its compatibility with the Islamic tradition a very honorable place within the context of Iranian Islamic thought was granted to this kind of philosophizing, so much so that it became part of the official learning and teaching in religious seminaries (*hozeh elmiyyeh*) throughout Iran. 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 with every kind of rational and philosophical thinking has been a major duty of Islamic scholars in Iran. Islamic philosophy has been 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 was preserved from Marxism and atheistic positivism.

Thus, we can say that Philosophy plays a growing role in Iranian culture. Philosophical research is very lively and the study of Philosophy, both Islamic and Western, is quite popular among university students. Even many students of technical or medical disciplines are keen to learn about Philosophy and to participate in philosophical debates. The practical result of this interest can be shown in the growing number of Institutes dedicated to research and the teaching of Philosophy.

It is also interesting to register the fact that in Iran there are actually more than 50 journals dedicated, direct or indirectly, to Philosophy. Among them we would like just to register the following: *Hekmat va Falsafeh*, *Qabasat*, *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*, etc. It is also common to see major newspapers offering articles about philosophical questions or points of view. And in no way is it uncommon to see that books in Philosophy are often among the most popular.

In Iran there are nineteen governmental universities and an equal number of private universities with one or two departments of philosophy. Philosophy is also taught as a main subject in seminaries scattered all over the country. In some of these cases the teaching of philosophy lasts for about ten years. There are also more than 40 institutes for philosophical research throughout the country.

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 conferences.

In Iran, the majority of scholars believes that Islamic Philosophy has the power to seriously contribute for the solution of many contemporary problems. Imam Khomeini, for example, mentioned precisely this fact in his historical letter to Mihail Gorbachev, a letter in which Imam Khomeini suggested that Gorbachev and the entire group of leaders of the Soviet Union should carefully study Islamic philosophy and mysticism, particularly the doctrines of Mulla Sadra and of Ibn Arabi.

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 very well know, 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 cause 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.

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### **Abstract:**

Philosophy in Islamic territory has different adventures. In this paper, at first, I examine contemporary trends in Islamic philosophy from rejection to liveliness. From a Western point of view, there is a supposition that Islamic philosophy is restricted to activities during middle ages, while it is not so for Iranian philosophical heritage. After a glance to Iranian-Islamic background, I will show the development of philosophy in Iran since then.

Most feature of contemporary approach to philosophy is transcendent philosophy based on Mulla Sadra's views. I will enumerate some characteristics of his philosophy then I will point to the reception of Western philosophy in Iran and the contemporary activities in both Islamic and Western philosophy which has made Iran as a lively environment for philosophy.

Key words: Islamic Philosophy, Iran, Mulla Sadra, *Hikmat*