

## **The role of philosophy in Islam today**

*by Safet Bektovic*

Philosophical thinking hasn't always been welcomed by the majority of Muslims. Among many people, Muslim philosophers are seen as problematizing, questioning and undermining Islamic tradition and orthodoxy. That's why a great deal of conservative Muslims looks at philosophers with suspicion. This can be said of many modern Muslims too, unfortunately. I have often met this suspiciousness, being a Muslim philosopher myself.

What makes me unhappy is the fact that some of Islam's greatest philosophers are not adequately received and understood by Muslims, given their huge importance in developing an Islamic culture and civilization in the world. This article deals with Islamic philosophy and the role it has to play today. How can we make the tradition of reflective and critical thinking within Islam relevant for Muslims today?

### ***Contemporary Muslim philosophers and the question of authority***

Following the development of modern Muslim intellectual life, one will note that the number of living Islamic philosophers is very small. Assuming that contemporary Muslim philosophers do not play a great role in the current public debates about Islam, it seems as if philosophy and other humanistic disciplines are left out of the public Islamic discourse. And the discourse is instead occupied by lawyers, theologians and traditional ulama (religious scholars (ed.) In relation to this context, many people, especially in the West, are stressing the issue of defining and representing Islam. Influenced by what they see, hear and read about Islam, westerners have been very confused as to who represents and speaks for Islam.

Akbar Ahmed is one of the Muslim thinkers who tries to address this issue. In his book "Journey into Islam"<sup>1</sup>, he discusses the question of defining Islam in the context of globalization, and the possibility of a mutual understanding between the Western and the Islamic world. He analyses not only the role of Western media, politicians and experts, but also the whole spectrum of Muslim voices; professors, sheikhs, presidents, students and ordinary people from various countries where this Islamic discourse is taken place.

In regards to the question of defining of Islam, it is clear that there are many Muslim who pretend to be representative, yet there is no single locus of authority. This is also a conclusion in a comprehensive Gallup's multi-year survey, based upon more than a thousand interviews with residents from more than 35 nations. The survey is presented by John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed in their book "Who speaks for Islam. What a Billion Muslims really think" (2008).

Discussing the authenticity of those Muslim voices which may or may not be representative of Islam is a matter of high complexity. This goes far beyond this article, still, the level of complexity such a discussion arises, form part of the context of my reflections. One thing is important to maintain: Defining Islam has become a very demanding socio-political, philosophical, theological and historical task, which implies a multi-disciplinary approach. At the same time, we are witnessing heavily misunderstandings of Islam made by both non-Muslims as well as Muslims, due both to the common ignorance about Islam among people, yet also due to misinterpretations brought about by highly-educated scholars (Huntington, B. Lewis). Therefore, any interpretation of Islam has to be viewed with critical eyes, whether it is stated by a Western Islam-expert or by a Muslim representative.

My research on European Muslim identity and my experience of how many Muslim intellectuals

present Islam, by primarily referring to salafi-authorities or traditional ulama, has led me to ask the following questions: What has happened to critical thinking in the various Muslim cultures? Why has philosophy become so marginalized in the Muslim self-understanding? Why is Ibn Taymiyya (theologian, dead 1328, Cairo)<sup>2</sup> more appealing to modern Muslim thinkers and readers than Ibn Rushd (also known as Averroës, philosopher, born 1126, Cordoba)?<sup>3</sup> Why does Yusuf Qaradawi<sup>4</sup> have more appeal than Mohammed Arkoun?<sup>5</sup> And last but not least, why do we have organized movements working passionately to eliminate philosophy and critical reasoning from Islam within our Muslim communities?

An interesting phenomenon is that a great deal of modern-minded, rational-thinking, young Muslims base their identity on a simplified Islamic (or fundamentalist) ideology, despite its historical defectiveness and its evident epistemological contradictions. It is, however, not very consistent to emphasize that Islam is a religion of the ratio and at the same time reject the entire rationalistic philosophy of Islam as a corruption of the true religion, which some of these young people seem to be doing. Or for that matter, to stress that Islam, in its essence, isn't a religion but a political ideology. This means in reality to deny the divine origin of Islam, since every ideology was created by man.

*2 One of Islam's most forceful theologians who, as a member of the Pietist school founded by Ibn Hanbal, sought the return of the Islamic religion to its sources: the Qur'an and the sunnah. He is also the source of the Wahhābāyah, a mid-18th-century traditionalist movement of Islam.*

*3 Islamic religious philosopher who integrated Islamic traditions with ancient Greek thought. He produced a series of summaries and commentaries on most of Aristotle's works (1169–95) and on Plato's Republic, which exerted considerable influence in both the Islamic world and Europe for centuries. Ibn Rushd, is to my knowledge and experience, better known in the West than in the Muslim world.*

*4 Egyptian scholar and preacher (born 1926) best known for his popular al Jazeera program, ash-Shariah wal-Hayat ("Shariah and Life"), and IslamOnline (a website that he helped to found in 1997), where he offers opinions and religious edicts ("fatwa") based on his interpretation of the Qur'an.*

*5 Mohammed Arkoun (born 1928 in Algeria) is one of the most influential scholars in Islamic studies today. In a career of more than 30 years, he has been a critic of the tensions embedded in his field of study, advocating Islamic modernism and humanism*

### ***Rediscovering philosophy as a legitimate approach to Islam***

Many Western as well as Muslim universities and institutions have in recent time engaged themselves in extensive research on Islamic intellectual tradition in which a number of progressive Muslim thinkers provide – in different fields - epochal contributions to the understanding of problems that Muslims are facing today. Therefore, with this knowledge in mind, one may ask: Where is the link between this intellectual activity and the daily practice of Islam? It appears that the link between the intellectual elite and the everyday Muslim is almost non-existent. A thing, that seems to suit the political elite in many Muslim countries very well as they make use of certain religious intelligentsia in order to promote status quo in the eyes of the masses.

If philosophy should have a practical impact on modern society, it needs to be recognized as a legitimate approach to Islam and as such have its own institutions. This doesn't imply that philosophers should be authorities. Not all philosophers are socially involved. A long time ago, Ibn Rushd made a claim saying that philosophical knowledge wasn't for everybody, but a privilege reserved for the elite. Today, in a similar way, Abu Zayd<sup>6</sup> claims that enlightenment never can be institutionalized. Enlightenment has never been

a public movement in any of the Muslim countries. Bearing that in mind, as well as the whole socio-political structure of most Islamic communities, the system of education and the tendency to ideologize Islam (both in the West and the East), there is no doubt that the gap between the intellectual elite and the masses will remain for some time in the Islamic world.

My concern is not to make philosophical thinking attainable for every Muslim, but how to legitimize philosophical thinking in Islam, and at the same time create room for every philosophical interpretation in the world presented from an Islamic point of view. And here one might ask: In what way could the Muslim philosophers contribute to the framework of world philosophy? Would their contribution only be of religious, confessional nature? Or would it be in the realms of philosophy of science, philosophy of nature, philosophy of language, political philosophy, moral philosophy, as one might expect, considering the orientations of classical Islamic philosophy.

### ***The need for a philosophical discourse between Muslims in the West***

In any variant, philosophical discussion or discourse is of practical relevance, particularly for Muslims living in the West. Inspiration from Muslim philosophical tradition as well as from the inter-philosophical communication between Islam and Europe could promote and facilitate the dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Without this inspiration to develop an adequate political philosophy and a philosophy of religion, it will be difficult for the Muslim believer- as for all theologians living in the West- to respond to current challenges such as globalization, secularism, a multi-cultural society. In my opinion, the purpose of philosophy is to correct the relevant questions and

*6 Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd born 1943 in Egypt. He was associate professor at the faculty of the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at Cairo University from 1987. In 1995 Zayd suffered major religious persecution for his views on the Qur'an as a religious, mythical, literary work. He is now living and working in Holland.*

to clarify the problems. With its critical analysis and systematic approach, philosophy has always served as a tool to systematize the human interpretation of the world. The right questions and clear problem-formulations is in itself a condition for solving the problems. Proposing a solution to a specific problem cannot be done without a prior understanding of the problem. This is why establishing a philosophical approach in Islam is of vital importance.

First of all, I would like philosophy to be more integrated in Islamic thought as a legitimate element, as it was in some previous periods of time. Secondly, I would like philosophy to have more influence on Islamic jurisprudence. The cliché „Shariah is the solution“ has to be problematized with the aim to understand the role of the human being in defining Islam and Shariah. To neglect the role of the human interpretation is to say that Shariah-law in its whole is divine, thus raising man to God's position.<sup>7</sup>

Observing Islamic tradition, we see that philosophy never existed as an autonomous discipline, rather, it served as a methodological tool for reasoning in its whole, including fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence (ed.)). This was also the idea of Ibn Rushd as he managed to combine philosophy and fiqh in his Islamic thinking. It is in the modern era with the separation between the Humanities and Science, that Islamic philosophy is viewed to be this particular discipline. And then I have to raise the question as to what role Islamic philosophy could play in this new situation?

### ***A relation between Islamic philosophy and the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard 8***

With the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard in mind, I would say that Islamic philosophy has to be a corrective to the established Islamic discourse. Not a norm, a regulating factor, but instead a corrective, emphasizing the issues, questions and problems which have been disregarded or neglected.

*7 According to Ziauddin Sardar this means “a metaphysical catastrophe” to Islam.*

*8 Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (5 May 1813 – 11 November 1855) was a prolific 19th century Danish philosopher and theologian.*

*Kierkegaard strongly criticized both the Hegelianism of his time and what he saw as the empty formalities of the Church of Denmark. Much of his work deals with religious themes such as faith in God, the institution of the Christian Church, Christian ethics and theology, and the emotions and feelings of individuals when faced with life choices.*

How then is Kierkegaard’s philosophy of religion useful in an Islamic context? Let me take the principled one: The first condition and the leading principle of Kierkegaard’s religious analysis is the differentiation between the divine and the human. According to Kierkegaard, the purpose of man is as follows: Not to absolutize the relative, and not to relativize the absolute. Why is this relevant to a Muslim? Because this number one principle has to do with the very essence of Islamic monotheism emphasizing the absoluteness and oneness of God. And due to the tendency to confuse the human with the divine in Islamic thinking— in the shape of sacralization of human interpretation of God’s will – has it had terrible consequences for Islam. A “kierkegaardian” Islamic philosophy, on the contrary, would stress the subjectivity of all human understanding and knowledge of God, and, at the same time, it would preserve a methodological skepticism in relation to legal decisions, making it difficult for fuqaha (experts in Islamic jurisprudence(ed.) to make decisions with 100% certainty.

However, we have to note that, to be corrective is not the same as to correct. Corrections are only valid and legitimate if made by someone with authority. Kierkegaard worked without any authority himself. In spite of this, he considered his work as a corrective to the established order i.e. political establishment and official Christianity. His target wasn’t Danish politics or Christianity as such but the single individual and therefore, his focus was on explaining the existential difficulties in the process of becoming a Christian believer.

When he sat on a bench in Frederiksberg Gardens, looking at people and smoking his pipe, he thought to himself: Many people in Denmark try to make Christianity a comfortable type of religion that doesn’t require any existential effort. Christianity isn’t a comfortable religion, and this isn’t the true way to be a Christian. Someone should remind all Christians, that to be a Christian is probably the most difficult task. Therefore, someone must serve as a corrective to this misunderstanding.

### ***The future role of Islamic philosophy***

My philosophical project is not about formulating a new philosophy. Instead, I want to legitimize the role of philosophical reasoning by giving it a corrective role. Some Muslim philosophers are already working in this direction without any explicit promotion of this idea. In this connection, I can refer to Mohammed Arkoun who suggests that philosophy deconstructs Islam’s “imaginaire”, i.e. the various ideological concepts, which manifest themselves in political fundamentalism, dogmatism and populism, and which is known as the so-called “Islamic vision.” The official, dogmatic-ideological Islam discourse that rejects the historicity and the plurality of Islam should be radically challenged by philosophy,

claims Arkoun.

Al-Jabiri views the role of philosophy in relation to political criticism. According to him, the main purpose of philosophy is to demystify the popular phrase “Islam and politics are one”, and to open for a new, more secular understanding of Islam’s history. Al-Jabiri, however, is especially interested in the Arabic-Islamic tradition, and he is of the opinion that philosophy must be engaged in a double process: a deconstruction of the past and a re-examination of the most pressing issues facing post-colonial Arab thought. This is the way to liberate contemporary Arab culture from the parochialism of a theological mind (represented by the salafiyya movement).

The impact of Islamic philosophy on the contemporary discourse is probably not great, but it is an important impact, nevertheless. Philosophy renews itself by reflecting on questions that are the matter of everyday social practice. In order to respond to how philosophy can play its role, whether as a corrective, as intellectual opposition, polemics or something else, it is necessary to discuss the potential and possibilities of critical thinking in contemporary Islam and its relationship to other traditions, particularly the western one. In the past, the encounter with Greek philosophy was essential for the development of Muslim philosophical thought. Today, the encounter with modern and post-modern western philosophy proves to be inspiring for many Muslim philosophers and thinkers. There is a tradition for the mutual exchange of thoughts between Muslims and non-Muslims as they worked together in the past to develop philosophical ideas.

This has continued up until today. Discussing the social and political impact on Islamic theology, the universality and applicability of spiritual and ethical dimensions of Islam with other philosophers, I end up concluding that philosophy problematizes and challenges the orthodoxy of Islam.