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ARAB-MUSLIM CIVILIZATION IN THE MIRROR OF THE UNIVERSAL

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Production of pedagogical tools for the promotion
of dialogue among cultures



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FOREWORD

The purpose of the publication entitled *Arab-Muslim civilization in the mirror of the universal: philosophical perspectives* is to foster dialogue based on mutual respect and understanding as a means of combating ignorance and promoting tolerance and peace. This work creates synergy in an original way, drawing on both philosophical and educational resources promoting knowledge and combating ignorance, which makes it unique.

The rich and varied content of this book is the result of the efforts of a team of philosophers and pedagogues who have examined Arab-Muslim civilization from a philosophical perspective. Their aim is to share with readers the extensive contribution of this civilization to human thought and the wealth of knowledge it has accumulated over the centuries, which embraces many traditions, languages and continents, from Persian to Arabic, from Africa to Arabian Peninsula.

This book, both innovative and didactic, presented in the form of analytical, documented and illustrated worksheets, is designed to be used in wide-ranging and multidimensional ways. The worksheets are primarily intended to train trainers, namely teachers, professors, educators and instructors. More broadly, their purpose is to integrate and strengthen documentary corpuses in the fields of education, the media and culture. Thus, they set out to provide philosophical material, elaborated by contemporary philosophers and experts in Arab-Muslim civilization who offer an insightful overview of the challenges of our time. They also propose a specific method to make optimum use of material that is sometimes difficult and complex, through the inclusion, for every issue addressed, of topics providing didactical help in the form of interpretation tools and special educational resources and exercises.

The leitmotif of this philosophical material in an educational context is to offer every reader the opportunity to develop new approaches and to provide new academic arguments to combat prejudice and stereotypes, thus opening up new avenues for reflection and discussion.

This constitutes a response to the terms of reference set by the Memorandum of Understanding between UNESCO and the Alliance of Civilizations with regard to the *development of teacher training on intercultural capacities to address challenges raised by the diversity of cultures, religions, faiths, and traditions* and to *developing educational, cultural and scientific contents that foster dialogue and mutual understanding*.¹

¹ Article IV.1, UNESCO – Alliance of Civilizations (AoC) MoU, 2008.

In a changing world, the insights provided by a philosophical approach to many existentialist issues – that concern each one of us, and in particular younger generations – takes on a new meaning and significance. Substance is thus provided within formal and informal education to foster exchange and dialogue, to combat ethnic, cultural and religious prejudice and to encourage tolerance and respect, particularly in an increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious social context. In this regard, intercultural and philosophy education – two key aspects of the worksheets presented herein – play a major role.

Intercultural education should contribute to (i) promoting respect for individual cultural identity through culturally appropriate and adapted quality education, (ii) imparting the necessary cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills to enable everyone to take a full part in the life of society and (iii) promoting respect, understanding and solidarity among individuals and ethnic, social, cultural and religious groups.

Philosophy education is an education of freedom and critical thinking – an exemplary bulwark against all forms of doctrinaire passion and extremism. Philosophy draws on the exercise of freedom in and through reflection. It provides a method, an initiative and an educational approach that contribute to developing each person's ability to question, compare and conceptualize – all of which are assets providing a basis for effective quality education.

Dialogue among peoples and civilizations is a fundamental obligation fully taken up by UNESCO through its various programmes. May the dynamics of dialogue, initiated in this work by philosophers and pedagogues, effectively inspire academic training in schools, universities and other formal and informal spaces of learning and sharing environments. May everyone be able to draw on this large repository of ideas for a new discovery of the very rich Arab-Muslim civilization.



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INTRODUCTION

OPENNESS TO THE OTHER

For centuries, the Arab-Muslim civilization has drawn its richness, its vitality and its originality from the multiplicity of its sources and resources, from the dialogue established between its thinkers and from the fruitful controversy rendered possible by its philosophical tradition and Greek legacy. It is this dialogue and spirit of emulation regarding the life of the mind that the philosophical texts in this work have attempted to reflect and reconstruct through the great thinkers of past and present.

This work exemplifies UNESCO's steadfast concern to promote dialogue and understanding among peoples and cultures in order to constantly combat obscurantism of every sort, whatever its source. This ambition is reflected in the Memorandum of Understanding between UNESCO and the Alliance of Civilizations, to be implemented, among other things, through production of an "intercultural vademecum": a multidisciplinary and multi-purpose educational tool designed for a wide audience and which presents an intercultural view of history bringing together the Arab-Muslim world and the West.

The programme, made possible thanks to the generous support from the Kingdom of Spain, comprises five projects: an anthology of scientific, philosophical, literary and artistic connections between the Arab-Muslim world and the West (from the seventh to nineteenth centuries); young artists for intercultural dialogue between the Arab and Western worlds; museums as a civic space for developing intercultural skills; reporting for peace; and, lastly, the present collection of pedagogical worksheets entitled *Arab-Muslim civilization in the mirror of the universal: philosophical perspectives*, the result of extensive work on concepts.

As an eminent discipline of free and independent minds, philosophy is an ideal way to help people engage with otherness and discern its complexities. In the texts collected here, the authors have used philosophy to write freely, drawing on a whole range of sources. This in itself is a guarantee of pluralism and diversity, enabling readers to form their own opinions of the multifaceted Arab-Muslim civilization.

Whether philosophy in the Arab-Muslim civilization is likened to other religions and systems of belief or the doctrines of the Greek philosophers; or whether it comes from philosophers with an extremely rigorous scientific background or thinkers rooted in the religious tradition, it is clear that it always proceeds from a steadfast desire for knowledge. It is precisely this progress towards the Other, through knowledge, which underlies these pedagogical worksheets.

AN INVITATION TO NOURISH THE MIND

A number of paths are pursued here: the universal as both composite and divided; civilization as a human requirement whose cultural expression depends on the context; the multiple ways of the past reconstructed in their own terms; the desire for meditation and the specific relationship to transcendence.

These pedagogical worksheets thus aim at fostering a better understanding of the major figures and achievements of philosophy, science and the arts in Arab-Muslim civilization. This is an answer, through the light of learning and the sharing of knowledge, to those who are trying to stigmatize this civilization by stirring up fear and hatred, since friction arises from a lack of understanding. In the long term fears and hatred can only be countered by education. Humankind has never before had access, through the means of communication, to so much information as today. Yet it has become clear that easy access to information is not enough to combat prejudice: preconceptions are rife. Experience, observation and argument are losing ground to hasty judgement. These pedagogical worksheets thus trace the patient progress of the mind towards reason and rationality, describing shared ways of life and recalling the fundamentals of Arab-Muslim culture.

A FOUR-STAGE PHILOSOPHICAL PROCESS

These pedagogical worksheets comprehend four stages:

The first stage is philosophy itself, which determines everything else and provides the foundation of each worksheet. A variety of authors have been invited to expound it. They have enlarged on their own individual fields with the aim of providing the reader with relevant information on Arab-Muslim philosophy for a given subject.

As in the case of all philosophers and every code of writing, the authors here have been given all the necessary academic freedom. And it is precisely the diversity and multiplicity of views and arguments that constitute the originality and richness of this project. Readers will find a pool of ideas that will encourage them to engage in their own reflections and from which they will be able to draw fresh inspiration and a fresh understanding of Arab-Muslim civilization.

The second stage is an exploration and understanding of the text. This is the purpose of the section headed *Reflecting on the text*, which, according to its author, Khaled Roumo, is an aid to understanding the text of the pedagogical worksheet. For the lay reader these texts offer a treasure-trove of knowledge which is sometimes unfamiliar and hard to understand. It is therefore necessary to bring this sum of multidisciplinary knowledge within readers' reach while being careful to spare them the impression of entering an alien world and to encourage them to approach it under guidance. To this end, the *Reflecting on the text* section lists a number of questions based on keywords from the text. These questions offer an interactive field of investigation: readers can use these keywords as the starting point for an exploration and investigation of the text. This approach has a number of advantages: it provides answers to the first questions that cross people's minds, which may be inspired by a desire for knowledge, by received ideas or even by deep-seated prejudice; it spurs readers' curiosity, leading them to uncover unsuspected aspects of the subject discussed, and it encourages consideration of fundamental issues common to all cultures.

The third stage is the use as a teaching aid. Each of the 34 worksheets making up the work has a section entitled *Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturally*. This is the pedagogues' contribution to the project; it is meant mainly for teachers, to whom the work is primarily addressed, but can also be used by any reader wishing to study and explore the philosopher's text in greater detail.

This section consists of several steps: firstly, there is comprehension and review, when judgement is suspended and the focus is on exploring a culture, civilization and philosophy from the inside. Thus a set of questions on the worksheet key points are to be found under the heading *Understanding the text*: the answers bring out essential concepts and key ideas.

Next comes the stage of assimilation, analysis and criticism, when readers can bring to bear their judgment and preconceptions and put them to the test. Thus the section headed *Entering into dialogue with the text* contains suggestions for working on the text with our own intellectual frame of reference while allowing this same text to work on our inner nature. Obviously, these subjective choices must be tested against other subjective choices (the group's) to clarify assumptions and understand why they are made, or else to change them. The practical stage, illustrated by the *Suggested teaching method* section, offers some ways of comparing our understandings of and critical relationship to the text in order to go beyond a simple exchange of opinions and prevent people sticking rigidly to their positions. Furthermore, the various instructions invite us to use a number of philosophical skills: analysis, judgement, argument, conceptualization, problematization, etc.

These first three steps have been developed by Oscar Brenifier, a philosopher and teacher of philosophical practice. The last stage in this use as a teaching aid consists of a series of *educational exercises* prepared by Jonathan Levy, an educational psychologist and trainer. According to the author, these exercises represent an intercultural teaching method in which knowledge is constructed jointly and “trainers” and “trainees” are not simply players but also producers of new meanings and practices. This entails a multidisciplinary approach, group methodology and learning by doing. The method is intended to embody an innovative approach to teaching in which the act of “learning”, occurring in a context of cultural diversity, must be considered pregnant with complexity and a range of teaching concepts, models and theories as well as different methods and techniques. The “Educational exercises” section thus allows experimentation during which participants can play around with subjects using games, simulations, case studies, role playing, etc. These exercises are intended to help readers to learn to make connections between the content of the texts and their own perceptions and experience in order to clarify the ideas being explained.

The **fourth stage** is contextualization in relation to other cultural areas and civilizations. This is the object of the *Other times, other places* section. As its author Jacques Nicolaus explains, this section uses selected examples to underline that there is no break or divide between Arab-Muslim civilization, and other civilizations but rather far more interpenetration than people believe and links forged so long ago that they have been forgotten. Cultural, technical, scientific, social and other issues constantly arise in virtually identical terms in different civilizations. Thus different civilizations have often drawn extensively on the same sources, and Arab-Muslim civilization and the West share a large number of cultural references.

These suggestions for philosophical reflection on key themes in various fields of knowledge are thus above all an invitation to look with fresh eyes and see beyond what we sometimes think we know in order to renew our commitment to remaining open to the Other: a true search for meaning in order to attain mutual understanding and continuous dialogue between cultures.

This project relied on a dialogue between philosophers’ texts and pedagogues’ readings, thus combining two objects dear to UNESCO: encouraging the production of innovative content and bringing it within reach of education practitioners – and other audience beyond.

By underlining the role of philosophical thought in considering today challenges in terms of dialogue and mutual understanding, UNESCO is steadfastly pursuing its task of promoting a culture of peace nurtured by processes of learning and the alchemy of sharing.



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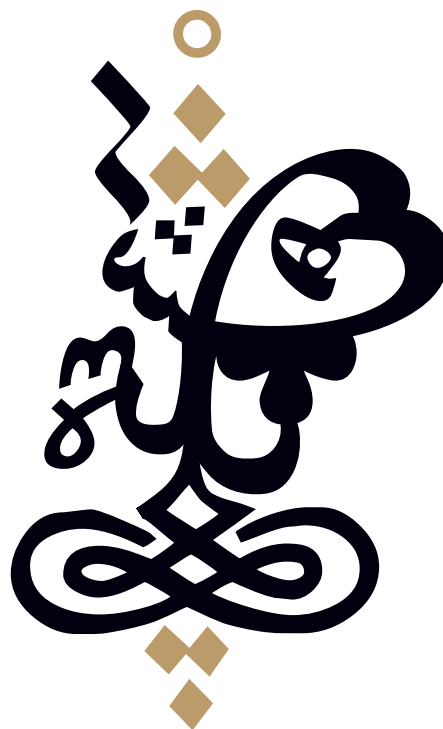
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Khaled Roumo is an educator in religious and cultural diversity. He is also a translator, teacher of Arabic, author, poet and lecturer. He is the founder and artistic director of WAJD, a world music group, and regularly runs philosophy discussions. He has published numerous works, including *Le Coran déchiffré selon l’amour* (Koutoubia, Paris, 2009) and *La Problématique foi et raison chez Ibn Khaldoun et son actualisation*, in the collective publication *Ibn Khaldun, fondation des sciences sociales* (Publisud, Paris, 2009).



PROLOGUE

The worksheets collected here represent a patient exposition of the basic intellectual, spiritual, artistic and political foundations of Arab-Muslim civilization. These worksheets concentrate on philosophy rather than history, although they reset the major intellectual figures and inventions of this civilization in the context from which they sprang.

I. RATIONALITY

This project shows that rationality is at work in the fields of learning and in human endeavour, whether political or artistic. As in other civilizations, people here have learned to coexist, build towns, ensure clean access to water and, of course, provide education. Rather than discussing a golden age associated with the medieval expansion of the Islamic world, the authors have tried to emphasize connections, exchanges and movements of people and learning. This makes it possible to compare cultures without conflating them: comparing them leads to realize that there is no special quality that places a particular civilization beyond the bounds of comparison, that cultures should not be conflated, since it must not be supposed that they all possess an abstract universal that negates difference. When Shakespeare said “I’ll teach you differences” and Montaigne indicated that his logic could be summed up by the word “distinguo” (“I distinguish”), they taught us the ultimate humanist lesson: the description of observable differences is a never-ending task.

If the achievements of a civilization can be measured by a mellowing of manners inasmuch as the civility which the latter creates results in milder punishments and an education designed to produce virtuous and well-bred people, we can assert that, with its concept of *adab*, Arab-Muslim civilization developed a form of coexistence in which utmost refinement vied with the humanist values of shared learning and the fostering of virtues. *Savoir-vivre*, *savoir-faire* and learning are all part of *adab*, which has been excellently elucidated by authors such as al-Tawhidi (tenth century) and al-Jahiz (ninth century), who were able to bring out the full flavour of knowledge by blending the pleasures of conversation at table with the rigour of confirmed learning from both the religious and the secular sciences. There is an obvious comparison with the education of a gentleman in Renaissance Europe: the same respect for learning, the same idea of fostering humanist values through knowledge, even if the methods of *adab* differ from those chosen by the scholars of the Renaissance.

II. SPIRITUALITY

Originating with the pilgrimage, travel quickly became a means for people to put their learning to the test. Going back to the source of learning, relating this learning to the almost sensory elements of its origin and establishing a line of transmission were cognitive acts implying scientific commitment during travel, so that scholars adopted the traditionalist method of passing on a linguistic message, originally used for handing down the prophetic traditions. Reading the great tradition of Arab geographers such as Ibn Battuta and al-Biruni, we can see that they pursue rationality and harbour a suspicion of myth (*ustura* in Arabic). Al-Biruni's writings and descriptions, for example, are objective and unprejudiced, and, like Herodotus, he prefers to reserve judgement and to note what he observes. This benevolence which prevents al-Biruni from making value judgements is rooted in a sagacity indicative of a profound knowledge of human nature. The sceptical humanism of Herodotus and al-Biruni is among the most effective antidotes for humankind's worst enemy: unacknowledged ignorance – the sort that is afraid to speak its name and which is responsible for so much human misery.

Travel, as we were saying, was originally associated with, although not confined to, pilgrimage. The traditionalist method was used for collecting the prophetic traditions but was not limited to this purpose. Likewise, for many philosophers, the reading of the Quran, far from being inward-looking, formed part of humankind's general quest for truth. According to al-Kindi, the pursuit of truth was a historical process in which all nations participated, and Ibn Khaldun pointed out that the sciences had been studied by followers of all religions; they had been practised by the human race ever since civilization first made its appearance. Truth is closely associated with wisdom in the Arab-Muslim world. Among the 99 names of God are "the Wise" and "the Truth". If, therefore, philosophy is wisdom, it is also a pursuit of the truth. It uses proofs to attain truths which religion presents through imagery, using parables and examples. Philosophy is thus justified by religion itself, for the holy text enjoins humankind to seek true knowledge of things. There is a historical process of truth which is sometimes embodied in religious writings and sometimes in philosophical writings. The mystics for their part emphasized that the 99 names of God were realized in human beings in the form of attributes. Every individual must rediscover these attributes in himself or herself and reveal the infinite in the finite through a corresponding ascetic effort to purify knowledge and the emotions. The philosopher's perplexity relates to knowledge of how things happen in the world and has produced all the secular sciences and methods such as medicine, agriculture, botany, logics, etc. The mystic's perplexity relates to the phenomenon of the world itself: a surprise at everything that exists, questioning the place of human beings in the cosmos and with regard to each other. In the Arab-Muslim world, mystic brotherhoods have helped to spread learning, blending in with local customs: brotherhoods in Turkey have a different organizational structure from those in Senegal. But it is always the mystery of divine transcendence that is celebrated.

While for Islamic scholars, self-knowledge entails knowledge of the divine, the methods of attaining this knowledge have differed: in the rationalist tradition of al-Farabi and Averroes (Ibn Sina), the intellect is the vehicle to this end. In the spiritual tradition inaugurated by Avicenna and which found its highest expression in Suhrawardi, knowledge of the divine implies prophetic imagination and a belief in interceding saints – in short, a theosophy in which the mind is illuminated by the divine.

III. ART, REASON AND THE BODY

Poetry plays a central role in both these systems (the rationalist and the spiritualist). Poetry for the Arabs was comparable to theatre for the Greeks: it was the form in which people related to reality in pre-Islamic Arabia. Poetic memory has thus preserved the way in which Arabs perceived and named things. Admittedly, with the arrival of Islam, poets no longer possessed the sacred authority that they had enjoyed in pagan times, but it was still poetry which, so to speak, came to the assistance of the holy text to render it more intelligible: once the written word made its appearance in civilization with the transcription and dissemination of the holy word, scholars sought to preserve the ancient richness of the Arabic language amassed in poetry, knowledge of which was essential to an understanding of the holy texts themselves (the Quran and the prophetic traditions).

Philosophers participated in this debate. They understood that the type of education they value so highly – reconciling the Greek philosophers with each other and accommodating them to the holy text – could not be achieved without poetic imagery. Such imagery made the abstract nature of the proof more tangible and thus reached a wider audience. The holy text itself contained parables and examples in verse form. Thus the logics inherited from Aristotle would be extended to the tangible forms of imagery and rhetorical persuasion. Judgment

and reasoning certainly produced assent, but this assent could take the form of rhetorical satisfaction if the proofs put forward were elliptical. A reading of the holy text required premises from science and philosophy to restore the meaning which poetry by itself could present only in encrypted and esoteric form. Or else, using a very different method inspired by mysticism, meditation might occur in verse as in the case of Muhammad Iqbal, a twentieth-century philosopher in what was to become Pakistan. It could also take the poetic form of folk expression, as in the case of Nasruddin Hodja, who represents a tradition (both oral and written) rather than a person as such, and it is from this tradition that he draws his strength, since he offers lessons in the school of life rather than playing the fossilized hero. Even his name changes. Owing to his fame around the Mediterranean and beyond, including outside the Islamic world, he has been given a variety of names: Djuha in North Africa, Afandi in China, Nasradhin Chotzas in Greece, and Hersch'le in Israel. The stories that he tells are instructive and effective. Their seeming levity reveals and conceals a deep understanding of reality, even if it is easy to remain with an outward and superficial reading.

This concern for education in tangible forms is apparent in architecture. The holy nature of the Arabic language, through which the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, means that calligraphy has inevitably been a major feature of Islamic art. This art is further distinguished in large part by geometric abstraction, which becomes a symbolic vehicle of divine expression. Ornamentation in the form of abstraction is thus a reflection of God, who is invisible yet present in all things. By extension, it is an expression of his beauty. The spiritual comes together with everyday life to glorify God in the extreme.

The mosque is the most symbolic element of Islamic architecture; it fulfils an important educational role, since it is not only a place of prayer but also a place where learning is imparted. People come a long way to listen to a particular *shaikh* who gathers a few followers to explain an obscure passage of the Quran or a prophetic tradition. The mosque fulfils the same function in Arab-Muslim civilization as the gymnasium in Greek culture: a multi-purpose space revolving round educational activities. The mosque is surrounded by buildings which together form a significant whole: the madrasa or Quranic school, the hospital, the hospice, the souk and the hammam. Both mind and body are thus encouraged to grow.

IV. SCIENTIFIC LEARNING

While there was a return to the learning of Latin and Greek during the Renaissance, Arab scholars of the Middle Ages gained their knowledge of the "Ancients" (particularly the Greeks) through extensive engagement with translation. Thus an army of scholars came together to translate texts on medicine, philosophy, astronomy, etc. The Arabic language was fast enriched by these translations, since translating into a language extends the latter's lexicon and range of meanings. The caliphs themselves were aware that their authority not only needed intellectual influence but also required the arts and sciences to flourish if they were to remain in power. Cities such as Baghdad, Fez, Cairo and Kairouan were able to develop only thanks to the joint knowledge of the "engineers" of the time, who used to master ancient forms of irrigation, together with water supply and farming methods to improve crops – all matters that had impelled scholars to collect the learning of the Ancients.

Whether owing to exchanges across the Mediterranean or translations of the medieval knowledge amassed by the Arabs, Arab-Muslim civilization still remains a presence in Europe today: a body of pronouncements that have been discussed and criticized and are now anonymous because of their success. It has been said that Averroes was the spiritual father of Europe, since many conceptual distinctions present in his work have continued to pervade European learning: the unity of the intellect, for example, also technically known as the theory of monopsychism. We may also be reminded of Avicenna, with his crucial distinction between essence and existence: even today, this distinction is an important and universally used conceptual tool, now employed without any reference to the thinker who so brilliantly theorized it in the first place. In other fields, such as history, geography and the sciences, we may also call to mind Leo Africanus' *Description of Africa*, which provided sixteenth-century Europe with a better understanding of a continent that was so close and yet so little known. A new cosmography, i.e. a new representation of the world, was established thanks to Leo Africanus, who in his previous life in the service of the king of Morocco, before his capture off the coast of Carthage, had been called Hasan al-Wazzan. At the same time a new cosmology – a new representation of the heavens – originated by Copernicus was gaining ever more support.

V. LIFE IN THE CITY

The development of medicine in the classical age of Islam, together with the survival of ancient Arab, Persian and Greco-Roman traditions in the East until the Middle Ages, helped to shape the relationship between body and spirit in a special way. This was quite distinct from the relationship prevailing in Christianity, since it was free of original sin. A distinctive feature of Islamic spiritual literature is its endeavour to maintain a balance between body and spirit in which satisfaction of bodily desires may actually be the precondition for or pathway to spirituality.

Many philosophers took a medical model for political thought. Thus the body politic was likened to an individual's body and political crises to fevers. Plato's *Republic*, which is known and commented on by Arab philosophers, had associated medicine with law: two human endeavours which were necessary evils in a society unable to regulate itself. Remedies therefore had to be administered in the same way as penalties. Thus the pursuit of the virtuous city was not confined to specific customs but related rather to human beings, their dispositions and their humours. The *de facto* authorities that prevailed since the constitution of the first Muslim dynasties were usually hereditary monarchies established on the basis of military might. Political thought in the classical age developed in this context, where it had come to be recognized that *de facto* authorities were a necessary evil. It was often religious scholars who monopolized the criticism of such authority. But in the contemporary period we have also seen determined laypeople engage in such criticism. In the early nineteenth century, the European presence in Islamic societies enforced the idea of models different from those generated within these societies. A state of mental discomposure was to affect every level of society, from the political elites who saw their position seriously threatened, to the masses who saw their convictions and way of life being strongly challenged. Two terms encapsulated this situation: *Nahda* (renaissance of the language and nation) and *Islah* (religious reform). These two forms of political revolt have had a lasting effect on the social and political order and prevailing ideas. The idea that Islam might play a part with regard to the drive to secularization that the other historical religions had also experienced gained ground among authors such as Jamal-al-din al Afghani in the second half of the nineteenth century and Ali Abderraziq in the first half of the twentieth century.

The *Nahda* movement also challenged the traditional representation of the role of women in society. Statutory discrimination with regard to personal status was condemned by numerous supporters of the movement, such as Qasim Amin. A consensus was reached on education: it was to be made available to everybody, and all women should have the right to be educated. Education was then regarded as one of the mainstays of the Arab cultural renaissance: women should be able to appear in public to go to school, and later to work outside the home. Only a conservative political approach could justify isolating women in the private sphere. Today, education for girls has made good progress, and the fertility rate has diminished significantly. However, the female employment rate remains low. The interaction between social changes and women's growing contribution to the public sphere is seriously challenging the representations of their role in their societies.

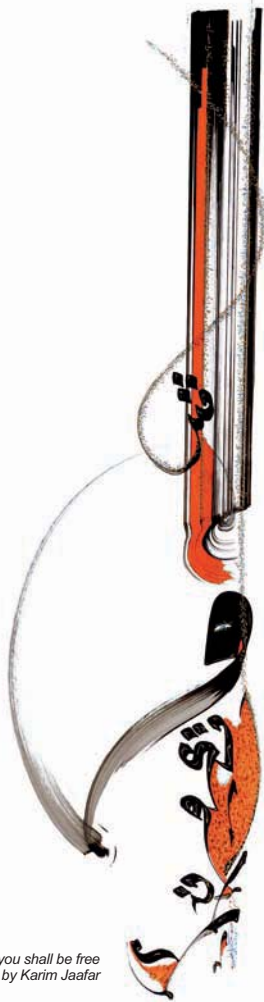
These worksheets are designed not only to promote a better understanding of Arab-Muslim civilization but also to encourage improved coexistence. Stigmatization of a culture, or a hegemony in which one culture is considered superior to another, is a phenomenon that belongs to the past. To counter such throwbacks, civilization, as we have seen, makes an invaluable contribution by mellowing manners. But this work is never-ending. It is invaluable but it is tenuous. It is like a tree that must be tended every day rather than a diamond that is sufficient unto itself.



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Scientific Coordinator
of the present publication

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- ¹ Worksheet: *The concept of civilization.*
 - ² Worksheet: *Adab and the formation of men.*
 - ³ Worksheet: *Herodotus and al-Biruni: the power of commonality.*
 - ⁴ Worksheet: *The search of the Truth.*
 - ⁵ Worksheet: *God and the worlds* and Worksheet: *The love of God in the work of philosophers and mystics. Sufism: a spiritual exercise.*
 - ⁶ Worksheet: *The modern Sufi tradition in Africa: Tierno Bokar & Amadou Hampate Ba.*
 - ⁷ Worksheet: *Self-knowledge.*
 - ⁸ Worksheet: *Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi: Eastern lights.*
 - ⁹ Worksheet: *The Arabic art of poetry.*
 - ¹⁰ Worksheet: *From demonstration to poetry: logic, the key issue in Arabic philosophy.*
 - ¹¹ Worksheet: *Muhammad Iqbal.*
 - ¹² Worksheet: *Nasruddin Hodja, a popular philosopher and master of the negative way.*
 - ¹³ Worksheet: *Art in the Arab-Muslim civilization.*
 - ¹⁴ Worksheet: *Education: sense and essence.*
 - ¹⁵ Worksheet: *Translators and transmitters of knowledge.*
 - ¹⁶ Worksheet: *Philosophy and science in Islam: a fruitful cohabitation.*
 - ¹⁷ Worksheet: *The notion of peace in Arabic Mirrors for Princes.*
 - ¹⁸ Worksheet: *Arab science: know-how, experimentation and theoretical knowledge; Worksheet: Technology in the service of progress: the example of hydraulic technologies; and Worksheet: Arab agronomy: from the science of the soil and plants to the art of the garden.*
 - ¹⁹ Worksheet: *Averroes and the interpretation of the law.*
 - ²⁰ Worksheet: *Ibn Sina's conception of wisdom.*
 - ²¹ Worksheet: *Communications and the dissemination of ideas.*
 - ²² Worksheet: *The body and the spirit in Arabic philosophy.*
 - ²³ Worksheet: *Political thinking in the Muslim world.*
 - ²⁴ Worksheet: *The Nahda: the Arab renaissance.*
 - ²⁵ Worksheet: *The great figures: Al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and al-Kawakibi.*
 - ²⁶ Worksheet: *Women's movements and women on the move in the Arab-Muslim world.*





Move on and you shall be free
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THE CONCEPT OF CIVILIZATION

CIVILITY AND CIVILIZATION ENABLE HUMAN BEINGS TO LEARN TO LIVE IN THE COMPANY OF THEIR LIKES. THE MINIMUM SHARE OF DAILY ACTIONS ENABLES ONE TO COMPARE HUMAN BEINGS WITHOUT LEVELLING THEM. THE UNIVERSAL IS NOT AN ABSTRACTION, IT IS RATHER A LEARNING IN HUMAN DIVERSITY IN THE HARMONY OF A SHARED DESTINY. AS THE WORLD WIDENS, IT IS ALL THE MORE URGENT TO KNOW AND RESPECT THE OTHERS. THE SOFTENING OF MORES IS A MAJOR ASSET IN ANY CIVILIZATIONAL ENDEAVOUR, BUT IT IS ALSO A PRECARIOUS ONE WHICH NECESSITATES A SHARED AND UNREMITTING EFFORT.

INTRODUCTION

As an introductory remark, it may be suggested that civilization is good sense, not common sense, or a set of trivial ideas or prejudices, but a coalition of cultures with different discursive practices, all interconnected: art, poetry, geography, history, philosophy and grammar. There was something similar in early twentieth-century Vienna, in tenth-century Bagdad and in Renaissance France: something civil and urban that gave birth to the dynamic word civilization, which first appeared in the writings of the Marquis de Mirabeau. Civility, the Italians' *civilità*, is a word expressing the

mellowing of manners in the form of conviviality (al Muanassa), of the shared pleasures of conversation, of courtesy and clemency. The word 'civilization' appeared recently, in the eighteenth century. Mirabeau the elder supposedly made the word famous in *L'Ami des hommes ou traité de la population* (*The Friend of Man or Treatise on Population*) in 1757, using it to refer to the way men become civil, that is the way their manners are softened. Thus, the idea of non-violence (gentleness) is part of the meaning of the word. Progress, development, propriety, the quality of the relationships

between citizens, these are the other major characteristics implied by this word. As regards the word 'civility', a word attested as early as the fourteenth century in Oresme's works, it is synonymous with courtesy and also refers to the softening of morals in cities.

In Arabic, the word *hadara* refers to urbanity as well as to civility. In the sixteenth century, Ibn Khaldun felt this word deserved a new science of its own. This was a new seed sown in the field of research that until then used to relate civility either to rhetoric or to politics and made no effort to connect the two branches: rhetoric belonged to logic – considered as reasoned practice of discourse – and politics to the field of human affairs involving will power. Henceforth, these two branches were to be made to intersect in order to show the forms of historical change affecting men and encouraging them to organize their society in a different

way: not according to a transcendence cut off from the world and from history, but through relationships among human beings involving civility on a daily basis without the discursive and political obstacles that prevent its existing. The new science Ibn Khaldun decided to promote was to bring together the object of rhetoric, that is, implanting permanent dispositions in human soul through the technique of persuasion, and the object of politics, that is, 'directing the mass toward a behaviour that will result in the preservation and permanence of the species.'¹ Once politics and rhetoric were brought together like this, civility began to be considered as a humanization issue, which some writers later interpreted as a passage from nature to culture.

The three above-mentioned examples are a quintessence of this civility to which three figures can be associated: al-Farabi (Bagdad, tenth century),



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Montaigne (Bordeaux, sixteenth century), Freud (Vienna, twentieth century). None of them lived in a golden age. The three periods during which these 'cosmopolitan souls' lived were periods of turmoil, but turmoil and tumult also imply liberty at work, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau observed in *Discours sur l'origine et l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (*Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*) 'a tumultuous liberty is better than tranquillity of servitude'. Eight caliphs were assassinated in the early tenth century, religious wars raged in sixteenth-century France and witchcraft trials were common at the time of the Indian massacre and the Great Sultan's conquests. Europe's massive entrance into the First World War occurred at the time when Europeans most believed in the progress

of humanity. Therefore, there is no question here of describing a golden age but of seeing how this working towards civilization functions when so much is in a precarious state, and of recognizing it precisely when it is in danger. That is why we must pause to survey these periods of past history in order to understand the present age, which seems to be so chaotic but which is also showing signs of this working towards civilization, which it is our duty to carry on and develop. We have to open the toolbox that history is if we want to make sense of the present and to examine carefully the first globalization movement that took place in the sixteenth-century if we want to understand the one that is now under way.



CONVERSING IN PERIODS OF UNREST: PLEASURE AND CONVIVIALITY

Al-Farabi lived in Bagdad and spent a lot of time in political and literary circles where knowledge from Persia mingled with knowledge from what was to become Mongolia and Turkey. He also frequented people belonging to various religious denominations: Jews, Christians, Nestorians, specialists of the Syriac language and translators of the Greek language. I do not intend to give pride of place to this figure of knowledge only but to talk about a galaxy of people around him or who lived just after his time like al Tawhidi, al Sijistani and Yahia abu Adi al Amiri, who all became characters in the book which is the counterpart of the *Arabian Nights* and is entitled *Al Tawhidi's Book of Pleasure and Conviviality* (*Al Imta wa al Muanasa*), a book that developed an art of conversation and which was considered as the philosophical Arabian Nights. I mean conversation and not controversy or closely argued technical discussion. Conversation is the embodiment of good sense and civility, made up of relevant and irrelevant remarks, suggestions and set phrases like 'it is said', 'as for me' and 'it seems to me', all of which make one's discourse belong half to the speaker and half to the listener. The philosophical nights produced by al Tawhidi are examples of that art of conversation consisting for example in wondering if there is any point in studying the Greeks. Are there elements in their philosophy specific to the Greek language that might cause Arabic to lose its soul? Or is it enough to carry out a few cultural transpositions in order to broaden the patterns and frameworks of thinking?

Let us come back to the cultural context of tenth-century Bagdad. Four figures stand out in this new philosophical milieu of tenth-century Bagdad: Yahia Ibn Adi (893-974), Abu Sulayman al-Sijistani (ca 912-987), Abu Hassan al-Amiri (d.992) and Abu Hayyan al Tawhidi (d.1023). In early tenth-century Bagdad,

numerous scholars had to become copyists to earn a living. In such a period of unrest, their dependence on viziers was great.

Yahia Ibn adi was a Jacobitic Christian Arab philosopher, a disciple of al-Farabi. As one of al-Farabi's students, he was not only a logician but also a translator of Syriac to Arabic as well as a copyist. Abu Sulayman al Sijistani was also a logician. He was certainly a student of Yahia ibn Adi's, but not of Matta ibn Yunus's, who translated Aristotle's *Poetics*. As from 942, there was nobody else but Ibn Adi in Bagdad since al-Farabi had left for Alep and Matta Ibn Yunus was dead. It is thought that al Sijistani settled in Bagdad around 939 and then fully dominated al-Farabi's school. Everybody who was in quest of the science of Antiquity came to his classes. Everything we know about al Sijistani was reported in *Siwan al hikma* (*Vessel of Wisdom*), the work of an unknown writer who reported al Sijistani's words. His work was not translated to Latin, which explains why it is relatively unknown. However, he belongs to that chain of philosophical transmission linking up al-Farabi and Avicenna. The circle of studies around al Sijistani was strongly influenced by Neoplatonism. To put an end to theological controversies, al Sijistani postulated that God is unknowable. This fideistic and Plotinian stance removed all theological obstacles from the field of rational work.

Another outstanding figure in this philosophical circle was al Amiri. He also belonged to what may be called al-Farabi's school. Born in Nishapur, he also moved to Bagdad and he is known for the book he wrote entitled *Happiness and its causes*: 'he uses a subtle Arabic style with abundance of Persian maxims and Greek apophthegms', and just like al Sijistani, he 'sought a Neoplatonician system suitable for his age

Other times, other places

The Islamic civilization as seen from a Western historian

Here are some short excerpts from the *History of Civilizations* written in 1963 by Fernand Braudel¹. As in his most famous work, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, he developed an analysis based on taking into account a threefold temporality: geographical time (long or even very long), social time (medium length, the states) and the time of events (short, individually experienced, the time of political history long favored by historians). It focuses on the study of the old phenomena that shape societies and seeks to create links between history and other disciplines (sociology, economics, anthropology), which often earned Braudel criticism from those who worked in these fields and accused him of subjecting these disciplines to history.

In the following excerpt he established links, in the long term, between the civilizations of the Near East that have preceded Islam.

“Civilizations take ages to be born, to settle, and to grow. It is true to say that Islam arose with Muhammad in a few short years: but the statement is also misleading and hard to understand. Christianity, likewise, was born with Christ, yet also in a sense predated Him. Without Christ or Muhammad, there would have been neither Christianity nor Islam: but each of these new religions seized upon the body of a civilization already in place, in each case breathing a soul into it. Each was able to draw upon a rich inheritance – a past, a living present, and – already – a future. Islam as a successor civilization: the Near East in new form. As Christianity inherited from the Roman Empire of which it was a prolongation, so Islam instantly took hold of the Near East, perhaps the world’s oldest crossroads of civilized humanity. The consequence was immense. Muslim civilization made its own a series of ancient geopolitical obligations, urban patterns, institutions, habits, rituals and age-old approaches to faith and to life itself... So it was not with the preaching of Muhammad, or the first decade of dazzling Muslim conquests (632-42), that the biography of Islam began. Its real origins lie deep in the immemorial history of the Near East.”

Fernand Braudel, 1995, *A History of Civilizations*, trans. by R. Mayne, London, Penguin, pp. 41, 43

Islam did not break with the Greco-Roman civilizations and the Near East, as has sometimes been said and written; it is rather a firmly established continuation. The effort to preserve, translate and disseminate the ancient texts is proof enough of it.

This civilization is marked by its geographical origin, but without it Western Europe, isolated after the barbarian invasions, would have been (even more) isolated from the rest of the world.

“... Islam dominated the Old World, determining its global destiny. It alone, as we have said, brought together the three great cultural zones of the Old World – the Far East, Europe and Black Africa. Nothing could pass between them without its consent or tacit acquiescence. It was their intermediary. ... For centuries, nevertheless, Islam alone sent Sudanese gold and black slaves to the Mediterranean, and silk, pepper, spices and pearls to Europe from the Far East. In Asia and Africa, it controlled trade with the Levant. Only from Alexandria, Aleppo, Beirut or Syrian Tripoli did Italian merchants take over.”

Ibid. pp. 62-63

Islam obviously has its peculiarities: among these, the most important is undoubtedly the language of the Quran, Arabic, which has become the first language of international communication for the Muslim world and the basis of its culture. It has given unity and coherence to a vast empire regrouping different peoples. Thanks to translations, someone who reads Arabic has access to world culture.

“... Culture gained immense advantage from this linguistic asset. The son of the famous Harun al-Rashid, Mamun (813-833), had large numbers of foreign and especially Greek works translated into Arabic. Knowledge of them spread all the more rapidly in so far as Islam very soon began using paper, which was so much cheaper than parchment. In Cordoba the Caliph el-Hakam II (961-976) was said to have a library of 400,000 manuscripts, with forty-four volumes of catalogues. Even if these figures are exaggerated, it is worth noting that the library of Charles V of France (‘Charles the Wise’, son of ‘John the Good’) contained only 900.”

Ibid. p. 72

¹ Fernand Braudel (1902-1985). After meeting Lucien Febvre, in 1937 he joins the *Ecole des Annales*, established in 1929. Imprisoned in Germany during the war, he spends these three years of captivity to prepare his thesis only by using his memory. He defends his thesis in 1947, entitled *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II*. This study marks a significant date in historiography as the author is not interested in the politics of the sovereign Philippe II, but in a geohistory centred on the study of the Mediterranean, developing an analysis based on a threefold temporality ...

and his nation.² The interest in apophtegms derives from the importance attached to desultory conversation by Abu Hayyan al Tawhidi's *Book of Pleasure and Conviviality*: speech when related to its conditions of enunciation is living speech.

Abu Hayyan al Tawhidi studied philosophy, grammar and Shafite religious law. Shafism is one of the four great schools of religious law. It prevailed in Lower Egypt, south Arabia, Iraq and South-East Asia. This school gathered together in a coherent and systematic way the fundamental bases of Muslim jurisprudence. Al Tawhidi's masters were two of the above-mentioned philosophers: Yahia ibn Adi and al Sijistani. They were al-Farabi's disciples and the main characters of al Tawhidi's *Conversations* or *Al-Muqabasat*. There are 106 of these conversations about various topics and really distinct beliefs: Muslims, Jews, Christians, Sabians compare their creeds. The author's purpose in these *Conversations* is introduced in Conversation No. 2: 'My purpose is to gather facts related to philosophy and to add others of the same kind dictated by distinguished scholars of my century and by masters of whom I was a contemporary' Protected by vizier Ibn Sadan until the latter was executed in 984, al Tawhidi turned this vizier into the main character of his *Book of Pleasure and Conviviality*, the philosophical version of the Arabian Nights during which various subjects are discussed.

This is akin to court culture, the best example of which is al Tawhidi. The Buyids' religious indifference or tolerance permitted the birth of a true philosophical spirit made up of discussions and diverging opinions aimed at training the mind rather than sectarian controversy. To paraphrase Montaigne's words: 'princes do me good enough if they do me no harm', Buyids were respectful of things of the spirit or at least indifferent to their development. In his essay 'Imamisme et littérature sous les buyides' (Imamism and literature under the Buyids), Francesco Gabrieli wrote: "*The Buyid policy towards the Abbasids was the fruit of a compromise between the Iranian princes' Shiite orientation or even affiliation and the political opportunity that suggested sparing the caliphs and the Sunni majority... All in all, even though moderate or imamite Shiism was not a state religion and kept its minority position, it became a popular doctrine in Iraq under the Buyids for many*

learned minds claiming to adhere to tashayyu hasan (a praiseworthy Shiism)... It is impossible to avoid feeling that such exceptional cultural development was not due to the freedom and relative tolerance Sunni and Shiites took advantage of".³

Abu Mohammed al Muhallabi's court (d.974) enabled many learned men to show the extent of their talent. He was a vizier of the Buyid sultan Muizz al Dawla. Miskawayh, a great man of letters from Rayy, settled in Bagdad and belonged to the generation of al-Farabi's students. According to him, this vizier, just like the one mentioned by al Tawhidi, did not only have 'the qualities of a leader'. He could also "*skillfully speak about himself; he was eloquent and inspired respect. He knew how to find money and was acquainted with the former manners of the vizierate. He was generous, brave, well-educated and spoke a pure Persian. He brought back into favour in the chancellery a great number of rules of etiquette which had died out, saved many buildings from ruin and managed to exploit resources, thus achieving great works. At the same time, he was lavish with his gifts for litterateurs and scientists; he revived forgotten branches of knowledge and praised them so as to give everybody a new taste for them*".⁴

R.Walzer observed that works by al-Farabi like *The Ideas of the Citizens of the Virtuous City* were addressed to a well-informed public even though they were not scholars: 'according to al-Farabi's own words, the book was first of all addressed to Muslims... I believe that 'secretaries', members of the administration and *kuttabs* who represented a sort of non-religious culture in the Muslim world of that period constituted most of its public'.⁵

What is to be learnt from al Tawhidi is this civility in the service of conversation, developing the humanity of those who enter into dialogue.

Conversation is the quick and lively speech that keeps language dynamic; it is to quote Montaigne, a 'sweet seasoning' that does not need to be swathed in music. In fact, it is no controversy degenerating into partisan spirit. It is a question of conversing rather than giving one's opinion. That is the spirit of civility.

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY: AN ENLARGED WORLD AND A FORM OF GLOBALIZATION

Let us now turn towards sixteenth century France to go deeper into this art of conversation. The period is just as murky: the Spaniards massacred the American Indians, civil and religious war raged in France and the Turks extended their empire. Africa wrote itself into history thanks to the testimony of Leo Africanus, Hassan al wazzan, this diplomat from Fes, captured off the coast of Carthage sold in Rome and baptized by the pope himself who gave him his name. Bodin and Montaigne did not just use Leo's examples but their scepticism made them also adopt that epistemic prudence when describing things: when Montaigne mentioned King Abd el Malik, he saluted him as a 'stoician hero'⁶ since that king was able to die in a natural manner, but this is more likely a scenario than a theoretical construction based on this example.

Whether it was Moulay Abd el Malik facing death 'without amazement but without worry' or Solyman the Magnificent who, with Roman-like grandeur, left vassal states in possession of their kingdoms, unexpected historical figures made their entrance into French literature, *via* Montaigne.

Montaigne acknowledged three excellent men, or rather the 'most excellent' among men: Homer, Alexander the Great and Epaminondas. Two of those three are glorified by the Mahometans. Is not Homer supposed to be this common ancestor claimed by 'Mahomet II, the Turkish Emperor', who wrote to Pope Pius II: "*I am amazed that the Italians should band against me, since we both have a common origin in the Trojans and, like the Italians, I have an interest in avenging the blood of Hector on the Greeks*".⁷

As for Alexander, the Arabs and then the Turks made him into a legend. At the same time, Montaigne wrote: 'The Mahometans, who despise all other biographies, accept and honour his alone by a special dispensation.'⁸

Let us pause for a moment to consider that Turkish empire of the sixteenth century. At the time when Spain colonized Central and South America and when Italy discovered Africa through the figure of Leo Africanus, Europe underwent great political changes due to the Ottoman expansion. What perception did that empire have of its frontier? How was it envisaged? Was it even envisaged?

Where was the ottoman frontier? Was it below the Ottoman-Moldavian frontier or beyond the territory of Moldavia and Valachia? Considered from the viewpoint of the Ottomans' indirect domination, these principalities were not part of the Sultan's well-guarded territories.

According to Montaigne, Solyman the Magnificent showed Roman grandeur. When he happened to colonize other peoples like the Hungarians, he left the king in his place so as to use him in bondage as the Romans used to do: "*It is likely that Solyman, whom we have seen generously giving away the kingdom of Hungary and other states, was moved more by that consideration than by the one he usually cited: namely that he was sated by so many monarchies and overburdened by such dominion*".⁹

The Sultan's territories were indeed 'well-guarded Islamic territories' but their frontier was definitely uncertain.

Until the eighteenth century, the Ottoman Sultans kept no permanent embassies abroad but sent only occasional diplomatic missions.

From 1430 onwards, the tiny state of the Republic of Ragusa (Dubrovnik today) was a tributary of the Ottoman Empire and had to pay a yearly tribute to the Sultan, in return for which it received guarantees and commercial privileges. The state of Crimea, on the shores of the Black Sea, the state of Crimea enjoyed a similar status but was in an ambiguous position: that state did not have to pay a tribute since it was Muslim; it did not have to pay *kharaj*¹⁰ and the Crimean princes received an annual pension from the Ottoman province's funds, but it was different from such provinces as Egypt or Yemen, it was a vassal state that had kept its own government and its own tribal structure. Was Crimea part of the Empire or was it outside the Empire? The Ottomans' answer fluctuated depending on circumstances.

It was only in the late eighteenth century that Turkish political writings officially recognized the fact that the empire had limits. In short, it was a triumph of realism over ideology.

In these conditions, the Ottomans were not totally invincible in conquest and this was true not only during the decline of the empire but also when the expansion was at its peak; the Turks did experience setbacks.

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- *What is hadara?*
- *What might be at the origin of the concept of “civilization”?*
- *What are the characteristics of conversation according to at-Tauhidi?*
- *To what purpose does as-Sijistani state that God is unknowable?*
- *What does Miskawaih consider to be the qualities of a good vizir?*
- *Why was Sulaiman the Magnificent a great man for Montaigne?*
- *What characterizes the borders of the Ottoman Empire?*
- *What are the two opposing dimensions in human progress?*
- *What human ambivalence is concealed by culture?*
- *What is the specificity of the work of Ibn Khaldun in the Muslim world?*
- *What are the main differences between religious discourse and political discourse?*
- *Why does Ibn Khaldun criticize the “Greek miracle”?*
- *What a differences in outlook do you see between the Western and Eastern authors mentioned?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *Is the concept of civilization outmoded?*
- *Does the concept of civility echo the more recent concept of intersubjectivity?*
- *Can concepts resolve the problems of society?*
- *What is the main function of conversation?*
- *Is it useful to acknowledge that there is something unknowable?*
- *Is it necessary to discard the concept of truth in order to converse freely?*
- *Is the art of conversation a luxury or a necessity?*
- *What are the three main causes of malaise in a civilization?*
- *Is the concept of a “Golden Age” useful or harmful?*
- *Do you, like Berque, think that there is something missing in Islamic culture?*
- *Must the universal always be the yardstick for determining what is right?*

Suggested teaching method: identifying problem areas through questions

One or more questions are chosen.

Each participant replies individually in writing to the questions chosen.

Each participant reads out his or her answers to the group. Each participant chooses a statement in which he or she sees a problem, and then devises one or more questions to be put to the author of the statement.

Each participant puts his or her question in turn to the person chosen, who responds to the problem raised.

The group determines collectively whether or not the answer is satisfactory.

A short discussion may ensue.

A new problem is raised.

The same process begins again.

If possible, begin again with other questions.

The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Simulation

- *Divide the participants into three groups.*
- *Each group represents a different fictitious country.*
- *Each group creates a fictitious name for its country, its behavioural characteristics and general attitudes in the face of conflict situations, developments in art and science, tolerance and intolerance before the diversity of religions and beliefs, its systems of governance, and its conception of civilization.*
- *Each group appoints delegates to participate in a debate on the concept of civilization.*
- *Place six chairs in the middle of the room for the delegates; the other participants form a circle around the delegates in order to observe the debate.*
- *At the end of the debate the participants describe (without explaining them) the various cultural characteristics. Discussion on factors contributing to open or closed attitudes in various fields.*
- *Asking the participants also to read the worksheet “Culture, civilization and philosophy”.*
- *Discussions and comparisons between the content of the debate and that of the two texts.*



Reflecting on the text

- > *What in the author's view is civilization?*
- > *How does Ibn Khaldun bring together rhetoric and politics to establish "urbanity"?*
- > *What distinction does the author draw between "civilization" and the "Golden Age"?*
- > *Comment and illustrate this sentence by J.J. Rousseau:
A tumultuous liberty is better than tranquillity of servitude.*
- > *Comment and illustrate: Discourse belongs half to the speaker and, half to the listener.*
- > *Can one speak of an art of conviviality when distinguishing conversation from controversy and argument?*
- > *Identify the major figures in that art.*
- > *How does the philosopher as-Sijistani avoid polemics with theologians?*
- > *Discover the thousand and one philosophical nights of tolerant dynasties and a kind of "secular culture" in the tenth century Muslim world.*
- > *Montaigne and the perception of boundaries in the sixteenth century.*
- > *Compare Freud's definition of culture with that of Lévi Strauss.*
- > *What is history in Ibn Khaldun's view?*
- > *In what way is this historian innovative?*
- > *What does history consist of in Ibn Khaldun's view?*
- > *Comment and illustrate: History in the Khaldunian manner is not the history of treaties and reigns, but of dispersions and the ups and downs of conflict.*
- > *What should one think of Europe, an empty space of sovereignty, in the author's view, and a condition of civility and of civilization?*

CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The third period took place in early twentieth-century-Vienna. Freud was amazed to see that men were so much driven by a death wish that they let all the advances brought by civilization founder in the First World War massacre. Let us start from the definition of human culture he gave in *The Future of an Illusion* to sort out the human paradox that consists in undoing what he is composed of: “Human civilization... presents, as we know, two aspects to the observer. It includes on the one hand all the knowledge and capacity that men have acquired in order to control the forces of nature and extract its wealth for the satisfaction of human needs, and, on the other hand, all the regulations necessary in order to adjust the relations of men to one another and especially the distribution of the available wealth”.¹¹

These two aspects of culture present a paradox, since if the transformation of nature has brought about progress, there is no trace of it in the management of human affairs. This fact was noted by Levi Strauss as well as by Freud; the former thought that it was precisely because of our control over nature that we were unable to get the measure of what had changed in human relations, while the latter admitted that “while mankind has made continual advances in its control over nature and may expect to make still greater ones, it is not possible to establish with certainty that a similar advance has been made in the management of human affairs; and probably at all periods, just as now once again, many people have asked themselves whether what little civilization has thus acquired is indeed worth defending at all”.¹²

One should not hastily conclude from this paradox that technical progress in the form of a control over

nature is not desirable, or that it is an obstacle to the management of human affairs. Having observed that technical progress is not necessarily accompanied by the satisfaction that we can expect from life, or by a definite improvement in human relations, we should not conclude that this progress is fanciful, vain or even harmful: “we ought to be content from the recognition of this fact to conclude that power over nature is not the only precondition of human happiness, just as it is not the only goal of cultural endeavour; we ought not to infer from it that technical progress is without value for the economics of our happiness”.¹³

There is a continuous ambivalence between two ways of considering man whose culture is overlooked: on the one hand he is denied a whole field concerned with civilization, on the other hand he is considered as a happy survival of a former golden age. In fact, this ambivalence is structural and proceeds from the same illusion. Indeed, it is well-known that the belief in a golden age or in a primitive humanity is a negation of the anthropological and of human experiences. Such a belief proceeds from “an illusion of retroactivity according to which original good is future evil contained... Golden age man and Paradise man spontaneously enjoy the fruits of an uncultivated unsolicited uncontrolled untamed nature. Neither work nor culture, such is the longing for absolute regression”.¹⁴

Civility consists in countering the golden age by undertaking the task of eradicating war (familial, civil or religious) among men, a task of great value even though it is precarious and short-lived. Ibn Khaldun understood contingency at work in history and how fragile is men’s civilising task, always in danger.



IBN KHALDUN: CIVILIZATION AS THE FRAGILE WORK OF HISTORY

Twenty-five years ago, Jacques Berque observed in his book entitled *Arabies*, that for the Arabs “*man’s life and the world’s life are so to speak put under a vacuum bell-jar into which God is supposed to blow today’s world all the time. Yes indeed, history is thought to be placed in an iron lung. Our breath, our heart-beats are permanent creations, simple atoms of duration. There is probably something of this temporality with the Arabs and in any case, with their theologians. But I suspect the theologians are expressing only a small part of reality. Or rather we are unable to hear it except by referring ourselves to the cloak of attitudes and practices enveloping them. It is true that Arab thinkers have not found their Michel Foucault yet.*” (p. 130)

Berque was naturally thinking of the predominance of theological texts, but he admitted that these texts only express a small part of reality. Some thinkers, like Ibn Khaldun, undertook to express different aspects of that reality since he combined references from historians, poets, philosophers, jurists and theologians. His texts are a mosaic and adopt by no means the unity of tone often found in the theologians’ texts. Indeed, he endeavoured to read the archives of the society he was from. Without going as far as saying that he was the Michel Foucault-like figure that Jacques Berque wished for, we may highlight the critical and genealogical part of his work, which brings him close to the philosopher of ‘the quest for knowledge’ or ‘the quest for truth’.

Ibn Khaldun underlined that history is an art through which one pays attention to the changed dispositions of past nations: “*A hidden pitfall in historiography is disregard for the fact that conditions within nations and races change with the change of periods and the passage of time... The condition of the world and of nations, their customs and sects, does not persist in the same form or in a constant manner. There are differences according to days and periods, and changes from one condition to another. Such is the case with individuals, times and cities, and it likewise happens in connection with regions and districts, periods and dynasties.*”¹⁵

This analogy between the destiny of the individuals and that of nations recalls the methodology of human sciences in which concrete individual facts become models for interpreting abstract collective facts. At the same time, this insistence on changing modes evokes what Michel Foucault called the specific: historical rationality is a rationality applied to what is specific— the specificities of politics, language and arts are all hallmarks of a given political body. This notion of change has an epistemic importance: it reveals the demiurgic part played by history; instead of considering like the theologians that God repeatedly creates the world, all we need say is that the great upheavals of history give the illusion that man is brought into existence anew (Ibn Khaldun, op. cit., p. 30). Therefore,

demiurgy can be historical. The present issue is that Ibn Khaldun, by the use of one and the same expression, is giving both an epistemic and a methodological value to the historical rationality he is bringing into play: “*When there is a general change of conditions, it is as if the entire creation had changed and the whole world had been altered, as if it were a new and repeated creation, a world brought into existence anew.*” (ibid. p. 30)

The method lies in the expression ‘as if’: we shall pretend the world is recreated, which exempts us from evoking the ‘iron lung’ and the theologians’ atomism mentioned by Berque.

History is not therefore caught up in messianism or in the reign of the end of time but in the change in human relations (*tabdil al ahwal*). History is not the unfolding of a pre-determined destiny or the story of a complete or not yet complete meaning. It takes into account the emergence of political power and the amassing of wealth and the birth of arts and sciences, bearing in mind the fact that if we are interested in the past, it is because it never really passes and it informs the present which is just like it: ‘the past is similar to what will happen like water to water’. We are not interested in the past in terms of an origin but in terms of a provenance, as M. Foucault would have it. We are also interested in its discontinuities ‘breaking the instant and dispersing the subject in a multiplicity of possible positions and functions.’¹⁶ For example, this instant of dispersion may be the period of decline of a political power. One must understand the signs: when for example a caliph starts using gold instead of copper for his swords. The historians all noted that Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs used only copper for their swords, their riding apparel ...never gold. It was the eighth caliph after al Rachid who used gold (Ibn Khaldun, op. cit. p. 22). The idea of discontinuity is essential because it places the historian face to face with the contingencies of his object.

Ibn Khaldun introduced a new manner of doing history since he refused to reduce it to the history of dynasties. For him, history was rather the history of the narratives characteristic of a given period or generation. Besides, human society was to be contextualized: as a link in the human species, it was not analysed from the point of view of a transcendent referent like God.

Ibn Khaldun did not confine himself to fieldwork or to speculation, and thus avoided sterile theories and national histories. He was driven by a concern for connections and associations and put into practice the principle according to which no art is limited to itself: poetry, history, theology, philosophy, geography are all associated to produce a so-called ‘civilization’ thinking. J. Goody described this sort of method at work and the pitfalls it avoids: “*Many anthropologists seem to be the prisoners of their refusal to implement any*

*other method than fieldwork, as they are unwilling to see how their studies are systematically linked with others. 'Local knowledge' is essential, but it should come at the beginning rather than at the end. To me, it is fundamental to integrate and compare our observations with those of other researchers, and resort to every possible method however imperfect it may be. Refusing techniques other than fieldwork and speculation, you tend to withdraw into thorough descriptions of the people you have 'appropriated', combined with groundless global assertions on the one hand and a quest for new gods on the other."*¹⁷

These new gods may be either nationalism or some extremism or other. Here lies the sophism of specificity – of the deadly resurgence in nationalism. I shall mention another type of specificity further on.

When Ibn Khaldun undertook to write the concomitant genesis of political power and of human forms of organization, he analysed a field of presence in which a civilization as language is formed in the general sense of the term, in the 'Foucauldian' sense of the term. In this sense, he distorted and disguised traditional knowledge so much so that all that could be acknowledged there was the work of the historian. Ibn Khaldun used the manner in which power emerges as

his main subject. History is made of 'everything unsaid', but also of everything unknown, and the 'gaps' cast a relative shade on what is known. As such, Ibn Khaldun denounced the privilege granted to powerful transmissions: the cultures that possessed prophets and Greek culture. Ibn Khaldun criticized the Greek miracle in the same manner as the historians who worked with M. Foucault like P. Veyne: it was pure contingency if a ninth-century-caliph (al-Mamun) committed himself to the series of translations. But history is also made of what has not been passed on like the knowledge of the Chaldeans, the Syrians, the Babylonians and the Copts (Ibn Khaldun, op. cit., p. 39). This passage links together the gaps with the system of truth as a system of power; it highlights the quest for truth, which includes contingency into the truth through the hitches in its transmission. Truth is being eternalized and universalized in historical processes due to a double oversight: the gaps have been forgotten. The gaps are a way of acknowledging the historical contingencies but also the power struggles. They are what constitutes history: 'Both the learned and the ignorant are able to understand it' (Ibn Khaldun, op. cit., p. 5).

History in the Khaldunian manner is not the history of treaties and reigns but of dispersions and the ups and downs of conflict.



CONCLUSION

Glancing at the sixteenth century through the three figures: Leo Africanus thanks to whom Africa wrote itself into history, the Ottoman Empire which reached its limits even though it was hard for the Sublime Porte to establish its frontiers, despite numerous treaties and conventions, and the figure of Montaigne and his art of conversation – an author who brings together the other two – I tried to give a general idea of the first form of globalization which raised the issue of civilization and civility in an acute way. It is through unrest and agitation and danger that salvation is sought. Civilization makes no definite drastic cuts; there is always an in-between space which is also a space for liberties and possibilities, between these frontiers, these inside-outside areas, these dominations.

The issue of civility may be neither what is common to all nor sharing the universal; the latter should somehow remain empty since emptiness is the real space of liberty. If we turn to our contemporary world, it is clear that Europe in the form of the Union is not sovereign, and yet it makes laws, which is for us an interesting testing ground. From a legal viewpoint, the very sign of legal civility is giving lighter penalties in the form of the abolition of torture or of the death

penalty. Europe has not only achieved that but has also managed to eradicate war within its borders. Europe is the empty space of sovereignty and yet this space is strong enough to oblige the states to enforce laws: it was the space in-between the *states* that was able to eradicate war. Europe is acquiring assets but still has difficulty sharing them and goes on exporting wars and producing outsiders and people with no place of their own – no longer learned hostages captured by corsairs off the coast of Tunis like Leo Africanus, but disposable men on Lampedusa Island or from the Spanish enclaves in Morocco. This space 'in-between' states, this empty sovereignty that Europe was able to establish for itself, this empty sovereignty dispensing laws can try to reconsider its frontiers or at least to act in a pragmatic way as Solyman and his successors did since they were able to introduce a free space within the system of vassality. We are lucky to have sovereignty without an empire, an empty sovereignty so to speak, but this emptiness should be reconsidered to become a condition for civility and civilization for all other countries in the world, deprived of any imperialistic aim and in accordance with ideals that are not so much restrictions to be obeyed as standards or a tool-box to reconsider today's world.

¹ Ibn Khaldun, 1967, *The Muqaddimah: an Introduction to History*, trans. by F. Rosenthal, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 39.

² J. C. Vadet, 1964, *Le souvenir de l'ancienne Perse chez le philosophe Abû al-Hassan al-âmirî*, *Arabica*, Vol. 11, p. 258.

³ F. Gabrieli, *Imâmisme et littérature sous les Buyides*, in 1970, *Le Shî'isme imâmite: Colloque de Strasbourg, 6-9 mai 1968*, Paris, PUF, pp. 106-107.

⁴ Quoted by M. Arkoun, 1988, *L'humanisme arabe*, 2nd ed., 1982, Paris, Vrin, p. 62.

⁵ R. Walzer, 1971, *Al Fârâbî, in L'éveil de la philosophie islamique*, *Revue des Etudes islamiques*, Special issue, Paris, Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner.

⁶ Quoted in O. Zhiri, 1991, *L'Afrique au miroir de l'Europe, Fortunes de Jean Léon l'Africain à la renaissance*, Genève, Droz. Reference is to Montaigne's *Essays*, II, 21: 'What man has ever

lived so far and so deep into his own death? What man ever died more on his feet! The ultimate degree of treating death courageously, and the most natural one, is to face it not only without amazement but without worry, extending the ordinary course of your life right into death'. Montaigne, 2003, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech, London, Penguin, pp. 771-772.

⁷ Montaigne, 2003, *The Complete Essays*, II, 36, op. cit., p. 852.

⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 36, p. 854.

⁹ Montaigne, 2003, *Of the Roman grandeur*, *The Complete Essays*, op. cit., II, 24, p. 780.

¹⁰ Non Muslims living in Muslim countries were called *dhimmis*, that is members of a community that had been granted a pact (*dhimma*) protecting them and allowing them to practise their faith in exchange for a tax: the payment of a capitation (*djiziya* or *kharaj*).

¹¹ Freud, 1961, *The Future of an Illusion*, in *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 21, London, The Hogarth Press, pp. 5-6.

¹² Freud, 1961, *The Future of an Illusion*, op.cit., p. 7.

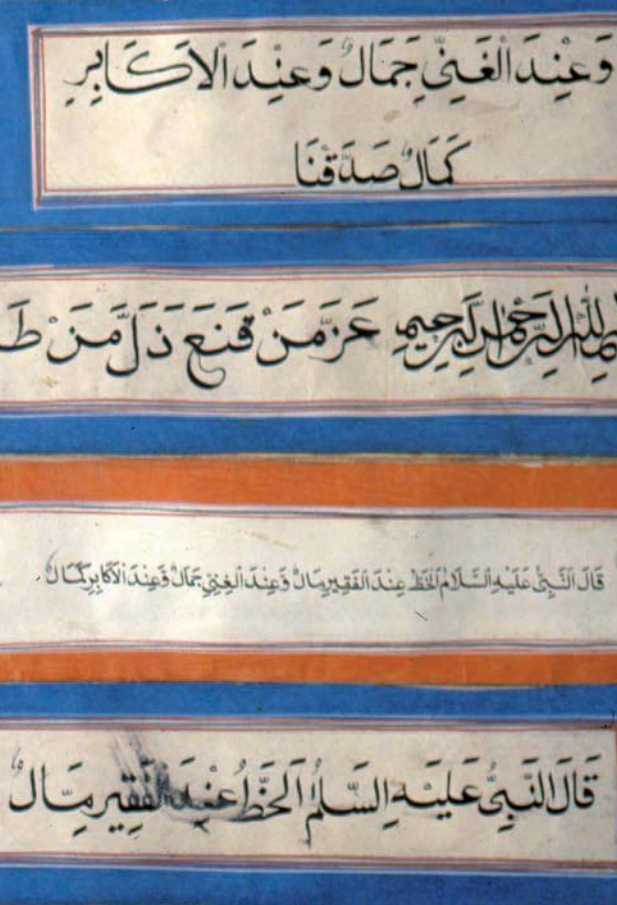
¹³ Freud, 1961, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, op. cit., p. 88.

¹⁴ See G. Canguilhem, 1966, *Le normal et le pathologique*, Paris, PUF, p. 178.

¹⁵ Ibn Khaldun, 1967, *The Muqaddimah*, op. cit., pp. 24-25.

¹⁶ M. Foucault, 1972, *The Discourse on Language*, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, New York, Pantheon Books, p. 231.

¹⁷ Jack Goody, *Beyond the Walls*, 1992.



Album of calligraphy, Turkey, 19th century © IMA/Ph. Maillard
The art of writing remains a recognized skill that was for a long time reserved for the social elites. The practice consisted of calligraphic exercises that are found in notebooks, often folded in accordion, such as this one, produced in Ottoman Turkey in the 19th century.

ADAB AND THE FORMATION OF MEN

THE WORD *ADAB* IS POLYSEMOUS. IT CAN REFER TO RULES OF CONDUCT AS WELL AS TO EDUCATION, TO BELLES-LETTRES AS WELL AS TO WISDOM, POSSIBLY TO CIVILITY OR TO KNOW-HOW. ALL THESE MEANINGS TEND TOWARDS THE NOTION OF THE FORMATION OF THE HONEST MAN, IN THE FASHION OF THE MODEL THAT PREVAILED IN EUROPE DURING THE RENAISSANCE. THE STUDY OF LITERATURE SHOULD ACTIVATE *BONHOMIE*. KNOWLEDGE *STRICTO SENSU* IS DEPENDENT ON THE ACQUISITION OF MANNERS AND KNOW-HOW.

DEFINITION OF *ADAB*

Like all the notions and concepts introduced in the classical age of Islam (seventh to fifteenth centuries), the word *adab* is rich and highly polysemous. As it could at once refer to education, rules of conduct, culture, know-how, maxims of wisdom, elegance and belles-lettres, the term seems extremely disconcerting and hard to grasp out of its contexts. What most caused this variation in meaning corresponds not so much to different historical periods as to context and usage within different literary and scientific fields. Therefore, any attempt to use a diachronic perspective to understand the evolution of this notion in the Middle-Ages is more or less bound to fail. Indeed, the word could just as well be used to refer to children's education as to the

idea of having a certain amount of general knowledge and of mastering sufficient knowledge necessary for the formation of a well-bred man. Whenever the word was used for codification or systemization purposes, *adab* became synonymous with precepts, codes and rules (ethical rules, rules of conduct, etc.), as shown by the first best-known treatises entitled *Al-Adab al-kabir* (*The Comprehensive Book of the Rules of Conduct*) and *Al-Adab al-saghir* (*The Lesser Book of Conduct*) by Ibn al-Muqaffa, which we will comment on later. A restricted use of the term derived from the desire to codify gives it the meaning 'maxims' or 'wise sayings' as in *Abad al-falasifa* by Hunayn ibn Ishaq (*The Philosophers' Maxims*).¹

Cultivated without being pedantic, well-disciplined without being narrow-minded, elegant, polite and reasonable, the *adib* embodied the ideal of Abbasid society in the ninth and tenth centuries, which went as far as possible in its questioning about man in numerous branches of knowledge (philosophy, history, science, religion). This major sense of *adab* as referring to a well-bred man's general culture appeared for example in the well-known definition according to which it means 'to take a little of everything', to dabble in all fields of culture and to be skilled in many subjects.² Those skills, which should remain general, were opposed to the type of knowledge a specialist had in one specific field like grammar, poetry, lexicography, history, rhetoric, politics, etc., hence another meaning referring to the social usage of that knowledge, in particular of historical and literary knowledge. With the development of Arabic literary prose in the eighth century, the word *adab* started to refer to the good manners that were necessary if a refined learned man wanted to be part of the literary, scientific or political elite. That development came about in response to the needs of the secretariat in the caliphate administration, and it thrived thanks to the presence of a court culture encouraging numerous scholars to vie with one another. In this sense, the plural *adab* took on a new meaning, which played a major part in the elaboration of this notion and is historically

connected with a quarrel between the Persians and the Arabs in the second and third centuries AH (eighth to ninth centuries CE). Rising to the top ranks of the administration of the caliphate thanks to their command of handwriting and in particular to their knowledge of the art of government, some men of letters of Persian origin did not hesitate to criticize the Arabs' ethnic supremacy, and to claim the Persians' cultural superiority over the new masters of the Orient. More precisely, the Arabs were accused of being deprived of *adab*, of great cultural traditions and refined skills. One of the most accomplished treatises that tackled the quarrel known as *shuubiyya* is the *Arabs' Book on the Refutation of shuubiyya* by Ibn Qutayba, an author of Persian origin himself who lived in the ninth century. By drawing attention to the fact that these attacks were prompted by envy and jealousy, he wanted to refute the central thesis that crystallized on the question of *adab*.³ Therefore, to fulfil his objective, Ibn Qutayba described pre-Islam Arabs' customs, ethical codes, acts of bravery, and he recalled their skills in the fields of hippology, astronomy, physiognomy, words of wisdom, and above all poetry, which constituted their 'national' pride. Beyond the 'ideological' core of that quarrel, it seems obvious that it had an influence on the meaning of the word *adab* as it added to it everything connected with subtlety, refinement, as opposed to coarseness of their ores and the brutality of



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their behaviour. Associated with refinement (*zarf*) and with a certain *art de vivre*, in particular in cooking and dress, *adab* exemplified the moral aspect of *zarf* more than its physical aspect with authors like the Iranian al-Washasha (*On Refinement and Refined People*) and the Tunisian al-Husri (*The Flowers of Good Manners and the Fruits of Intelligence*), since it referred to an artistic and aesthetic content, like beautiful poetry or the stories it was appropriate to quote at salons and at court. The literary content should reveal the *adib's* intelligence and subtlety, while giving him the opportunity of showing others his moral qualities and his wit, and above all entertain his friends and table companions as well as the men in high places he went around with.

Despite its polysemy, the notion of *adab* is coherent since the meanings we have just mentioned are often all jumbled together in the discourses or treatises supposedly dealing with this domain. Yet, all these meanings may be made to converge towards a focal point highlighted by three bodies of meanings. All *adab* first refers to a corpus of knowledge either relating to a socioprofessional category or enabling one to belong to it. This appears clearly through these book-titles for example: *Adab al-katib*, (*Rules for Secretaries*) by Ibn Qutayba, *adab al-qadi adab* (*Rules for Judges*) by al-Mawardi, *adab al-wizara* (*Rules for*

Ministers) by Ibn al-Khatib, *Adab al-muluk* (*Rules for Kings*) by al-Thaalabi or d'Ibn Razin al-katib, *Adab al-nadim* (*Rules for guests*) by Kushajim) etc. That knowledge, and 'belles-lettres' in particular, were to have an influence over the individual's character and play a part in his moral formation, which makes *adab* the equivalent of the Greek *paideia*. In this second body of meanings are gathered all the senses referring to the relation between nature and culture and evoking the way individuals behave, customs of such or such nation, individual or group habits (such as 'adab al-furs', the Persians' customs or traditions). Finally, insofar as that knowledge did not aim at theory or at being practiced secretly or alone, another aspect that is more of an aesthetic sort illustrates this example of *adab* through the *adib's* behaviour, speech, appearance and above all literary style, which was the embodiment of his whole self. This third meaning prevailed at the end of Islam's classical age, as can be seen in Ibn Khaldun's presentation of *adab* whose finality, according to him, is to 'handle prose and poetry properly by imitating the Arabs' models and manners'.⁴ This presentation shows that education was at the heart of *adab* and that the latter may be brought back to the major issue of man's moral formation, which, in Kant's own words, is, along with the art of government, one of the most difficult human inventions.⁵ The summary definitions assembled by al-Zabidi,

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Other times, other places

The concept of 'honest man'

'The *adab*' may be assimilated to the concept of 'honest man' that appeared in Europe in the seventeenth century and whose main characteristics were the importance given to the general culture, courtesy, sociability, moderation, the balance, etc

But contexts differences are not to be overlooked; the 'honest man' was the ideal of humanity that the courtier must achieve. It was a way of 'civilizing' the aristocracy who attended the courts of the great rulers. The honest man is often noble, if he is not, he must possess the spiritual nobility and virtues. He must be of good company, surpass his feelings and avoid self-promotion at every opportunity. To please the court, he must control his pride, master his feelings and practice altruism. This is how Molière in 'The Misanthrope' expresses through Philinte the ideal of the gentleman of the seventeenth century:

*Philinte. Let's fret less over morals, if we can,
And have some mercy on the state of man;
Let's look at it without too much austerity,
And try to view its faults without severity.
In this world virtue needs more tact than rigor;
Wisdom may be excessive in its vigor;
Perfected reason flees extremity,
And says: Be wise, but with sobriety.
The unbending virtue of the olden days
Clashes with modern times and modern ways;
Its stiff demands on mortals go too far;
We have to live with people as they are;
And the greatest folly of the human mind
Is undertaking to correct mankind.
Like you I note a hundred things a day
That might go better, done another way,
But not withstanding all that comes in view,
Men do not find me full of wrath like you;
I take men as they are, with self-control;
To suffer what they do I train my soul,
And I think whether court or town's the scene,
My calm's as philosophic as your spleen.*

Molière – *le Misanthrope act I scene I*

Molière, 1968, *The Misanthrope and Other Plays*, trans. by D. M. Frame, London, Penguin/Signet Classics, p. 27-28.



an eighteenth-century lexicographer, confirm this analysis since he said that ‘*adab* is what contributes to the education (*yataaddab*) of the cultivated man (*adib*); the reason why he was given that title was because he taught praiseworthy actions and forbade despicable actions.’⁶ However, a major difficulty in our analysis is to establish the concrete link between the ethical sense of *adab* and its aesthetic meaning. Admittedly, a certain evolution in the notion of *adab* may be postulated, since according to C.-A. Nallino, it apparently had an aesthetic and ‘literary’ meaning and started to refer to elegance, distinction, refinement, spiritual pleasures in the third to ninth centuries, while previously it apparently only had an ethical meaning and referred to good conduct and the imitation of praiseworthy habits. However, the historicist explanation tells us more about with the evolution of Arab-Muslim societies than with the philosophical content of this notion. In fact, the point is not so much the emergence of a new meaning of *adab* replacing the old one as the birth of a very strong trend towards artistic and literary refinement, which added nuances to the issue of the well-bred man’s formation and education. To solve this difficulty, we are inclined to favour the hypothesis according to which ethics and aesthetics are inseparable and the contemporary meaning of *adab* which is at once ‘literature’ and ‘politeness’ corresponds to those overlapping meanings existing in the Middle-Ages, which allows us to emphasize the continuity between the old meanings

and the modern meanings rather than on the strong differences between them. However, it is necessary to explain how and where ethics meets aesthetics. In our opinion it is rhetoric that is the meeting point par excellence for the different meanings of *adab*. Indeed, insofar as a good education required a command of the art of eloquence and of persuasion, it is obvious that the development of the individual’s taste for literature and of his artistic sensibility through constant appeals to his imagination greatly contributed to orienting education towards an aesthetic sense. This sense, as shown by al-Washsha’s book *On Refinement and Refined People* and al-Asfahani’s *Book of Songs*, may lead to a love of singing and music and to a greater importance being attached to the individual’s appearance and elegance, from a physical as well as from a moral point of view, not to mention the increasing focus on the form and style of the wise sayings and maxims of wisdom. That explanation, which considers the art of eloquence as the meeting point of ethics and aesthetics, can be supported by a remark made by Ibn al-Muqaffa, who had been considered by the Ancients as a master in the field of *adab* both in its aesthetic sense of the term, as he was one of the greatest masters of Arabic literary prose, and in its ethical sense, since his treatises were mainly about parenethics.⁷ Indeed, according to him, ‘education (*adab*) is carried out through the art of discourse (*mantiq*)’ and ‘the art of discourse is all a question of learning.’⁸

REASON AS AN INSTRUMENT OF ADAB

A very strong link between *adab* and character can be detected as early as the pre-Islamic period in some poetic lines written in praise of education because thanks to it the individual could interiorize praiseworthy qualities and turn them into second nature, a habitus allowing him to act spontaneously in accordance with good manners. One of the poets of that period wrote in the mode of conceit: “*This was the way I had been educated (uddibtu), so much so that it had become part of my character. In fact, education (adab) is the key to good manners*”.⁹

While these lines draw attention to how hard it is to follow usage and manners – which is what the use of the intensive form ‘*addaba*’ (educating, forming) reveals – they show how *adab* was at the heart of the Arabs’ ethical code before Islam and before the introduction of the secretariat which codified its expression and developed its analysis from the art of literary prose.¹⁰ As it is the key to a happy disposition, which maintains

morals and perpetuates them, ‘*adab* is something you acquire through habit’ according to a well-known maxim in classical Arab culture.¹¹ Acquiring praiseworthy qualities gives man the possibility of reaching *murua*, a fundamental notion in the Arab ethical system describing the qualities of the perfect man, the *vir*, who embodies humanity and benevolence. In one of the first works of literary prose, Salih Ibn Janah (half a century before the works of Ibn al-Muqaffa and of the secretaries of the Umayyad and Abbasid period) established an indestructible link between three fundamental notions: *murua* (man’s humanity), *adab* (education) and *aql* (reason).

‘Man’s humanity consists in the fact he moves away from what ruins his image and he tries to collect what improves it. There is no humanity for whoever has no education, and there is no education for whoever is not endowed with reason. Whoever believes his reason is sufficient and allows him to do without others is bereft

of reason. Indeed, reason strengthened by several other reasons, as good as it is or better than it is, is far superior to a reason which, even though it is a good one, has no guide.¹² In this definition of *adab*, reason is the means of accession to education and of reaching *al-murua*, that supreme stage of humanity. According to this definition, education commands man to follow the same track as other men before him and to do his best all along his life to acquire everything beautiful and noble mankind produced: 'There is no better tool than reason to acquire education, and there is no adornment without education' quotes Salih ibn Janah in a line of poetry.¹³ This shows that *adab* is not so much about educating or accumulating knowledge as helping the individual to rise up to that higher level (*al-murua*) allowing all moral social and political relationships between the individual and his fellow human beings. In other words, and it is also the case with the *paideia* in Greece, the point is not educating, but forming.¹⁴ However, these views about education expressed long before the Greek philosophers' works were translated do not insist solely on the forming of the philosopher or of a specific category of people; they rather concern man in general. As soon as they were expressed in the first century of Islam with Salih ibn Janah, and in the second century with Abd al-hamid al-katib and Ibn al-Muqaffa, they insisted on an individual's being open to 'what the greatest nations agree on', as al-Jahiz said.¹⁵ Man was encouraged to seek the perfection of his innate reason by acquiring the intelligence drawn from other individuals and other nations. As he wrote: "Wise men agree on the fact that innate reason and instinctive nobleness can only reach the highest level of perfection with the help of acquired reason. To illustrate the question, they used the metaphors of fire, wood, lamp and oil. Indeed instinctive reason is an instrument and acquired reason is a subject matter. *Adab* is just other men's reasons added to yours".¹⁶

The lights of reason which are being illustrated here through the metaphors of the fire and the lamp are the result of education acting on a raw material, which Arab moralists called 'innate or instinctive reason' (*al-aql al-gharizi*). Even though that innate intelligence is insufficient to rise up to the highest stage of humanity, it turns out to be necessary for acquiring knowledge and praiseworthy qualities. Thus, a dialectic develops here between reason and education, the former being the condition for the latter, and the latter the tool thanks to which the former can achieve perfection and pass from the stage of instrument to that of matter. The same metaphor of the light is used in *Kalila and Dimma* in which Ibn al-Muqaffa says that *adab* is similar to daylight, as it gives everyone possessing the sense of vision the ability to see even better, but has contrary effects on bats as it makes their sight even more defective. That metaphor reinforces the idea that *adab* needs reason to fulfil its task and if man is deprived of intelligence – as is the case with the fool – he cannot take advantage of education.¹⁷ The lights of reason are not the fruit of the

primary instrument, which is what potentially allows man to be different from an animal, but which without education, can remain ineffective and turn man into an animal. So-called acquired reason (*aql muktasab*) is shown therefore to be the result of instinctive reason, although the result is never totally achieved. Its content, although as al-Mawardi said, it can be increased or diminished, depends on two factors he analysed at length: on the one hand experience, which encourages a frequent use of reason and characterizes the careful man – *phronimos* – and on the other hand, the other intellectual faculties such as intelligence – *dhaka* – intuition – *jawdat al-hads* – sagacity – *al-fitna* – and quickness of mind – *surat al-khatir* – which enable the individual to strengthen his acquired reason by supporting instinctive reason.¹⁸

This dialectic of reason and education has been perfectly described by Salih ibn Janah through metaphors referring to politics and craftsmanship: "Let me tell you that reason is a prince and education a minister. Without the minister the prince becomes weaker, and without the prince the minister has no reason to exist. Indeed, reason and education are similar to the furbisher and the sword. When the furbisher receives a sword, he polishes it and turns it into a beautiful valuable object, ready to be used. The furbisher is education (*adab*) and the sword is reason (*al-aql*). Whenever education meets with reason it may benefit it, it may support and strengthen it and put it on the right track in the same way as the furbisher does. But if education finds no reason, nothing can be done as you can only reform what already exists. Therefore, one of two men with the same education may be by far the quickest of wit, depending on the nature and original power of reason".¹⁹

What characterizes the first metaphor of education in this passage is that it imparts education with the role of ruling, of being in power, of making the prince's rule most beautiful and glorious. From a linguistic viewpoint, the word minister (*wazir*, vizier) means to assist, to help, to be in charge of something. If *adab* obeys the commands of reason, if it carries out the dictates of the supreme authority, it alone is, through its intense work, capable of revealing the magnificence of the prince's rule. The second metaphor puts more emphasis on education as an art in the antique and medieval sense of the word, that is, as know-how, talent, mastery of certain rules whose implementation may lead to concrete and practical results that can be judged. That is the meaning of the comparison between *adab* and the furbisher who, while polishing the instrument he is holding, makes it more valuable from a material as well as aesthetic point of view. The second metaphor is all the more meaningful as the word *adab* also means 'being polished' and as nowadays the word referring to culture is 'thaqafa', a word recalling the idea of polishing, acting on a raw material, since originally it referred to the act of removing the roughness from a branch or a piece of wood, making it smooth and polishing it.

THE PRINCIPLES OF EDUCATION

This interdependence of reason and *adab* is a permanent feature of classical discourses on the formation of the individual. *Al-Adab al-saghir*, a well-known treatise by Ibn al-Muqaffa, starts on this idea, reminding us, like Salih ibn Janah, that reason 'has innate predispositions and characteristics thanks to which it accepts education (*adab*) and thanks to the latter reason improves and develops.'²⁰ This interdependence led most authors to make a description of moral qualities inspired by Islamic ethics as well as by contributions from Greek, Persian and Indian cultures. Many texts may be found on that subject systematically dealing with ethical characters and virtues, with, however, diverging intentions and different methods of composition. Such is the case with *The Comprehensive Book of the Rules*

of Conduct and *The Lesser Book of Conduct* by Ibn al-Muqaffa, *A Reform of Ethics* by Mishkawayh, and the text bearing the same title by his contemporary Yahya ibn Adiyy. It is also the case of *Characters and Manners* by Ibn Hazm or *Rules of Conduct Here Below and Hereafter* by al-Mawardi. Carrying out a study on the happy medium in virtues and research on the highest lifestyle, these writings develop *adab* in its deepest and most systematic meaning, that is, the rules of conduct that should not only be known in theory but turned into practical dispositions, rules of life. Hence the distinction between *alim* (the scholar) and *adib* (the well-bred man): that distinction is not based on the fact that the word *ilm* refers to religious knowledge and that *adab* describes profane knowledge as is claimed in some studies,²¹

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



Reflecting on the text

- > *What are the various meanings of the term adab?*
- > *In a language known for its rich lexicon, why is a single term used for so many meanings?*
- > *Compare the concepts of the adib and the "honest man" (man of integrity, virtue, gentleman) of the classical period.*
- > *Comment on the union of the three dimensions of humanity, education and reason.*
- > *How does the acquisition of adab lead to the universal?*
- > *What do you think of the saying: adab is just the reason of other people added to your own?*
- > *Define the difference and the relationship between "instinctive reason" and "acquired reason".*
- > *Which faculties support reason?*
- > *What is the difference between a scholar and an "honest man"?*
- > *Highlight elements of the moral education of a man endowed with sense in his private and public life.*
- > *What do you think of the principles of education or of government formulated by al-Jahiz, Aristotle and Hobbes?*
- > *What, according to Avicenna and Rousseau is "negative education"?*
- > *Discover the content of an Arab-Muslim education in the classical period.*
- > *Comment on the astonishingly modern teaching principles of Avicenna and Ibn Khaldun.*

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturally

Understanding the text

- Find about 20 different meanings of the term *adab*. Then propose three different terms that might possibly serve as a single translation of the term, and justify each of these choices in turn.
- What is the difference between teaching and forming, and how does the term *adab* combine the two?
- What is the difference between ethics and aesthetics, and how does *adab* combine the two?
- What is the difference between learning and reason, and how does *adab* combine the two?
- Why are pleasure and pain essential means of character formation?
- Does basic human nature tend rather to be good or to be bad?
- Have you noted a historical trend in the concept of *adab*?

Entering into dialogue with the text

- Find various meanings of the term *adab* that you consider mutually contradictory.
- Find three conceptions of education that do not seem to be in line with what you already knew about Islamic culture.
- Find three conceptions of education referred to in this text that are not in line with your own.
- Find three conceptions referred to in this text that closely resemble your conception of education.
- Have you discovered one or more ideas that you think should be more fully integrated into your conception of education?
- Have you discovered one or more ideas that make you think about your personal identity?
- What seems to you to be lacking in this text?

Suggested teaching method: **critical analysis**

The group is split up into three-person teams. One or more questions are chosen. Each team drafts a joint answer to the chosen questions. One after another, each team reads out its answers to the entire group. Each team collectively selects three answers that it wishes to criticize, and drafts its criticism. The criticisms are read out to the entire group. Each team prepares its answers to the criticisms received. The answers are read out. If possible, begin again with other questions. The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Quotation exercise

- Ask the group to read also the worksheet "Education: sense and essence".
- In subgroups, ask the participants to analyse the text individually, and then to exchange their points of view.
- Ask the participants to distinguish between the two worksheets and their characteristics.
- Ask each participant to consider and explain, in their respective subgroups, the various educational experiences that they have had with their parents and teachers.
- Compare these experiences with the texts.
- Prepare quotations on various expressions and definitions of *adab* on sheets of plasticized paper.
- Distribute four or five quotations to each group.
- Each group chooses one quotation and develops arguments in support of that quotation as an explanation of *adab*.
- Each group explains its quotation and the definition of *adab*. It illustrates by situations or examples in education.
- Discussions on the differences and similarities between the quotations.
- General discussion on educational goals, teaching models and methods, and consequences for the Arab-Muslim world.

but to the fact that the former simply refers to instruction, while the latter refers to education. This is also the reason why *aquil*, the sensible man, cannot be defined independently from *adab*, since reason can only be apparent through *adab* and experience. The formation of man, as al-Mawardi explains, requires experience or habit, and both aptitudes depend on the given branch of knowledge as well as on one's personal feelings. 'Adab', al-Mawardi says, 'is the form of reason. Give it the form you like.'²² But what exactly is the status of this rationality closely linked with education? Is it just the *ethos* of the branch of instruction helping to curb the passions of one's soul and preventing the individual from behaving like an animal, or is it the supreme ability of intellection and conceptualisation?

Both *Moral Tales* by Ibn al-Muqaffa, which in fact are only the maxims of wisdom from *Kalila and Dimna* without the accompanying narrative text and fable, try to draw the perfect portrait of *the aqil*, the sensible man. Generally speaking, the portrait describes the qualities found in the man who has managed to govern himself and who has become able to guide the conduct of those under his command. The theme of self-government (*syasat al-nafs* or *tadbir als-nafs*) boils down to ethical science and is the first part of a triptych together with domestic government and city government, constituting the totality of practical science. This roughly corresponds to the demands of *adab*, of the moral formation of man predisposing him to a successful private life at home, and to a successful public life as a citizen. The maxims in Ibn al-Muqaffa's *Moral Tales* confirm that reading: while *The Comprehensive Book of Rules of Conduct* refers to the *aqil* (the sensible man) in the third person and draws up a bible of good conduct, *The Lesser Book of Conduct* contains maxims on the relationship between friends and enemies in the field of politics, on the supreme qualities of the courtier and on the company of one's fellow men. The determination to present a systematic vision of ethics clearly emerges in the first pages of *The Lesser Book of Conduct* which is meant for the man in search of *adab* (*talib al-adab*).

It specifies that it is necessary to know the bases (*usul*) before having a good mastering of secondary points (*furu*). Thanks to that approach, *adab* is granted the status of a type of knowledge that is fundamental for tackling human relationships and learning the principles of good conduct in religious matters, physical education, courage, generosity, rhetoric and the rules relating to everyday life. Ibn al-Muqaffa specifies the objectives of his treatise by addressing the man in search of *adab* (*talib al-adab*) as follows: "I shall ask you to think about some subtle traits of character and about as many points which are difficult to understand at first sight, and which years of experience might have taught you even if you had not been aware of them. My intention is to give you the means of forming your mind to adopt the right dispositions inherent to these points before getting into bad habits. Indeed, young men tend to get caught napping by many faults which might exert their influence over them."²³

This definition of the general programme of *adab* shows it is closely connected with experience, and, as we noted above, with the figure of the *phronimos*. According to Ibn al-Muqaffa, education is only the means of hastening the acquiring of experience, which is supposed to increase with the years and one's own experiences. However, as al-Farabi explains in *Epistle on the Intellect*, experience is a fundamental element of practical rationality and of the distinctive qualities of the careful man.²⁴ Besides, in his presentation of the different meanings of the word 'reason', al-Farabi emphasizes the fact that in Islamic culture, the meaning of 'sensible man' essentially corresponds to Aristotle's meaning in Book six of *The Nichomachean Ethics* concerning the *phronimos*.²⁵ Therefore, it seems clear that the supreme objective of *adab* is to train man to acquire the practical wisdom predisposing him to have a sound judgement and to be a good ruler, especially when he holds a position of political responsibility (administrative secretary, adviser to the prince, minister, judge, governor of a province, etc.)

Another text written by al-Jahiz a century later confirms this reading. In *On Life in Here Below and Hereafter*, he examines the question of the bases of *adab* and explains that his predecessors did not fully grasp these bases. Al-Jahiz said predecessors but this is a half-veiled allusion to Ibn al-Muqaffa from whom he tried to stand aloof by introducing the question of self-government and government in general.²⁶ The main difference between the Jahizian approach and Ibn al-Muqaffa's lies in the fact that the former related men's character to two fundamental principles: to seek what is useful and to avoid doing harm. In fact, in accordance with these principles, all men have a natural tendency to "enjoy resting, an easy life, accumulating riches, glory, power, domination, novelty as well as refinement and all that delights the senses like fine shows, sweet smells, exquisite dishes, delightful voices and the delectable feel of things. Men's nature hates the opposite of what I have just described."²⁷

In order to be able to live together, they need an education (*tadib*) based on order and defence, which cannot be effective without those two traits of their character that prompt them to act and to inspire fear.²⁸ Then, according to al-Jahiz, it was through these two principles (inspiring fear and using the threat of punishment) that God made men obey Him and that is why they are valid principles for ruling and leading men. 'Hope and fear', al-Jahiz concludes, 'are the basis of all government (*tadbir*) and the key to all politics (*siyasa*), whether

"comprehensive" or "lesser"²⁹. Al-Jahiz's originality when he is compared to Ibn al-Muqaffa lies in the fact that he tried to associate the principles of education with the notions of hope and fear. In fact, Aristotle already mentioned that point in *The Nicomachean Ethics* when he wrote that 'young people need to be educated through the use of pain and pleasure'³⁰. However, al-Jahiz's idea goes further than the question of the methods used in matters of education; it also touches upon the relation between the here below and the hereafter, the principles of conduct in this life and the question of celestial reward or punishment. Actually, al-Jahiz stresses in a preceding passage that the rules of conduct (*adab*) are valid for the hereafter as well as for the here below and that the Day of Judgement is nothing but the consequence of one's conduct here below³¹. Therefore, what guarantees the individual's salvation hereafter is the exemplary nature of his moral conduct here below, and men cannot be induced to attain moral perfection without the two principles God resorted to so as to make people obey Him and prevent them from disobeying Him. While secularizing these two principles, like Hobbes who insisted that reward and punishment are like 'as it were, the nerves and tendons that move the joints and limbs of a commonwealth'³², al-Jahiz associates ethics and noetic theory, politics and metaphysics. Any Prince with the ambition of ruling men correctly and ensuring their salvation, any teacher wishing to instil virtues into children would therefore take these two principles into account.





THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN

As al-Mawardi remarked, education involves two aspects: the first concerns the work carried out by the tutor, the master or the parents with the boy, while the second refers to self-government, which is necessary and concerns not only the young but also adults, since it accompanies the individual all along his life.³³ The continuity between the two aspects may be noticed in the treatises devoted to the question of good conduct or of government in general. Written by philosophers or political thinkers, the short treatises, often entitled *On Politics* or *On Government*, tackle the issue of children's education within the more general set of problems relating to government. These problems concern personal ethics, the ethics defining relations with one's relatives, wives, children, slaves, and the civil government. The inclusion of this issue within a general framework defining the art of government betrays the continuity between the different tasks (ethical, domestic and civil), which are linked by a teleological objective aiming at helping the individual to have a successful life and at endowing him with the principles which are indispensable for the success of his action, whatever the situation he is faced with. This approach which owes a lot to the Ancients remains faithful to a general project in which the education of the child is an integral part of a theory on man and on his passions and his nature, as well as of a political theory on the role of prince as a teacher for his subjects and as the supreme authority regarding their moral formation. Inspired by a short treatise assigned to Plato entitled *Plato's Testament on the Education of Young Boys* as well as to a text by Bryson, a little-known Neo-Pythagorean, the author of a *Treatise on Domestic Government*, the works by Avicenna (*On Politics*), by Tusi (*On Ethics*) or by Ibn al-Jazzar (*On Children's Good Conduct and the Care and Attention They Require*) compile the Ancients' views about education while adding medical knowledge mainly from Galen and adapting them to the major teachings of Arab-Muslim tradition. Generally speaking in these texts, men and children are neither good nor bad by nature. However, as shown in the text ascribed to Avicenna, they insist on the fact that blameworthy morals are prompt to encroach upon and finally to overcome children's natures. *"When the child is weaned, then his education and his moral formation begin, before he is attacked or overcome by blameworthy morals or objectionable characteristics. For evil morals so quickly take over the young boy and bad habits prevail; and if any of these gain influence over him they overcome him, and then he cannot separate himself from them nor struggle against them."*³⁴

This presentation of the teacher's work is surprisingly modern since it is close to what Rousseau believed he was introducing in his novel *Emile* thanks to his method called negative education, which 'should consist not in curing the vices of the human heart – because there are none there naturally – but in preventing them from being born and in keeping tightly shut the passages through which they enter.'³⁵ Avicenna's text contains roughly the same principles, that is, virtue need not be taught but vices should be nipped in the bud: 'For the child's own good, the father should keep him away from blameworthy morals and remove bad habits from him'.³⁶ As regards disciplinary means, the text confirms the views expounded by al-Jahiz since it insists on means based on the oppositions of hope and fear, benevolence and harshness, gentleness and punishment, praise and reprimand. Even though these views remained faithful to the ideas expressed by the Greeks, and even though the master's qualities essentially corresponded to the criteria prevailing in Ancient Greece for the choice of the *Paidagogos*, it is to be noted however that the content of the teachings was typically Arab-Muslim. Indeed, it involved learning the Quran, the alphabet, fine poetry describing noble qualities, with a predilection for simple metre (like *rajaz*) and rhythms easy to remember. As soon as he mastered the Quran and had the necessary basic knowledge of the language, he was encouraged to choose a vocational training corresponding to his nature and skills. It was up to the tutor to guess the boy's preferences, his predilections and desires. This is an important point insofar as he took into account the boy's preferences, but he also tried to avoid wasting time in the educational process. Avicenna's text noted another important aspect that consisted in educating a child by other children, even more than by the master. Individual private tutoring is a most boring situation, besides the fact that it is not a very effective educational method. Being among a group of children from honourable families facilitates learning, and good manners are acquired through imitation and the spirit of competition. Besides, giving children the right to speak and allowing them to express themselves in front of an audience contributes to an internal formation of a horizontal nature since it comes from children and is aimed at children.

In the fourteenth century, Ibn Khaldun expressed the same point of view recommending that the boy's character should be taken into account, and returned to the great principles of education in Islam with a description of the teaching institutions and the contents of their teachings, and insisted on the notion of 'malaka', of habitus when learning sciences and arts is concerned. According to him, ideally, in order to be skilled in a science, you should pass through three stages of learning: the first consisting in skimming over the subject, the second in revising secondary points and tackling comprehensive/thorough explanations, and the third in an overall revision checking that no point has been misunderstood or skipped over. Thanks to this method, Ibn Khaldun may be considered as a follower of a progressive educational method, and of a gradual teaching of sciences. "When a student has acquired a habitus in some science or other, it enables him to learn other sciences, and he is eager to learn more and go further. That is how he gets a full command of science. But if he gets confused, he becomes unable to understand and he feels discouraged from learning and may turn away from science and from learning."³⁷

Through this text, Ibn Khaldun's purpose appears clearly – to avoid tiring the student with arguments he would be unable to grasp without the bases and without the use of clear examples that may gradually facilitate the understanding of abstract aspects of the subject.³⁸

However, it may be noted that with Ibn Khaldun the word *adab* started to take on the modern meaning it had from the nineteenth century onwards, when the Oriental peoples were led to choose a word to express what Western countries meant by the word 'literature' and its equivalents in other European languages. Indeed, the educational principles formulated by Ibn Khaldun more often used the word 'talim' (forming, teaching), that is associated nowadays with the word 'tarbiya' (education). Even then, *adab* was for him limited to prose and poetry, to fragments in anthologies that had to be learnt by heart in order to excel in the art of writing. The works written by the founders of *adab* like Ibn Qutayba or al-Jahiz are no longer considered as comprehensive surveys aimed at man's overall formation, but just as works of literature.³⁹

- ¹ Hunayn ibn Ishaq, 1985, *Adab al-falasifa*, Koweit, ALECSO.
- ² See that definition in Ibn Khaldun, n. d., *Al-Muqaddima*, Beirut, Dar al-jil, p. 612.
- ³ On that question, see the fundamental work by Ibn Qutayba, 1998, *Fadl al-arab wa Hanbih la ulumiha*, Abu Dhabi, Al-Majma al-thaqafi. The book is also known under the title *Kitab al-arab fi l-radd fi l-radd ala l-shu ubiyya*, [The Arabs' Book on the Refutation of Shubites].
- ⁴ Ibn Khaldun, *Al-Muqaddima*, translated by A. Cheddadi, 2002, *Le Livre des Exemples*, Paris, Gallimard, p. 1103.
- ⁵ Kant, 1900, *On Education*, trans. by A. Churton, Boston, D.C. Heath, p. 12.
- ⁶ Al-Zabidi, Taj al-arus, quoted in C-A. Nallino, 1950, *La Littérature arabe, des origines à l'époque de la dynastie umeyyade*, Paris, Maisonneuve, p. 8.
- ⁷ In the Middle Ages, to qualify somebody's art of writing, the scholars compared it with Ibn al-Muqaffa's epistles, in particular with a short text called *Al-Durra al-yatima* (The Gem), often mistaken with *Al-Adab al-kabir*, even though it is a different text.
- ⁸ Ibn al-Muqaffa, 1991, *Al-Adab al-sahgir wa l-adab al-kabir*, Sousse, Dar al-Maarif li l-tibaa wa l-nashr, p. 6.
- ⁹ Al-Marzuqi, 1991, *Sharh Diwan al-hamasa*, Beirut, Dar al-jil, Vol. 2, p. 1146.
- ¹⁰ The chapter from which these lines are drawn is entitled 'kitab al-adab' and contains all the poetry describing the Arabs' ethical code and presenting thoughts about generosity, friendship, honour, manliness, courage, family support, self-sacrifice for a noble cause, etc.
- ¹¹ See this maxim in Al-Jahiz, 1991, *Risalat al-maash wa-l maash* [On Life in the Future and Life Herebelow], in *Rasail al-Jahiz*, Beirut, Dar al-jil, Vol. 1, p. 112.
- ¹² Salih ibn Janah, *Kitab al-adab wa l-murua*, in M. Kurd-Ali, 1913, *Rasail al-bulagha*, Cairo, Dar al-kutub al-arabiyya al-kubra, p. 302.
- ¹³ Salih ibn Janah, *Kitab al-adab wa l-murua*, op. cit., p. 302.
- ¹⁴ On paideia, see W. Jaeger's classic thesis, 1988, *Paideia. La formation de l'homme grec*, Paris, Gallimard.
- ¹⁵ Al-Jahiz, 1991, *Risalat al-maash wa-l maash*, op. cit., p. 95.
- ¹⁶ Al-Mawardi, 2002, *Adab al-dunya wa l-din*, Damas-Beirut, Dar Ibn Kathir, pp. 16-24.
- ¹⁷ Ibn al-Muqaffa, 1991, *Kalila wa Dimma*, Beirut, Maktabat lubnan, p. 150. This edition contains textual variations different from that used by A. Miquel for the French translation of the text. For the passage corresponding to that latter edition, see Ibn al-Muqaffa, 1980, *Le Livre de Kalila et Dimma*, Paris, Klincksieck, p. 96.
- ¹⁸ Al-Mawardi, 2002, *Adab al-dunya wa l-din*, Damas-Beirut, Dar Ibn Kathir, pp. 16-24.
- ¹⁹ Salih ibn Janah, *Kitab al-adab wa l-murua*, in M. Kurd-Ali, 1913, *Rasail al-bulagha*, Cairo, Dar al-kutub al-arabiyya al-kubra, p. 306.
- ²⁰ Ibn al-Muqaffa, 1991, *Al-Adab al-sahgir wa l-adab al-kabir*, op. cit., p. 5.
- ²¹ This point of view is supported by C. Pellat in his article 'Adab' published in J-E Bencheikh, 2000, *Dictionnaire de littératures de langue arabe et maghrébine francophone*, Paris, PUF, p. 13.
- ²² Al-Mawardi, 2002, *Adab al-dunya wa l-din*, op. cit., p. 366.
- ²³ Ibn al-Muqaffa, *Al-Adab al-kabir*, translated by J. Tardy, 1993, *Traduction d'Al-Adab al-Kabir d'Ibn al-Muqaffa*, *Annales islamologiques*, 27, p. 185. We have removed from this quotation the words that were between brackets in the article.
- ²⁴ Al-Farabi, 1938, *Risalat fi l-aql*, ed. by M. Bouyges, Beirut, Catholic Press, 1938, pp. 10-11.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ²⁶ The full title of the Epistle is *On Life Hereafter and Here below for Good Conduct (adab)*, on the *Government of Men and their Dealings*. It is also well-known under the title of *Kitab al-adab* (The Comprehensive Book of the Rules of Conduct), as mentioned by T. Al-Hajri, 1983, *Majmu rasail al-Jahiz*, Beirut, Dar al-nahda al-arabiyya, p. 114.
- ²⁷ Al-Jahiz, *Risalat al-maash wa-l maash*, op. cit., p. 103.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- ³⁰ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 10, 1172a 21.
- ³¹ Al-Jahiz, *Risalat al-maash wa-l maash*, op. cit., p. 99.
- ³² T. Hobbes, 2009, *Leviathan*, Oxford, OUP, p. 212.
- ³³ Al-Mawardi, 2002, *Adab al-dunya wa l-din*, op. cit., p. 367.
- ³⁴ Ibn Sina (Avicenna), 1906, *Kitab al-Siyasa*, ed. by L. Maaluf, Majallat al-Sarq (Cairo), p. 1074. See also Ibn Sina, *De la politique*, trans. by Y. Seddik in Bryson, 1995, *Ibn Sina, Penser l'Economique*, Tunis, Edition Média Com, p. 49.
- ³⁵ Rousseau, 1990, *Rousseau Judge of Jean Jacques: Dialogues*, ed. by R. Masters and C. Kelly, Dartmouth, University Press of New England, p. 23.
- ³⁶ Ibn Sina, 1906, op. cit., p. 1074.
- ³⁷ Ibn Khaldun, 2002, *Muqaddima*, op. cit., p. 1069.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1068.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1103-1104.



Vase with two handles, Spain, end of 14th century © IMA.

CULTURE, CIVILIZATION AND PHILOSOPHY

AN INCOMPLETE IMAGE OF EUROPE SHOWS IT AS ONLY INDEBTED TO GREECE AND ANCIENT ROME, WHEN IN FACT THE PART PLAYED BY THE ARAB-MUSLIM CIVILIZATION IS A GREAT ONE. BE IT THANKS TO THE EXCHANGES ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN OR TO THE TRANSLATIONS OF THE MEDIEVAL KNOWLEDGE THE ARABS HAD STORED UP, THE ARAB-MUSLIM CIVILIZATION WAS AND STILL REMAINS TODAY A FIELD OF PRESENCE FOR EUROPE. THE EXAMPLE OF LEO AFRICANUS, IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY, GIVES THE MEASURE OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE VISION OF THE WORLD IN WHICH THE ARAB WORLD TOOK PART: A NEW COSMOGRAPHY, A NEW CONFIGURATION OF THE WORLD WAS SET UP BY A SCHOLAR WHO STOOD AT THE CROSSROADS OF SEVERAL CULTURES AND WHOSE LIFE WAS EVENTFUL IN RELIGIOUS CONVERSIONS. IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, EUROPE REDISCOVERED ISLAM AND BROUGHT IT INTO FASHION, EVEN THOUGH MORE JUDGEMENTS WERE PASSED THAN OBSERVATIONS MADE.

AFRICA VERSUS EUROPE, THE EAST VERSUS THE WEST

From the historians' point of view, it is important to establish the genesis of the incomplete image of Europe, 'seen,' as Jack Goody puts it, 'as a boundary-maintaining region, a continent defined by an ancestry reaching back to Greece and Rome, and subsequently by its own religion, Christianity'. And, in an enlightening comparison with the constitution of African countries, he adds: *"The continent, like every old, and indeed new, nation, demands its exclusive history and geography, as we see from recent events in Africa where, after independence, the nations into which it was often illogically divided were defined, legitimized, in this very way. So too with Europe."*¹

This acute sense of borders is interestingly put in perspective with the way the East 'has been less certain of the boundary between the continents.'² As Gilles Veinstein notes, the Ottomans found it very difficult to define the boundaries of the Turkish empire because of the many contracts it had with neighbouring countries like Poland, the Crimea, Yemen or Egypt.

In recent years, the distributive conflict, which results in this part of the world aggregating the endemic problems of AIDS with that of access to treatment thanks to the marketing of generic medicines, requires a global political apprehension coming under international law to avoid considering Africa as a special case and contributing by this concept to an already de facto exclusion.

The recent examples of a triumph of democracy, like the end of Apartheid in South Africa,³ have given rise to what G. Tarde calls imitation by means of judicial assimilation: many countries, following the example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, want to put an end to the divisions of the past and establish places where people can speak and make their own a past that has long been 'burnt', hushed up. 'To burn the past' is the phrase used by young stowaways embarking on death boats and landing on European shores. What fate awaits these people? How can Europe define its borders when it aims at building up a common European space on the basis of the exclusion of eventual immigrants.

It is a principle of the European system of human right to allow for greater variability and interaction resulting in additional protocols and a flexibility of judgement at the national level which gives the member states room to manoeuvre individually when dealing with issues of immigration, exile, refugees but also bioethics: there is

no European consensus on birth and end-of-life issues. However, the Preamble to the European Convention of Human Rights emphasizes that the purpose of the Council of Europe is to tighten the bonds between the countries. The Convention appears to be 'living' instrument, to be interpreted in the light of the present. The formalism of each state's legal system must be transcended and the latter must be rendered applicable to cases that were hitherto not provided for. This living instrument is present in article 29:7 of the African Charter: to preserve and strengthen African cultures only if they are positive, which means that African cultures must encourage criticism of the corporal punishments and mutilations inflicted on women; the cultures must evolve. A progressive development of human rights aims at preventing European as well as African countries from 'nationalizing inhumanity'⁴ or extend the notion of enemy on the grounds of some sort of nationalism or hegemony. The experience of the International Court of Justice in the cases of Rwanda and ex-Yugoslavia deserves all our attention.



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NEW EUROPEAN KNOWLEDGE ABOUT MUSLIM AFRICA: THE COSMOGRAPHY OF HASSAN AL WAZZAN (LEO AFRICANUS)

Over the past few years, Oumelbanine Zhiri, a professor at San Diego University, California, has written two remarkable books⁵ on Leo Africanus, thus contributing largely to bringing to the public's attention a man who was a historical figure before being a character in a novel.⁶

After travelling throughout Africa, especially North Africa, Leo Africanus came to Europe, ready to describe Africa from what he has retained in his library-like memory. Refusing to describe places he had not visited, Leo Africanus privileged white Muslim Africa, where he had travelled widely. His account 'half-way between a work of descriptive geography and a travel story'⁷ is thus as much a cosmography as a testimony. Sent on diplomatic missions around Africa and the Middle East on behalf of the King of Fez, before he was caught in 1518⁸, he was a historical protagonist who tried to intersperse his accounts of events and conflicts – which sometimes took place during his missions – with personal comments, making it difficult to decide on the genre of his *Description of Africa* but making its reading all the more pleasant: "When he lacked books to describe the land, the peoples and the past of Africa, he had to rely on his memories of the people and landscapes he had seen, of the events he had lived through, and not simply on the texts he had read."⁹

Ramusio, the editor of *Description of Africa*, considered that one could no longer rely only on Ptolemy's tables to give an account of Africa: Leo Africanus' work had to be taken into account: "The reason why I gladly endeavoured this work was the observation I made when examining Ptolemy's Geography. The tables that describe Africa and the Indies are very imperfect in comparison with the great knowledge of these parts of the world available today."¹⁰

The *Description of Africa* was not only used as an important source of geographical knowledge, it 'introduced Africa into the European cultural horizon, not only in the domain of geography but in both serious and entertaining literature'.¹¹ Thus, Leo Africanus' descriptions were of interest not only to historians of

plants and historians of languages, to people curious about magic practices as well as to alchemists. In this respect, his work fully contributed to the Renaissance 'magical ontology' Alexandre Koyré speaks about in *Etudes d'histoire de la pensée scientifique*,¹² an ontology resting on total 'curiosity about facts, about the wealth of the world, the variety and multiplicity of things. Wherever a collection of facts and an accumulation of knowledge sufficed, wherever there was *no need for theory*, the sixteenth century produced wonders'.¹³ The absence of need for theory suggests that magical thinking is not tackled from the perspective of mistakes. Showing the magical and religious notions of human beings as mistakes means giving in to a need for theorization leading to an explanation which is far from clear where the description and correlation of facts would be sufficiently explicit. Wittgenstein, who had read J. G. Frazer's *Golden Bough*, an anthropological work dealing with primitive people, severely criticized Frazer's need to explain things, as it completely misled him in his analysis of magical practices: "I think one reason why the attempt to find an explanation is wrong is that we have only to put together in the right way what we know, without adding anything, and the satisfaction we are trying to get from the explanation comes of itself".¹⁴

It can certainly be said that 'Compared with the impression that what is described here makes on us, the explanation is too uncertain'.¹⁵ We must be careful to avoid producing explanations that turn out to be even cruder mythologies than what they are supposed to account for: '[Frazer's] explanations of the primitive observances are much cruder than the sense of the observances themselves'.¹⁶ Magic must be compared to magic, not to science. Moreover, someone who is skilled in ritual practices may just as well be an expert in agriculture and metallurgy. Leo Africanus gives a detailed description of Africa, but this does not stop him from spending some moments of silence at Mulai Bu Aza's tomb to ask for his protection: "My selfe being a childe, went thither on pilgrimage oftentimes with my father; as likewise being growne up to man's estate, I repaired thither as often, making supplication to be delivered from the danger of lions."¹⁷

The relationship to death is a good example of a relationship to reality which is at once magical and rational: the same Leo who goes to the Berber holy man for protection elaborates a rational meditation on death after carefully noting down the inscriptions on marble tablets in Fez' cemetery: "They lay one stone over his head and another over his feet, whereupon useth to be engraven some epitaph, with the day and yeare when the partie deceased. I my selfe bestowed much labour in gathering of epitaphes, which I saw both about Fez and in other places of Barbary; all which being set downe in a booke I gave unto the kings brother. The matter of their epitaphes is divers, some tending to consolation, and others to sorrow."¹⁸

Alexandre Koyré did not think that the Renaissance's break with the Middle Ages resulted in the emergence of a critical mind and the decline of magical thinking. He rather thought that witchcraft and magic were even more widespread during the Renaissance than during the preceding period. As they remember and magnify the numerous anecdotes concerning witchcraft in Fez as described in *The Description of Africa*, readers of the book certainly partook in the magical thinking Koyré spoke about. What is more, at the time, this magical thinking passed for science. Paracelsus, who was a contemporary of Leo, believed, as many people of his time did, 'in the transmutation of metal as well as the influence of planets'.¹⁹

Leo Africanus' description of Africa was first used as an interesting assembling of textbook cases in keeping with a comparatist method concerned only with phenomena and their correlations, without any metaphysical dimension. Describing without theorizing, without generalizing, without seeking a systematic explanation. Describing without deducing too much. Bodin, Montaigne do not only pick up examples from Leo, but, as they are sceptics, adopt the same epistemic cautiousness in their descriptions. When Montaigne speaks of King Abd al Malik, he salutes him as a 'stoic hero'²⁰ because this king was able to live his death naturally, but this sounds more like a textbook case than the reference to an example within a theoretical construction.

When Jean Bodin hailed Leo Africanus as 'the only one who after a thousand years discovered Africa, buried in miserable brutishness and forgotten by us, and revealed it to the attention of everyone',²¹ he wanted his reading to be completely in line with the tradition of those who, like Machiavelli, intended to break with the Platonic ideal of what cities ought to be like, and describe the *res politica* as it was, notably with all its violence; for republics find their origin in violence, even though it disappears afterwards to make way for a necessary political legitimacy resulting from the agree-

ment and consent between the rulers and the ruled. The violence acts committed by the king of Timbuktu, and mentioned by Leo Africanus,²² show that *The Description of Africa* provided the necessary elements to think out the origin of States. Bodin's philosophical theory is all the more substantiated as the comparatist method – or what could be called textbook cases – supplies the universal horizon without which his theory could hardly be considered valid. But this universality is not that of an abstract universal, a mind engaged in conquering the world, nor is it that of Hegelian-like theoretical constructions, but it is rather to be deduced from the confrontation between realities that have first been analysed and described in all their diversity.

Thanks to the comparatist method, a new look is cast on nature, from which all exoticism is removed, which is in fact nothing but a way of naturalizing alien cultures. The accumulation of examples on a multiplicity of subjects partakes of the will to found the diversity of the world beyond all doubt. As Montaigne put it: 'I make additions but not corrections.' What matters for the reader of Leo Africanus' book is not what is sensational or exceptional, it is the description of a continent which is as good as any other continent.

To describe is to connect, to seize an object of comparison as you would a standard, rather than take 'an a priori standpoint'.²³ Of course, restricting oneself to describing may give the impression that one does not carry the research far enough – a research that will only be considered as done with when one has come up with an explanation – but coming to terms with the absence of explanation amounts to coming to terms with the absence of systematization, which, as we know, can easily degenerate into prejudices. Description is probably not just the bottom line or the degenerate form of explanation. If we can still hear Leo Africanus' clear voice, it is because of its descriptive quality. By describing facts and doing them justice, one avoids the danger of generalizing our explanations. But describing does not mean giving up a synoptic vision – such vision is simply not an abstraction or a generality, but rather a way of 'draw[ing] lines joining the parts',²⁴ of understanding. Darwin's genius lies in synoptic vision and analytical method; it does not lie in the explanation of the transformation of species, but in establishing this transformation according to the comparative methods of embryology, palaeontology and plant observation.

Until the nineteenth century, Leo Africanus' book was of use 'to draw up the plans of all the European explorations and conquests'.²⁵ By giving Europe access to a knowledge of Africa, Leo also gave his adoptive continent the means to act upon his native one.

Insert written by Jacques Nicolaus

Other times, other places

The Saint Sever Beatus world map¹

The collection of various medieval maps of the world reveals elements that, once analyzed, allow for a better understanding of how the world and space were perceived in the western world in the Middle Ages. The medieval maps were based on the reorganization of the Roman Empire that took place during the fourth century under the rule of Diocletian. The ensuing triumph of the Christian Church gave a religious pitch to the geographers' data, making the synthesis between biblical data, travel notes and legends. Latin Europe divided the ecumene in three parts: Asia, Europe and Africa, which corresponds to the history of the world's peopling according to the Bible, by Shem, Ham and Japheth. [*And the sons of Noah, that went forth of the ark, were Shem, Ham and Japheth: and Ham is the father of Canaan. These are the three sons of Noah: and of them was the whole world overspread.* Genesis, 9, 18–19].

Like most medieval maps, the map from the Saint Sever Beatus has a religious meaning: Heaven is located in the Far East² in other words in the upper side of the map, the north is to the left and the south to the right. Jerusalem did not yet occupy the centre of the world as was the case after 1100 and until the fifteenth century, according to Saint Jerome's recommendations. *Thus saith the Lord God; This is Jerusalem: I have set it in the midst of the nations and countries that are round about her.* (Ezekiel, 5, 5)

This map was executed to illustrate the distribution of the world between the apostles for them to evangelize it.

The Holy Land naturally occupies a major location. The lands mentioned in the Bible (Middle East, Egypt) represent nearly a quarter of the lands. It is the world's mental representation that prevails in this case.

Asia corresponds to the territory that Alexander the Great occupied. Beyond Mesopotamia, the representations are succinct; it was a territory known to the Europeans only through more or less reliable accounts.

Africa is bordered by the Red Sea, which in fact corresponds to the Indian Ocean, and the Ocean. Finally, a vast Europe evokes Peutinger' map, made in the days of the Lower Empire. France is clearly represented; it is the most ancient map of it and for the greater part adopts the toponymy used by Gregory of Tours.

The Mediterranean is located at the centre; the larger islands being represented with simplified round figures.

The rivers, the widths of which are amplified, run north to south or south to north. They were the principal communication channels of the time and also served as borders.

The courses of the rivers were not well known; the Tigris and the Euphrates crossed Arabia, the Nile had its source in the Atlas.³

Legends and explanations are numerous in Asia and in Africa and, the greater the uncertainty the more developed are the historical publications and legends. Asia's riches are highlighted. Beyond the Red Sea lies an unknown territory, *quarta pars trans Oceanum interior*, left to burn under the hot sun. The text is derived from Isidore of Seville's work.

This vision of the world lasted until the great explorations that began at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Ptolemy's geography, already known to the Arabs but unknown in Occident during the Middle Ages was introduced among the circles of Florentine scholars, and Jacopo d'Angelo gave the first Latin translation of it. Then navigation requirements called for the use of more realistic maps made from proficient measuring instruments that were continually improved.

Sources: *'The Discovery of the Earth' exhibition catalogue, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1979.*

¹ A highly decorated manuscript executed on the order of Gregory de Muntaner (1020–1072), at the Abbey of Saint Sever in Gascony. The manuscript is probably older than 1060. The proximity to Spain inspired the manuscript (motifs from Arabic art, richness of the colours...)

² In his *Etymologies* (XIV, 3, 11) Isidore of Seville (ca. 570–636) locates Heaven in the Far East.

³ The source of the Nile was unknown to the European until the nineteenth century.



Reflecting on the text

- > *How can the development of human rights constitute a block to the rationalization of the “inhuman”?*
- > *What does the Renaissance owe to Leo Africanus, the scholar of Arab-Muslim culture, in respect of its discovery of Africa?*
- > *What to think, given the context, of the following principle concerning the discovery of other cultures: “the very search for an explanation is in itself a failure”?*
- > *Identify the part played by the “rational” and the “magical” in our approach to a given culture.*
- > *What, in this regard, is your view of the principle “describe without deducing too much”?*
- > *What, in the author’s view, are the virtues of comparative methodology in studying cultures?*
- > *What is “exoticism”?*
- > *The humanist Bodin considers violence to be “the origin of Republics”. What do you think?*
- > *Why should the synoptic view and the analogical method be emphasized in the study of cultures?*
- > *How are cultural prejudices produced, even by great authors (Montaigne, Rousseau, Pascal, Leibniz, etc.), and what purpose do they serve?*
- > *How can a great author’s genius and ignorance of a culture engender harmful “enormities” that prejudice the meeting of cultures (Pascal discussing Muhammad)?*
- > *What virtues does Montaigne think Islam lacks, and what virtues does he think it has?*
- > *What, according to Leibniz, is the fatum or Turkish fate?*
- > *What does Rousseau find to be positive in the politics of the “stupid Muslim”?*

ISLAM IN THE MIRROR OF PHILOSOPHY, THE RENAISSANCE AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Knowledge

How did Montaigne and Pascal come to hold the prophet Muhammad as someone who forbade the faithful to read? Montaigne does not cite his source, and Pascal may have had Montaigne as his source, as is often the case in the *Thoughts*. Rousseau may give us an indication when he writes that 'the Muslims... claim to find all the sciences in the Koran'.²⁶ However, none of the three philosophers makes the same use of this doubtful saying. In the context of Montaigne's reference, the salvation of the ignorant is glorified: 'Just as life is made more pleasant by simplicity, it is also made better and more innocent'.²⁷ And he appeals to Saint Paul, Mahomet and above all Lycurgus to testify to what he writes: *'I will not linger here over two Roman Emperors, Valentinian – a sworn enemy of knowledge and scholarship – and Licinius, who called them a poison and a plague within the body politic; nor over Mahomet who, I am told, forbade his followers to study. What we must do is to attach great weight to the authoritative example of a great man, Lycurgus.'*²⁸

Mahomet is here mentioned in good part, as being aware of the danger of the corruption of the faithful by knowledge. Rousseau took up the same theme(s) of corruption of mores as a result of the development of the arts and sciences, but for him the 'stupid Mussulman', far from abstaining from reading, contributed to the revival of the arts and sciences. The Italian Renaissance, and before it the University of Paris owe everything to the transmission of culture by the Arab-Muslims, and here we see being revived in Constantinople, the cradle of the Enlightenment and its trail of vices, 'the eternal scourge of letters'²⁹: *"The most profligate debaucheries, the most abandoned villainies, the most atrocious crimes, plots, murders, and assassinations form the warp and woof of the history of Constantinople. Such is the pure source from which have flowed to us the floods of knowledge on which the present age so prides itself."*³⁰

Pascal uses the reference found in Montaigne in a completely different way: what is hailed is no longer the simplicity of those who spurn the arts, but the merits of the Christian religion which, contrary to Mahomet's teachings, encourages reading: *'The difference between Jesus Christ and Mahomet – Mahomet was not foretold; Jesus Christ was foretold. Mahomet slew; Jesus Christ caused His own to be slain. Mahomet forbade reading; the Apostles ordered reading. In fact, the two are so opposed that if Mahomet took the way to succeed from a worldly point of view, Jesus Christ from the same point of view, took the way to perish.'* (598)³¹ This parallel of clear oppositions between Jesus Christ and Mahomet shows Mahomet as enjoying this world while Jesus Christ enjoys the next, which is the only true one according to Pascal.

Religion

How can Mahomet share human wretchedness and be a prophet of God? Pascal draws many parallels between Moses and Jesus Christ, both considered as prophets. At no point is Muhammad, or Mahomet, as the Turks call him, considered as a messenger of God. He is 'not foretold', that is not heralded, not inspired, the reasons he puts forward having 'only their own force' (594), that is to say he is a rhetor asking to be believed: 'What does he say then, that we must believe him?' The religion of which he is a messenger is thus deprived of divine 'authority' (602); without any tradition of mysteries, without morality, without felicity. '[Making] laws for themselves' and '[breaking] through so many that are so just and sacred' is a distinctive characteristic of 'the soldiers of Mahomet', and Pascal unhesitatingly compares them to 'robbers, heretics' and 'logicians' (393). In Molière's *Don Juan*, Sganarelle just says the same thing about his master, who only seems to acknowledge the (religious) law he gives himself. Don Juan is described par his servant as 'a madman, a dog, a devil, a Turk; a heretic, who believes neither in Heaven or Hell' (act I, scene 1). The word 'Turk' comes between 'devil' and 'heretic'. This helps portray the character, indeed very much of a logician, since he believes 'that two and two make four'.

Such an anathema pronounced on 'Mahometan' religion, never referred to as 'Muslim', is nowhere to be found in Montaigne's works, even though the two French philosophers often had recourse to the same examples. But they do not make use of them in the same way. The Muslims' paradise, for instance, is for Pascal (598) a sure indication that Mahomet is not God's prophet. How would he be, when he promises to take into the other world all human wretchedness deriving from senses. With these 'ridiculous clarities' he is his own judge. And he condemns himself. According to Montaigne, Mahomet describing 'a paradise decked out with tapestries and carpets, with ornaments of gold and precious stones, furnished with voluptuous nymphs of outstanding beauty, with wines and choice foods to eat' did not speak seriously, but was 'laughing at [him]'. That is, he intended to adapt better to his audience, who could easily imagine all these worldly treasures; he did not mean that such riches could be found elsewhere. He spoke like Plato describing 'the orchard of Dis, telling us of the physical pleasures and pains awaiting us'. It is for fun. It must not be read literally. How could one possibly do so, when one knows that Plato – and one could just as well say Mahomet – is the prototype of the philosopher's whose 'thoughts were all of heaven'. In fact, both Plato and Mahomet know that 'All the pleasures of mortals are mortal'.³²

Public virtues

Note that Montaigne mentioned the Turks and, more generally, the Muslims, only in reference to public virtues, not private ones. A century later, Corneille called his play 'The Cid', in reference to the name the defeated Moors had given to Rodrigue. Don Ferdinand (act IV scene 3)³³ admits that his 'power to recompense [Rodrigue] now is slight':

*But your two captive kings make recompense
Both naming you their Cid in my presence.
Since Cid in their language is lord in ours,
I'll not begrudge you all such honours.*

The recognition Rodrigue is granted not only plays a major part as a dramatic mechanism, rendering meaningless Chimene's private demand for revenge; but above all it borders on the universal by the paradoxical use of a foreign name: if the name to honour the winner is given by the loser, it cannot be vain, nor suspicious as was the name given to Rodrigue's father by the king – recognition by one's own people can always be criticized. Rodrigue's virtue is thus confirmed by the arabic name 'sidi', or 'cid', meaning 'lord' indeed, but with a stronger religious connotation than there is in 'lord'. As he confronts death, standing upright, both in the eyes of the Count and in the eyes of the Moors Rodrigue is definitely the Cid.

To die on one's feet, without the slightest cowardice, to be courageous and bravely lead one's troops into battle is what true leaders do: Montaigne mentions Selim I, sultan of Constantinople and Mulai Abd-al-Malik, the king of Fez: 'Selim I was very right, it seems to me, to say that no victories won in the leader's absence are ever unqualified', as 'the counsel and commands which bring men their glory are exclusively those which are given on the spot in the midst of the action.'³⁴ But there are several ways of looking at the example of the King of Fez. Not only does he combat on the spot, he also proves a great strategist even as his wounds are a sign of his imminent death. He continues to be aware that his life is not his own, but belongs to his people. He faces death 'without amazement [and] without worry, extending the ordinary course of [his] life right into death', with this ultimate sagacious gesture: 'holding his finger to his sealed lips (the common gesture meaning Keep quiet)', 'so that news of [his death] should not arouse despair among his troops.' The king does not only die in a glorious way, he is also careful of the way his death is announced to those whose lives depend upon him. When Rousseau elaborated a model of education in Emile, he took up the example of Montaigne's king of Morocco: the imaginary pupil, Emile, a standard of good education, will be capable of controlling suffering, just as he will know that approaching death is not death: "Even the approach of death, which is not death itself, will scarcely be felt as such; he will not die, he will be, so to speak, alive or dead and nothing more. Montaigne might say of him as he did of a certain king of Morocco, 'No man ever prolonged his life so far into death'." ³⁵

Fate

The context in this example of the king of Morocco is one of war. Neither Montaigne nor Rousseau take it up as if it was a moral code for soldiers in dire straits Far from it indeed. However, certain philosophers, like Leibniz, coined a distinctive phrase to refer to Muslims in battle: *fatum mahometanum* (Mahometan fate). The term is not to be confused with the Stoic *fatum*, and still less with the Christian *fatum*. The Mahometan *fatum* is a way for Leibniz to find a new name for the Lazy Sophism, condemned by the stoic Chrysippus, and according to which 'if the future is necessary, that which must happen will happen, whatever I may do.' This is what Leibniz calls 'fate after the Turkish fashion because it is said of the Turks that they do not shun danger or even abandon places infected with plague.'³⁶ There is no longer room for good advice or foresight. But to argue thus is to misunderstand necessity. To consider it properly is to assent to events that occur while allowing oneself to do one's utmost to deal with them according to one's abilities.

That, on the other hand, is the Stoics' *fatum* according to Leibniz, which resembles the Christian *fatum*, but only provides 'tranquillity', whereas the Christian *fatum* gives 'contentment' because 'you have to do with a good master' who 'has care for everything', so that you are not 'impart[ed] a forced patience' but true contentment. Obviously, Leibniz degraded the *fatum mahometanum* to the rank of a prejudice, which was far from being Montaigne's position. Prompted by his scepticism towards any theological justification, the latter sometimes took up clichés or prejudices but, through comparison or avowed irony, freshened them up. The Muslims are fatalistic, or so it is said. This proposition is emptied of declarative value and considered in its pragmatic sense. If, as is said, they are fatalistic, it is to better brave danger. *Fatum* is not therefore resignation, but rather acting resolutely and courageously, and with a touch of intrepidity – a feature that a 'great prince' (king Henry IV of France) does not lack: "The historians of the Turks say that this conviction that their days are numbered by the unbending decision of Fate is so widespread among the people that it manifestly is seen to give them assurance in danger. And I know a great Prince who may nobly draw some profit from it, if Fortune continues to give him a shove."³⁷

The comparatist method is used to thwart cultural particularism. Leibniz, on the other hand, thought that the Turks' resolution in battle had more to do with taking drugs than with believing in fate: "The sophism which ends in a decision to trouble oneself over nothing will haply be useful sometimes to induce certain people to face danger fearlessly. It has been applied in particular to Turkish soldiers: but it seems that hashish is a more important factor than this sophism."³⁸

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- How do Western and Eastern ideas about borders differ?
- What is specific about the approach of Leo Africanus?
- What is the specific contribution of Leo Africanus to European culture?
- What ideas does Leo Africanus develop regarding the relationship to death?
- Is Leo Africanus an idealist?
- What opposing European standpoints on Islam are described in this text?
- Find three criticisms of Islam expressed by French authors.
- What is the main virtue traditionally assigned to Muslims?
- Find three virtues attributed by French authors to Islamic culture.

Entering into dialogue with the text

- Does the approach adopted by Leo Africanus seem reliable to you as a source of knowledge?
- Do you agree with Wittgenstein that one should not attempt to explain primitive practices but simply describe them?
- Do you agree with Leo Africanus regarding his recommendations in the face of death?
- Does the lack of critical dimension in Leo Africanus seem to you to be a shortcoming?
- Do you think that the message of Islam is an incentive to knowledge or to ignorance?
- Do you consider the promise of an earthly paradise after death to be a praiseworthy conception?
- Can fatalism be regarded as a "good" philosophy?
- Can the concept of martyrdom be positive?

Suggested teaching method: **critical analysis**

The group is divided up into three-person teams.
One or more questions are chosen.
Each team drafts a single joint answer to the questions chosen.
One after the other, each team reads out its answers to the entire group.
Each team collectively selects three answers that it wishes to criticize, and writes down its criticisms.
The criticisms are read out to the entire group.
Each team prepares its answers to the criticisms it has received.
The answers are read out.
If possible, begin again with other questions.
The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Simulation

- Divide the participants into three groups.
- Each group represents a different fictitious country.
- Each group creates a fictitious name for its country, its behavioural characteristics and general attitudes in the face of conflict situations, developments in art and science, tolerance and intolerance before the diversity of religions and beliefs, its systems of governance, and its conception of civilization.
- Each group appoints delegates to participate in a debate on the concept of civilization.
- Place six chairs in the middle of the room for the delegates; the other participants form a circle around the delegates in order to observe the debate.
- At the end of the debate the participants describe (without explaining them) the various cultural characteristics. Discussion on factors contributing to open or closed attitudes in various fields.
- Ask the participants to read also the worksheet "Translators and transmitters of knowledge".
- Discussions and comparisons between the content of the debate and that of the two texts.

Are cultural differences irreducible? Do the Islamic and Christian cultures rest on heterogeneous bases? Whatever may be said, if one questions their origins, one cannot but admit that they are the same – and fictitious, i.e. resting on fiction. Montaigne acknowledges three excellent men – or rather, the ‘most excellent men’: Homer, Alexander the Great and Epaminondas. Two out of three are glorified by Mahometans. Is not Homer their common ancestor, as, according to Montaigne, Mahomet II, the Turkish Emperor, claimed in a letter to Pope Pius II: “I am amazed that the Italians should band against me, since we both have a common origin in the Trojans and, like the Italians, I have an interest in avenging the blood of Hector on the Greeks” (p. 852)? As to Alexander, he became a legend first for the Arabs, then the Turks. At the time when Montaigne wrote, ‘the Mahometans who despise all other biographies accept and honour his alone by a special dispensation’ (p. 854).

In his inaugural speech to the College de France, Jean Pierre Vernant noted how little attention was paid to the study of sacrifice, a key issue in the comparative analysis of religions. Even today we know how it is brandished on one side of the world and denied on the other: those who plant bombs are called ‘suicide bombers’ on one side of the world, ‘shahid’ on the other, i.e. kamikazes or martyrs. Yet the sacrificial dimension is present. As the Moroccan anthropologist A. Hammoudi³⁹ suggests, ‘sacrifice’ might be the common denominator of ‘martyr’ and ‘suicide bomber’. Concerning the resolution to die a vigorous death, Montaigne mentions the sect of the Assassins, a remote inspirer of today’s so called ‘terrorist’ acts: “*The Assassins, who are a people dependent on Phoenicia, are considered by the Mahometans to be sovereignly devout and pure in morals. They hold that the surest way to merit paradise is to kill someone of an opposing religion. They therefore show contempt for all personal danger and are often to be found singly or in pairs, carrying out such profitable executions at the cost of their certain death, appearing before an enemy in the midst of his troops to ‘assassinate’ him – it is from them that we have borrowed that word. Our own Count Raymond of Tripoli was killed this way in his own city.*”⁴⁰

Montaigne tells the tale but does not judge, giving this example as one among the possible variations on the resolution to die and the vigour put into it.

Politics

We saw that Rousseau thought that the softening of morals resulting from the development of the arts was inherited from the ‘stupid Mussulman’. But the ‘Mussulman’ was not always that stupid. In the days of the prophet and under his aegis, he ‘held very sane views’ essentially consisting in a necessary connection between the holy cult and the body politic. Like the pagans, Mahomet was clever enough to relate religion to the laws of the State. In both cases, ‘political war’ is also ‘theological’, and the social bond is reinforced thanks to a single power: “*Mahomet held very sane views, and linked his political system well together; and, as long as the form of his government continued under the caliphs who succeeded him, that government was indeed one, and so far good. But the Arabs, having grown prosperous, lettered, civilized, slack, and cowardly, were conquered by barbarians: the decision between the two powers began again; and, although it is less apparent among the Mahometans than among the Christians, it none the less exists, especially in the sect of Ali, and there are States, such as Persia, where it is continually making itself felt.*”⁴¹

Let us consider this passage carefully. At first reading, it might seem that Rousseau is only repeating the mythology of a golden age of Islam, around the well-guided (al Rachidun) first caliphs, as is commonly found among the radical Muslims who turns their backs on modernity, held responsible for all the scissions. But Rousseau’s argumentation is not about that. The comparison between Mahomet and the pagans who do not separate their gods from their laws on the one hand, the search for what preserves the social bond in the chapter entitled ‘Civil Religion’ on the other, show the first Islam less as a model than as an example in the history of a civil religion, a time of happy ignorance that Pascal considers as the very sign of a false religion (see above). The example of Islam finds its meaning in the comparison with the history of Christianity: when Jesus separated religion from the State, he ‘made the State no longer one, and brought about the internal divisions which have never ceased to trouble Christian peoples.’⁴² Jesus tried to revive Moses’ law, but there was no one to listen to him; he who was the ‘son of man’ roused men but not a people. Can a Christian talk of a country?

The contradiction is unsustainable: 'Christianity as a religion is entirely spiritual, occupied solely with heavenly things'.⁴³ Could one talk of Christian troops or Crusaders? *"Without disputing the valour of the Crusaders, I would point out that, far from being Christians, they were the priests' soldiery, citizens of the Church. They fought for its spiritual country, which the Church had, somehow or other, made temporal. If one interprets this correctly, it is a characteristic of paganism: as the Gospel by no means sets up to national religion, a holy war is impossible for Christians."*⁴⁴

Besides, what Rousseau writes about Mahomet brings him close to the pagan Greeks as much as to Moses: God's law is men's law. It is also interesting to see how Rousseau interprets the split between Sunni and Shiite Islam, considering it as a mere – and unavoidable – cultural development, resulting from the intermingling of Arab and Persian populations in particular.

Rousseau's analyses definitely depart from those of the so-called Enlightenment philosophers whose political viewpoint regarding Islam is mainly characterized by the denunciation of so-called 'oriental' despotism, considered as a necessary topos of political analysis. In the Persian Letters, Montesquieu sets the Eunuch up as a paradigm of this denunciation. The character is used to criticize both the subjection of Turkish and Persian women and the absurdity of the despotic regime (Letters 9, 148, 63, 64): the tyrant is like the eunuch, separated from the people and a slave to his slaves.





- ¹ J. Goody, 2004, *Islam in Europe*. Cambridge, Polity Press, p. 13.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ³ To sum up the situation in South Africa: when democracy was inaugurated in 1994, the Constituent Assembly held its session alongside a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The specificity of this political institution was a doubling up of constitutional decisions by parliamentary vote on fundamental law and by the meeting of a commission, both legitimated and mandated by a provisional constitution resulting from a remarkable compromise, a political hapax legomenon between, to put it briefly, Apartheid and the African National Congress. In other words, the nation emerged from the elaboration of the constitution on the one hand and the exposition of crimes and sufferings on the other. In other words, the nation was strengthened and the members that had been kept apart (apartheid) all became citizens of an egalitarian republic without the punishments, chastisements and crimes that usually go hand in hand with the establishment of a new regime. The works of the Commission were recorded in a *Report*.
- ⁴ As M. Delmas Marty, College de France professor, phrased it.
- ⁵ O. Zhiri, 1991, *L'Afrique au miroir de l'Europe, Fortunes de Jean Léon l'Africain à la renaissance*, Genève, Droz; 1995, *Les sillages de Jean Léon L'Africain du XIV^e au XX^e siècle*, Casablanca, Wallada.
- ⁶ A. Maalouf, 1986, *Léon l'Africain*, Paris, Lattès.
- ⁷ Zhiri, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
- ⁸ He was offered as a gift to Pope Leo X who baptized him, giving him his names and surname: Johannes Leo Medici, in 1520.
- ⁹ O. Zhiri, 'Il compositore', ou l'autobiographie éclatée de Léon l'Africain, in Benmakhoulf, A. (ed.), 2000, *Le voyage des théories*, Casablanca, Le Fenec, p. 79.
- ¹⁰ Zhiri, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
- ¹¹ Zhiri, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 106.
- ¹² A. Koyré, 1973, *Etudes d'histoire de la pensée scientifique, l'apport scientifique de la Renaissance*, Paris, Gallimard, p. 52.
- ¹³ *Ibid.* p. 52.
- ¹⁴ L. Wittgenstein, 1987, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, English trans. Rush Rhees, Brynmill Press, p. 2.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 3.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 8.
- ¹⁷ Leo Africanus, 1896, *The Description of Africa and of the Notable Things Therein Contained*, 3 Vol., English trans. J. Pory, ed. R. Brown, London, Hakluyt Society, Vol. 2, p. 405. [In both extracts from Leo's text, we have partly modernized the spelling used in the English original. Translator's note.]
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 474.
- ¹⁹ Koyré, 1971, *Mystiques, spirituels, alchimistes du XV^e siècle allemand*, Paris, Gallimard, p. 79.
- ²⁰ See Zhiri, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 144. The passage from Montaigne she refers to is in *Essays*, II, 21: 'What man has ever lived so far and so deep into his own death? What man ever died more on his feet! The ultimate degree of treating death courageously, and the most natural one, is to face it not only without amazement but without worry, extending the ordinary course of your life right into death' Montaigne, 1991, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech, London, Penguin, pp. 771-772.
- ²¹ J. Bodin, 1966, *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History* (1550), English trans. By B. Reynolds, New York, Octagon Books, p. 80.
- ²² In *The Six Books of a Commonweale*, Book 1, chap. 6, Jean Bodin refers to this episode: 'And it is not yet past seventy years that the people of Gaoga in Africa had never felt or heard of any king or lord whatsoever, until that one amongst them a traveller had in his travel seen and noted the majesty of the king of Tombut: and thereupon conceiving a desire to make himself a king also in his own country, he at first to begin withal, killed a rich merchant; and so possessed of his horses arms and merchandise, divided them amongst his near kinsfolks and friends, acquainted with his purpose; by whose aid he by force and violence subdued now some, and after others, killing the richest, and ceasing upon their goods: in such sort that his son became rich with the robberies of his father, made himself king, whose successor has so continued after him in great power, as we read in Leo of Africa. This was the beginning of the kings of Gaoga, which in short time greatly increased. And thus much concerning the beginning of Commonweales...' J. Bodin, 1606, *The Six Bookes of the Commonweale*, English trans. Richard Knolles, London, Impensis G. Bishop, pp. 47-48. For the comfort of contemporary readers, we have modernized the spelling of the English original.
- ²³ L. Wittgenstein, 1993, *Philosophical Occasions*, Indianapolis, ed. by J. C. Klagge and A. Nordmann, Hackett Publishing Company, p. 30.
- ²⁴ L. Wittgenstein, 1987, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
- ²⁵ A. Laraoui, 1982, *L'histoire du Maghreb, un essai de synthèse*, Paris, Maspero, p. 213.
- ²⁶ J.-J. Rousseau, 2001, *Letter to Beaumont, Letters Written from the Mountain and Related Writings (Collected writings of Rousseau) Vol. 9*, English trans; J. Bush; eds. C. Kelly and E. Grace, Dartmouth College, p. 149.
- ²⁷ Montaigne, 1991, *The Complete Essays*, *op. cit.*, p. 554.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ J.-J. Rousseau, 1992, *The Social Contract and the Discourses*, English trans. G.D.H. Cole, New York, Everyman, p. 2.
- ³⁰ J.-J. Rousseau, 1992, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
- ³¹ B. Pascal, 1910, *Thoughts, Letters and Minor Works*, English trans. W. F. Trotter. New York, Collier and Son. All references to Pascal's *Pensées* are to this translation. The figures refer to the number of each *Pensée*.
- ³² Montaigne, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 579.
- ³³ Reference is to the English translation by A. S. Kline, 2007.
- ³⁴ Montaigne, 1991, *op. cit.*, pp. 768-769.
- ³⁵ J.-J. Rousseau, 2000, *Emile*, English trans. B. Foxley. London, J. M. Dent, p. 113. (Everyman's Library).
- ³⁶ G. W. Leibniz, 1951, *Theodicy Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, English trans. E.M. Huggard, London, Routledge, p. 54.
- ³⁷ Montaigne, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 805.
- ³⁸ Leibniz, 1951, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
- ³⁹ During a conference on *The Meaning of History*, held in Casablanca, 8-9 April 2005.
- ⁴⁰ Montaigne, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 806.
- ⁴¹ J.-J. Rousseau, 1992, *The Social Contract and the Discourses*, English trans. G.D.H. Cole, New York, Everyman, p. 301.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 300.
- ⁴³ Rousseau, 1992, *op. cit.*, p. 304.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 306.



Heritage 2001. The Medina (Morocco) © UNESCO/Bonnier, Eric
The city of Fes in Morocco has been an essential stage in the transmission of knowledge during the past centuries. As a famous saying goes, 'if science was born in Medina, nourished in Mecca and perfected in Egypt, it is in Fes that it was transmitted.'

COMMUNICATIONS AND THE DISSEMINATION OF IDEAS

**JOURNEYING IS NOT JUST GOING FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER.
IT IS A QUEST IN WHICH MEN TURN INTO COURIERS OF KNOWLEDGE.
FIRST RELATED TO PILGRIMAGE, THE JOURNEY SOON BECAME THE MEANS BY WHICH MEN
VALIDATED THEIR KNOWLEDGE. GOING BACK TO THE SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE,
RELATING THIS KNOWLEDGE TO THE QUASI-SENSORY CONSTITUENTS OF ITS EXPRESSION,
PUTTING TOGETHER THE CHAIN OF TRANSMISSIONS: THESE ARE COGNITIVE ACTS
THAT PRESUPPOSE A SCIENTIFIC COMMITMENT DURING THE JOURNEY.
SCHOLARS RESORTED TO THAT SAME TRADITION-BASED METHOD,
WHICH WAS FOUNDED ON THE TRANSMISSION OF A LINGUISTIC MESSAGE
AND HAD ALREADY PROVED ITS WORTH IN THE TRANSMISSION OF THE PROPHET'S SAYINGS.**

PILGRIMAGE AS A FOUNDING JOURNEY

As one of the five pillars of Islam, pilgrimage soon represented more than a ritual journey. One went to Mecca to perfect not only one's religious education, but also one's knowledge, for, on the way to Mecca, there were stops and resting places in several towns where one could learn things, exchange views and confront hypotheses. The symbolism of this journey may be illustrated by an episode from the Quran: Ismail accompanies his father Abraham to Mecca, where together they build the kaaba: "*We enjoined Abraham and Ishmael, saying: Purify My House for those who visit (it) and those who abide (in it) for devotion and those who bow down (and) those who prostrate themselves.*" (Quran, 2:125). This founding moment had become an obligation for those who made the pilgrimage as well as a motivating factor for the circulation of people and ideas. The pilgrimage

was also a spiritual journey because the people who accomplished it felt transported to the kingdom where God was present to them. Such mystics as Ibn Arabi (twelfth century) spoke of a spiritual Kaaba, and in 1909, the Egyptian mystic Batanuni wrote in his *Rihla hijaziya (The Hijaz Journey)*: "*If we had not witnessed the bodies moving and the hands raised in prayer, if we had not heard the words of humility and the hearts beating before this infinite greatness, we would have believed we were transported into another existence. And in truth, we were indeed in another world: we were in the house of God and in the immediate presence of God*".¹ This 'immediate presence of God' was the burning desire of those who were called Sufis, the mystics of Islam who took the spiritual journey, the *safar*, as a central theme, by emphasizing the Prophet's night journey, from Mecca to Jerusalem.

FROM THE DESERT TO THE CITY

The notion of journeying was a fundamental constituent of Arab-Muslim civilisation: in barely one century, from 622 to 751, the whole Arabian peninsula, Syria, Iraq, Persia, Egypt, North Africa and a great part of the Iberian peninsula were incorporated into Islam by conquest; to the east, this conquest went as far as the shores of the Indus. Moreover, this nascent civilisation developed around cities, it was essentially an urban civilisation, though born of a desert, the Arabian desert: “*In Latin Europe, the centres of power were mostly castles; in Islam, they were cities. The places for education and the production of written work in Europe before the twelfth century were monasteries; they were mosques and madrasas in Islamic big cities.*”² To live in a city was to share in a life of civility and urbanity. By analogy, Avicenna compared the city to a category of thought: human beings reside in cities just as thought resides in a category. Aristotle’s ten categories are likened to ten cities: the hybrid beings or chimeras that do not belong to any of these categories are like nomads still looking for a dwelling place.

In the city, the mosque was the place par excellence where knowledge was transmitted. Disciples gathered around their master and listened to his much-travelled discourse. The University of Al Qarawiyyin (named after the people from Kairouan), in Fes, founded in 857 by a woman, Fatima al Fihri, was such a place. As the saying goes: ‘Science was sewn in Medina, flourished in Mecca, was ground in Egypt and sifted in Fes.’ This culinary metaphor of science as sifted food calls to mind the fact that savour and knowledge were indissolubly linked. The master dispensed knowledge and granted a certificate (*ijaza*). He was constantly on the move, for he had to find a patron, who might be a prince or a caliph according to circumstances. Patronage compelled him to travel. The learned people were always on the road: Averroes (1126-1198) travelled from Cordoba where he was a

cadi (judge) to Granada where he was a *cadi al qudat* (supreme judge) and to Marrakech where he died; and he didn’t end his journey there since his remains were brought back to Cordoba on a donkey’s back – his works on one side balancing his body on the other. Born in Andalusia, his near contemporary Ibn Arabi (1165-1241) travelled to the east and was buried in Damascus. Avicenna (980-1037), in the service of the Samanids, was always on the road too. Sijistani (ca 942-1000), who came from Sijistan, an eastern province of what is today Iran, joined the logical school of Yahia ibn Adi, in Baghdad, and enjoyed the company of his fellow countrymen on Fridays at the mosque in Baghdad. Al-Farabi (870-950) spent most of his time in Baghdad and Alep, although he came from neither of the two towns. Those few examples show how much journeying went hand in hand with building up knowledge in the Middle Ages.

‘Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave, seek knowledge even if it be in China’, the prophet says. According to Franz Rosenthal, the word ‘knowledge’ (*ilm*) is frequently used in the Arab-Muslim Middle Ages: “*Ilm is one of those concepts that have dominated Islam and given Muslim civilization its distinctive shape and complexion. In fact, there is no other concept that has been operative as a determinant of Muslim civilization in all its aspects to the same extent as ilm. This holds good even for the most powerful among the terms of Muslim religious life such as, for instance, tawhid ‘recognition of the oneness of God’, ad-din ‘the true religion’, and many others that are used constantly and emphatically. None of them equals ilm in depth of meaning and wide incidence of use. There is no branch of Muslim intellectual life, of Muslim religious and political life, and of the daily life of the average Muslim that remained untouched by the all-pervasive attitude toward ‘knowledge’ as something of supreme value for Muslim being.*”³

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Therefore, mosques and religious schools were places of knowledge, of *ilm*. In Egypt, the al Azhar mosque, founded in 970-971 by the Fatimids, a Shiite Ismailian dynasty, trained students who had come from all the Muslim regions to study sacred sciences: Quranic exegesis, Prophetic sayings, the sciences of *kalam* (theology) and of *fiqh* (law). Taha Hussein, the blind Egyptian writer of the early twentieth century evoked the place and rendered an atmosphere of knowledge firmly fixed in sacred and everyday life: *"The boy used to love the Azhar at this moment when worshippers were finishing their early-morning prayer and going away, with the marks of drowsiness still in their eyes, to make a circle round some column or other and wait for the teacher who was to give a lecture on tradition or exegesis, first principles or theology. At this moment the Azhar was quiet, and free from the strange intermingled murmurs that filled it from sunrise until evening prayer. You could only hear the whispered conversations of its inmates or the hushed but steady voice of some young man reciting the Koran. Or you might come upon a worshipper who had arrived too late for the common service, or had gone on to perform extra prayers after completing the statutory number."*⁴

Likewise, the madrasas or schools built near the mosques spread knowledge that could be of a secular kind: astronomy, philosophy, geometry. These schools were usually built around a central yard with an ablution

fountain. The yard was surrounded by small bedrooms on two floors. Even when it was very hot, they were fit for schooling: *"In Najaf, most madrasas are equipped with refrigerated cellars (sardab) thanks to a system of traditional ventilation. There can be several underground levels of these cellars and they are used by the students in very hot weather."*⁵

The corollary of the military and missionary conquest was the development of the Arabic language. Arabic became the language of culture, stabilized and codified by learning taking place in the city. This language became widespread among the elite, contributing to the dissemination of knowledge, so much so that, in 1492, when Christopher Columbus, who was convinced that he was going to reach Asia, where he knew Arabic was spoken, took with him Luis de Torres, *"a Jew who had recently converted to Christianity to avoid expulsion. Columbus intended to get to the court of the great Khan of China and he knew that no one would speak Latin there, even less Castilian. Hence he needed an interpreter speaking the international language of trade and erudition, namely Arabic. The inhabitants of the island of San Salvador were dumbfounded when, on the arrival of the three Spanish caravels in October 1492, they were given a speech in Arabic by Luis de Torres. The first words spoken by a European to Americans was thus the language of the Quran."*⁶

ALEXANDER, ARABIZED AND ISLAMIZED

It is commonly agreed that Alexander the Great (third century BCE) is mentioned in the Quran, in The Cave, as Dhu el qarnain, 'the one with two horns': *"Say: I will recite to you an account of him. Truly We established him in the land and granted him means of access to everything; So he followed a course. Until, when he reached the setting-place of the sun, he found it going down into a black sea, and found by it a people."* (18:83-86)

Alexander saved the mass of believers by setting up a brass barrier to protect them from the country of the fiendish monsters, Gog (*yadjudj*) and Magog (*madjudj*): *"They said: O Dhu-l-qarnain, Gog and Magog do mischief in the land. May we then pay thee tribute on condition that thou raise a barrier between us and them? He said: That wherein my Lord has established me is better, so if only you help me with strength (of men), I will make a fortified barrier between you and them: Bring me blocks of iron. At length, when he had filled up the space between the two mountain sides, he said, Blow. Till when he had made it (as) fire, he said: Bring me molten brass to pour over it. So they were not able to scale it, nor could they make a hole in it."* (18:94-97).

The myth of Alexander has the desired effect: it delimits the world of politics and trade within the reach of the Muslims: 'The Alexandrian epic is the political, military and cultural prologue necessary for a wide network facilitating the movement of men and goods throughout Eurasia.'⁷ One example of this movement is that of Chinese prisoners (as early as 751) who were silk and paper craftsmen and brought their techniques to Baghdad.

In that same sura, called The Cave, the theme of journeying is also present in another form: Moses meets a mysterious green man (*al Khidr*), a pilgrim like him, but who is gifted with the science of predestination and holds a rank which is superior to that of the prophets, almost angelic. He symbolizes divine providence, the knowledge of what is best for humanity. In his journey with Moses, he seems to play an evil role, for he sinks a boat, kills a young boy and fixes a wall, but it is the ignorant and impatient man who interprets as evil the events commanded by divine providence, which a believer must accept because they proceed from a wisdom the unbeliever has no access to.

Other times, other places

The voyages of Admiral Zheng He

In the West people sometimes forget that in the late Middle Ages (thirteenth to fourteenth century), China was a great world power, possibly the first of all. Yet one rarely talks about Chinese travellers. Their presence outside their empire is seldom mentioned.

However, there is an outstanding figure in this domain: Admiral Zheng He. Zheng He was born in southern China, in the province of Yunnan, in a *Hui* family (that is, a Muslim family).¹

A young officer noted for his qualities, he was appointed head of the largest enterprise ever carried out at that time, going on seven maritime expeditions during the reigns of two emperors, Yongle and Xuande (who ruled from 1425 to 1435). The aim of these expeditions was to reactivate trade routes and find new products but also to establish new diplomatic relations, eliminate piracy, spread the values of Chinese culture, explore new lands... and, as regards Zheng He himself, to visit Mecca during his last trip (but he died before arriving there) ...

What strikes the imagination first is the estimated gigantic size of some of the large chuan junks² (only fragments of which remain today), which were probably five times longer than the caravels of Christopher Columbus (the latter being indeed more manageable) ... Secondly, an idea that has long been taken for granted is demolished here, namely the idea that long sea voyages were an exploit carried out primarily by European sailors. Although Marco Polo had described the large size of Chinese vessels, the Genoese and the Venetians thought his descriptions were exaggerated.³

Two years after the death of Zheng He, the Emperor Xuande also died. The isolationist clan was back with a vengeance. China shut itself off from the outside world, expeditions were abandoned, the navy was decommissioned. From 1436, the building of ocean-going vessels was simply punished by death. As a consequence, in 1474, the fleet was reduced to one third of what it was earlier in the century and, in 1503, to one tenth.

The Chinese nautical science disappeared from memory (the plans of ships were destroyed!). Zheng He's voyages therefore led to nothing, according to historian Jacques Marseille: *'Several reasons explain the surprising change of course of an empire that did not seek to expand. Firstly, parts of the Great Wall had to be mended because of pressure exerted by the Mongols north of the steppe and many troops had to be sent there. The empire could not afford to finance everything. Then there was the pressure of the mandarins, who despised trade – to them, agriculture was the only true source of wealth – feared most of all the rise of a new class, the merchants, and hated the eunuchs who had organized these maritime expeditions.'*

This political decision, fraught with consequences, left the way clear for Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch navigators and conquistadors at a time when Europe was asserting its power...

Chronology of Zheng He's Voyages

1405-1407: First expeditions, to the Sunda Islands, Ceylon and India.

1407-1409 and 1409-1411 Second and third Expeditions:

Exploration of Indochina, the East Indies.

1413-1415: Fourth voyage to the Strait of Hormuz.

1417-1419: Fifth expedition to Java, the Arabian coast to Aden, stops on the east coast of Africa.

1421-1422: Sixth trip: visit of thirty-six states between Borneo and Zanzibar.

1432-1433: Last Expedition: coasts of Arabia and Africa. Zheng He's death.

¹ Ethnically speaking, the Hui are Han Chinese except that they are Muslims. Their presence is reported in China in the seventh century where they settled while keeping their religious faith. They form one of the fifty-six nationalities of China today. They must be distinguished from other Muslims who live, for example, in Xinjiang (the Uighur ...) and are related to the Turkish peoples.

² Some experts believe they were over 130 m long; laden with luxury goods, silks, porcelain ... they are called 'jewellery boats', 'pearl/bead boats'...

³ The fact is that certain descriptions in the Book of Wonders are sometimes questionable.

THE COURIERS OF KNOWLEDGE

The language develops therefore as a recitation of the Quran, but it also gives rise to the development of formal grammatical analysis, so that it may be codified and understood, for many particles in the Quran are open to divergent interpretations. Such a codification presupposes a comparison of linguistic usages. It is thus important to travel to gain first-hand knowledge of the dialects of the Hijaz, Basra⁸ or Kufa. The dialect spoken by the Bedouins was carefully recorded by the grammarians who needed to size up the linguistic deviations resulting in the various usages in order to codify the language as a whole. Hence this passage from al-Isfahani's *Book of Songs* (see further down): "Al-Suli, who had it from Ishaq, son of Ibrahim al-Mawssili, through two intermediaries, reports as follows: 'a Bedouin woman used to come from the steppe to visit me, and I was generous to her because she spoke formal Arabic (kanat fassihah). One day, she said to me: "by Him who knows where all beings endowed with language are heading, in truth it seems that you were born and grew among us thanks to science."⁹ So the Bedouin language may be a criterion of linguistic correctness.

Pre Islamic poetry can thus be considered as a first-rate laboratory. It spreads out into multiple dialects and idioms, according to the tribes the poets originate from. One of its central themes even is human condition: 'the solitude of man in the desert, elegies on what remains of the abandoned campsite.'¹⁰ This poetry is pervaded by the idea that man is made of the trace he leaves behind him, the floating memory of the evanescent past, printed in sand but soon to be erased: "The tent marks in Minan are worn away, where she encamped and where she alighted, Ghawl and Rijam left to the wild, and the torrent beds of Rayyan, naked tracings, worn thin, like inscriptions carved in flattened stones."¹¹

Journeying also takes on a fundamental function as a means to collect and authenticate prophetic sayings. It partakes of the same epistemic cautiousness and manifests care when saying 'so and so said in such or such a place that the Prophet said...' rather than 'the Prophet said...' The words of the Prophet are thus considered in terms of transmission. Enunciation as a linguistic event occurring in such or such a place and attributed to so and so is a criterion: one must avoid transmitting contents or meaning as pre-established; when the chain of transmission is not made explicit, the meaning is purely conjectural. Shuba b. al-Hajjaj (d. AH 160/CE 776), a jurist but also an exegete working from tradition said: 'A tradition that is not introduced by such words as "so and so said", or "so and so informed us", is like a man surrounded by unmuzzled beasts.'¹²

So, couriers of knowledge went to Mecca, in Medina, not just as a pilgrimage but to authenticate prophetic sayings, so that, according to the Moroccan jurist Iyad (d. 1149) he who 'was in possession of one sound hadith would see a multiplication of journeys towards him.'¹³ One must go back from what is described to what was seen or heard, i.e. go back to the companions of the prophet. Going back to the source of knowledge, relating this knowledge to the quasi-sensory

constituents of its expression, putting together the chain of transmissions: these are cognitive acts that presuppose journeying and moving from place to place, so much so that some scholars used that same tradition-based method – 'founded on the transmission of a linguistic message'¹⁴ – although they were not theologians concerned with collecting prophetic sayings. Among them were encyclopedists like al Nadim or al Isfahani who, with his great work, *Kitab al Aghani* (literally, the Book of Songs), leaves us a legacy of the classical culture of the tenth century by means of the method which considers the chain of transmission as constituting meaning. This is the method used by al-Isfahani to render a multiform world: "encompassing in one single panorama the world of Ptolemy, duly appropriated by conquest, exploration, and conversions; conjuring up the development of the world from Eden to the construction of the great mosque of Samarra, including Solomon, Aristotle, the Quranic revelation, the gest of Uqba ibn nafi and Al-Farabi's system – such things open up wide perspectives for the mind inclined towards 'wisdom', hikma, enriched by 'general knowledge', adab, interested in encyclopedism, musharaka, or simply enamoured with reason."¹⁵

In the ninth and tenth centuries, a new science, *jughrafiya*, geography, whose main spokesmen were Ibn Hawqal, Masudi and al Muqaddisi, became a major field of knowledge. The known world was then composed of China, India and, nearer to Arabia, Greece and Byzantium. 'The concept of Europe did not exist' André Miquel writes. 'Arab scholars divided the world according to climates (iqlim): usually seven, sometimes three or five, longitudinal strips lying in general between the equator and the Arctic.'¹⁶ The border regions of the world were inhabited by monsters, as was the case in the texts of ancient authors like the first century Latin writer Pliny the Elder. Masudi (d.956), the author of *The Meadows of Gold*, views the people of Gog and Magog, mentioned in the Quran, as evil half-human beings. Masudi travelled throughout India, Ceylon, the countries around the China Sea and Egypt. Not to forget Biruni (early tenth century), who could speak Greek, Latin, Sanskrit and Persian, and translated Patanjali's Yoga sutra and Euclid. And at the beginning of the fourteenth century, Ibn Battuta travelled for twenty-nine consecutive years (1325-1354), made the pilgrimage to Mecca several times, acted as an interpreter, a jurist, an advisor for many Princes, lost and recouped his fortune several times, like Sindbad the sailor in *The Thousand and One Nights*, but always kept a firm hold on his knowledge.

It was the beginning of a new cosmography. In his book entitled *The Face of the Earth*, written in the first half of the ninth century, Al Khawarizmi challenged the works of Ptolemy. Much later, in the sixteenth century, Leo Africanus also corrected Ptolemy's description of Africa. Here is how the philosopher Jean Bodin praised his *Description of Africa*: "We will then say that he is the only historian to have disclosed an Africa that had sunk into sad Barbarism and other people's oblivion for thousands of years, and to have revealed it to universal consciousness."¹⁷

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturally

Understanding the text

- *What is the historical meaning and usefulness of the pilgrimage to Mecca?*
- *What is the role of cities in the history of Islam?*
- *What is the role of mosques in the history of Islam?*
- *Why do Islamic scholars travel?*
- *What does the figure of Alexander represent in Islam?*
- *Why is it important to cite the author and place of origin of a statement?*
- *How does geographical movement affect religious thinking?*
- *What are the important borrowings from Arab literature?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *Do you think that cities are the natural seat of civilization?*
- *Does Islamic culture tend rather to be open or closed?*
- *In what way does a religious site lend itself to the development of knowledge?*
- *What is the point of a pilgrimage?*
- *Must the author's identity always be taken into account in a piece of writing?*
- *In what respect are religions shaped by the places from which they originate?*
- *What accounts for the universal interest in the *The Thousand and One Nights*?*

Suggested teaching method: **questioning the question**

A question is chosen.
Each participant writes down individually a question that he or she considers a precondition for answering the question asked.
Everyone reads out to the group the question that they think should be asked.
Everyone chooses the three questions that they consider the most useful to be asked.
Everyone reads out their choices. The group discusses these questions and chooses by a majority the most relevant questions.
Everyone must answer these three questions in writing, then answer the initial question, and consider how these three questions have altered the issues under consideration.
The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Drawing

- *Ask the participants to read also the worksheet "Translators and transmitters of knowledge".*
- *After a discussion around the text on the importance of travel in the Arab-Muslim world, distribute sheets of A3 paper and felt-tip pens.*
- *Each participant draws a map of his or her city or neighbourhood showing a proposed itinerary, with the idea that some people will be led to visit it for the first time. The drawing should include historic, cultural and religious sites, administrative and commercial buildings, etc.*
- *All the participants display their maps on a wall and examine the various drawings.*
- *Initiate a discussion on the different ways of proposing an itinerary and symbolizing important sites.*
- *Ask the following questions: Among the drawings, which for you is the most understandable or attractive, and why? What has been excluded from each drawing and why?*
- *Group discussion on the different ways of translating and understanding symbols.*
- *Ask the following question: Which symbols are specific to a place and which ones are universal?*
- *Make the connection with the way in which each participant has understood the others' drawings.*
- *Divide the participants up into groups of 5 to 6 persons, distributing a new A3 sheet to each group.*
- *Each group produces collectively a map of a city (or country) and reaches an agreement on the choice of important sites and the way of symbolically representing that importance.*
- *Each group presents its map and reports on its discussions about the meaning of the symbols and the complexity of mutual understanding in intercultural relations.*
- *Final discussion on the importance of travel (pilgrimage) and the complexity of translation (choice of what is particular and what is universal) for Arab-Muslim civilization.*



THE CIRCULATION OF TEXTS, THE DISSEMINATION OF IDEAS

The Muslim religion was indeed related to travelling. Travelling even served as a schema to understand how the religion spread. A historical reading of this propagation reveals the hitches in this process and the contingent relationship between a religion and a nation. Al-Farabi showed that a religion may appear in a nation before philosophy does. In that case, the relationship to philosophy may be distorted because it is then viewed in the light of religion and considered as conflicting with it. This conflicting element is thus not something essential but historical. Al-Farabi used a hypothetico-deductive method to show how a nation adopted a religion before or after it adopted a philosophy. The method enabled him to avoid essentialisation or an attitude related to a certain dogma, and to allow for alternatives: *“On the other hand, if religion is transferred from a nation where it belongs to a nation without a religion - or if a religion belonging to a certain nation is adopted and improved by additions, deletions, or some other change being made, and then is made the religion of another nation - and its character is formed by that religion, it is taught that religion, and it is governed by it, then it is possible that religion will emerge in this nation before philosophy is realized and even before dialectic and sophistry are realized. As for philosophy, when it does not emerge in a nation out of its innate gifts, but is transferred to it from another people where it had belonged, it can emerge in this nation after the religion that has been transferred to it.”*¹⁸

Al-Farabi provided a model which may be interpreted historically as follows: the Muslim religion was revealed in a nation that was for the greater part pagan, Arabia. It was only two centuries later that a massive movement of translations introduced Greek philosophy. Depending upon such historical contingencies, the relationships between philosophy and religion must be interpreted historically according to the distinctive methods of each practice: exposing images in one case (religion), exposing concepts in the other (philosophy), with a possible harmonization of the two.

Translating can at times be adapting: the most representative tales of Arabic culture travelled from India, Mesopotamia or Greece. For instance, Ibn al-Muqaffa's eighth century *Kalila wa Dimna*, a book of animal tales, came from India, 'more precisely from the Brahminical circles in the years 300 CE'¹⁹ From India it travelled to Iran, as the Sassanid king Chosroes (sixth century) sent his physician to India to bring back this wise book for the princes to use as a sort of mirror to govern themselves and their subjects. The physician translated it into Pehlevi and added a few fables. It was then translated into Syriac, a language of transmission, then translated and adapted in Arabic in the eighth century by Ibn al-Muqaffa. Translation, adaptation, additions, render the history of this text if not confused at least definitely opaque. However, the journey of the text from India to Baghdad is part and parcel of the work itself.

The same goes for *The Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of extraordinary stories that have come from Persia as fragments, anonymous tales in which those who speak are not animals but characters ruling as princes or kings. Here is what al Nadim wrote about the genesis of these tales, which are told during evening soirees: *“The ancient Persians were the first to compose extraordinary tales and edit them as books, with animals occasionally speaking. They preserved them in libraries. The genre aroused the enthusiasm of the Arsacid princes, the third generation of Persian kings. The movement increased and intensified with the Sassanids. Translated by the Arabs into their own language, these texts attracted the attention of the masters of style and good writing who polished them and embellished them, following the same pattern, with similarly inspired works.”*²⁰

What more can be said about the journeying of this text, a journey through seduction, transformation and embellishment. This is what happens when a text is transmitted. The striking paradox both in the case of *Kalila wa Dimna* and of *The Thousand and One Nights* is that these texts became emblematic of Arabic culture, having, with time, gained a specificity resting on the anonymous heritage of the first versions.

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



Reflecting on the text

- > What are the various dimensions of the Muslim pilgrimage?
- > How does it contribute to the exchange of knowledge and the spread of ideas?
- > How did Arab-Muslim culture leave the semi-nomadic lifestyle of its birthplace to flourish in the city?
- > What part does the mosque play in exchanges?
- > A woman who founded one of Islam's greatest universities as early as the ninth century.
- > Why is the Muslim scholar frequently a great traveller?
- > How do you explain the role played by Arabic in the development of Arab-Muslim culture?
- > The first words spoken by a European to inhabitants of the New World were in Arabic.
- > What relation can you establish between the codification of the Arabic language and the journeys?
- > What role did encyclopaedists and geographers play in the journeys and exchanges?
- > Discover a tenth-century polyglot scholar who, in addition to Arabic, knew Greek, Latin, Sanskrit and Persian.
- > Follow the journeys of the tales.

¹ Quoted by P. Lory, 1996, *Les lieux saints du Hedjaz et de Palestine, Lieux d'Islam, Autrement, Special issue, No. 91-92, p. 38.*

² H. Laurens, J. Tolan, G. Veinstein, 2009, *L'Europe et l'Islam, quinze siècles d'histoire, Paris, Odile Jacob, p.78.*

³ F. Rosenthal, 2007, *Knowledge Triumphant: the Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam, Leiden, Boston, Brill, p. 2.*

⁴ T. Hussein, 1997, *The Days*, trans. by E. H. Paxton and H. Wayment, Cairo, The American University of Cairo Press, p. 116.

⁵ J. Calmard, 1996, *Les universités théologiques du shiisme imâmite, Lieux d'Islam, Autrement, Special issue, No. 91-92, p. 80.*

⁶ H. Laurens, J. Tolan, G. Veinstein, 2009, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

⁷ E. Huyghe, F. Huyghe, 2006, *La route de la soie ou les empires du mirage, Paris, Payot, p. 32.*

⁸ As early as the eighth century, 'The school of Basra developed a purist approach to the language, considering the dialects of the Bedouins as its literary ideal and linguistic horizon' in H. Touati, 2000, *Islam et voyage au Moyen-âge, Paris, Seuil, p. 59.*

⁹ J. Berque, 1995, *Musiques sur le fleuve, Les plus belles pages du Kitâb al-Aghânî, Paris, Albin Michel, 1995, p. 83.*

¹⁰ J. Berque, 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹¹ See Michael Sells' translation of these lines into English in 1989, *Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes by Alqama, Shanfara, Labid, Antara, Al-Asha, Dhu Al-Rumma, Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University Press, p. 35.*

¹² Ibn Hbban, *Al Majruhin*, 1.2, quoted by H. Touati, 2000, *Islam et voyage au Moyen âge, op. cit.*, p. 42.

¹³ H. Touati, 2000, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁴ J. Berque, 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹⁵ J. Berque, 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁶ Laurens, Tolan and Veinstein, 2009, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹⁷ J. Bodin, *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History*, New York, Octagon Books, 1966. This is how Bodin described Leo the African: '... by race a Moor, by nation Spanish, by religion Mohammedan and later Christian. After he had wandered over almost all Africa and Asia Minor on long journeys, and a good part of Europe also, he was captured by pirates. He was presented as a gift to Pope Leo, at whose residence, with incredible zeal and diligence, he translated into Italian what he had composed in Arabic about Africa...', p. 80.

¹⁸ See M. Lahdi and C. Butterworth's translation of Al-Farabi's *Book of Letters*, par. 148.

¹⁹ See A. Miquel's introduction to the French translation of Ibn al-Muqaffa, 1980, *Kalila wa Dimna*, Paris, Klincksieck, p. VII.

²⁰ AL Nadim's *Fihrist* is quoted by A. Miquel in his introduction to the French translation of *The Thousand and One Nights: 2005, Les mille et une nuits, Paris, Gallimard, Vol. 1, p. XVI.*



Mosaic decoration on a door, with birds. (Uzbekistan) © UNESCO.
Al-Biruni was born in Uzbekistan before spending 34 years of his life in Ghazni, Afghanistan.

HERODOTUS AND AL-BIRUNI: THE POWER OF COMMONALITY

ON READING AL-BIRUNI FROM AN INTERPRETATIVE PERSPECTIVE, ONE CAN UNCOVER NOT THE ELEMENTS OF A POSSIBLE ENCOUNTER BUT RATHER THE PRESENCE OF A CERTAIN HERODOTEAN SPIRIT IN ARAB-MUSLIM THINKING. INDEED, THE WORK OF AL-BIRUNI, AN ERUDITE SCHOLAR AND HISTORIAN BORN IN 973, REVEALS THAT, ALTHOUGH HE HAD NO KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORKS OF THE “FATHER OF HISTORY” (HERODOTUS WAS BORN IN 480 BCE IN HALICARNASSUS) AND THEY WERE CENTURIES APART, THERE WAS A COMMUNITY OF VIEWS AND A CERTAIN SIMILAR WAY OF CONSIDERING THE OTHER AND HISTORY. TO CONVEY THE WORD *HISTORIA*, THE ARABS HAD TWO DIFFERENT WORDS WHICH THEY USED COMPLEMENTARILY: FIRST *TAHQIQ* TO EXPRESS THE IDEA OF METHOD, AND THEN *TARIKH* TO REFER TO HISTORY AS A DISCIPLINE. THE USAGE OF EACH DRAWS THE DIVIDING LINE BETWEEN HISTORIOGRAPHY STRICTO SENSU AND HISTORY AND IS AN INDICATION OF THE PURSUIT OF RATIONALITY THROUGHOUT THE WORK OF AL-BIRUNI, WHO SHARES WITH HERODOTUS A COMMON SUSPICION OF MYTH (*USTURA* IN ARABIC). AL-BIRUNI DESCRIBES AND RELATES WITHOUT ANY BIAS OR PREJUDICE, AND, LIKE HERODOTUS, PREFERS TO RESERVE HIS JUDGEMENT. THE BENEVOLENCE THAT PREVENTS AL-BIRUNI FROM MAKING VALUE JUDGEMENTS STEMS FROM A PROFOUND WISDOM, WHICH BEARS WITNESS TO A TRUE KNOWLEDGE OF HUMAN NATURE. HERODOTUS’ AND AL-BIRUNI’S SCEPTICAL HUMANISM IS AMONG THE MOST EFFICIENT ANTIDOTES AGAINST HUMANKIND’S WORST ENEMY: UNACKNOWLEDGED IGNORANCE.

We know for sure, and the actual state of research allows us to be absolutely positive about it, that the Arabs never had *direct* knowledge of Herodotus and his writings, nor of his illustrious successor Thucydides, nor, more generally of the Greek tragedians such as Homer.¹ How can this be accounted for? Two complementary reasons may help us understand this established fact.

1) The Arabs did not need Greek historians the way they needed Greek philosophers and scientists: (a) the former group, unlike the latter, were in no way indispensable for the development of knowledge in Islam. In terms of usefulness, figures like those of Herodotus, Thucydides or Polybius were no match for those of Plato, Aristotle or Plotinus. Besides (b), when it came to theatre and poetry, the Arabs were self-

sufficient: why bother with Greek tragedians and poets when pre-Islamic poetry provided them with what they considered as the most accomplished form of poetry? Finally (c), they did not need the Greeks either in a foundationist perspective: while Herodotus established both the ‘birth of history’ and the revival of Greece in general and Athens in particular, which boasted the supremacy of a model (qualified by some as liberal in the cultural, political and economic sense of the word)² that it aimed to impose upon the world, the Arab-Muslim tradition refers to the Revelation as the founding act of its civilization. In other words, by narrating the Median wars, Herodotus indelibly recorded the birth of classical Greece, since the victory over the Persians united the Hellenes, beyond their particularisms, in a common destiny. But this event is of no interest for the Arab-Muslim civilization: for the Muslims, that is for the

community of believers, the *ummah* is what binds all the people together and gives them the sense of power and greatness that is shared by all those belonging to one and the same culture and civilization.

2) Still in terms of usefulness, Herodotus' conception of freedom within the law was of no interest to the Arab-Muslim philosophers. What did Herodotus say? Some elements of answer may be found in a debate between the Persian king Xerxes and a Lacedemonian exile reported by the historian, who placed it just before the decisive battles took place. According to Xerxes, there was no doubt that the Persian army would win: the soldiers' superiority in number and ardour in battle, increased tenfold by the fear of physical reprisals in the event of their being routed could only lead to victory for the Persians. To such unflinching optimism, the exile Demaratos replied with a phrase that has remained famous: 'though [The Lacedemonians] are free, they are not free in all respects, for they are actually ruled by a lord and master: law is their master, and it is the law that they inwardly fear – much more so than your men fear you.'¹³ Thus freedom is what ultimately brings victory, but it is a freedom amended or modified by law. Although Demaratos was talking about the Lacedemonian regime, the universal significance of his answer could not be lost on Herodotus' readers: despotism would never be as constraining as the law. But such a conception of freedom and the law could not appeal to the Arab-Muslim philosophers insofar as, to them, the norm that restricts the freedom of the individual is God's law as found in the

Quran and the *sharia*, and not a man-made law like the one Demaratos and Herodotus refer to.

Nevertheless, reading Herodotus from a (reasonably) hermeneutic perspective, one can uncover not the elements of a possible encounter but rather the presence of a certain Herodotean spirit in Arab-Muslim thinking. Indeed, the work of al-Biruni (b. 973 in what is today's Uzbekistan), an erudite scholar and historian, reveals that, although he had no knowledge of works the 'father of History' (b. 480 BCE) and they were centuries apart, a community of views and a certain similar way of considering the Other and History relates the Greeks and the Barbarians of the Arabic peninsula.

Herodotus and al-Biruni were both exiles – one in Samos, because of his political activism; the other in Ghazna, today's Afghanistan, for thirty-four years, until his death, because of dark political matters in which he had been unwillingly involved), both eager for novelty and with the same passion for the Other (Herodotus travelled all over the Mediterranean world, through Egypt, Persia, Phoenicia, Cyprus, Assyria, going as far as Cyreanica and Scythia, while al-Biruni travelled across the whole of what was Central Asia at the time, and constantly encouraged his contemporaries to travel, as very eloquent passages of his *Geodesy* show), both respectful of difference, which they took to be a source of enrichment rather than a threat. Such was the humanistic spirit that the Greek from Halicarnassus and the Barbarian from Kath had in common.



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PHILOLOGICAL PROLEGOMENA AND HISTORICAL METHODOLOGY

We shall begin by defining Herodotus' contribution and the specificity of his approach. We cannot but note, first of all, that Herodotus invented the genre of historical writing. He himself qualified his work as 'research'. He was thus the forerunner of a certain way of writing about History but also of conceiving what it is. History was no longer to be mistaken for myth, and became a more rigorous topic, even though Thucydides took great care to differentiate himself from his illustrious predecessor, stigmatizing his tendency to logography although Herodotus' approach, to quote Châtelet, 'broke with the logographic tradition by putting aside the mythological origins and refusing the legends that poetry helped to spread.'⁴

Indeed, if Herodotus was far from making History a scientific discipline, he was still the first to have the intuition of a historical causality that required a widening of the spatiotemporal field of research. With Herodotus, History is no longer the history of the Greeks, but also of the Other par excellence, the Barbarian, and of the relationship between two civilizations that *almost* everything opposes. Thus, in the first

page of his *Researches*, the 'Father of History' set the tone: "*Herodotus of Halicarnassus here presents his research so that human events do not fade with time. May the great and wonderful deeds – some brought forth by the Hellenes, others by the barbarians, – not go unsung; as well as the causes that led them to make war on each other.*"⁵

Herodotus' presentation of his work is remarkable in many ways. First, he shows how historical research differs from myth and epic in that it creates a specific category: the event. As Châtelet, working as a memorialist and reviving the past, shows, Herodotus differentiates himself and refuses to take sides in the debate opposing the atemporality of myth and the sacredness of epic. Thus, historical means contemporary and human, that is profane and pertaining to the world of perception, but also, in a sense, rational. This is the second point that needs to be stressed: as time becomes more human, the real becomes more rational; the historian hunts down the *causes* of events and the reasons for human action.

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But this rational apprehension of History happens to have a counterpart among Arab historians. To ascertain the import of this remark, it will be useful to anchor one's arguments in philology and bear in mind the following points:

a) There are two words in medieval and modern Arabic for 'history', *akhbar* and *tarikh*. The first one is the broader of the two and conveys the idea of history in the sense of anecdote. It implies specific anchorage in time and is by no means limited to the expression of a series of events that may be organically related to one another. With time, it was used to include the sayings and behaviour of the Prophet. Alongside other words like *athar*, it almost became synonymous with *hadith*.

Around the ninth century, *tarikh* became the accepted technical word for 'history'. The most likely etymological hypothesis relates it to the word 'moon' with the sense of 'month'. It gradually came to mean 'date', 'era' and 'epoch'. Though no occurrence of *tarikh* may be found in pre-Islamic literature, in the Quran or in the very first *hadiths*, one can however be quite positive that the word is contemporaneous with the introduction of the Muslim dating method, which was the only valid temporal reference in Islam: the Hegiran calendar. It was indeed first in relation to this idea of dating that *tarikh* took on the meaning of 'historical work' and 'history'. At first, only the historical works that were dated were called *tawarikh*.

The two historians who are the objects of our interest here, al-Biruni and Ibn Khaldun were quite familiar with a certain number of methodological requisites specific to Herodotus' *Historia*, in spite of differences that might seem final and irreducible.

b) The fact is, all Herodotus' research has its Arabic counterpart: the *tahqiq*. The word is to be found for example in the title of a book that al-Biruni, a famous scholar and historian, wrote about India. It refers at once to the idea of a *method* applied to historical material and to the treatment of empirical data, the fact of experimenting and seeking confirmation (or invalidation) of something. To put it tersely, *tahqiq* means 'scientific investigation', which presupposes a minimum amount of methodology to manage this sort of research. Though it is important to note that the Arab historiographers of the mid tenth century made very slight use of

methodology – the historians who worked on the annals 'did no more than' attempt attempted to establish the chronology of heterogeneous and discontinuous events that they connected in a relatively basic way by giving the date of the year, the month, even the day when they took place – it is just as important to call to mind that history soon came to be considered by 'those in the trade' as a wealth of examples and teachings to be exploited in a truly philosophical perspective. Thus, what was lost or missed from a strictly historical point of view tended to surface when history was no longer considered as a rational object but the means rationality resorted to. The fact is that 'historians tended to be more and more preoccupied with political and moral guidance when they related recent and contemporary events; History became a philosophical teaching based on examples'(see the entry '*Tarikh*' in *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*). It is in this context that one should understand the Arabs' *itibar* and *isnad*, two specific modalities of the *tahqiq*, which give history the status of a scientific discipline it might never have achieved otherwise. Thus, the *itibar* relates to the fact of extracting a meaning (that is, the impact, the value) from a series of facts or events, while the function of the *isnad*, a practice which was specific to religious sciences to start with though historians were apt to resort to it, is to check the authenticity of what is reported by examining the credibility of a chain of transmitters. Although this practice was criticized by Ibn Khaldun because it was rooted in ethics and religion, the principle that guides and motivates it – the pursuit of authenticity and veracity – is the methodological requisite par excellence as regards historiography.

All this may be summed up and interpreted as follows: to render the word *historia*, the Arabs had two different words which they used complementarily – first *Tahqiq* to convey the idea of method, and then *tarikh* to refer to history as a discipline. The usage of each draws the dividing line between historiography *stricto sensu* and history and is an indication of the pursuit of rationality throughout the work of al-Biruni, who shares with Herodotus a common suspicion of myth (*ustura* in Arabic).

We will now consider the connection between Herodotus and al-Biruni. What concrete elements could account for a parallel between two worlds that seem to have nothing in common?

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- *Why did the Arabs not need the Greek historians?*
- *In what way was Herodotus an innovator?*
- *What is the key political issue between Xerxes and the Greeks?*
- *What are the differences between myth, epic and history?*
- *What is the difference between tarikh and tahqiq?*
- *Why does Ibn Khaldun say that "history is deeply rooted in philosophy"?*
- *Why does philosophy criticize history?*
- *What could Herodotus have contributed to Arab-Muslim civilization?*
- *Why does Herodotus prefer sometimes to remain silent?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *Is history less necessary than philosophy?*
- *In what way can despotism sometimes be legitimate?*
- *What is the connection between law and freedom?*
- *Does sharia restrict or provide a foundation for freedom?*
- *Is the advent of history necessarily an advance?*
- *Is history a succession of histories?*
- *Is history rational?*
- *What is interesting about myth?*
- *Is the heritage of Herodotus lacking in Arab-Muslim civilization?*
- *Should one sometimes be silent when talking of a culture other than one's own?*

Suggested teaching method: **identifying problem areas through questions**

*One or more questions are chosen.
Each participant replies individually in writing to the questions asked.
Each participant reads his or her answers to the group. Each participant chooses a statement in which he or she sees a problem, then formulates one or more questions to be put to the author of the statement. In turn, each participant puts his or her question to the person chosen, who responds to the problem raised.
The group collectively decides whether or not the answer is satisfactory.
A short discussion may then ensue.
A new problem is raised. The same process resumes.
If possible, begin again with other questions.
The group reviews the work and the exercise.*

Educational exercises

Simulation

- *Divide the participants up into subgroups of five or six persons.*
- *Explain that each group is a team of historians.*
- *Set each group to work on a different historical fact (a war, a revolution, a scientific or technological innovation ...).*
- *Each group lists all the key elements needed to understand their historical fact.*
- *Ask each group to present their historical facts and the key elements used to analyse them.*

- *Ask them also to read the worksheet "The universal and the Other".*
- *Ask each group to compare their lists of key elements with the elements referred to in the texts; what similarities are there, what differences?*
- *Ask the group to discuss the following questions:*

What choices of key elements would have been compatible with the historical approaches identified by Herodotus?

What choice of key elements would have been compatible with the historical approaches of Arab-Muslim historians?

What are the consequences for Arab-Muslim civilization of the different historical approaches?

How do these compare with the historical and anthropological approaches of other civilizations?

According to the participants, what is universal and what is particular?

Other times, other places

The founding historians: analysis and interpretation of facts

Though the Arab-Muslim historians gave a limited role to ancient historians, especially Herodotus and Thucydides, they did not neglect history. A strong figure emerges from the Muslim world in this field: Ibn Khaldun. Ibn Khaldun reconnected with Herodotus and Thucydides' thread of concerns (did he study their works?) and extended these concerns by developing new conceptions. But unfortunately he had little or no influence on contemporary historians...

What is striking about the work of this historian is the modernity of his views and the methods he theorizes. It was not until the nineteenth or even the twentieth century that an equivalent level of historical analysis was reached in the West.

More than five hundred years lie between these two excerpts, but there are a number of similarities in the approaches of these two great historians, Ibn Khaldun and Marc Bloch.¹

The first text was written in the late fourteenth century:

It should be known that history, in matter of fact, is information about human social organization, which itself is identical with world civilization. It deals with such conditions affecting the nature of civilization as, for instance, savagery and sociability, group feelings, and the different ways by which one group of human beings achieves superiority over another. It deals with royal authority and the dynasties that result in this manner and with the various ranks that exist within them. Also with the different kinds of gainful occupations and ways of making a living, with the sciences and crafts that human beings pursue as part of their activities and efforts, and with all the other institutions that originate in civilization through its very nature.

Untruth naturally afflicts historical information. There are various reasons that make this unavoidable. One of them is partisanship for opinions and schools. If the soul is impartial in receiving information, it devotes to that information the share of critical investigation the information deserves, and its truth or untruth thus becomes clear. However, if the soul is infected with partisanship for a particular opinion or sect, it accepts without a moment's hesitation the information that is agreeable to it. Prejudice and partisanship obscure the critical faculty and preclude critical investigation. The result is that falsehoods are accepted and transmitted.

Another reason making untruth unavoidable in historical information is reliance upon transmitters. Investigation of this subject belongs to (the discipline) of personality criticism. Another reason is unawareness of the purpose of an event. Many a transmitter does not know the real significance of his observations or of the things he has learned about orally. He transmits the information, attributing to it the significance he assumes or imagines it to have. The result is falsehood.

Another reason is unfounded assumption as to the truth of a thing. This is frequent. It results mostly from reliance upon transmitters.

Another reason is ignorance of how conditions conform with reality. Conditions are affected by ambiguities and artificial distortions. The informant reports the conditions as he saw them, but on account of artificial distortions he himself has no true picture of them.

Ibn Khaldun, 1969, *The Muqaddimah, an Introduction to History*, trans. by F. Rosenthal, ed. and abridged by N. J. Dawood, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 35.

¹ French historian, specialist of the Middle Ages, co-founder with Lucien Febvre, of a journal entitled *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*. An ardent patriot, he was active in the resistance during the German occupation of France. Arrested, tortured, he was executed in June 1944. He revolutionized the conception of history that prevailed at the time and was according to him too much based on factual history and not enough on the economic and social aspects. He thus developed a tool for analyzing societies and of their mechanisms of evolution. The modernity of his thought allowed him to enter history. A university in Strasbourg bears his name.

The second was written in the first half of the twentieth century, exactly in 1941:

Basically, the error is analogous to the one which inspired that pseudogeographical determinism which is today once for all discredited. Whether confronted by a phenomenon of the physical world or by a social fact, the movement of human reactions is not like clockwork always going in the same direction. Renan to the contrary notwithstanding, the desert is not necessarily 'monotheistic', because the people who inhabit it do not all bring the same spirit to its scenes. Scarcity of watering-places would bring about the clustering of rural population, and abundance of water would disperse it, only if it were true that people made proximity to springs, wells, and ponds their supreme consideration. In reality, they sometimes prefer, for the sake of security or co-operation, or even through mere gregariousness, to live in close groups even where every field has its spring; or inversely, as in certain regions of Sardinia, where everyone builds his dwelling in the middle of his little estate, they resign themselves to long walks for the scarce water as the price of the isolation on which they have set their hearts. Is not man himself the greatest variable in nature?

Let us not here be misled, however. In such a case, the fault is not in the explanation itself. The fault is only in accepting any explanation a priori. Although up to now there have been, relatively few examples of it, it may well be that, under given social conditions, the distribution of water sources determines place of habitation more than any other factor. Certainly it does not determine it of necessity... The error was in considering this hypothesis as given at the outset. It needed to be proved. Then, once this proof – which we have no right to consider as unfeasible out of prejudice – has been supplied, it still remains for us by digging deeper into the analysis to ask why, out of all the imaginable psychological attitudes, these particular ones should have imposed themselves upon the group. For, as soon as we admit that a mental or emotional reaction is not self-explanatory, we are forced in turn, whenever such a reaction occurs, to make a real effort to discover the reasons for it. In a word, in history, as elsewhere, the causes cannot be assumed. They are to be looked for...

Marc Bloch, 1964, *The Historian's Craft*,
trans. by P. Putnam, New York, Vintage Books, p. 197.

HERODOTUS AND AL-BIRUNI: TWO OBSERVERS COMBINING IMPARTIALITY AND GENEROSITY

The way Herodotus presented his work deserves our attention. As we have already mentioned, he wrote that he intended to give an account of 'the great and wonderful deeds – some brought forth by the Hellenes, others by the barbarians'.⁶

Putting the Greeks on the same level as the Barbarians and suggesting that the Other, who was traditionally denied any positive characteristics and denounced for savagery, violence and roughness, was capable of the most praiseworthy and beautiful actions, was no doubt unprecedented in Greek thinking.

What is more, when it came to comparing the Greeks and the Barbarians, Herodotus insisted more on showing the diversity of their ways and customs than on actually contrasting them, which, once again, testifies to his real daring anti-conformism. Thus as Châtelet writes, 'the theme of difference takes over that of antagonism'.⁷ In the name of the resonance of the universal spirit in Herodotus' approach, the historian can 'teach a lesson in relativism' and above all give things their due: political violence and war cannot possibly be explained by cultural differences.⁸ Armed conflict is not the prerogative of a single civilization to the exclusion of all others any more than good is the constant and absolute hallmark of a culture or a tradition that would by definition be incapable of evil (or at least of a lesser good). There is no strictly 'racial' consideration in Herodotus' text, but rather the idea that all human beings, whoever they may be, are as capable of the greatest virtue as of the worst vice.

What must be retained in Herodotus is undoubtedly this humanistic spirit, which is also to be found in the comparatist al-Biruni (as the Russian orientalist Rosen calls him) when he pulls off the remarkable feat of passing difference off as commonality, when Herodotus perhaps 'contented himself' with celebrating difference: "As the word of confession... is the *shibboleth* of Islam, the Trinity that of Christianity, and the institute of the Sabbath that of Judaism, so *metempsychosis* is the *shibboleth* of the Hindu religion."⁹

Thus, pagans and monotheists, believers and unbelievers eventually meet provided one is capable of looking beyond appearances: a uniting symbol lies behind the difference that, in theory, draws us apart from one another. Playing with this central idea, al-Biruni showed unforeseen ecumenism when he pointed out commonality where it was least expected. Indeed, after describing the three Hindu primary forces of the intellect, strength and passion, and certainly aware of the feeling of strangeness, and even of incomprehension the Arab-Muslim reader may have before such pagan beliefs, the historian added that: "Here there is an analogy between Hindus and Christians, as the latter distinguish between

the Three Persons and give them separate names, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but unite them into one substance."¹⁰

The universal that unites is limitless: al-Biruni kept on claiming to be a unifier relating the Hindus to the Greeks, the Other in the Arabs' heart. It was a deliberate methodological choice that the author clearly acknowledged. Thus, in the preface to his book on India he wrote: "My book is nothing but a simple historic record of facts. I shall place before the reader the theories of the Hindus exactly as they are, and I shall mention in connection with them similar theories of the Greeks in order to show the relationship existing between them."¹¹

Indeed, what better token of trust would there have been for the Arab-Muslim readers than to see an essential resemblance between the Greek they had been taught to know and respect, with whom they had almost become intimate, and a fundamental otherness that might have at first disconcerted and shocked. al-Biruni put his readers' mind at ease by adding: "These ideas entertained by the Hindus are much less surprising when you put them side by side with Greek mythology."

And further still: "[The Hindus] believe matter to be eternal. Therefore, they do not, by the word creation, understand a formation of something out of nothing. They mean by creation only the working with a piece of clay... they attribute the creation to angels and demons ... All this reminds one of the words of Plato in the book *Timæus* ..."¹²

By now, one may be able to discern a trend, a clearly visible baseline: what constitutes the humanistic spirit we have mentioned and tried to trace owes much more to a symbolic dialogue that thinkers, scholars and erudite people have engaged in and continued through and over the centuries than to a mere master-disciple relationship in which Herodotus would play the part of the reference against which to measure the works of those who made History after him. Thus, al-Biruni's propensity to find the common denominator uniting all differences responded – and not corresponded – to Herodotus' praise of diversity.

But as in any real dialogue, the differences in the positions of those taking part in it are so slight: while al-Biruni's intuition of a unifying commonality is clearly established from the start, with Herodotus the same idea only shows at the end of a step by step intellectual process. Thus, when Herodotus' praise of difference becomes a 'philobarbarism',¹³ when the Other is no longer merely considered as different, that is exotic, but as an interlocutor worthy of interest, who can teach and enrich us, the intuition of a unifying commonality really becomes operational.

His philobarbarism occasionally sounds like a vibrant homage paid to a Persian civilization as worthy of admiration as the neighbouring Greece: it gave birth to heroic men who were capable of the greatest feats, responsible for some of the most beautiful inventions and discoveries, ready to sacrifice themselves for their prince, loathed lies and rewarded virtue at its true value, but were also curious about the Others and ready to assimilate what was best in them: 'Of all men, the Persians especially tend to adopt foreign customs' (*Histories*, I, 135).

Therefore, why not draw one's inspiration from these Barbarians or, at least, why not work towards a better understanding of their customs and traditions, rather than denounce their futility and even their stupidity? But, Herodotus claims, in spite of their high mindedness, which their love of freedom reveals, the Greeks do not apply the principle of charity: they refer to the doubtful works of logographers, and consider a fair amount of gossip and legends as trustworthy instead of gathering first hand information.

In this respect, Herodotus' historiography is just the opposite of classical logography. With genuine impartiality, the historian noted down, recorded, traced what was good and what was less so, so much so that he hunted down and exhibited quasi-organic connections between the Greek and Barbarian civilizations – which was already a sign that difference instead of opposition was being highlighted. Thus, Herodotus categorically affirmed that a certain number of Greek divinities had barbarian origins: "*The names of almost all the gods also came to Greece from Egypt. My inquiries led me to discover that they are non-Greek in origin, but it is my belief that they came largely from Egypt*" (II, 50).

This shows that the intuition of a commonality which ran counter to the mentality of the time, was really meaningful to Herodotus. The dissemination of remarkably postmodern declarations in his work, echoing al-Farabi's analyses of the *milla* and the necessity to keep to what we acknowledge as a common sphere because our individual beliefs are incommensurable, is most certainly disturbing. Thus, though it is true that 'on becoming aware of history, our consciousness opens out to a positive criticism which philosophical thinking has not yet had access to', one cannot but note that, across centuries and cultures, the propensity of Herodotus's historiography towards philosophy would by no means have seemed irrelevant to al-Farabi.¹⁴ Indeed, Farabi and Herodotus spoke the same language, the language of wisdom and respect, as one can see when the 'Father of History', exposing the reasons for the consecration of barbarian rites (the Egyptian rites in this case), expressed himself as follows: "[I]f I should tell why they are sacrosanct, I would cross into the topic of divine matters, which I am especially trying to avoid.

Up till now, I only mentioned this subject when I was forced to, and even then I merely touched its surface" (*Histories* II, 65).

If one must avoid tackling 'divine matters', it is because men will never cure themselves of the deep conviction they have in the matter, namely that they are the only ones to possess the 'true' religion, even though they were to make the effort to compel themselves to go through the compared merits of the beliefs of everybody. As the value of the religious is incommensurable, it would be better to keep it at a distance and not to attempt comparisons or value judgements which would be by definition unfounded and totally irrelevant.

Moreover, the Sceptics' theme of silence, a wise silence respectful of diversity, is developed at length in Herodotus' *Histories*. For to relate is not – and should certainly not be – to judge. Thus, the 'Father of History' wondered about a strange paradox: why did the Egyptians, who considered pigs as unclean animals, sacrifice them exclusively to celebrate the moon and Dionysos. Herodotus refrained from accounting for this attitude, not out of ignorance, but out of respect for the customs of the Other: 'There is an account given by Egyptians which, though I know it, would not be very proper for me to divulge here' (II, 47). Elsewhere, describing the habits of the Egyptians, he tells how those who take part in rites in the temples must not be buried in the woollen cloaks that they wear during the ceremonies; but when it comes to explaining the reason for it, Herodotus merely states its religious character and concludes tersely: 'to do so would offend their religious sensibility' and further down he insists on it, without any additional information, merely explaining that 'there is a sacred story concerning this' (II, 81). Thus, the religious or sacred motive for such acts is enough to justify that the meaning be left unexplained.

Al-Biruni, too, refused to judge the Other. He described and related without any bias or prejudice, and, like Herodotus, preferred to reserve his judgement. Thus, when he described some of the customs that his Muslim readers might have considered as 'oddities', and when one would have expected him to stigmatize the Hindu belief in charms and incantations, the 'Father of comparativism' was surprisingly restrained and moderate in his position: "*I, for my part, do not know what I am to say about these things, since I do not believe in them. Once a man who had very little belief in reality, and much less in the tricks of the jugglers, told me that he had been poisoned, and that people had sent him some Hindus possessing the knowledge of charms. They sang their charms before him, and this had a quieting effect upon him, and soon he felt that he became better and better, whilst they were drawing lines in the air with their hands and twigs.*"¹⁵

Chronological landmarks

- > 498 bce: Beginning of the Median wars
- > 480 bce: Birth of Herodotus in Halicarnassus
- > 448 bce: End of the Median wars
- > 431 bce: Beginning of the Peloponnesian war
- > 425 bce: Death of Herodotus in Thurii
- > 404 bce: End of the Peloponnesian war
- > 395bce: Death of Thucydides
- > ca. 210-202 bce: Birth of Polybius
- > 126 bce: Death of Polybius
- > ce 800: Birth of al-Kindi, the first Arab philosopher
- > 839: Birth of Tabari
- > 870: Birth of al-Farabi, 'The Second Master'
- > 873: Death of al-Kindi
- > 923: Death of Tabari
- > 950: Death of al-Farabi in Damascus
- > 973: Birth of al-Biruni, a historian and great traveller
- > 1048: Death of al-Biruni
- > 1332: Birth of Ibn Khaldun
- > 1406: Death of Ibn Khaldun in Cairo

The Median wars (or Greco Persian wars): the Median wars brought the Greeks into conflict with the Persians at the beginning of the fifth century bce. They were triggered by the rebellion of the Greeks of Asia against the Persian domination.

The Peloponnesian war: Athens and Sparta were adversaries, as each wanted hegemony and supported a different conception of the Greek State (Spartan oligarchy versus Athenian democracy) and way of life (tradition versus outward-looking ways)

Al-Biruni: A learned Persian scholar, he was considered as a major figure of the Middle Ages. He wrote about a hundred books on various topics, such as *The Chronology of Ancient Nations* and *The Book of India*, a country he went to and explored.

Al-Farabi: A Turkish philosopher, known by the Latins as Alfarabius and Avennasar. He was called 'The Second Master' because he was the worthy follower of the first, Aristotle. Endowed with uncommon intelligence and erudition, he commented Aristotle and Plato, trying to reconcile their teachings in order to transmit the message of his life, namely the preeminence of philosophy over religion and the possibility of founding an ideal city in which the nomothetes would be a philosopher.

Ibn Khaldun: A learned jurist born in Tunis. He was the author of a monumental *Universal History*. He was the first Arab scholar, at the crossroads of sociology and anthropology, to consider History as a real science obeying its own rules governing the transition from the rural world (the Bedouins) to the city. He was critical of *isnad* and openly denounced the partisan viewpoint of the historiographers who preceded him and were too subservient to the ruling power and its interests.

Polybius: A general, a statesman and probably the greatest historian of his time. Among his many writings is a monumental *History*, a comprehensive survey in forty volumes only a small part of which has come down to us. Well acquainted with Roman institutions, he set up a typology of governments and made no secret of his preference for a mixed regime, which was taken up by a certain kind of modern republicanism, Machiavelli's and Harrington's in particular.

Thucydides: A Greek historian, the author of *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. He was considered as a precursor of the science of history because he linked all the events together from a general viewpoint, defining an overall meaning toward which all the facts, including the most secondary ones, converge.

Yaqubi: He was also a geographer. Author of a *History*, a treatise on universal history. Though not the precursor of this classical genre, he was the one who best expressed its universalist scope, as he did not content himself with exclusively recounting what related to the Islamic world, but equally dealt with the Patriarchs, Christ, the Apostles and India.

Tabari: He is the reference par excellence among Arab historians. In *The History of the Prophets and Kings*, he carefully recounted the events that took place during the first three centuries of the Hegira. His 'Chronicle' begins with the creation of the world and ends in 915. He was the first to systematize the method of *isnad*, while developing the classical form of Arab-Muslim historiography, the *khobar*. Facts were thus accounted for year by year once their authenticity was guaranteed. Each recorded fact is related to a chain of worthy transmitters, so that the historians who followed him took the facts he had recorded for granted without submitting themselves to the fastidious task of checking them.

So, those Hindu practices cannot be purely and simply refuted and denounced or described as quackery, although they are obviously preposterous, because a witness, both trustworthy and impervious to supernatural stories tried out the efficacy of the incantations of the charmers on his own person. The historian's impartiality is perfectly illustrated here.

Thus, while dealing with very delicate topics that were not tackled in Islam, the author of the *Book of India* recounted the religious customs of the heretics and pagans as though he was working as an entomologist, dissecting the beliefs and rites of the 'miscreants' without showing them as such in his account. For example, when he came to speak of the 'origins of Indian laws', he did not so much affirm their specificity – the fact that, unlike the monotheist religions in general and especially in Islam, they had not been formulated by a prophet – as show that, in this instance, the difference between monotheism and paganism is after all relative: '...they can dispense with prophets, as far as law and worship are concerned, *though in other affairs of the creation they sometimes want them.*'¹⁶

The benevolence that prevents al-Biruni from making value judgements stems from a profound wisdom, which bears witness to a profound knowledge of human nature. After describing the alleged pretentiousness of the Hindus, the historian makes this remark, at once terse and striking: '...the Hindus claim to differ from us, and to be something better than we, as we on our side, of course, do vice versa...'¹⁷

To note down the examples of this 'behavioural identity' is a leitmotiv with al-Biruni, present throughout the *Book of India*. Thus, for instance, referring to the Hindu predilection for charms and incantations already mentioned, al-Biruni writes: 'Sometimes the Hindus are considered as sorcerers because of their playing with balls on raised beams or on tight ropes, but tricks of this kind are common to all nations.'¹⁸

The preface to the *Book of India*, however, is perhaps even more indicative of the spirit of tolerance that motivates al-Biruni and definitely and unfailingly relates him to Herodotus, who prefers silence to judgement: "I have... written this book on the Hindus, never making any unfounded imputations against those, our religious antagonists, and at the same time not considering it inconsistent with my duties as a Muslim to quote their own words at full length when I thought they would contribute to elucidate a subject. If the contents of these quotations happen to be utterly heathenish, and the followers of the truth, i.e. the Muslims, find them objectionable, we can only say that such is the belief of the Hindus, and that they themselves are best qualified to defend it. This book is not a polemical one. I shall not produce the arguments of our antagonists in order to refute such of them as I believe to be wrong."¹⁹

By writing respectively about the non Greek Other and the non-Muslim Other, Herodotus and al-Biruni undoubtedly play the parts of transposers. As François Hartog rightly points out: 'there is a world in which one recounts and a world that is recounted; how to insert, in a convincing manner, the world being recounted into the world in which one recounts is the narrator's problem: he is confronted with the problem of transposition.'²⁰ At the same time, by refusing to reveal what intimately drives the Other, Herodotus and al-Biruni show us the possible difference between 'what can be translated' and 'what can be transposed', and clearly choose the latter. The fact is, what can be translated may turn out to be dangerous insofar as it carries along a treacherous ideal of purity and clarity and must therefore give way to what can be transposed, which implies an awareness of our differences and aims at doing them justice in the best possible way, perhaps precisely by accepting not to give an account of them. Nowhere did Herodotus manifest the least frustration about the silence he had chosen and fully assumed, because his behaviour was commanded by wisdom; if he insisted on his ethical *epokè* and often mentioned his decision to be silent, it was not out of an itching desire to speak, even as he was writing, but rather so that his reader would not be mistaken about his refusal to speak, but attribute to it the appropriate value of a very eloquent silence.

Similarly, al-Biruni never turned the evocation of the Hindus' 'oddities' into mocking denunciation. While he noted that those Hindus definitely 'changed their customs into the opposite',²¹ he did not tire of minimizing their differences whenever the opportunity occurred, so as not to put off the Muslim reader and make his encounter with the Other easier. This was the case for example with the comparison al-Biruni drew between Sanskrit and Arabic: he almost succeeds in convincing us that these are two dialects stemming from one common linguistic matrix! "We must ask the reader not to take any offence if he finds all the words and meanings which occur in the present chapter to be totally different from anything corresponding in Arabic. As for the difference of words, it is easily accounted for by the difference of languages in general; and as regards the difference of the meanings, we mention them only either in order to draw attention to an idea which might seem acceptable even to a Muslim, or point out the irrational nature of a thing which has no foundation in itself."²²

By showing that the dialogue between cultures and civilizations is an age-long necessity, that it is not only possible but highly advisable, because of the moral and material benefit everyone may draw from it, by insisting on the idea that certain questions had better be left unanswered for the happiness of humankind – for example which customs are best – Herodotus' and al-Biruni's sceptical humanism is among the most efficient antidotes against humankind's worst enemy: unacknowledged ignorance.



- > How is it that, although they drew on the Greek philosophers and scientists, the Arabs were unaware of historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides or tragedists such as Homer?
- > What, despite the gap of 15 centuries between Herodotus and al-Biruni were the similarities between the two historians as regards their destinies and their humanism?
- > How does the rational apprehension of history function in the two authors?
- > How do the two authors handle cultural differences?
- > What is the nature of al-Biruni's unexpected ecumenism?
- > What does the article's author rely on in linking "humanism" to a "symbolic dialogue" rather than to a "master-pupil relationship"?
- > In discussing the "religious phenomenon" and its "incommensurable" nature, what comparison does the article's author draw between the Greek historian and the Arab-Muslim philosopher al-Farabi?
- > How is "a historian's impartiality" shown in Herodotus's portrayal of the Persians and the Egyptians and al-Biruni's major work *The Description of India*?
- > What is the value of the silence of Herodotus and al-Biruni with regard to interpreting the customs of the non-Greek or non-Muslim Other?

¹ F.-C. Muth, 1992, *Zopyros bei den Arabern: Streiflichter auf ein Motiv Herodots in der arabischen Literatur*, vol. 33, pp. 230-267, p. 257.

² See F. Châtelet, 1996, *La naissance de l'histoire*, Vol. I, Paris, Seuil.

³ Herodotus, 2007, *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*, trans. A. L. Purvis, ed. R. B. Strassler, New York, Pantheon Books, VII-104, p. 537.

⁴ F. Châtelet, 1996, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁵ Herodotus, 2007, *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*, *op. cit.*, I, p. 3.

⁶ Herodotus, 2007, *op. cit.*, I, p. 3.

⁷ Châtelet, 1996, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Al-Biruni, 1910, *Alberuni's India*, ed. and trans. by E. C. Sachau, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Vol. 1, p. 50.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94; italics added.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7; italics added.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 321-322; italics added.

¹³ F. Châtelet, 1996, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

¹⁴ See Châtelet, 1996, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

¹⁵ Al-Biruni, 1910, *op. cit.*, chap. XVII, p. 194; italics added.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107; italics added.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, chap. XVI, p. 185.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, chap. XVII, p. 195; italics added.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Preface, p. 7.

²⁰ F. Hartog, 1980, *Le miroir d'Hérodote*, Paris, Gallimard, p. 225.

²¹ Al-Biruni, 1910, *op. cit.*, chap. XVI, p. 179.

²² *Ibid.*, chap. XXIV, p. 251.



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THE UNIVERSAL AND THE OTHER

CLOSE READING OF THE QURAN SHOWS THE CONCERN FOR UNIVERSAL JUSTICE IN WHICH ALL HUMAN BEINGS ARE INVITED TO SHARE, AS WELL AS THE CONCERN FOR RELATING THE EXISTENCE OF MAN TO A UNIVERSE AND NOT TO SOME LIMITED LOCATION. ACCESSING THE TRUTH IS ACKNOWLEDGED BY SUCH PHILOSOPHERS AS AL-KINDI AS THE ACCESSION TO A HISTORICAL PROCESS IN WHICH ALL THE NATIONS PARTICIPATE, AND IBN KHALDUN POINTS OUT THAT SCIENCES ARE STUDIED BY THE PEOPLE OF ALL RELIGIOUS GROUPS, THAT THEY HAVE EXISTED AND BEEN KNOWN TO THE HUMAN SPECIES SINCE CIVILIZATION HAD ITS BEGINNING IN THE WORLD. ON THE POLITICAL LEVEL, THE SEARCH OF THE VIRTUOUS CITY IS NOT RESTRICTED TO SUCH OR SUCH CIVILIZATION IN PARTICULAR, BUT IS TO DO WITH MAN AND HIS DISPOSITIONS. THESE DISPOSITIONS ARE NOT PSYCHOLOGICAL AND RELATED TO THE PERSONALITY OF ONE INDIVIDUAL. THEY ARE ON A HUMAN SCALE, NOT ON A CULTURAL SCALE. THE UNIVERSAL, WHETHER IT IS EMBODIED IN SCIENCE OR POLITICS, IS THE PATH ALL HUMAN BEINGS MUST FOLLOW, WHATEVER THEIR RELIGION. TO THINK THAT CIVILIZATIONS CARRY CONTRADICTIONARY MESSAGES THAT DRIVE THEM TO CLASH WITH ONE ANOTHER REVEALS A 'HOLY IGNORANCE' OF ARAB-MUSLIM CUSTOMS, TEXTS AND TRADITIONS.

It is only too well-known today that the theory of the shock of civilisations, conveyed by the actions and stands of the Muslim fundamentalists, was greatly detrimental to the image of Islam and its followers around the world. The idea slowly but surely crept into people's minds that Muhammad's religion, bloody and intolerant, was incapable of opening up to others and get out of its particularism in order to aim at universal values.

New texts have flourished, which trade in this idea and expose all the aspects of Islam's structural incapacity: not only have the Arabs never invented anything – the very concept of science is alien to them – but they cannot even pretend to the status of transmitters of knowledge that tradition usually ascribes to them: how could they have transmitted Aristotelian thinking to medieval Christendom when they knew nothing about Greek?

If there is ignorance, it would seem to be on the side of those who rewrite History. As early as the eighth century, indeed, the Arabs continuously brought their contribution to the universal by incredibly audaciously and precociously imagining the possibility of a world that that would be familiar to all its inhabitants, as they assimilated, transmitted and created knowledge. The scholars and the philosophers, but also the medieval Arab theologians, who quenched their thirst on the sources of Greek, Persian and Hindu experiences, tried their hand at a brilliant lesson in humanity – on a world-wide scale –which can only command one’s admiration.

Any attempt at examining the modalities and manifestations of the Arab-Muslim universal must necessarily ask whether this tradition holds elements likely to account for its pretensions to universality (I). When these elements have been tracked down, one should try to understand how the need for the universal concretely expressed itself (II) and how the Muslims met this need (III), be it in the ontological and gnoseological fields or in that of practical philosophy. Note that we will focus on how the Arabs received Greek knowledge, as a certain orientalist tradition unfortunately glossed over the Hindu and Persian sources from which the Arabs also quenched their thirst for knowledge.



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I. THE ELEMENTS OF UNIVERSALITY SPECIFIC TO THE ARAB-MUSLIM TRADITION

1. 'Les habitants du monde' [the inhabitants of the world] or 'The nations' versus 'les univers'

And We have not sent thee but as a mercy to the nations. (21: 107)

Nous ne t'avons envoyé que par miséricorde pour les habitants du monde [alamin]. (21: 107)

O Children of Israel, call to mind My favour which I bestowed on you and that I made you excel the nations. (2: 47; repeated in 2: 122)

Fils d'Israël, rappelez-vous Mon bienfait par Moi prodigué, et que Je vous ai élus sur les univers. (2: 47; 2: 122)

Most French translations of the Quran retain the cosmological dimension to convey the meaning of *alamin*; 'les univers' is thus the most widespread translation. Yet, the phrase 'les habitants du monde' (the inhabitants of the world), closer to the English translation 'the nations' (in other translations the worlds, the creatures, the peoples) is far from being unfounded: if indeed *alamin* is the plural form of *alam*, which means world or universe, it is hardly ever used. On the other hand, the choice of 'les habitants du monde' or 'the nations' is all the more legitimate as *alamin* as the plural form of *alamiyyun* is a very common form, with this meaning.

This kind of specialists' quarrel may sound vain, since the universal dimension is present whatever the word chosen: it would then refer either to an ontological (cosmological) universal or to an anthropological universal. But when one looks up the fifty-three occurrences of the term in the Quran, all supposed to refer to the addressees of the third monotheist religion and not simply designating all the existing worlds, what may have seemed unimportant becomes crucial. '*Alamin*' conveys the universal dimension of a religion destined for the whole of humanity. The anthropological dimension of the universal is, so to speak, more 'universalistic' than its cosmological or ontological version.

2. Vicegerency (istikhlaf) and moral dignity (karama)

And when thy Lord said to the angels, I am going to place a ruler in the earth, they said: Wilt Thou place in it such as make mischief in it and shed blood? And we celebrate Thy praise and extol Thy holiness. He said: Surely I know what you know not. (2: 30) (Translation Maulanna Muhammad Ali)

Recall that your Lord said to the angels, 'I am placing a representative (a temporary god) on Earth.' They said, 'Will You place therein one who will spread evil therein and shed blood, while we sing Your praises,

glorify You, and uphold Your absolute authority?' He said, 'I know what you do not know.' (Translation Khalifa)

Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: 'I will create a vicegerent on earth.' They said: 'Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood? – whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy (name)?' He said: 'I know what ye know not.' (Translation Yusuf Ali)

And your Lord said to the Angels: 'I am placing a successor on earth.' They said: 'Would You place in it those who would corrupt in it, and spill blood, while we sing Your glory, and praise You?' He said: 'I know what you do not know.' (Translation Progressive Muslims)

The concept of vicegerency is fundamental in Islam. One need only consult the writings on the subject to understand how decisive the different philological interpretations of the exegetes are for the very substance of the Muslim religion. Does *khalifa* mean a *representative* (Khalifa's translation) or the *successor* (Progressive Muslims) of God on Earth? According to whichever interpretation is chosen, one would seem to adhere to a more or less 'humanistic' conception of Islam. Indeed, if *khalifa* 'simply' refers to the representative of God on Earth, then man would only second God, depriving him of any creative power; he would be no more than a mere deputy in charge of a tempting mission in the absence of the authorized representative. Things would take a much different turn if the term came to mean 'successor' in the sense of the one who *substitutes* for someone else and thus permanently replaces him. 'Human freedom' would thus be 'saved' and a 'liberating transcendence' would be found - nothing less than that. From the beginning of the Quran to this day, the same philological quarrel between the rigorous (rigoristic?) supporters of Islamic orthodoxy and the upholders of some kind of opening (or abyss?) has been going full swing.

Yet those who try to prove the humanistic and universal character of Islam must not feel at a loss or disheartened, for, if the words say what they mean, the debate about 'representative' and 'successor' is absolutely vain. Indeed, besides the fact that the representative cannot possibly lack all possibility of manoeuvre, his freedom being 'a part of God's freedom', the word *khalifa* as it is used in the verse mentioned above is a generic singular: any human being, whoever he may be, is a vicegerent of God on Earth. This freedom, so much sought after by the followers of 'the succession interpretation' lies precisely in the universality of the *khalifa*. If all human beings, no matter what makes them be specific beings, have the same power and the same importance in the eyes of God, no one can claim to dictate to one's fellowmen how to behave or lead their lives. Each one of us is responsible before God. Freedom is a responsibility, and responsibility is universal. To obey does not mean not to be free, but to be free before the law, a law which establishes a universal justice. This link between universality and vicegerency is very well expressed

by Hodgson who sees in it the essence of Islam: 'For the Muslims,' he writes, 'human laws and customs are redirected towards universal justice; human beings, rescued from their petty negligence by their confrontation with the word of God, must act as God's vicars in all the created world.'¹

The concept of vicegerency is consolidated by that of *karama* (dignity) as it appears in the Quran: "And surely We have honoured (*karramna*) the children of Adam, and We carry them in the land and the sea, and We provide them with good things, and We have made them to excel highly most of those whom We have created." (17: 70)

By choosing human beings among all other creatures to represent him, God raised them to a higher dignity, as the use of the word *karramna* indicates. He endowed them with reason and free-will. But consequently, dignity is not 'simply' a matter of rank; it becomes actual moral dignity. Because human beings must

always be worthy of God's choice, they must without respite make sure to protect and preserve themselves.

However, the following question is raised: what are the roots and sources of this need for the universal that the Arabs show? How can one account for the effort made to exhibit the hermeneutic tensions of classical orthodoxy and at exploiting the resulting interplay in order to set up the prism through which to look at the word of God in a different, and possibly subversive, way? The extraordinary trend towards translation that developed in the Arab-Muslim Middle Ages provided the philosophers, the scholars and the learned people with the means of bringing to light the potential of universality concealed in their tradition, as well as the theoretical tools that enabled them to move from a logic of *justification* – whereby one endeavours to convince oneself of the possibility of *accepting* the *pagan* Greek, Persian and Hindu legacies – to a logic of *acceptation* – whereby one individually elaborates the elements of one's participation in the universal.

II. TRANSLATION: BETWEEN A CONCRETE NEED AND A SYMBOLIC ACT OF OPENING TO THE OTHER

Translation is one of the most fundamental manifestations of the universal. By opening the doors of their culture to the Greeks into their culture, the Arabs displayed the linguistic hospitality that is, according to Derrida, real hospitality. They managed to combine satisfying a material need of knowledge with strategic and utilitarian issues without losing sight of the human dimension of the endeavour, contrary to what some people today try to make us believe when they explain that Islam, among other things, spurned the Greek mind.

1. The context

There were two main factors in favour of the emergence of the trend towards translation developed by the Arabs between the eighth and the tenth century. *To start with*, the first Arab conquests during the Umayyad dynasty resulted in the political and administrative unification of the countries and peoples until then subject to Hellenization, thus creating a favourable environment for the exchange of knowledge. By bringing together under the single banner, by definition impartial, of Islam (and in particular by protecting the Greek speaking communities from the latent aversion to Hellenism that Byzantium had displayed since the seventh century), the Umayyad conquests favoured the peaceful cooperation of the scholars and learned people. Later, the accession of the Abbasids to the throne, thanks to the backing of the Persians among the population, and to the transfer of power from Damascus to Baghdad sparked off a trend towards translation that lasted for about two centuries.

2. Translating from a universalist viewpoint

Translating to learn and translating to transmit: this also partook of the universal for the Arabs. Indeed, the Muslim learned people, scholars, and theologians were first attracted by the universality of the Greek texts, that is the use they could make of them and the incommensurable benefit they could draw from them in their quest for knowledge, all kinds of knowledge.

The translation of Aristotle's *Topics* illustrates this perfectly. It was commissioned by the caliph al-Mamun, aware of the need for the Muslims to possess a manual enabling them to stand up to their 'miscreant' interlocutors experienced in the art of *disputatio*, but also conversant with the need for Muslim theologians to hone their rhetorical arms so that the internal jousting between the followers of different Islamic sects might acquire a truly argumentative dimension. All this shows that the Muslims had understood the universal scope of the art of rhetoric, just as valid for paganism as it is for Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The philosopher al-Kindi sums up perfectly the humanistic mind with which the Arabs apprehended the Greek Other: "We ought not to be ashamed of appreciating the truth and of acquiring it wherever it comes from, even if it comes from races distant and nations different from us. For the seeker of truth nothing takes precedence over truth, and there is no disparagement of the truth, no belittling either of him who speaks it or of him who conveys it. (The status of) no one is diminished by the truth; rather does the truth ennoble all."²

The great number of translated works, together with the different versions of a same text, translated two or three times, if not more, show how the love of truth,

Other times, other places

Claude Levi-Strauss and accepting the other

In his work Herodotus studied all men 'both the Greeks and the Barbarians.' With a universal open mind that was exceptional for that time, Herodotus showed an interest in the history of all peoples so that the achievements of humankind would not be forgotten. In order to underline the rigour of his historical analysis, Herodotus is often compared to Thucydides. But Herodotus was more interested in the beliefs, customs and manners of non-Greek people; in other words the 'other', and had no intention of establishing a hierarchy.

If universalism is fundamental in the Quran, interest in the 'other' as regards his cultural and religious differences was not particularly prominent in the Arab-Muslim world. Or so it is said in the West... But this would be to forget too quickly Europe's own history, marked by its Eurocentrism, especially since its rise towards the end of the Middle Ages. Europe began to colonize, and colonization was discussed and justified by the establishment of a hierarchy of races in the sixteenth century (see the Valladolid Debate¹, for example) then the development of a pseudo biological racism in the nineteenth century. For the conquistador and colonizer, the 'other' or the 'savage' had to be regarded as inferior...

It was not until very late in the twentieth century that people became aware of the problem. The work of Claude Levi-Strauss, in particular, was a great help here. The following two short extracts will help us to understand the spirit of his humanistic anthropology: the rejection of contempt and of the feeling of superiority, the recognition of the humanity of the 'other' and the interest he shows for him.

Here are two excerpts from his work indicating his viewpoint:

[American anthropologists] could leave their universities and visit native communities as easily as we could go to the Basque country or the Riviera. What I am praising is not an intellectual tradition but an historical situation. It must have been an extraordinary advantage to have access to communities which had never yet been the object of serious investigation and which were still quite well preserved, since their destruction had only just begun. Let me quote an anecdote to illustrate what I mean. An Indian, through some miracle, was the sole survivor after the massacre of certain savage Californian tribes. For years he lived unnoticed in the vicinity of large towns, still chipping stones for the arrowheads with which he did his hunting. Gradually, however, all the animals disappeared. One day the Indian was found naked and dying of hunger on the outskirts of a suburb. He ended his days peacefully as a porter at the University of California.

Claude Levi-Strauss, 1992, *Tristes tropiques*, London, Penguin, p.60.

*... Even ethnology in its infancy did not hesitate to arrange the people it was studying in classes separate from ours as close to nature, as implied by the etymology of the word 'savage' and, more explicitly, the German expression *Naturvölker*; or outside of history, when so called 'primitive' or 'archaic', another way to deny them a constituent attribute of the human condition.*

Ceremony of the sixtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution of UNESCO - Speech by Claude Levi-Strauss, November 16th 2005

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¹ The question was whether the Spanish could colonize the New World and dominate the Indians by right of conquest. The debate essentially pitted the Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas, who denounced the injustices and cruelties committed by the Spanish against the theologian Sepúlveda between 1550 and 1551.

which is the supreme universal, guided the Arabs in their scientific quest. There are thus at least three translations of Aristotle's *Topics*, three of Euclid's *Elements*, five translations of Ptolemy's *Almagest*. Nearly all the Greek Hellenistic works on optics were translated as early as the ninth century, notably thanks to the dynamism of such eminent figures as the philosopher al-Kindi and the Banu Musa brothers, mathematicians and patrons. They organized groups of translators who translated directly from the Greek nearly all the writings

on optics, geometry and astronomy that were available to them, from Euclid to Hero of Alexandria to Galen. It may be mentioned that today we know some of the writings of Apollonius, Diophant and Menelaus only in their Arabic translations, as the Greek original was lost; and while algebra was introduced into Europe thanks to al-Khawarizmi's famous *Algebra*, the development of research in algebra in the Renaissance was continued by his successors: Tusi, Samawal and Khayyam, to mention but three names.

III. ASSIMILATING AND SURPASSING EXOGENOUS ELEMENTS IN THE VARIOUS FIELDS OF PHILOSOPHY

1. Gnoseology

a. The Quranic roots

And when they meet those who believe they say, We believe, and when they are apart one with another they say: Do you talk to them of what Allah has disclosed to you that they may contend with you by this before your Lord? Do you not understand? (2: 76)

[...] there are surely signs for a people who understand. (2: 164)

The root *-q-l*, at the origin of the word *aql*, which means 'intellect', is used no less than forty-nine times in the Quran; although there are two other roots in Arabic that refer *specifically* to comprehension, namely *f-h-m* and *f-q-h*, these are only used once and five times respectively in the Quran. Thus, the root *-q-l*, which is *the only one* to refer strictly to the *reasoning* aspect of understanding, is by far the most frequent. 'The understanding suggested in the verbal forms elaborated from the *-q-l* root is based on reason, as opposed to an intuitive (*fahim*) or cognitive (*faqih*) form of comprehension.'³

b. The classification of sciences

As the famous fourteenth century historian Ibn Khaldun wrote: *"The intellectual sciences are natural to man, inasmuch as he is a thinking being. They are not restricted to any particular religious group. They are studied by the people of all religious groups who are all equally qualified to learn them and to do research in them. They have existed (and been known) to the human species since civilization had its beginning in the world. They are called the sciences of philosophy and wisdom. They comprise four different sciences [logic, physics, metaphysics, measurements, comprising four different mathematical sciences: geometry, arithmetic, music and astronomy]."*⁴

While the repeated appeals to the intellect in the Quran show that the concept of rationality is certainly not foreign to Islam, Ibn Khaldun's reasoning underlies the theory of an Islamic rationality: Islam and reason cannot be incompatible since reason is universal, and so is science, which is the ultimate manifestation of reason. Because nothing can prevent human beings from thinking and exercising their reason, science cannot be the privilege of a single religion, culture or tradition. Six centuries before Ibn Khaldun, his peers had already got the full measure of this by elaborating their list of scientific terms.

The classifications of sciences, that is the systematic representation of the different branches of knowledge according to a regulating principle testify to the metaphysical approach of their authors as much as to the state of the different fields of knowledge at the time. Thus, the philosophers and scholars, from al-Kindi to Ibn Khaldun, but also the theologians like I-Ghazali each set up their own classifications. Though they still relied greatly on Aristotelian logic, the Arabs were no doubt the first to consider it to be a model of rationality, in what was a true form of panlogism. This can be seen in al-Kindi's desire to set up a rigorous method of reasoning inspired by Euclid's work and Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, among others, in order to tackle the theological issues of his time.

• Al-Farabi

In his *The Book of the Enumeration of the Sciences* – translated into Latin by Gerard of Cremona in the twelfth century – al-Farabi remained faithful to the Aristotelian classification though he slightly diverged from it. Thus, he extended the nomenclature elaborated by the Great Master by including in it not only the linguistic sciences but also authentically Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), rational theology (*kalam*) – considering that each religion has its own *kalam* – and political science. Al-Farabi's inventory was taken up in its broad

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

<p><u>Understanding the text</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the theory of “the clash of civilizations”? • What is the outstanding contribution of Arab culture to universal culture? • Does the Quran speak to the whole of humanity? • What are the different meanings of the term khalifa? • For what reasons were Greek works translated into Arabic between the eighth and tenth centuries? • How does the Quran encourage reasoning? • What were the innovations of Islam in the classification of sciences? • What is the importance of the concept of “acquired intellect”? • What is the significance of the distinction between “eternal creation” and “creation ex nihilo”? • On what does Miskawaih base the contention that man is a social being? • How can al-Farabi think that happiness is to be found in this life? • Explain the five rights underpinning the moral dignity of man. • What is the function of the <i>milla</i> for al-Farabi? 	<p><u>Educational exercises</u></p> <p>Simulation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divide the participants up into subgroups of five or six persons. • Explain that each group is a team of historians. • Set each group to work on a different historical fact (a war, a revolution, a scientific or technological innovation ...). • Each group lists all the key elements needed to understand their historical fact. • Ask each group to present their historical facts and the key elements used to analyse them. • Ask them also to read the worksheet “Herodotus and al-Biruni: the power of commonality”. • Ask each group to compare their lists of key elements with the elements referred to in the texts; what similarities are there, what differences?
<p><u>Entering into dialogue with the text</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think that civilizations stand in opposition to one another? • Are all forms of universalism ideologically marked? • Can Islam claim to be universal? • Are religions always community-based? • Must what is particular always be in opposition to what is universal? • Can a European identify with Arab culture? • Does the Quran speak to everyone? • Can modern Islam draw on medieval sources? <p>Suggested teaching method: critical analysis</p> <p>The group is divided up into three-person teams. One or more questions are chosen. Each team writes down the team’s joint answer to the questions chosen. One after the other, each team reads out its answers to the entire group. Each team collectively selects three answers that it wishes to criticize and writes down its criticism. The criticisms are read out to the entire group. Each team prepares its answers to the criticisms it has received. The answers are read out. If possible, begin again with other questions. The group reviews the work and the exercise.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the group to discuss the following questions: • What choices of key elements would have been compatible with the historical approaches identified by Herodotus? • What choice of key elements would have been compatible with the historical approaches of Arab-Muslim historians? • What are the consequences for Arab-Muslim civilization of the different historical approaches? • How do these compare with the historical and anthropological approaches of other civilizations? • According to the participants, what is universal and what is particular?

lines by all the following philosophers (even though the Brothers of Purity, for example, claimed to be Pythagoreans rather than Aristotelians, and subordinated logic to mathematics), with, up to Ibn Hazm, two recurring features: the separation between traditional sciences and rational sciences on the one hand, and on the other hand the systematic absence of history from either of these two categories. What changed was the place attributed to each genre, as well as the nature of the attempts made at reconciling them.

• *Ibn Hazm*

Ibn Hazm and his *Epistle on the Categories of the Sciences* initiated a real change in the apprehension of what is scientific in the classical bipartition. Ibn Hazm claimed that any rational science can only be valid according to one single criterion, which is its usefulness in after life. Thus, he considered that mathematics, logic and metaphysics were only useful in this world, and he substituted religious science to metaphysics, as being the only science capable of guiding us for afterlife; as for history, it certainly could assist religious science in its effort, since Muslim history was the most reliable of all histories.

But concomitantly, Ibn Hazm clearly stated that there were four sciences about which *all* nations agreed: astronomy, mathematics, medicine and philosophy (which included logic and metaphysics). Thus, the idea that science could be universal, that all the nations could have a common conception of the world, were it purely formal, that philosophy itself might constitute a focal point within the diversity of cultures, languages and religions, was far from being trivial matter.

• *Ibn Khaldun*

With Ibn Khaldun, the notion of universality was further extended. A scholar and a historian, he wrote an account of the state of human knowledge in his *Muqaddima*, distinguishing the sciences of the *millat* (the community as a *religious* community, that is, *Islamic*), from the rational sciences and from irrational skills (magic, astrology...). By elaborating an authentic sociology of knowledge, he connected the development of sciences to urban civilisation (*imran*), and made this connection the linchpin/crucial of his conception of history. To Ibn Khaldun, historical science was the science of human change and development. This 'new science', at the crossroads of anthropology and sociology, borrowed from reason and tradition but curtailed the classical vision of historiography that had prevailed until then: the *taqlid* ('imitation', that is dogmatic traditionalism), consisting in reproducing identically from generation to generation the narratives inherited from the past. In this respect, it was emblematic of the desire to see in particular events the manifestation of something that surpassed them and, as such, gave them the intelligibility that made them worth recording: it was the beginning of historical rationality.

c. The theory of the intellect and rational psychology

Medieval Arab philosophers borrowed from Aristotle the idea of the partition of the soul and his theory of knowledge, but they departed from him on the question of intellection, as they put an end to an ambiguity as to the status of the immanent or the transcendent agent intellect.

The Arab-Muslim philosophers set up Aristotle's theory into a system by clarifying the process of intellection. To do so, they took great pains to specify the role of acquired intellect (*mustafad*) by using the theory of Alexander of Aphrodisias, the 'second Aristotle'. They all (up to Ibn Tufayl) insisted on the transcendence of the agent intellect.

Set between the intellect in act and the agent intellect, the acquired intellect as it is described by al-Farabi for instance, has the function of reducing the qualitative gap between an extraordinary being, the prophet who receives revelation, and the philosopher. Indeed, the claim that *only* the Prophet can have access to metaphysical truths follows from the fact that he is the *only* one who can perceive them *thanks to his powerful imagination* (they are subsequently transferred directly to the agent intellect for intellection). The philosopher, for his part, can reach the same result as the prophet thanks to the acquired intellect, that is, really, but his own means, without the help of such exceptional imagination as the prophet's.

Averroes (Ibn Rushd) went even further than al-Farabi and set all men on the same level: prophets, philosophers and ordinary people can all gain knowledge of metaphysical truths. He was thus the only Muslim philosopher to postulate the immanence of the agent intellect, placing the access to knowledge within the sublunar world. Locating access to knowledge the way he did was a crucial step: it radically did away with the idea that there were two ways of knowing, a religious one and a philosophical one, and consequently, in fact, with all the tradition that had prevailed until then and aimed at harmonising and reconciling the two teachings. For Averroes, while reason could account for itself and for prophecy, it did not work the other way round. Reason is all the more universal than prophecy as prophecy can provide us with no *vademecum* likely to guide us towards *eudaimonia*: it cannot teach us about God, the universe, creation, even less about the human soul.

Ibn Rushd's position was unequivocal: nature did not 'elect' a part of humanity whom it endowed with the Knowledge of all things, at the expense of the rest of humanity, 'condemned' to studying to learn theoretical sciences. The reason for this was simple: why should there be such discrimination, when all human beings, without exception, possessed the mental faculties required to access theoretical knowledge? And he also added that nature could not be redundant: it would be absurd to think that it had shown boundless generosity towards a certain number when each and all of us might access theoretical knowledge by their own means without the help of anyone – be it nature.

2. Ontology and cosmology

a. Ontology

When it came to translating, that is to transposing, the Greek *estin*, the *falasifa* were faced with a major lexicological difficulty: since there was no copula in Arabic, how were they to think out and elaborate a theory of being when the word itself, and consequently the concept, did not exist?

The first one to think about the question would seem to have been al-Kindi. He conveyed the notion of *estin* by the transliteration *ays*, and the absence of being by adding to *ays* the privative prefix used in classical Arabic, *la*, which gives *laysa*, habitually used in Arabic to refer to nothingness or the absence of being. By giving a clearly Greek etymology to a notion central to both metaphysics and religion, al-Kindi opened the way for a philosophical tradition relying on these philological elements to found the concept of *being*.

Al-Farabi was the one responsible for the founding of the concept. Following al-Kindi, he wrote in his *Book of Letters* that no word could be found in everyday Arabic to translate exactly the Greek (and Persian) copula, while in Syriac or Sogdian, for instance, one could find 'a term used to designate all things without this term characterizing one thing more than another. And the term is used to indicate the link between the predicate and what is predicated' (First part, § 80). The problem, al-Farabi admitted, was that 'the term is necessarily required when dealing with theoretical sciences and the art of logic' (ibid., § 83).

Al-Farabi suggested two solutions to solve the problem: either to use the word *huwa* (a pronoun) to stand for the copula, or *mawjud* ('the existent'). While the point of the first option is that it is close to the structure of the classical Arabic clause, that is the nominal clause, its use as a copula cannot be systematic, on account of the possible confusions between this specific use and the use of the word *huwa* as a pronoun – which it is in the first place. The big problem with the second option is that it leads to the formulation of sentences that do not make sense in Arabic, because there is no avoiding its nature as a derivative noun (*masdar*). The true solution, al-Farabi claimed, was to use one option or the other according to the type of utterance.

Such a way of apprehending the lexicological difficulty testifies once again to the Arabs' amazing ability to integrate the Greek universal into their culture and, by doing so, to reinvent it, even though it seemed impossible to take up the challenge.

But there was probably more to it. By solving this problem of terminology, the *falasifa* gave themselves the conceptual means of establishing an onto-theology whose modalities were to be defined by the delicate transfer between Islamic orthodoxy and the Greek legacy, which owed much to Plotinus.

How was existence to be accounted for without affecting the fundamental dogma of monotheism in general and Islam in particular, namely creation *ex nihilo*? What seemed impossible to achieve was solved

by a certain philosophical tradition that qualified creation with a different attribute, equally divine: eternity. Thus, by replacing the notion of creation *ex nihilo* by that of eternal creation, the emphasis was shifted to make room for the notion of existence.

How was that possible? It is a fair question: since God creates out of nothing and from time immemorial, how can the existence of *x* be accounted for, which by definition implies a determined moment *m* when *x* occurs? The idea is in fact to assert the eternity of existence and at the same time understand this eternity as a power in the Aristotelian sense of the word, a power that may or may not *effectively* befall beings thanks to a divine *fiat*.

One can assess the amazing tour de force accomplished by the Arab-Muslim philosophers: according to the emanatist theory they defend, beings proceed from the divine for all eternity; his creation is a 'simple' manifestation of his liberality, that is, of his perfection. Conceiving of existence as an ever present power, a power that may or may not be activated by divine liberality, the philosophical theories of al-Farabi or Avicenna preserve the notion of a God creating out of nothing but manage to give human beings a privileged place.

It would certainly be quite wrong to deduce from the possibility of existence, that is, from the fact that it may or may not befall being, that its nature is accidental. It is quite the opposite. For if what befalls being depends on divine will, the cause is *just as necessary* as what is caused. As Avicenna puts it in the *Book of Healing* (Metaphysics, I)⁵: 'the existence of a cause is necessarily related to the existence of its cause, and the existence of what is caused results necessarily from the existence of its cause'. This incredibly subversive assertion resulting from the need to reconcile philosophy and religion may boil down to a simple yet fundamental creed: if God gives existence to beings when he knows he could have chosen not to do so, then awareness of one's existence is what must define human beings in the first place. Avicenna was very eloquent on this subject: even if human beings were in such a situation as to lose all touch with what surrounds them, they would still and in spite of everything retain the feeling of their own existence.

With Avicenna, religion deliberately surpassed itself and tended towards a kind of existentialism long before the word existed: if what defines us, as a divine gift, is existence, then nothing else really matters much. 'Surpassing itself' does not mean annihilating itself: the fact that what necessarily unites all of us to a man is our condition as existents is after all a way of paying homage to the divine *karramna*, as it elaborates a proto-conception of the human being.

In this sense, the notion of the universal inevitably results from a readjustment of the word of God from a philosophical viewpoint.

However, it is essential to stress the fact that the emanatist soil in which Avicenna's thinking is rooted does not account for all the Arab-Muslim approaches to being and the One. Indeed, Averroes worked towards ridding Aristotelianism of all neo-Platonic elements,

showing that Being can be attributed to all things. Since there is only one word to refer to unity and diversity, the sublunar world may be considered as independent and an autonomous science of nature may be created. By substituting the homonymous conception of being to the analogical conception, the philosopher from Cordoba showed his definite will to restore to favour the properly human sublunar world, and paved the way for Galileo and Bacon.

b. Cosmology

The Arabs' cosmology, that is, their way of apprehending and representing the world, fell within the general frame of their vision of being, which was the emanatist frame. Indeed, according to al-Farabi, an heir to the neo-Platonic tradition, the world was only a hierarchical organisation of intellects that, as they engendered one another thanks to intellection (*taaqqu*), gave birth to a soul (*nafs*), which in its turn generated a celestial sphere (*falak*). Thus, when the One comprehended its own essence, it produced the first intellect; as the latter in turn comprehended itself, it produced the celestial orb, and by comprehending the One it produced the second intellect. This process goes steadily on to the tenth intellect, which was the agent intellect, setting the inferior boundary of the supra-lunar world.

The first two intellects were at the origin of the celestial spheres: the 'first heaven' and the 'heaven of the fixed stars', while the other seven generated the seven planets that were known at the time. The souls of the spheres, for their part, produced matter in the sublunar world, according to God's will, and endowed it with psychic faculties. According to the way these faculties interacted (and came into conflict), forms were elaborated, which represented the last stage before the creation of beings, as a combination of matter and form from the simplest (minerals) to the most elaborate (human beings).

One needs to bear in mind that what may rightly again have seemed to be a way of reconciling philosophy and religion was in fact far more subversive: in fact, it had to do with making as much room as possible for science and philosophy by showing that if they could give rise to a rational explanation of the world, then it was quite legitimate to use reason to apprehend all the different aspects of being. Thus, even though the fact that God was the origin of everything and created all things from nothing out of pure generosity did not exempt one from considering creation rationally, by imagining a series of intellects driven by a First Motor (which the Arab-Muslim philosophers followers of Plotinus preferred to call the One) ruling over the universe, the purpose of the philosophers went well beyond a scientific-philosophical apprehension of the world, and aimed at achieving the systematic use of one tool: reason. By rationalising Islamic cosmology, the Arab philosophers reinterpreted in their own way the Greek transition from *mythos* to *logos* as a transition from the particular to the universal.

3. Practical philosophy

a. The idea of happiness, between worldly perfection and ultimate felicity

Happiness as the supreme goal of human beings: the case of Miskawayh

In his most important book, the *Tahdhib*, Miskawayh insisted on the idea that men were social and sociable beings by nature and needed their fellowmen to achieve perfection, that is, happiness: "Among all the animals, man is the only one unable to ensure the perfection of his essence all by himself. He needs the help of a great many people for his life to be perfectly pleasant and for everything to go well for him. This is why philosophers say that man is by nature a political animal. In other words, he needs a city with its inhabitants in order to thoroughly enjoy human happiness... [His fellowmen] indeed, ensure the perfection of his essence and put the finishing touches to his humanity. He, in his turn, ensures that they will achieve the same ends."⁶

While Miskawayh's ethics naturally follows the Aristotelian tradition of human beings as being political by essence, it is however more than that. The originality of the Arab philosopher lies in the way he keeps hammering out the boundless sociability of human beings, so much so that he considers religion as a mere instrument for living together: "Maybe religious law prescribed that they should gather in their mosques five times a day, maybe it valued congregational prayer (*salat al-jamaa*) more than individual prayer (*salat al-ahad*) only to bring this potential sociability to actuality..."⁷

Thus, what matters most is being together and the point of religion is to provide individuals with the opportunity to meet and get together everyday. Could there be a better lesson in humanism?

Al-Farabi: the dissolution of classical bipartition?

We still have to show that the search of earthly happiness is just as worthy as the longing for ultimate felicity. One of the most interesting attempts on the matter was al-Farabi's: "Now Socrates, Plato and Aristotle are of the opinion that human beings have two lives. One is constituted by nutriments and the rest of the external things we require daily for our constitution, and it is the primary life. The other is the one whose constitution is in its essence without having need of external things for constituting its essence. Rather, it is sufficient unto itself for maintaining [its] preservation and is the final life."⁸

In this extract, Aristotle is not only associated to Plato, but also to Socrates, in the context of a 'concordist doctrine' asserting their common belief in a life after death: it is the perfect paradigm of a terse, authoritative argument, which is based on no precise reference and associates three figures of ancient wisdom in a single sentence. Behind it all, in the background, there lies of course a will to show that philosophy and religion are not contradictory: for that matter, it is interesting to note how 'religiously philosophical' the definition of the ultimate life is: the terminology used is authentically philosophical (he

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



- > *How does the author assess “the clash of civilizations” and its relationship with “Islamic fundamentalism”?*
 - > *Establish a connection between the concepts of freedom, responsibility and universality in the Arab-Muslim tradition.*
 - > *What was the impact of the enterprise of translating the Greek heritage into Arabic?*
 - > *What was the view of the universality of reason and science held by some Muslim authors?*
 - > *Evaluate al-Farabi’s innovation in his inventory of sciences.*
 - > *Ibn Khaldun introduces rationality into the study of history.*
 - > *Ibn Rushd (Averroes): all humans are capable of rising to metaphysical knowledge.*
 - > *From Greek ontology to Islamic ontotheology.*
 - > *How can religion and philosophy be reconciled?*
 - > *How are religion and “living together” combined in Islam?*
 - > *Charter of human dignity in Islam.*
 - > *How does al-Farabi portray the “virtuous city”?*
 - > *The links between particularism, universalism and diversity.*
 - > *Consensus through cross-referencing, an antidote to fundamentalism.*
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refers to the 'essence' of ultimate life) and there is no specifically Islamic (in the religious sense of the term) connotation in al-Farabi's explication.

No wonder then if Ibn Tufayl could write that 'Farabi placed ultimate felicity here below.' However, and without going that far – the Commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* Ibn Tufayl referred to is still nowhere to be found – one can safely suggest that the Second Master opted for 'the strong version of conciliation': happiness exists *hic et nunc*, but also in the afterlife, since ultimate felicity reinforces earthly felicity. Thus, it is quite possible to pursue the happiness of 'primary life' and enjoy the happiness the ultimate life has in store for us.

b. The five practical universals

Using the concepts of *alamin*, *istikhlaf* and *karama* (see above), some theologians distributed the moral dignity thus defined into five primary 'rights', described as original rights – since the Arabic word used to refer to these rights is *usul*, which conveys the Greek idea of *archè*, but also means 'principle' (in the logical and metaphysical sense), 'foundations' (in the gnoseological and epistemological sense) and 'elements' (in the mathematical and chemical sense).

These rights are at once necessary, categorical and universal. They are: the protection of religion, of the soul, of reason (that is the right to education and culture), of material belongings, of honour. They belong to what Muslim law calls undetermined interest (*maslaha mursala*), in other words, that on which Islamic orthodoxy (the Quran and the *Sunna*) has not expressed an opinion. The Muslims, however, have felt the need to elaborate a minimal charter in which are recorded the incommensurable aspects of human dignity and humanity from a consequentialist (*maqasidi*) rather than simply foundationist (*asli*) viewpoint. It means that the Muslims, for example the theologians Shatibi or Juwayni, give themselves the means to understand universality from a teleological perspective, in relation to what is good, useful or bad, harmful, and not only in literally doctrinal terms – which considerably widens the range of universality, even if one remains within the frame of conformity to the Law (*sharia*).

Sceptics might suggest that it is an objectivist conception of human law (God's Law endows and human law subsequently guarantees the endowment), so that speaking of human rights would be inappropriate. Though it is true, it is incorrectly anachronistic: those were the Middle Ages, and it was only with Modernity that the notion of subjective rights arose. In this sense, Arab theologians did their best, given the intellectual context at the time. By elaborating a series of practical universals that continued Islamic orthodoxy, Shatibi confirmed that Arab-Muslim civilization could not be ignorant of humankind. It certainly is quite significant that the twentieth century Muslim philosophers should have referred to this kind of approach to elaborate an 'Islamic declaration of human rights' (in the mid 1980s). In fact, as early as the 1930s and 1940s, progressive reformers, like Tahar Ben Achour in Tunisia, chose the consequentialist school to lay the foundations of a tolerant and open Islam.

c. The best political regime

The issue of the best political regime and of the ideal city has been the classical issue of ancient practical philosophy since Herodotus. Mastering the Platonic classification of political regimes as it was expressed in book 7 of *The Republic*, the medieval Arab philosophers devised the best political regime by harmonizing Plato's theories and the Arab-Muslim tradition. Thus, in *The Attainment of Happiness*, al-Farabi identified the king, the legislator, the philosopher and the guide (imam), insisting on the non-religious connotation of the last term: "In Arabic, it only means he whose example is to be followed and who is welcome, in the sense that his perfection is welcome, his purpose is welcome." (Section 57, [43])

Similarly, in his Aphorisms, the Second Master combined the Platonic tripartition of the city with certain typically Islamic characteristic features, though he did so in a subversive way. He enumerated as follows five classes in the virtuous city: "There are five parts of the virtuous city: the virtuous, the linguists, the assessors, the warriors, and the money makers. The virtuous are the wise, the prudent, and those who have opinions about major matters. Then there are the transmitters of the creed and the linguists; they are the rhetoricians, the eloquent, the poets, the musicians, the scribes, and those who act in the same way as they do and are among their number. The assessors are the accountants, the engineers, the doctors, the astronomers, and those who act in the same way as they do. The warriors are the combatants, the guardians, and those who act in the same way as they do and are counted among them. The moneymakers are those who earn money in the city, like the farmers, herders, merchants, and those who act in the same way as they do."⁹

It may be noted that the fifth class corresponds to Plato's craftsmen, while the fourth corresponds to the class of guardians; note also that to refer to the 'warriors' al-Farabi used the word *mujahidun*, in which the root *jihad* is easily recognizable, most certainly because he intended to forestall the suspicion that Greek thinking might contradict the precepts of Islam. As for the first three classes, they corresponded to the Platonic class of leaders.

Yet the most interesting feature lies in the detailed account of the first two classes. Al-Farabi placed the philosophers, the wise people, *before* the religious people, who were counted alongside the rhetoricians and the poets. In view of Plato's hatred for the latter, one understands that the Second Master, a follower of Thrasymachus' method, intended to communicate to his readers an implicit message. The hierarchical organization set up by al-Farabi is indeed confirmed by the central theory that he developed, the idea that philosophy comes *before* religion, the latter to be understood merely as an imitation (*muhakat*) of the former. Being totally ignorant of the art of demonstration, religion could only expound by means of images the truths that philosophy attained through a rigorous argumentative process.

Forestalling the transcendence of religion by showing it came chronologically after philosophy and was symbolically subordinated to it represented a fundamental stage on the way to universality.

d. Consensual Cosmo-politics

The quest for universality was also defined in strictly political terms. To al-Farabi, if philosophy aims at searching for happiness, it must not do so with merely determining the means of ensuring the happiness of the city, but it must aim at promoting that of the inhabited world (*mamura*). According to al-Farabi, the home, the neighbourhood, the city and the nation were characterized by the incompleteness of the happiness that developed there, while the *mamura* was defined by the achievement of human perfection. This was without a doubt both a philosophical and a politico-religious definition of the imperial (and thus caliphal) reality of Islam.

The Second Master went even farther: according to him, each city had its own *milla*, the common fundamental set of symbols and images intended to guide the masses on the way to acquiring a certain amount of knowledge, and by doing so, to make them into a real community. To realize this is also to admit that it is really possible to understand one another, in spite of the diversity of the *milal*: our neighbours may not share our beliefs and convictions but their differences are in fact merely *symbolic*. It is on the principle of mediation and on its *raison d'être* that we are universally in agreement: the truth cannot be put into the hands of those who are unable to understand it. In this, al-Farabi followed Plato's teaching, which was tinged with saving caution. In his *Summary of Plato's Laws* he wrote: "*The wise Plato did not allow himself to reveal and disclose sciences to everyone. That is why he chose to resort to symbols, riddles, obscurity and difficulty so that science may not fall into the hands of those who are not fit for it ... In that, he was right.*"¹⁰

That truth, al-Farabi said, must be left aside, if we all wish to understand one another. Thanks to the *milla*, al-Farabi managed to deal with particularism as well as universalism and diversity of his time.

To consider the Second Master as our contemporary is clearly to acknowledge that the Arabs have 'contributed their share of universality' over the centuries. The same could be said about Averroes, who systematized al-Farabi's cosmo-political intuitions by giving them a noetic basis. Indeed, by apprehending the agent intellect as 'of all things among men, the most equally distributed', by putting everyone on an equal footing and sending revelation and prophecy back where they belong – that is in the hearts of believers – the Cordoban philosopher enabled the supporters of a correctly understood universalism to identify a certain number of elements in favour of a cross-cultural dialogic ethics. Thus, when the contemporary Italian philosopher Augusto Illuminati (Illuminati is a follower of Dante, who had been much influenced by Averroes) elaborated his theory of general intellect ('common' or 'public' intellect are exact synonyms), he considered Averroes' material intellect as the 'prehistory'¹¹ of the concept, the fundamental and primary intuition of a 'transpersonal mechanism of thought'.¹² Indeed, the material intellect alone, 'at work everyday in all human beings, provides the universal principles and concepts that are common to the species as a whole'.¹³ Thus, since we are, in spite of our diversity, endowed with the same capacity to represent, we cannot but eventually get on with one another: if we do not interpret intelligible data in the same way because of our particularisms and differences, *we can still understand that others may think differently from us*, because we are rooted in the same base.

At a time when the multicultural societies strive as best they can to handle the diversity that develops within them and craves recognition, a discourse inspired by al-Farabi and Averroes is a highly topical one and gives us reasons for hope.



SUMMARY

I. The Greek process of elaboration of the universal



II. Universal elements in the Arab-Muslim tradition



III. Manifestations of the Arab-Muslim universal

as the conjunction of two forms of translation and transposition that follow each other in time, each however logically presupposing the other: the translation of the Greek universal into Arabic (I) and the transposition of the Greek universal into the Arab-Muslim civilization (II)

Ontology (*wujud*); Cosmology; Anthropology (proto-conception of the individual); Epistemology (classification of sciences) + Gnoseology (theory of the intellects) + Prophetology (*nbuwwa*); Practical philosophy (Ethics, Politics, *Fikh*); Cosmopolitics: al-Farabi's *mamura*; Philosophy of history: Ibn Khaldun.

The ancient and medieval universal was elaborated respectively by the Egyptians, the Phenicians, the Babylonians, the Greek, the Romans, the Muslims, the Chinese, the Hindus and the Latins but held in common by them all.

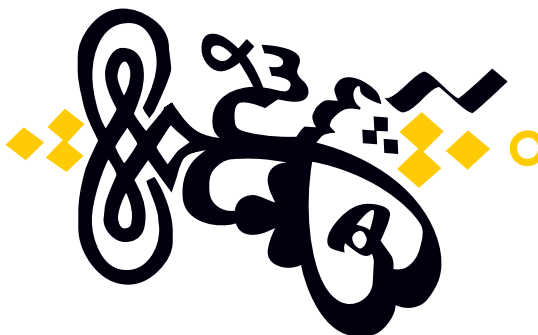
CONCLUSION

To conclude, it may be necessary to say a few words about the relationship between globalisation and universality, in order to dismiss, without taking sides, both the Western supporters of the theory of the clash of civilizations and the Muslim fundamentalists with missionary impulses, and to fully make of al-Farabi our genuine contemporary. While the former try to make us believe in the structural incapacity of Islam to produce universals, the latter would like to convey the idea that there can be no universality outside the 'globalized' (O. Roy) and uniform Islam of the *Ummah*, gathering believers beyond their geographical, historical and cultural diversity. Either way, they are mistaken as to the very definition of universality.

The former overlook the importance of globalization as a structuring phenomenon; they mistake fundamentalism for essentialism, and disregard the fact that

many people today, who are the offspring of post-modernity, define themselves by asserting the particularisms of their identity without however lapsing into hatred of the Other. By paying little attention to cultures, loyalties and other belongings, they deny the possible existence of a universal feature within each particularity. As for the latter, they excessively surf the crest of the 'wave of globalization' and mistakenly and prejudicially identify the universal and the globalized: Islam can only be universal through globalization, that is, if a single set of rules and precepts is set up for all the Muslims of the planet (and the others).

But the one principle universality can best be compared to is the commonness whose importance was taught by Averroes eleven centuries ago, and which might herald a sort of 'cross-checking consensus' thanks to which the particular would find its true place.



¹ M. G. S. Hodgson, 1999, *L' Islam dans l'histoire mondiale*, Paris, Actes Sud, p. 120. (Sindbad)

² Al-Kindi, 1974, *Metaphysics* [a translation of al Kindi's treatise *On First Philosophy*] ed. and trans. by A. L. Ivry, Albany, State University of New York Press, p. 57.

³ P. Büttgen, A. de Libra, M. Rashed, I. Rosier-Catach (dir.), 2009, *Les Grecs, les Arabes et nous. Enquête sur l'islamophobie savante*, Paris, Fayard, p. 110.

⁴ Ibn Khaldun, 1989, *Book One of the Kitab al-Ibar*, in *The Muqaddimah*, trans. by F. Rosenthal, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 371.

⁵ See Ibn Sina [Avicenna], 1978, *La métaphysique du shifa*, ed. and trans. into French by G. C. Anawati, Paris, Vrin, Vol. 1, p. 212.

⁶ Miskawayh, 1959, *Tadhib al-akhlaq wa tathir al-araq* [The Cultivation of Morals and the Purity of Dispositions], Cairo, Maktabat Muhammad Ali Sabih. This refers to the new edition by C. Zurayk, 1966, Beirut, Maktabat al-Hayat, p. 46. For an English translation see Miskawayh, 1968, *The Refinement of Character*, trans. by C. Zurayk, Beirut: American University of Beirut.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Al-Farabi, 2001, *The Political Writings: Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts*, trans. by C. Butterworth, Cornell University Press, Aphorism 28, p. 25.

⁹ Al-Farabi, 2004, *The Political Writings...*, op. cit., Aphorism 57, p. 37.

¹⁰ See Al-Farabi, *Talhis kitab nawamis Aflatun*, § 2, 1-3. Quoted in al-Farabi, 2003, *Aphorismes choisis*, trans. by S. Mestiri and G. Dye, Paris, Fayard, p. 23.

¹¹ See A. Illuminati, 2003, *Del comune. Cronache del general intellect*, Rome, Manifestolibri, p. 8.

¹² Ibid., p. 7.

¹³ Ibid., p. 25.



I have only one light in the darkness, and it is love © Calligraphy by Karim Jaafar

THE SEARCH FOR THE TRUTH

THE NOTION OF TRUTH IS CLOSELY RELATED TO THAT OF WISDOM IN THE ARAB-MUSLIM WORLD. AMONG THE NINETY-NINE NAMES OF GOD ARE THOSE OF 'WISE' AND 'TRUTHFUL'. THUS, IF PHILOSOPHY IS A FORM OF WISDOM, IT IS ALSO A SEARCH FOR THE TRUTH.

IT RESORTS TO DEMONSTRATION IN ORDER TO ATTAIN THOSE TRUTHS THAT RELIGION PRESENTS IN A FIGURATIVE WAY, BY MEANS OF PARABLES AND EXAMPLES. PHILOSOPHY IS THUS JUSTIFIED BY RELIGION ITSELF, FOR THE HOLY TEXT ENJOINS MAN TO SEEK THE KNOWLEDGE OF THINGS WITH TRUTH.

THE HISTORICAL PROCESS OF TRUTH IS EMBODIED NOW IN RELIGIOUS TEXTS, NOW IN PHILOSOPHICAL TEXTS. IT IS FOR MAN TO RELATE THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF THE TRUTH SO THAT IT MAY BE ACKNOWLEDGED IN ITS UNITY THROUGH ITS VARIOUS PRESENTATIONS.

WISDOM: A PHILOSOPHICAL STRATEGY

Jean Jolivet was able to show that Arabic philosophy developed all over the Arab-Muslim world as wisdom. As the word 'wise' is one of the ninety-nine names of God, it is quite acceptable to mention 'wisdom' in an Islamic society structured by the holy text, the Quranic text. If philosophy is first presented as wisdom, it will be accepted more easily and not seem to be borrowed from Greek paganism. The Greek philosophers are referred to as 'The Ancients' and not as pagans. Many philosophers did not hesitate to use the word 'wise' or wisdom in the titles of their works when what they had in mind was philosophy: this was the case with al-Farabi in *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle*, and it was the case with Averroes in the *Decisive Treatise* whose subtitle was *Determining the*

Connection Between Divine Law and Wisdom. In both cases, al-Farabi and Averroes refer to the philosophers but present them as sages to include them in the long list of wise men in the history of humanity: the prophets, the Indian and Persian Magi as well as the Greek philosophers. From the first paragraph of his book, the Andalusian philosopher uses the word '*falsafa*', philosophy, instead of 'wisdom'. An ancient literature had already won fame for its humanism of 'eternal wisdom' (Miskawayh), but as Jean Jolivet points out, this humanism came in a compilation of aphorisms from the Ancients (Persians, Hindus, Greeks) which had not been rendered in the very specific argumentative form so characteristic of the philosophy of the commentaries al-Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes became famous for.

Besides, on the one hand Arab philosophy is often stereotypically presented as a pale imitation of Greek philosophy, and on the other hand, the *sharia* is seen as a specific element of it. First of all, in the domain of thought, the Arabs did not invent anything, and then, regarding the norms they use, they are too specific to be compared to other norms. This stereotype is coupled with the idea that the *sharia* (such a specific phenomenon) is anhistorical, and Arabic philosophy being merely imitative only served as an intermediary allowing philosophy to go from Athens to the University of Paris in the thirteenth century or to the University of Padua in the fourteenth century. However, a close analysis of the philosophical and legal corpus shows that Arab philosophy created a new paradigm of thought, and that the *sharia* has set up numerous examples of case law throughout history.

In the Middle Ages there was an unprecedented development of philosophy in Arabic. As Jean Jolivet underlines it, one can even say it was born 'twice': 'philosophy was born twice in Islam: first in the form of an original theology, *kalam*, then in the form of a philosophical movement which for a large part, drew

its inspiration from Greek sources'.¹ This phenomenon is all the more noteworthy as the philosophy which stemmed from Greek sources did not seek the protection of theology, the form in which it first appeared, we might say. It was even explicitly conceived as a philosophy stemming from the Greek pagan tradition but it sought its justification in the Law. Conceived as reasoned speech and not as inspired speech, it tried to find in Aristotle's works in particular, the means to found its discourse. As Averroes pointed out at the beginning of the *Decisive Treatise*, though it interpreted the revealed texts with a legal content and drew its legitimacy from them, it never forgot its source: the intellect. According to Averroes, Aristotle's syllogism is the only access to the truth. "Since it has been determined that the Law makes it obligatory to reflect upon existing things by means of the intellect, and to consider them; and consideration is nothing more than inferring and drawing out the unknown from the known; and this is syllogistic reasoning or by means of syllogistic reasoning, therefore, it is obligatory that we go about reflecting upon the existing things by means of intellectual syllogistic reasoning."²



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Leo Strauss drew attention to this aspect. Indeed, there is something specific in Arab and Jewish philosophy, which always considers the truth from the point of view of the Law: *“For the Jew and the Moslem, religion is primarily not, as it is for the Christian, a faith formulated in dogmas, but a law, a code of divine origin. Accordingly, the religious science, the sacra doctrina, is not dogmatic theology, theologia revelata, but the science of the law, halaka or fiqh.”*³

Thus there was a double effort of reconciliation, a reconciliation of the holy text with the pagan philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, and a reconciliation between these pagan philosophies themselves. The truth cannot be multiple, but there may be multiple ways of attaining to the truth. To legitimize the study of pagan texts in Islamic backgrounds circles, it was necessary to harmonize them to meet the objection according to which these philosophers contradict each other and therefore undermine each other. Medieval Arab philosophers were driven by the desire to make all truths coherent.

Averroes had the following motto: nobody can attain the whole truth on his own. Nothing but the

succession of generations and an established continuity between different cultures can give a picture of it: *“Since this is so, if we find that our predecessors in former nations have reflected upon existing things and considered them according to what is required by the conditions of demonstration, it is perhaps obligatory for us to reflect upon what they say about that and upon what they establish in their books.”*⁴

This idea of a true process over generations and across cultures had already been forcefully expressed by al-Kindi in his work *On First Philosophy*. In the ninth century, al-Kindi not only imposed a new way of relating to thinking, but also a new way of relating to other cultures. These two orientations are connected: the new way of thinking refers to the philosophical practice which is a reasoned practice keeping its distance from the prophets’ inspired speech and the theological exegesis seeking to clarify it. The nascent philosophy in the ninth-century Middle-East was a philosophy with a bias towards Greek culture, which could be discovered thanks to the translations carried out in the ‘house of wisdom’— the translation centre that the caliph al-Mamun founded in 832.



AL-KINDI: THE TRUTH AS THE WORK OF HISTORY

The idea that became obvious for al-Kindi was that the search for the truth is part of a historical process in which the truth itself is considered as a product of history. Al-Kindi defended a process-oriented conception of the truth in which Arab-Muslim culture participated, insofar as it defined itself as a culture accepting past discoveries. In order to be honoured as a knowledge-based procedure, the truth had to be recognized as an accumulative process. Wherever it is from, the truth has to be sought: *“It is proper that our gratitude be great to those who have contributed even a little of the truth, let alone to those who have contributed much truth, since they have shared with us the fruits of their thought and facilitated for us the true (yet) hidden inquiries, in that they benefited us by those premises which facilitated our approaches to the truth.”*⁵

Even though it showed deference to Aristotle for example, ‘the most distinguished of the Greeks in philosophy’,⁶ it does not mean he was servile towards the ancients. In fact, the truth cannot be reduced to the achievements of one culture in particular. The ancients smoothed but did not completely pave the way. It was necessary to finish what they began ‘following the custom of the language and contemporary usage’.⁷ Therefore, the truth is not an abstraction which can be adapted everywhere. It is context-based even though it does not necessarily change with each context. What has to be said is not that there are as many truths as

there are cultures – if this was the case it would lend credibility to relativism and annihilate the truth one wants to preserve – but that the truth depends on the historical situation and that the cultures are like torches which keep it alive and burning with ever new research. This involves debates, objections, additions and rectifications. Therefore the ones who objected to the transmission of Greek philosophy in Arab countries were illogical, since in order to be able to reject an idea, you first need to know it. It was necessary to provide ‘a cause’ and give ‘a demonstration’ before declaring it was no use carrying on the Greeks’ research: *“The presentation of cause and demonstration are part of the possession of knowledge of the real nature of things. Pursuit of this acquisition is, therefore, required by their own tongues, and devotion to it is necessary for them.”*⁸

But as the people who were opposed to the Greeks were often ‘strangers to the truth’, they were not aware of this minimal requirement, which consists in getting to know first what you are fighting against. Donning the formal dress conferred on them by their ‘spurious thrones’, they seized the right to *“traffic in religion, though they are devoid of religion. For one who trades in something sells it, and he who sells something does not have it. Thus one who trades in religion does not have religion, and it is right that one who resists the acquisition of knowledge of the real nature of things and calls it unbelief be divested of (the offices of) religion.”*⁹

AL-FARABI: HARMONISING WITH A VIEW TO AN OSMOSIS OF CULTURES

Among the elements of unbelief projected onto Greek philosophy is the idea that the Greek philosophers defended contradictory discourses. Aristotle contradicts Plato. Why should we retain the lesson of those who contradict themselves when the religious message of Islam, via its dogma, is exempt from any contradiction? Al-Farabi answered this argument in a book entitled *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle*. According to him, there is a fundamental harmony between Plato's educational project as it appears in the allegory of the cave in the *Republic* and the logical project of Aristotle who considered that acquiring knowledge implies first respecting the canonical forms of reasoning illustrated by the figures of the syllogism. The difference between the two philosophers is only a difference in style and only those who are not well acquainted with the requirements of demonstration, only those who are enamoured of polemic and are driven by a passion for ambiguity can remain content with the idea of oppositions between the Greek philosophers. Al-Farabi went through many themes on which Plato and Aristotle apparently differed and he concluded each time that there was an element that could reconcile their philosophies. Thus, we know for example that Plato considered knowledge to be above all reminiscence: through an effort of his soul entirely directed towards the Good, which is at once the true and the beautiful, man rediscovers the essence of things he knows already, but which he cannot always understand, as his judgement is obscured by prejudice.

On the other hand, Aristotle believed that knowledge was acquired by applying an operation of induction on all the particular cases that had been taken into account. They seem to differ on all counts, and yet Aristotle admitted that, after a while, once one got to know the particular cases, it was possible to attain the universal considered not as something subsequent but as something that resided in each particular case but which one could not grasp immediately. At one point, man's soul in relation with the particular apprehends the latter as embodying the universal: for example in Socrates I see Man. It is as if one remembered that Socrates is a man, which is close to what can be found in Plato's works.

Once this reconciliation had been achieved, which preserved the truth of Greek philosophy, al-Farabi set about tackling the other reconciliation: the one between the holy text and philosophy. No one but religious adepts, who are ill informed, consider them to be in conflict because they cannot see that religion adopts the paradigms of 'speculative things' belonging to philosophy. Philosophy expresses itself by means of demonstrations while religion expresses itself in images. But the message is the same in both cases. Then the philosophers "*will make an earnest effort to cure [the badly informed adherents of religion] of this belief [that religion is contrary to philosophy] by seeking to make them discern that the contents of their religion are paradigms of the contents of philosophy.*"¹⁰

AVERROES: THE TRUTH AND THE VALIDITY OF KNOWLEDGE

Both al-Kindi and al-Farabi aimed at preserving the truth in general, not any specific truth. Whether it is expressed in religious or philosophical terms, knowledge is above all judged by its validity and not its source. Any ban on the transmission of knowledge means hiding the truth. Averroes took up this set of themes and gave it a strong methodological character; Aristotle set up three types of arguments: the demonstrative argument, the dialectical argument and the rhetorical argument. The type of argument to be employed is a function of the public being addressed. For experts in 'deep science' as the Quran calls them, the appropriate argument is the demonstration and its tool, the syllogism. Those who protest strongly against this method are only concerned about the source of knowledge, not about its validity: they wonder if it is Muslim or not. Averroes found this question absurd, because the choice of a tool should not raise the question of its belonging or not to a religion. When a sheep is immolated, nobody wonders whether the knife belonged or not to someone who shares his religion, but only if it is sharp: "*If someone other than us has already investigated that, it is evidently obligatory for us to rely on what the one who has preceded us says about*

what we are pursuing, regardless of whether that other person shares our religion or not. For when a valid sacrifice is performed by means of a tool, no consideration is given, with respect to the validity of the sacrifice, as to whether the tool belongs to someone who shares in our religion or not, so long as it fulfils the conditions for validity."¹¹

Determining the religion of people who help us grasp a part of the truth is of no help to us. Arab philosophers defended one history of the truth, an antidote against the narcissism of small differences through which 'every culture claims the right to look down on the rest'.¹² They did not defend a double truth but one truth, a cross-cultural process. The idea of double truth, a truth established by faith and a truth established by reason, which the Latin Middle Ages projected onto the Arab Middle Ages is nonsense. The truth requires consistency and cannot vary according to the discipline concerned, for example theology or philosophy. It transcends disciplines and cultures, even though we can only attain the truth through thinking practices which are divided into disciplines and find their expression in specific cultures.

THE TRUTH IN MUSLIM LAW

If Muslim law has its source in the holy text, it does not mean that it is contrary to reason. This question of the relation between law and reason was clarified by the Islamologist R. Brunschvig. He makes a distinction between 'subject to reason' and 'contrary to reason'. If Muslim law has its source in the holy text and not in reason, it means that it is not subject to it as regards its source, but it does not mean that it is contrary to it. Therefore, Muslim law is ultimately justified by reason, a justification which appeals to 'notions of wisdom (*hikma*), aims or objectives (*maqasid*), interest or usefulness (*masaluh*) for human beings'.¹³

Al-Shafii (767—820), who is well-known for unifying Muslim law and drafting the first coherent version, pointed out in his epistle that there cannot be two types of wisdom. However, the Quran as well as the Sunnah (the prophetic tradition) are described as wisdom. To avoid the homonymy, he suggested associating the Quran and the Sunnah within the same corpus. This was how the idea of associating the Quran and the Sunnah as regards the sources of law was born. Al-Shafii tried to put into perspective what was considered as tradition by the people in Medina: why should the declarations of the prophet's companions in Medina be privileged, as the Malikis wanted? After the great turmoil caused by the establishment of the four law schools in the tenth century, some claimed that the gates of *ijihad* were closed, in order to protect the *sharia* (see *Hallaq*). Yet this reconstruction is open to criticism since there has always been *itjihad*, an effort at understanding, derivation and clarification.

Al itjihad is not an arbitrary activity which all Muslims are meant to practise. It is an effort that follows rules. Certain requirements were listed by al-Ghazali (*Hallaq*), among which the knowledge of the Quran and the Sunnah.

Some, like Mawardi, tried to transpose this legal effort into the political field. He wanted the caliph to surround himself with *ulama*, to advise him as *ahl al ray*.

We have to point out first of all the omnipresence in the Quran of the vocabulary related to proof (*bayyina*) and testimony (*shahada*). There are different degrees of acceptance or admissibility of testimony: "*In the same way as the testimony of a dishonest person is inadmissible, a corrupt piece of information is unacceptable. It is just worthless. Indeed, although the words information and testimony are different, they are semantically connected in most cases. That is why the information or the testimony from an immoral person is inadmissible for all scholars.*"¹⁴

There is also a distinctive feature in Muslim jurisprudence, namely the privilege accorded to the texts. The judge in his legal proceedings has to refer to the Quran, to the sayings of the prophet and to the community consensus in order to judge the facts. Admittedly he takes into account testimony, oaths, refusals to testify under oath, confessions, but he is not obliged to stick to the facts. Therefore, what puts pressure on the judge is not the facts but the interpretation of the texts in his

search for the truth: "*Unlike the canon judge or the ius commune judge, the qadi does not have to discover the truth in the facts. He finds it in the texts. He is duty bound to 'judge in accordance with the truth and the law' (al-qada bilhaqq), but the truth is appears as what is unquestionably knowledge (ilm yaqin); and we know that this knowledge has three sources: 1) the revealed Word of God: the Quran, 2) the interpretation of this word by the prophet's normative practice (sunnah) which, inspired by God and leads to the historization of the Quran and 3) the consensus of the religious scholars*".¹⁵

From an epistemic viewpoint, how can we understand this precedence of the texts over the facts? First of all, it is necessary to make a distinction between *de re* beliefs and *de dicto* beliefs. *De re* beliefs are related to real events: if I believe that somebody has committed a crime, my *de re* belief means that I am capable of specifying who did it or even of reporting it to the police. On the other hand, the *de dicto* belief is a reported belief, something that is being quoted. It is an element of language and as such, it is context-free, contrary to the *de re* belief. Thus, it is more easily appended to the knowledge of legal procedure than the *de re* belief which implies referring to a speaker. Therefore, if the truth is to be found in the texts and not in the facts, according to the above-mentioned quote, it is necessary to point out should be noted that it is easier to include textual truth in a knowledge of legal procedure than factual truth which implies going back to the facts themselves through a piece of evidence, although it is clear that this is only evidence and not fact.

The religious scholars are well acquainted with the legal texts. The judge can seek advice from one of these scholars, the mufti, who is a law specialist and has therefore an authorized opinion. He has an exhaustive knowledge of Muslim law, which is not the case with each and every person, but his decision is not followed by real sanctions. Muftis are often appointed by rulers to assist the judges, the only ones entitled to lay down the law.

However, no judicial decision creates any real precedent: making another decision is always possible. It is important to allow for the idea that the difference between the legal doctrines has always been considered as a positive idea, and has even been encouraged by the words attributed to the prophet: 'The difference between the doctrines within my community is the sign of God's grace'.¹⁶ The doctrines are much debated and so are some sources of law such as the process of deductive analogy (*qiyas*), the personal effort of interpretation of the law (*ijihad*) or even in some cases, the consensus (*al-ijma*), which is the synchronic aspect of the living tradition which every generation has achieved, the primacy of one text over another (*al tarjih*). Only the Quran and the sayings of the prophet (*sunnah*) are exempt from that questioning. However, even in this case there may be a controversy about the precedence of the one over the other. If the overwhelming majority of religious scholars consider these two texts complementary, still the Quranic law cannot be

understood without the practice of the prophet. The different means of understanding legal truth through the reading of these two texts may be presented as follows: 1) the sayings of the prophet can call attention to a Quranic injunction such as the condemnation of perjury; 2) they can apply the general declarations in the Quran about charity or pilgrimage for example, to specific cases etc.; 3) they can complement certain aspects of the Quran such as the illegal forms of marriage for example.

According to Averroes, the subdivision of the Quranic sources of the legal norm into the sayings of the prophet, consensus and analogical reasoning has an interlocking structure in which each part finds its justification in the part preceding it, while the Quran remains the fundamental text that prevents infinite regression. Therefore, the sayings of the prophet are justified as a legal source since the holy text says we must follow the prophets. The consensus is raised to the level of a source since the prophet legitimized it through his declarations, and syllogistic derivation or analogical reasoning, which is based on these three sources may also be included among the sources of law.

How did Averroes insert the increased prestige of the last source of law, syllogistic activity, into this pecking order? He sought to show that it was through this activity that the aims of the other legal principles were clarified. The link between the paradigm of knowledge, which is the demonstrative syllogism and the legal paradigm which is analogical reasoning is enlightening. It underlines the rational bias in all human activity, whether it is theoretical or practical, whether it concerns metaphysics or the law. The Quran and the sayings of the prophet are not monolithic blocks that may be understood merely by being repeated: they too involve rational criteria. If syllogistic derivation is based on the other three legal sources, it is because they lend themselves to it, in other words they lend themselves to a derivation of meaning that may affect only one word, in which case it is a metaphor, or a whole clause, in which case it is a syllogism. What remains to be seen is how the various derivations operate.

One must admit that the Quran contains redundant or implicit phrases, metaphors like 'faith orders', 'prayer prevents evil' or 'the wings of vice' for example. It is not true to say that in so far as the Quran is the true word it contains no metaphor, since metaphors may be more appropriate than literal expressions, not because they convey a new meaning but because they use an old meaning in a new way. Besides, a term often used as a metaphor is no longer metaphorical. Now the issue is to find out what is intended from a point of view of communication (*al takhattub*), as with such metaphorical expressions such as 'forbidden to you is dead [meat]', 'forbidden to you are your mothers', 'forbidden to you are your daughters'... these three phrases combine the implicit with metaphor and refer respectively to the ban on eating dead meat unless it has been sacrificed according to the rite, and to the prohibition of incest with one's mother or daughter. The intention is conveyed by the intended action in question: eating in one case and copulation in the other.

The derivation of meaning also concerns a whole clause, as with enthymemes, the rhetorical syllogisms in which a premise is missing. In the following verse which has the same form as an enthymeme for example: 'Those who are ill or travelling may substitute the same number of other days' (2, 185), a premise is missing. Rewritten, the verse would be something like this: those who are ill do not fast some days of the month of Ramadan, yet they have to fast throughout the month of Ramadan, therefore they will have to fast after Ramadan the same number of days of broken fast during the month of Ramadan. Without such tacit reconstruction, the norm cannot be understood.

Thus, legal syllogisms are essential in the practice of case law. 'They are one of the bases of the jurisprudence' as confirmed by the other three sources.

A justification of syllogistic derivation can also be found in the *sunnah*, the sayings of the prophet. The prophet ordered the use of personal point of view (*rayy*) and of *ijtihad*, which is the personal effort of interpretation of the holy text. The argument goes as follows: how can what used to be allowed at the time of the prophet and of the revelation be forbidden once the period of revelation is over? As is specified in one of the sayings of the prophet: 'I judge among you according to my personal point of view in the matters where there is no revelation.' In addition, the Quran corroborates the use of judgement and the search for the reasons on which syllogistic derivation is based. One of the verses has a similar message: 'Surely We have revealed the Book to thee with truth that thou mayest judge between people by means of what Allah has taught thee' (4, 105).

The third legal source is the consensus. It is divided in two: first what scholars and common believers agree on, that is performing one's ablutions, observing prayer, fasting, and practicing charity, and secondly what all the scholars, but not the masses, agree on, namely theoretical questions.

Generally speaking in Muslim tradition, consensus is a form of agreement within the community about the meaning of the religious text. Averroes pointed out that there could be no consensus about theoretical matters, only about practical matters.¹⁷ Transposed from the juridical to the theological field, the consensus loses all significant import and the theologians' practice, based on supposedly consensual interpretations which, however, unavoidably give rise to a sectarian spirit, finds itself strongly shaken. Averroes's philosophical culture drove him to give prominence to evidence and to forget consensus, leaving that notion for theologians' dialectics. It was all the easier for him to do this as this source of law belonged to a specifically human field, and not a divine one (the Quran) or a prophetic one (the sayings of the prophet).

Averroes devoted a whole book to *al khtilaf*, or in other words the legal controversy. The type of problems posed here favours the use of syllogisms in both their generic and specific forms, generic in the sense of meaning or clause derivation, specific in the canonical form of Aristotelian syllogisms. Averroes'¹⁸ contribution to case law analysis is a combination of the *fiqh* tradition (the bases of Muslim law) and the Aristotelian tradition.

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturally

Understanding the text

- *What relationship do we find between wisdom and philosophy in the Islamic tradition?*
- *On what basis, according to al-Kindi, are the differences between the various pagan philosophies and scriptures reconciled?*
- *On what basis, according to al-Farabi, are the differences between the various pagan philosophies and scriptures reconciled?*
- *What is the relationship between history and truth?*
- *Is the source of knowledge a criterion for Averroes?*
- *What are the consequences of the concept of "double truth"?*
- *What is the relationship between the Quran and the sunnah?*
- *What are the criteria used by an Islamic judge?*
- *What is the meaning of: "Truth is to be discovered in texts and not in facts"?*
- *What is the role of consensus for Averroes?*
- *What is the role of controversy for Averroes?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *In your opinion, is philosophy equivalent to wisdom?*
- *Do you think that truth emerges from history?*
- *Is the concept of "Truth" meaningful for you?*
- *Do you consider community consensus to be a valid criterion of judgment?*
- *Do you consider metaphoric expression an appropriate mode of education or communication?*
- *Should one be guided more by consensus or by controversy in determining the truth?*
- *Give three different meanings to Ibn Khaldun's words: "I know only what God has taught me".*

Suggested teaching method: **mutual correction**

*One or more questions are chosen.
Each participant replies on a sheet of paper.
The sheets are collected and redistributed at random. Everyone must analyse the work placed before them, comment on it and grade it.
The sheets are redistributed a second time, a second assessment is made.
The sheets are redistributed a third time.
A third assessment is made.
The author of each piece of work receives the assessments, then comments on them, stating whether or not he or she accepts the comments made.
Everyone reads out their conclusions.
The group reviews the work and the exercise.*

Educational exercises

Game

- *Explain to the participants that the aim of the exercise is to explore the concept of truth.*
- *Divide them into groups of three.*
- *One participant in each three-person team proposes a sentence which he or she considers to be true.*
- *A second participant asks questions in order to establish whether the sentence is true.*
- *The third participant observes and notes key elements in the questions and in the answers.*
- *Everyone changes roles until they have all had a turn at stating a truth, being questioned and observing.*
- *In the full group, start a discussion around the various elements noted by the observers on the concept of truth.*
- *Ask the participants also to read the worksheet "Ibn Sina's Conception of Wisdom".*
- *In the full group, start up a discussion on key aspects of the use of syllogisms, taking into account historical contexts, universality and relativism.*
- *Compare and discuss these aspects with the questions and answers given during the exercise.*
- *Conclude by way of discussion with the participants on specific and other, universal, approaches to the concept of truth in the Arab-Muslim world.*

Other times, other places

Gratian and canon law in the Middle Ages in the West

The crisis of the Great Schism of 1054¹ and religious nationalism accompanying the rise of the absolute monarchies of Western Europe during the Middle Ages led the Christian West to seek a balance between wisdom and the divine law. The circumstances demanded it. Indeed, the distinction between spiritual power and temporal power had been poorly defined since the conversion of Constantine. The emperor had then become the real leader of the Church. After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476, the pope again took part control of the Church while becoming the temporal leader of the Papal States, though this latter status was sometimes challenged. The Investiture Controversy,² which brought the pope into conflict with the Holy Roman Emperor was the key breakthrough in the thirteenth century asserting the supremacy of papal power. The debate was political, legal, but also philosophical.

The development of canon law brought these different aspects into play. It was also a search for truth through law.

Gratian was a Benedictine monk. Between 1139 and 1150 he compiled a collection of papal decisions known as *The Decrees of Gratian*, which had considerable influence on medieval ecclesiastical law and later formed the first part of the Code of canon law.³ Gratian borrowed from Abélard⁴ the principles of rules to follow in order to eliminate the inconsistencies in the texts: 1) remove the Apocrypha 2) track copyists' mistakes 3) distinguish quotations from the very thought of the authors, in order to understand the meaning of words, because one and the same term can mean different things.

The first title of the *Decree* indicates its purpose: *Concordia discordantium canonum*, that is to say, 'Concord of discordant canons'. Compared with previous compilations, Gratian applied the method of scholasticism to the texts of the Christian tradition (Fathers, councils, papal decrees): resolve the contradictions between the old canons and reconcile the doctrines. In so doing, he brought together and unified the whole canonical tradition of the Western Church at the time of the first two Lateran Councils (1123 and 1139), which settled the conflicts arising from the Investiture Controversy. The introduction of texts of Roman law, recently rediscovered, made the book a matchless legal weapon to the service of the pope, the starting point of all studies and subsequent codifications, the equal of *The Digest*.⁵

As is clearly stated in the original title of the decree, Gratian reconciled Roman law and canon law; hence the importance of the debates of the time between faith and reason, philosophy and theology.

The first sources of canon law can be found in the *New Testament*, principally in the *Acts of the Apostles*, which show the efforts of the young Christian community to provide itself with structure and rules. Both decretals and conciliar decrees were soon compiled so that they could be put to use. As the documents were sorted by chronological order, they are referred to as 'chronological collections'. They are the only channels through which the old decrees and decretals are known. Unfortunately this work of compilation was not always very meticulous: compilers truncated and interpreted texts in a questionable manner, they often copied things down without checking the sources and even sometimes completely fabricated documents...⁶

Roman law, the result of a slow development, is a logical construct largely inspired by Greek philosophy, which enabled the Romans to shape a law that met both their love of order and their practical turn of mind.

In Roman law, there exist several formal sources: custom, law in the broad sense of the word, the edicts of magistrates or honorary law, *senatus consulta*, imperial constitutions and case law (in the Roman sense of the word, meaning 'wisdom of the law').

Later, in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas proposed a theological work based on an effort to synthesize reason and faith, and which attempted to reconcile Christian thought and Aristotle's realistic philosophy. He distinguished between the truths accessible to reason alone, and those of faith, defined as an unconditional adherence to the Word of God. Asserting the superiority of the spiritual over the temporal, he said philosophy was 'a servant of theology'.

¹ Between the Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Catholic) Churches.

² Until the late ninth century, the popes only bore the title of Bishop of Rome. In the year one thousand, the Church had become a very powerful temporal authority. But though the Church was rich, it was still subordinated to temporal power. Following an old Carolingian principle, the Emperors of Germany appointed the bishops and gave them investiture (and so did the kings and lords). The sovereigns wanted to make the church an important organ of government, and therefore ensure the fidelity of the clergy.

³ The Canon Law is the set of laws and regulations adopted or accepted by the Church for its own government and that of its followers. Canon law has no bearing on the doctrine and liturgy.

⁴ Abelard (1079—1142) a philosopher and a dialectician. He was a major figure of his century in the field of logic and language analysis. As a theologian and believer he tackled holy science with the method and rigour of a philosopher to confront faith and reason. In theology, his doctrine was based on the belief that knowledge of the world was unattainable without rejecting the realism of things.

⁵ *The Digest* (sometimes called *Pandects*) is a systematic compilation of excerpts from the opinions and judgments of Roman lawyers, gathered on the order of Emperor Justinian. The Digest consists of fifty books, covering the whole of private law (people, property, obligations, inheritance rights), justice and criminal law. The Digest, brought from Constantinople, was known in Italy after 1140. After that date, it stimulated the study of law at the University of Bologna.

⁶ The most famous example was the forged "Donation of Constantine" by which the emperor Constantine granted Pope Sylvester primacy over the churches of the East and the imperium (imperial power) on the West. The demonstration of its apocryphal character was made in 1442 by the humanist Lorenzo Valla.

It must be pointed out that Averroes considered the notion of legal controversy as a positive element that favoured the improvement of the critical use of reason. As we shall see, legal controversy is the opposite of theological dissensions on every count. Far from trying to introduce a new type of dogmatics, legal controversy fixes the scope and the limits of every juridical solution and appeals to the informed judgement of the reader who, through his personal effort (*al itjihad*), is able to form his own opinion. Of course, this does not mean encouraging people to disobey the law in the name of their own opinion, but giving everybody the means of comparing different legal models linked to different law schools, even though it is obvious that the limit between the believer committed to his faith and the citizen obeying the law is not clear-cut in a religion based on the law like Islam. Averroes justifies the use of juridical syllogisms with the following argument: because of the indefinite number of cases and of the limited number of sources – the Quran and the sayings of the prophet – new cases have to be derived from the cases which have already been taken into account. Juridical reasoning (*quiyas shari*) is based on an analogy with 4 components: 1) the basic case, 2) the similar derived case 3) the cause or resemblance resulting in the legal qualification, 4) the judgement (*hukm*) or legal qualification.

One goes from the original case provided for in the texts (Quran, sayings of the prophet) to the similar new case (for which there is no provision) when the two cases share the same cause and are thus liable to be considered to correspond or even to be exactly the same.

Juridical reasoning, however predictable it may be, may involve important issues like extending the scope of a term beyond its reference to an explicit situation in the Quran, in cases for example where the man only is mentioned and the judge decides to consider that the woman will be granted the same rights.

So there is room for reflection on technical or logical loopholes in Muslim law. These loopholes are technical when laws have to be extended, generalized or interpreted. They are logical when an effort to create new legal measures is required. Each time, it is fundamentally necessary to trust in man's rationality, however rudimentary it may be, if the pacifying role of law in society is to be preserved.





HISTORICAL TRUTH AS REGARDS PROPHECY: IBN KHALDUN

The chapter in Ibn Khaldun's book entitled 'The various types of human beings who have supernatural perception either through natural disposition or through exercise, preceded by a discussion of inspiration and dream visions'¹⁹ deserves a detailed analysis.

The first paragraph is a vicious circle, rhetorical and empty. Ibn Khaldun points out that certain individuals are chosen by God so that they may 'connect links' (*wa ja alahum was ail baynahu wa bayna ibadihi*) between Himself and his creatures. The beginning is quite in keeping with what a theologian could write, but a first subversion appears at this point: instead of explaining how God chooses his intermediaries, the author ends his paragraph with a Quranic phrase, transforming the passage into a vicious circle: 'Indeed, I know only what God taught me.' Once again it is God who knows what it is to be an intermediary. Therefore, this theological method leads us nowhere. It is just a conventional preamble, which neutralizes all attacks and delays any innovative element in the analysis.

What follows, in the prophet's own words, is a phenomenological description of the state of inspiration: "[H]e said: 'At times, it comes to me like the ringing of a bell. This affects me most... At other times, the angel appears to me in the form of a man...' During that (process, the inspired person) shows inexplicable signs of strain and choking. Aishah said: 'The revelation would come to him on very cold days. Nevertheless, when it left him, there was sweat on his forehead.'" ²⁰ Then Ibn Khaldun quotes the Quran: 'We shall lay upon you a weighty message' (p. 70). This verse, which follows the prophet's and his wife's words in the narrative, becomes phenomenological and is no longer theological. The weight of the message is physical as well as mental; the body is affected too when receiving the message.

A mosaic of views on the state of inspiration follows, always in keeping with a phenomenological method for describing textbook cases, in order to account for supernatural perception. According to theologians, the state of inspiration is achieved through the power of God, not

through the action of the prophet. The miracle consists in the distinction between the inspired word and sorcery. This inspired word is considered as a 'fast tongue (*lughatu al isra*)'. This happens repeatedly to prophets and at times, other human beings catch a glimpse of it. Then Ibn Khaldun explains that during sleep, the soul achieves accedes to what is invisible (*al ghayb*), to what is absent. Everyone can experience this. Real dream vision is different for diviners (*al mirat*) who claim they can see by examining the hearts, livers and bones of animals or by burning incense.²¹ Ascetics like yogis or Sufis are also mentioned, who eliminate their physical powers through continuous training or aim at obtaining the experiences of gnosis and divine oneness. There are also 'fools and imbeciles' who are kinds of Sufis but resemble insane persons, or the ones who read the future in the stars, in combinations of figures, among whom Sidi Ahmed al-Sebti, a thirteenth-century-Moroccan Sufi who reintroduced Ptolemy astrology. All these practices are mere illusions or even nonsense (*al tahafut*), since they are based on the belief that finding the right answer to a question is the sign of a correspondence with events. 'Things of the future... cannot be known',²² there are only enigmas which can be solved the way mathematical problems are solved. In other words, language conventions can lead to solutions in keeping with the data of the problem, but cannot be confirmed from an experimental point of view. Events cannot be prophesied. The chapter ends with verse 232 of the Surah of the cow: 'Allah knows and you don't know'. Back to the vicious circle of prophecy. Prophecy as such is not an object of knowledge, but it is caught up in a constellation of concepts, most of which are based on illusions and inconsistencies. Except for the mathematical answers to the enigmas which the mind can overcome, there is no world of meanings, no world talking to us and which man deciphers, no founding subject, no signifying world, as Foucault would have it, but a world of singularities, regularities, dispersions and discontinuities. From the fool to the ascetic, from the visionary to the sorcerer, from the numerologist to the sleepwalker, there is no continuity other than the same claim, namely that they are capable of 'supernatural perception', that is of inventing a system of truth.



- > In what, in the author's view, does the singularity of Arab philosophy lie?
- > How does this idea fit into a universal continuity?
- > What does the philosopher al-Kindi mean by "trading in religion"?
- > What connection does al-Farabi make between philosophy and religion?
- > Identify the three levels of philosophical and spiritual knowledge determined by Averroes, depending on one's audience.
- > Assess Averroes's openness in saying about those who bring knowledge: It matters little whether or not they are of our religion.
- > What is "double truth" and what is Averroes's position with regard to it?
- > What is the value of controversy in philosophical practice?

¹ Jean Jolivet, 1995, *Philosophie médiévale arabe et latine*, Paris, Vrin, p. 407.

² Averroes, 2008, *Decisive Treatise*, Eng. trans. Charles Butterworth, Provo, Brigham Young University Press, p. 2.

³ Leo Strauss, 1989, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, ch. 9 entitled How to begin to study Medieval Philosophy, p. 221.

⁴ Averroes, 2008, *Decisive Treatise*, op.cit., p. 6.

⁵ Al Kindi, 1974, *Al Kindi's Metaphysics: A Translation of Yaqub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi's Treatise On First Philosophy*, trans. by Alfred L. Ivry, Albany, State University of New York Press, p. 57.

⁶ Ibid. p. 58.

⁷ Ibid. p. 58.

⁸ Ibid. p. 59.

⁹ Ibid. p. 59.

¹⁰ Al Farabi, 1969, *Book of Letters*, trans. by M. Mahdi and C. Butterworth, part 2, chap. 24, §149, p. 20, Unpublished version on <http://www.scribd.com/doc/21010783/Alfarabi-Book-of-Letters>.

¹¹ Averroes, 2008, *Decisive Treatise*, op. cit., p. 7.

¹² S. Freud, 1961, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. by W. D. Robson-Scott in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 21, London, The Hogarth Press, p. 13.

¹³ Robert Brunschvig, 1976, *Etudes d'islamologie*, Paris, Maisonneuve Larose, p. 347.

¹⁴ Muslim, *al-Sahih*, I, 7, quoted by H.Touati, 2000, *Islam et voyage au moyen âge*, Paris, Seuil, p. 47.

¹⁵ Baber Johansen, *Vérité et torture: ius commune et droit musulman entre le Xe et le XIIIe siècle*, in F. Héritier, 1996, *De la violence*, Paris, Odile Jacob, p. 148.

¹⁶ Quoted by B. Johansen, op.cit. p. 149.

¹⁷ See Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

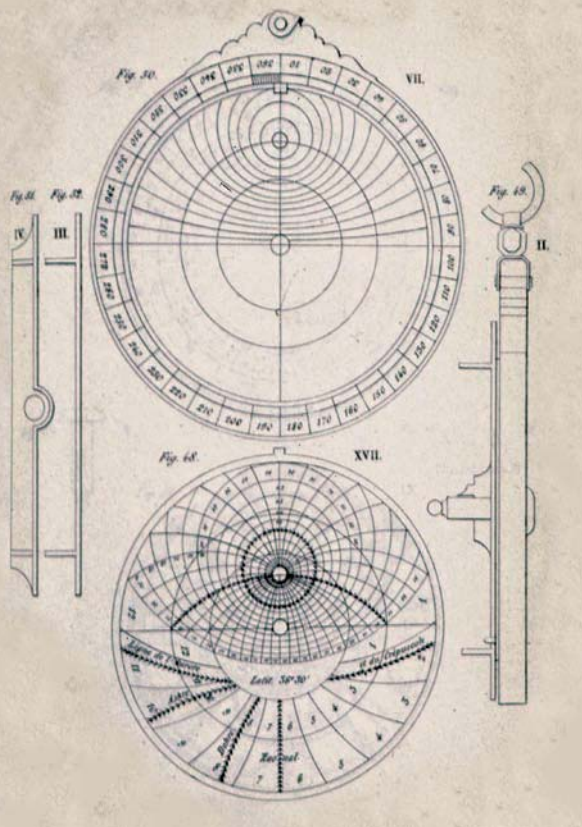
¹⁸ A. Turki underlines the originality of Averroes's approach: 'His declared intention was to try to find an appropriate and likely explanation for this *Khilaf* (controversy) by studying the deductive modes of these solutions from the classic legal sources. Unlike his predecessors in the endeavour... and although he was a Maliki from a family of distinguished Malikis, he did not aspire to contribute to the controversial literature, committed to defending his school. Therefore he honestly and objectively reproduced any valid view about any controversial issue, and added to it his arguments or rather those which seemed to him the most relevant.' A. Turki, 1982, *La place d'Averroès juriste dans l'histoire du malikisme et de l'Espagne musulmane*, in *Théologiens et juristes de l'Espagne musulmane*, Paris, Maisonneuve-Larose, p. 286.

¹⁹ Ibn Khaldun, 1969, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. by F. Rosenthal, ed. and abridged by N. J. Dawood, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 70.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 70.

²¹ Ibid. p. 84.

²² Ibid. p. 89.



Astronomy book, Paris, 1844 © IMA/Ph. Maillard
The works on astronomy of Arabic scientists have, ever since the 12th century, aroused numerous commentaries by European scholars, to be found in the publication *Mémoire sur les instruments astronomiques des Arabes* [Essay on the astronomical instruments of the Arabs] by the French Louis-Amélie Sédillot, published in 1844.

TRANSLATORS AND TRANSMITTERS OF KNOWLEDGE

DURING THE ARAB MIDDLE AGES, KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPED THANKS TO THE TRANSLATION OF GREEK WORKS. THIS IS HOW THE PROFANE SCIENCES, FIRST OF WHICH IS PHILOSOPHY UNDERSTOOD AS A CAREFULLY CONSIDERED KNOWLEDGE OF THINGS, ADDED TO THE SCIENCE OF PROPHETIC TRADITION AND RELIGIOUS EXEGESIS. MEDICINE AND LOGIC WERE THE TWO FIELDS THAT MOST BENEFITED FROM THE INTRODUCTION OF GREEK TEXTS IN THE ARAB-MUSLIM WORLD. TRANSLATION WAS NOT ONLY AN INTRODUCTION TO A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF OTHER CIVILIZATIONS AND AN INCREASED RANGE OF MEANINGS, BUT ALSO THE MOST EFFICIENT MEANS OF ENRICHING THE ARABIC LANGUAGE. EVEN TODAY ONLY TRANSLATION WILL ENABLE THE ARAB-MUSLIM COUNTRIES TO SHARE IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT IS PRODUCED ELSEWHERE.

THE HOUSE OF WISDOM IN BAGHDAD: A TRANSLATION CENTRE

During the Middle Ages, Arabic was the means of transmission of scientific knowledge. Arabic was gradually enriched by the translations from Syriac and less often directly from Greek.

As Danielle Jacquart and Françoise Micheau underline in *La médecine arabe et l'occident médiéval*, 'Arabic, the language of Bedouin poetry, of the Tradition and the law, and of the administration, lacked a scientific terminology. The elaboration of faithful and rigorous Arabic translations contributed to fixing a vocabulary that had been deficient until then.'¹

The trend towards translation of Greek philosophy in the middle of the ninth century was initiated

by caliph al-Mamun (833). The doxograph al-Nadim, in his *Kitab al-fihrist*, composed at the end of the tenth century, mentioned a dream the caliph had supposedly had: Caliph al-Mamun dreamt of a man with a fair complexion tinged with red, a broad forehead, meeting eyebrows, a bald head and dark blue eyes and with affable manners, sitting on his rostrum. 'I was,' al-Mamun said, 'very close to him and filled with fear. I asked him: "Who are you?" He replied "I am Aristotle" I was delighted and said: "O wise man, I am going to ask you a question." He said: "Do". I said: "Can you define that which is good?" He replied: "It is what is good according to reason." I said: "And what else?" He replied: "It is what is good according to revelation." I said: "What else?" He replied: "What is good in the

eyes of all." I said: "What else?" He replied: "There is nothing else."²

This dream initiated the grand age when Greek texts were translated into Arabic, very often via Syriac. A House of Wisdom (*Bait al hikma*) was opened for that purpose: "Al-Mamun probably did not found this huge library, but he certainly gave impetus to the activities relating to it. ... As a place for consulting, copying, meeting, the *bait al hikma* guaranteed the dissemination of ancient knowledge. Aristotle, Plato, Hippocrates, Galen, Ptolemy, Dioscorides, Euclid, the names of all the great Greek philosophers and scientists were now present in Islam."³

This was the sign of the politicians' desire to give Greek philosophy a real place in Arab-Muslim culture. This will was not always expressed continuously, but it contributed to the discovery and transformation of one culture by another.

Al-Tawhidi, a great man of letters of the tenth century, gave a faithful idea of this interest for translations in Baghdad. He studied grammar, Shafiite law and philosophy in Baghdad. His book *Enjoyment and Conviviality* is considered to be *The Thousand and One Philosophical Nights*. One of these nights staged a famous lively debate between the grammarian al-Sirafi (893-979), who was sceptical about the universality of Aristotelian logic and the logician Abu Bishr Matta (870-940, who supported this universality. Are Aristotle's *Categories* mere codifications of the Greek language or do they indicate universal notions? What is at issue is the relevance of translation: is the translation of Greek works to be encouraged or is it not? If Aristotle's categories are the very schemas of thought, then they need to be rendered faithfully in Arabic. That is the logician Abu Bishr Matta's point of view.

In perfect agreement with Abu Bishr Matta's positions, al-Farabi built the argumentation of his *Book of Religion* on a methodology inspired by the ten Aristotelian categories: the question is to know what is appropriate to a given time and country, which sort of action (a virtuous action) and which individual substance (a virtuous ruler) in what is qualitatively and quantitatively distributed (the regulation of actions) and in the relationship (of the group), thanks to the possessions (goods) preserving the inhabitants from being patients (passion) in the hands of political action.

The debate between Abu Bishr Matta Ibn Yunus, who was already quite old, and the young al-Sirafi took place in 932 in the presence of the vizier Ibn al-Furat. It was retranscribed by al-Tawhidi in the eighth night of his book, *Enjoyment and Conviviality*. The very title of this book evokes passages from *The Nicomachean Ethics* (1174b23), in which it is written that human activities are accompanied by pleasure. The issue is a questioning of the authority of Aristotle, considered too academic a philosopher, together with al-Sirafi and al-Tawhidi's common longing for a return to a 'popular Platonism' compatible with religion: man pursues wisdom by ridding himself of the chains of the world as perceived by the senses. Al-Tawhidi, who reports the debate, is Al-Sirafi's disciple. Al-Sirafi taught jurisprudence at the mosque of al-Rusafa in Baghdad for fifty years. He was a Mutazilite, a disciple of Gubbai.⁴ In theology, to be a Mutazilite means that you subscribe to the doctrine according to which the Quran is a creation, human beings are fully responsible for their acts and God always does what is best, in a spirit of justice and goodness which in a way rationally limit his almightiness. From a legal point of view, al-Sirafi is a Hanafi, that is, he is sceptical about the chain of transmission of the Prophet's hadiths: there is no need for the technicality of Aristotle's logic, considered not only as a waste of time but even as a corrupt way leading man to stray from the eternal repetitive wisdom embodied in the first kings of humanity and the prophets.

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TRANSLATION AND DISTORTION OF MEANING

Let us get back to this eighth philosophical night. The theory defended by Matta was that logic is a tool for telling correct language from incorrect language. But al-Sirafi retorted that there is no such thing as language in general. There is only the Arabic language, the Greek language, the Turkish language etc... Thus, logic can only codify a specific grammar and not the phantom grammar of an improbable language. Only a specific language can reach intelligibles. Logic does not transcend language. But according to Matta, if that is the case, then the whole undertaking of translation would be threatened – yet surely something was transmitted from Greek culture to Syriac culture, and then on to Arabic culture, something which may not be reduced to any one of these three linguistic forms. So there exists something like a treasure of meaning that passes from one culture to the other, and is relatively independent from either language concerned. On the one hand, logic is presented as an art of reasoning, on the other as an art of speech in which utterance and meaning are inseparable: logic is nothing but a way of speaking a specific language logically. The shift from the noun (logic) to the adverb (logically) is where the controversy lies.

Whether meaning is distorted in translation is a major issue of Arabic philosophy. Turning to al-Farabi for support, Averroes explicitly reproached Avicenna for raising the question of the distortion of meaning, when dealing with combined or uncombined predicates,

the Wise Man, i.e. Aristotle, did not think it necessary to raise the question of the distortion of meaning in combined predicates like 'Zayd is a clear-sighted physician': Zayd may well not be clear-sighted and still be 'a clear-sighted physician'. Avicenna, for his part, had noted that *"if predicates are true when uncombined and true when they are combined, their mode of designation when they are combined and their meaning must be their mode of designation when they are uncombined. But if the meaning is distorted when they are combined or uncombined, if something becomes untrue, the predicate that was considered as untrue when they were uncombined is not the predicate that is true when they are combined, and similarly, the predicate that is true when uncombined is different from the predicate that is untrue when they are combined."*⁵

Averroes joined forces again with al-Farabi to counter this argument derived from usage and customs, according to which meanings are distorted. The same issues are presented in the eighth philosophical night; Matta, a student of al-Farabi's, insists on the preservation of meanings beyond translations, provided they are meanings having passed the Aristotelian categorical text and hence being one of the ten categories (with a special mention for the first category, only the second form of which is universal). For a logician like Matta, there is as it were a greater dignity in taking into account meanings before utterances.



AN EXAMPLE OF TRANSLATION: 'BE' AS A VERB AND A COPULA

What happens however when the translation into Arabic of a logical element, such as the copula that connects a subject to a predicate, has no immediate corresponding term? In that case, knowledge of the language enables one to find the logical links even though there is no strict correspondence. The logical form must be distinguished from the grammatical form. The absence of a grammatical form does not threaten the logical form. On the contrary, it opens the way to logical inventiveness, since it helps to render explicit the tacit logical connections in language. Here are two passages explaining the status of the copula in Arabic: *"It is not enough to have an uncombined subject and an uncombined predicate, they must be combined in an affirmative or negative proposition. So, if one wants linguistic signs to conform to the thought, this proposition must comprise three elements, the first corresponding to the subject, the second to the relation and the third to the attribute? Having in mind the idea of man and the idea of animal does not constitute a judgement as the relation is lacking. Likewise, in a proposition, the relation must be expressed by a specific term... which is called the copula (rabita). In Arabic, sometimes the copula is omitted but it is implied, and sometimes it is a noun or a verb that indicates it; for example, one can say Zayd huwa hayy (Zayd he alive); here the word huwa does not have a specific sense, but indicates merely a relation and becomes a particle."*

The absence of a copula in Arabic does not mean that there is no logical connection in a proposition in Arabic. The use of a pronoun serves as a logical link on the grounds of syntactic correctness and rhetorical practice. It is both what is said in Arabic and a way of rendering explicit a logical link. As Averroes puts it:

*"There is no utterance in the Arabic language which signifies this type of link, even though it is found in all the other languages. The utterance most closely resembling it in the Arabic language is what the word 'is' [huwa] or 'exists' signifies, as in our saying 'Zayd is an animal' [Zaydun huwa hayawan] or in our saying 'Zayd exists as an animal' [Zaydun mawjudun hayawan]."*⁶

As one can see, rhetorical adequacy is no threat to logical adequacy, quite the opposite. In his works, the contemporary logician Quine stresses the focal value of the pronoun: the pronoun focalizes the subject, makes it possible to stabilize it, to put it down as a substance, as what is. The pronoun, like the copula, plays the part of predication, both effect the passage from conjunction to predication.

While Arab philosophers had a 'summa of logic' to refer to, there is no known equivalent for the Latin philosophers of the school of Paris, even though [Thomas Aquinas'] views on the philosophy of logic are often of the highest value.⁷ One may note that Aristotle's *Categories* and *Peri Hermeneias* and Porphyry's *Isagoge* were known as early as the twelfth century, followed by Aristotle's *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics*, *Topics* and *Sophistic Refutations* in the mid-twelfth century, as part of the 'new logic' which constituted the philosophical corpus being taught. The twelfth century was also the time when Aristotle's works were discovered in direct translations from the Greek (in 1268, William of Moerbeke, 1215-1286, translated the *Peri Hermeneias* which Thomas Aquinas commented) while Arab Aristotelianism was discovered thanks to translations from Arabic (in particular those of Michael Scot).



Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturally

Understanding the text

- What are the three forms of goodness in al-Mamun's dream?
- What basic problem does Greek philosophy raise for Muslim thinkers?
- What contradiction arises in the relationship between Islam and human reason?
- What opposes Averroes and Avicenna?
- How to translate, when there is no translation equivalent for a logical element?
- Why is the copula "be" translated into Arabic by a pronoun?
- What were the functions of translation in the Middle Ages?
- What is the usefulness of word-for-word translation?
- How do William of Auvergne and Avicenna differ in regard to the status of the soul?
- Explain the concept of *mana*.
- In what way does Averroes present a challenge to the Christian Middle Ages?
- What is double-truth theory?
- What is the difference between Averroes and his commentator Siger de Brabant?
- Why does Thomas Aquinas condemn Siger de Brabant?
- How is the rationalism of Thomas Aquinas different from that of Averroes?
- In what way can forced Arabization be considered a failure?

Entering into dialogue with the text

- What is the most important, the utterance or its meaning?
- Is grammar no more than logic?
- Is translation necessarily a betrayal?
- Does Avicenna's idea that "the soul is the perfection of the body" have any meaning today?
- What is the use of metaphysics?
- Do you think that truth is one or many?
- Do you think that the universe is a coherent entity?
- What are the challenges of translation?
- Can one legitimately impose a language?

Suggested teaching method:

interpret

One or more questions are chosen.

Each participant replies on a loose sheet.

The sheets are collected and distributed at random. Everyone must analyse the work placed before them, comment on it and give it a mark. The sheets are redistributed a second time. A second assessment is made.

The sheets are redistributed a third time.

A third assessment is made.

The author of each work receives the assessments, then comments on them, stating whether or not he or she accepts the comments made. Everyone reads out their conclusions.

The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Drawing

- Ask the participants also to read the worksheet "Communications and the dissemination of ideas".
- After a discussion around the text on the importance of travel in the Arab-Muslim world, distribute sheets of A3 paper and felt-tip pens.
- Each participant draws a map of his or her city or neighbourhood showing a proposed itinerary, with the idea that some people will be led to visit it for the first time. The drawing should include historic, cultural and religious sites, administrative and commercial buildings, etc.
- All the participants display their maps on a wall and examine the various drawings.
- Initiate a discussion on the different ways of proposing an itinerary and symbolizing important sites.
- Ask the following questions: Among the drawings, which for you is the most understandable or attractive, and why? What has been excluded from each drawing and why?
- Group discussion on the different ways of translating and understanding symbols.
- Ask the following question: which symbols are specific to a place and which ones are universal?
- Make the connection with the way in which each participant has understood the others' drawings.
- Divide the participants up into groups of 5 to 6 persons, distributing a new A3 sheet to each group.
- Each group produces collectively a map of a city (or country) and reaches an agreement on the choice of important sites and the way of symbolically representing that importance.
 - Each group presents its map and reports on its discussions about the meaning of the symbols and the complexity of mutual understanding in intercultural relations.
- Final discussion on the importance of travel (pilgrimage) and the complexity of translation (choice of what is particular and what is universal) for Arab-Muslim civilization.

THE UNIVERSITY OF PARIS IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

The teachings given in Paris, a university that was famous for the study of logic and theology, depended on translations done in Toledo and in Sicily. As the leading European centre for the dissemination of knowledge in the twelfth century, the University of Paris, which was given statutes by the papal legate Robert of Courçon in 1215, retained its supremacy over Oxford until around 1320. The teaching method, very similar to that of the Andalusian medersas, did not make a clear-cut distinction between understanding a past philosopher's thought and elaborating an individual reflection. This explains the predominance of commentaries of the works of the ancients. Certain philosophers like Leo Strauss⁹ view this method as a means to get round censorship and some passages in the work of Siger of Brabant (ca. 1240-ca 1284), who was targeted by the 1277 condemnation (see below) may have looked like mere exegesis to those who defended him. Indeed, the University of Paris was not a place of 'philosophical speculation' but rather of 'theological prudence and rectitude'.⁹

To transmit, one must first translate. Hermann the German, in Toledo, and John of Luna translated Averroes' *Middle Commentaries* in the mid-thirteenth century. Michael Scot, who translated Aristotle while in Toledo and Averroes while in Palermo, was the greatest translator of Averroes, with among other translations the great commentaries on the *Metaphysics* and the *De Anima*. Charles Burnett¹⁰ substantiates the idea that Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194-1250) may have had access to the works of logic and noetics of Averroes' son, Abu Mohammed Abdallah, thanks to the university he founded in Naples in 1224. Renan took it to be a legend and did not give credence to Giles of Rome's story that Averroes' sons stayed at the Hohenstaufen court.

The translations from Arabic are word for word renderings, they follow a method Arabic translators had already used with Greek and Syriac. Such a method should not be discredited, as it bore fruit and, according to Leo Strauss, was consequently far more respectful of the text: "*Medieval students of Aristotle who did not know a word of Greek are by far superior as interpreters of Aristotle to modern scholars who possess a simply overwhelming knowledge of Greek antiquities. This superiority is decisively due to the fact that the medieval commentators disposed of the most literal translations of the Aristotelian text and that they stuck to the text and the terminology of the text.*"¹¹

Neither Averroes nor Thomas Aquinas could read Greek. Yet they were great commentators of Aristotle. 1215 to 1240 was a period during which, in Paris, Arab philosophers were more thoroughly studied. Averroes was mentioned by Albert the Great and Roger Bacon around the years 1240 to 1250. William of Auvergne (d. 1249) rejected Avicenna's emanationist doctrine and his ten intelligences, considered to be intermediaries created between God and human beings. As Gilson writes, 'the luxuriant metaphysics of the emanation of the world'¹² is the 'diffuse Platonism' of the early twelfth century that the new Aristotelian school intended to end. Although he criticized Avicenna's metaphysics, especially his doctrine of emanation, William of Auvergne took up part of his psychology, considering the soul much more as what ruled the body than as its form or entelechy. Avicenna had declared that the soul was not so much the form as the perfection of the body. One may note that the interest William of Auvergne showed in logic made him stand back from the metaphysical pair of matter and form as described by Aristotle and his Arabic commentators: just as the soul is not a form of the body considered as matter, so the intellect is not receptive of forms but uses signs as substitutes for things.

However, in the thirteenth century, Latin philosophy still depends very much on such fundamental Aristotelian concepts as those of matter and form, even though it occasionally gives them a new turn of meaning. It is the case for example with the concept of *intentio* (mana in Arabic), inherited from Avicenna and taken up by Thomas Aquinas to account for the activity of the intellect. In this context, intention refers to the genus and the species alike; in other words it is a universal with which to think out things. It is a broad-spectrum concept: it refers to what is aimed at in the semantic field of the action as well as to the thought form of the object. The Arabic word for it is *mana*, which means at once meaning, notion, idea and concept. In this way, what appeared irreconcilable in the form and sign (see William of Auvergne above) disappears here: the intention of a thing is its notion, which is at the same time derived from its form. According to Averroes, the material intellect is receptive to the intention of the imaginative form, not to the form itself, thus distancing itself from the corporeity and the particularity of the imagined form. What does it matter whether this intention is called sign or form? What is at stake is the relinquishment of the received image. Just as the sign is used to signify what is not, so one can have in one's mind the intention of a non-being.

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



Reflecting on the text

- > *Observe how political will and the desire for knowledge pave the way for the preservation and development of universal cultural achievements (from Greek to Arabic via Syriac ...).*
 - > *Note how the debate about Greek philosophy (Aristotle) touches on both the universal and the particular.*
 - > *Make the connection between this debate and translation: preservation or alteration of meaning.*
 - > *How does translation enable tacit relations to be made explicit in the target language?*
 - > *Follow the way ideas travelled: from Toledo and Sicily to Paris and Oxford.*
 - > *What strategy did philosophers adopt to avoid censure by religious circles?*
 - > *Assess how widespread Arab philosophy was in the West in the thirteenth century.*
 - > *Discuss the question of “double truth”: religious and philosophical truth.*
 - > *Observe a well-known dichotomy (Islam struggles to reconcile law and intellect; Christianity to reconcile faith and reason).*
 - > *Compare the vision of St Thomas with that of Averroes.*
 - > *Comment in context: The more we translate, the greater the density we impart to a language.*
 - > *Comment in context: Every reader reads in the light of his own knowledge.*
 - > *Comment in context: A language is what belongs to no one.*
 - > *Note the gaps in the various levels of language – political, religious, factual.*
 - > *Identify the danger of “monolingualism” and the need to speed up the translation movement.*
-

Other times, other places

Gerard of Cremona (1114-1187) and Toledo

Gerard of Cremona came from Italy. Italy was part of Latin Christendom, in which Latin was used by the Church and the intellectual world; it roughly corresponded to today's Western Europe, which in the Middle Ages covered the empire of Charlemagne plus the British Isles and Scandinavia... It was a rough, troubled and divided world, but it had been very dynamic since the beginning of the eleventh century. It was peopled by Catholic Christians subjected to the religious hierarchy of the pope, bishops and priests. All the scholars could write and read Latin. For these intellectuals, there was insufficient knowledge in this Latin world. They longed for more knowledge, which led Gerard of Cremona and others to go to the Iberian Peninsula.

The Iberian Peninsula was conquered by the Arab-Muslims in the eighth century. They brought Islam with them, one part of the population was converted, while another part remained Christian. There were also Jews. The conquerors encouraged the development of all fields of knowledge: mathematics, medicine, philosophy, geography, literature... They also brought with them the Arabic language thanks to which all these sciences were transmitted; there was an abundance of books in Arabic, which the princes had had brought from the East to fill the libraries of the madrasas. During this era, Spain abounded in scientific manuscripts of Greek and Latin origin translated into Arabic, and Toledo was a major cultural centre of the Muslim world. These manuscripts were analyzed and commented upon by Muslim scholars, such as the twelfth century Cordoban philosopher Ibn Rushd – known as Averroes in the West – who is regarded as the greatest commentator of Aristotle and also left treatises on medicine, grammar, law and astronomy. In Toledo, in the twelfth century, there even was a centre dealing with the translation of Arabic manuscripts into Latin in order to ensure their dissemination in Europe.

The city of Toledo was taken by the Castilians in 1085; however, it retained its cultural significance. To complete his education, Gerard of Cremona went to Toledo in 1167. It was necessary for him to learn Arabic in order to gain access to the ancient and Muslim culture stored in libraries. With a team of Christians, Muslims and Jews, he translated over eighty Arabic scientific works into Latin, among which were Ptolemy's *Almagest*, Apollonius's *Conics*, several treatises by Aristotle, Avicenna's *Canon*, Abulcasis' *Al-Tasrif* and various writings by al-Kindi, Thabit ibn Qurra and al-Razi. He translated scientific terms literally or just kept them as such.

He wrote: 'Besides an excellent knowledge of the language he is translating from and the one he speaks, a good translator needs to have a perfect knowledge of the discipline he is dealing with.'

By learning from the Arab-Muslim world, Gerard of Cremona, along with others, enabled the West to catch up on its intellectual lag and initiate its future cultural development.

Document

“...[L]est master Gerard of Cremona be lost in the shadows of silence... all the works he translated – of dialectic as of geometry, of astronomy as of philosophy, of medicine as of the other sciences – have been diligently enumerated by his associates... For the love of the Almagest, which he could not find at all among the Latins, he went to Toledo. There, seeing the abundance of books in Arabic on every subject... he learned the Arabic language in order to be able to translate. In this way, combining both languages and sciences, he passed on the Arabic literature in the manner of the wise man ... to the end of his life, he continued to transmit to the Latin world (as if to his own beloved heir) whatever books he thought finest, in many subjects, as accurately and as plainly as he could.”

The full text of this eulogy (1187) was translated by M. McVaugh, in section 7 of E. Grant (ed.), 1974, *A Source Book in Mediaeval Science*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, p. 35

The discovery of the cultural, intellectual, technical and even moral advancement of the Arab-Muslim civilization prompted the European princes to create new structures in their own kingdoms in order to catch up. The important development of libraries on the other side of the Mediterranean had logically happy consequences upon the Christian western world. As Geoffrey of Beaulieu wrote:

“While he was still overseas... the faithful king¹ heard about a great Muslim sultan who diligently had enquiries made about all the kinds of books which would be needed by Islamic thinkers and had these works written out at his expense and stored in his library, so that the learned could have a copy of every book they required. The pious king, seeing that the sons of Darkness seemed wiser than the sons of Light, conceived the idea that on his return to France he should have copied at his expense all the books of holy writings which had been found to be useful and authentic in various monastic libraries, so that he, learned men and the religious in his household could study them to their profit and to the edification of their neighbours. On his return he carried out his plan and had built an appropriate and strong place in the treasury of his chapel (the Sainte Chapelle) in Paris, where he industriously collected many original works, such as those written by Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Gregory and other orthodox teachers... He preferred to have codices newly copied than to buy those which had already been written out, saying that this way he could increase the number and usefulness of the holy books.”

Translated by J. Riley-Smith in *The Politics of War: France and the Holy Land*, in W. Noel and D. Weiss (eds), 2002, *The Book of Kings*, London, Third Millennium Publishing, p. 79

The Sorbonne was founded in 1253 in Paris – but the creation of universities had already started over a century before in France, in Italy and in Spain. As was the case with hospitals and observatories, it is very likely that European universities were created according to the Muslim model, which was already several centuries old (the university of al Qarawiyyin in Fes was founded in 859, the mosque-school of al-Azhar in Cairo in 972, the House of Wisdom dated back to the eleventh century).

¹ Geoffrey of Beaulieu was referring to Louis IX, who went on a Crusade from 1248 to 1254. He was captured in the battle of Mansura and was a prisoner there for four years.

ARAB PHILOSOPHY AS A 'FIELD OF PRESENCE'

Arab philosophy implicitly constitutes what Michel Foucault calls 'a field of presence', 'by which is understood all statements formulated elsewhere and taken up in discourse, acknowledged to be truthful, involving exact description, well-founded reasoning, or necessary presupposition; we must also give our attention to those that are criticized, discussed, and judged, as well as those that are rejected or excluded'.¹³ Consequently, the question of the distinction between Averroists and anti-Averroists is even more difficult to solve if both sides borrow from Arabic peripateticism. A possible rough criterion could be formulated as follows: some philosophers, like Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) tried to reconcile Christian thought with Aristotle – they are anti-Averroists. Others, like Siger of Brabant, were concerned with a purely philosophical interpretation of Aristotle, with the help of Arab

commentators – they are Averroists or 'secular Aristotelians'. But this dichotomy hides the problems instead of expounding them. To begin with the anti-Averroists, Albert the Great cited and commented al-Farabi and Averroes, sharing in their views up to a certain extent (see above concerning felicity), and Thomas Aquinas was a patient exegete of Aristotle, but his work here did not always take him far from Averroes. Henry of Ghent taught theology in Paris from 1276 to 1292. He was one of the advisers of Etienne Tempier when he condemned the 219 propositions in 1277. Yet, he drew his inspiration from Avicenna, acknowledging being as the primary object of thought; yet, if he acknowledged being as prior to God and to what is created, he did not go as far as conceiving it as a common, univocal notion. Being applies either to God or to what is created, but cannot possibly be common to God and created beings.

THE THEORY OF 'DOUBLE TRUTH'

On the other hand, those who were called 'Averroists', like Siger of Brabant, working in the uncertain fringe between commentary and individual research, dealt with such themes as the eternity of the world or the unity of the intellect. But Siger of Brabant was cautious and did not intend to relativize the truths of revelation when compared to philosophy. Rather, truth is and remains the truth of the positive data of revelation. To him, the practice of philosophy merely consisted in being faithful to a discourse, in his case that of Aristotle and his Arab commentator, Averroes, not in some search for truth: "*Now what concerns us is only the intention of the philosophers, especially Aristotle, even though the opinion of the Philosopher does not agree with truth, and revelation has given us, concerning the soul, information which natural reason cannot conclusively justify.*"¹⁴

Obviously, this has nothing to do with the theory of 'double truth'. Moreover, the question of double truth is the object of many misinterpretations worth mentioning. P. Hadot rightly underscored the fact that 'tradition, translation and exegesis' inevitably entail 'misunderstandings, slips, loss of meaning, re-interpretations that may sometimes lead to misinterpretations'.¹⁵ The 1277 condemnation was aimed at, among other theories, the theory of double truth, i.e. philosophical and theological truth. It was attributed to such Averroists as Siger of Brabant, although, as we have just seen, his epistemic caution led him to acknowledge the truth of faith alone. What is worse, and this is where the misinterpretation lies, this theory supposedly going back to Averroes is nowhere to be found in his work. First, Averroes held the coherentist theory of truth according to which one truth cannot contradict another truth and always agrees with it. Indeed, he said so in a book (*The Decisive Treatise*) which was not translated into Latin. Secondly, Averroes was not concerned with the confrontation

between reason and faith but rather in the conciliation between the law and the intellect. Only a law may be subject to reconciliation, not truth. A system of laws may involve tensions and sometimes calls for abrogations. But Averroes held the idea that Muslim law (al charia) does not only agree with intellectual truths but contributes to them as it enjoins human beings to pursue such truths, not only allowing them to do so, but actually compelling them, in the legal sense of the word, to do so. Between Averroes' attempt to account for philosophy from a judicial point of view and Siger of Brabant's cautious attempt at reconciling Aristotle's exegesis with the truths of Christian faith, there is no common measure, but there is matter for such a misinterpretation as 'double truth'.

As a main theme, Thomas Aquinas developed the debate between reason and faith at the level of contradiction, an approach Siger of Brabant had carefully avoided. According to Thomas Aquinas, there could be no contradiction between what is divinely in us by faith and what is in us by nature. He spurned Siger of Brabant's cautiousness: "*Among those who labour in philosophy, some say things that are not true according to faith; and when told that what they say goes against faith, they answer that it is the Philosopher who says so; as to themselves, they do not affirm it, they are only repeating the Philosopher's words.*"¹⁶

Thomas Aquinas is a realist, he does not make do with the nominalist scepticism of those who will not give an opinion about the truths that are beyond the intellect. He uses the weapon of logic – i.e. two contradictory propositions cannot be affirmed at the same time and in the same respect – to show that if the propositions of philosophy are necessarily true and contradict those of faith (in particular the propositions about the eternity of the world, which deny that it may have been created

out of nothing) then those of faith are bound to be false, which is just impossible. The 1277 condemnation finds in this the logical material for its ruthless enforcement.

But while he intends to combat Averroism, by an irony of the history of philosophy, Thomas Aquinas in fact rehabilitates Averroes: truth never contradicts itself, it is always in agreement with itself. It would not be right to say, for fear of being absurd, that one can admit philosophically what faith refuses. Of course, as Alain de Libera clearly showed, Thomas Aquinas' rationalism

is distinct from Averroes': we cannot mistake one for the other on the grounds of their closeness as to the status of coherentist truth. Apart from this status, their rationalisms present divergent features: Thomas Aquinas intends to show that reason 'cannot reach by itself the object which constitutes its ultimate end: the vision of God', while for Averroes 'without philosophy, revelation cannot reach the objective which constitutes its ultimate end: the constitution of a universal human community based on the Quranic revelation.'¹⁷



THE PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUE OF TRANSLATION INTO ARABIC TODAY

Note first of all that, in all fields of knowledge, the number of texts translated into Arabic is insufficient. Yet translation enriches a language; the more translation there is, the more substance is given to the language. The real is 'polyglot and inexhaustible', Michael Edwards says suggestively. The latter is a College de France professor and Racine and Shakespeare scholar, who reads and comments their works in the original language: Racine speaks to an English reader of Shakespeare, and Shakespeare takes on a Racinian hue thanks to this connoisseur of French literature who is well-versed in the creative workings of a language. His works are of interest only insofar as the French never stops giving its opinion on the English and vice versa.

Only if you grasp the weft and warp of other languages can you weave the fabric of the target language: the idea is not to unwind the thread from a single bobbin, but to pick out the matching threads in a ball of tangled yarn. Racine and Shakespeare, Lewis Carroll and al-Tawhidi, a tenth century polygraph whose book *Enjoyment and Conviviality* was considered as the *Thousand and One Philosophical Nights*, a tale to be likened to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* if one wants to grasp the sort of wonder produced internally by the polysemy of the words, and understand the sort of daydreaming that language is and the oneiric playfulness of translation.

The whole point of translation is not taking up meanings and rendering them, but becoming receptive to new flashes of understanding. One understands because one translates, not the other way round: there are no fixed meanings to be transmitted into another language. The untranslatable is what we keep (not) translating and fleshing out, as Barbara Cassin, the editor of the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies* (Paris, Seuil, 2004), writes. It is a Vocabulary, not a Dictionary, because it is in the nature of a vocabulary to be incomplete.

Translation presupposes a form of empathy: you share a situation of perception, and you translate because there is a common situation of perception. It is indeed an unsettling form of empathy because it presupposes a certain amount of misunderstanding

and a certain amount of shifts in meaning, but all that is part of the task of the translator. Translators do not seek a word for word correspondence, which they will never find, but rather try to narrow the range of possibilities from direct to inverse translation and vice versa, starting from a remote or merely related term to get to a more and more precise one – yet not appropriate: translation inevitably involves a certain amount of approximation.

A translation is always an adaptation – all the more so as the meaning is formed in the address, as Averroes understood perfectly in his *Decisive Treatise*, when he distinguished between the rhetorical, dialectic and demonstrative levels in a text or a discourse. Thus, some readers may see the holy text as a web of images (rhetorical level), some may find in certain words clues referring to meanings contradicting the literal meaning (dialectical level), others may detect scientific meanings (demonstrative level). Each reader reads according to his/her degree of knowledge.

A language cannot be controlled and mastered according to the traditional forms of exercise of power. Montaigne spoke Gascon, read in Latin and wrote in French. He thought that his French would no longer be understood fifty years from then, because the language was not yet fully put together; the meaning of the words and the genders were still not fixed. The language fluctuated and would continue to do so. But there is nothing to be afraid of: meaning depends on the context and is still to come; the fluctuation should not stop us – it really is rather an opportunity. The fluidity of the translation functions alongside the fluctuation and even the polysemy of words. The official languages of the Arab world (the political language and the religious language) are like powerless formal dress because most of the time they (the political language in particular) are not imbued with life the way dialects are. The standard language of the television news is not connected to the linguistic reality of employers, workers and trade unionists, but all the technological forms of broadcasting are available to it. In dialects, creation is constant. Of course, the state of a language presupposes its history – but there is nothing to be afraid of in the historicity of language.

Most Arabic countries attempted to enforce Arabisation after they became independent, mistaking the rejection of the language of the colonizer for the rejection of colonization. Yet, as Derrida put it, a language is what does not belong: French does not belong to the French nation anymore than Arabic belongs to the Arab nations.

University training exclusively in Arabic leads nowhere, while training in French paired with Arabic, even dialectal Arabic, opens up choices for the future: this is an indication of the failure not so much of Arabisation as of monolingualism. Young people from the Maghreb read literature in Arabic, and very little French literature. French bookshops close down one by one, in particular because of the cost of French books that are for the most part imports, and thus beyond the means of the majority of Arabic-speaking readers.

In the Arab world, the humanities, especially philosophy, are taught in MSA: a language derived from teaching will prove extremely valuable when it comes to translating the *Vocabulaire*. Arabic is a language of teaching, but it is also an immense failure: in the 1980s, Arabisation was carried out without taking into account another language's viewpoint. Arabic was not put in perspective. It is one of the failures of decolonization at the academic and university level: Arabic was formed self-referentially, on a poor basis, for there are very few translated and published works. When France publishes 50,000 books a year, Morocco publishes 1,000 and the whole Arab world publishes fewer books per year than Switzerland. In the years 2,000, there was a new awareness, at least in Morocco, of the failure of an Arabisation that was not only political but also extremely ideological. There is a historic speeding-up in the publication of Arabic texts today. There have been several such moments in the Arab world in the past. One such moment took place in the ninth century, when translations from Greek to Syriac, then from Syriac to Arabic developed; another one took place in the nineteenth century, when Mohammed Abdou, in Egypt, sent students abroad with scholarships and kept them at home for six months when they came back to make them translate the books they had brought back.

There is today a new trend in translation. An important organization (the Arab Organization for Translation) for the translation of books on human sciences, based in Beirut, has translated a great deal of important works over the past four years (Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Ricœur's *Oneself as Another*, and texts by Bachelard, Hume, Canguilhem, etc.); fundamental works were quickly translated into Arabic thanks to considerable investments. The translation of the *Vocabulaire* will certainly be a major moment in this trend. It will be published and distributed in six fascicles by the Arab Cultural Centre, which assures distribution throughout the Arab world.

Translation is done in the context of an ever-changing language. Context is a purely subversive notion because it can never be delimited. When one sees a forest from a plane, its outline looks perfectly clear, but when one is at ground level, one can only have a rough idea of it. Translators work at ground level, not from the viewpoint of the observer in the plane. Augustine's 'theory of the two cities' cannot be translated literally into Arabic, a circumlocution is necessary because the 'theory of the two cities' does not make sense to an Arabic audience. In the same way, the word 'bourgeoisie' raises an issue. How are we to translate it? By 'financial class'? 'capitalists'? 'The worthies' (this translation has now become the accepted one)? The Arabs often use *al-bourgeoisyya*, just as the Japanese use *bourgeoika*: it is a possible translation. As to *pravda*, there is a word in Arabic too referring both to 'justice' and 'truth': *al-haqq*. So, translating is creating: thanks to the triliteral roots of the Arabic system, it is possible to translate numerous words by creating them in Arabic by paronymy (new words are created by adding suffixes according to the model of the Arabic system). There is no pre-established meaning: translation suggests that understanding comes before signifying.

¹ D. Jacquart and F. Micheau, 1996, *La médecine arabe et l'occident médiéval*, Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose, p. 41.

² Al Nadim, *Kitab al fihrist*. The translation is from the French version as can be found in J. Jolivet, *Esquisse d'un Aristote arabe*, in M.A. Sinaceur ed., 1991, *Penser avec Aristote*, Toulouse, p. 177.

³ Jacquart and Micheau, 1996, op. cit., pp. 34-35.

⁴ For information about Gubbai, see Ahmed Alami, 2001, *L'ontologie modale*, Paris, Vrin.

⁵ Reference is to the French translation of Averroes' essay on isolated predicates: Averroes, 2000, *Essai sur les prédicats isolés*, *Commentaire moyen sur le De Interpretatione*, trans. by A. Benmakhlouf, Paris, Vrin, pp. 157-163.

⁶ Averroes, 1998, *Middle Commentaries on Aristotle's Categories and De Interpretatione*, trans. by C. Butterworth, South Bend, St Augustine's Press, p. 134-135.

⁷ P. Geach, 1968, *Reference and Generality: An Examination of Some Medieval and Modern Theories*, emended edition, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, p. X.

⁸ Leo Strauss, 1952, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Free Press.

⁹ Gilson, 1978, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, 3rd ed., London, Sheen and Ward, p. 244.

¹⁰ C. Burnett, The 'sons of Averroes with the Emperor Frederic' and the Transmission of the philosophical works by Ibn Rushd, in G. Endress and J.A. Aersten (eds.), 1999, *Averroes and the Aristotelian Tradition*, Brill, pp. 259-300.

¹¹ L. Strauss, 1989, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: an Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss, Essays and lectures*, selected and introduced by T. L. Pangle, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 220.

¹² Gilson, 1978, op. cit., p. 240.

¹³ M. Foucault, 1982, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. by Rupert Swyer, New York, Vintage, p. 57.

¹⁴ Gilson, 1978, op. cit., p. 724

¹⁵ P. Hadot, 18 Feb. 1983.

¹⁶ Quoted by Gilson, 1978, op. cit., p. 398.

¹⁷ A. de Libera, 2003, *Raison et foi*, Paris, Seuil, p. 255.



A stone with the name of God, North India, 14th century © IMA/Ph. Maillard
Allah is the supreme name of God found on all types of material, in all times and in all regions of the Islamized world, such as on this Indian stone in red sandstone of the 14th century.

GOD AND THE WORLDS

THE GOD OF MUHAMMAD IS FIRST A VOICE ORDERING HIS MESSENGER TO SPEAK IN HIS NAME:

‘*QUOLI, SAY: I SEEK REFUGE WITH THE LORD OF MEN (RABBI NNAS),
THE KING OF MEN (MALIKI NNAS), THE GOD OF MEN (ILAHI NNAS),
FROM THE EVIL OF THE WHISPERINGS OF THE SLINKING (DEVIL)*’ (114: 1-4).

IF THE QURAN SPEAKS ABOUT GOD, HIS TRANSCENDENCE, HIS POWERS, HIS MERCY,
IT DOES SO AS IF IT WERE GOD HIMSELF SPEAKING ABOUT HIMSELF.

THE FIRST CHARACTERISTIC OF THE GOD OF MUHAMMAD IS THUS, THAT HE IS A ‘TALKING GOD’.
BUT IS THE VOICE THAT MUHAMMAD HEARS IN HIS HEART OF HEARTS THAT OF THE DIVINE ONE
OR THAT OF GABRIEL, THE ANGEL OF THE REVELATION?

THE 99 QURANIC NAMES FOR THE DIVINE ONE SEEM TO REFER TO HUMAN CAPACITIES
AND QUALITIES THAT HAVE SIMPLY BEEN BROUGHT TO PERFECTION.

GOD IS THUS THE FAITHFUL ONE IN WHOM ONE TRUSTS (*AL-MUMIN*),
HE WHO ALWAYS FORGIVES (*AL-GHAFUR*), HE WHO IS VERY BENEVOLENT (*AL-RAUF*),
HE WHO IS UPRIGHT IN HIS ACTIONS (*AL-RASHID*), ETC.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO REFUSE A CONCEPTION OF GOD IMAGINED FROM MAN?

WHAT IF THIS EVER SO MYSTERIOUS GOD HAD INTENDED TO SPEAK TO US AND MAKE US AWARE
OF A SUPREME MYSTERY RESIDING WITHIN US? A MYSTERY HAVING THE HEART OF EACH HUMAN BEING
NOT ONLY FOR ITS TABERNACLE, BUT FOR ITS VERY SOURCE, WHICH MUST BE ALLOWED TO FLOW FREELY?

The God of Muhammad is forever speaking of himself in the Quran, which he proclaims to be his own word - the Prophet, who is traditionally reputed to be illiterate, being the merely passive receiver of these words. But the paradox is that the more this God, whose supreme Name is Allah, says about his own being, the more the mystery deepens, and the more our intelligence is disconcerted. The more he unveils

his being, the more it remains veiled. It is our aim to show here how, strangely, as the text unfolds, the mystery of God becomes that of a mysterious proximity inhabiting the tabernacle of the human heart... As if Allah was in fact the designation given to something existing within human beings. Many Islamic thinkers, be they mystics or philosophers, have advanced this hypothesis, and it was the Indian Muhammad Iqbal who

did so in the most striking manner in the early twentieth century. Muhammad Iqbal felt that man does not totally and uniquely express his humanity in his everyday individuality. Our complete humanity is realized in an 'ultimate Ego' precisely represented by Allah. Here is how he formulates it in his book, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*¹: 'In order to emphasize the individuality of the Ultimate Ego the Quran gives Him the

proper name of Allah'. Thence everything that the Quran says about God could be understood as describing an ultimate human state towards which every individual anxious to progress spiritually in self-discovery should direct his eyes and his efforts. But before we examine this complex path towards bringing together human nature and God's nature, let us study the fundamental characteristics of God as he appears in the Quran.



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A TALKING GOD

"Iqra !, Read in the name of thy Lord Who creates... Read and thy Lord is most Generous, Who taught by the pen. Taught man what he knew not." (96: 1-5). The God of Muhammad is first a voice ordering his messenger to speak in his name: "Quoll, Say: I seek refuge with the Lord of men (Rabbi Nnas), The King of men (Maliki Nnas), The god of men (Ilahi Nnas), From the evil of the whisperings of the slinking (devil)". (114: 1-4)

If the Quran speaks about God, his transcendence, his powers, his mercy, it does so as if it were God himself speaking about himself. The first characteristic of the God of Muhammad is thus that he is a 'talking God'.

But a question immediately crops up when we read other verses: is the voice that Muhammad hears in his heart of hearts that of the Divine One or that of Gabriel, the angel of the Revelation? It is indeed the latter who is indicated in the following verse: "Surely it is the word of a bountiful Messenger, The possessor of strength, established in the presence of the Lord of the Throne." (81: 19-20). The word of God, the voice of the angel, the heart of Muhammad. And there we have, marked out from heaven to earth, the luminous path of the descent of the holy text of Islam: "And surely this is a revelation from the Lord of the worlds. The Faithful Spirit has brought it." (26: 192-193)

So God did not address human beings personally, but through two intermediaries, the angel and the prophet. And as we see this simple fact, so we see the

constitution of the mystery of a God whose word but not whose voice Muhammad hears, whose message but not whose visit he receives.

Another question comes up here, that of what the angel Gabriel symbolizes. One may consider, along with certain Islamic thinkers, that the angelic reality would seem to correspond to a colourful way of representing the higher faculties of the human spirit. The orientalist Henri Corbin, in his book *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*,² explained that Suhrawardi (a twelfth century Iranian 'theosophist', that is a philosopher specializing in the comprehension of what representations of the divine and the angelic mean) considered that the angel Gabriel could be identified as 'the archetypal angel of humanity' and 'the Active Intelligence of the Avicennan philosophers'. We already have here then one possible way of clarifying our initial hypothesis that the human and the divine can be brought closer together: when God expresses himself through the intermediary of an angel, in this case when Gabriel brings Allah's Quran to Muhammad, it would in fact be man's spirit manifesting its highest possibilities of expressing the mysteries of existence. What religion calls 'revelation' could then be understood as a rare psychic phenomenon in which a human individual actuates capacities for uttering truths that transcend his ordinary reason and remain buried and inert in other men. His status as a 'prophet' then expresses the fact that, through him, in a language accessible to his fellow-men, exceptionally profound perceptions of reality and meanings of existence are revealed.

AN UNNAMEABLE GOD WITH 99 NAMES

According to the Sunnite theologian al-Ashari (873-935), this divine voice in man is one of the eight attributes of God: power, science, life, will, hearing, sight, speech, duration. These are all faculties that seem to make the Quranic God an anthropomorphic divinity. This has been a controversial subject from the very beginnings of Islam. In his *History of Islamic Philosophy*, Henri Corbin explains that, according to the Mutazilites, the first theologians of Islam, where 'the

Quran and certain *hadiths* [the prophet's holy words] present the divinity in anthropomorphic form (God with hands, a face, sitting on the throne, etc.)', these are only metaphor. No aspect of God evoking a likeness to human beings should be understood literally. Placed in the context of present-day suspicion as to what the divine is, this controversy raises the question as to whether Muhammad's God would not be an idealized human figure. The Quran appears to anticipate this

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Other times, other places

The light of the Aten

Light is what best expresses the existence of God. This symbolism, which is also found in Islam, is not new, as Zoroaster had already mentioned it in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. And before him, the first acknowledged form of monotheism had already resorted to it. That was in Egypt in the fourteenth century BCE, at the time when the Pharaoh Akhenaten had tried to impose the exclusive worship of the Aten on his country. Akhenaten was the son of Pharaoh Amenhotep III and the Great Royal Wife Tiy. He supposedly became pharaoh at the age of fifteen. He reigned from approximately 1352 BCE to 1336 BCE.

Early in his life, the future pharaoh took the name Nefer-Ra-kheperu (manifestations of Re are perfect). It is assumed that as Amenhotep III could no longer ensure the rule of his Kingdom, he called on his son to ensure a co-regency with him. At that point, aged fifteen, Nefer-Ra-kheperu ascended the throne and took the name of Amenhotep IV (in ancient Greek: Amenophis IV). On the death of his father, Amenhotep IV became the one and only great Pharaoh of Egypt.

Amenhotep IV is known as one of the forerunners of monotheism. He saw the Aten as the sole God of Egypt. The Aten had been so far considered as a minor god even though his influence had been growing, encouraged by Pharaoh Amenhotep III. Amenhotep IV went much further. While his father provided mere encouragement, he decided on a radical religious reform. He effaced all references to Amun¹ throughout Egypt, causing a political and religious crisis and the dissolution of the clergy (which was extremely powerful at the time and challenged the authority of the Pharaoh himself) and the closing down of all the temples dedicated to Amun. This was when the Pharaoh took a new name, Akhenaten ('He who is useful to the Aten'). By eliminating the polytheistic religion, the pharaoh made of the Aten the sole and all-powerful God and of himself the Aten's incarnation on earth. The Aten is represented as the solar disc, which provides heat and light (and therefore life) for mankind, light becoming its attribute. Akhenaten imposed on his people a figurative vision of his God (a god both near and far, both real and intangible) as well as a literal one (does not the sun rise every day?). This was obviously not the case for Amun. Still, Akhenaten failed to impose the monotheism of the Aten, and the people continued to celebrate the other gods secretly.

Akhenaten is perhaps the author of the famous 'Great Hymn to the Aten', engraved on Ay's tomb.² Some passages may have been plagiarized from ancient texts in honour of other gods. Subsequently, this hymn inspired other more recent religions: the Psalms of David, for example, retain something of its inspiration.

Aten is the only god in abstract form conceived by the Egyptians. It was the first clearly affirmed monotheistic religion. It may be noted that Moses, born circa 1200 BCE was almost a contemporary of Akhenaten. Nonetheless, it would be unwise to deduce from this, as some people have done, that Judaism originated in or was influenced by the cult of the Aten.

Yet, in the following extract of the hymn of the Aten, one may notice many similarities with contemporary monotheism in the formulations and the conception of a single God:³

*How manifold it is, what thou hast made!
They are hidden from the face (of man).
O sole god, like whom there is no other!*

Extract from the Hymn to the Aten. in J. B. Pritchard (ed.), 1958, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, Vol. 1, Princeton, Princeton University Press, pp. 227-230.

¹ One of the major gods of ancient Egypt often represented as a ram. Its clergy were particularly rich and powerful. The Greeks identified him with Zeus.

² Ay's tomb is situated in a wadi not far from the Valley of the Kings, called 'the West Valley', near Tell el-Amarna. Twenty-five rock tombs of noble dignitaries of the reign of Akhenaten have been found. Among them was that of Ay, the priest of the Aten, one of the powerful figures in the kingdom.

³ A single god who created the universe, a benevolent god, eternal and universal... (See more specifically Genesis I 24-1, 31; Quran XLII 29 and XLII, 49)

interpretation, proclaiming that God is 'the unseen' (*ghayb*, 10: 2), a 'mystery'³ whose impenetrable reality can neither be seen nor conceived from anything in this world: 'Vision comprehends Him not, and He comprehends (all) vision.'(6: 103) and 'highly exalted is He above what they ascribe (to Him)' (6: 100). And yet the hypothesis that God is the projection of a perfect Man is continually fuelled by the Quran itself, whose ambiguity, in this respect as in so many others, remains unfathomable. For the Quran is as liberal in its efforts to name God as it shows conviction in declaring him unnameable. The 99 Quranic names for the divine one

seem to refer to human capacities and qualities that have merely been brought to perfection. God is thus the Faithful one in whom one trust (*Al-Mumin*), he who always forgives (*Al-Ghafur*), he who is very benevolent (*Al-Ruf*), he who is upright in his actions (*Al-Rashid*). Is it possible to refuse a conception of God imagined from man? Faith is loath to envisage this possibility, whereas intelligence cannot avoid it. Any Muslim with a conscience who wishes to throw light on the convictions of faith by means of the intuitions of the intellect and reason's doubts will find matter enough here for an inner dialogue with himself.

A GOD WHO IS MYSTERIOUSLY NEAR

Who is this infinitely complex God who wants to be called Allah? In his *Kitab Lawami al bayyinat fi al asma wa as sifat* (The Book of Divine Names), the theologian Fakhr Din Razi (1149-1209) explains that the name Allah comes from an Arabic root meaning 'to hide'. The orientalist Louis Gardet tries to suppress the apparent contradiction between the idea that God is a mystery and that of his likeness to human beings. In his work *L'Islam, religion et communauté*, he writes: 'All the Names that it pleased God to reveal both refer to him and hide him; they refer to him in his activity as Creator and judge, they hide him in his inaccessible mystery'.⁴ His Names reveal him therefore via those of his qualities which we can understand because they resemble our own; but they act at the same time as a veil - that is what is called *hijab al-ism* 'the veil of the name' - because by showing just so much of him as we can understand, they leave in the dark what is inaccessible to us. And Muhammad's God hence appears as a coexistence of opposing qualities: the very near and the very far, human, all too human at times (the text of the Quran shows him to us as being now bitter, now vindictive, now jealous or irascible), but also radically impenetrable

(*Al-Samad*). A verse of the Quran sums all this up with all the synthetic elliptical eloquence that the Book deploys with consummate art: 'He is the First and the Last, the Manifest [*Dhahir*] and the Hidden [*Batin*]'(57: 3). In this respect, to the tradition of theological and mystical thought, the list of his Names appeared to be divided in two, those Names which reveal his likeness or proximity (*tasbih*) to men and those which, on the contrary, express his uniqueness and transcendence (*tanzih*) with respect to all created beings. For the Sufi Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), that can be summed up in the paradoxical expression 'Yes/No', or 'Him/Not Him' (*Huwa/Lahuwa*), given that as a result of this divine essence of a God who is at once indescribable and endowed with a multitude of names, the impression is both that we can say everything and anything about him and that all language is powerless. This paradox has the effect of communicating to the consciousness of the believer the *sense* of God's being mysteriously near - 'we are nearer to him than his life vein'(50: 16). He is He who is always there, all the more accessible to the senses as he remains invisible.

A GOD OF LIGHT

The being of this God of Islam is best expressed by the image of light. Like the sun in particular, he cannot be looked at straight in the face. Muhammad was only able to approach him during his *mi raj* (ascent to the heavens), and saw him through the veil of a strange 'farthest lote-tree' (53: 14). And as the light of the sun creates what is visible, so the entire universe appears as the creation of the infinite radiance of God's being. This metaphor of a God of Light, secretive and yet beaming forth, is developed in one of the most poetic passages of the Quran: "*Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth. A likeness of His light is as a pillar on which is a*

lamp — the lamp is in a glass, the glass is as it were a brightly shining star — lit from a blessed olive-tree, neither eastern nor western, the oil whereof gives light, though fire touch it not — light upon light. Allah guides to His light whom He pleases." (24: 35).

The mystery of a divine light thrice hidden and sheltered by the pillar, the lamp and the glass, springing forth sublimely from a supernatural tree, symbolizing the infinite creative power of God, who is at once 'root' or tireless creative energy, and 'foliage' or endless creation, forever multiplied and repeated.

GOD THE UNIVERSAL MATRIX

“That is Allah, your Lord. There is no god but He; the Creator of all things’ (Khaliqou koulli shayin).” (6: 102). Speaking of himself in the third person he constantly reminds us that he is the unique, universal origin of all things: *“Surely Allah causes the grain and the date-stone to germinate. He brings forth the living from the dead and He is the bringer forth of the dead from the living... He is the Cleaver of the daybreak; and He has made the night for rest, and the sun and the moon for reckoning... And He it is Who has made the stars for you that you might follow the right way thereby in the darkness of the land and the sea... And He it is Who sends down water from the clouds, then We bring forth with it buds of all (plants)...”*. (6: 95-99). Man’s

intelligence is constantly directed towards this mystery of God’s creative power and the deep origins of life. Muhammad himself is but a witness for this purpose: *“Surely We have sent thee as a witness and as a bearer of good news and as a warner ... That you may believe in Allah and His Messenger And (that) you may declare His glory, morning and evening.”* (48: 8-9).

He enjoins Muhammad on many occasions to focus men’s gaze on his absolute uniqueness as the Creator and insists on the fact that he is the exclusive matrix for all the universes. This principle became the fundamental dogma of Islam: ‘Say: He, Allah, is One... And none is like Him’(112: 1; 4).

WHAT IS THE USE OF GOD TODAY?

Where must this creative power be sought? Remember that Muhammad’s God said he was ‘nearer to him [that is, man] than his life-vein’. What if this ever so mysterious God had intended to speak to us and make us aware of a supreme mystery residing within us? A mystery having the heart of each human being not only for its tabernacle, as we said at the beginning, but for its very source, which must be allowed to flow freely?

Mircea Eliade, the great philosopher of religions, wrote in his book, *The Sacred and the Profane*, that the ultimate aim of religion goes beyond the ends that are assigned to it by most men, including believers themselves. As a matter of fact, he said, the supreme aim is the imitation of God, that is for the human being to acquire the characteristics that seem to belong by right to God alone. Man is thus apparently made – and the ancient Greek myths tell the story so well – to rob the Gods of their nature, to steal their being.

And that is precisely the logic underlying the Quranic list of the 99 Names of God. We are indeed confronted here with a God who apparently wished to reveal himself to men in all the variety of his nature, as if he had tried to teach them and transmit to them all the constituent parts of the art of being God. These Names are as it were the mirror in which man can contemplate his dream of becoming God. But there is more to it. They are the steps in a pedagogy leading to our self-deification. And hence they constitute a particularly elaborate reply to a fundamental question concerning the human condition: ‘How are we to make our lives sacred?’ Or in other words, how are we to rise up above ourselves, or what we presently are, towards what we have just called a supreme mystery residing within ourselves?

The mercy of the God of the Quran thus offers us the model that we can imitate in our striving for ethical improvement. As for the harmony existing between his attributes of wisdom and power, does he not give a fundamental key for reflecting on our present-day situation with respect to nature? As Descartes foresaw in the seventeenth century, we have indeed become ‘masters and possessors of nature’. With the formidable increase in our technological power to act, we are on the point of acquiring an unprecedented dominance over the totality of being. But what do we need in such a situation other than the image of God as a model? This Quranic God is indeed the most perfect concept of an omnipotence associated with justice, mercy, wisdom, and knowledge, all of which are capable of guiding him in a creative, not a destructive, direction.

The Quranic image of God would help us more consciously to cope with the power mutation that we are experiencing at the present time without controlling it; our technological power is destroying nature, our wealth-producing power is increasing inequalities. This image would show us, on the one hand, how we could extend our power to act – just think for example of God’s absolute power to create – and would provide us with a vision of a possible horizon for the development of our own power. And on the other hand it would give the latter a direction and impose ethical limits on it, by teaching us, as God himself knows how to, to put this power in the service of life.

The Quran’s message to the twenty-first century would then be to warn us that the gods we are on the way to becoming must become exceptionally conscious of the significance of this power mutation

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturally

Understanding the text

- What is the function of the word in the divine nature?
- In this text, are man and God compared or opposed to each other?
- Find 10 names for God and explain what they mean or imply.
- According to this text, can one reason about God's being?
- According to this text, can man be deified?
- What ethical implications does the text propose on the basis of the concept of God?
- Why are "dynamic" concepts used to speak of God?
- What is the meaning of the words: "God is nearer to you than your jugular vein"?

Entering into dialogue with the text

- Is the conception of God and of the relationship to God described by this text in conformity with your own view of the matter?
- What is the meaning of this text for non-believers?
- Do you see any interest in the concept of "divine mystery"?
- Do you think that the concept of "God" is contrary to the concept of "reason"?
- Which attribute of God do you consider the most appropriate, and which the least appropriate?
- Do you consider metaphor to be a satisfactory mode of expression?
- Do you think that there is only one God or several gods?
- Is it desirable to deify man?

Suggested teaching method: comparing standpoints

The group is divided up into three-person teams.

Three questions are chosen.

Each team writes a single joint answer to each question chosen.

Each member of the group notes the answers for themselves.

New three-person teams are established at random.

A new discussion starts up to reply to the questions; the team must write new collective answers, which all the members of the group note for themselves. New three-person teams are established at random, taking care that individuals who have already worked together are not again in the same team. The teams write new collective answers.

The initial groups are reformed; everyone reports on his or her experience, the questions are discussed again in order to check whether the group still gives the same answers.

The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Exercise in comparison

- Divide the participants into subgroups.
- Distribute one sheet of A3 paper and felt-tip pens to each group.
- Ask the participants to draw a four-column table and to mark at the top of each column the name of a religion: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism (or Buddhism).
- Ask them to draw four rows as follows:
 1. Conception of God,
 2. Conception of heaven and hell,
 3. Practices and rituals,
 4. Impact on human relations.
- Ask the participants to discuss these aspects of religion and to fill in the table.
- Each group presents its table and compares differences.
- Ask the participants to read also the worksheet "The Love of God in the work of the philosophers and mystics. Sufism: a spiritual exercise"
- Discussion of their findings and comparison with their tables and, in particular, with their representations of Islam.
- Discuss the similarities and differences between religions and particularly, in the case of Islam, the concept of God, the place of action, and the notion of harmony.

and of the responsibility it implies. One does not become a god without paying a price. This existential function has great ethical and spiritual demands and it is a matter of urgency that we know what they imply. If we do not, then we shall be the suicidal tyrants of a badly governed world that is dying because of us, instead of being the good, benevolent gods of a nature that is alive and of which we are a part.

That would be 'a use of God today' that believers and unbelievers could share. For it is not a question of believing or not believing that God exists. It is enough to consider that this Quranic God – at once supremely powerful and wise – is a model, no matter whether he be a real or a conceptual one, capable of enlightening humanity as to what it is, a humanity precisely in quest of a new kind of wisdom appropriate to its new omnipotence. We shall be able to take on this power only if we learn from such a God how to be as clear-sighted as he is in all he does.

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



Reflecting on the text

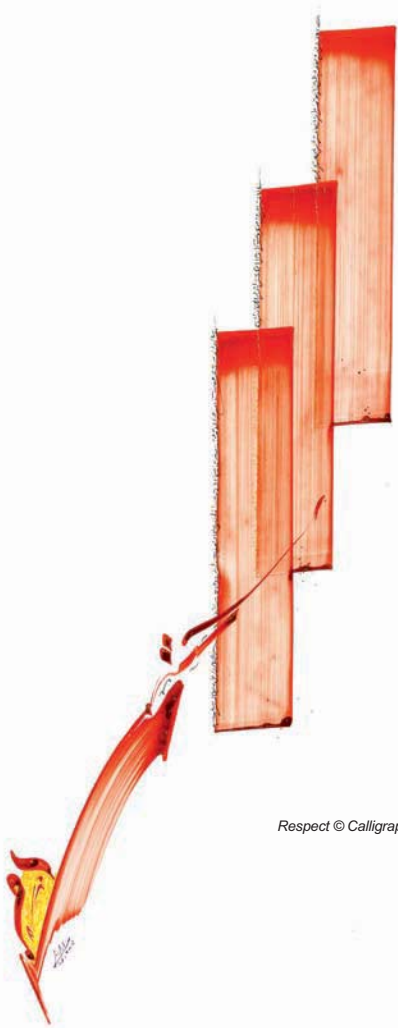
- > *What, according to Islam, are the links that bind man to God?*
- > *What is revelation in Islam?*
- > *Is the God of Islam an anthropomorphic divinity or a God of mystery?*
- > *With regard to the divine, what is the relationship between the tangible and the invisible?*
- > *And in that order, what is a light thrice-hidden?*
- > *Can God be seen as a “universal matrix”?*
- > *What, in the author’s view, is the Quran’s message for the twenty-first century?*
- > *What to think of the query “what is the use of God today”?*

¹ M. Iqbal, 2000, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, New Delhi, Kitab Bhavan.

² H. Corbin, 1994, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* Omega Publications, p. 16.

³ It is the word used in the French translations of the Quran.

⁴ L. Gardet, 2002, *L'Islam, religion et communauté*, 6th ed., Paris, Desclée de Brouwer.



Respect © Calligraphy by Karim Jaafar

THE LOVE OF GOD IN THE WORK OF THE PHILOSOPHERS AND MYSTICS. SUFISM: A SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

THE SUFI MYSTIC IS NOT A PERSON WHO WONDERS HOW THE WORLD IS MADE, BUT ONE WHO IS SURPRISED THAT THERE IS A WORLD AT ALL, OR, TO BE MORE PRECISE, WHO IS IN A CONSTANT STATE OF WONDER. IT IS A *HAYRA* THAT BEWILDERS PHILOSOPHERS AND FILLS MYSTICS WITH WONDER. IT IS THE FACT THAT THE WORLD EXISTS AND NOT HOW IT EXISTS THAT IS A CONTINUAL SOURCE OF SURPRISE FOR THE MYSTIC. HIS SURPRISE IS EXPRESSED IN HIS EXCLUSIVE LOVE OF GOD, A LOVE WITH NEITHER HOPE OF PARADISE NOR FEAR OF HELL, A LOVE THAT RESULTS IN THE LOSS OF ONE'S SELF, SO THAT GOD'S ATTRIBUTES MAY FIND THEIR EXPRESSION IN THE HUMAN SOUL. CONSIDERED AS FORLORN PEOPLE, AS *AFRAD*, THE SUFIS FLEE ALONE TOWARDS THE ONE.

The Sufi cannot be reduced to a single type of figure: there are urban men of letters, extremely well-read, and rural saints, mystic theologians like al-Ghazali and simple unsophisticated minds like Rabi' al-Adawiyya, minor figures (al-Hallaj) and canonic

figures (Ibn al-Arabi, al-Tirmidhi, Jalal al din al-Rumi). They are so called because they wore the '*suf*', a homespun wool cloak, the *muraqqa*, a patched gown. Other etymologies have been suggested: *al ssaff al awwal*: those of the highest rank, or *safa*: purity.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS ACTION

Goethe wrote: 'When one devotes oneself to everyday demanding tasks, one has no need of revelation.' For the Sufi these demanding tasks are meditation as a spiritual exercise, meditation in the form of prayer, indefinite repetition of God's name, constant praying to drive fear from the spirit, meditation as a path leading from the world of the law (*charia*) to the world of the truth (*haqiqah*) experienced as an unveiling (*mukachafa*). Jalal al din al-Rumi,¹ who, in the thirteenth century, founded the brotherhood of the Mawlavīs, better known as the whirling dervishes because of the cosmic dance they execute, pointed out that it was in the invocation of God, in the name of 'Allah' that appears the 'here I am' (*labbayka*) that the believer is waiting for. In other words, in invoking 'Allah', no reply is expected other than the one given in his name and that is why it can only be repeated in the two senses of question and answer: '*aduni as tagib lakum*'. That gave birth to a practice, the *dikr*, which is corroborated in a passage from the Quran (7, 205): 'And remember thy Lord within thyself humbly and fearing, and in a voice not loud, in the morning and the evening, and be not of the heedless.'

Islam is not experienced as an opinion, a conviction, or a representation, but as a way of life, a form of behaviour. First the attitude, then the opinion. It is not because they are Muslims that they reform their lives, it is because they reform their lives that they consider

they are Muslims. And reforming their lives consists in modelling their lives, polishing their souls, just as one scrapes rust off a mirror.

To be sure, these exercises are action but they do not exempt a person from taking action in the ordinary sense of the term: in the sense of being of service to their fellowmen, giving help and assistance, action being not only an act of piety in its own right (*al amal mina al iman*), but also the means by which human beings can acquire a balanced place in nature: being out of proportion with the forces of the universe, they procure a solid basis for themselves in action. It is true that a human being's acts are created by God, according to al-Tirmidhi, who does not want to run counter to the dogma that says that God creates everything, but just like the threads used by the weaver for the making of fabrics, 'sorting out and harmonizing'² are the responsibility of the worker and 'the fabric is meant to be acquired' (*kasb*) under the protection of intention (*al niyya*). Good intentions are not expectations of action to come, for, according to Ibn Hazm, 'good intentions bring happiness (*al surur*) while unreasonable expectation brings illusions (*al ghurur*)'³ Actions are performed according to a spiritual development described by al-Ansari: 'First you are taught to act without considering the result of your action; then you avoid wishing for any kind of compensation for your action; finally you stop being satisfied.'⁴



The author

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HEAVEN AND HELL

I shall begin with the example of a woman, Rabia al-Adawiyya, who lived in the eighth century CE, the second century AH, and died in 802 very late on in life. Everybody knows of her today because of a song by Uum Kulthum and her poem about a piece of cloth. I am taking the example of a woman because, as Ibn Arabi (thirteenth century CE) said, 'There is no superior quality that men may have without women equally having access to them',⁵ or again as Hasan al-Basri, a contemporary of Rabia's, said, 'we spoke so much about God that one could no longer tell who was a man and who a woman'.

According to the story, one day, Rabia al-Adawiyya was seen running through the streets of Basra carrying a torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When asked what she was doing, she said, 'I want to put out the fires of Hell, and burn down the rewards of Paradise. They block the way to God. I do not want to worship from fear of punishment or for the promise of reward, but simply for the love of God.' 'He is a bad servant who only serves his master from hope of Paradise and fear of Hell.'

She intended to serve God for God's own pleasure, with all her soul and not half-heartedly keeping an eye on worldly goods:

*O Lord,
Whatever share of this world
You could give to me,
Give to Your enemies;
Whatever share of the next
You want to give to me,
Give it to Your friends.
You are enough for me.*

*O Lord,
If I worship You
From fear of Hell, burn me in Hell.*

*O Lord,
If I worship You
From hope of Paradise, bar me from its gates.*

*But if I worship You for Yourself alone
Then grace me forever the splendour of Your Face.⁶*

Hell and paradise are represented in terms of phenomena perceptible to the senses: a fiery river on the one hand, gems, *houris* and an abundance of fruit on the other. But for the Sufi these sensory elements do not correspond to true faith, but to the rewards and sufferings of mortal beings, for they are mortal, not eternal, rewards and sufferings. Ibn Arabi (thirteenth century CE) did not adopt Rabia's conception of things: what is on Earth is not, as she thought, merely earthly, they are signs of God that must be deciphered. There is a spiritual *kaaba* just as there are spiritual *houris*. These are a scholar's words and they contrast with Rabia's coarse character. We may take the opportunity of pointing out here that it was only belatedly, in the tenth century, that the mystic began to be considered as an *arif*, one who knows, a *muhaqqiq* or a *muthabbit al din* because of his 'spiritual achievements'.⁷

One can put this differently and say that we can at any moment be faced with both hell and paradise, in the way we behave, in our dreams, which, when they turn to nightmares, reek of hell. Is it not said that one must not tell all about one's dreams but give alms in expiation for them.

It might come in useful to compare these hopes and fears regarding paradise and hell with those of other cultures. The story of the Shogun asking a monk what heaven was, and what hell was, is instructive. Asked on the spot like that, these questions are meaningless. They only acquire meaning in context, in certain circumstances, and by means of examples. It is the example that is instructive and thus becomes exemplary; answering the question makes you a pedant with hackneyed ideas that do not relate to life. So the monk, by way of a reply, began to insult the Shogun, who remained impassive at first and let the monk go on insulting him, but as things got worse and worse, he lost his cool and, knife in hand, advanced on the monk. The latter seized his hand and said 'that's what hell is', the Shogun, ashamed and unsure of himself, sheathed his knife, and the monk replied, 'and that's what paradise is.'

So paradise and hell are states of mind before being fiery rivers or *houris*, they are states of mind designating union with or separation from the principle.

VARIOUS INFLUENCES ON THE EMPIRE

In the eighteenth century Iraq became the heart of the Muslim empire. Basra was the second most important town in the country, and the empire stretched from Spain to the valley of the Indus. Basra was a town on the borders of the Bedouin Arab world and Persia, and it was there that the great figures of Sufism were born. They belonged to a fringe group of the population that felt that Islam, with its trading and conquests, had begun to lack transparency and that encouraged a move back to a more spiritual life.

In this empire one must try to imagine the contacts existing between the Arab world and the Far East. A highly significant model figure here was Alexander the Great, who, in the third century BCE, had conquered half of the known world at that time. One incident in particular during his expeditions interested the Sufis, and that was when Alexander rode towards Diogenes and the latter shouted to him: Stand out of my sunlight!

The incident was a recurring theme of sixteenth century Persian miniatures representing the king or emperor coming to converse with the wise man/saint, who lived in a cave. The miniatures portray the shaggy-haired sage facing the magnificence of the prince, but with a tree bending down over the saint as a sign of nature bowing down before the humble wise man (*Mala ilayhi*). This recalls the sura 22: 18 where the trees and stars are said to 'make submission' to Allah (*al najajamu wa al shajaru yasjudan*). Persia was also strongly imbued with Buddhist culture. The town of Termez, the hometown of the famous Sufi al-Tirmidhi, which lies between what is now Afghanistan and Tajikistan, was 'still an important site for Buddhism in the seventh century'.⁸ The virtues of the Sufi saints have many points in common with those of Buddhism, for example, benevolence (*karam*), compassion (*rafa*), solicitude (*shafaqa*). Al-Tirmidhi stressed God as 'compassionate', *al rauf (inna allaha bin nassi la raufur rahim, sura 2: 143)*.⁹

RABIA AL-ADAWIYYA

Let us come back now to Rabia (d.801). Who was she? Rendered famous by a song by Umm Kalthum, Rabia was a simple soul, to whom, though she wrote nothing herself, a great oral tradition has attributed many sayings. She was a woman who began life as a slave and was then freed by her master, who was enthralled on seeing her pray all night long: she was a '*sahibatu al ahwal*', a woman who has moods, attitudes of fervour, even to the point of going into a trance, though in general it is just a matter of forgoing one's senses in order to have a vision of God. An ascetic she may well have been, but she was first of all a flautist. She never married, since she considered that there could be no room in her heart for anyone else but God: 'The tie of marriage is for those who have being. But here being has disappeared for I have become as nothing to my self, and I exist only through Allah for I belong wholly to Him, and I live in the shadow of His control.'

Rabia had no shaykh to guide her, for in her generation, the eighth century, which was close to being a pure example of Mohammedan Sufism, having a shaykh was not an obligation. She herself received visitors, somewhat reluctantly, but people went away full of admiration for her. She was quickly given as an example, even by the greatest mystics like Ibn Arabi or al-Jinni. There was a flowering of women mystics in Islam, women initiates who were active in the spiritual domain and accepted because they were not rebels but women who preferred the love of God to anything else. The Sufis have divine grace, one might say, and this grace is that they 'carry with them the Quran which doesn't weigh heavy on their backs', since they can recite it by heart; they are not mere readers of the book, but bearers of the text. In other words, to be *wali*, a word referring by turns to the idea of being close to God, that of effective assistance (*al madad al madad*,

of providing 'protection, care, refuge, friendship and alliance'.¹⁰ *Wali al allah*, the friend of God, lives in elevation. In the tenth century Tirmidhi gave a clear definition of this term, it refers to 'him who speaks, hears, listens, sees acts and meditates with the permission of God', 'he is chosen by God and the object of His attention'. The *wali* is a person who, naked before God and in imitation of the Prophet, has been able to abandon all his great hopes. His soul has done more than just endure all the bad luck that God has brought upon him, in contemplating God it has forgotten it.

If we take all these features into consideration, Rabia was indeed a *waliya*. People came to make her acquaintance, to understand her strict observance of poverty but also her way of not asking for anything – she never held out her hand – for she wanted to give and not to beg. Logically if you give something, you do not ask for something. It is not like what happens in normal social relations: there is no gift calling for a gift in return. The kind of relationship she wanted with God was a relationship of love shot through with the fear of not being worthy of it: "*My peace is my solitude ... O Healer (of souls) the heart feeds upon its desire... My hope is for union with Thee, for that is the goal of my desire.*"¹¹ This attitude evidently implies a renunciation, a *zuhd*, a way of 'ridding the thing of the desire one has of it'. Concurrently, and in this relationship with others, giving, based on renunciation, means forgiving not condemning the other person if he has perpetrated a reprehensible act. For Rabia, asking for forgiveness is an act that must itself be forgiven for it is an act motivated by self-interest: Owing to the subtle insincerity which can taint repentance, Rabia warned, 'Our asking forgiveness of God itself needs forgiveness'.¹²

Insert written by Jacques Nicolaus

Other times, other places

How influential was Sufism outside the Muslim world?

One may note, in the case of St. Francis of Assisi, an approach that is similar to that of the Sufis:

- A way of life that rejects material wealth and advocates a return to original poverty.
- The love of God expressed, among other things, through the love of God's Creation.

To what extent was St. Francis directly influenced by Sufism?

One must not forget St Francis's presence in Muslim lands in 1219 as he accompanied the crusaders to Damietta, nor his meeting with the Sultan of Egypt, Melek al Kemel, assisted by the Sufi Fakhr ad Din Farisiqui who allowed him to preach the Gospels (however unsuccessfully) and compare his beliefs with those of the Muslims. He also travelled to Morocco... This openness to other cultures contrasted with that of his coreligionists who saw no other solution but a military one, carried out in the crusades.

'All that is good in the writings of pagan people (the Muslims) belongs neither to the pagans nor to anyone else, but to God alone, from whom comes all good.'

St. Francis thus acknowledged the universality of Islam.



Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- *What are the different etymologies of the term Sufi ?*
- *Why do people invoke the name of God?*
- *In what way is being Muslim an attitude?*
- *Why should one stop being satisfied?*
- *Why does Rabi'a wish to "extinguish hell and burn heaven"?*
- *Why does Ibn 'Arabi not agree with Rabi'a?*
- *What is the relationship between Buddhism and Sufism?*
- *Why is astonishment a recommended attitude for Sufi?*
- *Are Sufis pretentious when they say that they are "the elect of God"?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *Do you think that it is good to stop being satisfied?*
- *Do you agree more with Ibn 'Arabi or with Rabi'a?*
- *Do you think that the concepts of "heaven" and "hell" are useful?*
- *Is the contemplation of God a negation of human existence?*
- *Can renunciation be an ideal?*
- *Must one learn not to ask forgiveness?*
- *Are you sometimes a Muslim?*

Suggested teaching method: **thinking and observing**

The group is split up into two equal teams: A and B. First, group A discusses and group B observes. A question is chosen.

Group A discusses the question in order to answer it, while group B observes. A given amount of time is set in advance for the discussion, for example, 10 minutes. When group A thinks it has finished, group B describes what it has observed during the discussion. It comments on the ideas, behaviour and role of those concerned. Another possibility is to put together specific pairs of persons from groups A and B, who analyse each other's respective responses.

When the assessment has been completed, group B answers and group A observes. Group A comments.

If possible, begin again with other questions. The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Exercise in comparison

- *Divide the participants into subgroups.*
- *Distribute one sheet of A3 paper and felt-tip pens to each group.*
- *Ask the participants to draw a four-column table and to mark at the top of each column the name of a religion: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism (or Buddhism).*
- *Ask them to draw four rows as follows:*
 1. *Conception of God,*
 2. *Conception of heaven and hell,*
 3. *Practices and rituals,*
 4. *Impact on human relations.*
- *Asked the participants to discuss these aspects of religion and to fill in the table.*
- *Each group presents its table and compares differences.*
- *Ask the participants to read also the worksheet "God and the Worlds".*
- *Discussion of their findings and comparison with their tables and, in particular, with their representations of Islam.*
- *Discuss the similarities and differences between religions and particularly, in the case of Islam, the concept of God, the place of action, and the notion of harmony.*



THE MYSTIC'S ATTITUDE

The Sufi mystic is not a person who wonders how the world is made, but one who is surprised that there is a world at all, or, to be more precise, who is in a constant state of wonder. It is a *hayra* that bewilders philosophers and fills mystics with wonder. It is the fact that the world exists and not how it exists that is a continual source of surprise for the mystic, a surprise and a gift. He considers that he is here in the world to give: he thanks for the gift in one case and in the other to be the one who gives. That is why the Sufi never asks for anything, for he feels that one is guilty of pride when one asks for something, just as Rabia says that one shows pride even when one asks for forgiveness.

The Sufi is acutely aware of his humility before God and the cosmos, he feels, one might say, a cosmic humility. He knows that not being a hero is a weakness, but he also knows that it is an even greater weakness to play at being a hero. The Sufi who acts like Rabia immediately offers his services to God, immediately in the sense of directly, without any intermediary, without anyone interceding, but also in the sense of at once

and forever, according to a time that does not pass, the least possibly mobile image of eternity.

When Elias Canetti, in *The Voices of Marrakesh*, sees a beggar constantly repeating the word 'Allah', he mimetically begins to repeat the word 'Allah' on the way home. In this case it may be said that the Sufi beams forth. What the mere sound of the voice enabled Canetti to grasp others formulated discursively, having spotted in each repetition of the word God a change in the intonation according to whether it meant '*mina allah*' (from God), '*ila allah*' (towards God), '*fi allah*' (in God), '*billah*' (by God).

Sufism is a form of saintliness. The great saints are all chosen ones. The chosen one par excellence is the prophet, *al mustapha*. Their saintliness prolongs the prophet's message. So the Sufis are the prophet's heirs. They do not merely follow the prophet in the exaltation of their faith, which protects them against thoughts that are absurd or mediocre, but they aim at being in contact with the divine.



LOVE OF GOD

The Sufi initiates a relation of love with God. This is quite rare in Islam, for God is merciful and benevolent, but he is not immediately presented as loving with a passionate love like the *chawq* or the *ichq* in the verse '(a people) whom He loves and who love Him' (*The Quran* 5, 54: *sawfa yatil-laahu bi qawmiy yuhib-buhum wa yuhib-buunahu*). The verb 'to love' is not particularly used with connotations of passionate love. The Sufi feels love for God and compassion for human-kind. Al-Ghazali defines this love as 'burning desire, intimacy, sweetness and trust'. He who has been subjugated only by His love in all its purity, in all its truth, will be welcomed into the realm of truth.¹³

It would be wrong to think that the Sufis are marginal people living on the fringe, even if their spiritual exercises do keep them apart from others. They are not people in a category of their own, for they continue to exert an influence even after they are dead and continue to appear to believers, thus proving that the verse in the Quran saying 'do not think of your dead as being dead, they are alive', is right. All Muslims, wherever they may be, lay claim to these saints (Ahmad Tijani, Abdelkader Jilali). They project an aura far beyond their homeland. People come from afar to meditate at their gravesides (Sidi Ahmed Tijani and his connection with West Africa). They are taken for counsellors, for intercessors, though they themselves had no need of intercessors. When they die, thousands of people come to their funerals,

and the luckiest among them ask for a piece of their shroud, a concrete sign crystallizing the permanent dialogue with the dead saint.

They continue to have an effect and, to those who invoke them, this effect, their *baraka* is perceptible in everyday life. In his *Memorial of the Saints* (*Tadhkirat al awliyya*), Fakhr al Din al Attar said that Rabia appeared to someone and told him that she had driven away the angels who had come to see her after she died, since she wanted to be welcomed by God himself, for he could not have forgotten an old woman who had had no one else but Him in the world. This was a highly improbable exaggeration of course, indicating not so much what Rabia was as the use that was being made of her.

Immersed in God, they do not claim to have a discourse of their own. The paradox is that they have a very individualized life, even though they wanted to have an anonymous life, to merge into the universe as a whole and put aside the veil of their personality. But it is important to see that insofar as they are overwhelmed by the knowledge of God, they do not just efface their identities, they are full of this knowledge. Their constant trial consists in spiritual exercises aimed at finding within themselves the attributes of God, such as truth, for example. When Hallaj said: 'I am the truth', or Ali said: 'I am the word of the Quran' they did not intend to blaspheme but to say that the Sufis recognized God's

attributes within themselves for God expresses himself within us by means of his attributes, but most of the time we do not understand what he says because we are too distracted by our worldly activities. For the Sufis the Quran is food in its esoteric form (*batin*), that which does not appear to all, which cannot be mistaken for the exterior forms of dogma such as the observance of rites. Some thinkers like Ibn Arabi have even rehabilitated the figure of the Pharaoh by giving a quite different interpretation of the verse 'I am your Lord, the Most High' (79, 24) (*ana rabbukum alaa*): the Pharaoh pointed out that the attribute of lordship, an attribute of God, was within each of us and that he had succeeded in seeing it within himself. This does not imply that you consider yourself God's equal but that you recognize

God within yourself, see God within yourself, since He is everywhere. In Rumi's words: 'Divine knowledge is lost in the knowledge of the saint!' so that he cannot say that it is 'the finite ego effacing its own identity by some sort of absorption into the infinite Ego; it is rather the Infinite passing into the loving embrace of the finite.'¹⁴

They are *afrad*, solitary people, for the way to the truth is a solitary path. A hadith explicates the stage when they set off: 'The messenger of God said: Walk! The forlorn will be the first to arrive!' They asked him: 'O messenger of God, who are the forlorn?' And he replied: 'They are the ones who tremble at the thought of God; the thought of God will rid them of their burdens, so that on the day of Resurrection they will come lightly laden.'¹⁵

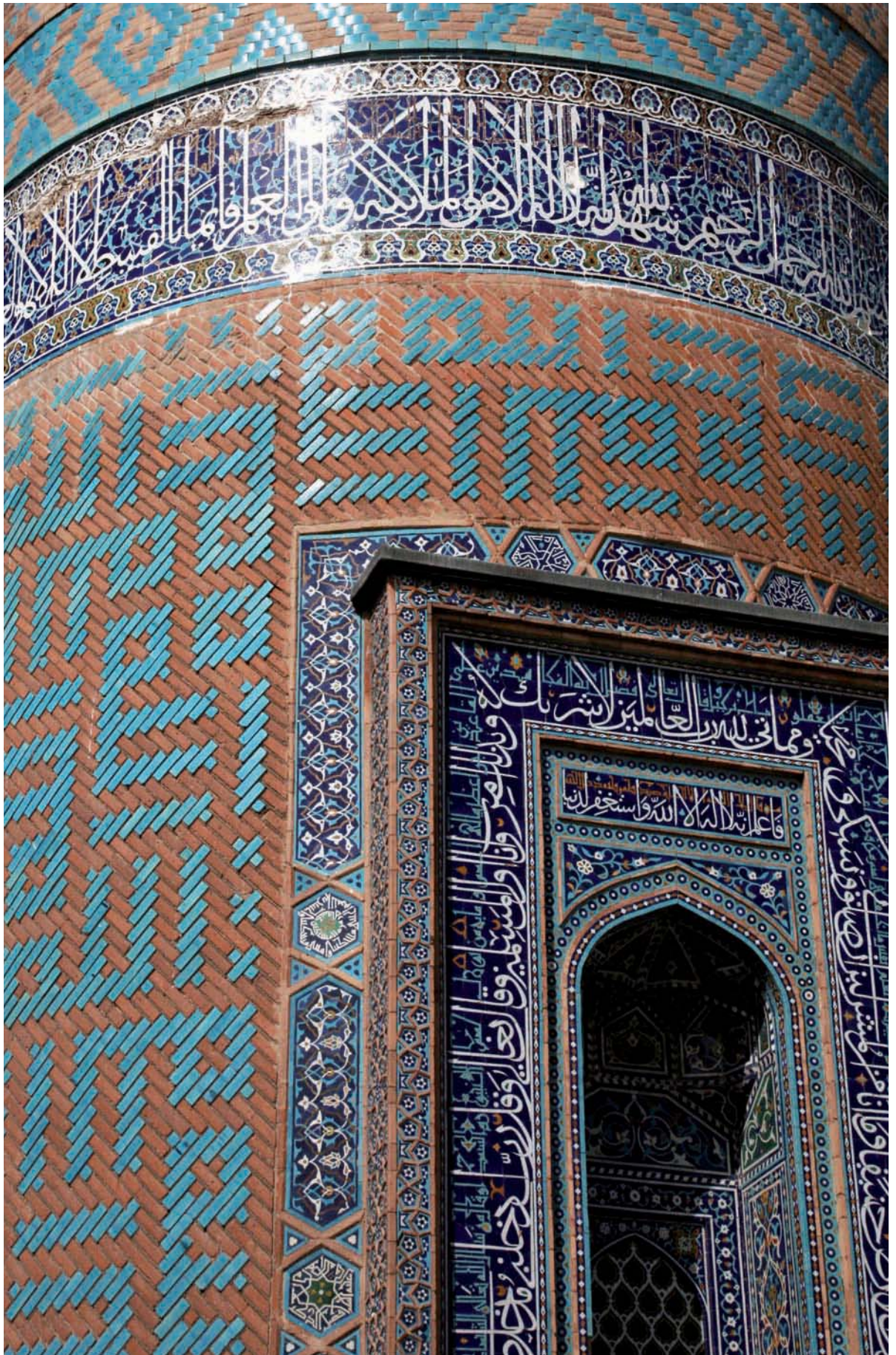
THE STATIONS OF THE SAINT

The spiritual exercises consist of stages or stations (*manazil*), which begin by the awakening (*al yaqdhā*), repentance, then the return to God (*tawba*). The stations then go on with soul searching (the *muhāsaba*: 'keep your duty to Allah, and let every soul consider that which it sends forth for the morrow' (59, 18: *wa ltandur nafsūn ma qaddamat li ghadin*) and resipiscence (*inaba*), a return to God by reforming one's errors (39, 54: 'And turn to your Lord and submit to Him', *anibu ila rabbikum*). These first stages are followed by other more elaborate and intellectual ones: reflection (*tafakur*, 16, 44) by means of the inner eye, which has a vision of the truth, reflection followed by meditation (*taddakur*) and a rescue from danger (*itissam*): 'And hold fast by the covenant of Allah all together and be not disunited' (3, 103). Finally, the last states are flight (*al firar*: 'fa fir ruu ila illahī' 51, 50), and the *sama*, hearing: 'And if Allah had known any good in them, He would have made them hear.' (8, 23), '*law alima allahu fihim khayran la asma ahum*'. Ibn Arabi¹⁶ considers that the *sama* is the very origin of existence, when one hears the Word of God saying 'kun' (let there be...), and al-Ghazali says that the mystic manages to hear 'each atom of heaven

and earth' that God causes to speak in a language that only the initiates can understand.¹⁷

Sufism had existed for a long time before it became organized into ways or paths (*tariqa*). It was not until the thirteenth century that there appeared the idea of a rigidly controlled way under the aegis of a leader whom one must never abandon. The word 'tariqa' refers both to the way the soul takes to reach God and to the brotherhood in which a set of rites for the training of the spirit are conducted under the aegis of a master who adapts the spiritual exercises to the capacities of his disciples. The Sufi can stay for a certain number of days in a brotherhood and then go back to his family, for most of them have started a family. The mourid or novice must consider everybody to be better than he is, worship Gods for His own sake, take care of his own heart, in which the degrees of saintliness (*al darajat*) reside, after serving God and humankind. There are many anecdotes concerning the various stages of the novices: begging where they ruled if the novices were princes, asking those they had offended for forgiveness without seeking to get a good reputation by acting like that.





Sheikh Safi al-din Khanegah Shrine Ensemble, in the City of Ardabil, Iran © UNESCO/Iran Images/Mohammad Tajik
The Mausoleum of the Sheikh Safi al-din Khanegah in the City of Ardabil is a place of Sufi spiritual retirement and is an exemplary Iranian building in turquoise brick and ceramics.



- > *What is Sufism?*
- > *Are there one or many forms of Sufism?*
- > *What is action in Sufism?*
- > *The Kaaba, Hell and Paradise: can they be construed as “states of mind”?*
- > *What, according to Sufism, should be the relations between the king and the sage?*
- > *Identify links between Sufism and Buddhism.*
- > *How can a woman be a Sufi?*
- > *What difference is there said to be between a “Quran bearer” and a “Quran reader”?*
- > *Why do “perplexity” and “wonderment” define the world of the Sufi?*
- > *Describe the love of God according to Sufism.*
- > *Are Sufis out of this world or at its heart?*
- > *Are they “inhabited” or “effaced”?*
- > *What is spiritual exercise in Sufism?*
- > *How do Sufis approach the text of the Quran?*
- > *Compare the Sufi tariqas or “paths” with Christian monastic orders.*
- > *What is a woman delighting in God?*
- > *What is the Sufis attitude to time?*
- > *Who are the abdals or “spiritual substitutes”?*
- > *What, according to the Sufis, is the vision of the truth?*



THE CHAIN OF TRANSMISSION

Another saint from another epoch: Aicha al-Mannu-biyya (d. 1267), who was born near Tunis, at Manuba, has at least four sanctuaries in Tunisia (two in Tunis, one in Kairouan and one in Bizerte). She only exists 'as a saint, a legend'.¹⁸ She is a 'Majuba', in raptures with God, the word meaning both being attracted by and attracting someone. In popular language the word means enraptured or possessed. When faced with people who are enraptured in this fashion, one feels respect mingled with terror. But that does not stop them from being jeered: Aicha was considered to be 'a mad woman who approaches men and lets them approach her and has no husband.'¹⁹ She is sometimes referred to as 'the saint ignored by creatures,' in other words misunderstood by them. A strong Mary-like figure, the only woman mentioned by name in the Quran, she too was one who was not understood and who caused a scandal (*ma laki hadha huwa min indi allak*).

As was the case with Rabia, we are not confronted with history here but with hagiography, with the transmission of a spirituality that involves the authority of age-old memory, not the memory that gives the past as past, but the memory that gives the past as contiguous with the present, as a past that does not pass. It is by them that history is made, even though they are not part of this history. In both cases, hagiography takes shape two centuries later, in the tenth and the fifteenth century respectively. She has no master but receives her knowledge from God and entertains a privileged relationship with al Khadir, the character in the Sura called the cave who is granted God's mercy and according to Ibn Arabi is 'the guide of the prophets and master of the forlorn,' for he has received knowledge from God. Just like Muhammad, of course, for the night journey (*isra*, 17, 1) then the ascent (*al miraj*, 53) but also like Adam for the science of names, like Moses for speech, like Jesus for the imman of the wanderers, the model for pilgrims according to an etymology deriving *massih* from *saha*, to travel, like Noah, the first man to call people into the path of God (*al dai*) to whom she can be compared, for God gave him the ark of salvation (*safina al najat*).

There are the prophets and then there are their deputies, the *abdal*. They form the continuity of the transmission of the saints, when one of them dies God replaces him. They are of value because of their practical behaviour and not through any link they might have with a dogmatic authority. They are the prophets' successors, and with their help the world can resist chaos. One of the masters of al-Hallaj, Sahl ibn Abdallah al-Tustari, a Sufi theologian who died in 896, said that '*Abdals* cannot be raised to their rank without four qualities: keeping the belly empty, sleeplessness, silence and solitude from the turmoils of society',²⁰ hunger being seen as furthering the illumination of the heart. But there is an additional reason why they are called thus: they have replaced their reprehensible acts by positive acts: 'The second reason why they were called *abdals* is that they transformed the negatives traits of their character and so trained their souls that the beauty of their qualities became the adornment of their actions.'²¹

The *walis* and the *abdal* can be troubled by the people in power for they are often reproached for claiming to be prophets. This was certainly the case with al-Hallaj, but also with Tirmidhi, who had to defend himself against this accusation before the Balkh court.

Spiritual exercises like fasting are punctuated by stages or stations (*manazil* and *mawatin*), which vary with each individual along his initiatory journey.

Knowledge of the *ilm* was highly valued. In medieval writings, this word is statistically more frequent than the word religion. The prophetic tradition reminds us that 'The *scholars* are the *heirs* of the *Prophets*' (*al ulama warata al anbiyya*). It is the idea that the saint is the heir to several prophets. The saint, the mystagogue, he who comes back into the world to help the destitute, offering his services to humankind, is 'a mercy in all the universes' (*rahma fil alamin*).

The holy man knows how to be God's deputy on earth, taking God as his guarantor: *khalifan lillah li annahu akhada allaha wakilan lahu*, *tawwaku ala allah* (5, 23): put [his] trust in Allah and *al tafwid li lah* (40, 44): entrust [his] affair to Allah.

Ruzbihan Baqli (d.1209), in *The Unveiling of Secrets*, tells of his experience of the vision of the truth: "As I was immersed in the light of eternity, I stopped at the door of magnificence and I saw all the Prophets present there; I saw Moses with the Torah in his hand, Jesus with the Gospel in his hand, David with the Psalms in his hand, and Muhammad with the Quran in his hand. Moses gave me the Torah to eat, Jesus gave me the Gospel to eat, David gave me the Psalms to eat, and Muhammad gave me the Quran to eat. Adam gave me the most beautiful names [of God] and the Greatest Name to drink. I learned what I learned of the elect lordly sciences for which God singles out his prophets and saints."²²

Finally, with Geneviève Gobillot, one can say of al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi (820-930), a follower of al-Muhasibi (d.857) that 'man is encouraged to use all his faculties to rejoin God without being asked to mutilate his nature.'²³ Much less radical than Rabia, al-Tirmidhi wanted to be nice to the rich and powerful for, as he said, 'even though their behaviour is not appreciated, this is necessary so that they will not be disgusted with religion, because of their psychological situation, which has accustomed them to never being inconvenienced.'²⁴



¹ Al Rumi, al Masnavi, III, 189 and sq., quoted in E. de Vitray-Meyerovich, 1995, *Anthologie du soufisme*, Paris, Albin Michel, p. 167.

² A. H. al-Tirmidhi, 2006, *Le livre des nuances ou de l'impossibilité de la synonymie*, ed. and trans. by G. Gobillot, Paris, Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner, p. 45.

³ See A. H. al-Tirmidhi, 2006, op. cit., p. 77.

⁴ Al Ansari, 1977, *Manazil al sairin* [The Stations of the Traveller], ed. Ibrahim atwa Awad, Cairo, Maktabat Jacfar al-Haditha, quoted in Al Tirmidhi, op. cit., p. 47.

⁵ N. Amri, 2008, *La sainte de Tunis: présentation et traduction de l'hagiographie de Aisha al Mannûbiyya*, Paris, Sindbad, Actes Sud, p. 19.

⁶ Rabia al adawiyya, O Lord, in A. Harvey and E. Hanut (ed. and trans.), 1999, *Perfume of the Desert: Inspiration from Sufi Wisdom*, Quest Books, p. 79.

⁷ N. Amri, op. cit., p. 19.

⁸ G. Gobillot, in her edition of A. H. al-Tirmidhi, 2006, op. cit., p. 67.

⁹ Ibid. p. 69

¹⁰ N. Amri, op. cit., p. 16.

¹¹ See <http://oldpoetry.com/opoem/show/26078-Rabia-al-Basri-My-Beloved>.

¹² Rabia al adawiyya, 2002, *Chants de la recluse*, ed. by M. Oudaimah, trans. from Arabic to French by G. Pfister, Paris Ed. Arfuyen.

¹³ Al-Ghazali, *Ihya Ulum-id-Din* [The Revival of the Religious Sciences], quoted in E. de Vitray-Meyerovich, 1995, *Anthologie du soufisme*, op. cit., p. 124.

¹⁴ M. Iqbal, 1996, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Lahore, Sang-e-Meel Publications, p. 98.

¹⁵ Quoted by E. de Vitray-Meyerovitch, op. cit., p. 86.

¹⁶ Ibn Arabi, *Futuhat al maqqiya*. Quoted in E. de Vitray-Meyerovich, op.cit., p. 187.

¹⁷ Al Ghazali, *Ihya*, Book IV, quoted in E. Vitray-Meyerovich, op. cit., p. 199.

¹⁸ N. Amri, op. cit. p. 67.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 70.

²⁰ Al Ghazali, 1993, *Ihya Ulum-id-Din* [The Revival of the Religious Sciences], trans. by Fazl-UI-Karim, Vol. III. Karachi, Darul-Ishaat, p. 67

²¹ Al Tirmidhi, *Nawadir al usul*, in A. H. al-Tirmidhi, 2006, op. cit., p. 34.

²² R. Baqli, 1997, *The Unveiling of Secrets: Diaries of a Sufi Master*, trans. by C. W. Ernst, Chapel Hill, Parvardigar Press, p. 21.

²³ G. Gobillot in A. H. al-Tirmidhi, 2006, op. cit., p. 33.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 40.



Polished cup with vegetal motifs, 11th-12th century © IMA/D. Kroner

THE MODERN SUFI TRADITION IN AFRICA: TIERNO BOKAR & AMADOU HAMPATE BA

THERE ARE DIFFERENT FORMS OF PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION IN THE ISLAMIC COUNTRIES. WE WISH TO DESCRIBE HERE THREE EXAMPLES FROM THE RECENT PERIOD IN WEST AFRICA, WHERE THAT TRADITION IS VERY MUCH ALIVE. TIERNO BOKAR, A SAGE WHOSE LIFE IS AN EXAMPLE FOR ALL, AND WHOSE MESSAGE TRANSCENDS HIS OWN CULTURE. AMADOU HAMPATE BA, A STORYTELLER WHO SPREAD HIS PEOPLE'S WISDOM WORLDWIDE. THE MURIDS, AN ACTIVE POLITICAL AND SPIRITUAL MOVEMENT.

TIERNO BOKAR

There is a well-known episode from Tierno Bokar's life: at a time when, and in a place where filiation determined affiliation, he did not hesitate to take sides in a religious disagreement, in favour of Cherif Hamallah, the spiritual master whose teaching seemed to him the more valid, against al-Hajj Umar, a rival master who was a relative of his. This choice obviously got him into trouble, all the more so as his relatives had the ears of the colonial officers of that period. This independence of mind characterizes a man guided by a concern for integrity, who was later called 'The sage of Bandiagara'. Amadou Hampate Ba, his disciple, who both defended him and wrote his described Tierno Bokar as a man who "led the simplest possible life, dividing his time between teaching and prayer. [His sayings] are words imbued with love, tolerance and infinite goodness towards all

men; words opposed to all violence and oppression, whatever the source may be; words surprisingly timely, as well as universal. For Tierno Bokar, Love and Charity are the two inseparable sides of Faith. The love of God cannot be understood without the love of man. 'Faith is like a piece of hot iron,' he said. 'In cooling down, it reduces in volume and becomes difficult to shape. It is therefore necessary to heat it in the hottest furnace of Love and Charity. We must plunge our souls into the vivifying element of Love and keep on guard to leave the doors of our souls open to Charity. It is thus that our thoughts will orient themselves towards meditation.'

His *zawiya* – a place for meetings and prayer in a Sufi brotherhood – was incidentally called 'a refuge of love and charity' (p. 11).

Tierno Bokar was no 'accident' of history: he belonged to a family tradition in which spiritual life was a fundamental value. His grand-father Seydou Hann, for example, was a Sufi mystic trained at the Quadiriyya School who had then joined the Tijani Order. *"In the evening after a day of studying, Tierno Bokar would return home and become immersed in the uplifting, stimulating family atmosphere, where the lessons would continue with his grandfather. According to custom, a grandson can ask questions of his maternal grandfather at any hour of the day or night without fear of ever wearying him."* (p. 11).

Very early, he was introduced to the great thinkers, like al-Ghazali or Ibn Arabi. Then he experienced the war with the French invasion, which taught him that 'material weapons can only destroy matter but not the principle of evil itself which always rises from the ashes stronger than ever [...] Evil... can only be destroyed by the weapons of Good and Evil' (p. 13). He soon learnt that only the divine name of Allah can satisfy one's soul. 'If you persist, the light contained in the four letters will spread over you, and a spark of the divine Essence will enflame your soul ablaze and illuminate it' (p. 15). As his family had become impoverished, he learnt the noble trade of embroiderer, a craft that also had a spiritual sense: rather than depriving men of their life, 'learn to cover the physical nakedness of men before covering their moral nakedness with your teachings' (p. 109). For the traditional weavers, each piece has a particular significance, and weaving symbolizes 'primordial creation'. In fact, the same was true of all traditional crafts.

Then he met a new master, Amadou Tafsir Ba, a Tijani mystic who had been blind for many years and combined his knowledge of Islam with that of the Peul culture. The latter was surprised by the spiritual profoundness of his new pupil, by his detachment and the infinite love he felt for all creatures. The master's wisdom was 'to put his student on guard against the bondage that the texts imposed on students who did not assimilate them with joy' (p. 21). The pupil found his philosophical lessons in the Quran, for example the equivalent of Socrates' Know thyself in the prophet's words: 'He who knows himself knows his Lord', and the great questions posed by philosophers such as al-Ghazali: 'Who are you? Where are you from? Why have you been created? What does your happiness consist of? What does your unhappiness consist of?' When he was twenty-six, his master told him there was nothing more he could teach him, but he accepted

to become a master himself only at the age of thirty-four, when his master died.

He was no ascetic in the strict sense of the term, since the concept is foreign to African culture, in which 'living' is the essential law, but he led a simple and frugal life made up of prayer and teaching and he carefully fulfilled the compulsory social rituals, for example the daily visits to his family and friends. All his life, he was deeply attached to his mother, who, even when she was very old, showed a touching solicitude towards her son. He always served her at meals. He also had to take care of numerous practical problems since up to two hundred persons stayed at his zawiya during its heyday, and 'it was not always easy to assure [their] material life' (p. 31). As he did not want to live only on charity, he started different activities like harvesting and selling cotton.

Near the end of his life, Tierno Bokar got involved in a lot of trouble because of a religious and political quarrel: an argument between the 'eleven beads' trend, to which he belonged, and the 'twelve beads' trend – figures referring to the number of times you should repeat a prayer – which split the Muslim community. And the French colonial authorities had identified the 'eleven beads' supporters as anti-French resistant activists. What with problems with the colonial authorities and power struggles among the Muslim religious leaders, the whole situation became intolerable. As Tierno Bokar had, for religious reasons, supported Sheikh Hamallah, the leader of the eleven beads trend, he was harassed by the French administration and the local authorities, and was even banned from the Mosque, which brought about the decline of his zawiya. Calumny, envy, hatred and fear drove everyone away from him. When people got indignant about this and condemned his enemies, he would answer: 'They are more worthy of pity and prayer than of condemnation and reproach, because they are ignorant. They don't know, and unfortunately, they don't know that they don't know' (p. 99). Tierno Bokar, who was getting older, fell ill nevertheless and died, a victim of intolerance, that tendency human beings have which is completely opposed to the principles of the Tijanya and those of the master. As is often the case, the clan spirit had replaced the religious spirit. However, it is said that many who had abandoned him or harassed him came to ask for his friends' forgiveness when they heard about his death.

Let us turn now towards some of the master's favourite concepts.

The author



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The word

“Speech is a divine attribute, as eternal as God Himself. It was through the power of the Word that everything was created. By bestowing upon man speech, God delegated to him a part of His creative power.” (p. 109).

This recalls both the biblical tradition of the Divine Word, which creates by naming and differentiating, and the Greek philosophy tradition of the creating logos, of language that is also reason, and whose nature is consequently the same as the world's reality. Mindful of the efficacy of speech, and although he spoke Arabic fluently, he always used the other speakers' mother tongue when he addressed them. He would often quote the Prophet here: 'Speak to people according to their ability to understand' (p. 149). He tried different teaching methods, using the Quran of course, but also the numerous traditional tales. Speech was for him vibration, it embodied his dynamic conception of the world. *“In the universe... and at every level, everything is vibration. Only the differences in the speed of these vibrations prevent us from perceiving the realities we call invisible. And he gave us the example of the propeller of an airplane that becomes invisible after attaining a certain speed of rotation.”* (p. 112).

Tolerance and the rainbow

Tierno Bokar was very open to the diversity of customs and living habits. The story goes that when one day a student criticized French people's habits of growing flowers, which is useless in the Africans' eyes, Tierno Bokar answered: *“He who cultivates flowers worships God, because these delicate parts of the plant, adorned with bright bursting colours, only open to greet God, for whom they are useful tools for the work of reproduction. Although the symbolism of flowers lower is not characteristic of our race, let us not speak against such symbolism.”* (p. 30).

To him, all people, in particular the ones who sincerely believed, were the repository of a particle of the spirit of God' (p. 128). He used the concept of the rainbow to illustrate the case: *“The rainbow owes its beauty to the variety of its shades and colours. In the same way, we consider the voices of various believers who rise up from all parts of the earth as a symphony of praises addressing God, Who alone can be Unique.”* (p. 126).

He was revolted when one day one of his students said he was happy that a Christian pastor had been made fun of and sent packing in front of the whole village.

The Sharia and Mysticism

These are two different aspects of religion, but you cannot have the one without the other. *“The essential objective of the Sharia is, by its very severity, to preserve man from the decadence of irreligion. It is comparable to a carpenter's plane that smoothes a wooden plank. The Sharia compels the believer to improve his or her conduct. Without a strong Sharia, moral defects will soon express themselves... If we liken the Sharia to a network of canals, mysticism will be likened to irrigation. The role of this irrigation is to open the human spirit to the Knowledge of God (marifa), which is like a kind of subtle water, in the absence of which the spirit becomes like dry, burning earth. Mysticism comes from two sources: First, from a Revelation made by God to an elect of his choosing, that is, to a Prophet who teaches and propagates this Revelation.*

Second, from the (lived) experience of the believer or, for one who is destined for the divine Light, from a direct intuition which is the fruit of his long meditative and religious practice.” (pp. 113-114).

At the centre of this tradition is the concept of the 'Great Jihad': the striving towards God involves a struggle against oneself first.

The well

A typical example of a metaphorical concept, the 'well' is anchored in the social and cultural reality, in a place where water, which is a rare and precious commodity, plays a fundamental role. But one can also perceive the evocative, symbolic and metaphorical strength of such a concept, which deeply affects the human soul. *“The well that receives its waters only from outside itself receives at the same time a thousand things that have been caught up by the current. Such a well is exposed to all this litter and to something even more dangerous: to find itself dry as soon as its water has been drawn out. On the other hand, the well whose 'eye' is situated within itself has no need of rain to fill it. Its water, filtered through the cracks of the earth, remains abundant, pure, and fresh, even during times of greatest heat.”* (p. 115). Tierno Bokar stresses here the independence of personal reflection and teaching, the importance of thinking for oneself, for he perceived the limits of authoritative arguments, imitation, repetition and of blindly conforming to the established norm.

Ostentation and complacency Turban and dust

The behaviour that Tierno Bokar most disliked was that of the religious hypocrite going around with a turban twisted eight times round his head. The man who adopts all the visible attributes of poverty, old age and piety and prays 'with much more volume than fervour' in order to gain immediate advantages, 'such a man corrupts the spirit and perverts the heart. He is a thousand times more abominable than an assassin who merely attacks a body' (p. 136). In the same way, he warned the follower saying that, after reaching a certain level of contemplation or worship of God, 'one must be on guard against one's own dust, that is, of the admiration of what comes from oneself' (p. 131). Therefore, at all levels and stages of human progress, you easily fall prey to traps and obstacles.

Black bird and white bird or desirable egoism

This concept comes from the Sufi tradition. 'It is the commendable Love of Self which is tied to respect for oneself and for one's neighbour' and consists in 'not want[ing] to soil either their mouths or their beings with bad words' (p. 146). This concern for oneself stops us from ever saying anything bad or harming anybody, and ever holding it against our enemies or speaking ill of them. 'The good act that is most beneficial is that which consists of praying for one's enemies... they wrong themselves more by speaking ill of them than by blessing them', Bokar said (p. 144). The black bird we send to somebody else 'returns to its original nest, taking with it the evil with which it was burdened, an evil which will end up eroding and destroying [the sender]' (p. 145).



PHILOSOPHY AND PHILOSOPHIES

At this point, there is a question that must be answered. Is such a teaching philosophical by nature? Is this really about philosophy, or about religion? The underlying question also concerns a cultural and geographical problem. Is philosophy a mainly European activity? Is there such a thing as African philosophy or not? It is impossible for us to deal in detail with such a controversial issue, but we nevertheless have to meet two major objections that may be made regarding our point of view, since doing so will lead us to analyse the philosophical dimension that exists not only in African tradition but in many other traditional cultures: there seems to us to be an 'earlier form' of philosophy than the supposedly canonical form of this subject as it is taught nowadays in most academic institutions where the word 'philosophy', so pregnant with meaning, is used. We shall briefly answer two arguments: the argument of religion and wisdom first, and then the argument of abstraction and concept. We shall only tackle these two, as they seem to be the most significant but also because they are emblematic and illustrate well the issues of a wide-ranging debate.

Some intellectuals wish to make a sharp distinction between two entities: religion, spirituality and wisdom on the one hand, and philosophy on the other. The main argument is that the first category is based on certainties, that is to say on revelations, acts of faith, assertions and dogma while philosophy is above all based on rationality, criticism, questioning, problematizing, *mise en abyme*, etc. It can be noted that somehow, as far as these questions are concerned, the religious view of some theologians converges with the philosophical view. Therefore, it seems to us that these oppositions, though not completely unfounded, quickly reach their limits, as the following arguments prove.

It is true that what religion, spirituality and wisdom have in common is to supply men with precepts in order to guide them, these precepts being equivalent to truths. It does not matter whether these truths are metaphysical, anthropological, cosmological, moral, ontological, or whatever, they act as postulates. Nevertheless, in the history of philosophy, it can be seen that some acknowledged philosophers also support some specific views of the world, whose value seems unquestionable to them: materialism, idealism, existentialism, positivism, etc. In other words, although the philosophers analyse and criticize, their works are very often based on acts of faith, and opponents are denounced, sometimes virulently, as being mistaken. And if the religious institutions are criticized for their past as well as present capacity of establishing themselves as political powers, this falls within the remit of other political or sociological issues. Not only that, but, through political doctrines and constitutions for example, philosophy has also conveyed, imposed or tried to impose, directly or indirectly, a specific world view. The best example is liberal democracy, relatively hegemonic nowadays in the West and fully assuming its vast power, which took its inspiration from a very specific philosophical tradition. This can be seen on the ethical level too. Kantian ethics or utilitarian ethics have certainly no less

influence than Confucian ethics. The scientific view and its scientist or positivist excesses, and sometimes even its rejection of humanism, metaphysics or ethics, is also a good example. And if contemporary academic philosophy cares little about teaching people how to be wise, remember it was not always the case. The very etymology of the word philosophy expresses both love of wisdom and love of knowledge, even though today's teaching of philosophy cares more about instilling knowledge and erudition than teaching people a manner of being and behaving.

Besides, if religion and wisdom make assertions, they question just as much. If throughout history, many schools, movements or schisms have emerged from a study of the same text, one must admit that, beyond the criticisms that could be addressed to these 'sect-forming' trends, these various schools or circles must at the start have undertaken a questioning or interpretative process, however thorough this process might have been. Yet there is no doubt that, provided one keeps an open mind, one is forced to admit that the issues that preoccupy the different religious trends are often full of philosophical implications and consequences that we have to perceive and analyse. In addition, in most religions of a certain longevity, there have been great minds who tried to grasp the deep enigmatic dimension of the original message, and show complacent or weary minds that it is not enough to repeat set phrases to be on the 'right track'. Religion, spirituality, wisdom, just like any regulating ideal, tend to aim at the infinite and the inaccessible and encourage the faithful, the initiated or the followers to climb a steep path as regards the intellect but also life. And if human beings feel somewhat reluctant about such asceticism, it does not depend so much on the nature of the message as on the specific character of the individual himself. Thus we shall support the idea that in the long run, the continuity or development of any message or world vision depends on the capacity of that message to generate innovative and enriching individualities, who, by implementing it and reinterpreting it in an invigorating way, realize it to the full.

The second point is connected with the first and refers to abstraction and concepts. In the controversy about the existence or non-existence of African philosophy, the supporters of an 'orthodox' philosophy copied on the Western model criticize the supporters of the narrative tradition as a legitimate form of philosophizing, which they call 'ethno-philosophy'. In short, the ethno-philosopher defends the idea that the oral tradition and the various narratives found in all cultures have a philosophical dimension. On the other hand, the academic philosopher, as we shall call him, claims, taking the cue from Hegel, that philosophy can only be philosophy if it adopts the 'scientific' form of the concept. However, he is forgetting that the Hegelian view is just one specific view, and during the same period, Schelling opposed Hegel and defended the idea that, besides first philosophy, which is metaphysical, there is a 'secondary' philosophy, which is narrative and which moreover existed prior to first philosophy.

Other times, other places

The Benedictine Rule

The Murid brotherhood stressed the importance of solidarity, charity, science and work, and this tallies with certain values of monastic orders founded in the Middle Ages in Europe, including the Benedictines and Cistercians.

The Benedictine Order was founded by Benedict of Nursia in 529. If the goal set by St. Benedict was primarily the quest for God he had also intended that the monks' work should not require them to leave the monastery: 'If it can be done, the monastery should be so situated that all the necessaries, such as water, the mill, the garden, are enclosed, and the various arts may be plied inside of the monastery, so that there may be no need for the monks to go about outside, because it is not good for their souls. 'Besides prayer and religious ceremonies, the monks devote therefore a very important part of their time to manual work 'for then are they monks in truth, if they live by the work of their hands, as did also our forefathers and the Apostles.'

Like the Murids, the Benedictines affirm the necessity of a spiritual guide, the equivalent of 'sheikh' is the abbot. He organized the religious life (prayers, the Divine Office, reading the Scriptures and the works of the Church Fathers) and ensured the smooth running of the material life of the community. These two movements have many values in common, Christianity and Islam have, in fact, common origins and a comparable ethical system.

Extracts of the Benedictine Rule:

[...]

10 *To deny one's self in order to follow Christ.*

11 *To chastise the body.*

...

14 *To relieve the poor.*

15 *To clothe the naked.*

16 *To visit the sick*

17 *To bury the dead.*

18 *To help in trouble..*

19 *To console the sorrowing..*

...

21 *To prefer nothing to the love of Christ..*

22 *Not to give way to anger.*

23 *Not to foster a desire for revenge.*

24 *Not to entertain deceit in the heart.*

25 *Not to make a false peace*

...

31 *To love one's enemies.*

...

33 *To bear persecution for justice sake.*

34 *Not to be proud.*

35 *Not to be given to wine.*

...

38 *Not to be slothful.*

39 *Not to be a murmurer.*

40 *Not to be a detractor.*

In the twelfth century, some Benedictine monks led by Robert of Molesme decide to break with the Abbey of Cluny, which had become too powerful and too rich, in order to renew the spirit of the rule of St. Benedict. One of their characteristic features is their interest in technical and scientific progress.

Community life was founded on the organization of the manual tasks and the role of the farm. The farmland was exploited by the monks themselves. Sometimes this land was far from the abbey, and so granges were built composed of farm buildings, workshops for production and repairs (forge, mill ...) water points, etc... They were run by a brother-granger.

The Cistercians played an important role in the economic development of the West by clearing the land, but also by spreading technical knowledge throughout the countryside. Reference is often made, perhaps excessively, to a 'Cistercian industrial revolution': they introduced the watermill, the vertical-axis windmill of Arab origin, the camshaft, the fulling mill for crushing hemp, the power hammer which generalized the use of iron tools, ... In agriculture, the selection of seeds and animals helped to increase yields, All these innovations spread throughout Europe and helped to improve living conditions, which were still precarious in those days.

The academic philosopher upholds the idea that philosophy needs to explicate things. But in this case, what about aphorisms like the ones Nietzsche used, in the Oriental tradition, or else the cynic who expressed himself by means of gestures, or the koan in the Zen tradition, or the literary works by Schiller, Dostoyevsky or Camus, or Holderlin's poems and Aesop's fables? That is why we wish to defend the idea of 'metaphoric concept', common in tradition, for example the concepts of 'light', 'breath', and 'source' which are as good as the conceptual equivalents of 'truth', 'spirit' and 'origin'. They are perhaps even more telling, more direct, more powerful.

Apart from the conceptual aspect, there are other philosophical reasons which make us side with ethnophilosophers against academic philosophers. Tales have a critical dimension and a capacity for problematization: they question and challenge ordinary world

visions. Heroes, strange situations, occult forces are all symbols, archetypes or allegories with an analogical value and they echo the prevailing conceptions the better to disrupt them, even more thoroughly than abstract concepts would. Indeed, there is a tradition that might be called 'philosophy of life', which is somehow contrary to a 'philosophy of spirit'. The problem here is to decide whether philosophy is above all a mainly cognitive and intellectual activity, or if it is a tool allowing us to have a better life, to be more human, to find happiness or tranquillity. These two views themselves refer to philosophical postulates. And it is quite possible to defend the idea that only a philosophy of life is real, that is an actual philosophy and not only a potential philosophy since it is materialized instead of being just formulated. Therefore, why should we not consider for the time being, that the nature of philosophy poses a problem, and that it might just be polymorphic?

AMADOU HAMPATE BA

Amadou Hampate Ba was Tierno Bokar's disciple, but his works are of specific importance because they were a bridge between African culture and Western culture, between oral and written traditions, between wisdom and knowledge. He went both to French school and to traditional school, he worked for the colonial administration, for his own country and for international structures like UNESCO. He frequently met African sages and Western scientists, and was himself both a sage and a scientist. He was from a noble family but he fulfilled the most humble tasks and later received the greatest honours. Just like his master, Amadou Hampate Ba was a Muslim, and member of the Tijaniya, an Islamic Sufi brotherhood. He said of himself: 'I am a man of religion, a Peul poet, a traditionalist, initiated to the Peul and Bambara secret sciences, a historian, a linguist, an ethnologist, a sociologist, a theologian, a Muslim mystic, an arithmologist and arithmosopher.' He looked critically at the Western influence in Mali and more generally in Africa: *"During the colonial period, they had already started to undermine traditional education. They used all the possible means to fight against the Quranic schools but also against the traditional craft workshops which in reality, were centres where plenty of knowledge was passed on – technical and scientific knowledge, as well as symbolic and cultural or even metaphysical knowledge"*.

He encouraged Westerners to look at African traditions, which were not at all well known, in a different way. 'One is bound to understand nothing about traditional Africa if it is considered from a profane viewpoint.' In fact, it is necessary to understand a specific truth from inside, in relation with itself, and not by transposing

it into a framework that is not its own. This necessity corresponds to the Hegelian concept of 'internal criticism', that is to say analysing and assessing a system from within, in the first place at least, in order to understand its own logic, before resorting to external criticism, that is to say confronting it with concepts that are foreign to it, even though Hegel did not make use of his principles in this case... The same goes for the encouragement to suspend one's judgement as a requirement for understanding, a recurring command in the philosophical tradition, with Descartes for example.

Amadou Hampate Ba was probably one of the best-known figures in the world of African literature, but he was also a philosopher who did his best to promote the emergence of a more human and fraternal civilization. He did not try to make demands or to fight as much as to teach: he did not worry so much about 'africinity' or negritude as about the loss of meaning and the quest for being in the most universal sense of the term. To him, giving up a metaphysical tradition had tragic effects on all mankind, if only the drabness brought on by the obligation for all human beings to conform to the norm. The inspiration he was driven by, which he tried to pass on, plunged into the deepest roots of culture, through its aesthetic dimension, which directly addresses the mind and the senses, but also through its ethical dimension, this inherently human 'sense of what is good', which used to fill Rousseau with such wonder.

The wisdom Amadou Hampate Ba proposed renews the Socratic message: 'All I know is that I know nothing'. It was also Nicholas of Cusa's learned ignorance, an acquired ignorance which implies

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- *What is there in common between Tierno Bokar, Amadou Hampate Ba and Ahmadou Bamba?*
- *What are the main defects combated by Tierno Bokar?*
- *What does “self-love” mean for Tierno Bokar?*
- *How does metaphor give food for thought?*
- *What are the two main ways of philosophizing?*
- *What is the value for humanity of the work of Amadou Hampate Ba?*
- *What parallels can be drawn between the teaching of Amadou Hampate Ba and Western psychology?*
- *What are the main lines of Ahmadou Bamba’s project?*
- *What are the three main values of the Murid movement?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *Do you see a resemblance between the teaching of Tierno Bokar and Christianity?*
- *Would you send your children to Tierno Bokar’s school?*
- *Can religion and philosophy really be reconciled?*
- *Do you think that there exist several philosophies or only one?*
- *Can we speak of progress in philosophy?*
- *Is Amadou Hampate Ba fighting a rearguard battle?*
- *Is metaphor an adequate means of teaching?*
- *Do you think that Ahmadou Bamba’s views are coherent?*
- *Do you consider the Murid movement a good political model?*

Suggested teaching method: **interpreting**

The group is divided up into three-person teams. A question is chosen. Each team must write down two or three different ways of understanding or interpreting the question. An answer is written down for each interpretation. If no difference in interpretation is provided, the group must justify or explain in writing why this cannot be so. One team reads out the results of its work to the entire group. The listeners are invited to make criticisms and objections. The team of authors must respond to them and decide whether or not they intend to modify their initial work, in what way, and why. One by one, each team reads out what it has written and each time the procedure starts up again. Time permitting, other questions are addressed in the same way. The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Comparing representations

- *Divide the participants into groups and give to each group a large sheet of paper and felt-tip pens.*
- *Ask each group to make two columns on the sheet. In the right-hand column ask them to list all elements that characterize philosophy, and in the left-hand column everything that pertains to belief, religion and spirituality.*
- *Each group presents its outline and compares similarities and differences with the other groups. It is especially important to note what elements appear in different columns according to the groups.*
- *Explain the lives, views and thoughts of Tierno Bokar and Amadou Hampate Ba.*
- *Discuss the philosophical positions taken by these two Sufi masters.*
- *End with an explanation of who the Murids were, with a discussion on combinations of Islam-Sufism/ African traditions/Western influence.*

becoming aware of one's limits. *"Whoever proudly hits his fist on his chest and takes great pride in saying I know, does not know that if he knew, he would know that he knows nothing... If you know that you know nothing, then you will know. But if you do not know that you know nothing, then you do not know"*.

This was why, in accordance with the teachings of Tierno Bokar, his master, Ba insisted so much on Truth's many voices and the many ways of reaching it, especially as some of these voices had started to die out. Hence his vibrant call when he addressed a UNESCO assembly: 'In Africa, when an old person dies, a library burns.' Again, beyond the purely ethnological aspect of these words, what is evoked here is what it means to be a human being, it is a human being's very identity that is at stake. In fact, human beings are not just individuals, they stand for something larger than themselves, a secular culture, a rich tradition, a teaching, in short, it is the very concept of humanity that is held to account and implemented here.

The fact that human beings have many dimensions is illustrated in African languages, for example in the Peul and Bambara peoples. 'There are multiple persons in each person', explained Amadou Hampate Ba: *"The notion of person is therefore quite complex, to start with. It involves an inner multiplicity, concentric or superimposed levels of life – physical, psychic and spiritual at different levels – as well as continuous dynamic forces... The forces produced by this potentiality are in perpetual motion just like the cosmos itself... Life, which begins with conception, is preceded by a cosmic pre-existence in which men are supposed to live in the kingdom of love and harmony, called Benke-So."*

In a way, such a conception reminds us of Aristotle's multiplicity of souls: the nutritive soul, the sensitive soul and the rational soul being superimposed in men, but also of a more modern psychological conception, in which various tendencies are combined and clash within the human mind.

Amadou Hampate Ba's literary works, his tales, explicitly refer to the initiatory tradition in African culture, where the Sufi mystic spirit naturally combines with native spiritual traditions. They contain, as in any spiritual work of art worthy of the name, the great eternal and universal themes: the quest for wisdom and knowledge, in which knowledge of the world and self-knowledge are closely intermingled; the quest for self and its many ruthless, painful, adventurous, miraculous and magic dimensions, since nothing is ever certain or even possible, or predictable or understandable; the paradoxical nature of things and beings, which certainly has, not an everyday logic, but a logic of its own that must be discovered; the endless play of trials and signs guiding the willing or even the unwilling, towards a 'divinization' or a 'humanization'; the progressive initiation with its stages, symbols and diverse places, which recall Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where the various forms

of good and evil wrestle and intertwine inextricably at times; 'an innumerable amount of incredible events, fantastic battles, perilous journeys, successes, failures and adventures endlessly renewed until the happy outcome... In the very image of life, the battle between good and evil is constant around and within oneself.' A phantom hope haunts the narrative, though it never really materializes. As in all traditional tales, his tales can be read in different ways. They can be read for pleasure, since they are a combination of gentleness, anxiety, suspense and happiness, which appeals to children first, and then to grown-ups, as the aesthetic perception anchors the narration or certain details of it in the readers' psyche. At a moral level, they apply and explain the traditional values which haunt and structure man's moral conscience. At a didactic level, they teach the paths towards life and happiness, the obstacles and traps, they present the discoveries and inner dramas that are all reference points we learn to know and recognize. At a metaphysical level, just like Platonic reminiscence or the innate ideas of Western tradition, they initiate us into the grand scheme of things, into the fundamental intuitions or archetypes which allow, punctuate and give birth to human thinking and existence, and define man's identity, nature, behaviour and integration into the great chain of being.

'If you want to save some knowledge and have it travel through time, leave it in the care of children', the old Bambara initiates say. In order to be unveiled, truth should first come forward veiled, perceptible and attractive, in a simple and presentable form, as in the Greek concept of '*aletheia*', or unveiling of truth, developed by Heidegger. Or, as Schiller said to the philosopher, 'When they have been scared away by your austere philosophy, the play instinct will bring them back.' The pleasure of gazing at a starry sky may re-emerge in the concept of truth, says the poet who is also a playwright and a philosopher. Art as a sensitive form of the idea, Hegel says.

Amadou Hampate Ba explained that the aim of the storyteller was first of all to 'be interesting for the people around him and to avoid boring them. A tale should always be pleasant to listen to, and at times, capable of brightening up the strictest persons. A tale without laughter is like food without salt.' This advice should inspire some philosophers and pedagogues burdening themselves with too many technical details. It does not hinder the didactic nature of the work, far from it. 'Skilled traditional storytellers are used to interrupting their narratives with many instructive developments. Each tree, each animal may be the object of a practical and symbolic lesson'. After all, our singular being is at once the centre and the real subject of all the stories. These stories take place within us. Just like a spectator of the great works of many civilizing traditions, we cannot avoid being caught up by the cosmic battles and the petty disputes occurring in the universe, because they alone can account for the human problem - the endless clash between the finite and the infinite.

THE MURIDS

It seems to us interesting to show that the Sufi tradition is not only embodied by a few exceptional men, but to explain how it can constitute an organized social movement, and become the driving force of a community. Of course, in the transition from the abstract to the concrete, from the ideal pattern to its actualization in history, from the initial message to its representation or implementation, from the master to the disciples, we come up against the harsh daily human reality, with its share of pettiness and meanness. As history shows, all the movements based on great ideals are always betrayed by their own sectators; we are bound to come up against man's the most ordinary limitations of men in all their banality. Yet, it is necessary to be able to acknowledge, despite the numerous possible criticisms, be they excessive or legitimate, the importance and the need for the concept of a regulating ideal, as advocated by Immanuel Kant – the need for an ideal of life. The Sufi tradition is no different from all other philosophical, political or religious traditions: some important figure or other of a specific school draws attention to himself more for being a little tyrant or a great dictator, for his greed or his taste for being in the limelight, than for his spiritual or human qualities. People might say afterwards he was not a dedicated follower or true believer or blame him for corrupting the message, but let us find comfort in Hegel's idea according to which, despite or thanks to all sorts of mediocre ambitions driving or limiting specific individualities, sometimes more so than noble ideals, great things have nevertheless been achieved throughout human history. Thus we shall try to account for the Murid movement without going into the various criticisms that have been levelled at this large movement, but only in order to get to know and understand the potential, originality and specificity of an intellectual, spiritual, social and political movement, both Muslim and African.

In all political or religious traditions, a reformer regularly appears who tries to renew an established way of thinking, from a rereading of an original text. Various figures of this sort have punctuated the history of Sufism, including Sheik Ahmadu Bamba (1853-1927), the founder of the Murid brotherhood, a religious and political movement mainly established in Senegal and the Gambia. Bamba wanted to reconstruct a Senegalese society greatly disrupted by colonialism, drawing his inspiration from the teachings of the Quran and Sufi tradition, especially from the Tijaniya, the Qadiriyya and al-Ghazali, and what is more insisting on two specific values: hard work and science. He experienced many setbacks with the colonial administration, including an eight-year deportation. Of course, as always in these cases of 'renewal', the 'reformer' was greatly criticized by the 'orthodox' supporters, all the more so as Ahmadu Bamba defined himself as the Prophet's spiritual heir, a sort of 'saint' sent by the latter, a figure who thus deserved to be worshipped. Many found this pretension annoying. And as always in Africa, the Islamic religious culture combined with the local traditions, adjusted to or, for that matter, fitted into the Wolof culture, which sets great value on the ideas of solidarity and hard work.

The Murid brotherhood, which is very well structured and hierarchical, has so far been governed by a caliph general, who is a direct descendent of the founder. Some people would call it a 'feudal' structure, but it is still very popular among the Senegalese at home and abroad, where the faithful inevitably recreate the original structures in their host country. The Murid movement has continuously been growing: the figures vary, but according to various sources, there are three to five million faithful. Every year, a million pilgrims go to Touba, the holy city, which has become the second-largest and second-wealthiest city of the country. Indeed, the Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade is a renowned member of the community, a good example of the movement's political power, which always gives voting instructions, thus securing a dominating role for itself in Senegalese politics.

On the economic level, it is quite active in the agricultural sector, groundnut production in particular, which is an important source of income. It must be added that agriculture was a noble activity to which all the Wolof devoted themselves, irrespective of their social status, slaves or free men, as this agrarian people loved hard work and the land. In 1912, when the land of the groundnut basin grew poorer, Sheikh Ahmadu Bamba set about colonizing new land. In a hostile environment (arid deserts, lions, nomadic shepherds) the Murid leaders saw to the settlers' needs for organization and concentration in the new agricultural areas.

Another major economic sector is trade, related to the tradition of cattle breeding and the barter economy. Today, it is said that the Murids, who control most of the retail trade, are in command of the major part of the informal economy. They have gradually replaced the Lebanese who had monopolized the sector since the colonial period. They did it regardless of the established rules and with business acumen, which nevertheless encouraged the emergence of a national capital which has greater ambitions today than to stick to the retail business. The Murids are fond of repeating that the most successful Senegalese businessmen belong to their movement. Another significant source of income must be added to this: funds sent from the French and American diaspora. These sums are mainly re-invested in Touba, the holy city, but are also used to grant the faithful with small craft and trade centres outside the formal economy. These informal circuits enabled the Marabouts to afford new products, even luxury products, without serving as a basis for a capitalistic accumulation of wealth.

As regards solidarity, the movement has created many structures in which neglected children and children from poor families are provided with food, housing and teaching, because this humanitarian and educational activity is a major aspect of the movement's activity.

Ahmadu Bamba, the founder

Ahmadu Bamba's father was an eminent juriscounsel who taught the Quran, and who for integrity's sake had turned down offers of political functions. The story goes that, when he was very young, *"the boy's parents had discovered very early in him an innate perfection that resulted in attitudes and habits of piety, of good moral conduct, of devotion, of solitude, and a behaviour loathing fun, indecency and sins...Everywhere he passed during his early age, after his assimilation of the Quran, whether it is for acquirement of science or other instruments such as grammar, prosodies, rhetoric, logic, linguistics, literature, poetry, people recognized him a perfection unanimously spiritual that could result from a light coming from God only."*

For many years, he taught alongside his father, and composed a versification of a treaty of jurisprudence: *Jawhanaru-n-nafis* (The Precious Jewel) and other works on theology, Sufism, education, grammar, etc.

Bamba had the office of caliph conferred on him at the school of a master of the Qadiriyya: Sheikh Sidia. Then he decided to settle in the bush, far from the sound and the fury, in an area he had had cleared for him. That was where many former students of his father's and members of his family came to stay with him. Peasants came too, for protection, exhausted by the many persecutions, and former rebel warriors tired of incessant fighting. His message of peace: 'let us wage war against one's own soul and not against the soul of someone else' found a real echo among the whole population, ravaged by war, colonial brutality and acts of violence perpetrated by the various warring gangs.

This heterogeneous population, motivated by different longings, founded the first Murid village or community, out of a concern that was as much political as religious. In fact, his motto: 'there is no other power than God's' proclaimed their independence as regards all foreign or local authorities, rebels or colonialists. At the same time, Bamba neither revolted violently nor accepted to collaborate with the people in power: his opposition to the belligerents took the form of a passive resistance, which everybody found very disconcerting: some accused him of being a collaborator while others accused him of being a rebel. He was very successful very quickly, which got him into trouble with the French administration and the various local authorities. As he often said in different forms, he worshipped God with great devoutness, and 'He was not the slave of the futilities of this bottom-world, nor of the domineering colonial authority, nor of the one of the pagan chiefs of the old local aristocracy'. He refused the invaders' and the jealous local leaders' arbitrariness and corruption; in the same way as Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi, he refrained from all violent words or acts: he wished to distinguish between evil and those who brought evil. Similarly, he was reluctant to deal with religious school infighting and he encouraged deep humanism. Above all, he longed for a human and intellectual rehabilitation of his people, so that peace might be restored and the people raise their heads. Therefore, it was necessary to anchor the religious conception here below, so as not to deny the meaning and importance of daily life.

Murid society, thinking and spirituality

The Murid structure is based on the relation between a 'sheikh', a spiritual guide, and his disciple, the 'talib'. An intellectual and economic dependence was established through this relation. Thus the talib has economic obligations towards his sheikh, but the sheikh is supposed to act as mediator in all dealings the talib has to have with the administration or the judiciary, which is a sort of economic and political clientelism with an initiatory dimension. Indeed, this is found in other Sufi brotherhoods, a pattern that is close to the traditional Wolof structure, in particular the former relationships between members of different castes, including the slaves who were a significant part of society. We must remember that Muridism was introduced in the aftermath of the break-up of the traditional social organization which was very well-structured – for example with its distinctions between nobles and workers, free men and slaves – a break-up caused by colonization. Indeed, the invaders transformed the geographical and political structures, as well as economic dynamism, now dependent on French commercial interests, a destabilization which created a great feeling of insecurity. This structure may be considered to be feudal because of its institutionalized social hierarchy, but also because of the important system of dues, a sort of tribute everybody had to pay to his superior. However, the main change corresponding to the 'modern' dimension of the Murid reform was that vassalage became voluntary: there was no longer any physical or other form of coercion, contrary to what happened in the past. This message contributed to the adaptation to capitalist modernity which had been introduced by colonialism, but also strengthened their religious and national sense of identity, and was a way of escaping from the feudal ethics of the Wolof kingdoms, where workers often had an inferior status. Ahmadu Bamba even advocated 'sharing tasks' by introducing equality between the various types of tasks and appointing sheikhs from all social strata.

As in all Sufi traditions, the sensual element is the highest conception of divine knowledge and divine love, a mystic vision. Another major aspect is the need for a sheikh: 'he who has no sheikh as spiritual guide may go wherever he likes: Satan is with him'. A Western reader may find such a conception strange, but this conception involving being wrenched away from one's self as a condition for achieving awareness, as an opening towards universality or transcendence echoes Western philosophical tradition. Moreover such practice of spiritual and existential submission was very common in the Christian tradition. The disciple thus receives the sheikh's teachings, and he is supposed to merge mentally and physically into his master, to give himself up into his hands 'like a corpse in the hands of the washer of the dead', a necessary state of annihilation to receive God's grace. This is what is called the *djebelu*, a sort of 'gift-giving', as mentioned by Marcel Mauss, which implies being able to have complete confidence in the master. Nonetheless, this proceeding is not applied in a radical fashion by each and every individual, it is rather a religious ideal. On the other hand, this does not mean that the disciple is blind: he has to be able to use his own judgement. Indeed, Bamba encouraged his followers to study scientific truth and its applications:

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



Reflecting on the text

- > *What does “filiation and affiliation” mean in Sufism?*
 - > *What according to Tierno Bokar is faith?*
 - > *What is meant by Sufi training?*
 - > *What was the relationship between Sufism and colonialism as seen in Tierno Bokar’s life story?*
 - > *How did the encounter between the Quran and African tradition take place?*
 - > *What is Tierno Bokar’s position on the diversity of belief?*
 - > *What is “love of self” in Sufism?*
 - > *How to break down the barriers between religions and philosophies?*
 - > *What bridges can be built between African and Western cultures?*
 - > *What was the effect of colonial oppression on traditional African culture?*
 - > *How can meaning be sought through diversity?*
 - > *What do African culture and Sufism have in common as regards initiatory traditions?*
 - > *How do you define the storyteller’s vocation in African culture?*
 - > *What is the Sufi Murid movement and what are its goals?*
 - > *What was its founder’s profile and what was the impact of his action on the social fabric?*
-

‘Science and action are twin essences and he who knows science but does not use it is a stupid ass... there is no difference between men and animals except knowledge...’ Therefore, some Murid marabouts devote themselves entirely to scientific research. Sheikh Anta Diop, the great African historian wrote: ‘This community, with Professor M’Backé Bousso, was already interested in mathematics, applied mechanics, some problems of thermodynamics (steam machine) and above all the precise measure of time...’

The complete renunciation of worldly matters is one of the bases of Murid morality. Bamba had unwavering faith in the idea of inner struggle, the ‘great Jihad’ of the Sufi tradition, which all human beings worthy of the name permanently have to wage against themselves. The golden rule is selflessness: ‘Be like the small donkey which won’t eat the load it’s carrying, for true happiness consists in forgetting existence.’ But since this extreme selflessness cannot be achieved by an ordinary adept, he has to redeem himself through hard work instead. Bamba had a good understanding of this duality in man, who cannot live only in contemplation: work is an integral part of prayer. The Murid ‘has to work as if he would never die and pray God as if he would

die tomorrow.’ This conception of sanctifying work, though it is anchored in the Wolof tradition, is not really foreign to Islam and can be found for example in Ibn Khaldun’s works: ‘without work, no income is earned, and there will be no useful result.’ Work also involves moral value. Man therefore, who is God’s vicar, does not only have to worship God but also to leave a trace of his presence on earth. Work is part of the moral and physical acts and trials ensuring the salvation of the soul. Bamba’s genius is to have associated the mystic tradition with a more ‘modern’ or secular wish for social success or material ambition. The works of this visionary remain quite an original phenomenon in Africa, in so far as they have revitalized an endangered culture and stimulated a population, while offering individuals a programme of solidarity and social improvement. Even manual work which used to be reserved for the lower classes has now increased in value, and also added to the individual’s freedom, as everybody can choose the activity that is best for him/her, without worrying about questions of caste or family origin.

Admittedly, Muridism was mainly a rural phenomenon to begin with, but this is no longer the case today. Its basic function, however, was the moder-

nization of rural life, the introduction for example of modern agricultural methods like fertilizers, ploughing with the help of animals or tractors, and importing cars or modern means of communication. This modernization brought progress in housing development with the use of materials made to last, in interior decoration; it also brought well laid-out roads, and village wells. With the Groundnut Crisis and the rural exodus, the social panorama of the country and the organization of the movement have changed. As it was impossible to reproduce the village architecture, with houses close to one another, in specific urban neighbourhoods, 'dahira' were built, sorts of community compounds and meeting-places for the faithful, to perpetuate the tradition of unity and solidarity. Today, Muridism has established itself in cities, especially in Dakar, where it is considered as an essential factor for stability and even for the reconstitution of a society that was showing signs of breaking up. This time, the talibs themselves have developed religious and commercial networks thanks to the brotherhood and to its special relationships with the political authorities, which is a sign of the success of the secularization initiated by Ahmadu Bamba, but which is certainly also the consequence of collusion and clientelism, which were rife within the weakened State.

A new intellectual or economic elite has now imposed itself upon the movement, sometimes in opposition to the traditional legacy, and this has brought about some tension within the movement, if only because the status of the big businessmen and their generosity towards the brotherhood differentiate them from the mass of the faithful: gifts from disciples to marabouts play an important part and wealthy people de facto have a special place in society. Economic, social or academic performances clash with spiritual asceticism, but that is the dynamic that characterizes the expansion of this movement today. Contrary to the Tijaniya, the other great Senegalese brotherhood, which is established worldwide and is an elitist movement, Muridism has first of all a popular and national dimension, which Senegalese are proud of: 'Muridism is the best bulwark against fundamentalism!' Of course, the Murid movement may well be and has already been strongly criticized, but what seems interesting and original in the history and the constitution of this movement, despite its institutional shortcomings, is to examine the way in which an Islamic culture can reconcile at once spiritual tradition, a traditional anchoring, the existence of a nation, individual success and scientific and technical modernity.



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Aristotle (384 - 322 BC). To mark the 2300th anniversary of the Greek philosopher's death, UNESCO organized a round table in Paris in 1978 and presented a commemorative medal. Struck by the Paris Mint, the engraving was done by Max Léognany. (France) © UNESCO/Niamh Burke (France)
The works of Aristotle have nourished the thinking of the scholars of the Arab-Muslim world, such as Al-Farabi and Averroes.

SELF-KNOWLEDGE

HOW DID THE ARABIC PHILOSOPHERS ASSIMILATE THE DELPHIC ORACLE 'KNOW THYSELF'? AS THEY DEVELOPED A THEORY OF THE INTELLECT AS AN ABILITY TO THINK THAT TRANSCENDS THE PARTICULARITIES OF INDIVIDUALS; THEY RAISED MAN TO THE HEIGHT OF THOUGHT THINKING ITSELF OUT, THAT IS, DIVINE THOUGHT. INDEED, ON RARE OCCASIONS, IN AN EXTREME EFFORT OF THINKING, MAN ACHIEVES SUPREME PLEASURE, THE PLEASURE OF THOUGHT THINKING ITSELF OUT, WHICH CHARACTERIZES THE DIVINE. CONSEQUENTLY, KNOWING ONESELF MEANS KNOWING THAT PART OF ONE'S SELF THAT RENDERS MAN SIMILAR TO GOD. THUS, THINKING IS NOT TAKING REFUGE IN MAN, BUT RATHER MAN, ACCORDING TO THE EFFORT HE PUTS INTO IT, IS VESTED WITH THOUGHT.

FORMS OF INTELECTION

In the *De Anima* (On the Soul) Aristotle is much more interested in the act of thinking than in the nature of the intellect or intellects. The term agent intellect was introduced by commentators like Theophrastus and Alexander of Aphrodisias (second century CE) but occurs nowhere in Aristotle's writings. Aristotle's commentators were more interested in the essence and nature of the intellect than in its function. Averroes kept his distance from Alexander of Aphrodisias and from Ibn Bajja (Avempace), and concurred for the most part with Themistius, a fourth century CE disciple of Plotinus who helped him to see that the human intellect, when it intellects the agent intellect, is the acquired intellect, which has attained its ultimate perfection and comes to resemble God.

In his *Commentary on the De Anima*, Averroes sought to safeguard the individuation of our act of thinking as well as its objectivity. He had recourse to Alexander of Aphrodisias's idea that the material intellect is a disposition dealing less with the forms of the imagination than with the intentions (*al maani*) of these forms, and is thus less affected by the specific representations of the imagination. But this intellect cannot be reduced to being merely a pure disposition, for it is really contiguous with the agent intellect, more precisely it is the first step in a process attaining perfection in the agent intellect. Being mere reception, the material or potential intellect is not sufficient, something must activate what is received: it is the agent intellect that affords us access to universal thoughts. The potential

intellect has therefore a dynamic nature linking it with both the imagination and the agent intellect.

Let us pause for a moment to examine the link between the imagination and the intellect by analyzing the notion of *'fikir'* (thought) in Averroes's *Great Commentary on the De Anima*: what he means is the rational power of the imagination, which is connected with the intel-

lect. In human beings, the capacity to grasp intentions from the perception of the external senses is a form of internal sense different from the other two internal senses, imagination and memory. The *fikir*, the power of particular reason, which could also be called the 'passible intellect' is a form of reason possessed by human beings alone. The *fikir* contributes to the development of a rational soul without strictly speaking being an intellectual capacity.

QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE INTELLECT: DO HUMAN BEINGS THINK?

Let us take for a starting point one of the theses condemned in 1277, that of the unity of the intellect. Averroes defended this thesis in the *Middle Commentary on the De Anima*, using the method that Al Farabi had explained: "*Philosophy revolves around the question of 'insofar as' and 'in a certain respect'. It has thus been said that if these questions were to disappear, philosophy and the sciences would be an empty word.*"¹ Here is how Averroes uses this method when dealing with the unity of the intellect: "*the intellect is a disposition free of material forms, as Alexander said; and in another sense, it is a separate substance attired with this disposition.*"², and a little further in the same text he writes that the intellect that has the ability to actualize every intelligible is called the agent (or active) intellect, while the intellect that receives every intelligible is called the passive intellect (see p. 116) and concludes that they are one and the same thing. There then is the thesis of the unity of the intellect: the intellect thinks and a human being, according to the amount of effort put into it, thinks or fails to think along with the intellect. It is not human beings who are the origin of thought, but thought that is vested in them in accordance with their efforts. This thesis, condemned in the form 'human beings do not think', was fought by Thomas Aquinas, who believed that the intellect was one of the powers of the human soul: 'there is not one and the same potential intellect for all men' (§ 73)³ and 'the active intellect is not a separately subsisting intelligence, but a faculty of the soul' (§76). For Averroes, the intellect acts within human beings, for

Thomas Aquinas, a human being is mainly intellect. How then could the latter give short shrift to the expression 'separate', used by Aristotle? The answer is to be found in his *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*: Aristotle calls the intellect 'separate' because 'unlike the senses, the intellect has no bodily organ.'⁴ But that does not mean that it is extrinsic to the soul, within which it merely acts: "*For the nobility of the human soul transcends the scope and limits of bodily matter. Hence it enjoys a certain activity in which bodily matter has no share; the potentiality to which activity is without a bodily organ; and in this sense only is it a 'separate' intellect.*"⁵

Thus the soul does have an action of its own, which does not come to it from elsewhere. But because of this specific action of its own, it cannot achieve a vision of God. For Averroes on the other hand, the soul is not limited in this way, because it has not and is not a specific intellect, and therefore there is no obstacle to its sharing with God, even though this happens rarely⁶, a divine thought that turns out to be supreme beatitude. Thomas Aquinas by no means advocated this conception, but Albert the Great⁷ had no qualms about expounding (momentarily adopting?) Arabic peripateticism (al Farabi, Avempace, Averroes) long before the 1277 condemnation. According to this philosophical school, human beings, by thinking along with the separate intellect, in accordance with a philosophical way of life described by Ibn Bajja (Avempace) in his book, *Management of the Solitary*, can experience supreme happiness.

THE PLEASURE OF THINKING OR THOUGHT, A MIRROR OF ITSELF

Reading Averroes, one cannot but remark a constant desire to rescue Aristotle from the Avicennan tradition, which had platonized, indeed islamized him far too much. But from the fifteenth century⁸ many thinkers underlined the trickery in such an approach: according to them Averroes had remained more of a Platonist than he admitted. In particular, his theory of the soul was apparently much more indebted to neo-Platonism: indeed Averroes often quoted Themistius (fourth century CE) and many studies⁹ have shown that the latter was less of a peripatetic than a neo-platonist, closer to Plotinus than to Alexander of Aphrodisia. But Averroes also quoted Alexander, and, by criticizing both Alexander and Themistius, tried to work his way towards Aristotle.

See for example Averroes's *Great Commentary* of book lam-lambda of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, from 1072b16 sq. What is at issue for Aristotle in this passage is to establish that the greatest pleasure comes from the highest form of thought: thought thinking itself out. For Averroes this thesis involves several stages:

First stage - one must determine the causes of pleasure, whatever it may be. This is done by referring to habitual forms of behaviour insofar as they are acts: being awake, feeling, thinking. Aristotle says of the first principle that "*its continuous life is like ours at its very best for short moments. Such is its eternal state, which for us would be impossible... (At any rate, this explains why waking, perception and thought give us so much pleasure...)*"¹⁰

These three pleasures are only considered such because they are acts, but being an act is not enough for something to be a pleasure, there must be another reason. Averroes thought he had found it by reducing these three forms of behaviour to a common characteristic: perception. In each of the three cases there is a perception, an apprehension of something: *"it is as if [Aristotle] had said: He feels pleasure because He apprehends. What indicates (dalil) that the cause of pleasure is apprehension is that our waking, perceiving and understanding are pleasant."*¹¹ Averroes here introduces the idea of perception (*idraq*), understood in the broad sense of grasping, apprehending, thus giving an explicit reason for the characterizing of waking, feeling and thinking as pleasures.

Second stage - Having determined the cause of pleasure, one must now define its mode. To do so, Aristotle evokes memory and hope, which are forms of pleasure. In both cases, even though we are dealing with things that do not actually exist, since what is remembered is not actual, and neither is what is hoped for, the pleasure results from the fact that we pretend to perceive them as actual, what is hoped for or remembered is actualized in thought. Hence pleasure only occurs in actual things, be they really actual or only presumed to be, so that, as Averroes tells us, 'The desire that precedes apprehension is painful rather than pleasant.'¹² It is actual perception that is the cause of all that is pleasurable in memory and hope 'pleasant apprehension concerns only that which exists in actuality, not in potentiality.'¹³

Third stage - Once the cause (perception) and the mode (actual) of pleasure have been defined, one still has to establish its intensity. While the word pleasure no longer occurs in Aristotle's text nor in his lexicon, it still remains a primary concern for Averroes: 'the highest pleasure belongs to that which is understanding and intellect in the highest degree' (ibid.); and that which is understanding and intellect in the highest degree is what thinks by itself, not by something else; such a thought,

Aristotle said, is what is 'best'. The amount of pleasure is thus given by the autonomous part of the thinking that thinks itself, thus defining the criterion of what is best: 'Intelligence in itself is of that which is best in itself.'

Fourth stage - here again the specific vocabulary of pleasure disappears from Aristotle's text, which merely says: 'And in apprehending its object thought thinks itself.'¹⁴ So this stage consists in identifying that which thinks itself, that is to say the intellect, for when it thinks of the objects of thought, it is thinking itself, because it is itself nothing but an object of thought that thinks. Averroes comments on this passage by not only identifying true thought with the intellect but also by characterizing true pleasure: *"That which understands its own essence feels pleasure by itself; it is that which truly feels pleasure; that which possessed this attribute is the intellect: when it acquires the intelligible and understands it, it understands its own essence, for its own essence is nothing but the intelligible which understands. Thus the intellect is that which feels pleasure by itself."*¹⁵ This passage re-orientates Aristotle's text towards the acquisition of objects of thought, an issue that Arabic commentators frequently tackled and which enabled them to postulate the presence in human beings of the divine intellect. But Aristotle's text here lends itself to this conclusion by mentioning the difference between potentiality and actuality and the difference between intelligible 'becoming' and the intellect. Averroes is analyzing here the process by which the intellect apprehends itself and he calls to mind Aristotle's distinctions between the intellect in potentiality and the intellect in actuality, given in the *De Anima* (430a): *"It is as if he wanted thereby to distinguish between the faculty of the intellect which is sometimes in potentiality and sometimes in actuality and the intellect which is always in actuality, the intellect which is not in matter. Therefore our intellect thinks itself only at times, not permanently."*¹⁶ 'Our intellect' (*al aql minna*) differs from 'the intellect which is always in actuality' in that it does not always think.

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GENUINE PLEASURE: THE PLEASURE OF THE INTELLECT

On the basis of this step-by step reflection on thought thinking itself, it may be said that genuine pleasure is that of the intellect.

An intellect that thinks objects of thought is not always at one with these objects: it must be an intellect in actuality, but our intellect is now in potentiality now in actuality. So genuine pleasure concerns only those moments when the intellect is in actuality.

This intellect in actuality becomes one with the intelligible. It is conception or intellection that identifies them, and thereby the intellect 'becomes' an object of thought. It is therefore a dynamic element, namely thinking, which allows this identification to be made, an identification, adds Averroes, between 'the receiving part and the received part'. He stresses the importance of the 'modes of being' (*Al ahwal al mawjouda fi al aql*) or 'dispositions' of the intellect. Only these modes of being can provide the difference between what is intellect and what is object of thought: "[...]Insofar as it thinks the intelligible, [the intellect] is said to be 'thinking', and insofar as it thinks by itself, the thinking is the intellect itself, as opposed to that which thinks by means of something else; and insofar as the thinking part is the object of thought itself, it is said that the intellect is the intelligible."¹⁷

The best, as we have already seen, is that which thinks by itself, and that which thinks by itself is an ever-actual intellect, called the 'divine intellect'. The divine intellect is not like our intellect, now in potentiality now in actuality; it is always in actuality, so it is better than ours. But we are not to be outdone; Aristotle had deduced from thinking 'the supreme pleasure (*hediston*) and excellence (*ariston*) of contemplation'

and Averroes, reducing contemplation (*alray*)¹⁸ to intellectual apprehension (*al tassawur bil aql*), notes that that is what is best in us, 'much better than that which belongs to us.' The best is not considered here merely in relation to what concerns intelligence, the comparison is broadened out to include all that exists for us. This emphasis points to the forms of life implied by such a conclusion as to genuine pleasure.

Our idea of pleasure bound to the divine intellect is due to the proportion that the intellect installs between God and ourselves whenever it is freed from potentiality. At such moments, the pleasures are 'equal', according to Averroes. The difference is not a difference relative to the nature of pleasure, but one relative to its temporal modality, God's pleasure in apprehending His own essence and the pleasure that is ours when our intellect apprehends its own essence are the same. Just as all the intellects of human beings experience an identical pleasure when these intellects are in actuality, so there is a similar identity between all intellects in actuality and the divine intellect. Whereas Aristotle, in this passage merely risked mentioning the temporal modality, pointing out that 'God is eternally in the state in which we are for a while,' Averroes went as far as to establish a strict equality between the intellectual apprehension of God and that of human beings, an equality which is the real condition of a sharing of temporality between God and human beings: "*this is why we think that if God's pleasure in apprehending His own essence is equal to the pleasure we feel when our intellect apprehends its own essence, that is to say in the instant in which it is freed from potentiality... that which belongs to us for a short while belongs to God eternally...*".

WHAT REMAINS OF OUR THOUGHTS AFTER DEATH?

Such were the passages considered by Thomas Aquinas and the Latin tradition to be blasphemous. Averroes seems no longer to leave any room here for the individuation of souls and hence for their reward or punishment. In *On There Being Only One Intellect*, Thomas Aquinas wrote: "*Take away from men diversity of intellect, which alone among the soul's parts seems incorruptible and immortal, and it follows that nothing of the souls of men would remain after death except a unique intellectual substance, with the result that reward and punishment and their difference disappear.*"¹⁹ He sees the problem here as being Averroes endangering the idea of individual immortality. According to Thomas Aquinas, the unity of the pleasure of thinking is a threat to the immortality of the soul.

The effects of a unitary conception of intellectual pleasure on the immortality of the soul are therefore quite clear: there is no immortality for the mental images that make individuals of us, only what completely transcends the individual subsists, namely the divine intellect, with which, on rare occasions, we coincide. As for immortality, one thing is sure, as Salomon Munk points out in his presentation of Averroes: 'As an individual, man obtains nothing beyond the limits of his earthly existence; the permanence of the individual soul is a figment of the imagination.'²⁰

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturally

Understanding the text

- For Averroes, how can the human intellect attain its ultimate perfection?
- Why does philosophy revolve around such questions as “insofar as” and “in a certain respect”?
- How do Averroes and Thomas Aquinas differ in regard to the problem of the intellect?
- What is the meaning of “thought that thinks itself”?
- What is the cause of pleasure for the human intellect, according to Averroes?
- Why would “thinking for oneself” procure greater pleasure?
- Why does the intellect not always understand itself, according to Averroes?
- In what way can man be divine?
- Why does Thomas Aquinas criticize Averroes?
- In what way are living and knowing similar?

Entering into dialogue with the text

- Is it meaningful to speak of the “ultimate perfection of the human spirit”?
- Who is right, Averroes or Thomas Aquinas, with regard to the problem of the intellect?
- Is the greatest pleasure of human beings that of the intellect?
- Does the supreme act of the intellect consist in thinking itself?
- Does our intellect have an essence?
- Can our being dissolve in the unity of everything?
- Can one establish an equivalence between living and knowing?

Suggested teaching method: **assessing the answers**

A question is chosen.
Each person replies individually in writing to the question chosen.
An answer is selected then written on the board.
The group discusses and decides by a majority whether the answer is acceptable.
The moderator asks whether anyone has a different answer.
The moderator writes the answer on the board and the group considers both whether the answer is acceptable and whether there is a substantial difference in the answers, to avoid repetition.
If the second answer is accepted, the group analyses the difference between the two.
The moderator asks whether anyone has a third answer, then the process starts over again.
Once the three answers have been accepted and analysed, the group examines the implications of these various answers.
If possible, begin again with other questions.
The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Visualization exercise

- Discuss the different explanations of the concept of intellect as seen by Averroes and Thomas Aquinas.
- Explain that an experience is going to be attempted on the basis of the four stages described in the worksheet.
- First stage: determining the causes of pleasure: Ask the participants to close their eyes, relax and visualize an experienced situation that gave them great pleasure. Then ask the participants to open their eyes and to note down on a piece of paper what they think were the causes of the pleasure.
- Second stage: analysis of pleasure: Divide the group into pairs. Each participant explains to his or her partner the situation and the cause of the pleasure in question and then the other partner does the same thing. The pairs discuss perceptions and acts and ask questions in order to clarify them.
- Third stage: thinking for oneself, not through someone else: Discussion still in pairs: What changed my perception of the situation through the other person’s questions? What is specific in my way of reasoning in relation to the other person?
- Fourth stage: understanding oneself: Ask the pairs to discuss what each person has discovered about himself or herself.
- Full group discussion: ask if there are volunteers who wish to sum up their two-person discussions.
- Start a discussion on the aspects mentioned in the worksheet concerning the transcendental intellect and immortality.
- Group discussion on this process of reasoning and the consequences for the Arab-Muslim world.
- Ask the participants to read also the worksheet “Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi: Eastern Lights”.
- Start a discussion on the questions of intelligence, self-knowledge, relationship to God, and mystical and metaphysical visions as seen by Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi.

DIVINE ATTRIBUTES AND THE THEOLOGIANS' ERROR

In his above-mentioned commentary, Averroes refers to Alexander of Aphrodisia (late second century CE, one of the first commentators of Aristotle): "Alexander says: by 'pleasure', one must not understand here the pleasure that is the result of passion; the effect that is the result of passion is the opposite of pain, but the pleasure which is in the intellect itself is not a passion and has no opposite because no ignorance is the opposite of this apprehension."²¹ This reference fulfils two functions here:

1) It forestalls any form of anthropocentrism: the pleasure in question here is not so much the pleasure of a human being as the pleasure of the intellect, it is a pleasure that has no opposite, since it is caused by an apprehension that is neither an apprehension that admits of something contrary nor an apprehension that can at times be potential. By referring to Alexander and not to Themistius (Averroes can play the one against the other according to how he happens to be reasoning), Averroes reminds us that for him, as well as for Alexander, the agent intellect of the *De Anima* and the intelligence of the Prime Mover in the lambda book of the *Metaphysics* are one and the same.

2) It fulfils a didactic function in reconstituting the argumentation more easily. Indeed it stresses apprehension, for it is apprehension that enables one to understand why Aristotle said that 'God is living'. Apprehension is the middle term enabling the syllogism to be built. The demonstration justifying God's being qualified as alive requires two syllogisms, the first linking apprehension and life, the second linking the act of the intellect with the intellect in actuality. The first syllogism, which is a first-figure syllogism, goes like this:

The act of the intellect is apprehension
That which apprehends lives
The act of the intellect is life

Let us now take the conclusion of our syllogism and apply to it what we know of the act of the intellect: thinking, the act of the intellect is something that lives; as he who thinks by himself is better than he who does not think by himself, it is he who has the better life; therefore the intellect in actuality (God) has the highest form of life. This time the syllogism is a third-figure syllogism, it is valid according to the criterion of what is best:

The act of the intellect is living
The act of the intellect is the intellect in actuality
(according to the principle of the best)
The intellect in actuality (God) is living
Hence the traditional attributes of God
as He who is living and knows.

Evoking the Christians, Averroes refers to the Trinity and points out the contradiction there is in thinking three in one: "[I]n this respect the Christians were mistaken when they adopted the doctrine of the

Trinity in the substance; it does not save them from it to say that it (i.e. the substance) is three and God one."²² The problem he raises is quite familiar to his readers and there is every reason to believe that he too was acquainted with the literature of the Church Fathers. Pierre Duhem, in the section of his book *Le système du monde* dealing with the rise of Aristotelianism ('La crue de l'aristotélisme'), cites St Basil of Caesarea, a contemporary of Themistius, whom Averroes had read. St Basil wanted to determine once and for all the meaning of the terms *ousia* (essence) and *upostasis* (hypostasis). He considered that *ousia* referred to *koiné phusis* (nature in general), whereas *upostasis* refers to a specific individual. What is at issue is to find out whether Christ, the Son, has different *ousia* from that of the Father.

Averroes refuses to side with either the Christians or the Muslims: in both cases there is, according to him, a misunderstanding as to the nature of God. When the Christians say that there is one God in three hypostases (a single *ousia* in three *upostaseis*), Averroes considers that they are multiplying the *ousia* of God and hence threatening his unity. If the *ousia* is multiple, then the compound form of this *ousia* is a unity added to the compound form, in other words the *ousia* cannot be reduced to a simple unity. Averroes adds that the Asharites (orthodox theologians named after the founder of this tenth century theological school) made the same mistake because they mingled God's attributes with his essence, hence violating the simple unity of God, so that to say 'God is living' would be to introduce a duality.

Averroes adds: "These two doctrines [of the Christian theologians and the Muslim theologians] imply that it is composite... and every compound is originated, unless they claim that there are things which are compound in themselves. If there were things composite in themselves, they would be things passing from potentiality into actuality by themselves and moved by themselves, without mover."²³ In this way we are led to the negation of the prime mover of the universe, that is to say the negation of God. How then can we avoid any form of composition in propositions such as 'God possesses life', 'God is living'? These propositions refer to the same simple reality, only when they are decomposed into subject and predicate can we be led to believe that a composition is involved. The qualified term (God) and the qualifier (life) are only distinguished because the analysis requires it. To analytic decomposition, there is no corresponding decomposition in the object of analysis.

To say that God is eternally living introduces no difference into his concept. From the moment that the existence of an eternal reality has been established (the mover of the universe), the fact that he is described as eternally living introduces no composition.

Insert written by Jacques Nicolaus

Other times, other places For Montaigne, suffering is necessary to pleasure

In chapter XV of his *Essays*, entitled 'That difficulty increases desire' Montaigne developed an idea that came close to Averroes' when he wrote: 'Desire that comes before perception resembles more a suffering than a pleasure.' Montaigne used the words difficulties or dangers rather than suffering. It is the prospect of pleasure that incites us to confront them at the risk of suffering. He rejects the idea that the prospect of suffering ruins our lives. On the contrary, this idea is the necessary stimulus to pleasure and life:

'No reason but has its contrary' says the wisest of the Schools of Philosophy.¹ I have just been chewing over that other fine saying which one of the ancient philosophers cites as a reason for holding life in contempt: 'No good can bring us pleasure except one which we have prepared ourselves to lose';² 'In aequo est dolor amissae rei et timor amittendae'; [Sorrow for something lost is equal to the fear of losing it];³ he wanted to show by that that the fruition of life can never be truly pleasing if we go in fear of losing it.

But we could, on the contrary, say that we clasp that good in an embrace which is all the fonder and all the tighter in that we see it as less surely ours, and fear that it may be taken from us. For we know from evidence that the presence of cold helps fire burn brighter and that our wills are sharpened by flat opposition...

We see also that by nature there is nothing so contrary to our states than that satiety which comes from ease of access; and nothing which sharpens them more than rareness and difficulty: 'Omnium rerum voluptas ipso quo debet fugare periculo crescit.' [In all things pleasure is increased by the very danger which ought to make us flee from them.]⁴

Montaigne, 2003, *The Complete Essays*,
trans. by M. A. Screech, London, Penguin, pp. 694-695.

Montaigne also develops this vision in the social field. Some evils are necessary for individuals and for society in order to avoid the softening of souls and institutions. Montaigne sees in the troubles of his time (they were plentiful!) a way to identify elite individuals engendered by storms. Events trigger a salutary self-questioning. Montaigne also thought that it was perhaps naive to think that an excess of rules can bring security, freedom to act can often lead to better decision-making:

It is an act of God's providence to allow his Holy Church to be, as we can see she now is, shaken by so many disturbances and tempests, in order by this opposition to awaken the souls of the pious and to bring them back from the idleness and torpor in which so long a period of calm had immersed them. If we weigh the loss we have suffered by the numbers of those have been led into error against the gain which accrues to us from our having been back into fighting trim, with our zeal and our strength restored to new life for the battle, I am not sure whether the benefit does not outweigh the loss.

We thought we were tying our marriage-knots more tightly by removing all means of undoing them; but the tighter we pulled the knot of constraint the looser and slacker became the knot of our will and affection. In Rome, on the contrary, what made marriages honoured and secure for so long a period was freedom to break them at will. Men loved their wives more because they could lose them; and during a period when anyone was quite free to divorce, more than five hundred years went by before a single one did so:

'Quod licet ingratum est; quod non licet, acrius urit.'
[What is allowed has no charm: what is not allowed, we burn to do.]⁵
Montaigne, op. cit., p. 698-699.

¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Hypotyposes*, I, vi, 12.

² Seneca, *Epist. Moral.*, IV, 6.

³ *Ibid.* XCVIII, 6.

⁴ Seneca, *De beneficiis*, VII, ix.

⁵ Ovid, *Amores*, II, xix, 3.



Reflecting on the text

- > What, according to Averroes, is the relationship between the material intellect and the agent intellect?
- > What does the concept of *fikr* (thought) cover?
- > In respect of the divine and the human, what are the points of disagreement between St Thomas and Averroes?
- > What do you think of this statement by Averroes: *It is not man who is the source of thought; rather thought invades him in proportion to his effort?*
- > How does Averroes imagine the presence of the divine intellect in man?
- > How can meditation be a path that links the human and divine intellects?
- > Averroes considers that there is identity of pleasure among the various human intellects in action and identity of the latter with the divine intellect. In what way does this idea connect with our perception of the universal?
- > How does Averroes view immortality in its relation to individuation?
- > In what way does Averroes contest the ideas of Christian and Muslim theologians about the uniqueness of God?

¹ Al-Farabi, *The Book of Agreement between the ideas of the two philosophers, the divine Plato and Aristotle*. Ref. here is to Al-Farabi, 1999, *L'harmonie entre les opinions de Platon et d'Aristote*, IFEAD, Damascus, p. 78.

² Averroes, 2001, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, trans. by A. L. Ivry, Provo, Brigham Young University, p. 111.

³ T. Aquinas, 1992, *Summa Contra Gentiles. Book 2: Creation*, trans. J. F. Anderson, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press.

⁴ T. Aquinas, 1951, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, trans. by K. Foster. and S. Humphries, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1951, § 699.

⁵ Ibid. § 699.

⁶ See his commentary to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 1072a26 seq.

⁷ See A. de Libera's commentary on Albert the Great's *De Intellectu* in A. de Libera, 2003, *Raison et foi*, Paris, Seuil, pp. 63 seq.

⁸ P. Duhem, 1913, *Le système du monde : la crue de l'aristotélisme*, chapter 3, VI, quotes the Italian George Valla : 'And out of the mire came a barbarian, a greedy pig, a complete idiot, Averroes of the stinking brain, taking pleasure in specious debate, quibbling like a sophist, who managed to present us with an Aristotle to such an extent a Platonist that we have never known the like in any other philosopher' (p. 561).

⁹ Omer Ballériaux, 1989, *Thémistius et l'exégèse de la noétique aristotélicienne*, *Revue de philosophie ancienne*, Vol. VII, No. 2, pp. 199-235: 'So now we have to turn to Plotinus, and no longer to Alexander of Aphrodisia, in order to try to catch a glimpse of Themistius' sources.' Or again 'It is not a particular, individual, active intellect that is, for Themistius, the formal element constitutive of the ego, but the single agent intellect, which J. Trouillard, in a totally Plotinian perspective, called an *inner transcendence*' (pp. 212 and 227 respectively).

¹⁰ Aristotle, 1998, *Metaphysics*, trans. by H. Lawson-Tancred, London, Penguin, p. 374.

¹¹ Ibn Rushd, 1984, *Ibn Rushd's Metaphysics, a Translation with Introduction of Ibn Rushd's Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics, Book Lam*, trans and intr. by C. Genequand, Leiden, E. J. Brill, pp. 157-158.

¹² Ibid., p. 158.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Aristotle, 1998, *Metaphysics*, op. cit., p. 374.

¹⁵ Ibn Rushd, op. cit., p. 158.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 158-159.

¹⁸ In other contexts (notably in rhetoric), the term *ray* may merely mean 'an opinion'.

¹⁹ T. Aquinas, 1993, *Aquinas against the Averroists: On There Being Only One Intellect*, ed. by R. M. McInerny, West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, p. 19.

²⁰ S. Munk, 1982, *Des principaux philosophes arabes et de leur doctrine*, Paris, Vrin, pp. 454-455.

²¹ Ibn Rushd, op. cit., p. 159.



Avicenna (980-1037). To mark the 1000th birth anniversary of the most influential of Islam's philosopher scientists, UNESCO minted this commemorative medal in 1980. Abu Ali al-Husain Ibn Abdallah Ibn Sina was known in Europe as Avicenna. Designed by sculptor-medallist Victor Douek. UNESCO established the Avicenna Prize for Ethics in Science in 2002. (France) © UNESCO/Niamh Burke.

IBN SINA'S CONCEPTION OF WISDOM

THANKS TO A REPEATED READING OF ARISTOTLE, THE PHILOSOPHER AVICENNA MANAGED TO SET UP A DISTINCTION BETWEEN EXISTENCE AND ESSENCE THAT PROVED AN ESSENTIAL ONE IN PHILOSOPHY AND DEEPLY AFFECTED PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING, FROM THOMAS AQUINAS TO SPINOZA, LEIBNIZ AND KANT. THIS DISTINCTION WAS SO OPERATIVE AND SO CONTINUOUSLY USED THAT AVICENNA IS NO LONGER EVER EVOKED AS THE PHILOSOPHER WHO FIRST POINTED IT OUT. THE EFFICIENCY OF A TRANSMISSION IS ASSESSED BY THE ANONYMITY ATTAINED. FORGETTING THE ORIGIN OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN EXISTENCE AND ESSENCE PARTAKES OF THE SUCCESS OF THE DISTINCTION.

AVICENNA'S DISTINCTION OF EXISTENCE AND ESSENCE AT THE BASIS OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

The thesis according to which existence is added to essence has become a basic, albeit anonymous, element of philosophy. On it are founded all the rational demonstrations of the existence of God for it provides the valuable distinction between self-caused being whose essence involves existence and created (produced by something external) being whose existence is added to its essence. In the common determination of a thing, that is to say its essence, existence is not included, except for being necessary in itself, in other words God, whose essence envelops his existence. For substances that are composed, the rule is to separate essence from existence and to understand the latter as being an added element, an accident. From this strong thesis stemmed, much later, an analogy between existence and number: if existence is added to essence, then it can be enumerated, conceived of in extension,

whereas essence remains more of a concept, that is to say is understood in comprehension. One can also see in God's being an exception to this an inconsistency for those defending this thesis. The history of the concept of God's existence reveals to us this double possibility: either it is an exception (Avicenna, Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza) or it is an inconsistency (Kant, Frege).

The tension provoked by Etienne Tempier's condemnation of Averroes' theories reproduced in the Latin cultural era what the Arab-Muslim world had experienced: those who defended the central importance of the Christian faith against the hegemony of the supposedly pagan Greco-Arab thinking repeated, perhaps unwittingly, al Ghazali's attacks on the philosophical views of al-Farabi and Avicenna, which he recorded in his book, *The Incoherence of Philosophers*.

When one compares the theses attributed to the Arabic philosophers commenting on Aristotle and sharply condemned by al Ghazali with those appearing in the 1277 condemnation, one finds many examples of crosschecking. The question of the eternity of the world and that of God's ignoring of specific things appear in Tempier and al Ghazali alike. As a matter of fact al Ghazali is much more insistent than Tempier when it comes to the inanity of the belief in a necessity acting causally in nature, but in the thirteenth century too Aristotle's natural philosophy was on several occasions anathematized, in particular in 1210, when it was forbidden to teach this philosophy in Paris. Among the questions that appeared regularly in different cultures, albeit for diverse reasons according to the contexts in which they were formulated, we may note the following: Is God constrained by reason or not? Does he act with indeterminate power or with qualified reason?

Reactions to these hotly discussed and disputed questions may provoke an increase in tension. This was the case with Raymond Llull (1235-1315), who 'learned Arabic, and went several times to preach

to the Saracens.'¹ From 1310 to 1312 he travelled throughout Europe, to Paris, Vienna, Montpellier, Genoa, Naples, Pisa, and everywhere he sought to remind people that philosophy must be theology's servant and nothing more than that, whereas all Arabic philosophy, be it Jewish or Muslim, had gained its independence from theology, hence its extreme precariousness: "*The precarious status of philosophy in Judaism as well as in Islam was not in every respect a misfortune for philosophy. The official recognition of philosophy in the Christian world made philosophy subject to ecclesiastical supervision. The precarious position of philosophy in the Islamic-Jewish world guaranteed its private character and therewith its inner freedom from supervision.*"²

From being of a private nature, it had become a 'field of presence,' it had undergone conflicts and survived. We know that the condemnation of fifteen theses, thirteen of which 'were inspired by Averroes', on December 10, 1270, by no means put an end to the influence of Arabic peripateticism in the Latin world. Not even the 1277 condemnation did that.



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AVICENNA'S IDEA OF WISDOM, BETWEEN THE UNIVERSAL AND THE PARTICULAR: THE MAN CALLED ZAYD AND HIS HUMANITY

In a passage dealing with the status of substance in Plato and Aristotle, al-Farabi points out that, despite the fact that they outwardly disagree on this subject, there is in fact a way of reconciling, a harmony, between the anteriority of individual substance in Aristotle and the anteriority of intelligible substance in Plato. *"Thus they speak about one thing in an art according to the requisites of that art, then speak about the very same thing in another art differently than they first spoke about it. This is neither unprecedented nor excessive, since philosophy hinges on arguing 'insofar as' and 'with respect to.' As the saying goes, were 'insofar as' and 'with respect to' eliminated, sciences and philosophy would cease to exist."*³

It is true that, without this possibility, any reflection on the universal is bound to fail. The distinction made between universality and the universal is entirely based on the use of the expression 'insofar as', since the humanity that is in Zayd, insofar as it is humanity and only humanity, is not the universal 'human' said to be shared by all individuals.

How are we to understand the term 'universal' in Avicenna? It is characterized in logic as follows: the universal is what can be applied to many; the particular is what cannot be applied to many, it is what is numerically one, like Amr or Zayd.

Let us pause for a moment on the term universal. One passage generally retains the attention of commentators, Jean Jolivet⁴ as well as Alain de Libera⁵ and Robert Wisnowski⁶. The passage is as follows: "... 'horseness' has a definition that is not in need of the definition of universality, but is [something] to which universality accidentally occurs. For, in itself, it is nothing at all except 'horseness'; for, in itself, it is neither one nor many and exists neither in concrete things nor in the soul, existing in none of these things either in potency or in act, such that [these] are included in 'horseness'."⁷ (Metaphysics 5, 1).

The issue of this passage is to situate the universal in the ontological network of existing beings and of things. De Libera considers that this ontological network is something new when compared to the views of Alexander of Aphrodisia. It is indeed necessary to situate this network in relation to the developments of the two theological schools, the Asharites and the mutazilites. Rather than reflect on the sources of this network – Jolivet has in fact more or less done this already – Alain de Libera tries to grasp its philosophical implications. It might be said that he is working in a logic of justification rather than a logic of discovery.

The question to be posed is the following one: 'Is the humanity of Zayd inasmuch as it is humanity, [something] other than the one in Amr?' In order to avoid the aporia of the common man (that is to say, if it is the same, Amr and Zayd are just homonyms for men, if it is different, humanity is identified with Zayd, which is impossible). De Libera makes it quite clear that Avicenna, to get out of this dilemma, argues as follows: 'The humanity that is in Zayd, insofar as it is humanity, is nothing else than humanity.'⁸ How can we clarify this point?

It would seem that we do have to go back over the major philosophical tool discovered by al-Farabi: the expression 'insofar as'. One possible lead that might be followed up for the interpretation of 'humanity insofar as it is only humanity' would be 'neither particular nor non-particular or neither existing in the soul/reality nor nonexisting in the soul/reality, or more generally speaking, neither qualified nor non-qualified.'⁹ I think that Alain de Libera rightly rejects such a thesis, which is of course based on the passage of *Metaphysics* 5, 1, cited above. But as a matter of fact this passage concluded by saying that the universal as a universal is a thing. This qualification tells us a lot. I intend to stress two points here.

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



Reflecting on the text

- > What is at stake in the essence/existence debate?
- > Compare the Christian vision of God with that of Islam.
- > What is the place of by philosophy and theology in those two religions?
- > What is Avicenna's definition of the universal and the particular?
- > What links does this philosopher establish between the two concepts?
- > In what manner does the universal exist?
- > In what way does the essence/existence debate revolve around the existence of God?

A NAME FOR THE UNIVERSAL

1. I have a name for the universal

A characterization, it is said to be a thing, even though clarifying what this characterization might mean may turn out to be difficult for we are here confronted with quasi-indefinable entities, 'of ideas engraved in the soul in their original form.'¹⁰ The radical abstraction leading to the rejection of pairs of opposites has been strongly emphasized, but what has not been sufficiently shown is what this characterization involves insofar as it introduces numerous pairs of opposites. This is an essential point, for according to the method tested in the treatise on the *Categories*, the negation of two opposites, for example 'neither just nor unjust', can leave us in a situation in which we have no name to give. For those opposites that have no intermediate (in other words which are contradictories), we have no name to qualify what is neither just nor unjust. On the other hand there are opposites which do have an intermediate (in other words, which are contraries), like black and white, where the intermediate is grey. So one can ask oneself the question: is there an intermediate between the particular and the general, or, a question that is prior to that one, do the particular and the universal behave like contraries? Avicenna reflects at length on this problem in his *Commentary on the Categories*, not merely in the part where we should expect to find such a reflection, namely at the end of the treatise, where he sets about distinguishing between different types of opposites, but from the very beginning of the treatise when he distinguishes between primary and secondary substance. I intend therefore to go back over these passages in order to put Alain de Libera's interpretation into a logical perspective. What does Avicenna tell us at the beginning of his commentary? After bringing to mind the two canonical definitions of the universal and the particular, namely that the universal applies to many, whereas the particular does not apply to many, he proposes the following dissymmetry: whereas universal nature is bound up with some particular or other, the particular is not bound up with some universal or other. With respect to existence, this dissymmetry is justified in the following manner: substantiality, when it exists, has no need of a subject, which is the case with primary and particular substance; its quiddity is such that it has no need of a subject, so it is not bound up with some universal or other. With respect to existence it is self-sufficient, its quiddity is not defined in reference to something else, as is the case with relatives. The term universal, however, is defined in relation to the particular. On the one hand, Amr and Zayd are not considered to be particulars with respect to a universal, but isolated particulars, on the other, when humanity is taken into consideration, it is related to some particular

or other, because the universal is what applies to many items. Particular nature is by no means bound, as far as its existence is concerned, to universal nature insofar as it is a universal. Avicenna must therefore meet the objection that consists in saying that if the universal is relative to particulars, in the sense that it applies to them, the particular is also relative to the universal, because one cannot set up a relation in one case and suppress it in the other. Avicenna's reply consists in showing that the universal and the particular are not opposed in the way that relatives are, for example 'twice' as opposed to 'half'. This is an example of the dissymmetry we have already explained. To maintain this dissymmetry is also to indicate indirectly that the universal cannot be separated as the particular can, for, if it could, the expression 'insofar as' would mean the same as being separated, and we would find ourselves back in Platonism or in Frege's third realm of thoughts subsisting by themselves, in which, alongside these subsisting thoughts, there are separate universals. One may indeed add that they are not opposites in the sense of contraries, since the universal and the particular are not in a single subject (the particular is in no subject). Nor is it an opposition in the sense of affirmation and negation, since the notions of true and false are not brought to bear here. One might set the one against the other, as Averroes does, in terms of having and not having, as long as one makes sure that this opposition is in the mind only: the particular is that which lacks universality. This is one way of giving, in this respect, a definition of the singular: *"In a way, individuals present a related disposition, namely a privation of the relation that characterizes the universal. Such a disposition is a privative notion that pertains to thought and is responsible for the individual being defined without being a universal predicated on a plurality. Thus, insofar as it presents a related disposition in thought, namely that privation of the relation that belongs to the universal, it is indeed defined. On the other hand, insofar as it does not have a related nature outside the soul, it is indeed an individual and not a universal."*

Avicenna makes no such suggestion, even though the opposition in terms having and not having is closer to what he is seeking to say than the relation of dissymmetry. He merely highlights the relation between the universal which needs a particular as far as existence is concerned, and the particular which has no such need. This examination of the different forms of opposition is necessary if we do not wish to confine ourselves to the 'neither...nor' of the first part of the characterization, but we still have to see what the second part refers to, namely that the universal is a thing.

Insert written by Jacques Nicolaus

Other Existentialism

times,
other
places

While such authors as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Kafka and Shestov largely addressed this subject in their works as early as the nineteenth century, existentialism only took the form of a philosophical movement in the twentieth century, first with the works of Jaspers and Buber in Germany in the 1930s, then in those of Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the 1940s and 1950s in France.

This philosophical movement asserts that man is free and not determined. It is what he does, what he chooses, that makes him what he is. Atheistic Existentialism (Sartre) proclaims that the concepts of God and human nature are non-existent.¹ Human beings must find their own values within themselves and must decide by themselves what acts to accomplish. In other words, it is the conception of the realization that human beings must be responsible for their values and their existence.

Existentialism is mostly connected with Sartre's thinking: 'existence precedes essence.' That means that human beings come into the world, exist and are defined afterwards. If an individual cannot be defined at the beginning of his/her existence, it is because he/she is fundamentally 'nothing' to start with, and then always becomes what he/she chooses to become. Each individual builds up what he/she believes to be fair or true, and in this perspective, they are only responsible to themselves for the society they live in and the way they act.

According to Sartrean existentialism, man is, paradoxically, condemned to freedom, since 'there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom.'

Sartre developed the key concepts of existential philosophy: freedom of choice, the distinction between essence and existence, commitment and responsibility, bad faith (fleeing from one's freedom), relationships with others (man is forced to live with others to know himself and exist), the identity of the individual, the conception of history, consciousness and intentionality.²

Sartre writes that it is absurd that we should be born and it is absurd that we should die. Man defines himself by his actions and his existence. In a Godless meaningless world, he is alone and condemned to be free: 'I am my freedom.'

"If, however, it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men... To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all."

Jean Paul Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism, trans. by P. Mairet, in W. Kaufman (ed.), 1989, *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, Meridian Publishing Company, p. 291.

¹ A Christian existentialism, whose main French representative is Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), is marked by a strong opposition between a weak and anguished man and an absolute and transcendent God. The purpose of life is to get closer to God.

² '[T]he word intentionality signifies nothing else than this universal fundamental property of consciousness: to be consciousness of something; as a *cogito*, to bear within itself its *cogitatum*.' (E. Husserl, 1999, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. by D. Cairns, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, p. 33.

2. So the universal has a name

Semantically the universal has a name. It is a thing. And lexically it has a name too, it is the paronym derived from the word meaning 'everything': *kull-kulli*. So all goes well, we are not confronted with the case of a universal lacking any lexical basis, which we are in the case of certain paronyms or derivations, whose paradigm is missing, as for example 'the good fighter', the being capable of fighting, where fight is nothing but a name for the knowledge one has of this word, but not for power in action, this natural power to do things easily. I insist strongly on this lexical and semantic question because, like Alain de Libera, I wish to take seriously the characterization of the universal as a thing. I would gladly extend to Avicenna what Richard M. Frank says in an article on the Asharites: "*'Thing' cannot rightly be considered a literal equivalent of 'chay' when the latter occurs as a technical term in the lexicon of Asharite metaphysics, when it is not equivalent to 'res' or 'aliquid'— ein blosses Ding — but is a formal lexeme, distinct from the common use of the word in ordinary language.*"¹¹

By taking charge of the theological and philosophical meaning of the word 'thing', one can go further into the ontological network allowing Avicenna to characterize the universal. When he says that 'a thing is always existent, be it in the individuals or in the imagination and the intellect,'¹² Avicenna from the start rules out the Mutazilite interpretation according to which one could just as easily consider a thing as being existent as being non-existent. Such an interpretation allowed them to interpret verses such as 'His command, when He intends anything, is only to say to it, Be, and it is' (*Quran*, 36, 82). Avicenna rejects such a possibility. But he does not totally agree with the Asharites for he does not make thing and existence coincide, as they do. A thing has distinct modes of existence, either in external reality or in the mind. If the universal is a thing, then it exists in some way or another. Indeed not as a universal *in re*, but in the mind. It does not exist separately in the sense that it could be apprehended by the mind as an entity. On the other hand, it has, as Frege might put it, a form of unsaturation (*Ungesättigkeit*) largely justifying the dissymmetry between the universal and the particular that Avicenna spoke of. But what cannot be found in Frege is the possibility of understanding the concept

of existence in many different senses. That is why, in Frege, the thing and existence are not inseparable, a notion which is essential in Avicenna's ontology. The latter distinguishes between thing and existence, but he also shows they are inseparable. That too is why it is so difficult to substantiate the thesis of the indifference of essence as regards existence, a thesis that Frege certainly upholds but probably not Avicenna. To uphold such a thesis it is not an ontology that is needed but a theory of semantics. Frege does not thematize the unsaturation of the universal in ontological terms. And that is where he introduces something new. But the strength of Avicenna's analysis lies in his modalizing of existence and his allowing us to speak, if not of a third realm, at least of many possible worlds. In the interpretation he gives of the problem of the predicates combined in the proposition 'Homer is a poet', he reserves the possibility of saying that the proposition 'Homer is' is a true proposition – with an isolated predicate 'is' – as long as one remains within the framework of the imagination. So one finds once again the principle of Avicennan predication: 'Any predication always applies to something that has been realized in the mind.'¹³

A further remark must be made concerning the inseparability of the thing and existence. Avicenna is quite clear about the fact that thing and existence have different meanings: 'thing' is linked with terms like 'essence', whereas existence is linked with terms like 'affirmed' (*mutbat*) or realized' (*muhassal*). In the one case what is at issue is a 'specific existence', in the other an 'affirmative existence', in the words of R. Wisnowsky: "*To predicate affirmative existence of an entity is to assert that the entity is, not what the entity is. To predicate existence that is specific, on the other hand, is to assert what the entity is, not that the entity is. Since existence that is specific is identical to inner reality, and inner reality is identical to whatness (mahiyya), it follows that existence that is specific is identical to whatness. And since existence that is specific is identical to whatness, and existence that is specific is distinct from affirmative existence, it follows that whatness is distinct from affirmative existence. In other words, essence is distinct from existence.*"¹⁴

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- *What is the difference between essence and existence?*
- *In what way is God different from other beings?*
- *What do Étienne Tempier and al-Ghazali have in common?*
- *What distinguishes the status of philosophy in its relationship to the various religions in the Middle Ages?*
- *For Avicenna, is humanity the same in all human beings?*
- *What, for Avicenna, opposes the universal and the particular?*
- *What issues are bound up with the concept of “thing”?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *Should a distinction be made between the essence and the existence of beings?*
- *Is God a being?*
- *Is God ruled by reason?*
- *What should prevail, faith or reason?*
- *Is al-Farabi a relativist?*
- *Does humanity exist as a quality?*
- *Is there an intermediary between the particular and the universal?*
- *What do you consider the most substantial: the universal or the particular?*
- *Does the mere fact of naming something necessarily cause it to exist?*

Suggested teaching method: analyzing questions

Three different questions are chosen. Each participant must reply to them in writing. Each participant considers the questions and answers that he or she has given, in order to determine the purpose and function of the questions and assess their relevance and usefulness.

Each participant reads his or her assessment to the group in order to compare analyses. The group collectively ranks the initial questions from the most useful to the least useful. If possible, begin again with other questions. The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Game

- *Ask the participants also to read the worksheet “The search for the Truth”*
- *Explain to the participants that the aim of the exercise is to explore the concept of truth.*
- *Divide them into groups of three.*
- *One participant in each three-person team proposes a sentence which he or she considers to be true.*
- *A second participant asks questions in order to establish whether the sentence is true.*
- *The third participant observes and notes key elements in the questions and in the answers.*
- *Everyone changes roles until they have all had a turn at stating a truth, being questioned and observing.*
- *In the full group, start a discussion around the various elements noted by the observers on the concept of truth.*
- *In the full group, start up a discussion on key aspects of the use of syllogisms, taking into account historical contexts, universality and relativism.*
- *Compare and discuss these aspects with the questions and answers given during the exercise.*
- *Conclude by way of discussion with the participants on specific and other, universal, approaches to the concept of truth in the Arab-Muslim world.*

R. Wisnowsky's re-translations are interesting but they end up by denying the inseparability of the thing and existence by placing the first term in the light of essence and the second term in the light of existence. But it seems to me of great importance to keep the inseparability mentioned by Alain de Libera. What is in fact at issue here is the existence of God. Frege¹⁵ noted that in Spinoza there was something resembling the thesis of the indifference of essence as regards existence, but he clearly shows that Spinoza hesitated and backed down when it came to the existence of God: one cannot affirm of God that he is one and single for his existence is his essence.¹⁶ This means that God evades affirmative existence, for specific existence takes the place of affirmative existence. In fact the exceptional case of God challenges what Spinoza upholds elsewhere, namely that 'we do not

conceive things under the category of numbers, unless they have first been reduced to a common genus.'¹⁷ Spinoza's hesitation here did not go unnoticed by Frege. As a matter of fact there is a similar hesitation in Avicenna insofar as God, for him, does not belong to the genus of intelligible substances, for "*if species and genus are intelligible substances, not all intelligibles are substances and genera, but among the intelligibles, some individuals subsist by themselves and are related to no subject to which they would be applied, and these individual intelligibles are first in substantiality in comparison to all things.*"¹⁸

Recognizing singular intelligibles is what really constitutes an obstacle for the thesis of the indifference of essence as regards existence.



¹ E. Gilson, 1978, *Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, London, Sheed and Ward, p. 350.

² Leo Strauss, 1988, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 21.

³ Al-Farabi, 2004, *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato and the Divine Aristotle*, in *The Political Writings: Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts*, trans. by C. E. Butterworth, Ithaca, Cornell University, p. 134.

⁴ J. Jolivet, 1984, *Aux origines de l'ontologie d'Ibn Sinna*, in *Etudes sur Avicenne*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, pp. 11-28.

⁵ A. de Libera, 1999, *L'art des généralités*, Paris, Aubier.

⁶ R. Wisnowski, 2000, *Notes on Avicenna's Concept of Thingness*, in *Arabic sciences and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 10, No. 2.

⁷ Avicenna, 2008, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, trans. M. E. Marmura, Provo, Brigham Young University Press, p. 149.

⁸ A. de Libera, 1999, *L'art des généralités*, op. cit., p. 524.

⁹ Ibid. p. 527.

¹⁰ Avicenna, quoted by J. Jolivet, op. cit., p. 11.

¹¹ Richard M. Franck, 1999, *The Asharite ontology: Primary entities*, in *Arabic sciences and Philosophy*, Vol. 9, No. 2, September, p. 172.

¹² Quoted in A. de Libera, op. cit., p. 584.

¹³ Avicenna quoted by A. de Libera, op. cit., p. 585.

¹⁴ R. Wisnowsky, op. cit., p. 193.

¹⁵ See Frege, 1980, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, trans. by J. L. Austin, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, p. 62: '[Spinoza] holds further that we cannot properly call God one or single, because it would be impossible for us to form an abstract concept of his essence. Here he makes the mistake of supposing that a concept can only be acquired by direct abstraction from a number of objects.'

¹⁶ Letter EP 50, pp. 259-260, in Spinoza, B. de, 1995, *The Letters*, trans. by S. Shirley, Indianapolis, Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company: 'Now since the existence of God is his very essence, and since we can form no universal idea of his essence, it is certain that he who calls God one or single has no true idea of God, or is speaking of him very improperly.'

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Avicenna, *Al Maqulat [The Categories]*, ed. by I. Madkour, Tehran, AH 1405, p. 100.



Darb-e-Imam Tomb (16th-17th cent.), detail of glazed decoration, Safawid era (Iran) © UNESCO/Abbe, André.

The idea of nature springing up from a vase as a symbol of perpetually renewed life is found on this ceramic panel decorating the walls of the Darb-e Imam Tomb in Isfahan (Iran).

SUHRAWARDI AND IBN ARABI: EASTERN LIGHTS

FOUNDER OF THE EASTERN SCHOOL AND A CONTEMPORARY OF AVERROES IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY, SUHRAWARDI DID NOT BREAK WITH RATIONALIST PHILOSOPHY: HE JUDGED IT TO BE INSUFFICIENT, BUT NONETHELESS NECESSARY FOR THE SPIRITUAL PATH REQUIRES A SOLID TRAINING IN LOGIC AND METAPHYSICS. THIS TRAINING DOES NOT HOWEVER SUFFICE. WHAT IT LACKS IS THE RELATION TO INSPIRATION AND THE RECOURSE TO ALLEGORY OR THE INITIATORY NARRATIVE, WHICH COMMITS THE PHILOSOPHER TO THE SPIRITUAL PATH. AS THEY INTENDED TO RELATE ISLAM TO A TRADITION OF THEOSOPHY AND PHILOSOPHY OF ILLUMINATION, SUHRAWARDI AND IBN ARABI EXPLAINED PROPHECY AS RESULTING FROM THE ACTIVATION OF THE IMAGINATION INDEPENDENTLY FROM SENSORY IMPULSES. THE CHARACTER OF AL-KHADIR (LITERALLY, 'THE GREEN MAN'), IN THE QURAN, IS SEEN AS A GUIDE WHO INSPIRES THE PROPHETS AND THOSE WHO COUNT AMONG THE SAINTS.

AVICENNA OPENS UP NEW HORIZONS

Here we have an oriental wisdom in which the initiatory tale takes up an important place. Averroes claimed he would re-establish the truth of Aristotle's thought, for he considered that Avicenna had perverted it. In fact Avicenna had associated Aristotle with the Plotinian, in short neo-platonic, tradition, which held that intelligence is referred to in terms of ranks and functions, 'hypostases'. Plotinus had distinguished the One, Intellect

and Soul as the three hypostases of reality. Avicenna followed his lead and distinguished ten intellects. His tale of the bird was translated into Persian by Suhrawardi .

But, going further back than Aristotle, Avicenna sought inspiration from the great pre-Socratic Empedocles, for whom the world is made of love and strife. Suhrawardi said light and darkness.

SUHRAWARDI AND ILLUMINATION

Shihabuddin Yahia Suhrawardi was known as shayk al-Ishraq (1155-1191), the master of illumination. He was born in the North-West of Iran at Suhraward. He was a contemporary of Averroes but his philosophy drifted away from Arabic Aristotelianism and revived Persian wisdom, Platonism and Zoroaster, Zarathustra. Here is what he said of these borrowings: *"There were among the ancient Persians a community of men who were guides towards the Truth and were guided by Him in the Right Path, ancient sages unlike those who are called the magi. It is their high and illuminated wisdom to which the spiritual experiences of Plato and his predecessors are also witness and which we have brought to life again in our book called Hikmat al-Ishraq (The Philosophy of Illumination) and I am the first to have embarked upon such a project."*¹

He studied in Ispahan, where the Avicennan tradition was flourishing, and died in the citadel of Aleppo at the age of 36 after being accused of impiety by Salahuddin, whom the crusaders knew as Saladin. He was reproached for believing in the persistence of a secret prophesy (*nobowwa batina*), the meaning of which is revealed only to wise men who follow each

other in a holy line of descent (*silsilat al irfan*). It must be kept in mind that Suhrawardi invoked Hermes Trismegistus as an archetypal ancestor of the wisdom coming from the East, and with him Pythagoras and Empedocles. Their wisdom consists essentially in a symbolic discourse that allows of no refutation but whose meaning is revealed to those who have followed the spiritual path of interpretation.

Founder of the Eastern school, Suhrawardi did not break with the philosophy of his Aristotelian predecessors; he judged it to be insufficient, but nonetheless necessary, for the spiritual Path requires a solid training in logic and metaphysics. This training does not however suffice. What it lacks is the relation to inspiration and the recourse to allegory or the initiatory narrative, which commits the philosopher to the spiritual Path: *"To whom Allah gives not light, he has no light" (Quran, 24, 40). For just as the mystic who has no aptitude for philosophy is an incomplete being, so the philosopher who is not accompanied by a personal vision of the signs and the malakut (the Kingdom), is also an incomplete being, someone of little importance, a man to whom the spiritual world has never made itself heard."*²



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This commitment supposes a self-awakening, a gradual initiation into knowledge by means of trials that consciousness sets itself. In a major work, *Kitab hikmat al Ishraq (The Philosophy of Illumination)* Suhrawardi wrote as follows: 'On a wondrous day the Holy Spirit blew it into my heart in a single instant, though its writing took many months due to the interruptions of journeys.'¹³ This information concerning the short period of inspiration and the lengthy period of analysis is important: it shows just how different inspired speech, which comes in a flash, is from reasoned speech, which uses all the mediations of discourse required for the unfolding of ideas.

Light, in other words life, shines forth according to an emanative hierarchy, in which angels and archangels occupy a place according to their rank. Among these angels, there is the angel of humankind, which philosophers call 'agent intellect', that is to say an intelligence that never stops thinking, never sleeps, is never distracted from itself, is always actual, always involved in the activity of thinking. To the spirit and the angels corresponds light, and darkness corresponds to matter and the body. Suhrawardi distinguishes between pure intellect, which attends to nothing but itself, and the intellect that governs a body and is named soul, a soul that can be human or celestial. He also distinguishes between the dark material world, accessible to the senses, called '*barzakh*', and the world of archetypal forms (*alam al mithal*), which are neither fully ideas nor fully sense data. It is an in-between world whose function is to give full consistency to the visionary world, the colourful language of the prophets, the borderline experiences of the mystics. Suhrawardi's conception was inspired by the Quran (24, 35): "*Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth. A likeness of His light is as a pillar on which is a lamp — the lamp is in a glass, the glass is as it were a brightly shining star — lit from a blessed olive-tree, neither eastern nor western, the oil whereof gives light, though fire touch it not — light upon light. Allah guides to His light whom He pleases.*"

The verse in itself offers many images that require a tried and tested science of interpretation and a concrete experience of a soul's vision, which resembles a burning bush, a soul considered in relation

to its capacity to see and not to the objects it sees. Suhrawardi described the soul contemplating the light with the help of his knowledge of Plotinus: what the soul is in reality is the intelligible being to which it is reduced, and as the intelligible being knows no limit, the ego reduced to the intelligible has no limit either, and so it is light. How can all the veils be removed? 'And thus spoke he who gave the Law to Ara and Persian: 'God hath seven and seventy veils of light. Were these to be stripped from His face, the majesty of His countenance would consume all that He beheld.'¹⁴ If God can be assimilated to the One, he is over and beyond all intelligible beings. In Plotinus' words, he remains the one that we never attain. We can attain no higher limit than the light of the intellect, and we do so by means of an ascent in contemplation.

The worlds thus characterized infuse the Muslim religion with a spirituality that enables this monotheism not to be reduced to literalism and legalism. The idea of a *sharia* that is not merely a law but, as its etymology shows, a path (from *Shari*: avenue), a road, finds its expression in those worlds. Wise men and prophets show the path, and it is important to have good interpretative tools to understand and imitate them. So there is an esoteric meaning that is revealed only to those who set out on this path, accompanied by these extraordinary men. The *hakim ilahi* is the wise man who possesses divine knowledge and who, interceding with the divine, prevents the world from breaking up, allows it to subsist. This sage is called a 'pole' (*qotb*), and, in the Shiite tradition, it is the imam, literally, he who guides. The interpretation, the *tawil*, in the Shiite sense of the word, is a way of leading the symbols back to their original bearer, the imam, the one who has the key to their meaning. We are indebted to Henri Corbin for revealing this entire tradition of the metaphysics of light. Here is what he said: "*The tawil, Shiite hermeneutics, does not deny that prophetic Revelation was concluded with the prophet Muhammad, the 'seal of prophecy.'* It postulates, however, that prophetic hermeneutics is not concluded and will continue to bring forth secret meanings until the 'return,' the *parousia*, of the awaited Imam, of him who will be the 'seal of the Imamate' and the signal for the resurrection of Resurrections."⁵

IBN ARABI: MYSTICISM AND METAPHYSICS

Philosophy certainly did not go into a decline after Averroes died. The *Ishraqi* movement of illuminationism was well represented by Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi (1165-1241). These two thinkers shared the thesis according to which the imagination must not be reduced to that faculty that serves as a relay for sensation, as Aristotle would have it. On the contrary, it is the intellect that activates the imagination, not some sensory impulse. As an example we can refer to the highly symbolic character in Sura 18, the Sura of the Cave, in which a 'green' man (al Khadir), assumes the role of guide to the prophets, in this case Moses, and who possesses knowledge that is difficult to interpret. He is the spiritual master of Ibn Arabi, the one through whom esoteric meaning is revealed, providing one is extremely patient. The leitmotiv of this character in the Sura, what he says to Moses, who wants to follow him, is: "*He said: Thou canst not have patience with me. And how canst thou have patience in that whereof thou hast not a comprehensive knowledge?*" (18, 67-68).

According to Ibn Arabi, there is a hierarchy of invisible figures, holders of the esoteric meaning that is necessary to invigorate religion, and we must learn from their teachings by mastering the visionary art that is acquired through meditation. Al Khadir is a sort of guardian angel who reveals each human being to himself. Once one becomes aware of oneself, one is aware of one's lord, as the prophetic saying goes: 'he who knows himself knows his lord'. Knowing one's lord to know oneself, knowing oneself to know one's lord: the movement works both ways, for each of these forms of awareness leads to the other. It is not

abstract knowledge, but knowledge made of empathy and, above all, of compassion. And this is the link with Sufi themes: 'Those to whom God remains veiled pray the God who in their belief is their Lord to have compassion with them. But the intuitive mystics [*Ahl al-Kashf*] ask that divine Compassion be fulfilled [come into being, exist] through them.'⁶ Ibn Arabi, known as the Shaykh al Akbar and also as the son of Plato (*ibn aflatun*), took over from Plato the realism of essences: the idea that essences are realities in the full sense of the term. He exemplifies this debt in the doctrine of the Divine Names. Ibn Arabi considers that the divine names are the essence of God revealing itself to us under such and such a name. The name of al Rahman, the Beneficent, must particularly be borne in mind because it is the name by which God becomes love for his creatures. It is by means of the divine name and, in particular, that of 'lord', a specific divine name (*Ism Khass*), establishes a specific personal relationship with God. Thus the following verse of the Quran is often found inscribed on tombstones: 'O soul that art at rest, return to thy Lord, well-pleased, well pleasing' (89, 27-28) It shows how each soul makes its own the lord to whom it returns. Henri Corbin is more specific: 'the soul is not enjoined to return to God in general, to Al-Lah, who is the All, but to its own Lord, manifested in it, the Lord to whom it replied: *Lab-bayka*, Here I am!'⁷ Even in this life, the appeased soul experiences a serenity made possible by the presence within it of the divine, in accordance with verse 28 of Sura 13: 'Those who believe and whose hearts find rest in the remembrance of Allah. Now surely in Allah's remembrance do hearts find rest.'



Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturally

Understanding the text

- *What is at stake between Avicenna and Averroes?*
- *Why can Suhrawardi be accused of impiety?*
- *Why does Suhrawardi consider the spiritual way necessary?*
- *What is self-awakening?*
- *What is the difference between the agent intellect and the individual intellect?*
- *What is God for Suhrawardi?*
- *What is the value of spirituality for the Muslim religion?*
- *What is the function of hakim ilahi?*
- *What is the path to know God, according to Ibn Arabi?*
- *What is the function of naming in the relationship to God?*
- *Why would one need both reason and spiritual experience?*
- *What is Mulla Sadra's radical new approach to the question of being?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *Does the presence of a spiritual dimension in a philosophical approach change its focus?*
- *Is spirituality a necessity for human beings?*
- *Does spirituality help one to become oneself?*
- *Does the concept of the "agent intellect" have a reality?*
- *What is the value of contemplating absolute Oneness?*
- *Is being no more than a concept?*
- *Is metaphysics an outmoded activity?*

Suggested teaching method: **questioning the question**

*A question is chosen.
Each participant must write out individually a question that he or she considers a precondition for answering the question asked.
Everyone reads out to the group the question that they think should be asked.
Everyone chooses the three questions that they consider the most useful to be asked.
Everyone reads their choices. The group discusses these questions and chooses by a majority the most relevant questions.
Everyone must reply in writing to these three questions, then reply to the initial question, and determine in what way these three questions have altered the issues addressed.
The group reviews the work and the exercise.*

Educational exercises

Visualization exercise

- *Discuss the different explanations of the concept of intellect as seen by Averroes and Thomas Aquinas.*
- *Explain that an experience is going to be attempted on the basis of the four stages described in the worksheet.*
- *First stage: determining the causes of pleasure: Ask the participants to close their eyes, relax and visualize an experienced situation that gave them great pleasure. Then ask the participants to open their eyes and to note down on a piece of paper what they think were the causes of the pleasure.*
- *Second stage: analysis of pleasure: Divide the group into pairs. Each participant explains to his or her partner the situation and the cause of the pleasure in question and then the other partner does the same thing. The pairs discuss perceptions and acts and ask questions in order to clarify them.*
- *Third stage: thinking for oneself, not through someone else: Discussion still in pairs: What changed my perception of the situation through the other person's questions? What is specific in my way of reasoning in relation to the other person?*
- *Fourth stage: understanding oneself: Ask the pairs to discuss what each person has discovered about himself or herself.*
- *Full group discussion: ask if there are volunteers who wish to sum up their two-person discussions.*
- *Start a discussion on the aspects mentioned in the worksheet concerning the transcendental intellect and immortality.*
- *Group discussion on this process of reasoning and the consequences for the Arab-Muslim world.*
- *Ask the participants to read also the worksheet "Self-knowledge".*
- *Start a discussion on the questions of intelligence, self-knowledge, relationship to God, and mystical and metaphysical visions as seen by Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi.*

Other times, other places

Zoroaster and Zoroastrianism

Zoroaster was born in a western province of Persia, some 2500 or 3000 years ago. Several scholars have suggested the periods between 628 to 551 BCE or 630-550 or 660-583, others speak of 800 to 1000 BCE. He was called 'the Herdsman', who herded the human flock whom he was in charge of guiding. He himself called himself *Saoshyant*, the Saviour. He was hostile to any excess.

He is known as Zoroaster in Greek, which means *golden star*, a name used by Plato, thanks to whom he became known in the West. He is also known as Zarathustra,¹ Zaratushra or Zarathushtra. As a young priest, he received revelations from the great Achaemenid god Ahura Mazda (a name meaning *Lord - Wisdom*) who reigned over all creation. Zoroaster's revelations were collected in *The Gathas*, which are part of the holy text called *The Avesta*.²

It took a long time for the doctrine proposed by Zoroaster (Zoroastrianism or later Mazdeism)³ to spread, because of the opposition of the priests of the already existing cults.

The Zoroastrian reform stemmed from the centralist and universalist movement that prevailed in the Achaemenid Empire.

Hostile to any excess, Zoroaster rejected bloody sacrifices, which he considered barbaric and unnecessary, and cultic drunkenness. Only the purity of the soul mattered. The celebration of fire symbolized the luminous glory of Ahura Mazda. The deities of polytheism disappeared as the Zoroastrian reform tended towards monotheism.

The excellence of Ahura Mazda consisted in the 'good spirit' [*Spenta Mainyush*] to which later Mazdaism constantly opposed the evil spirit [*Angra Mainyush*]. Life is a struggle between Good and Evil, morality an incentive to bravery and zeal. Like Socrates, Buddha and Confucius, Zoroaster introduced a concrete form of proselytism, and encouraged speculation on earthly rather than heavenly matters.

The doctrine of Zoroaster welcomed all the suffering poor whatever their social origin. It allowed for hope of salvation without costly ceremonies (sacrifice). It spread throughout society, especially among the farmers and the working classes and not just among the priests and the feudal lords.⁴

The Zoroastrians believe in the immortality of the soul. The soul of the dead is judged and must cross the *Chinvat* bridge, which extends over hell. The soul of the just reached the eternal light, that of the damned goes down to hell. In between, there is a purgatory for the souls of those whose good and bad deeds balance out. Another key aspect of Zoroastrianism is the apocalyptic aspect: the last days will be heralded by the coming of a messiah, saviour and deliverer, *Saoshyant*, who will renew the world after the resurrection.

¹ This spelling is more familiar because of Nietzsche's and Wagner's respective *Also Sprach Zarathustra*.

² The Message of Zoroaster was first transmitted orally and then was drafted into a set of texts known as *The Avesta*. Initially it included twenty-one books describing the existence of two principles: Good and Evil.

³ The Mazdeism applies to Zoroastrianism after the reform in Ardeshir's time.

⁴ Hence the resistance of the ruling classes to Zoroaster's reforms, which spread only slowly.

MULLA SADRA SHIRAZI: THE ORIGATION OF REALITY

'A wise man versed in divine science', Mulla Sadra is a follower of Suhrawardi. Just like Suhrawardi, he reconciles a training in philosophy based on reasoning with a spiritual path depending on vision. If a human being meditates without using the tools of reason, he has no safeguard, and his vision can seem like a delirium, and if he sticks to the logical reasoning of the Aristotelians, his knowledge, severed from spiritual experience, will only be abstract. In the *Huduth* he wrote: *"You know that belief is different from certainty, for the former is a matter of unthinking assent or of controversy, which play a pivotal role in opinion (Zann) and evaluation, whereas the latter is an inner vision that only stems from the demonstration that enlightens intelligent minds or by perfect unveiling."*⁸

This unveiling is the full reality of being: being is not reduced to a concept. Access to the being of all things is acquired by means of 'an inspiration from the Mystery (al ghayb), support from the Kingdom (*Malakut*), help from on high and celestial confirmation.'⁹ Mulla Sadra Shirazi had read Avicenna, who was the first to have succeeded in distinguishing between essence and

existence. Only in God do essence (what a thing is) and existence (the fact that a thing is) coincide. For every other creature the distinction must be made between an essence, which gives the common characteristics of a thing and an existence, which is added to essence in certain cases, namely when essence leaves the domain of ideas to enter the domain of existing realities. Mulla Sadra Shirazi broke with this view of being as something adventitious, an addition to essence. He intended to defend the primordial and fundamental character of being, and grant being the reality that Avicenna and Suhrawardi seemed to allow to take shelter in essence: 'In the past, I used to be firm on the defence of the principality of essence, making existence a [mentally dependent] abstract [entity], until my God guided me and showed me his proof.'¹⁰ Mulla Sadra Shirazi thus went from a metaphysics of essence to a metaphysics of being. Understanding alone distinguishes between essence and existence, but in fact essence is never lacking in existence. If it were, then essence would be twofold in reality: the essence that has a sort of being as essence and the essence to which being is added.





- > What is Suhrawardi's twin Arab and Greek heritage?
- > In his own words, in what way is this "theosopher" an innovator?
- > What key connection does he make between inspiration and philosophy?
- > How does he liken angels to "agent intelligence"?
- > Law or path? What esoteric meaning does Suhrawardi suggest the sharia may assume?
- > What, in Suhrawardi's view, is a sage?
- > How does Ibn Arabi link imagination to intelligence?
- > In Ibn Arabi's view, what is the role of "invisible figures" in spiritual life?
- > What analogy does Ibn Arabi think possible between Plato's "essences" and the "divine names" of Islam?
- > In what way does Mulla Sadra confirm Suhrawardi's ideas about the link between "reason" and "spiritual experience"?
- > In Mulla Sadra's view, what connection can be made between "essence", "existence" and "being"?

¹ Suhrawardi, *Kalimat al-tasawwuf*, quoted in H. Corbin, 1971, *En Islam iranien, aspects spirituels et philosophiques, II, Suhrawardi et les platoniciens de Perse*, Paris, Gallimard, p. 29. Translated in English in S. H. Nasr, M. A. Razavi (ed.), 1996, *The Islamic Tradition in Persia*, Richmond, Curzon Press, p. 147, n. 11.

² Suhrawardi, *Al-Mashari wa al Mutarahat* [The Paths and the Conversations], §111, quoted by H. Corbin, 1971, *En Islam iranien, aspects spirituels et philosophiques, II, Suhrawardi et les platoniciens de Perse*, Paris, Gallimard, p. 21.

³ Suhrawardi, 2000, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, trans. by J. Walbridge and H. Ziai, Provo, Brigham Young University, p. 162.

⁴ Suhrawardi, 2000, op. cit., p. 111.

⁵ H. Corbin, 1998, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, trans. by R. Manheim, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 29.

⁶ Ibn Arabi, *Mawaqi al-nujum*, quoted in H. Corbin, 1998, op. cit., p. 117.

⁷ H. Corbin, 1998, op. cit., p. 132.

⁸ Mulla Sadra al Shirazi, *Huduth* [The Origination of the World], quoted in par C. Bonmariage, 2007, *Le réel et les réalités, Mulla Sadra Shirazi et la structure de la réalité, études musulmanes XLI*, Paris, Vrin, p. 21, note 7.

⁹ Mulla Sadra al Shirazi, *Asfar* [The Four Journeys], quoted in C. Bonmariage, op. cit., p. 29.

¹⁰ Mulla Sadra al Shirazi, 1992, *The Metaphysics of Mulla Sadra*, trans. by P. Morewedge, Binghamton, Global Academic Publications, § 85.



If life is short, a smile takes only a second © Calligraphy by Karim Jaafar

FROM DEMONSTRATION TO POETRY: LOGIC, THE KEY ISSUE IN ARABIC PHILOSOPHY

THE ARABIC PHILOSOPHERS CONSIDERED EDUCATION AS THE WAY OF HARMONIZING THE CONCEPTIONS OF THE GREEK PHILOSOPHERS PLATO AND ARISTOTLE. PLATO HAD CONCEIVED OF A CAVE FROM WHICH MAN PROGRESSIVELY EMERGES IN ORDER TO LEARN, AS HE DISCOVERS LIGHT. ARISTOTLE HAD IMAGINED A LOGIC THAT HAD THE SAME FUNCTION: MAN GRADUALLY PASSES FROM CONCEIVING TO JUDGING, THEN FROM JUDGING TO REASONING. THUS, HE ACQUIRES THE LUCIDITY THAT RESULTS FROM DEMONSTRATIVE REASONING. BUT IN HIS EDUCATIVE QUEST, MAN REMAINS CONNECTED WITH THE METHODS OF PERSUASION RESTING ON EXAMPLE THAT ARE SO USEFUL IN POLITICS, AND WITH POETICAL IMAGERY, WHICH IS A DISGUISED FORM OF REASONING. FAITH IN REASONING, IN ITS DEMONSTRATIVE AND POETICAL EXPRESSIONS, IS A TYPICAL FEATURE OF THE EDUCATIVE PROJECT OF THE ARABIC PHILOSOPHERS WHO COMMENTED PLATO AND ARISTOTLE.

The demonstrative paradigm developed by philosophers such as al-Farabi (d.950) and Averroes (d.1198) in their commentaries of Aristotle's logic (the *Organon*) was contextualised in a theory of knowledge that takes into account the different degrees of assent (*al Tasdiq*). Hence those philosophers advocated a long organon in their commentaries, that is an organon integrating rhetoric and poetics: Arabic philosophers esteem that logic does not merely concern operations of definition and demonstration but also the acts of language bound up with rhetorical argument and poetic suggestion.

Aristotle's logic as it was developed by Western tradition does not include the works on poetics and rhetoric. Yet those two works were integrated into traditional Arab logic. J. Brunschwig¹ wondered what Western philosophy would have been like if it had taken into account the theory formulated in the long

organon,² instead of the 'epistemocentric' theory that has prevailed at least since the beginnings of modern philosophy. The theory of the long organon, that is, of logic integrating poetics and rhetoric, was supported by many neo Platonic philosophers such as Philoponus, Olympiodor and Ammonius, even before it was upheld by Arabic philosophers. It was then resumed and backed up by such Arabic philosophers as al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) or Ibn Rushd (Averroes).

Let us quote here al-Farabi's text in which he did not only integrate poetics and rhetoric into Aristotle's logic, but reconciled Plato's philosophy with Aristotle's: "The example that Plato gives in his *Republic* about the cave – how man gets out of the cave and goes back into it – perfectly matches the order in which Aristotle arranges the parts of his logic. Indeed, he starts with superficial general remarks, that is remarks that apply

to many things, and then progressively moves on and up towards the most perfect of all sciences. From there he gradually moves down until he gets to the tiniest, pettiest, vilest of them. What is included in the *Second Analytics* is what is most complete in sciences and corresponds to the highest degree. What is to be found in the *Poetics* is what is most imperfect, tiniest in sciences, what is most remote from perfect science. The same goes with the sciences that Plato placed in the myth of the shadows of the cave.”³

Al-Farabi continues this parallel between Plato and Aristotle by linking it up with an educational approach: “Indeed, when the individual finds himself in this cave, he does not know who he is, nor does he know who the people he is with are when he looks at them, but only knows them when he looks at the shadow cast by any one of them. And since the knowledge of the many, which enables them to know themselves, is like the knowledge of the wise men, the situation for any individual will be as follows: to start with, he cannot see himself, nor can he see anyone else staying with him in a dark place, as long as the sun has not shone upon him directly and has not moved from one of them rendering shadow and darkness perceptible – at this stage, he knows himself and those who are with him, thanks to the knowledge he has of the darkness and

of the shadows they cast –, eventually, he sees himself and those who are with him thanks to direct perception and not via their shadows and darkness.”⁴

In her study, Deborah Black⁵ does justice to this so-called ‘contextual theory’ – a theory that sets the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* in the context of logic. For a long time, those who worked on the Aristotelian logical corpus minimized, and even neglected, this theory, even when the texts that were being studied⁶ explicitly formulated it. And yet, the inclusion of poetics and rhetoric into logic is indeed quite legitimate. For instance, Victor Goldschmidt⁷ notes that theatrical performance makes the audience reason: “Far from deceiving us as to the original, artistic transposition makes us know it better; it requires from the audience an effort at reasoning that, on two occasions, Aristotle defines with the technical term ‘syllogism’, and concludes by subsuming the model within the performance: ‘this is that.’”

The Arabic philosophers always supported arguments along the same lines, that is, fully acknowledging a ‘poetic’ reasoning and a ‘rhetorical’ reasoning. In his *Ihsa al ulum (The Book of the Categories of Science)*, al-Farabi lists poetic syllogism among ‘the arts that resort to syllogism’,⁸ while in the *Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s Rhetoric* Averroes points out



The author

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that 'the enthymeme is a kind of syllogism... Therefore this art must be carefully studied by the logician... Even though rhetorical assent is not true, it looks as though it were true... And what looks true comes under logic, which is the science of the true.'⁹ As Avicenna also points out, the logician's interest in Aristotle's *Poetics* must be distinguished from the musicologist's or the prosodist's; 'the logician only considers poetry in so far as it is imaginative speech.'¹⁰ He does not consider rhythm metrics or prosody.

This is the framework in which the syllogism (*al qiyas*) is recognized as a general method including the demonstrative syllogism as well as the rhetorical enthymeme (*al dhamir*) or the poetic metaphor. The enthymeme is a syllogism in which a premise is omitted and the metaphor may be understood as a syllogism that yields only its conclusion and leaves it up to the receiver to supply the two implicit premises. The receiver thus participates in the creation of the metaphor since this stylistic device achieves completion only when the addressee participates in it in some way or other: the metaphor is complete only in so far as we understand it.

The integration of rhetoric into the art of logic in general rests on two arguments: **1)** account must be taken of the rudimentary rationality of the masses, who, having no access to the truth by demonstration, can only accede to what is 'similar to the truth', the object of

rhetoric. And what is similar to the truth 'takes the place of the truth in the eyes of the masses';¹¹ **2)** Though the masses do not have access to the true, they are nonetheless disposed to know what truth is: 'People are quite naturally disposed to have a knowledge of what truth is, and in most cases they opt for the truth and act in accordance with it.'¹² Even if they make do with what is similar to the true, that does not mean they are not condemned to remain at that stage and the science of logic, which is the science of the true, should give an account of what is similar to the true, explain the substitution of the one by the other, which can only take place in accordance with the norm of the true.

Ibn Ridwan (d.1061 or 1068) gives a good summary of the division of truth into five types according to the nature of the syllogisms involved: there is "a demonstrative discourse by which one seeks to obtain one of the following two things: perfect representation or certainty; a dialectical discourse by which one seeks to obtain what dominates in public opinion in terms of representation and belief; a sophistic discourse, which likens the false to the true just as one likens bad dinars to true dinars and false dirhams to true dirhams; a persuasive discourse on which the soul may rely and which it submits to; a poetical discourse, which leads the soul to an understanding of the thing based on what is similar to it and what imitates it."¹³



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Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- *What was the innovation of the Arabic philosophers in the field of logic?*
- *What is a poetic syllogism?*
- *What are the differences between logical, rhetorical and poetic syllogisms?*
- *How can the truth be distinguished from what is similar to the truth?*
- *For Avicenna, does the exception invalidate the rule?*
- *What are the five modes of discourse according to Ibn Ridwan?*
- *What are the specific functions of poetic discourse?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *Do you think that poetry is ruled by logic?*
- *In what way does the rhetoric use logic?*
- *Do you agree with the following words of Averroes: "People are naturally disposed to know what truth is"?*
- *In what way is it useful to categorize?*
- *Is "good sense" or "common sense" a criterion of judgment?*
- *In what way is poetry subservient to truth?*
- *Does truth tend to be naturally singular or universal?*

Suggested teaching method: assessing the questions

*A question is chosen.
Each participant replies individually in writing to the question chosen.
A first volunteer reads out his or her answer.
Each participant drafts a question aimed at clarifying or expanding on the answer given.
Each participant reads out his or her question to the group. The volunteer chooses three questions which he or she answers orally.
If a participant considers that the volunteer has not answered, he or she can raise the problem at any time. However, "not answering" should be distinguished from "not agreeing".
Each participant drafts a further question concerning what has been stated. The volunteer again chooses three questions and answers them.
The work performed is reviewed by the group as a whole in order to determine to what extent the volunteer has or has not answered the questions, whether or not the questions were useful, etc.
Another volunteer is requested and the procedure is repeated. Variant: the first volunteer chooses the next one.
If possible, begin again with other questions.
The group reviews the work and the exercise.*

Educational exercises

Playing with metaphors

- *Open a discussion on the importance and purposes of the use of metaphors and analogies.*
- *Ask the participants to read also the worksheet "Averroes and the interpretation of the law".*
- *After a discussion of the worksheets, ask the participants to split into teams of three, with each team being requested to read a poem.*
- *Each team then discusses the meaning of the poem and possible logical links with reality.*
- *Collective discussion on the different interpretations and on the power of metaphors.*
- *Ask each team to choose a subject and to create a metaphor or analogy to explain it.*
- *Each team presents its metaphor and the other participants propose interpretations on possible links with reality.*
- *Discussion of the importance of metaphors and of poetry as an aid to communication in Islam.*
- *Discussion with the participants on various key aspects of the text: exoteric/esoteric relationship, appreciation of diversity, understanding of faithfulness/unfaithfulness and the search for harmony.*

I. CONCEIVING AND JUDGING

In this long organon much attention is given to the operations of conceiving and judging. Conceiving is achieved according to the ten categories represented by the particles that can be used to answer the questions that relate to our frames of thought, such as: Who or what? When? How? Where? How much/many? The reason why only ten categories correspond to our frames of thought still remained to be accounted for. According to Avicenna, the categories certainly do not encompass the full inventory of the world. The fact that there are unclassifiable, isolated individuals that come under no genus or species does not challenge the existence of only ten categories for the world to be expressed in intelligible terms.

“As it is not necessary in theory for an object to be similar to other objects that constitute a species along with it, there may be isolated individuals that do not belong to any species, and a fortiori may not belong to any category: it is however possible to assert that there are only ten categories since what is excluded is indeed not a category in itself, nor is it included in a new category. For instance, if we say that there are only ten cities in the world, the existence of nomadic people outside these cities does not contradict the assertion.”¹⁴

Aristotle was thus able to clear a universal territory of thought which the philosophers that followed him had to explore according to the principle put forward by al Kindi: the true is a process, revealed to different peoples at different times without being altered or divided in two. For Averroes, individual beings do not fall outside the range of logic. Aristotle said that they could not be defined, but Averroes relativizes Aristotle’s declaration by saying that individual beings are characterized by the fact that nothing is like them. But insofar as many things are characterized by the fact that nothing is like them, it becomes a common characteristic, at least in thought: *“In a way, individuals present a related disposition, namely a privation of the relation that characterizes the universal. Such a disposition is a privative notion that pertains to thought and is responsible for the individual being defined without being a universal predicated on a plurality. Thus, insofar as it presents a related disposition in thought, namely that privation of the relation that belongs to the universal, it is indeed defined. On the other hand, insofar as it does not have a related nature outside the soul, it is indeed an individual and not a universal.”*

II. RHETORICAL ASSENT

Rhetorical assent is that of a public having nothing critical or well informed serving as a basis for its support. But its support is nonetheless the sign of a minimal rational capacity that is used when reasoning is required in the conduct of daily affairs. Rhetorical reasoning is called enthymeme, a syllogism which lacks a premise but which wins support straight away. Such support thus implies the existence of something implicit. Averroes tells us in his *Commentary on the Rhetoric* that *“the masses are not capable of understanding inference from the conclusion that follows the premises, even if they do not see the difference between the conclusion and that from which the conclusion is drawn. In a syllogism they do not distinguish the premises from the conclusion. ... when someone informs you of what is required and what is at the origin of this requirement, it is as if he had said the same thing twice over, and that is ridiculous for support at first sight.”* It can be seen that the masses have a very rough conception of what an inference is, since their logical needs cannot be satisfied (*iqna*) by appropriate rhetorical arguments in which the explicit gives way to the use of ellipsis.

Assenting to something is what serves as a basis for defining as logical discourse practices as distinct as demonstration or enthymeme. It stops on the borderline of Rhetoric, which is considered to be the seventh logical art, the eighth being Poetics, which does not produce an act of assent but an act of imagination

urging the public to do or not to do something. The poetic syllogism does not produce assent at all, but images that prompt the soul to feel desire for something, or else terror, indignation, etc. However, even in works of poetry, there is an underlying reason, which derives from imitation or mimesis. Every artistic production involves an imitation of things perceived by the senses, an imitation that human beings enjoy. This is all very Aristotelian. Aristotle, in a passage of *The Rhetoric* (1371b4-10), writes: *“Again, since learning and wondering are pleasant, it follows that such things as acts of imitation must be pleasant – for instance, painting, sculpture, poetry and every product of skilful imitation; this latter, even if the object imitated is not itself pleasant; for it is not the object itself which here gives delight; the spectator draws inferences (‘That is a so-and-so’) and thus learns something fresh.”¹⁵*

Commenting on this passage, Averroes understands the word inference in the technical sense of syllogism, and notes that the image and object it conjures up is analogous to the premises and conclusion of a syllogism. *“That through which existing things are imitated does not bring pleasure because the resembling form is beautiful or not, but rather because there is, in this form, a kind of syllogism and a way of revealing what is most hidden, in other words the absent thing, which is the thing that is compared, through what is most apparent, in other words the comparison. For in imitation there is,*

as it were, a form of instruction established by syllogism, and this so because the image has the status of a premise and the thing the image evokes and renders intelligible is the conclusion." To be frank, the analogy is forced, for, in a syllogism, the premises are predications, whereas, in poetic discourse, we have instead similes. 'So-and-so is well behaved' (S is P) does not

function in the same way as 'so-and-so is a moon' (S is S'). But by forcing the analogy, Averroes develops a logical interpretation that can reveal in forced interpretations or even misinterpretations. What is important here is not to say that Averroes was mistaken but to emphasise the type of philosophy that the philosopher from Cordoba produced from a shift in meaning.



III. POETIC METAPHOR

A literalistic conception of metaphor is the idea that it is a potential non explicit form of reasoning, not everything is said, there is room for suggestion. The literal sense is saved, without creating a double meaning or a double reference, without depriving our world of reality and at the same time fully acknowledging the cognitive value of metaphor: metaphor is no threat to meaning but proposes a usage that is distinct from common usage. Both al-Farabi and Averroes took the metaphor to be a potential, imaginative syllogism. A syllogism is a reasoning that allows one to acquire knowledge, its cognitive aspect being thus saved. Language involves a part played by dreaming, and a syllogism is imaginative insofar as its premises are produced by the part that pertains to this dreaming. It is potential, for both the producer and the receiver of the metaphor are in the world of suggestion and not the world of the explicit: a metaphor is the conclusion of a syllogism whose two premises have been suppressed. And on hearing a metaphor the listener re-establishes the premises by an act of his imagination, thereby creating the metaphor and understanding it.

Metaphor is thus a metamorphosis: while it does save the literal meaning, it finds a new use for it, which is similar to a metamorphosis. Avicenna gives an eloquent example of this: 'honey is vomited bile'. It is literally true that it is bees' work to 'vomit' the honey: the metaphor does not create a new meaning, but is founded on the original meaning and offers it a new usage. There is metaphor here for the word 'vomit' is commonly associated in language with an activity that human beings seek to flee. Fleeing, pursuing: we are here concerned with acts associated with imaginings. We have not laid a finger on the literal meaning, but put it to a use which likens the metaphor to a metamorphosis: the honey is

not seen as something sweet that is sought after, but as something that has been spewed up and that bewilders the listener. It is disconcerting because it gives rise to a new perception of reality: honey is now rejected whereas it is generally sought after.

This analysis is important because it suspends neither the literal meanings nor the common references. Here the metaphor is every bit a modality of discourse with the same theoretical status as lying or affirming. The role of the imagination is enhanced, thereby suggesting that metaphor can be paraphrased neither by the producer nor by the receiver, both of whom are creators of metaphor: the former because he proposes it, the latter because he understands it.

Logic is in general associated with mental acts such as conceiving, judging, definition and demonstration. Far from denying these fundamental logical practices, Arabic philosophers such as al-Farabi and Averroes sought to insist on the equally logical character of practices like poetics and rhetoric. They aimed at showing that poetical images and persuasive rhetorical arguments come within the remit of logical rationality with precise rules that should be described. In a cultural context – classical Islam from the ninth to the twelfth century – in which both theology and poetry developed considerably, it was up to philosophy to show that both poetic creativity and theological argumentation met logical rules and a commonly shared rationality. These rules emphasize the fact that there are many ways to the truth. If no one truth contradicts another logically, it should nonetheless be acknowledged that the truths to which human beings give their assent do not all don the same discursive garb.

Other times, other places

Einstein and Plato's Cave

Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' represents the idea that human beings tend to understand the world as they perceive it, not as it truly is. It is an issue of paramount importance since it leads to the necessity of interpreting our perceptions by resorting to thought and reasoning in order to come to a true understanding of reality.

Einstein was not a philosopher, but he brought about a small revolution in the realm of thought. Usually what is considered to be true is what can be seen, what can be perceived by the senses. It is by completing this representation that we come to the essential specificity of the human species, which is distinguished from other species in that it does not just perceive but tries to understand thanks to the process of thinking.

According to his biographers, Einstein was perceived by his teachers as an average pupil, rather slow on the uptake. Curiously, however, he persisted in asking questions. A solitary child, he acquired a certain amount of knowledge all by himself. An interesting anecdote is often cited: around the age of four or five, he was deeply impressed at the sight of a compass his father showed him: the definite movement of the needle without any apparent cause 'made a deep lasting impression on him', the feeling that 'surely there must be something profoundly hidden behind things'.¹ He was described as an 'average pupil' by his teachers. When one considers how he later became the greatest acknowledged scientist of the twentieth century, it means that his approach was different from the way people commonly think – different, therefore considered inefficient. The non-conformity that he often displayed was often held against him. He was also considered to be 'slow' because he passed no hasty judgements and took time to think things over. This means that ever since he was a child reflection had prevailed over spontaneous and 'intuitive' reactions.

Finally, he was curious and would always obstinately try to understand the reasons for things and their functioning. He looked for logical, rational and verifiable solutions. In 1938 he developed his approach in the book written in collaboration with Leopold Infeld.

'It is really our whole system of guesses which is to be either proved or disproved by experiment. No one of the assumptions can be isolated for separate testing... Physical concepts are free creations of the human mind and are not, however it may seem, uniquely determined by the external world. In our endeavour to understand reality we are somewhat like a man trying to understand the mechanism of a closed watch... But he certainly believes that, as his knowledge increases, his picture of reality will become simpler and simpler and will explain a wider and wider range of his sensuous impressions. He may also believe in the existence of the ideal limit of knowledge and that it is approached by the human mind. He may call this ideal limit the objective truth.'

Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld,² 1978, *The Evolution of Physics*, 2nd. ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 30-31.

Einstein teaches us to think otherwise. Does the logical mind, that is to say, a mind that is consistent with the functioning of things as we perceive them, contradict the awareness of reality? We may be led to think that we should we rely directly and solely on experience and measurements. This approach equals that consisting in relying on our sole perceptions.

Thus, the birth of the physical theories of relativity has increased our awareness of the idea that any relative truth may be surpassed when confronted with a wider field of reality than that to which it applies.

¹ Michel Paty, 1997, *Albert Einstein ou La création scientifique du monde*, Paris, Les Les Belles Lettres.

² Leopold Infeld (1898-1968) collaborated with Einstein at Princeton in 1936-1937. In 1938, they wrote *The Evolution of Physics* together. They also published jointly three articles on the problem of motion.



Reflecting on the text

- > What is your opinion of the Arabic philosophers' practice of integrating rhetoric and poetry with logic?
- > How do those philosophers present the "truth" to the "masses"?
- > How does Ibn Ridwan arrange the five syllogisms (from the demonstrative syllogism to the poetic syllogism)?
- > How does Averroes propose to address the masses in terms of arguments?
- > What do you think of the idea that there is an underlying rationality in poetical works?
- > What do you think: going from metaphor to metamorphosis for a different perception of reality?
- > Do you think, in this context, that theology and poetry represent many paths to the truth?

¹ J. Brunshwig, *Quelques malentendus concernant la logique d'Aristote*, in M. A. Sinaceur (ed.), 1992, *Penser avec Aristote*, Paris, Erès/UNESCO, pp. 423-429.

² The organon is composed of Categories, On Interpretation, Prior and Posterior Analytics, Topics, Sophistical Refutations. The long organon also includes Rhetoric and Poetics.

³ The text is available in Latin: Al-Farabi, 1971, *Didascalica in Rhetoricam Aristotelis*, ed. by J. Langhade and M. Grinaschi, Beirut, Dar al Machreq, p. 213-214.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ D. L. Black, 1990, *Logic and Aristotle's Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy*, Leiden, E. J. Brill.

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⁷ V. Goldschmidt, *Art et science*, in M. A. Sinaceur (ed.), 1991, *Penser avec Aristote*, Paris, Erès/UNESCO, pp. 607-610

⁸ Al-Farabi, 1949, *Ihsa al ulum*, ed. by Uthman Amin, Cairo, Dar al fikr al Arabi, pp. 63-69.

⁹ Averroes, 1960, *Talkhid Kitab al khataba [Middle Commentary on the Rhetoric]*, Ed. Abd al rahman al Badawi, maktaba al nahda al misriyya, pp. 10-11.

¹⁰ Avicenna, *Talkhis kitab al shir (Commentary on the Poetics)*, 161-11-14. English translation in Avicenna, 1974, *Avicenna's Commentary on the Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. by I. M. Dahiyat, Leiden, Brill, p. 61.

¹¹ There is to this day no English translation of Averroes's *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Rhetoric*. Non Arabic speakers may refer to the French edition used here: Averroes, 2002, *Commentaire moyen sur la Rhétorique d'Aristote*, trans. by M.Aouad, Paris, Vrin, Vol. 2, p. 8.

¹² Averroes, op. cit., p. 8.

¹³ One may find reference to Ibn Ridwana's book in English as *The Book on the Utilization of Logic in the Sciences and Arts*. The edition used for this article is Ibn Ridwan, *Livre sur ce qui est utilisé de la logique dans les sciences et les arts*, manuscript, in Maroun Aouad (ed.), 1977, *La doctrine rhétorique d'Ibn Ridwan et la didascalica in Rhetoricam Aristotelis ex Glosa al-Farabi*, *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, vol.7, p. 202.

¹⁴ Avicenna, *Commentaire moyen sur les catégories [Middle Commentary on the Categories]*, in Madkour, 1932, *L'organon d'Aristote dans le monde arabe*, Paris, Vrin, p. 85

¹⁵ We refer here to the English edition of Aristotle's text: Aristotle, 1924, *Rhetoric*, trans. by W. Rhys Robert, London, Oxford University Press.



Page of the Blue Quran, North Africa, 10th century © IMA.
The Quran is the first artistic support of the Arab-Muslim civilization elevating calligraphy to the level of a supreme art. This is particularly true for this page of the Quran, blue with gold writing, produced in North Africa in the 10th century.

ART IN THE ARAB-MUSLIM CIVILIZATION

ARAB ART WAS BORN ALONGSIDE A NEW RELIGION, ISLAM. YET IT IS NOT AN EXCLUSIVELY RELIGIOUS ART, AS THE MAJOR PART OF ITS CREATIONS STEM FROM THE PROFANE WORLD. EVEN THOUGH THE MOSQUE REMAINED THE MOST EMBLEMATIC ELEMENT OF ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE, THIS NEW SOCIETY SOON IMPOSED ITSELF AS AN URBAN EMPIRE. IN ALL THE GREAT CITIES, BUILDINGS RELATED TO ISLAM WERE BUILT: APART FROM THE PREVIOUSLY MENTIONED MOSQUE, THERE WAS USUALLY A MADRASA (QURANIC SCHOOL), BUT ALSO HOSPITALS, ALMSHOUSES, SOUKS, HAMMAMS AND OF COURSE OFFICIAL ADMINISTRATIVE BUILDINGS AND THE SULTANS PALACE. HISTORICALLY, THE GENESIS OF ISLAMIC ART BETWEEN THE SEVENTH AND NINTH CENTURIES HAD RECOURSE TO WELL KNOWN OLD MODELS MAINLY COMING FROM THE HELLENISTIC AND IRANIAN TRADITIONS. THESE ORIGINAL SOURCES OF INSPIRATION WERE THEN ADAPTED, OTHERS WERE ABANDONED, MODIFIED OR SIMPLIFIED SO AS TO GIVE BIRTH TO NEW SHAPES AND ORIGINAL MOTIFS INSPIRED BY EARLIER SOURCES NOW RELATED TO THE NEW ISLAMIC SOCIETY. THE HOLINESS OF THE ARABIC LANGUAGE, WHICH WAS THE INSTRUMENT OF THE QURANIC REVELATION TO THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD, IMPOSED CALLIGRAPHY AS A MAJOR FEATURE OF ISLAMIC ART. MOREOVER, ISLAMIC ART IS PRINCIPALLY CHARACTERIZED BY GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION, WHICH BECAME ONE OF THE MAJOR SYMBOLIC VEHICLES OF GOD EXPRESSING HIMSELF. THIS ART OF ORNAMENTATION BASED ON ABSTRACTION IS THUS A REFLECTION OF GOD, INVISIBLE YET PRESENT IN ALL THINGS. BY EXTENSION, IT IS AN EXPRESSION OF HIS BEAUTY. THE SPIRITUAL JOINS EVERYDAY LIFE TO GLORIFY HIM IN THE EXTREME.

As all the great civilizations, the Arab-Muslim world has developed an art of its own, characteristic and identifiable as such. While the Western world divided its artistic history into periods, when it comes to the Arab-Muslim civilization, the term used is Islamic art. Yet, the appellation is still controversial: how can it be possible to unite under a generic term the art that evolved over fifteen centuries in dozens of countries, from the Atlantic Ocean to the frontiers of China? At the end of the nineteenth century, when the Western world really became aware of the existence of this art, it came to be referred to as 'oriental art'. Islamic art was then more specifically associated with Chinese and Japanese art, whose motifs inspired French painters. It became 'Arab art' for the 1903 exhibition at the Musée des arts décoratifs (Museum for the Decorative Arts) in Paris, where it was

displayed to its advantage for the first time. Eventually, in 1907, Gaston Migeon wrote his famous *Manuel d'art musulman*. The appellation has continued to evolve to this day, with the now preferred term Islamic art, or arts of Islam, the use of the plural introducing *de facto* the plurality and the diversity of this art.

Islamic art was born simultaneously with a new religion, Islam. Yet, it is not exclusively religious; its creations are for the greater part those of the secular world. Neither is it an art made by the Muslims for the Muslims. Whatever the religion of the artists, the craftsmen or the sponsors of the works may be, the artistic means they resort to are part of this civilization. There emerges a whole new typology of forms, objects and architectural constructions, which are all markers of this Islamic culture.

The Arab-Muslim civilization arose at the beginning of the seventh century in the Arabic Peninsula, concurrently with the revelation of the Muslim religion to the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad then defined not only a new faith but a different way of life. This civilization is reckoned to have started in 622, the year of the Hegira and of the beginning of the Muslim calendar. Its expansion was then meteoric: within hardly a century, the Arab armies reached territories as distant as Spain to the west, the north of India or Central Asia. After rivalries over matters of succession, a political and religious power was set up in the centre of this vast empire, first in Syria, during the Umayyad dynasty (661-750), then in Iraq with the Abbasids (750-1258). That is where the first artistic creations developed. But can they already be considered as Islamic art?

The territories that had been conquered by the Arab armies belonged to ancient civilizations, whose past had been tumultuous but artistically rich. This lavish cultural melting pot nourished a newly emerging society that had not yet defined an art of its own. In the genesis of Islamic art, the influences were Byzantine as well as Persian, and even Greco-Roman, but they were readjusted and even reinvented by the artists of the Arab-Muslim world, to fit the transformations of society.

The new philosophy supported by the Muslim religion and the new way of life that ensued from it naturally engendered a novel art, which came to be identified as Islamic art from the nineteenth century.



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ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

Architecture was the first artistic form to develop in Islam. A new building was the symbol of the Muslim religion and of its political power: the mosque, *masjid* in Arabic, which means 'the place where one bows down before God'. Prayer, one of the five pillars of the Islamic faith, is originally a private action, which soon becomes a collective act gathering together the community, especially during the Friday prayer. Yet, neither the Quran nor the hadiths indicate what the place of prayer should look like. The first Muslims had to find their inspiration outside the founding texts. At the time of the prophet Muhammad, in the very early seventh century, in Arabia, only two architectural constructions stand out as being symbolic of Islam: the mosque of the Kaaba in Mecca, a former place of pagan worship that had become the most important Islamic sanctuary, and the house of the Prophet in Medina. The latter became the prototype for the mosques that were built later. It consists of a vast rectangular open space lined with porticoes on two sides. This pattern was used again in the first mosques, referred to as hypostyle mosques, in particular that of the Umayyads in Damascus (705-715) where a spacious colonnaded courtyard gives on to a covered prayer hall. The very partially codified open space of the building expresses

a practical concern: it is a gathering place for as many people as possible, protecting the faithful from the summer heat and the winter cold. The pattern of the hypostyle mosque met with great success from Andalusia to the borders of Iran and Turkey. However, later, other shapes appeared in these countries. First, from the eleventh century, in the Iranian world was developed a mosque with what was called an *iwan*, a kind of large vaulted room that was open on one side, a legacy of pre-Islamic Iranian architecture. A large central courtyard was surrounded by one to four *iwans*. One of them usually opened onto an inner room where the *mihrab* stood. This prototype later spread throughout the Iranian world where it became the most frequent form. Then, from the fifteenth century, the Ottoman world created dome mosques in which the inner space prevails. It is a vast domed room, certainly inspired by the plan of the S. Sophia Basilica (sixth century) in Constantinople (which became Istanbul in 1453). The inner space is much higher, and the walls become either lavishly decorated supports or openwork screens that let the light in. The greatest masterpieces of Ottoman architecture, like the Suleymaniye mosque (1550-1557) in Istanbul, are wonderful examples of varieties of this model.

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Insert written by Jacques Nicolaus

Other times, other places

Calligraphy and medieval illuminations

Without developing into a major art like Chinese or Arabic calligraphy, the art of calligraphy and illumination made its presence felt in the medieval Western world. Hand-copied books required time and expertise, and their ornamentation increased their value.

Illumination is a hand painting or drawing adorning or illustrating a text or its margins, usually a manuscript. In the absence of paper, which was still unknown, parchment was the most suitable support for adorned and calligraphed text; it is made from animal skins, sheep- and goatskin usually. Later, with the development of trade and universities in the cities, specific guilds took care of the various stages of its fabrication: tawing, chamoising, parchment making.

The best quality parchment is vellum, which refers to calfskin, lambskin, or kidskin from still-born animals. The manuscripts in vellum were rare and very expensive, reserved for the most precious books. Even ordinary parchment was rare and expensive, so that manuscripts were often scraped clean for re-use: these are called palimpsests.

The words miniature or illumination are frequently used to refer to painted decorations inside books.

The Latin verb '*illuminare*' (to light up) became 'illuminate' in English. The word 'illumination' refers to all the decorative elements and figurative representations executed in a manuscript to embellish it, but in the thirteenth century, it more specifically referred to gilding. 'Miniature' comes from the word *minium* (a vermilion red lead oxide often used in decoration).

Until the twelfth century, the manuscripts were copied in ecclesiastical institutions, mostly abbeys, where they were used to celebrate mass. Most of the books copied were Bibles and other religious books. The art of books was less public and less profane than, for instance, architecture. It was less quickly influenced by new aesthetic forms (Romanesque, then Gothic). This art, practised mainly by monks and in the monastic schools, was cut off from the outside world. The manuscript illustrator worked surrounded by the old library books he got his inspiration from. There were literally teams of monk-copyists and illuminators working hard in the great monasteries.¹ They contributed to the preservation of culture in the West after the fall of the Roman Empire.

The Latin alphabet is the most widely spread kind of writing in the West. To the twenty-one original letters, five were added – J, U, W, Y and Z – to express the evolutions of the language and the usages of different peoples. The writing styles changed according to time and place. At the time of the Carolingian Renaissance, the caroline minuscule became popular; later, the gothic style developed.

From the thirteenth century, a secular craft industry and market developed with the expansion of universities, administrations, and the emergence of a new kind of upper and middle class public interested in books.

Making a manuscript required several stages. Until the fourteenth century, the text was written on animal skin (calf, sheep or goat), called parchment; it was obtained at the end of a long series of operations. The parchment was then cut into sheets bound into codices. Paper, made from rags, was a Chinese invention transmitted by the Arabs. It first appeared in Spain in the twelfth century, but was still rarely used in France before the fourteenth century, when the first mills were set up in Troyes. The first paper makers in England date back to the end of the fifteenth century.

In the spaces left by the copyist at the beginning of the texts, the illuminator painted miniatures and decorated or historiated initials; in the margins he would paint marginalia, foliage, popular scenes or drolleries that were often humorous.

¹ It inspired Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose* and Jean-Jacques Annaud's film.

Yet, whatever the plan chosen for these mosques, certain characteristic features are systematically found. The first one is the minaret, the tower where the muezzin sends out the call to prayer five times a day. The first minarets were massive square towers, but other shapes developed with the passing of time: helical in Samarra, circular and slender in the Ottoman world. The minaret became the symbol of Islam, visible from afar. In the newly conquered territories, the mosque and its minaret soon appeared as markers of the new political and religious power. Among the other characteristic features of the mosque is the *qibla* wall, indicating the direction of Mecca, which the believers face when praying. In the centre is the *mihrab*, a hollow niche which is traditionally the most ornamented part of the edifice. The niche supposedly commemorates the place where the Prophet stood when preaching in his house in Medina. This part of the mosque often comes with a dome, which enhances its importance. A *minbar*, which is a wooden or stone pulpit for sermons, is often added to the ornamentation of this space. The main role of these decorative elements in Muslim faith is a practical one: they show the direction of prayer; the *minbar* enables the imam to be heard more clearly by the crowd of believers. They also serve as major decorative surfaces within the buildings.

As a whole, the mosque remains soberly decorated, with a prevailing use of calligraphy, in particular with Quranic verses. Yet two of Islam's first monuments go against this principle: the Dome of the Rock, in Jerusalem, built in 692, and the Umayyad

mosque in Damascus, which dates back to 705-715. Both are adorned with rich gold-plated mosaics representing jewels in Jerusalem and vivid landscapes in Damascus. The interpretation of these motifs is controversial but, beyond their function as symbols, they were the works of highly skilled Byzantine craftsmen. It is a clear proof of the beginnings of this budding Islamic art, inspired in its infancy by the local influences and know-how encountered in the process of its development and conquests, before it was able to create its own original stylistic vocabulary.

Even though the mosque remained the most emblematic element of Islamic architecture, this new society soon imposed itself as an urban empire. It is a noteworthy radical change: though nomads by tradition, the Arabs were aware of the importance of cities for the establishment of a strong centralized political power. So, they first developed the urban centres that already existed, like Damascus, before creating new cities, like Baghdad in 762 or Samarra in 836. In all these cities, buildings related to Islam were built: apart from the previously mentioned mosque, there was usually a *madrasa* (Quranic school), but also hospitals, almshouses, souks, hammams and of course official administrative buildings and the sultan's palace. This galloping urbanization also influenced other artistic productions within the city. In order to meet the demands for pomp of a well-off urban class, artists and craftsmen's workshops grouped together in certain parts of the cities. The development of the arts thus became the symbol of the success of Islamic society.



Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- What problem is raised by the concept of “oriental art”?
- What is at the origin of “Islamic art”?
- Why was architecture the first artistic form to be developed in Islam?
- What is the origin of the initial form of mosques?
- What are the basic characteristic features of a mosque?
- In what respect is Islamic art a decorative art?
- In what respect is calligraphy an important artistic practice in Islam?
- What is the origin of the term “arabesque”?
- What is the role of geometry in Islamic art?
- Does Islamic art prohibit all representation of living beings?
- What characterizes Islamic art?
- What are the key concerns of Islamic art?

Entering into dialogue with the text

- Do you think that Islamic art is truly specific?
- How would you assess and how would you criticize Islamic art?
- Is the fact of having a sacred dimension an obstacle or a source of strength in the development of art?
- Why have we not developed the art of calligraphy in the West?
- Can we speak of the universality of art?
- Is the artistic impulse the same in Islam and in the West?
- Can art exist without constraints?
- What may the discovery of Islamic art reveal to the Western visitor?

Suggested teaching method: conceptualization

A question is put to the group.

All the participants draft individual answers on a sheet of paper. From these answers, they must produce a single term which they should establish as the key concept in their answers.

The list of concepts is written out on the board.

The moderator asks the participants if one of them would like to eliminate any particular concept.

When a participant speaks against a concept, he or she must give reasons for his or her choice.

The concept is discussed and then the group decides by a majority whether the concept is excluded or retained.

A further criticism is proposed; a discussion ensues and is followed by a further decision.

The discussion is over when there remains only one concept on the board.

The corresponding answer is read out and consequently becomes the final answer.

The group assesses its validity and the relevance of the concept used.

An analytical discussion concludes the work on this question. If possible, start the process again with other questions.

The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Case studies

- Ask the participants to close their eyes and think of Arab-Muslim art.
- Ask the participants either to explain the image they have of Arab-Muslim art or to make a drawing for the purpose.
- Ask the participants to read also the worksheet “The Arabic art of poetry”.
- Start the discussion on the various forms of art explained in the text and compare with the representations of the participants.
- As part of the study on the Arabic art of poetry, distribute the poem by ‘Antar (525-615), explaining that it is a pre-Islamic poem:

*Heavy his mail-coat, its sutures, lo, I divided them
piercing the joints of the champion; brave was
the badge of him.*

*Quick-handed he with the arrows, cast in the winter-time,
raider of wine-sellers’ sign-boards, blamed as a prodigal.
He, when he saw me down riding, making my point at him,
showed me his white teeth in terror, nay, but not smilingly.
All the day long did we joust it. Then were his finger tips
stained as though dipped in the ithlem, dyed with the
dragon’s blood,*

*Till with a spear-thrust I pierced him, once and again with it,
last, with a blade of the Indies, fine steel its tempering,
Smote him, the hero of stature, tall as a tamarisk,
kinglike, in sandals of dun hide, noblest of all of them.*

- Ask a participant to read out the poem by Abū Nuwās (747-815):

*Get away from ruins and dunes
And care for the vineyard girl!
Care for she who,
Were I to ask for her hand,
Would bedeck herself with gold jewels.
She who was created
To strike down worry
She who is the enemy
Of money and fortune*

- Ask the participants to compare the two poems and talk about the differences between them.
- Ask the participants to discuss developments and changes affecting poetry at the time when Islam was introduced as a religion.

THE DECORATIVE ARTS AND THEIR MOTIFS

There are very few references to art in the sources of this new civilization, few instructions or specific warnings. The Quranic revelation does not evoke art directly, only the hadiths provide us with rare allusions to it.

Islamic art is distinguishable from the usual Western forms of art because it is essentially decorative. It is expressed in everyday objects endowed with new indisputable aesthetic qualities. It is an art of shapes and ornamentation, which show/appearing in textiles and carpets, manuscripts or other more precious materials, such as ivory, rock crystal or gold. But it proved particularly innovative in the domain of ceramics, glass and ironwork. The importance of ceramics is unequalled. This technique definitely reached its peak in Islam. Among the great Islamic inventions, that of lustreware is unquestionably the most spectacular. The technique of metallic glaze was first used on glass in the ninth century. But it was very soon used by potters to make luxury items. The ceramic materials were first covered with white glazing which unified the base of the object. Metallic oxides, often copper or silver oxides, were applied on top. The objects were fired in kilns with reduced oxygen, so that the oxides may penetrate the glazing and produce metallic glints. The items made that way imitated gold tableware. Considering their cost and the technical skill required to produce them, they were luxury goods. Though a great number of them have been found throughout the Islamic world, but above all in Iraq and Egypt, it is still not known where they were produced. Other innovative techniques were invented by the potters of the Arab-Muslim world, but this example is still significant of Islamic art: the innovation resides totally in the use of simple materials to make works of great beauty.

Most of these works relate to what is called courtly art. The splendour and richness of their fabrication testifies to the power of the sponsor. For the great majority of these works were the result of orders issuing from princely patronage or a well-off class of society. The social and political structure set up by the Islamic ruling power encouraged the emergence of this patronage that could be seen everywhere.

Islamic art is defined as an art of ornamentation. The combination of all these motifs produced sensuous works quite remote from the idea of austerity often conveyed by the Arab-Muslim world. These objects, for they were almost exclusively shaped items, appeal above all to the senses of those who look at them, apart from any intellectual interpretation.

Historically, the first craftsmen of the Arab-Muslim world did not stem from this culture. They practised their skills in territories that were conquered by Islam, so they naturally continued to work for the new ruling power. Thus, the genesis of Islamic art between the seventh and ninth centuries had recourse to well known old models mainly coming from the Hellenistic and Iranian traditions. These original sources of inspiration were then adapted, others were abandoned, modified or

simplified so as to give birth to new shapes and original motifs inspired by earlier sources now related to the new Islamic society. The Arab conquests of the first centuries of Islam also led to movements of population and artists who took along with them not only their works, but also their techniques and know-how. These movements encouraged still further artistic intermingling resulting in the creation of original works. Thus, paper, a Chinese invention, was discovered by the Arabs after the battle of Talas in 751. After the Chinese defeat, prisoners were brought to the Islamic territories. The Arabs then put to good use their knowledge in the making of paper, in particular to distribute the Quran at a lower cost.

Islamic art expressed itself on various supports. Manuscripts and fabrics were traditionally favoured by the artists. They were luxury productions testifying to the wealth of the sponsors and the technical and artistic skills of the artists. But the art of making books was the first to develop, with copies of the Quran. The Quran, instrumental in the propagation of the new Islamic faith, became the favourite artistic support in the first centuries of Islam. The oldest pages that have been preserved date back to the eighth century and come from the Arabic Peninsula. They are simple parchment pages covered in brown ink writing rather simply transcribed. The holy text was progressively retranscribed with increasingly elaborate calligraphy and the pages were adorned with even richer and often gilt illuminations. The holiness of the Arabic language, which was the instrument of the Quranic revelation to the Prophet Muhammad, imposed calligraphy as a major feature of Islamic art. The art of beautiful handwriting appeared as the first visible form of this budding art, even before it invaded all the other supports. Apart from ancient Egypt with its hieroglyphs, it was the only civilization to give so much importance to writing and to be able to integrate it as a decorative motif in its own right. For the great skill of the Muslim calligraphers was their ability to enrich their palette with the passing of time. From the first primitive forms of writing, Arabic became a rich language and different styles of calligraphy were invented. For a long time, the prevailing style was *kufic*, a hieratic script that was, however, difficult to read and required that other more easily understandable scripts be developed. For concern for the transmission of the Quranic text was at the heart of the creative process. Thus, from the tenth century, theories on calligraphy were developed, in particular with the vizier Ibn Muqlah's *Treatise on the Science of Calligraphy and Calamus*, as he wanted to harmonize the texts according to his principle of 'proportioned script', *al-khatt al-mansub*. In the thirteenth century, the calligrapher Yaqut al-Mustasimi defined six basic calligraphic styles, the most famous and most commonly used one to this day being *naskhi*. Some of these scripts are also distinguished geographically: the *maghribi* in Maghreb and Spain, the *thuluth* and the *muhaqqaq* in Iran and the *bihari* in India. But the other characteristic of Arab calligraphy is that it was not confined to books, its favourite support, but invaded all kinds of supports. There are inscriptions on most of the walls of Islamic architecture, as well as on objects with a specific shape (dishes, bottles, goblets...).

The ceramic bowls made in Nishapur and in Central Asia in the tenth and eleventh centuries are quite remarkable on account of the unique inscription in elegant brown calligraphy running around the items. Some quotations are Quranic or pious sayings evoking the Prophet or God. Others are blessings often intended for the owner of the work. From the thirteenth century, the name of the sponsor of the work is often mentioned, less frequently so the name of the creator. Quite frequent too is what is called 'animated script', in which the vertical strokes of the letters end in little human heads. Finally, some scripts just become meaningless and are decorative motifs in their own right, their aesthetic value outweighing their meaning.

Apart from calligraphy, which was the first characteristic form of Islamic art to develop, plant motifs invaded all the supports. Nature has always inspired artists but some civilizations paid more attention to it than others. Thus, the first motifs on Islamic monuments came from nature: leaves, small palms, flowers, foliage... The mosaics in the Damascus mosque represent gardens with luxuriant vegetation. These images have often been interpreted as an evocation of Heaven, for which all good Muslims are destined, seen as a welcoming and opulent oasis. Apart from this interpretation, vegetation has always been a symbol of life and regeneration commonly used by artists for thousands of years. However, it soon appears extremely stylized and becomes in the end a mere evocation of plants worked on again like any decorative motif. This is the birth of the famous arabesque, from the Italian word *arabesca*, a word directly relating to the Arab world. It is a convoluted intertwining of plants, starting from one basic element to form a rigorous endless rhythmic composition. The arabesque, *tawriq* in Arabic, became a recurring motif in Islamic art. However it is not a new one: it was already present on mosaics in the Antiquity but it became the hallmark of the Arab artists who multiplied the motif to the extent that it occupied an entire predetermined space. The arabesque was then adjusted according to the supports, periods and regions. At the beginning of the eighth century, it was used on the magnificent sculpted facade of the Umayyad palace of Mshatta (preserved in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin), but also on Iraqi metalwork or on the frontispieces of Qurans of the Mongol period (thirteenth to fourteenth centuries). The plant motifs progressively became more and more abstract. This evolution is particularly apparent in the stucco ornaments of the palaces in Samarra, the Abbasid capital, along the Tigris River, in the middle of the ninth century. The plant curls and loops were stylized and became almost geometric shapes quite remote from nature and endlessly repeated. For the artists of the Islamic world had developed a horror of emptiness, *horror vacui*, and filled the whole surface that needed decorating. Every square centimetre was covered in endlessly connecting and combining motifs. Contrary to this stylization, some Muslim dynasties opted for a naturalistic treatment of vegetation. This tendency was particularly apparent in the Ottoman empire (1281-1924), with the ceramics of Iznik, from 1470. From 1555, the immaculate white

items bore blue, green and brick-red motifs, especially the famous quadric-floral motif with wild roses, hyacinths, tulips and carnations. Each flower is clearly identifiable as it stands out against a light background. Likewise, Mughal India (1526-1858) used floral motifs in the miniatures, where plants became the only motifs on the pages of the albums, as well as in architecture. In the lower parts of the walls of many monuments like the famous Taj Mahal (1632-1654) in Agra, there are large stone (usually sandstone or marble) panels finely sculpted with flowering plants among tufts of grass. At last, one could mention the rich silk fabrics of Safavid Iran (1501-1732), decorated with toothed leaves or stylized flowers standing out against a neutral background.

A great number of these plant motifs are associated with geometric ornaments. Though the Islamic motifs look muddled and seem, at first sight, to have neither beginning nor end and no pre-established arrangement, they turn out in fact to be a clever assemblage of precise, carefully chosen shapes. The art of these creators resided in their ability to fit the most incredibly detailed motifs into precisely delimited spaces while respecting the general harmony. Thus the ornamentation appears to be the skilful fitting together of geometric structures, frequently to create an effect of depth. These isometric compositions are never a matter of chance but follow a predetermined pattern and require mathematical calculations and the use of ruler, compass and set-square. Geometric abstraction is based on extremely advanced scientific theories. One of the first most popular texts used in geometry remained *The Elements*, written in the third century BCE by the Greek mathematician Euclid. The Arab scientist and mathematician of the tenth century al-Farabi later commented and completed Euclid's work on geometry. Other theoreticians set about studying this discipline with an aim to adapting it to everyday use. Thus, in the second half of the tenth century, Abul Wafa al-Buzjani wrote *A Book on those Geometric Constructions which are Necessary for a Craftsman*. Apart from artists, architects also resorted to the same theories in order to refine their constructions. Thus, they created the *muqarnas*, beehive-like structures based on mathematical and geometric calculation, used for the construction of domes before becoming fully decorative motifs.

The star polygon appears as one of the recurring motifs to be seen on the frontispieces of thirteenth century Mamluk Qurans as well as on ceramic mosaic wall-coverings in the Maghreb a few centuries later. This basic star-shape is developed, spreads, is broken down and multiplied ad infinitum. Each element of this wall-covering motif creates a network of serried lines and is characterized by the use of contrasting colours. Today, modern science has managed to determine seventeen possible variations in the combination of the motif. When looking at the decorative panels of the Alhambra in Granada (Spain), one can see just those seventeen compositions, no more no less: had the Spanish artists of the fourteenth century already managed to solve these calculations at the time?

Islamic art is principally characterized by the geometric abstraction achieved in the motifs already mentioned. The artists carried the use of these techniques to the limit because they corresponded perfectly to the new Muslim faith. Indeed, geometric abstraction became one of the major symbolic vehicles of God expressing himself. In the Muslim religion, God is abstract in essence. In the same way, theoretically, especially during the first centuries of Islam, temporal and religious powers are not distinct. This art of ornamentation based on abstraction is thus a reflection of God, who is invisible yet present in all things. By extension, it is an expression of His beauty. The spiritual joins everyday life to glorify Him in the extreme.

The artists of the Arab-Muslim world also made great use of animals in their creations. Indeed, most of the motifs already mentioned (plants, geometry) are filled with various animals. The first source of inspiration remained everyday life: numerous horses, rabbits, fish, camels or artists' pets were represented. Some, however, had a specific symbolic value: thus, the lion, a wild animal, was a sign of strength and bravery; the eagle was a mark of power, while horses referred to the powerful, since, in those societies, only the elite were allowed to ride them. It would probably be too long and of little interest to list all the animals illustrated in Islamic art, but a rather rich fantastic bestiary must be mentioned. Among the creatures that recur frequently are the harpy, the dragon and the phoenix.

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



Reflecting on the text

- > *What does the designation "Islamic art" cover?*
- > *At its birth, on what sources did it draw?*
- > *What were the characteristics of the first mosques?*
- > *What were the characteristics of mosques built in the Persian or Ottoman style?*
- > *What are the main elements of a mosque?*
- > *What are the principal monuments of urban centres?*
- > *What is the place of ceramics in Islamic art?*
- > *What is the position of artists and craftsmen?*
- > *What is the link between Islam's founding text and the art of calligraphy?*
- > *How did decoration draw on natural elements and give birth to the arabesque?*
- > *What link do you see between faith in an invisible God and the art of ornamentation based on geometrical abstraction?*
- > *What moral value is placed on the various animals in the bestiary of Islamic art?*
- > *What is the origin of the ban on figurative art in Islam?*
- > *How can the princely iconography be explained?*
- > *How do you account for the fact that Islamic art has a single vocabulary although it is heir to various traditions?*
- > *Note the breakaway movement under Western influence and the rebirth of a new art rooted in a muslim heritage.*

These monsters were not Islamic creations, but they come from older legends, adapted in the Islamic world. Thus, the originally Chinese dragon was commonly found in the decorative repertoire of the Iranian world, while retaining Chinese features. The phoenix, the bird that is born again from its ashes, was called a *simurgh* in Persia. The Chinese influence was obvious in this domain, though also present in many others. China was a constant source of inspiration, for its motifs as well as for the techniques they had developed (the Arab potters vainly tried to imitate Chinese celadon).

Both Arabic and Persian literature also referred to animals, endowing them with human traits. Thus, in the Indian fables of *Kalila wa Dimna*, translated into Arabic in the eighth century, two jackals tell of their adventures as they battle against other animals (a crab, a heron, crows...). And these fables inspired La Fontaine's famous fables several centuries later. Similarly, in the *Shah nameh*, a Persian national epic written in the year 1000 by the poet Firdawsi, the hero Rostam is accompanied by his horse Rakhsh, who rescued him on several occasions, notably from the claws of a dangerous dragon. Literature staged animals in fantastic or realistic narratives that underscore their importance. But isolated animal motifs are also found in Mughal Indian miniatures from the seventeenth century, as well as on Fatimid lustreware in the eleventh century. Only the countries of the Maghreb seem to have been reluctant from the start to have any sort of figured representation and this illustrated bestiary is not present, or only exceptionally so in ancient periods.

This observation also applies to the representation of human figures. A firmly rooted idea has it that Islamic art forbids all figuration; but this iconoclastic tradition needs to be amply qualified. Originally, the Muslim religion condemned all forms of idolatry and was founded on the oneness of God. These two fundamental principles influenced the artists who, as a consequence, proved less inclined to represent human figures.

After his exile in Median, the Prophet Muhammad, back in Mecca, went to the sanctuary of the Kaaba to destroy the idols around it. This symbolic gesture was decisive for the new faith, which wished to break with previous traditions. It was also a way of showing it was different from the Christian religion, extremely present through the representations of saints, of Christ and of the Virgin Mary. By rejecting the representations of human figures in religion, the Muslims differentiated themselves clearly from Christianity. This attitude brought them closer to such previous traditions, such as the very explicit and virulent warning against images conveyed in Judaism: "*Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.*" (Exodus, 20: 4)

However, the Quran in no way forbids figurative representation; only the idols are being targeted: "*O you who believe, intoxicants and games of chance and (sacrificing to) stones set up and (dividing by) arrows are only an uncleanness, the devil's work; so shun it that you may succeed.*" (Sura 5: 90). The 'stones set up' may refer to the idols in the Kaaba, destroyed by the prophet. Another passage in the Quran is even

more explicit and clearly denounces the adoration of idols: "*And when Abraham said to his sire Azar: Takest thou idols for gods? Surely I see thee and thy people in manifest error.*" (Sura 6: 74). Thus, the fierce opposition to idols does not apply to the creation of human figures in art at all. It is the use that is made of them that may be a problem for believers and that is why they cannot be found in religious places. In fact, this duality in art has often been a problem and is still controversial to this day: the works remain a source of admiration and wonder to the eye, but they are also illusions, as they pretend to be what they are not.

As for the *hadiths*, they are more unamenable to artistic creations: 'Angels do not enter a house in which there is a dog or a picture'; 'those who will be punished most severely on Doomsday are: the murderer of a Prophet, he who was put to death by a Prophet, the ignorant man who misleads others and he who makes pictures and statues'. Those quotations, far stricter, do not oppose the works themselves but their creators, responsible for making them. Banned from religious places, pictures are often found elsewhere, in particular in environments associated with the better-off social classes. Figurative art developed around the figure of the prince. He was the patron and held the power, so that he was naturally the most frequently represented figure. There are innumerable enthroned princes or hunters on horseback in Islamic art. Art got its inspiration from these figures and enhanced them. This iconography is known as 'princely pleasures': the activities of the princes are portrayed – hunting, banqueting, dancers and musicians performing, but also the figure of the enthroned prince. These cycles of Iranian origin invaded all the supports and all parts of Islam except the Maghreb, historically resistant to these representations. However, the Maghreb was not the only territory to reject the use of these representations of human figures. To be accurate, one must add that some ruling dynasties were more rigorous than others. As a whole however, because of their history, the Iranian and Indian worlds seem historically to be the most inclined to resort to figurative images: they illustrate books, decorate the walls of palaces, adorn ceramics, fabrics, and carpets.

The artists used figurative stereotypes that differed from one region to the next. In the Iranian world, beauty was expressed by a round face, small full lips and black eyes under a fine line of meeting eyebrows. In the Arab world, round faces were also favoured, but the eyes were wider and the features more realistic. Often, few elements distinguished men from women. This stylistic standardization might be due to the circulation of models from one workshop to another. The artists got their inspiration from them, thus creating a common language for this figurative art. The people represented were thus seldom identifiable. It was only in more recent periods that that portraits of distinct individuals appeared.

The first realistic portrait in Islam was supposedly that of Mehmet II (who reigned from 1451 to 1481), an Ottoman sultan who, in 1479, asked the Venetian painter Gentile Bellini to come to Istanbul to make his portrait (today preserved in the National Gallery in London). But this extraordinary initiative had very few immediate repercussions. Still, the increasing

European influence in the Islamic world from the sixteenth century made people think differently, and true portraits were made in the great Ottoman, Iranian and Indian empires. A shift from the spiritual to the temporal can be observed at that time. Books were written in praise of the sovereigns, distinguishable from the crowd and glorified. The *Babur Nameh* related the feats of the first Mughal sovereign Babur (r. 1526-1530) and his conquest of the north of India at the beginning of the sixteenth century, while, in the seventeenth century, the *Selim Nameh* recounted the heroic life of Selim I, Ottoman sultan from 1512 to 1520.

Islamic art remains essentially contradictory. It flourished throughout territories with different old traditions, which developed a single artistic vocabulary. According to the shapes and motifs used, it is possible to tell a piece of work made in the Maghreb from one made in the Mashreq. Why is it then that one does not speak of Syrian, Egyptian, or Moroccan art, but of Islamic art indeed? For in spite of these particular

regional characteristics, Islam managed to define an identifiable common artistic melting pot, notably thanks to the use of Arabic. The differences in the themes mentioned here, from the use of the arabesque, figuration and calligraphy to that of geometric compositions, define a style that art historians since the nineteenth century have identified as Islamic art. It is however interesting to note that the term no longer applies when it comes to twentieth century art in these countries. The political and economic decline of the great empires of the Arab world in the nineteenth century has led to an impoverishment in artistic production. Simultaneously, an increasing influence of the West since the sixteenth century has turned it into the only valid artistic reference. Centuries of creation have disappeared to the benefit of a standardized westernized art. Today however the resurgence of the Arab world on the world stage is bringing about the rebirth of an art specific to these countries, nourished by their past, which has become part of a new modernity to which it is not, however, chained.



Glossary

Hegira: Migration of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina in 622 and beginning of the Muslim calendar.

Hadiths: A set of deeds, sayings and commendations of the Prophet Muhammad.

Iwan: Large vaulted room that was open on one side.

Madrasa: Quranic school.

Mihrab: Recess indicating the direction of Mecca that Muslims face during the prayer.

Minbar: Pulpit for sermons for the imam.

Muqarnas: Structures based on mathematical and geometric calculation, used for the construction of domes before becoming fully decorative motifs.

Qibla: Wall, indicating the direction of Mecca, which the believers face when praying.



Tchehel-Sotoum Palace, Persian frescoes, Persian art, (Iran) © UNESCO/Abbe, André.
Poetry remains one of the most sought-after arts, used in declamations made on the occasion of majestic festivities that mixed dancers, musicians and sophisticated dishes, as illustrated by this fresco from the Tchehel-Sotoum Palace in Isfahan (Iran).

THE ARABIC ART OF POETRY

THE ABSENCE OF SUCH OTHER ART FORMS REPRESENTING REALITY AS WERE PRESENT AMONG THE NEIGHBOURING PEOPLES – LIKE THE THEATRE, WIDESPREAD AMONG THE GREEKS – HELPED TO MAKE POETRY AND DISCOURSE APPEALING TO THE SENSES AND THE IMAGINATION OF THE RECEIVER THE PLACE WHERE A WORLD VISION IS REVEALED IN PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA. POETIC MEMORY IS THE GRAND BOOK (DIWAN) OF THE ARABS, BECAUSE IT HAS BEEN ABLE TO PRESERVE THE WAY THEY NAMED THINGS AND PERCEIVED REALITY. MOREOVER, IN SPITE OF ITS SEVERITY REGARDING POETRY, THE QURANIC TEXT ENCOURAGED THE PRESERVATION AND EVOLUTION OF THE ART OF POETRY IN NO UNCERTAIN WAY. FOR WHILE THE TEXT SOUGHT TO DEPRIVE THE POET OF HIS SACRED STATUS, TO CONFER IT ON THE PROPHET ALONE, AND WHILE POETS WERE CRITICIZED FROM AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE BECAUSE WHAT THEY SAID DID NOT MATCH WHAT THEY DID, THE SETTING UP OF ISLAM STILL HAD POSITIVE EFFECTS ON POETRY. THANKS TO THE APPEARANCE OF THE CULTURE OF THE WRITTEN WORD, WITH THE TRANSCRIPTION AND THE DISSEMINATION OF THE HOLY WORD, THE SCHOLARS TRIED TO PRESERVE THE ANCIENT TREASURE OF THE ARABIC LANGUAGE, WHICH WAS ROOTED IN POETRY AND WHICH IT WAS NECESSARY TO KNOW IF YOU WANTED TO UNDERSTAND THE SACRED TEXTS (THE QURAN AND THE PROPHETIC TRADITIONS).

THE POETIC ART OF THE ORIGINS

‘Poetry was the register of the Arabs: it recorded their sciences, their history and their wisdom’.¹ This quote from Ibn Khaldun testifies to the central role poetry played in the lives of pre-Islamic Arabs, in that it went far beyond the mere expression of individual feelings. In the heart of the desert, where life was hard, and in a society where oral tradition and illiteracy prevailed, poetry was not only the medium in which the poet expressed his subjectivity, but also the medium in which the tribal ideal of generosity and magnanimity found expression. As for the ethics of pre-Islamic Arabs, only poems can give an account of it and convey its essence. On the other hand, the absence of such other art forms representing reality as were present

among the neighbouring peoples – like the theatre, widespread among the Greeks – helped to make poetry and discourse appealing to the senses and the imagination of the receiver the place where a world vision is revealed. Poetic memory is the grand book (*diwan*) of the Arabs, because it has been able to preserve the way they named things and perceived reality.

If the oldest poems only date back to the fifth century CE, in view of their formal perfection and their exemplary excellence, they are the end product of a very long evolution that had no doubt begun many centuries before. However, the sixth century poet Imriū al-Qays is considered by theorists of Arabic poetry as

the real founder of the poetic canon embodied by the *qasida* (the classic ode), as well as the inspirer of the themes that, for several centuries, his successors took up. One of the most famous critics of ninth century poetry, Ibn Qutayba, claims that Imriu al-Qays paved the way for all the other poets, by inventing comparisons and poetic themes that were copied by them.² His status as the first Arab poet is clearly manifest in the opening of his poem, with the description of what remains of the campsite the day after his beloved left with her tribe.

Fixed in Arabic poetic memory, the opening of Imriu al-Qays's *Muallaqa* embodies the conception of a world marked by the themes of disappearance, departure, solitude and death: "Stop here, you two!, Let us weep for the memory of a beloved and a campsite."

Arabic poetry's inaugural act establishes the presence of the trace of an absence through the motif of weeping at the beloved one's campsite. The poet who contemplates the traces of past happiness discovers the gaping wound inflicted by time on both human beings and objects. This opening sets up a complex relationship between the subject and time, the positive nature of which is always glorified and harks back to an Edenic past. But past happiness is only summoned

up to reveal the wound of the present and the eternal recurrence of the feeling of loss and grief. As soon as he is torn away from the tribe and retreats into his inner self, the Jahilite poet discovers that he must either fight against time or submit to it. But he cannot face up to the prospect of fighting against the unknown and against fortune, that mocker of the individual. Constantly confronted with death and solitude in the hostile environment of the desert, the individual is left with only one possibility: to leave his hands in the hand of Fate and accept the decrees of Fortune (*al-dahr*). Pre-Islamic poetics is indeed a poetics of immanence, as man can hope for nothing, neither for the permanence of things in this world, nor for an afterlife of possible happiness; rather, he confronts the imperfection of the individual, with a resignation which not even his acts of bravery, his feminine conquests or the glorious achievements of his tribe can remedy. Only poetic discourse – which does not yet leave an indelible trace for the poet, but rather constitutes an abode forever threatened by the evanescent nature of speech – can reconcile him for a while to himself and the world. Present in most pre-Islamic poems, particularly in the famous great Odes (*al-Muallaqat*), those themes denote what Salam Al-Kindi sums up in the phrase 'Orientless' man, a disoriented man who is 'epiphanized' in and by the discovery of ruin and desolation.³



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If we have chosen the above reading of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry it is in the first place because it reflects its themes in depth and in the second place because the major changes which came about with the establishment of Islam on the one hand and on the other the modernizing movement led by the Abbasid poets largely justify this reading. They give the interpretive keys of a poetry whose archaic vocabulary and desert-focused motifs might easily put off the contemporary reader and prevent him from appreciating its true value. But before dealing with these changes, let us first examine the way this poetry was set up as a model by eighth and ninth century critics.

Indeed, in spite of its severity regarding poetry, the Quranic text encouraged the preservation and evolution of the art of poetry in no uncertain way.⁴ For while the text sought to deprive the poet of his sacred status, to confer it on the Prophet alone, and while poets were criticized from an ethical perspective because what they said did not match what they did, the setting up of Islam still had positive effects on poetry. Thanks to the appearance of the culture of the written word, with the transcription and the dissemination of the holy word, the scholars tried to preserve the ancient treasure of the Arabic language, which it was necessary to know if you wanted to understand the sacred texts (the Quran and the prophetic traditions). Besides, Quranic criticism of poetry as a discourse which is not focused on truth-saying paradoxically contributed to the secularization of this art. Thus, poetry retained the themes that were most contrary to ethics, such as invective (*hija*), and which were the origin of the controversy between the holy word and the poets. Finally, insofar as it Arabic poetry was acknowledged to be an art which did not aim at the truth, it was disassociated from religion and acknowledged within its own limits: the production of images and the appeal to imagination. All these positive effects explain the interest that theologians and defenders of religion showed in the art of poetry, seeking as they did, like lexicographers or grammarians, to codify this practice and define its canons, as early as the eighth and ninth centuries.

Among the works of the period, those of Ibn Qutayba had the greatest effect and influence on the reception of poetry. Although *The Book of Poetry and Poets* was composed at a time of great poetic change – which we shall discuss later – it bears evidence of deep nostalgia for the pre-Islamic founding period and is markedly classic in style. Ibn Qutayba encourages the poets who wish to excel and show their talent in poetry to imitate the model of the Ancients, starting with the *nasib*, which contains the weeping at the campsite and the evocation of the memory of the beloved, then moving on to a second part in which nature must be described, and ending on praise for some patron or one of the powerful people of the time. According to Ibn Qutayba, this tripartite division is the canon of the *qasida*, and enables one to assess the poetic capacity of the poet, designated by a word that also refers to virility (*al-fuhula*). The notion is important because it is prominent in the works of poetic criticism which rate poets according to their ability to compose excellent poems.⁵ The canon set up by Ibn Qutayba is in fact merely a personal piece of criticism which, on the one hand, cannot exhaust all the long familiar Arabic poetic themes (threnody, conceit and invective), and on the other hand is not even respected as such in the great odes he refers to. It is rather an external look on the art of poetry since it confuses poetry with the praise of powerful men, while the more personal themes like the evocation of the past or the description of passionate love are only supposed to prepare the audience for the praise of the politician. By confining poetic art to a utilitarian role consisting in fulfilling a political function, Ibn Qutayba only described a framework that, to his tastes, was supposed to perform the mission of poetry. However, his work, like that of the other critics, encouraged an interest in classical models and the preservation of traditions that might have been lost.

Insert written by Jacques Nicolais

Other times, other places

Poetry and culture Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*

Few literary works have had the importance and ability to endure of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. The Homeric poems are rooted in oral tradition. We know about the *aioi* of archaic Greece, artists who sang epics to the accompaniment of a lyre; they improvised epic songs and selected themes from a repertoire known to their audience. They may be compared to the African griots or Celtic bards, characteristic of societies that have little or no knowledge of writing.

The author, Homer, about whom we know very little except that he was a blind *aiodos*, wrote poems or had them written from old legends first transmitted orally. The theme of these poems was the Trojan War and Odysseus' return to his homeland (Ithaca). Homer supposedly lived in the eighth century BCE, while his poems evoke events that occurred in the twelfth century, that is four centuries before his time...

Traces of this oral poetry have been highlighted in Homer's text. The main characteristics are the repetition of stereotyped formulae relating to the description of an event or a character, for example 'dawn, fresh and rosy-fingered' whenever referring to sunrise in *The Odyssey*; in the *Iliad*, when the hero is hit by the enemy, 'he thudded to the ground', 'his armour clattered about him', 'darkness engulfed him', etc... In the poems, the names of heroes and gods are often followed by a descriptive formula: the 'hairy-headed Achaeans,' 'swift-footed Achilles' or 'the tireless feet,' 'Odysseus of a thousand devices' 'Hector helmet flashing'...

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* are written in six-foot verse (hexameters), which gives a very simple, easily scanned and easily memorized rhythm. Images are repeatedly used. In the *Iliad*, the warriors are often compared to animals: 'As a tawny eagle swoops on a flock of birds – geese, cranes or long-necked swans – that are feeding by a river, Hector rushed...' (*Iliad* XV, 689-692).

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* are also representative of Greek religious thinking. With Homer, the gods resemble men, they have their flaws, qualities and passions. They form a family (the Olympians) that is neither united, nor supportive. They intervene in the lives of men either to protect or to harm them and often manipulate them. Their unions with the mortals engender heroes, demigods – of whom Achilles¹ is one of the most popular. Homer's work is more than a mere work of literature, it is a cultural and civilizational event. Today it is a tool for historians, geographers, archaeologists for the study of mythology, ethnology... Already in ancient Greece, it was the source of Greek poetry, it served as an argumentation and reference in debates and contributed to the unity of the Hellenic world, as it was known to all, if not read by everyone. Homer's work is the essential element of Greek identity.

Homeric poems were and continue to be a source of inspiration for artists. Thus Odysseus' descent into the kingdom of the dead (*Odyssey*, Book XI) is taken up by Virgil (*The Aeneid*, Book VI). Dante's *Divine Comedy*, composed in the late thirteenth century, was mainly inspired by *The Aeneid*, with Virgil guiding the descent into Hell. In the nineteenth century, the title of the long poem ('Comedy of Death') by the symbolist poet Théophile Gautier suggested that the text was a direct rewriting of Dante's text. Certain books leave their mark on an entire culture.

¹ Son of Thetis (sea goddess) and of the mortal Peleus. To make Achilles immortal, she dipped him into the waters of the Styx holding him by his heel, which remained the only vulnerable spot of his body, the very place where the arrow shot by Paris hit him. Though the son of a mortal, Hector can still be made into a hero for his personal qualities (courage, loyalty, faithfulness...)

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- What is the significance of poetry in the Arab cultural tradition?
- What, historically, are the earliest themes of Arab poetry?
- What vision of the world does pre-Islamic poetry traditionally convey?
- In what way did the introduction of the Quran offer advantages and disadvantages for poetry?
- What model is proposed by Ibn Qutaiba for the writing of poetry?
- What innovations does Abu Nuwas introduce into poetry?
- What innovations does Ibn al-Mu'tazz introduce into poetry?
- What are the criteria of poetry as a genuine art in the Arab world?
- Why should an understanding of Arab philosophy go beyond the limits of critical discourse?
- What is the function of poetry for Islamic philosophers?

Entering into dialogue with the text

- Should poetry be useful?
- What is the function of the poetic art?
- How does one judge the value of a poem?
- Is poetry concerned with what is good?
- Is poetry concerned with truth?
- What is the relationship between philosophy and poetry?
- What do you think can be criticized in the Islamic conception of poetry?

Suggested teaching method: validation criteria

A question is chosen.

Each participant replies individually in writing to the question chosen.

The name of a person is drawn by lot and the moderator writes his or her answer on the board. The group considers whether the answer is acceptable, identifying the criteria used, which are written one by one on the board.

As a starting point, we propose the following criteria: in order to be accepted, an answer must be clear, relevant, coherent, reasoned, sufficient.

If any one of these criteria is not met, the answer should be rejected.

The group then considers a second answer, to which the same criteria are applied.

It is nevertheless suggested that the criterion of difference should be added: the second answer should be substantially different from the first, otherwise it serves no purpose.

The same process begins again for a third answer. If the moderator considers that there are a sufficient number of answers, the group analyses the results, and in particular, where applicable, the relationship between the various answers.

Once the analysis has been completed, another question is taken up and the process starts up again. The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Case studies

- Ask the participants to close their eyes and think of Arab- Muslim art.
- Ask the participants either to explain the image they have of Arab-Muslim art or to make a drawing for the purpose.
- Ask the participants to read also the worksheet "Art in the Arab-Muslim civilization".
- Start the discussion on the various forms of art explained in the text and compare with the representations of the participants.
- As part of the study on the Arabic art of poetry, distribute the poem by Antar (525-615), explaining that it is a pre-Islamic poem:

Heavy his mail-coat, its sutures, lo, I divided them
piercing the joints of the champion; brave was the badge of him.
Quick-handed he with the arrows, cast in the winter-time,
raider of wine-sellers' sign-boards, blamed as a prodigal.
He, when he saw me down riding, making my point at him,
showed me his white teeth in terror, nay, but not smilingly.
All the day long did we joust it. Then were his finger tips
stained as though dipped in the íthlem,
dyed with the dragon's blood,
Till with a spear-thrust I pierced him, once and again with it,
last, with a blade of the Indies, fine steel its tempering,
Smote him, the hero of stature, tall as a tamarisk,
kinglike, in sandals of dun hide, noblest of all of them.

- Ask a participant to read out the poem by Abu Nuwas (747-815):

Get away from ruins and dunes
And care for the vineyard girl!
Care for she who,
Were I to ask for her hand,
Would bedeck herself with gold jewels.
She who was created
To strike down worry
She who is the enemy
Of money and fortune

- Ask the participants to compare the two poems and talk about the differences between them.
- Ask the participants to discuss developments and changes affecting poetry at the time when Islam was introduced as a religion.

THE ABBASIDS AND THE RENEWAL OF POETRY

We have already mentioned the influence of the Quranic text and of the religious culture it established on the first critical texts in poetry. Such influence can be clearly felt on a different level, that of the new vision of the world conveyed in the third monotheistic religion. The conception of a world in which man is the plaything of a blind force which can arbitrarily turn his joys into tragedies and shake his confidence in the present and the future gives way to a vision of the world in which man is supported by transcendence and in which the notion of hope plays an essential role in the elaboration of individual and collective destiny. A joyful, triumphant, confident ego thirsting after existential plenitude emerge between the lines of new texts by such writers as Bashshar ibn Burd, Al-Husayn ibn al-Dahhak, Muslim ibn al-Walid, Abu Nuwas, Abu l-Atahiya, al-Abbas ibn al-Ahnaf, Ibn al-Mutazz, Abu Tammam, al-Buhturi, Ibn al-Rumi and Mutanabbi, to name but a few of the great names of the eighth to ninth centuries. In spite of a return to Bedouin-inspired poetry in Mutanabbi's works, major changes can be noticed in all these great writers, which form the broad outlines of what came to be known as *al-shir al-muhadath*, the new poetry.

Abu Nuwas, one of the figureheads of this modernization of poetry, offers a concentrate of the changes brought about by the accession of the Abbasids to power in the middle of the eighth century. By violently attacking the core of the classic ode represented by the love prologue in which the man is invited to contemplate the ruins, Abu Nuwas sought to show that the model was obsolete; it embodies a bygone world, outmoded ethics and aesthetics. Why then carry on considering these developments as the criterion of excellence in poetry? Rebellious and provocative in poetry as well as in religion, he mocked the attitude of poets who still followed this tradition out of commitment to the past. He came to regard this poetic tradition as an embodiment of political authority, the official culture against which one must fight, both in the name of the poet's freedom and of independence of mind:

*Get away from ruins and dunes
And care for the vineyard girl!
Care for she who,
Were I to ask for her hand,
Would bedeck herself with gold jewels.
She who was created
To strike down worry
She who is the enemy
Of money and fortune.*⁶

The art of poetry was at the time the ground of a real quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, and Abu Nuwas, whom most critics of the time considered as the founder of this new poetry in the same way as Imri' al-Qays was the founder of Arabic poetry in general, best exemplifies this.⁷ For beyond the poetic disagreements, major changes took place, which favoured the emergence of something new.⁸ It can be seen first at the level of poetic sensitivity: enamoured of refinement, a stylish man and an aesthete, the 'painter of Abbasid modern life' aims at embodying an ideal opposed to that of the Bedouins. Admittedly, the latter are respected on account of their linguistic superiority and Abu Nuwas pays them a tribute in cynegetic poems (*tardiyyat*) demanding a precise knowledge of the lexicon relating to the desert and wild animals. But the Bedouin way of life is no longer to the taste of the Abbasid poet: better to have a break in the taverns of the town than to stop at the empty campsites the erstwhile poet addressed in vain as he knew he could get no answer, Abu Nuwas says ironically; the ideal of love has changed now that, with the intermixing of populations, the slave-singer or the young ephebe skilled in a new use of pleasures are the ones who embody the ideal of beauty.

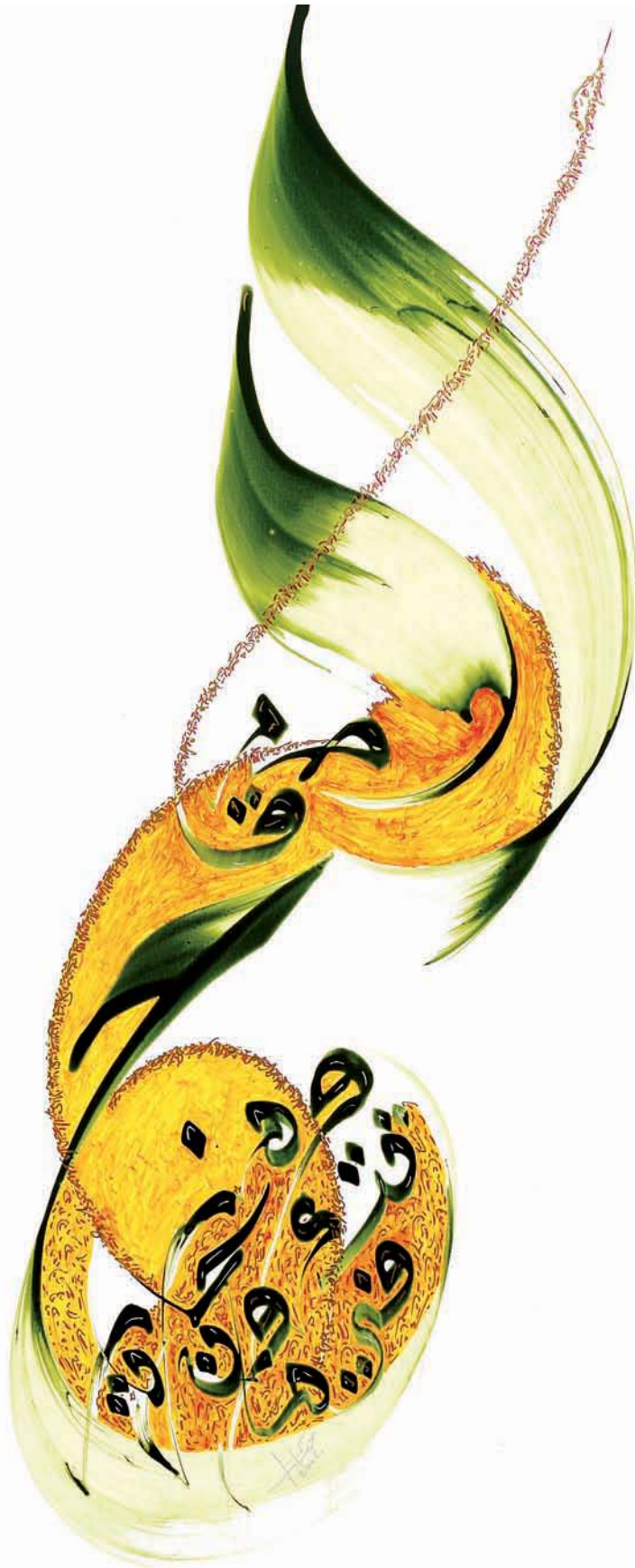


The most important of these changes are to do with poetry itself. Prepared by generations of Umayyad poets whose theme centred on love poetry (Umar ibn Abi Rabi'a and Majnun), modernist poetry of the Abbasid period sped up the transition from the great classic ode characterized by the plurality of themes to poems characterized by thematic unity. Hence the presence of a kind of specialization on the part of the poets whose writings focus on the themes of asceticism and the evocation of death (Abu l-Atahiya and *zuhdiyya*), or the praise of wine (*al-khamriyya*), with al-Husayn ibn al-Dahhak, Muslim ibn al-Walid and Abu Nuwas. Following on from poems on love and pleasure, the Orient and Andalusia witness the emergence of floral poems (*nawriyya*) or the description of gardens (*rawdiiyat*), which are reminiscent of the description of *locus amoenus* in Latin literature.

Literary studies which mention these changes only bring up the flexibility of the language, its fluidity, the birth of brief forms such as quatrains, the simplification of poetic rhythm or the will to have a proper sound universe and be above canonical metre as embodied in Abu l-Atahiya's famous remark: 'I am taller than a metre!' Although such details are correct, they remain general and do not reflect the deep changes noted in particular by Ibn al-Mutazz in the ninth century. In this respect, he was the man who best kept abreast of the birth and the evolution of modern poetry, by writing a book in which, despite its title for which he uses the term denoting the genre of *tabaqat* (classes) he shows an interest only in the new poets and, unlike the other authors of the *tabaqat*, has no recourse to criteria of

classification.⁹ Concurrently, Ibn al-Mutazz sought to explain the nature of the changes which affected the art of poetry with regard to images. His work thus focuses on the resources of poetic creation and on the means to invent something new. He wrote a book entitled *al-Badi* in which he shows that the poetry of modern poets obeys an essential requirement, namely the intensification of the use of tropes and the rhythmic resources of the language.¹⁰ Similes, metaphors or metonymies were certain present in Ancient poetry, but Ibn al-Mutazz explains that figuration becomes the central element of the poetry of the modern poets. The notion of *Al-Badi*, which may be translated as 'the excellent', also refers to rhetorical figures and the aim of the author is indeed to show that new poetry brings poetic creation to a higher level of abstraction, while cramming the language with sound patterns which come as a supplement to the classic resources generated by metre and rhyme. Parallelism in rhythm and syntax, alliterations, oppositions, repetitions, examples of eurhythmy, are the tools the new poet needs to summon up in order to fulfil the new criteria of excellence. Ibn al-Mutazz's reflection has its starting point in the works of Abu Tammam and other innovative poets disowned by literary criticism because they had ventured off the beaten track. But Ibn al-Mutazz, extremely cautious and conversant with the conservative circles of linguists and theologians, presented this new rhetoric as a mere extension of something old. Considering it as belonging to the holy texts, and claiming that it was a mere intensification of a long-standing usage, Ibn al-Mutazz managed to account for the innovation in poetry without stirring up controversy or dispute among erudite circles.





FROM POETICS TO POETHICS

The example of Ibn al-Mutazz shows that the initiative of Ibn Qutayba and of many other poetry critics went very much against the trend of concrete evolutions in this major art.¹¹ How indeed can we explain the discrepancy between the concrete evolution of poetry and the elaboration of a theoretical discourse about his art? Why do the works of Ibn Qutayba in the *Book on Poetry and Poets*, of Qudama in *Criticism of Poetry*, or of al-Amidi standing up for al-Buhturi against Abu Tammam converge towards the same aesthetics in spite of the fact that they are motivated by different intentions and proceed from different methods? How could the great theorists of the art of poetry in the classical age remain indifferent to the art of Abu Tammam, whose poetic innovations are often likened to those of Mallarmé, or to the universe of Abu Nuwas, which calls to mind that of Baudelaire? In truth, the answer lies in the fact that, like Boileau, they have committed themselves to the definition of poetry *qua art*. All these authors insist first of all on the fact that

poetry is a *sinaa*, that is, a craft, an art that requires the knowledge of a certain number of rules. The latter are at once linguistic, semantic, prosodic and rhetorical. Mastery of these tools leads us to liken the poet and the weaver or the stonemason. Like these craftsmen, the poet, while working, has at the back of his mind the mould in which he needs to cast his discourse, the way the words are linked to form a line and the lines to form a poem, just as stones are joined together to make a wall. Those strict rules of composition, disposition and organization are what sets poetry apart from prose. It is not merely *shir*, a word which relates to perception and sensitivity, it is also *nazm*, a composition which is reminiscent of a jeweler stringing beads to make a beautiful necklace. In this respect, the Arab conception of poetry resembles the definitions given by the Latins or the Greeks – the former relate it to *ars*, that is, a known, codified know-how which can be mastered; for the latter it is *poesis* (a production, a fabrication). The correspondence of form and meaning, saying and

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



Reflecting on the text

- > *What is the place of poetry among the Arabs?*
- > *What is the predominant theme in pre-Islamic poetry?*
- > *What is the relationship between Islam and poetry?*
- > *Compare the “quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns” in Arabic and French literature.*
- > *Study the links between poetry and politics.*
- > *Study the development of poetry in the urban environment and the formalist critics.*
- > *What is the relationship between the prince and the poet? And between philosophers and poets?*
- > *Note the modern poetic renewal: its causes and its consequences.*

the way to conceive it is central to the aesthetics that we called 'classic'.¹² With Ibn Tabataba, as with Ibn Qutayba, the social and political usefulness of poetry as embodied by eulogy is essential to the conception of an art which seems to exist for this sole purpose.¹³ Arab theorists of the status and the function of poetry agree with the universal taste characteristic of classicism: moral utility, submission to the rule, the pursuit of verisimilitude, a taste for order, the reign of reason, praise for the Ancients who must be copied if one wants to excel, balance between the faculties that enable creation. The word 'classic' describes both the theoretical effort involved in defining the poet's work and poetic production. But this classicism implemented by high ranking officials who served as secretaries, judges or theologians could not exist without an abundant production of poetic works which do not fit into these canons. So these canons are drawn up in order to supervise poetic work, accompany it, give it its place within the comprehensive system of knowledge. 'The essence of classicism', Paul Valery writes, "is to come after. Order supposes a certain disorder which it overcomes. Composition, which is artifice, follows on after some original chaos of intuitions and natural developments. Purity is the result of infinite operations on language, and attention to form is nothing but the thoughtful reorganization of means of expression. What is classic therefore implies voluntary, well-thought out acts which modify 'natural' production in conformance with a clear and rational conception of man and art."¹⁴

Valery's definition of the classic is perfect for the authors of the ninth and tenth centuries who formulated the great conceptions of poetry. But as we already noted about Ibn al-Mutazz, who was one of the representatives of that new poetry, these attempts at codification by no means exhaust the complexities of the poetic currents which emerged at the time. In our opinion, the sole merit of this novelty, which Ibn Qutayba tried to check by inviting young poets to imitate the Ancients and by setting up the model they ought to follow, lies in its normative character, which recalls the rules drawn up by jurists often out of touch with everyday practices. That is why we consider that the word 'muhdath' must be taken seriously. Unlike certain studies of classic poetry, we think that the poetry called *al-shir al-muhdath* cannot be reduced to a question of chronology according to which the poet is called *muhdath* simply because he comes after those who preceded him.¹⁵ This chronological interpretation of the poetic phenomenon was criticized in the ninth century by Ibn Rashi al-Qayrawani, in a book on the art of poetry entitled *al-Umda*. He discards the chronological explanation of the word, which he thinks does not account for the nature of poetry, and writes that 'all ancient poets, by comparison with those who preceded them, are new'.¹⁶ The meaning of the word is thus far from exhausting the nature of *ihdath* in poetry. This purely historical meaning is yet again the work of lexicographers (*al-lughawiyyun*) and transmitters (*al-ruwat*) of poetry who usually manifested hostility towards new poetry. Al-Qadi al-Jurjani, one of the critics who focused his attention on the works of al-Mutanabbi, contributed to the reappraisal of critical

discourse in the tenth century. Al-Jurjani was one of the first authors, along with Ibn al-Mutazz, to respond to the real change in poetic writing, which he analyses at length, studying the notions that are dear to the poets themselves: delicacy (*riqqa*), subtlety (*lutf*) and refinement (*tazarruf*). These notions indeed are what characterises the new style, closely related to urban civilization.¹⁷ From this perspective, a poetry which seeks to imitate the Ancients can only be highly affected (*takalluf*). Al-Jurjani also underscores the poetic failings of the Ancients as well as the Moderns, and endeavours to show that poetry must vary according to the time when it is produced. In his opinion, *qasida*, as J. -E. Bencheikh remarks, is no longer 'the one and only reference writing, ... and full pages of the production, which had been deliberately discarded by philologists in search of linguistic models, are being reintroduced in the analysis.'¹⁸

As we can see, critical discourse eventually managed to show the true facets of the new poetry and to take an interest in what distinguishes it from ancient forms. This proves that in order to know the art of ancient poetry, one cannot rely only on critical discourses that prevailed at the time. For most of them were motivated by a codifying logic as regards poetry, and if one sticks to their criteria, Khalid al-katib, one of the greatest love poets representative of this aesthetics of refinement in the ninth century, cannot be considered as a poet: an Abbasid prince once asked him why he did not compose panegyrics or invectives, two genres which critics considered to be the symbol of poetic excellence. He replied that he only composed poetry expressing his personal concerns.¹⁹ This aspect, poetry as expressing the universe of the poet, his ego, his inner self, was not always highlighted by critical discourses which considered poetry to be pure *technè* with moral, political or linguistic purposes. By taking into account what the poets themselves say of their poetry, and such comprehensive literary surveys as al-Isfahani's *Book of Songs*, which insists on the intimate relation between poetry and music, one might discover other facets of this art, so far overlooked by the principally scientific and formalistic approaches of literary critics.

The philosophers' approach might in this respect contribute to introducing important nuances in the more or less monolithic block of literary criticism. Heirs to Aristotle's *Organon*, authors like Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes took an interest in the art of poetry as part of a logical corpus at the top of which stands scientific demonstration. On the scale of the degrees of certainty provided by the art of logic, poetry certainly occupies the lowest position. However, it is invested with an important mission, which other discourses, except for rhetoric, cannot fulfill, and which consists in educating the masses. The fact that poetry first appeals to the senses and exercises the imagination of the poet as well as that of the listener or reader led philosophers to consider poetry as one of the means to shape the collective and individual *ethos*. In this respect, every poetics is a 'poethics', because it fits into a theory of representation and assent, just as it is bound to the civil

and moral functions which it can take on within the city. In spite of this vision of poetry, it benefited, in the works of philosophers, from a focus on the phenomenon of the imagination and the process of image production. Indeed, insofar as poetic discourse is produced by the imaginative faculty, which lies between the sensitive faculties and the rational faculty, poetry as the virtue of being able to address people with images while showing them the world as perceived by the senses. This led philosophers, in the wake of Aristotle, to reflect on the representation of reality (*mimesis*) and the process of imitation (*muhakat*). The specificity of their approach led the Arab philosophers to settle the fierce dispute among theologians about truth and lies in poetry. All poetry is untruthful, its beauty lies in the nature of the figurative process the poet is capable of initiating. The truth of the poem no longer consist in the poem corresponding to the reality it represents, but in the universe full of images that it can create. Beyond its educational and moral functions, poetry can have immanent purposes like surprise (*taajjub*), strangeness (*istighrab*) or just pleasure (*ladhdha*).²⁰

At the end of the classical age of Islam, in spite of those works focusing on the nature of the creative process in poetry, formal analyses were dominant in the definition of poetry. Ibn Khaldun can certainly attest to this when he reminds us of the importance of rules in this kind of work, while at the same time he insists on the poetic models to be followed in order to be acknowledged by poetry critics.²¹ The picture Ibn Khaldun drew of poetry as a strictly codified art constrained by rules was to remain in people's minds until Islam's past was discovered in the nineteenth century, and it was an attempt to counter the formalism, the metric and prosodic rules, that the movement for poetic renewal began. This resulted, in the mid twentieth century, in a liberation from the classical verse form and a transition from what the Ancients called *amud al-shir* (the canon of poetry) to other forms that were less constraining and more appropriate to the new ways of expressing one's thoughts. This liberation, often based on a discourse imbued with revolutionary rhetoric, led to the integration of Western innovations into Arabic poetry, with the introduction of free verse, prose poems and *shir al-tafila*, a formal compromise between ancient and modern poetry.

¹ Ibn Khaldun, 2002, *Muqaddima*, VI, chap. LVIII, *Le livre des Exemples*, trans. by A. Cheddadi, Paris, Gallimard, p. 1150.

² Ibn Qutayba, 1966, *Al-Shir wa l-shuara*, Cairo, Dar al-maarif bi-misr, p. 128.

³ S. Al-Kindy, 1998, *Le voyageur sans Orient*, Paris, Sindbad, Actes Sud, p. 45.

⁴ See in particular verses XXVI, 224-227, in which a criticism of poets is clearly expressed.

⁵ It is the case in two books written just before Ibn Qutaybas: al-Asmais *Fuhalat al-shuara* and Ibn Sallam al-Jumahi's *Tabaqat fuhul al-shuara*.

⁶ Abu Nuwas, 2002, *Poèmes bachiques et libertins*, trans. by O. Merzoug, Paris, Editions Verticales/Le Seuil, p. 101.

⁷ See Ibn Manzur, 1992, *Akhbar Abi Nuwas*, Beirut, Dar al-kutub al-ilmiyya, pp. 38-39.

⁸ See T. Hussein, 1993, *Hadith al-arbia*, Cairo, Dar al-al-maarif, book 2.

⁹ See Ibn al-Mutazz, *Tabaqat al-shuara*, Cairo, Dar al-maarif bi-misr, 1976.

¹⁰ Ibn al-Mutazz, *Kitab al-badi*, Beirut, Dar al-masira, 1982, p. 1.

¹¹ Yet, it did not prevent poets of that generation from composing poems in a classic vein, notably in the form of eulogies. This may be accounted for by the condition of poets and their relation to patrons. See the substantial work of M. Mannai, 1998, *Al-Shir wa l-mal*, Tunis, Editions de la Faculté des Lettres de la Mannouba.

¹² Ibn Tabataba al-Alawi, 1982, *Iyar al-shir [The Standard of Poetry]*, Beirut, Dar al-kutub al-ilmiyya, p. 125.

¹³ Id. pp. 18-19.

¹⁴ P. Valéry, 1930, *Situation de Baudelaire, Variété II*, Paris, Idées/Gallimard, pp. 239-240. Valery's emphasis.

¹⁵ See J-E. Bencheikh, 1989, *Poétique arabe*, Paris, Gallimard, p. XVIII, in which the author considers that the word '*muhdath*' must be understood with

the sole meaning of a chronological 'coming after'.

¹⁶ Ibn Rashiq al-Qayrawani, 1981, *Al-Umda*, Beirut, Dar al-jil, book 1, p. 90.

¹⁷ Al-Jurjani, 1912, *Al-Wasata bayna l-Mutanabbi wa khusumih*, Sidon, Matbaat al-irfan, p. 22.

¹⁸ J-E. Bencheikh, 1989, op. cit., p. XXV.

¹⁹ Al-Isfahani, 1983, *Kitab al-Aghani*, book 20, Tunis, al-Dar al-tunisiyya li l-nashr, p. 238.

²⁰ See U. Abd al-Aziz, 1984, *Nazariyyat al-shir inda l-falasifa al-muslimin*, Cairo, al-Haya I-misriyya I-amma li l-kitab, pp. 136-145.

²¹ Ibn Khaldun, 2002, op. cit., pp. 1128-1139.



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THE BODY AND THE SPIRIT IN ARABIC PHILOSOPHY

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDICINE IN THE CLASSICAL AGE OF ISLAM ON THE ONE HAND, AND THE SURVIVAL OF ANCIENT ARABIC, PERSIAN AND GRECO-ROMAN TRADITIONS IN THE EAST IN MEDIEVAL TIMES ON THE OTHER, HAS THROWN A PARTICULAR LIGHT ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BODY AND THE SPIRIT, WHICH IS QUITE DISTINCT FROM THE RELATIONSHIP THAT HAS PREVAILED IN CHRISTIANITY. INDEED, THE ABSENCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN HAS LED TO THE PRESERVATION OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS ON THE BATTLE OF THE PASSIONS AND TO THE ABANDONING OF THE MONASTICISM AND CELIBACY CHARACTERISTIC OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY. THE SPECIFICITY OF ISLAMIC SPIRITUAL LITERATURE LIES IN ITS EFFORT TO MAINTAIN A BALANCE BETWEEN BODY AND SPIRIT, IN WHICH THE SATISFACTION OF BODILY DESIRES MAY BE THE CONDITION OF OR THE WAY TO SPIRITUALITY. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE HUMAN BODY IN THE CIVILIZATION OF CLASSICAL ISLAM LED TO A REAL REFLECTION ON THE LINK BETWEEN POLITICS AND MEDICINE. AL-FARABI ESTABLISHED A STRONG RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PARADIGM OF THE BODY AND THE REPRESENTATION OF IDEAL POLITICS. TAKING UP HIPPOCRATES' REPRESENTATION OF HEALTH AS A BALANCE OF THE FOUR HUMOURS AND HIS REPRESENTATION OF SICKNESS AS A DISRUPTION OF THE HUMORAL BALANCE, HE TRANSPOSED THE MODEL OF THE BODY TO THE MANAGEMENT OF THE CITY WHICH MAY BE SEEN AS SOUND OR SICK.

DEFINITIONS

Just as there are (at least) two terms in English to refer to what is opposed to the body, namely 'the spirit' and 'the soul', there are two terms in Arabic, *ruh* and *nafs*. The first one derives from a root (RWH) which relates to the idea of breath, of rest, something airy and roomy. While the word *ruh* refers to the breath of life, to the spirit which animates man, the adjective *ruhani* refers to all that is spiritual and immaterial. Thus, in his major work, *The Rule of the Solitary*, Ibn Baja (ca. 1080-1138; known as Avempace in Europe) used the expression *suwar ruhaniyya* to designate the spiritual forms emanating from the faculties of the soul, like the sensible forms or the intelligible forms. He specified that although the two terms are synonymous, the word *ruh* refers specifically to all that serves as a driving force, a mover, capable of moving, like those immobile substances which move other substances which would apparently necessarily be bodies, since 'all bodies are

mobile".¹ But the problem pops up again because Arab philosophers present analyses which do not always equate the word *ruh* with all that is immaterial. The problem arises particularly when one needs to distinguish the word *ruh* from the word *nafs*, because in this case *nafs* renders this immateriality far better, while *ruh* is used to refer to the spirit which animates the body and is, according to certain authors, in particular those who are influenced by anatomy and medical treatises, a subtle body inhabiting the human body.

The word *nafs*, which comes from the root NFS also relates to the notion of breathing, of the circulation of air in the arteries, but it is distinct from the word *ruh* because it refers to the self, the same, the person; it does not merely hark back to the soul as a set of faculties or as a principle of life, but, beyond the biological and spiritual meaning, opens up onto the identity

of the person, his/her ipseity, his/her 'sameness'. The most successful attempt to distinguish the two terms, which are often used interchangeably, was that of the ninth century philosopher Qusta ibn Luga (d. 912) in an epistle entitled 'On the Difference between the Spirit and the Soul'. In his conclusion, he asserted that the *ruh* is a body contained within the human body and disappears on the death of the individual, while the *nafs*, which is not a corporeal substance, is capable of actions which may stop within the body (as is the case in sleep) without entailing its disappearance. Thus, the soul (*nafs*) is in some respect independent of the body and it uses the spirit that animates the human body in order to make the body move. If the animal spirit may be considered as a mover or a cause of movement, this can only be the case, according to Qusta ibn Luga, through the soul. His account is quite faithful to the physiological descriptions in favour with the Arab physicians of the middle ages and stipulates that the actions of the soul depend upon the subtle body called *ruh*, inhabiting the heart and the brain. The least *subtle* actions, those concerning life, the pulse and breathing, are located in the heart, where a body closely resembling air as regards its tenuous, delicate nature, can be found; the actions of the mental faculties (sensation, imagination, thought, reflection) are distributed in the cranial cavity, from the front to the back.²

As far as the body is concerned, there are four ways of designating it: *jirm*, *jism*, *jasad* and *badan*. The root of the first is JRM and relates to the idea of cutting: the word thus describes the body in its finite and limited dimensions. Seldom used to refer to the human body, it is frequently used to speak of celestial bodies (*al-ajram*

al-samawiyya), especially in the plural. The reason why this term is used for celestial bodies is that the word *jirm* designates the fixed dimensions of a thing which can no longer increase or diminish in size. Their celestial bodies have thus been definitively fixed ever since their formation. The second word, *jism*, comes from the root JSM, which means that a thing is agglomerated into a unity. Hence the use of the word *jasim* to refer to a corpulent man and *jasama* to speak of corpulence. *Jasad*, in turn, relates to the same meaning but specifies it by referring to the blood that circulates within the unified totality of the body, further characterized by its density (*kathafa*). Thus, while the word *jism* can be used for a fabricated object (a chair, a bed), the word *jasad* only applies to a being with a body in which blood circulates (animals, human beings). Finally, the word *badan* further specifies the meaning of *jasad* inasmuch as it does not refer to the whole body, limbs included, but rather to the trunk alone. Such rich polysemy can be found in the texts of Arab philosophers who use either one of these terms according to the topic tackled or the point made: Averroès for instance more often than not uses the word *jism* in his *De anima*, as the word is common to all bodies, while Farabi prefers to use the word *badan*, as can be seen in his *Political Aphorisms* or his *Ideas of the Citizens in the Virtuous City*. Ibn al-Ibri's *Treatise on the Soul* expresses this richness best, since the author uses all three words (*jism*, *jasad* and *badan*), according to the object of his demonstration. Thus, when he establishes/proves the non-corporeity of the soul, he says that it is not a *jism*; whereas, when he speaks of the union or the separation of the soul and the body, he uses the other two words because it is customary to use them as t specifically applying to human beings or animals.

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MEDICINE FOR THE BODY, MEDICINE FOR THE SPIRIT

Ethics is probably one of the classic domains in which the links between body and spirit are dynamically displayed. The development of medicine in the classical age of Islam on the one hand, and the survival of ancient Arabic, Persian and Greco-Roman traditions in the East in medieval times on the other, has thrown a particular light on the relationship between the body and the spirit, which is quite distinct from the relationship that has prevailed in Christianity. Indeed, the absence of the doctrine of original sin has led to the preservation of the philosophical and religious teachings on the battle of the passions and to the abandoning of the monasticism and celibacy characteristic of Christian spirituality.³ The specificity of Islamic spiritual literature lies in its effort to maintain a balance between body and spirit, in which the satisfaction of bodily desires may be the condition of or the way to spirituality. Self-knowledge, control over one's inclinations, and man's spiritual development do not imply a negation of the body or a refusal to acknowledge its needs. Rather, freeing one's corporeal energy gives access to the regions of the spirit. In other words, it is by caring about the body so that it is no longer a cause of worry for the subject that one may concentrate on spiritual matters and a posteriori limit the body to an instrumental function, that of helping the soul to perfect itself. The interdependence of the bodily and spiritual development of man explains why medical vocabulary is used in both cases and medicine applies to the body and the spirit alike. It is the case in such works as Razi's *Spiritual medicine (Al-tibb al-ruhani)* or Miskawyah's *Reform of ethics*, which exploit the paradigm of medicine for the treatment of the body and the spirit alike. Other philosophers, like Averroes, who was also a physician, show no reluctance in having recourse to the art of medicine to describe the psychological health of the person, it being the equivalent of bodily health. According to Averroes, it is political and religious law which assumes the task of defining this moral health just as doctors intervene on the body.⁴ This influence of the medical paradigm on the way individual character traits are dealt with can clearly be seen in the common vocabulary used to describe this activity which reforms, sets right, corrects or applies treatment to the body and the spirit alike. Two fundamental notions, *siyasa* and *tadbir*, are indeed used in order to refer to this operation of training and exercising and coaching which the individual must carry out on his

own body and spirit in order to be morally accomplished. One may thus speak of a policy of self-management, of self-government, (*siyasa al-nafs, tadbir al-nafs*) just as one speaks of the management, training, and government of the body or the care given to it (*tadbir al-jasad, siyasa al-jasad*). Given its importance in the political domain, this literature was greatly exploited by government theorists, in particular in the *Mirrors for princes'* genre, in which food, drink, exercise and bodily care are just as important as self-control, justice or attaining an ideal of excellence in the government of subjects. The treatise written by Al-Maghribi, an Egyptian intellectual who died in the early eleventh century, declares the government of the body to be the top priority of the person who governs, and the basis of all other spheres of government (the government of one's soul, the government of one's relatives, the government of one's subjects). Al-Maghribi explains how disastrous neglecting body exercise and overindulging in the soft living of a prince may be for the government of the subjects and how it may result in the king being ill-disposed, thus making him unfair or powerless.⁵

In his *Epistle on Ethics*, Avicenna, following Aristotle, specifies that it is the middle way which guarantees that actions will be praiseworthy (*al-khuluq al-mahmud*).⁶ Insofar as he declares that all character traits, be they beautiful or ugly, are acquired, Avicenna considers that the soul is capable of voluntarily getting rid of or acquiring any trait. "*When actions appropriate to the middle way are acquired, they should be preserved; if they are not acquired, they should be, and this is achieved when food diet, fatigue, rest, and all sorts of things which physicians are aware of are balanced.*"⁷

The paradigmatic role of the body is confirmed by the nature of the method that must be used in order to attain the middle way, which is none other than the method recommended by ancient medicine, that is to say treating symptoms by their opposites. Thus, when the physician notes that the body tends to be cold, he needs to warm it up, and vice versa. As regards the characteristics of the soul, one must avoid excess and concentrate on the repetition of the action which one wants to acquire and transform into a habitus (*ada*).⁸ The individual sets up within himself/herself a dynamic



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Other times, other places

The body in Christianity and other religions

Christianity like all other religions is the bearer of traditions that may, of course, evolve and adapt to new living conditions. These traditions also influence the way the human body, which is subject to rules, customs and taboos, is assessed.

In Christianity (and Judaism) the body is a tool and a victim of original sin: 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground' and 'in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children'...

The body is an earthly frame taken by Christ to share human weaknesses. The body is mortal, like the earthly condition, it ages and eventually disappears ('for dust thou art...'). The body is subject to temptations ('the flesh is weak'), it cannot be enhanced or glorified. On the other hand, the immortal soul is the ultimate goal of Christianity, it must be saved by faith in God.

The concept of original sin justifies all sorts of penance, fasting and sometimes mortification (in processions of flagellants as in Mexico...). Some monastic orders impose strict discipline on their members to get closer to God.

There are elements of comparison in Hinduism where the body is subjected to external constraint must be controlled by exercise and doing without. Renouncing his body, the Hindu model submits it to a strict ascetic lifestyle, he must lead a solitary life with no fire and no fixed abode, eat raw and wild food or beg for food...

For Buddhists, the body is inseparable from the spirit. After several years of an ascetic life, Buddha apparently understood that the body must not be mistreated, a healthy body goes with a healthy spirit, the two are closely linked. We must find a middle way, not too reasonable nor too unreasonable... and that is not always easy to find.¹

Few religions glorify the body; only the study of bygone civilizations can reveal evidence of this. In ancient Greece, while the word 'religion' had no real equivalent, the gods must be respected (if not necessarily believed in) because religion is civic and patriotic, to defend the gods is to defend the city. Religious festivals celebrate the body, physical beauty is not a matter of vanity. Athletic competitions are organized in large sanctuaries, the athletes compete naked.² The best known are the Olympics celebrated in the sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia. The race run in armour (ὀπλίτης δρόμος / *hoplitês dromos*) which closes the Olympics was the most spectacular. The competitors wore a shield on their left arm, a helmet and, until 450 BCE, greaves;³ they ran two stadia.⁴

Among the Aztecs, the body is valued for diametrically opposite reasons. The body contains the 'precious water' (blood) that is the food the god Huizilopochtli (sun god) needs to continue his course in the sky. Hence the widespread practice of human sacrifice that horrified the Spanish conquistadors and served as an alibi for the violent acts they then perpetrated on the defeated Indians. For the Aztecs the life of the body is unimportant, what counts is death. The victim's reward is to return to the god. In 1487, the inauguration of the great temple of Mexico apparently required the sacrifice of 15 to 20 thousand people. These were provided by the 'flower wars'⁵ but also by volunteers.

¹ 'Total abstinence is easier than perfect moderation' - St. Augustine

² Nudity is not shocking to the ancient Greeks. In the Judeo-Christian one does not show one's body in public, nudity is a veritable phobia undoubtedly stemming from the Bible: [before the Fall: 'And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed' (Gen. II, 25). After the original sin: 'And the eyes of them both were opened and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons' (Genesis III, 7). 'Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins and clothed them' (Genesis III, 21)].

³ The helmet, shield and greaves thus protected the hoplite (Greek soldier) completely. This athletic event glorified the citizen soldier.

⁴ A stadium is the equivalent of 192 meters.

⁵ Wars destined to take prisoners for sacrifice.

activity that consists in balancing the soul between the positive and negative poles so that it may always be in the middle. Other authors strongly influenced by stoicism, like Ibn al-Muqaffa, encourage the practice of self-examination as broadly outlined in the following remark of Seneca's: "[The soul] should be summoned everyday to give an account of itself. Sextius had this habit, and when the day was over and he had retired to his nightly rest, he would put these questions to his soul: 'What bad habit have you cured today? What fault have you resisted? In what respect are you better?'"⁹

In the same way, Ibn al-Muqaffa says that 'The sensible man must quarrel with his soul, summon it, judge it, reward it and chastise it in an exemplary manner'.¹⁰ Ibn al-Muqaffa's words¹¹ also echo the Pythagorean lines known as the Golden verses which were translated into Arabic in medieval times as *Pythagoras' Golden Testament*: "Never suffer sleep to close thy eyelids, after thy going to bed, Till thou hast examined by thy reason all thy actions of the day. Wherein have I done amiss? What have I done? What have I omitted that I ought to have done? If in this examination thou find that thou hast done amiss, reprimand thyself severely for it; And if thou hast done any good, rejoice".

According to Avicenna, this regulating activity on the ethical plane brings the soul moments of bliss which are distinct from those it attains thanks to the representation of intelligible forms. These moments of bliss result from the body's participating in the activity (*musharaka*), whereas intellectual activity can do without this participation. However, the factor that brings about these moments of bliss is no other than the rational soul which establishes with the body power relations based on domination. This situation of domination (*hay a isti la iyya*) enables the soul to compel the body to act along the middle way. In conclusion, Avicenna declares that "the soul enjoys two kinds of happiness: it gets the first kind, which has to do with its own excellence, by transforming itself into an intelligible universe; and it gets the second type, which concerns its link with the body, thanks to the situation of domination"¹² The objective is for the soul to achieve a state of separation from the body, a body armed with moderation as far as the desiring soul is concerned, and with courage as far as the irascible soul is concerned. "Human happiness, Avicenna adds, can only be perfect when the practical part of the soul is reformed, and this will come about when it acquires a habitus aiming at the middle way between two opposite character traits."¹³

FROM BODY POLITICS TO THE BODY POLITIC

The development of the knowledge of the human body in the civilization of classical Islam led to a real reflection on the link between politics and medicine, the part played by the ruler of the city being perceived as very similar to that of the physician concerned with the preservation of people's health. Arab philosophers, and most notably among them Farabi, established a strong relationship between the paradigm of the body and the representation of ideal politics. Taking up Hippocrates' representation of health as a balance of the four humours and his representation of sickness as a disruption of the humoral balance, Farabi transposes the model of the body to the management of the city which may be seen as sound or sick. Civil health is thus described as the result of 'the balance in the mores of its inhabitants; and its sickness as the disparity in their mores'.¹⁴ Farabi does not extend the comparison to the point where he establishes structural identity between the four humours and the constituent parts of the city. For example, nothing is said about its ethico-political feature, which might correspond to phlegm or black bile. The comparison is thus only valid insofar as it gives information about the job of the head of the city, which is in fact quite similar to that of a physician. Nicknamed the 'doctor of the city', the politician is responsible for attaining the balance between the constituent parts of the city and making sure that the balance is not upset within this body. Contrary to Machiavel, who uses the same comparison with humours to describe the civil war, likening the dissension within the body politic to humoral imbalance, Farabi uses the medical comparison in order to insist on the role of the politician. To be able to govern and claim to take on this responsibility, he says, one needs to assimilate a certain knowledge, integrate a practice, have a deep experience of human

matters. Not everybody can claim to lead people towards civil health, anymore than anybody can claim to cure a disease or preserve health. "Thus, the politician and the physician are alike in their actions and different as to the subject of their art, as the former is concerned with the soul while the latter is concerned with the body. And just as the soul is more eminent than the body, the politician is more eminent than the physician."¹⁵

He who claims to assume this function must thus learn how to know the civil body, how to find the means of inducing virtue in the citizens' souls, of elaborating an *ethos* which may predispose them to excellence, of combating vices and faults when they emerge within this body. However, the claim that the sovereign is the doctor of the city conceals a major difference between bodily and political medicine, because, thanks to his *technè*, which appears in the form of an architectonic art, the head of the city encroaches upon the domain of the physician. While the physician is interested in securing health in the bodies of the inhabitants of the city without bothering about their use for virtuous purposes, the head of the city knows about such things and is thus capable of determining what use should be made of these bodies, for example when it comes to starting a war. This emphasizes the architectonic nature of political science and the importance of the role of the prince, since, in order to govern properly, he needs to master the other two domains, that is, ethics, which is essential to politics, and noetics, which determines man's destiny and accounts for the finality of civil life.

This first use of the art of medicine justifies the presence, in Farabi's political treatises, of long chapters devoted to natural science, and more specifically to the

soul. But the use of medical art does not stop here: the representation of the city also resorts to the organicist model in order to describe the links in the chain of command within the government, from the top, the head of the city, down to the bottom categories of the social and political ladder. This analogy between the human body and the body politic is developed by Farabi in chapter seventeen of his *Ideas of the Citizens in the Virtuous City*. He insists on the hierarchy that prevails among the organs of those two bodies and distributes the relations of command and obedience according to their closeness to or distance from the central organ in the body (the heart) or in the city (the ruler). A second sort of logic, rooted in astronomy, supports this representation of power relations within the city and accounts for Farabi's insistence on the question of closeness to or distance from the head: the theory of emanation accounts for the process of dissemination of knowledge from the primary intelligence embodied by the head of the city, which Farabi compares to the First Cause of the universe, down to those who receive orders from their superiors but do not order subordinates. We

definitely have here then a political model that resorts to the organicist metaphor in order to underscore the hierarchical relations within the city. So, the function of representation fulfilled by the model of the body aims at accounting for the high or low status of the members according to their closeness to or remoteness from the chief-organ (*al-ra is al-udw*). It may be noted that the organicist metaphor is to be found throughout the works of many political philosophers such as Hobbes or Rousseau. Yet, although it is broadly preserved through the works of the Moderns, the latter, as can be seen with Rousseau, insist more on the necessity for '[a] self common to the whole, the reciprocal sensibility and internal correspondence of all the parts'.¹⁶ In Rousseau's text, the same metaphor describes the unity of the whole and the circulation among the parts, whereas Farabi and classical political philosophy in general use the comparison with the body to show the importance of the vertical architecture of the city in which communication between the head and the base can only take place thanks to a series of intermediaries, as is the case with the emanationist model.

THE FACULTIES OF THE SOUL: FROM BIOLOGY TO NOETICS

Deeply rooted in biology, which Arabs called *al-ilm al-tabii* (natural science¹⁷), the study of the human soul in the classical age of Islam remained true to the Aristotelian approach, which saw it as a form of the human body, or its entelechy, that is, its perfection.

This perspective accounts for the division of the soul into various parts or faculties: the nutritive soul, the sensitive soul, the imaginative soul and the intellectual soul. According to the beings the soul is related to, the subdivisions are arranged into a plant division (in charge of nutrition and growth), an animal division (to do with motor functions and sensation) and a human division (which completes the faculties it has in common with plants and animals with the distinctive faculty of thought). The originality of the contribution of Arab philosophy lies precisely in the study of man's intellectual faculty, both as related to the other parts of the soul and as regards its destiny. As Avempace explains in his *Book on the Soul*, the question whether all or part of the soul can separate from the body was raised by Aristotle just after he defined it as 'the first actuality of a natural body which has life potentially in it' (II, 1, 412, a25), thus expressing his desire to get to the heart of the matter, namely the nature of intellection, as developed in Book III¹⁸. But Aristotle only summarily dealt with the question, and we have to turn to the Ancient and medieval commentators to see the development of the tradition of a reflection focusing on the problem of the intellect. Avicenna is no doubt the thinker who best embodies the evolution in the way the question of the soul is dealt with, and his approach led both to a definition of the identity of man and to the nature of afterlife.

Intending to go beyond the idea that the soul only serves to animate the body and that it can separate from it to constitute itself as a distinct entity and heterogeneous substance, Avicenna, in *The Book of Healing*, presents the allegory of the suspended man. It consists in disregarding all the component parts of the body (limbs, organs, dimensions etc.) so that man may concentrate on his ipseity and affirm his existence regardless of any other parameter. According to this fiction, man will inevitably come to acknowledge his ego and constitute it without the body and the limbs, which have not been affirmed.¹⁹ This affirmation of the identity of the individual on the basis of the soul and not on the body is corroborated by considerations on the divine origin of this substance that binds itself to the body. Originating both in philosophy (neoplatonism) and religion (the holy texts of Islam), the question of the origin of the soul is presented allegorically in Avicenna's *Poem on the Soul*, in which the soul is compared to a dove that has descended from the heavens and is reluctant to remain in the 'heavy body', since it misses its celestial abode; but 'when the time comes for it to go back, it can forsake the body that it leaves behind/ And which does not follow it, bound to earth as it is. At last it can see the universe of the spirit – What the bodily eyes cannot see in their night.'²⁰ According to a superior intelligence included in the divine plans, the earthly sojourn is just an opportunity for the soul better to prepare for its return. And for this preparation it is necessary to acquire knowledge, an essential notion in Arab Muslim spirituality, which can be of a religious order (the knowledge of the holy texts), a mystical order (a knowledge reserved for initiates) or a philosophical one (the knowledge of nature, of man and living beings).

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- What stands in opposition to the “body” in the Arabic language?
- What is the difference between *ruh* and *nafs*?
- What is the difference between the different Arabic terms that designate the body?
- What differences do you see between Christianity and Islam in the relationship to the body?
- What relationship is established between medicine and ethics?
- What does the concept of the “middle way” represent?
- What is “self-examination”?
- What does Avicenna recommend in order to be happy?
- What is the relationship between psychological and political life?
- Can the soul be separated from the body for Muslim philosophers?
- How can the soul be purified?

Entering into dialogue with the text

- Do human beings have a soul?
- Is self-examination a necessary exercise?
- What is the relationship between mental health and physical health?
- Must one always seek the middle way?
- Is there a method for finding happiness?
- Can a politician be really compared with a doctor?
- What could be the meaning of a soul separated from the body?
- How can one purify one’s soul?
- How can one achieve beatitude?

Suggested teaching method:

Identifying problem areas through objections

One or more questions are chosen. Each participant replies individually in writing to the questions asked. Each participant reads his or her answers to the group. Each participant chooses a statement in which he or she sees a problem, then formulates one or more reasoned objections to be put to the author of the statement. In turn, each participant puts his or her objection to the person chosen, who responds verbally to the problem raised. The group decides collectively, after discussion, whether or not the answer is satisfactory. A fresh problem is raised. The same process resumes. The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Brainstorming

- Distribute to the participants sheets of A3 paper and felt-tip pens.
- After reading the worksheets “The body and the spirit in Arabic philosophy” and “Love and body techniques among refined people according to Al-Muwashsha”, briefly explain the themes and, in particular, the goal: the search for harmony.
- Half of the participants list all the necessary ingredients for good governance of the country (working individually).
- The other half of the participants lists all the necessary ingredients for the good health of a human being (working individually).
- Ask each subgroup to compare lists and to try to find a consensus and produce a joint list.
- The two subgroups present their lists in turn, on governance and health respectively.
- All of the participants engage in a discussion on the similarity of the two lists.
- Initiate a discussion after reading the worksheet “The body and the spirit in Arabic philosophy” with a view to seeking a “middle way” in comparing their lists.
- Each participant describes what he or she understands by a refined person.
- Discussion and conclusions on the links between ethics and aesthetics and concepts of refinement.

Insert written by Oscar Brenifier

Insert written by Jonathan Levy

Each sphere favours a specific method of access to knowledge: some thus support intuitive knowledge while others advocate discursiveness. But despite the occasionally violent disagreements among the different spheres, as al-Ghazali’s attack against philosophers in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* demonstrates, most scholars consider that knowledge is the supreme goal of man’s life. It must therefore be borne in mind that these precepts can be found throughout moral literature since philosophy was established in Islam with al-Kindi in the 9th century. In an epistle entitled *Discourse on the Soul*, al-Kindi uses the precepts inherited from

classical philosophers to underline the part played by knowledge as a means to polish the mirror of the soul and prepare man for salvation. The better polished by knowledge the soul is, the closer it is to God. It is then like a mirror reflecting the true nature of known forms and shows realities as they are. “When the intellectual soul is tarnished and impure, he writes, it is in a state of extreme ignorance and cannot reflect the forms of known objects. But if it is purified, expurgated and polished – the clearness of the soul results from the expurgation of its impurities and the acquisition of science – then the form of the knowledge of all objects

appears in the soul. The knowledge it has of objects can then be measured by the quality of its polish: the greater the polish, the greater the soul's knowledge and reflection of objects."²¹

This focusing of philosophical discourse on the superiority of the pleasures of the spirit over those of the body led certain authors to deny the possibility of an afterlife for the body, and consequently led to a strong reaction on the part of the defenders of the holy texts. Al-Ghazali thus blames the philosophers of Islam for not believing in the religious dogma according to which there is a physical and material happiness in afterlife. But as Ibn Rushd (Averroes) shows in his *Unveiling of the Programs of Proof*, the representation of the nature of afterlife must not provoke accusations of impiety since the religious texts allow for a certain semantic latitude so that they may be interpreted as representing different

forms of celestial happiness or unhappiness.²² However, the most important element in the discussion is the affirmation that intellectual beatitude is the supreme goal of man. Despite divergent opinions as to the assessment and conception of how one accedes to this spiritual beatitude, we can note that it has contributed to binding man's happiness to the care he may have for his intellectual development, which is itself bound to the care he may have for his body and passions, as seen previously. This requirement of knowledge of the self as a whole composed of a body and a soul disrupted the intellectual life of Latin scholars in the middle ages when Arabic philosophy was introduced in the 13th century. For this philosophy, which advocated the possibility and the necessity of attaining beatitude through the intellect in this life sowed the seeds of a new thinking centred on man, the final consequences of which are to be found in the philosophy of the Enlightenment.



Insert written by Khaled Roumo

Reflecting on the text

- > What is the nature of the relationship between the body and the spirit?
- > What do you think of the concept of the "happy medium" in connection with bodily and spiritual medicine?
- > What is the "examination of conscience"?
- > Evaluate happiness according to Avicenna (Ibn Sina).
- > Discover the parallel between the "bodily model" and the "governance of the city".
- > How can a politician be a doctor for the city?
- > Why should the prince's political science include both the ethical and the noetic (theory of knowledge)?
- > Compare al-Farabi's model of power with that of Rousseau.
- > Identify the originality of Arab philosophers' contribution to the study of the soul.
- > What about the origin and journey of the soul?
- > The three tiers of knowledge: religious, mystical and philosophical.
- > The "intellectual beatitude" of Arab philosophers and its influence on the Latin West.

¹ Ibn Baja, *Tadbir al-mutawahhid*, in M. Fakhri, Ibn Baja, 1991, *Opera metaphysica*, Beirut, Dar al-nahar, p. 49.

² Qusta ibn Luqa, *Risala fi l-farq bayna al-nafs wa l-ruh* [Epistle on the difference between the soul and the spirit], in L. Malouf, C. Edde, L. Cheikho, 1911, *Traité inédits d'anciens philosophes arabes musulmans et chrétiens*, Beirut, Imprimerie catholique, p. 132. This Epistle has also been attributed to Hunayn ibn Ishaq, but like L. Cheikho, we think that this is a mistake, and that the author is Qusta ibn Luqa.

³ See G. Anawati, 1970, La notion de "Péché originel" existe-telle dans l'Islam?, *Studia Islamica*, No. 31, pp. 29-40.

⁴ Ibn Rushd, 1998, *al-Kashf an manahij al-adilla fi aqid al-milla*, Beirut, Markaz dirasat al-wahda l-arabiyya, pp. 149-150.

⁵ Al Maghribi, *Risala fi l-siyasa* [Epistle on Politics], in I. Abbas, 1988, *Al-Wazir al-maghribi*, text and study by I. Abbas, Amman, Dar al-shruq li l-nashr wa l-tawzi, p. 203.

⁶ Ibn Sina, 1986, *Risala fi l-akhlaq*, in *Tis rasail fi l-hikma wa l-tabiyyat*, Beirut, Dar Qabis, p. 120.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁹ L. A. Seneca, 1928-1935, *On Anger*, *Moral Essays*, trans. by J. W. Basore, London, W. Heinemann, 3 Vol., Book III, 36.1.

¹⁰ Ibn al-Muqaffa, 1991, *al-Adab al-Saghir* [The Lesser Book of Conduct], Dar al-Ma'arif, Sousse, p. 15.

¹¹ See L. Malouf, C. Edde et L. Cheikho, 1911, *Traité inédits d'anciens philosophes arabes musulmans et chrétiens*, op. cit., pp. 59-63. The lines are from Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*, § 40.

¹² Ibn Sina, 1986, *Risala fi l-akhlaq*, op. cit., p. 122.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁴ Al-Farabi, 2003, *Fusul muntaza'a, Aphorismes choisis*, trans. and commented by S. Mestiri and G. Dye, Paris, Fayard, § 3, p. 42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁶ Rousseau, 1971, *Economie politique, Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, Vol 2, p. 278.

¹⁷ As with the Greeks, this branch of science dealt with the study of nature, *phusis*, as a whole.

¹⁸ Ibn Baja (Avenpace), *Kitab al-nafs* [The Book on the Soul] in M. M. Alozade (ed.), 1999, *Cahiers du groupe de recherche sur la philosophie islamique II*, Fes, Centre des Etudes Ibn Rushd, p. 97.

¹⁹ Ibn Sina, *Kitab al-shifa al-fann al-sadis mina l-tabiyyat*, in J. Bakos (ed. and trans.), 1956, *Psychologie d'Ibn Sina d'après son œuvre Kitab al-Shifa*, Prague, Académie tchécoslovaque des sciences, pp. 18-19.

²⁰ Avicenna, *Poem on the Soul*, French translation by H. Massé in *Revue du Caire. Millénaire d'Avicenne*, June 1951, pp. 7-9.

²¹ Al-Kindi, *Epître relative aux propos sur l'âme* [Discourse on the soul], trans. into French in S. Mestiri and G. Dye, 2004, *Le moyen de chasser les tristesses et autres textes éthiques*, Paris, Fayard, Bibliothèque Maktaba, pp. 105-108.

²² See Ibn Rushd, 1961, *Unveiling of the Programs of Proofs, in On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, trans. by G. F. Hourani, London, Luzac & Co., pp. 122-127.



Tchehel-Sotoum Palace (with 40 columns), detail of the Persian fresco, (Iran). © UNESCO/Abbe, André.
This elegant dancer that evokes the refinement of the princely pleasures comes from a fresco from the walls of the Tchehel-Sotoum in Isfahan (Iran).

LOVE AND BODY TECHNIQUES AMONG REFINED PEOPLE, ACCORDING TO *AL-MUWASHSHA*

ALTHOUGH *AL-MUWASHSHA* (*ON REFINEMENT AND REFINED PEOPLE*) SUPPOSEDLY DEALS WITH REFINEMENT AND REFINED PEOPLE, *AL-WASHSHA* BEGINS BY EXPLAINING HOW THE *ZARF* IS INTIMATELY RELATED TO THE OTHER TWO NOTIONS: *ADAB* (GOOD MANNERS, EDUCATION, ETHICAL RULES) AND *MURUA* (MANLINESS, UPRIGHTNESS). FAR FROM BEING CONSIDERED AS A NEGATION OF REASON. FAR FROM BEING CONSIDERED AS A NEGATION OF REASON OR AS WHAT PREVENTS IT FROM BLOSSOMING, PASSION IS RATHER PERCEIVED AS 'THE FIRST DOOR THROUGH WHICH MINDS OPEN UP TO INTELLIGENCE AND BLOSSOM'. THE WORD *ZARF* INCLUDES ALL THAT WAS DEVELOPED UNDER THE NOTION OF 'CIVILITY' DURING THE EUROPEAN ENLIGHTENMENT, FOR EXAMPLE BY ERASMUS. BESIDE THESE ASPECTS, WHICH RELATE TO GOOD BREEDING AND ATTEST TO THE POLITENESS AND CIVILITY OF THE 'DANDIES', THEIR REFINEMENT ALSO CONSISTS IN THEIR DELIBERATELY KEEPING APART FROM COMMON PEOPLE. THE *ZURAF*A SHARE WITH THE FIGURE OF THE REFINED PERSON A COMMON DESIRE TO STAND OUT AND A COMMON HATRED FOR VULGARITY, AS BAUDELAIRE REMARKED IN HIS ESSAY ON DANDYISM THEIR MANNERS AS REGARDS FOOD OR CLOTHES, THE EXISTENTIAL CHOICES THAT TURN THEM INTO SPIRITUAL PEOPLE ALWAYS INCLINED TO OPPOSE IGNORANCE AND COMMONPLACE, THEIR DESIRE TO PLEASE AND SURPRISE SHOW THE REFINED PEOPLE OF BAGHDAD SOCIETY AS THE ILLUSTRATION OF A FUNDAMENTAL PHENOMENON IN CLASSICAL ARABIC CULTURE, WHICH BROUGHT MEN TO WONDER ABOUT THEIR BODIES, THEIR EXISTENCE, THEIR ETHICAL AND AESTHETIC CHOICES.

THE CONTEXT OF *AL-WASHSHA*'S WORK

Al-Washsha, who was born around AH 250/CE 860 and died in AH 325/CE 936, is among authors whose activity was mostly focused on questions of grammar and rhetoric. But it is for the way he tackled the theme of refinement (*zarf*) that he is best known to the Moderns, and his major work, *On Refinement and Refined People*, also entitled *Al-Muwashsha*, is indeed devoted to this theme, which describes the art of living in the Abbasid society and the circles of beaux in the first centuries of Islam. *Al-Muwashsha* literally means 'the brocaded book', and is intimately related to the name of its author, which refers to a refined trade, consisting in

decorating fabrics and clothes, embroidering or brocading them so as to embellish them, make them look more colourful, give them the status of a work of art. If it is possible that *al-Washsha* practiced this activity himself, or that his family did, it is in any case certain, according to biographers, that he was the private tutor of one of the maidservants of a lady belonging to the Abbasid family. These biographical elements are important because they show that the author had direct knowledge both of the fashion world (clothing, jewellery, finery, perfumes) and of the Abbasid high society, in particular women's circles. This is attested in

Al-Muwashsha by the presence of long chapters describing women's beauty and attire, and by the composition of a book, now lost, entitled *The Stories of Refined Ladies*.¹ Within classical Arab culture, *Al-Muwashsha* is certainly not the only book dealing with women poets or refined women. But it is different for example from the mere compilation entitled *Eloquent Sayings of Women*, by Ibn Tayfur (819-893), or that on *Slave Women Poets*, by al-Asfahani (897-967), or the epistles on *Singing Slave-girls* and *Ephebes and Courtesans* by al-Jahiz (776-869), because it describes the refinement movement that swept through Baghdad society in the eighth and ninth centuries, trying not just to depict but to analyse and codify it, and even, as we shall see, to take firm stands as to ethics and aesthetics.

In spite of the interest and the relevance of the questions tackled by al-Washsha, J-C. Vadet, in his book on *L'Esprit courtois en Orient*, which is one of the very few studies to have dedicated some important developments to this text, considers that the link between the first part of the text, which deals with education and ethics (*adab*) and the second part, in which al-Washsha develops the themes of refinement, is not very clear. What is more, Vadet considers that the union of the three fundamental notions of *adab* (education, well-bred man's culture), *murua* (uprightness) and *zarf* (refinement) does not lead to the elaboration of a precise conceptual distinction between these notions: 'the trilogy of 'culture', 'uprightness' and 'refinement', he says, constitutes a training whose *raison d'être* is unclear.'² From this assertion, and from the idea that the author himself does not have 'the secrets of composition of his book' (p. 325), Vadet concludes that al-Washsha was unable to give a proper definition of the three notions that structure his book, so that the author 'imperfectly controls these notions' (p. 326). According to Vadet's study, al-Washsha was unable to separate the ethical aspect from the aesthetic aspect, *adab* from *zarf*. Reduced to a catalogue of manners, refinement is only perceived as mere formalism repeating the general topics to be found in books on *adab*. But the individual values conveyed by the themes of refinement cannot be part of a well-bred man's culture, which, Vadet says, stipulates belonging to the group.

In his introduction to the second part of his book, al-Washsha announces that the contents of the themes relating to refinement will be more pleasant and less serious than those in the first part. From this, Vadet postulates that he is announcing an opposition between the two parts and promising a dialectical movement in which 'the second part should contradict, if not refute, the first' (p. 324). But al-Washsha does not keep his word, and dashes the hopes of the modern reader who expects a dialectic vision of things, a systematic approach. But, Vadet says, a systematic mind is 'not the strong point of oriental authors, even when they want to systematize out of faithfulness to an ideal' (p. 321). The literary critic comes to the conclusion that the plan of the book is contradictory, confused, full of failings. The hotchpotch of developments on friendship, uprightness, passionate love and refinement makes it difficult to decide whether the theme 'relates more to love than to culture' or whether the author is 'a victim of his plan' (p. 323). Moreover, because it includes a long chapter about love, *Al-Muwashsha* is identified with disguised erotics, which Vadet relates to the myth of the Lady, a literary fiction or a poetic *topos* present in Bedouin-inspired love novels. This thesis is supported by the fact that al-Washsha criticizes the singing slave-girls and denounces the deceptive techniques they use to trap the well-bred man or the refined man, and turn away from him as soon as he falls in love. Such a reading carries to the extreme the logic of al-Washsha's disguised misogyny by describing him as someone who despises women and excludes them from the courtly spirit that can only characterize men. Al-Washsha, Vadet says, 'has neither esteem nor respect for women, all he respects and honours at most is the myth of the Lady' (p. 341).

Such judgements, which are too harsh and not very accurate, need to be qualified and specified according to precise objective criteria that would return both book and author to the place they deserve in classical Arab thought on the one hand, and bring out the interest for the question of the relation between ethics and aesthetics that is at the heart of the book and, we think, is totally misinterpreted in J-C. Vadet's analysis.



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ETHICS AND AESTHETICS

Although the notion of *zarf* is not clearly defined by classical authors, quotations by lexicographers and literati may enable us to analyse it and clarify its content. This has less to do with the inability of classical authors to define the meaning of words, as is often suggested, than with the latitude of notions in the classical age and their insertion into a multiplicity of semantic systems, so that it becomes impossible to grasp their contours. This is why al-Washsha, who must have a precise idea of the subject of his treatise and of the notions he summons up, does not hesitate to mention definitions that may give the impression that he does not master the notion. Thus, he asserts that refinement is the fact of being endowed with eloquence, self-restraint, a pure soul, control of one's passions, generosity, a perfect face and perfect appearance. Would this suggest that the notion of *zarf*, as indeed the linguistic meaning indicates, is a holdall, a receptacle for all noble qualities? Though he is anxious to list all the contemporary opinions on the question of the definition of this notion, al-Washsha does not remain content with these cursory views, and gives his own understanding of refinement and of what the refined man looks like. 'He can be recognized, he says, by his qualities, his positive personality and his manner of speaking. He does not hide behind his silence. Signs of his refinement can be seen in his gait, his dress, his language. You notice the grace of his movements even before you appreciate the gentleness of his inner being. Cannot you see how refined people avoid blemish, how tidy they are, how charming, delicate, elegant, perfumed? Souls long for them, hearts love them dearly, eyes follow them, minds are enamoured of them.'³

This portrait, together with the various reflections scattered throughout erudite works show that the *zarf* movement may boil down to three major components: an artistic dimension which shows that the *zarif* (the refined man) cultivates the cult of beauty in all its forms (dress, body techniques, way of life), and that he is always careful of his appearance, of giving other people a fine image of himself; a literary dimension centred upon freedom of thought, eloquence, mastering the

art of conversation and of repartee, and the capacity to improvise and pleasantly surprise an audience or friends in literary circles; and an existential dimension based on the awareness of belonging to a superior caste, united by the same desire to be different from common people and by the will to lead an exceptional life. Tightly interwoven in al-Washsha's text, these three components are, as we have seen earlier, deliberately fixed in an ethical code whose key words are friendship, decency, uprightness and loyalty. The physical and moral portrait of refined people carefully drawn by al-Washsha is thus meant to reconcile several aspects and respect numerous conditions, moral and aesthetic as well as ontological – hence the impression of contradiction that can be observed on certain levels, in particular as to the way passionate love is dealt with in the book. But the impression is soon dispelled as soon as one examines things in depth.

Indeed, although *Al-Muwashsha* is supposed to be about refinement and refined people, al-Washsha starts by writing that *zarf* is closely related to two other notions, those of *abad* (good manners, education, ethical rules) and *murua* (uprightness, humanity). Al-Washsha is obviously trying to assemble these notions and show how they are interwoven on several levels, all the more so as, right from the beginning of the text, he displays his intention to present those levels as a regulated code of knowledge. Such a tendency towards codification can be clearly detected through the use of such phrases as 'the laws of uprightness and education rules' or 'well-defined rules' and 'clear laws' (p. 23-24). Why does this ninth to tenth century author insist on closely relating themes that have to do with ethics with the central topic of the book, which has to do with aesthetics? What is the point of the following sentence, which uses a didactic mode to present a programme: 'Let me tell you that there is no education without uprightness, no uprightness without refinement, no refinement without education' (p. 23)? And why is refinement thus considered between the qualities that make up man's uprightness (*murua*) on the one hand and gentlemanly culture on the other?

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Other times, other places

The courteous Love

Courteous love took shape in southern France and Catalonia in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It is both a physical and spiritual exaltation spread by the troubadours and concerns the wealthy and aristocratic circles. This literary movement borrows from the chivalrous morality and the Arab-Andalusian civilization. Some similarities with the work of Al-Washshâ' appear in the expression of the courteous love.

Courage, loyalty and generosity are required in accompanying the submission of the lover to his lady. These sentiments find a favourable echo within the category of unmarried young knights in the court of Lords. These young knights, frustrated by their situation, are neglected by the noble ladies and away from inter-conjugal adultery that was apparently common place among the Lords and their wives.

The exaltation of a pure feeling of love, based on the union of hearts, often oneiric without neglecting the physical aspect of the issue has been theorized and disseminated by the troubadours.

Young knights see an opportunity to be distinguished by a pure and selfless love of the lady without the latter being pointed at and put in a humiliating situation.

The reward that can be expected from the lady often consists in a chaste kiss; it may sometimes go further, but never does it reach the sexual act itself. In order words, the knight-lover is a mere servant of the lady.

The message of the troubadours is strictly moralistic and aimed at tempering tumultuous youth by providing them a moral code. The Lord is thus respected through his wife. For women, this evolution represents their taking revenge; they are given a greater consideration than in the case of male friendship exaltation developed by the early misogynist society of the South.

The passionate love is denounced in stories such as that of Tristan and Isolde. By his very drinking the love potion intended for his uncle Mark and Isolde, Tristan overcomes two prohibitions: adultery and incest. Tristan, presented as a model knight, brave and honest, is not voluntarily responsible: he is the plaything of fate. The end is tragic...

This type of story, based on the ethics of chivalry is intended to remind those of the young knights who would happen to be too bold and would not respect the social order. Courteous love has not survived the double attack from the Church and feudalism of the North. On the one hand, the Church seized, from the mid-twelfth century, the marriage as an institution, which has thereon become a sacrament. The Church condemns all extra-marital sentiment. On the other hand, to the aristocracy of the North at the time of anti-Cathar Crusades, courteous love seemed a heresy.

Comtesse de Dieu is among those women troubadours who greatly contributed to the development of courteous literature. She was the lover of Raimbault of Orange, a learned knight, often in love and famous poet, who died before his thirties in 1173.

To answer these questions and understand al-Washsha's deep intention, it is necessary to situate his work in the global history of the movement of refinement born in the Abbasid society of the time. Our theory is that even though he does not confess to his deepest intentions, the author of *Al-Muwashsha* positions himself in relation to a literary and artistic movement which emerged in Iraqi society around the middle of the second century AH/ eighth century CE, at the time of the political and ideological triumph of the new Abbasid dynasty and the setting up of a new form of culture drawing on Persian traditions and finding a new expression in a poetry henceforth referred to as 'new' or 'modern' (*al-shir al-muhdath*). Influenced by hedonism and tainted with libertinage, a powerful poetic current emerged in the city of Kufa, south of Baghdad, which, before the foundation of the future capital of the Muslim world, had been an effervescent centre of literary and cultural life. The members of a group called 'the libertines of Kufa' (*mujjan al-Kufa*) raised the standard of a new way of life, defying the restrictions of the new religion, in particular as regards sexual intercourse, and 'pleasure-seeking habits'. But beyond their moral and social transgressions, the group was culturally very influential, even appealed to members of the ruling dynasty and embodied the main trends of refinement in Iraqi society. With their eloquence, their passion for freedom, their 'modernity' and their 'dandyism', poets like Abu Nuwas, Waliba Ibn al-Hubab, Muti ibn Iyas or al-Husayn ibn al-Dahhak championed a new way of life openly hedonistic in anything to do with the body, and resolutely subversive in anything concerning the mind. Al-Washsha's intention to codify love-making in all its forms and to relate refinement to a powerful ethical code going back to the ancient Arabs and included within the values of Islam cannot be understood, to our way of thinking, independently from this movement of modernist poetry that had paved the way for the connection between refinement and libertinage.

To bring the ideal of refinement and the model behaviour of the refined man back into a moral code highly regarded by the Arabs before and after Islam, al-Washsha developed at length the theme of friendship, the limits of jokes, the choice of company and the respect of such qualities as would not cost a man his deportment and would not reduce him to vulgarity. The same criteria that aim at preserving the lofty, aristocratic spirit of refinement apply to passionate love, as we shall see later. But it is important to tackle at once a question to do with the relationship between the ideal of *zarf* as outlined by al-Washsha and the matter of pleasure. This question is studied in chapter 14, entitled 'On customs relating to refinement', and is carried on right to the end of the first part of the book. As the word 'customs' (*sunan*) used in the title indicates, it has to do with relating refinement with traditions that date back to the pre-islamic period, and are reminiscent of famous Arabic sayings about love. Thus, al-Washsha at once declares that refined people must 'abstain from vile things' and 'shield themselves from sin. The truly refined man combines four qualities: clarity of language, eloquence, self-restraint and purity of the soul' (p. 79). While he goes on quoting the various definitions of *zarf* by known and unknown experts, al-Washsha insists on the virtue of *iffa*, which does not refer so much to self-restraint or chastity as to abstaining from all that is illicit or indecent.

The word refers both to the notion of moderation as regards carnal pleasures and of repulsion for forbidden or easy love affairs. Temperance, decency and delicacy inciting a man to shun sin and resist temptation: such is the virtue of *iffa* and the quality of *affif*. There are two ways of accounting for al-Washsha's insistence on this virtue: on the one hand, because of his beauty, his education, the delicacy of his manners, the way of life he has chosen, the refined man is constantly confronted with temptation, especially as regards singing slave-girls, who know the rules of refinement and are experts in music, singing and poetry, domains that also appeal to the groups of refined men. On the other hand, refined men have been linked to forbidden love affairs ever since the emergence of the group of libertines of Kufa. If we consider the figure of Abu Nuwas as a supreme authority around whom the notion of refinement tainted with libertinage crystallized, we shall see that certain ninth century authors who were contemporaries of al-Washsha considered that knowing Abu Nuwas's poetry was the means to put the finishing touches to the education of the individual, develop his literary taste and complete his training in poetry. In his biography of Abu Nuwas, Ibn Manzur quotes al-Suli's declaration⁴ that 'when you meet a man who can recite Abu Nuwas's poetry by heart, it is an indication that he knows good manners (*adab*) and a sign of his refinement (*zarf*).'⁵

As an example, here are a few lines of verse by Abu Nuwas, which may serve as a testament:

*Be reckless and libertine,
Be lewd in love
And be so openly
Let no interdict
Dissuade you
From going in for love
For interdicts generate frustration!*⁶

To understand al-Washsha's will to change the very meaning of refinement, and better to expose his opposition to this conception as it developed in his days, one need only quote this piece of verse that illustrates a vision totally opposed to that of Abu Nuwas:

*The refined man only attains the perfection
of refinement
If he stays chaste, away from sin
If he scrupulously respects the interdicts
of his Lord
Then will people call him refined.*⁷

May one conclude from this that *Al-Muwashsha* represents a moral reaction aiming at preserving the aesthetic approach of life while combining it with the precepts of *adab* and subjecting it to a strict moral code? One may certainly reply affirmatively and say that al-Washsha takes a somewhat conformist moral stand. However, this affirmation requires to be completed because of the fact that al-Washsha's intention is neither to encourage refined people to adhere to a strict discipline that would lead them, for example, to a practice of abstinence, nor to subject the *zarf* movement to rules that would make the refined people lose the essence of what they have in view, that is, to stand out and lead an exceptional life. The heart of the matter lies in a fundamental notion, excess, which underlies

all al-Washsha's thinking throughout the text. Refinement as it appeared with the libertines of Kufa and as it developed even after al-Washsha, is fundamentally shaped by the idea of intensity, by the deliberate choice of immoderation in carnal pleasures. An example of this can be found for example in the *Book of Convents*, by al-Shabushti, an author who, one century after al-Washsha, was still interested in the question of *adab* and its relation to refinement in the context of Christian convents. Considered at the time as pleasure resorts much frequented for their natural landscapes and the Bacchic and erotic pleasures they offered, convents were highly prized by the literati, politicians and

aesthetes. When al-Shabushti described these circles of poets and refined aristocrats, he insisted on a major aspect that defined the relation to pleasure: excess. Those whom he considered to be 'refined' sought to exhaust their bodies in a quest for extreme sensations and literally put them to the test, so that the author saw them as idle dissolute people whose sole purpose was to wallow in pleasure. Al-Washsha precisely wanted to move away from this ethics of excess and this philosophy that aimed at desire in terms of consumption and excess encouraged by the abundance of singing slave-girls and ephebes in Abbasid society.

THE PARADOXES OF PASSIONATE LOVE

The links between love and refinement appear for the first time in the text when refined people are praised both physically and morally and when passionate love is put forward as 'one of the most beautiful practices of educated men and of those with a noble nature.'⁸ Al-Washsha even presents it as an obligation to be fulfilled by refined people, and accounts for the need to experience passionate love fully not only because it is an existential experience that the refined man must undergo but also because of the subtle links between passion and reason. Far from being considered as a negation of reason or as what prevents it from blossoming, passion is rather perceived as 'the first door through which minds open up to intelligence and blossom. Its hold on the heart fortifies the soul. It can even make the coward brave and the miser generous. It loosens the tongue of the stammerer and deepens the resolution of the pusillanimous man' (p. 86). Conversely, the negative effects of passionate love on the individual, such as thinness, paleness, sleeplessness, sadness and melancholy are signs of actual experience and of belonging to the group of refined people: 'He who does not combine all these features is not in love according to refined people, the word 'passion' does not apply to him, this man does not belong among them and cannot be considered as an educated man' (p. 91).

As soon as he has done with developing the positive effects of passionate love on the body and the mind, al-Washsha adds an important clarification relating the point at issue to the ethical principles fixed previously. Contradicting the idea commonly held among literati, he declares that the carnal act destroys passionate love: 'People have introduced in burning love (*ishq*) a custom that is foreign to the tradition of refinement and to the nature of refined people: as soon as one of them reaches his beloved and detects a moment's inattention on the part of the watch in wait, he can only be satisfied

with sexual union. This corrupts love, destroys burning love, denies passion and impairs purity' (p. 117). In this respect, al-Washsha tries to restore the tradition of courtly love illustrated in the tales of famous pairs of lovers of the umayyad period (Qays and Layla, Jamil and Buthayna, Urwa and Afra). Therefore, Al-Washsha does not support the myth of the sublimated inaccessible Lady. Rather, the developments on the theme of passion – which broadly remain in keeping with the tradition of courtly love – enable him to describe in detail the desired practical effects on the body and the mind of the refined man, and to encourage the latter to plunge into the experience, learn its twists and turns, savour its pleasures and pains. Al-Washsha wants to restore to passionate love, both in its corporeal and spiritual dimension, a quality – loyalty to the pact of love – that seemed to have been lost in his days. The tales of faithful couples and martyrs to love are used to criticize the tendency towards consummation that had become identified with *zarf*. 'The lovers had no other desire but to look at each other, no other joy but to be together, to keep each other company, talk to each other and recite poetry. ... When one of them became attached to a girlfriend, only death parted them, no other occupied his heart, nothing distracted him from her and he turned his eyes towards no other. She did the same. If one of the two died, the other took his/her own life or went on living preserving their love and respecting the pact that united them. ... Nowadays, weariness and inconstancies, as well as betrayal and capriciousness, are viewed favourably. Today, the accomplished gentleman, the perfect lover, figures that because he has given himself to passion for years, if not ages, he is truly in love, but he finds a new girlfriend if his girlfriend is away if only for one day.'⁹

The fact that al-Washsha quotes the lines of his opponents, presents their arguments and discusses their opinions, shows that he is really committed in the

fight against a certain trend which, on the one hand, associates licentious love and refinement, and on the other, ignores the notion of pact of love. The question remains independent of that of the satisfaction of carnal pleasures, which al-Washsha does not mention, probably because he considered that it was not related to the analytics of passionate love he intended to deal with in his book. He is above all interested in warning refined people against the dangers of passionate love when it reaches the sickly stage of *ishq*, responsible for the wasting away of the individual and heralding his imminent death. This explains the importance of the chapters about women's perfidy, be they free women or slaves, 'for in their perfidy they are all the same: none of them keeps her promises and remains faithful' (p. 156). However, according to him, the case of the singing slave-girls (*qiyan*) is even more crucial because they resort to *ishq*, a fatal passion that can drive a man crazy or lead him to his death, for the sake of lucre. Al-Washsha lingers over the fact that their love is always a matter of self-interest, that they skilfully use the rhetoric of love and the language of passion for strictly materialistic purposes. However, he qualifies his position by mentioning the stories of women who have remained faithful to their lovers and by recalling that, although they are fickle and

quick to break off a relationship, these courtesans 'are absolved of their failings when one loves them' (p. 142). Thus, al-Washsha's definitely has reservations about this question. Considered from a moral point of view and in relation to the social image of the refined man, the love of singing slaves is to be avoided, since it can only lead to humiliating situations, like being enslaved to a slave. But from the point of view of love experience proper, the criteria are quite different: 'With them, union is nothing but deception and desertion is deadly. They are queens of hearts and bewitch the minds. ... They annihilate you with a tender look in their eyes, but bring you back to life with their mendacious words and vain promises. There is nothing more beautiful than their prevarication, more pleasant than their deceitful promises' (pp. 144–145). Enslavement to passion becomes an opportunity to taste the charms of love and, al-Washsha says, the man who does not venture out into this domain shows signs of a poor constitution, a lack of sensitivity and the death of his Being (p. 155). Thus, 'in spite of the bitterness, the incessant sighs and afflictions that love entails, it is sweet to those who taste it, and praised by those who experience it. It is at once matchlessly sweet and bitter' (p. 108).

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



Reflecting on the text

- > *What is your opinion of the fact that refinement stems from both the ethical and the aesthetic?*
- > *How does libertinism seem to detract from the code of refinement?*
- > *Why is this code opposed to intensity and excess?*
- > *How can the passion of love and reason cohabit?*
- > *Are carnal union and the passion of love compatible in the view of this code?*
- > *What importance does the code of refinement place on fidelity in love?*
- > *What role does the love contract play in refinement?*
- > *Discuss the "perfidiousness" of women in love.*
- > *Why does true refinement exclude homosexual love?*
- > *Evaluate the "utilitarian link" in men's favour between men and women (women as objects).*
- > *Why does the dandy feel exceptional and superior to others?*
- > *What is the relationship between objects and things of refinement and the individual who uses them?*
- > *The meaning of gifts among refined people.*
- > *Comment on the interweaving of natural and artificial beauty in the shape of poetic verse handwritten on a woman's body.*
- > *Discover women's strategy in love through this practice.*
- > *In what way does refinement include a spiritual dimension?*

These elements enable us to go back to J-C. Vadet's criticisms of *Al-Muwashsha*, and to make two remarks about the link between passionate love and refinement. The first relates to the question of the relations of al-Washsha with women: can he be said to display contempt for them? The second remark consists in explaining the reason why he holds two apparently contradictory attitudes towards being obliged and being forbidden to love.

It would be difficult to maintain that al-Washsha despises women, especially as he praises them on several occasions, and, in other books, like *Kitab al-fadil fi sifat al-adab al-kamil* (The Excellent Book on the Description of Perfect Education) dedicates several chapters to their eloquence, their wisdom, their faithfulness, their refinement and badinage in private life.¹⁰ The criticism of singing slaves in *Al-Muwashsha* and the declarations on the prohibition of complete submission to passion are thus to be considered as warnings, as pieces of 'advice', as al-Washsha puts it, which must be given to refined men. An important passage gives the key to the solution of this question and removes all ambiguity as to the interpretation of al-Washsha's position: "*In the passage that states our intentions, and in the different chapters of the book, we have shown that love and passion are allowed, we have invited educated people and encouraged refined people [to practice them]. Our book is full [of such exhortations]. However, we dedicate a whole chapter to advice intended for those who know how to behave and for knowledgeable people. The man endowed with reason will devote himself to it, but the ignoramus will give it up, for I spared no effort to fill this chapter with advice in prose and verse. Contemplate the foundations (usul) that I fixed, so that, with God's blessing, you may clearly see the secondary issues (furu).*"¹¹ In the style of the moralists, using a method of codification inspired from Muslim law, al-Washsha presents duty to love as a foundation and mistrust of the perfidy of women as a secondary issue. There is thus no contradiction in the theses upheld by al-Washsha, but rather particular attention paid to the complexity of the question of passionate love, and the will to underline nuances and present a contrasting vision that avoids clear-cut positions and fixed dogmatic viewpoints. Such art of contrast encourages the refined man to be attentive to the experience of limits and make a clear decision as to the situation in which he can afford to live in humiliation, sorrow and the languor of love. It is up to him to appreciate how far he can allow himself to be a woman's plaything and a slave to passion. Al-Washsha's viewpoint is thus subject to demands that only individual experience can account for.

An important passage corroborates our analysis: "*Among the commendable behaviours of refined people is their tendency to court women and jest with singing slave-girls. They consider the love of women as the best thing. That is the attitude of eminent people. To them, a passion for boys is by no means commendable and has no place in their lives. If they have preferred the love of women to that of boys, if they have praised them in all possible ways, it is on account of their engaging skilfulness, their accomplished charm, their fascinating bodies, their wonderful coquetry. They also have commendable qualities and a real charm, which, if not in intelligence, lies in coquetry. Their smell is a fragrance, their love tortures the hearts, ardent desire befits them better and they fit men better.*"¹²

This passage shows that al-Washsha restores to favour the love of women against a new trend among the circles of refined people, which consisted in preferring boys (*al-ghilman*). But the fact is that all the literature that deals more or less with the themes of refinement (erotic poetry, narratives of the kind recorded in al-Shabushti's *Book of Convents*) reflects this very strong link between refinement and homosexuality. Al-Washsha's reaction to it is so firm that he implicitly appeals to the authority of the Prophet of Islam who had set up a rostrum for the poet Zuhayr in his mosque so that he might listen to his poems praising the Prophet but, according to the pre-islamic Arab tradition, extolling passionate love and women's beauty. Yet, al-Washsha argues, the parts relating to the love of women weren't suppressed from these poems praising the Prophet, whereas the description of the love of epebes tends to be avoided in eulogies composed for eminent people (p. 144).

The second argument relating to the love of singing slave-girls, and thus to a secondary issue, shows that al-Washsha's purpose is, no matter what the cost, to spare refined men the situation in which they must pine away for an unrequited passion that they do not acknowledge as such. His position also reflects a fundamental existential choice, which gives precedence to refinement and the moral options that are related to it over love experiences bound to fail from the start. These experiences are necessary, as we have seen; they must indeed punctuate the existential journey of the *zarif*, but he cannot consider dying of love as the supreme end of life. What takes precedence, rather, is his social image, the ideal he represents and the vocations he is liable to encourage. It is to preserve the refined men's lofty spirit that, to conclude these developments, al-Washsha even advocates a purely practical relation between them and women: "*The onus is on men of reason and education and on experienced wise men to consider women as sweet-smelling plants – enjoy their freshness, savour them in all their beauty and, when they start withering, when they are no longer as they were when picked, throw them away, dismiss them from their coterie and turn away from them; for they have nothing left for those in search of pleasure, and no flavour for one to savour.*"¹³

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- What relationship does al-Washsha' establish between ethics and aesthetics?
- What is refinement for al-Washsha'?
- What distinguishes the concepts of adab and murua?
- What do the "the libertines of Kufa" represent?
- Does al-Washsha' have an elitist conception of humanity?
- Is al-Washsha's conception of humanity oversimplified?
- What distinguishes the philosophy of Abu Nuwas and al-Washsha'?
- How does ash-Shabushti justify excess?
- What, for al-Washsha', are the advantages and disadvantages of passionate love?
- How should the role and behaviour of singing slave-girls be understood?
- Identify five types of behavioural concern among refined people.
- Why do refined women write verses on their bodies?

Entering into dialogue with the text

- Does the verb "to embroider" have a positive or negative connotation in English?
- Is there a point where ethics and aesthetics converge?
- Find three different reasons for not succumbing to the temptation of desire.
- Is excess always a negative concept?
- Should passionate love always be sought?
- Is al-Washsha' a misogynist?
- Can dandyism be an ideal in life?
- In what respect is the status of the body described in this text different from a more contemporary and Western view?

Suggested teaching method: **assessing the answers**

A question is chosen.

Each person replies individually in writing to the chosen question.

An answer is selected then written on the board.

The group discusses and decides by a majority whether the answer is acceptable.

The moderator asks whether anyone has a different answer.

The moderator writes the answer on the board and the group considers both whether the answer is acceptable and whether there is a substantial difference in the answer, to avoid repetition.

If the second answer is accepted, the group analyses the difference between the two.

The moderator asks whether anyone has a third answer, and the process starts over again.

Once the three answers have been accepted and analysed, the group considers the implications of these several answers.

If possible, begin again with other questions.

The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Brainstorming

- Distribute to the participants sheets of A3 paper and felt-tip pens.
- After reading the worksheets "The body and the spirit in Arabic philosophy" and "Love and body techniques among refined people according to Al-Muwashsha", briefly explain the themes and, in particular, the goal: the search for harmony.
- Half of the participants list all the necessary ingredients for good governance of the country (working individually).
- The other half of the participants lists all the necessary ingredients for the good health of a human being (working individually).
- Ask each subgroup to compare lists and to try to find a consensus and produce a joint list.
- The two subgroups present their lists in turn, on governance and health respectively.
- All of the participants engage in a discussion on the similarity of the two lists.
- Initiate a discussion after reading the worksheet "The body and the spirit in Arabic philosophy" with a view to seeking a "middle way" in comparing their lists.
- Each participant describes what he or she understands by a refined person.
- Discussion and conclusions on the links between ethics and aesthetics and concepts of refinement.



Tchehel-Sotoum Palace, Persian frescoes, Persian art, (Iran) © UNESCO/Abbe, André
Women enjoying life pleasures in a garden, as illustrated by this fresco from the Tchehel-Sotoum Palace in Isfahan (Iran).

THE BODY AS A WORK OF ART

As is the case with all cultures, the ideal of refinement is based on the dandy's claim to moral, spiritual and artistic superiority over the other groups of society. Although the group of refined people belongs principally to the high society of the court or the aristocracy of the city, it is far from being closed upon itself since, by definition, the dandy requires the consideration of other people, and cannot do without society acknowledging his singularity and allowing him to break away from it. The practices that relate to fashion in clothing and to body techniques perfectly illustrate this aspect, and show that *Al-Muwashsha* is a unique work indeed. Thanks to al-Washsha, we know that the refined people of Baghdad scoffed at certain dishes, which they looked upon as common, and that they strictly conformed to table manners: 'They do not lick their fingers, do not fill their mouths with food, do not take big bites that would spatter them with grease, do not stain their sleeves. They chew their food without haste and to one side of their mouth at a time, do not mix dishes and do not leave scraps' (p. 178). In this respect, the word *zarf* includes all that was developed under the notion of 'civility' during the European Enlightenment, for example by Erasmus¹⁴ Beside these aspects, which relate to good breeding and attest to their politeness and civility, their refinement also consists in their deliberately keeping apart from common people by abstaining from certain dishes (offal, salted fish), or vegetables that may give them foul breath (garlic, onion). Certain culinary choices are only motivated by a desire to be different from other people, as is seen in the fact that they do not eat peaches, plums, pears, which they consider to be fruit for common people, and not for the elite.¹⁵

As far as clothing is concerned, al-Washsha codifies the way refined people dress, insisting on the need to match colours well and avoid garish ones. The principle of harmony in the clothes of the *zarif*, which testifies to the harmony in his soul, compels him not to wear 'a dirty garment with a clean one, or one that has already been worn with a new one. ... In a perfect outfit, the fabrics are similar and harmonize, match and agree' (p. 163). The description of these aspects is of course related to fashion trends, which al-Washsha pays much attention to. It explains the many references to magnificent clothes, their noble fabrics, and above all their prestigious origins, which were supposed to show that those who wore them were above the common people. As to women, they had to pay enormous attention to colours, which were endowed with a specific symbolism: 'White is, they say, for men. ... If women wear white clothes, it would suggest that they have been forsaken, while blue and black mark out widows and despondent women.' (p. 171). Clothes are thus part of a network of artistic, existential and moral meanings that allows them to escape from the idea that they are purely of practical use.

When he writes about jewellery and finery, Al-Washsha often invokes the same criterion: the distinction between refined people on the one hand and other social categories on the other. But he also makes a distinction within the category of refined

people between men and women. Thus, women may use men's perfumes, but men cannot use women's. As far as jewels are concerned, women do not like to 'wear rings set with glass beads or carnelian, silver or iron rings, burnished metal ones or those set with turquoise, garnet and small beads, for they are peculiar to men and slaves and little befit women who go in for refinement' (p. 174). This definitely shows that refined people do not find an object to be pleasant or unpleasant simply on account of its nobleness as such, but rather because it fits in ethics and aesthetics based on distinction and singularity. Refined men or women are anxious to establish a relationship between objects and things on the one hand (dishes, drinks, fruit, flowers, jewels, clothes, etc.) and human beings on the other, so that these objects may become the natural extension of the individuals and a mirror reflecting their interiority and spirit.

Given the limits of this study, it is impossible to linger on what the *zurafa* have in common with the dandies of the world, which is also what characterizes them.¹⁶ But we could at least mention their hatred for what is useful, which can be detected in their policy as regards gifts: while most people 'wish to offer great things, noble presents, unique and costly new objects, rare and precious items', refined people are 'content with offering things that are most delicate and of little worth',¹⁷ their choice is dictated by the aesthetics of daintiness on the one hand, and on the dissociation between the value of the act of giving and the material worth of the object. 'Thus, they can offer a single citron, an apple, a small fragrant melon, a branch of myrtle, a bunch of daffodils, a pint of wine, a little incense, a box of perfume; a very little something, a trifle, all kinds of tiny trinkets of little worth in the eyes of the men of reason who still prize them highly and gladly accept them' (p. 202).

Apart from these aspects, al-Washsha devotes the last chapters of his book to a practice that refined women cherish: it consists in calligraphing one or several lines of verse on a part of one's body (the cheek, the forehead, the sole of one's foot, the palm of one's hand, etc.). On the one hand, this practice underlines the organic relationship that develops between the body and writing seen as a means to lend dignity to the body, to transcend its natural state and turn it into an artwork. On the other hand, the fact that this kind of poetry deals most of the time with the theme of love invests the body with a fantasy dimension in which nature sublimated by art (the calligraphed body) establishes a relationship with others, compelling them to meditate on this sublime transformation of nature and to decode the language of the body. These texts represent a doubling up of pleasure within pleasure, the pleasure of the letter seen on the body and the meaning of the lines enjoyed thanks both to poetic imagination and to the focalization on the interweaving of natural and artificial beauty.

Lubna, the slave of Abbas, our table companion, wrote with aromatic paste and amber on the palm on her right hand:

They said: 'Make a wish'; I replied:
'I wish she had been mine in this life.'¹⁸

Another woman wrote these lines with musk
on her cheek:

*I agree to everything for the love of you,
so be fair
Do not misuse the power you hold
How could the oppressed lover obtain justice
from you
When you are both judge and jury?*¹⁹

What characterizes such lines is the fact that they were written by women on their own bodies, but put in the mouths of the men they were aimed at. The addressee is surprised by the fact that as he reads these lines composed by the singing slave-girl, he realizes that he is the speaker: he is the one telling his story, revealing himself, declaring his love and portraying his submission to the Lady. Thanks to this inversion in the enunciation scheme, the man addressed becomes the speaker addressing the woman and returning the words she has composed. The words of the besotted lover range over the feminine body, but this reversal compels him to read what he does not dare admit, say or formulate. Although their point of origin and their point of departure is the woman's body, the lines are also meant for him. The poetry written on the woman's body thus increases the power of this body as the vehicle of the lover's discourse.

The preceding developments have shown that the *zurafa* share with the figure of the refined person a common desire to stand out and a common hatred for vulgarity, as Baudelaire remarked in his essay on Dandyism.²⁰ Their manners as regards food or clothes, the existential choices that turn them into spiritual people always inclined to oppose ignorance and common-place, their desire to please and surprise show the refined people of Baghdad society – whose origins may go back to Medina and whose posterity goes on in many cities of the Arab Muslim world – as the illustration of a fundamental phenomenon in classical Arabic culture, which brought men to wonder about their bodies, their existence, their ethical and aesthetic choices. Thus, al-Washsha's codification of the practices of refinement has revealed certain attitudes as regards the body, human relationships (friendship, passionate love), and objects (dishes, clothes, perfume, finery, jewels, etc.). To assess its import for culture and civilisation, we have tried to examine this work from a double perspective, considering both the place occupied by the body in this book, and the moral and philosophical attitude towards pleasure, and more specifically towards passionate love. Through the study of this text, we have shown that it deals with a major phenomenon on the spiritual level, not in the religious sense of the word 'spiritual', but in its philosophical sense, referring to the practices that men are led to apply to themselves so as to know themselves better and behave better.

¹ See S. Bouhhal's introduction to the French translation of *Al-Muwashsha*, in Al-Washsha, *Le livre de brocart*, trans. by Siham Bouhhal, Paris, Gallimard, 2004, p. 20.

² J.-C. Vadet, 1968, *L'esprit courtois en Orient dans les cinq premiers siècles de l'Hégire*, Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose, p. 324.

³ Quotations from Al-Washsha's *Al-Muwashsha* are translated from the French 2004 text: Al-Washsha, 2004, *Le livre de brocart*, trans. by Siham Bouhhal, Paris, Gallimard, p. 85.

⁴ Al-Suli was a poet and Abbasid secretary who died in 857.

⁵ Ibn Manzur, 1992, *Akhbar Abi Nuwas*, Beirut, Dar al-kutub al-ilmiyya, p. 39.

⁶ Lines translated from the French edition, Abu Nuwas, 2002, *Poèmes bachiques et libertins*, Paris, Editions verticales/Le Seuil, p. 119.

⁷ Al-Washsha, 2004, *Le livre de brocart*, op. cit., p. 80.

⁸ Al-Washsha, 2004, *Le livre de brocart*, op. cit., p. 86.

⁹ Al-Washsha, 2004, *Le livre de brocart*, op. cit., p. 120.

¹⁰ Al-Washsha, 1991, *Kitab al-fadil fi sifat al-adab al-kamil* [The Excellent Book on the Description of Perfect Education]. Beirut, Dar al-gharb al-islami, pp. 209-238.

¹¹ Al-Washsha, 1868. *Kitab Al-Muwashsha aw al-zarf wa l-zurafa*. Beirut, Dar sadir. p. 168.

¹² Al-Washsha, 2004, *Le livre de brocart*, op. cit., pp. 142-143.

¹³ Al-Washsha, 2004, *Le livre de brocart*, op. cit., p. 160.

¹⁴ See N. Elias, N., 1973. *La civilisation des mœurs*. Paris, Calmann-Lévy.

¹⁵ Al-Washsha, 2004, *Le livre de brocart*, op. cit., p. 180.

¹⁶ See the excellent study of the topic by N. Ferjani, 2005, *Al-Mazahir al-jamaliyya inda zurafa l-arab*, [Aesthetic Aspects among Refined Arabs], Beirut, al-Dar al-arabiyya li l-mawsuat.

¹⁷ Al-Washsha, 2004, *Le livre de brocart*, op. cit., p. 202.

¹⁸ Al-Washsha, 2004, *Le livre de brocart*, op. cit., p. 240.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

²⁰ C. Baudelaire, 1992, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, in *Critique d'art, suivi de Critique musicale*. Paris, Gallimard, pp. 369-372.



Mosaic decoration. Kairouan (Tunisia), © UNESCO/Roger, Dominique.

HOW IS REASON USED FOR SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE AND BEHAVIOUR?

THE APPEAL TO REFLECTION IS ONE OF THE MOST RECURRING THEMES IN THE MUSLIM HOLY TEXT. IT CONTINUOUSLY ATTRIBUTES TO GOD WORDS THAT OBLIGE HUMAN BEINGS TO REFLECT ON HIS 'SIGNS'. THE WHOLE UNIVERSE IS THUS DESCRIBED AS A UNIVERSE OF SIGNS, A BOOK OF MEDITATION ON THE MYSTERY OF THE VERY APPARITION OF BEING. EACH VERSE IS A SIGN OF GOD, IN OTHER WORDS AN INVITATION TO REFLECT. BY URGING MAN TO FACE NATURE, TO FACE HIS OWN NATURE, IT ENJOINS HIM *NOT TO BELIEVE IN A HYPOTHETICAL HEREAFTER* (ABOUT WHICH OUR REASON IS INCAPABLE OF SAYING ANYTHING WHATEVER, AND HENCE MUST GIVE WAY TO THE IMAGINATION) *BUT TO DEVELOP SCIENTIFIC INTERPRETATIONS OF REALITY*. FOR CENTURIES REASON IN ISLAM HAS TAKEN INTO CONSIDERATION, WITH VARYING SUCCESS ACCORDING TO THE RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL THINKING AND CONTEXTS, THE TWO GREAT QUESTIONS IT FELT TO BE ESSENTIAL WHEN FACED WITH THE SACRED: THAT OF THE PART IT COULD POSSIBLY PLAY IN UNDERSTANDING ITS MYSTERY AND THAT OF ITS CLAIM TO FREEDOM WITH REGARD TO A RELIGIOUS SYSTEM OF LAW OFTEN CONSIDERED TO BE TRANSCENDENT. WHAT ROOM IS THERE FOR HUMAN REASON IN THE MORE THOROUGH EXAMINATION OF THE MEANING OF THE SACRED AND THE SACRALIZATION OF EXISTENCE? HERE RELIGIOUS DOGMATISM HAS SOUGHT, AS IT HAS OFTEN DONE ELSEWHERE, TO REDUCE THE PLACE ACCORDED TO RATIONALITY. BUT THE RELIGIOUS TRADITION IS NOT CONFINED TO THAT. IT HAS ALSO ADVOCATED THE *IJTIHAD* (THE EFFORT OF PERSONAL JUDGEMENT) AND, IN THE DOMAIN OF SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE, IT HAS PUT FORWARD THE THEORY THAT REASON AND INTUITION CAN COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER AND HENCE LEAD A HUMAN BEING TO THE STAGE OF '*ARIF BI-LLAH*', THAT IS TO SAY 'KNOWING THROUGH GOD'.

What is the status of the use of reason in Islamic religion? We shall deal with this question at two levels: the level of knowledge and that of action. To be more precise, we shall ask the following question: is reason considered in Islam as a spiritual faculty capable of 'making a knowledge of God accessible' on the one hand and on the other of determining what it is to 'behave well'? In the course of this twofold reflection we shall discover that the greatest minds in Islam,

theologians, philosophers or mystics, were totally unacquainted with the idea that faith and reason could be in conflict, because their faith was not an irrational one, that is to say in contradiction to the demands of reason. They had a *rational faith*, in other words a faith that found in reason a means of questioning its own mystery, and so of clarifying itself up to a certain point, of offering a certain degree of self-explanation or self-justification.

Al-Farabi (870-950) for example wrote in *The Book of Religion* that a religious conviction that is not based both on a 'primary knowledge' (*ilm awwal*), that is to say on a profound intuition, and on 'demonstration' (*burhan*) is a 'religion that has gone astray.' And he went on to suggest that 'virtuous religion resembles philosophy.' And later, when he distinguished between the theoretical and practical opinions of religion, it was to show that in both cases it remained indispensable to provide philosophical or scientific demonstration. Note that these two domains of human opinion are precisely the ones – knowledge and action – on which we wish to reflect here. For al-Farabi, as far as the theoretical opinions of religion on the origin and ends of the universe, the laws and system of nature, and the status and place of humankind in creation are concerned, 'their demonstrations are to be found in theoretical philosophy,' whose necessary function is therefore to prove as much as possible with reasoned arguments the religious affirmations of the holy text regarding these matters. As for religion's practical

opinions, that is to say its recommendations concerning good and bad behaviour, it is again up to reason to decide whether these recommendations should take the form of commandments or advice, and how they can be adapted to different times and places.

These men of great spiritual depth lived their faith as a contact with the profound mystery of existence, whose difficulty is so great that all our faculties have to be mustered to give us a chance to clarify it a little: reason, intuition, imagination, desire, no faculty can be dispensed with when we are confronted with what is sacred. Consequently, even if spiritual life cannot be completely rationalized, – and Islam is no different from any other religious tradition here, – it is not because faith is an enemy of reason that they sooner or later go separate ways: it is because their common objective, the sacred, is beyond each of them, beyond the sentiment fostered by faith, beyond the arguments built by reason.

THE ROLE OF REASON IN SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE

Is the Quran an appeal for the use or for the abandonment of reason? Did Allah, the God of Islam, want human beings to reflect on his mystery or merely to believe in him blindly and obediently? The appeal to reflection is one of the most recurring themes in the Muslim holy text. It continuously attributes to God words that oblige human beings to reflect on his 'signs'. The whole universe is thus described as a universe of signs, a book of meditation on the mystery of the very apparition of being. Leibniz and then, later, Heidegger said that the greatest metaphysical question human reason is confronted with is: 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' And it is towards that question that the Quran directs the curiosity and the thinking of the believer. Why does the universe exist? What are the finalities of its creation?

Take for example the following verse of the Quran: *"In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day, and the ships that run in the sea with that which profits men, and the water that Allah sends down from the sky, then gives life therewith to the earth after its death and spreads in it all (kinds of) animals, and the changing of the winds and the clouds*

made subservient between heaven and earth, there are surely signs for a people who understand." (2, 164)

We begin the commentary of this passage by making two points of vocabulary. The word 'sign' (*ayat*) used here also means 'verse' in Arabic. Consequently, each verse is a sign of God, in other words an invitation to reflect. So reason is urged to exert itself not just as regards a few mysterious or obscure passages, but given the very choice of a term with a double meaning, as regards each of the sentences of the Quran. Secondly, the word translated here by the verb 'understand' – 'a people who understand' (*ya qilun*) – belongs to the same family as the term 'intellect' (*aqil*). Now this term has been granted exceptional dignity by numerous philosophers and mystics of Islam, according to whom this 'intellect' designates a faculty of knowledge *one part of which is reason*, the other being intuition: the intellect sees truth synthetically (by means of an intuition that grasps the true beyond all concepts) and explicates it analytically (by means of a reason that demonstrates or uses arguments). The intellect is thus a two-sided faculty, possessing both intuition and reasoning. And for authors like Ibn Sina (Avicenna 980-1037), God himself is the



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sovereign intellect (*The Book of Healing*, § Metaphysics), a model for the human intellect, which emanates from it so to speak like a spark. God is the pure intellect, intuition and supreme reason, who, unlike the human intellect, not only contemplates but creates the truth. In God, knowledge is creative, or to express this strange idea in other words, his creative act is at the same time a cognitive act. His contemplation of the world is creative. It is his act of contemplation that creates the universe.

Having made this quite clear, let us now see in greater depth what the verse quoted above can teach us about the use of reason in Islam. The poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1873-1938) insisted on what he called 'the naturalism of the Quran',¹ that is its constant tendency to direct the gaze of human beings towards the world as perceived by the senses, nature, instead of towards a hereafter, as is to be expected of a holy text. How did he explain this? He wrote: 'No doubt, the immediate purpose of the Quran in this reflective observation of Nature is to awaken in man the consciousness of that of which Nature is regarded a symbol', in other words to make the world as perceived by the senses only a copy of the intelligible world, and thus to lead the believer to meditate on this other world. However, as he points out immediately, the veritable role of the Quranic text is quite different from the classic function of holy texts: "But the point to note is the general empirical attitude of the Quran which engendered in its followers a feeling of reverence for the actual and ultimately made them the founders of modern science. It was a great point to awaken the empirical spirit in an age which renounced the visible as of no value in men's search after God."²

From this point of view the Quran is anti-platonic: by inviting human beings to reflect on this world, it is non-metaphysical and teaches that 'Reality lives in its own appearances.' And it is precisely in this sense that it is an invitation to use reason: by urging man to face nature, to face his own nature, it enjoins him *not to believe in a hypothetical hereafter* (about which our reason is incapable of saying anything whatever, and hence must give way to the imagination) *but to develop scientific interpretations of reality*: historical analyses of the passing of time, physical analyses of the laws of succession and causality governing natural phenomena, sociological and ethnological analyses of the structuring of human societies and cultures, psychological analyses of the depths of man's inner being, philosophical analyses of the status of man in this universe.

From this Quranic invitation to use reason, Iqbal sought to deduce an explanation of how Islamic civilization was a major matrix for the constitution and development of the scientific spirit from the eighth to the fourteenth century. A major reference work for this question is Ahmed Djebbar's book, *L'âge d'or des sciences arabes* (The Golden Age of Arab Sciences).

The use of reason therefore seems consubstantial with spiritual life in Islam. Moreover the first school of theology, set up in Basra as early as the first half of the second century of the Hegira, the Mutazilite school, has always been described as being rationalistic. And it was indeed in several respects, for example the following two essential ones: in the first place, their extremely complex conception of divine unity (*tawhid*) that sought to establish by means of reasoned arguments that God's essence lay beyond all his attributes that are stated in the Quran (as for example his Mercy, his creative Power, his Wisdom, etc.); secondly, their affirmation that human beings are free to act and responsible for their acts. There again they were rationalistic in that they tried to show that this was not incompatible with the idea of God's omnipotence. If God was to be considered just, they explained, he had necessarily to allow human beings the possibility of behaving well or badly. Human freedom is not therefore the sign that something has 'escaped' God's will, but on the contrary shows his will for justice and his fundamental benevolence.

Later schools of theology, however, fought against the Mutazilites, notably the school founded around the great figure of al Ashari (b. 873). As Henri Corbin pointed out in his masterwork, *History of Islamic Philosophy*: 'Abu al-Hasan al-Ashari was profoundly opposed to the excessive rationalism of the Mutazilite teachers'.³ From then on, reason suffered in Islam. And naturally so did the philosophers who made use of it. In particular, remember the tribulations of Averroes, who, in the twelfth century, had to fight against religious dogmatism in order to stress the fact that, as Ali Benmakhlof reminds us in his book devoted to this thinker, 'the point is not to read the Quran as a text closed in upon itself, giving definitive positive and material knowledge, but as a programmatic text encouraging human beings to use their reason to acquire knowledge', that is to say 'as a text in which one finds a knowledge project, not in the sense that one will find knowledge in it but in the sense that one will find an injunction to acquire knowledge'.⁴

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Other times, other places

Darwin (1809-1882) and creationism: reason and faith

2009 was the Charles Darwin year. Both the 200th anniversary of his birth and the 150th anniversary of the publication of *The Origin of Species* were celebrated.

This book, which dramatically changed the vision of the world no longer relied on religious prejudice but was based on reason and scientific inquiry.

The theory of 'descent with modification' – which became the theory of evolution – also benefited from later additions and redrafting on the part of scientists, thus demonstrating the value they attributed to the overall scheme proposed in *The Origin of the Species*. Thus the discovery of the laws of heredity clarified the question of the transmission of characters. The 'synthetic theory of evolution', developed in the 1930s to the 1960s, allowed mathematicians, naturalists and paleontologists to converge around the Darwinian theories. Molecular biology and paleontology are now producing new adjustments, but all scientific progress now confirms the correctness of Charles Darwin's theses.

According to Darwin, the earth was gradually colonized by plants and unicellular organisms, which with each new mutation evolved into more complex beings: animals (including humans). Evolution is carried out by natural selection, the living things that are best adapted to their environment are the ones that survive. They are the ones that have the greatest chance of reproducing, and thus pass on their genes. In this way species change...

These theories are generally accepted and have become standard belief. Yet this was not always the case. Since its publication, *The Origin of the Species* has faced strong opposition based on the belief that God created the Earth and the universe in ways consistent with a literal reading of the Bible. Despite setbacks, the opponents of Darwinism did not give up. They opened up a conflict between faith and reason, which has still not been settled today.

There have been three main creationist movements since 1860:

- > (1860-1960): The '*hardline*' creationists: they advocate a literal reading of the Bible. For them, the Earth is 6000 years old at most, and God created the universe in six twenty-four hour days. Also called 'young earth creationism' this movement, which repudiates scientific proof, still exists but no longer has any credibility.
- > (1960-1980): the *evolutionist creationists*: this movement accepts that the origin of the universe and life on earth goes back a very long time, but it still takes into account the creation stories in Genesis.
- > (1990- ...) '*intelligent design*': Today's creationists claim that the traditional scientific theory of evolution by natural selection is not enough to account for the origin, complexity and diversity of life. They admit paleontological evidence concerning a succession of different living beings throughout the ages, but refute the pre-eminence of natural mechanisms of evolution involving no supernatural cause. This succession of species is the product of a 'higher' intelligence.

This last movement, using aggressive methods of lobbying, seeks to get Intelligent Design to be considered a scientific theory just like the others and demands that it be given access to the channels of education. This phenomenon, initially limited to American evangelists, finds an echo in Christian and Muslim fundamentalist circles in other countries. Thus, in early 2007, a de luxe work that looked to be scientific, the *Atlas of Creation*, was mailed to the vice-chancellors of universities and university-level colleges in France, and, after a cursory examination, it was often made available for students to consult. Indeed, the outward appearance of the work, whose contents and illustrations seemed to be of a scientific nature, did not at first arouse suspicion. But a closer reading revealed the intentions of the editor, a Turk named Harun Yahya, which were to destroy Darwin's evolutionary theory. A more thorough examination of the work revealed many fake effects. Some photos of fossils that were correlated bore no relation to each other, and sometimes they even belonged to different species.

In light of this conflict between reason and faith certain fundamental underlying issues appear:

- Must the scientific spirit submit blindly to religious dogma (in this case where is the critical attitude that characterizes the scientific mind)?
- What is role of reason in explaining the world?
- Must education give equal importance to science based on reasoning and to dogmatic assertions based on a literal interpretation of religious texts?
- What are the links between politics and religion? Should science and education be purely secular?

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



Reflecting on the text

- > *What do you think of the fact that the faith-reason conflict is excluded from the area of Arab-Muslim thought?*
- > *How does al-Farabi succeed in reconciling intuition and proof?*
- > *What status does the "sacred" hold as compared with faith and reason?*
- > *Does the Quran as a founding book seek reflection or unconditional support?*
- > *Define the double role of the intellect.*
- > *What is the connection between the perceptible world, nature, empiricism and reason?*
- > *What is a rationalist theology in Islam?*
- > *What is the relationship between human freedom and responsibility?*
- > *Define the status of the Quran: a legal code (a statement of law) or an exhortation (a statement of truth)?*
- > *Comment on a specific example of a fatwa on the headscarf.*
- > *The interpretative effort ijihad: its scale and its limits.*
- > *Discover the links between policy, law, revolution and reason.*
- > *How does "dogmatic closure" cause deadlock in Arab-Muslim societies?*

It was in this sense that Averroes, in his famous *Decisive Treatise* on the 'connection between religion and philosophy', proposed as an objective that philosophical reason, whose model he had found in Aristotle, had to be legitimized and authorized to question the sacred:

*"Now, the goal of this statement is for us to investigate, from the perspective of Law-based reflection, whether reflection upon philosophy and the sciences of logic is permitted, prohibited, or commanded – and this as a recommendation or as an obligation – by the Law."*⁵

THE ROLE OF REASON IN SPIRITUAL BEHAVIOUR

Our task now is to examine the use of reason in the practical life of the Muslim believer. We have just mentioned Averroes' reference to the Islamic Law (*sharia*), which has been defined historically as the legal and moral determination of good and bad behaviour. It traditionally comprises four categories of explicit legal qualifications (*ahkam*): what is forbidden, what is unsuitable, what is permitted, what is recommended, what is obligatory. But that naturally opens the way to the use of reason. Its role here is to class each possible act, each possible form of behaviour under one or other of these categories.

On what basis? Two references, two normative resources are considered here to be capital for helping reason to decide whether such and such an act is blameworthy, tolerable, or whether it can be demanded of the believer: the Quran on the one hand and on the other the hadith, in other words everything the Prophet, 'the finest of models', ever said or did.

As Muhammad Iqbal said, 'The primary source of the Law of Islam is the Quran' even if he made it quite clear immediately afterwards that 'The Quran, however, is not a legal code' (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*). This is indeed the first question Islamic reason must pose and the first decision it must make: is the Quran a set of instructions destined to become the object of the same legal obligations for all Muslims? Or does it consist of exhortations to the spiritual life that each Muslim must put into practice in accordance with his own reason and freedom. Historical Islam settled matters, defining itself once and for all as 'a religion of the Law.' But that raises a problem from the standpoint of the demands of reason, which go hand in hand with the demands of personal freedom: if it is indeed considered that the Quran 'gives orders' and formulates commandments, then faced with these orders and commandments, individual reason must keep silent. That is why Islamic culture presents so often, objectively, the image of a passive faith that considers submission to an incalculable amount of dogma and principles set up by social custom to be a spiritual virtue, especially since everyone believes they originate in the Quran itself, whereas, in fact, as we have explained, they are the result of an original interpretative choice of the text as a 'text of law', a 'text of truth', which it is not in itself, as Averroes and Iqbal would have liked to remind people with a hope of being heard.

So who has the right to use reason in Islam in questions of spiritual practice? Exclusively the experts in religious science, who know the hadiths and the various historical elaborations developed by the main juridical-theological schools. Reason in Islam, for everything concerning the practice of spiri-

tual life, is the property of the clerics. For centuries the latter have employed three tools that enable them to practise the control of reason: the *qiyas*, the *ijma* and the *ijhtiad*.

The *qiyas* is reasoning by analogy. Faced with each new situation, scholarly rationality summons up its energies to determine whether it is possible to find in the Quran or the hadith a situation resembling or corresponding to the new situation in question, and which could serve as a model. We shall give an example of this method of determining good and evil, which is at once legalistic, clerical and deductive. We have borrowed it from a little book published in 2002 by the *European Council for Fatwa and Research* presided by Yusuf al Qaradawi. Its explicit objective is to give European Muslims a rational expertise provided by well-known scholars in the Muslim world and specifically adapted to their situation in non-Islamic societies. Here is the example: *"If a newly converted Muslim sister suffers great difficulty in wearing a head-cover, must we command her to do so regardless, even if that threatens to eventually completely deter her from Islam?"*⁶ It is a question to which the college of scholars replies by *qiyas*, that is to say by deducing the good in this unusual situation (a woman converted to Islam in a non-Muslim country) from recommendations in certain Quranic verses. In this case the legal opinion, given after certain verses have been interpreted in a legalistic and traditionalist sense, is that a Muslim woman who does not wear the headscarf is committing a 'wrong-doing' and that faced with this 'illicit' or forbidden behaviour, 'we must not give up on this sister returning to the straight path and the correct way, praying for Allah (*swt*) to give her guidance and treating her in a beautiful and gentle manner.'

Two comments can be made concerning this conception of the use of reason:

1- It is contradictory to a human being's freedom of conscience and thought. How can it be legitimate for someone else to think in place of a person, to decide what is good and evil for him by claiming that his opinion constitutes a 'law', a law moreover that belongs to the spiritual domain, in which such a law may invoke the authority of the Quran and hence claim to be itself sacred.

2- Not only would 'scholarly reason' like to enslave an individual's reason like this, in a quite illegitimate manner, it is itself a slave. For its use is clearly subject to prejudices concerning good and evil that are a matter of simple religious custom, in other words of mores relating to the traditional dress of women in certain regions of the Muslim world, mores that can in no way be considered legitimately to have a universal value.

That leads us to the *ijma*, that is the scholarly consensus. This is the second rational procedure in Islam: the determination of good and evil is supposed to emerge from a meeting of experts, as in the example we have just given. The use of reason here is intersubjective: by means of dialogue, contradictory arguments, debating, and controversy, the different standpoints seek to enlighten each other, object to and refute each other and finally find the most satisfying compromise, so that in the end a decision judged to be the most objective emerges.

However, the reservations expressed concerning the *qiyas* still apply here: both are indeed uses of reason, but uses reserved for the specialists. And given that we are in the domain of spiritual life, we may reasonably doubt that an individual can be legitimately subject to someone else's reason. Science is a matter for specialists, and no one would dream of questioning their privileged right to elaborate what can be held to be true or false. But for religion things are different: in this domain there are indeed also skills acquired by study in religious universities. But does that empower one to say what is good or bad, licit or illicit? Does spiritual life belong to the public or the private domain, is it a matter for law or choice? That is the problem raised by practical rationality as it has been developed in the history of Islam.

And yet a way open to the use of a free rationality, available to all, exists in the history of Islam, the way of the *ijtihad*, defined by theologians as the third reflective tool as regards good and evil, again based on the Quran and the hadith. The term means 'effort of personal reflection'. Muhammad Iqbal defines it as follows: "*In the terminology of Islamic law it means to exert with a view to form an independent judgement on a legal question. The idea, I believe, has its origin in a well-known verse of the Quran - 'And to those who exert We show Our path'(16, 68-69). We find it more definitely adumbrated in a tradition of the Holy Prophet. When Muadh was appointed ruler of Yemen, the Prophet is reported to have asked him as to how he would decide matters coming up before him. 'I will judge matters according to the Book of God,' said Muadh. 'But if the Book of God contains nothing to guide you?' 'Then I will act on the precedents of the Prophet of God.' 'But if the precedents fail?' 'Then I will exert to form my own judgement.'*"⁷

CONCLUSION

For centuries reason in Islam has taken into consideration, with varying success according to the religious and political thinking and contexts, the two great questions it felt to be essential when faced with the sacred: that of the part it could possibly play in understanding its mystery and that of its claim to freedom with regard to a religious system of law often considered to be transcendent. What room is there for human reason in the more thorough examination of the meaning of the sacred and the sacralization of existence? Here religious dogmatism has sought, as it

But the use of the *ijtihad* too was very quickly reserved for the experts in the religious sciences, even though its original function was much broader, and, according to this hadith, was supposed to be synonymous with personal judgement. To justify that its usage had been legally restricted, Iqbal went on to say: 'The student of the history of Islam, however, is well aware that with the political expansion of Islam systematic legal thought became an absolute necessity.' This restriction of the use of reason in religious matters was thus indispensable to Islam throughout the period of its history when it tried to establish itself as a system that was both religious and political: if the justice and the authority of the State wished to label themselves Islamic, then Islam had to be defined as a political religion, that is to say that the Quran had to be understood as a 'code of law'.

But is that Islam's future? Is Islam destined to live as a religion and as a political system? This question illustrates what is principally at issue with the use of reason in Islam. If the use of reason is liberated or liberalized, that means that Islam can no longer be conceived as a political religion, nor for that matter as a set of dogmas that it is forbidden to discuss and which are reserved for specialist scholars. There can be no democratic freedom, no equal rights to freedom, without the right to use reason as an individual. All the Muslim scholars, all the political powers that want to found their authority on a function of being the guarantors of Islamic Law would be well advised to make sure that such a revolution does not take place if they want to retain their own power.

A certain number of contemporary thinkers consider that there is in this situation what Mohammed Arkoun calls a 'dogmatic closure' on the part of religious and political authorities who are in league to maintain the established order. How can we get out of this regime of 'legal reason', which places people under the tutelage of the *sharia*, and develop in Islam a culture of free reason? We would have to resume the efforts made by the Arab humanists of the eleventh century, notably Tawhidi and Miskawayh, who, as Arkoun has shown, had conceived 'the birth of a human subject anxious to have autonomy and freedom of judgment in the exercise of intellectual, civic and moral responsibilities' – and, we are tempted to add, spiritual responsibilities.⁸

has often done elsewhere, to reduce the place accorded to rationality, that is to the questioning and personal liberty that endanger its power. But the religious tradition is not confined to that. It has also advocated the *ijtihad* (the effort of personal judgement) and, in the domain of spiritual knowledge, it has put forward the theory that reason and intuition can complement each other and hence lead a human being to the stage of '*arif bi-Allah*', that is to say 'knowing through God', God being, as we have seen in Ibn Sina, intellect itself, sovereign reason and intuition.

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text	Educational exercises
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What relationship does al-Farabi establish between religion and philosophy? • What is the double meaning of the word <i>ayat</i>? • How, according to Avicenna, is human knowledge different from divine knowledge? • How, according to Iqbal, does the Quran encourage a scientific approach? • In what way is the Mu'tazilī school rationalistic? • What are the five categories of practical reason? • In what way is the Quran not dogmatic? • What are the three instruments of the rule of reason, and what is their function? • In what way are <i>qiyas</i>, <i>ijma'</i> and <i>ijtihad</i> complementary? • What is at stake in the relationship between religion and politics in Islam? 	<p>Survey of the legal situation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce the topic for debate to the participants: Religious and ideological conflicts in modern societies. • Give several examples/cases of different countries (if possible in visual form; PowerPoint). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Religion and public school, - Religion and national security, - Freedom of political parties ... • The participants choose one of the subjects. • Give the groups quantitative data in the form of documents.
<p>Entering into dialogue with the text</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can we disregard the sacred dimension in our thinking? • Can we answer the question "Why does the universe exist"? • Should everything that exists be seen as signs to be deciphered? • Does all that exists have an ultimate purpose? • Does a sacred text leave room for freedom of thought? • Do you consider there to be insurmountable contradictions between the various Islamic decision-making authorities? • Is Islam compatible with individual liberties? <p>Suggested teaching method: question or objection One or more questions are chosen. Each participant replies on a sheet of paper. The moderator gathers up the sheets and hands them out again at random. Each participant reads what is written, then asks one or more questions or raises one or more objections to what is written, specifying whether a question or an objection is intended. It cannot be both at the same time. Each participant takes back his or her sheet. All the participants assess what has been proposed to them and reply. When that has been done, the sheets are handed out again and the process starts up a second time, then a third time. Once he or she has replied to three persons, each participant analyses the exchanges and what may have changed in his or her answers. Everyone reads out their conclusions. A general discussion takes place in which the analyses are compared. The group reviews the work and the exercise.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The group studies the data and makes a synopsis. • Ask the group to identify values and conflicts of values. • The group outlines key questions. • Ask the group to clarify conflicts by using analogies. • The group thinks about the possible consequences of conflicts and describes them. • The participants adopt a position by discussing the pros and cons of various solutions. • The participants must justify their respective positions on the basis of facts. • Conclude with a discussion on: rational faith and its relationship to Islam.

Insert written by Oscar Brenifier

Insert written by Jonathan Levy

¹ M. Iqbal, 1996, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, New Lahore, Sang-e-Meel Publications, p. 20.

² *Ibid.*

³ H. Corbin, 1993, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. by L. Sherrard and P. Sherrard, London, Kegan Paul, p. 112.

⁴ A. Benmakhlouf, 2000, *Averroes*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, p. 58.

⁵ Averroes, 2001, *Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory*, trans. by C. Butterworth, Provo, Brigham Young University, p. 1.

⁶ European Council for Fatwa and Research, *First Collection of Fatwa*, trans. by A. O. Altikriti.

⁷ M. Iqbal, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁸ M. Arkoun, 2006, *Humanisme et Islam: combats et propositions*, Rabat, Ed. Marsam.



Frontispiece of Masnavi by Rumi, India, 14th-15th century © IMA. Nasreddin Hodja, linked to the Sufi tradition, is a contemporary of the great mystic Rumi, author of Masnavi, of which an Indian copy from the 14th-15th century is shown here.

NASRUDDIN HODJA, A POPULAR PHILOSOPHER AND MASTER OF THE NEGATIVE WAY

NASRUDDIN IS A MYTH MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, EVEN THOUGH IN THE CITY OF AKSHEHIR (ANATOLIA) IN TURKEY, SOME WILL PRETEND TO SHOW YOU THE GRAVE WHERE HE WAS APPARENTLY BURIED IN 1284. IF SUCH A HISTORICAL BEING DID EXIST, HE WAS ONLY THE STARTING POINT FOR A VERY LARGE BODY OF STORIES. THE HERO OF THOSE NUMEROUS FUNNY AND ABSURD TALES ENCOUNTERS MANY SITUATIONS AND CAN ALTERNATELY BE A PEASANT, AN IMAM, A BOATMAN, A ROAMING PREDICATOR, A KING'S COUNCELLOR, A TEACHER, OR A JUDGE, LIKE ULYSSES, NASRUDDIN IS NO ONE AND EVERYONE, HE REPRESENTS A TRADITION – ORAL AND WRITTEN – MORE THAN A SPECIFIC PERSON, FROM WHICH HE DRAWS HIS STRENGTH AS A SCHOOL OF LIFE MORE THAN AS A PETRIFIED HERO OR A PETRIFIED OPUS. EVEN HIS NAME CHANGES TOTALLY, SINCE IN HIS FAME AROUND THE MEDITERRANEAN AND BEYOND, EVEN OUTSIDE THE MUSLIM WORLD, HE WILL COME TO BEAR DIFFERENT NAMES SUCH AS: JIHA IN MAGHREB, AFANDI IN CHINA, NASTRADHIN CHOTZAS IN GREECE AND HERSCH'LE IN ISRAEL. THE TALES BEING TOLD ARE EFFICIENT AND PEDAGOGICAL. OUT OF THOSE STORIES, EACH LISTENER WILL HEAR AND UNDERSTAND WHAT HE CAN, WITH HIS OWN MEANS. THE APPARENT LIGHTNESS OF MANY OF THEM REVEAL AND HIDE A PROFOUND UNDERSTANDING OF THE REALITY OF BEING, EVEN IF ONE CAN EASILY REMAIN ON A SUPERFICIAL EXTERNAL APPREHENSION OF THEM.

THE NEGATIVE WAY

In the beginning of the Hippias minor dialogue, a discussion sets in between Hippias and Socrates, on the question of who is the best man in the Iliad, between Odysseus (Ulysses) and Achilles. The debate centers on the issue of lying, and Hippias claims that Achilles is a better man because he does not lie, contrary to Odysseus, who is the most cunning and does not hesitate to hold a false discourse. At a certain point, Socrates shows that Achilles makes as well statements which are not true, but Hippias then uses as a defense of his hero the fact he does not lie consciously: he just changed his mind, but he is very sincere. A debate Socrates concludes by claiming that Odysseus is better than Achilles, since when he lies, he very well knows that he is lying, so he knows the truth more than Achilles.

We would like to use this example of a classical philosophical text to introduce what we can call the 'via negativa' – negative path – of philosophical practice. We call it 'via negativa' just like the traditional concept of 'via negativa' used in particular in theology which is commonly used to determine for example the nature of God through the denial of what he is not. Thus Socrates defends lying in order to defend the truth, with the same irony that he claims his own ignorance in order to teach. And what is here used in a more conceptual and rational way is encountered as well in more playful way by the clown, the actor, the novelist, the caricaturist, the humorist, etc. All these very common modes of expression describe or stage certain schemes, behaviors, characters and situations, as a way to denounce them and obviously prone the opposite of what they repre-

sent. Thus the pretentious, the selfish, the hypocrite, the ambitious or any other typical defect will be presented in such a ridiculous, gross or exaggerated fashion, that this scenic posture will evidently criticize the ones who are affected by these defaults in order to encourage the quality opposite to it. Or at minimum, it represents a 'Know thyself' injunction.

An interesting aspect of this scheme is the large proportion of 'unsaid' in those modalities of expression, which leaves tremendous room to ambiguity, and at the same time a lot of space for freedom, since it does not saturate meaning, since it permits multiple representation and interpretation. The emergence of the comedy in renaissance Europe is a clear example of this freedom to criticize, both society and the power in place, therefore giving permission to think. Or what allowed the court jester to play his role of mocking even the king while going unpunished was precisely the dimension and tremendous ambiguity, that for example allowed the punning, the spirited playing with words. Harsh criticism came out of the fool's mouth, but in such an indirect way that if one would get offended, he would reveal himself and become the laughing stock of all. The baroque conception where world and stage become one single entity, making us a distant spectator of our selves, is a good illustration of this general principle.

Philosophy and antiphilosophy

But negative theology is mystical and comedy is a mere show, when philosophy is supposed to be of a rather scientific order: it should found itself on reason, on logic, on demonstration, draw a system, therefore ambiguity, innuendos, allusions, exaggeration and other such 'literary tricks' are not exactly welcome. We can here just remember the Hegel lectures on Plato, where the mere fact that Plato tells a story like the Allegory of the cave signifies that at this time he is not producing a philosophical discourse. Philosophy can only be rational and scientific, and this Hegelian heritage will definitely model the face of philosophy. Therefore the image of the philosopher, as the nature of his productions, tends to be wise and direct, more than foolish and indirect. After all, in a culture founded within the matrix of Christian values, let us not forget that the 'oblique' is the devil, for the devil is crafty. In French, the word 'malin' means smart or shrewd, but it refers as well to the devil, since it comes from 'malus': bad. The English word 'devious' has something of that order, since what is not straight seems suspicious, and what is deviant is devilish.



The author

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To be moral therefore means to say the truth, to say things the way they are, and to behave according to established standards of the good and the recommendable. In fact, in the mentioned Plato dialogue, Hippias shows a rather often occulted but fundamental aspect of the sophist: the sophist is the one who knows, he says the truth, he is the specialist of the good, the technician of knowledge, the keeper of rightness and morality. Callicles claiming that one has to follow his impulses and desires and Gorgias reducing speech to mere rhetoric is only an attempt by Socrates to show the fundamental immorality of such a position. Since, as Pascal said, true morality laughs at morality. And knowledge is in itself immoral, for its pretensions and hypocrisy, its fundamental negligence of virtue, its disdain for the good, and moreover its ignorance of being, its absence of being. The rational and moral speech is merely the discourse of convenience and convention, of good conscience, the philosophical correctness that Nietzsche criticizes as the 'small reason', in opposition to the 'great reason' of life, or when he denounces the illusory concept of human conscience. For even though this trend of negative philosophy is not the hegemonic one and is even contrary to it, it maintains itself as the regular 'other' of philosophy: its enemy brother, its shadow and denigrator.

This minority current of philosophy, this antiphilosophy, which pretends to show and shock more than it pretends to tell and explain, is already very present and visible within philosophy itself, for example in the character of Socrates, and its devastating irony, this form of speech that says the contrary of what it says. What a historical joke we have there in Socrates, that we can recognize as the founding figure of philosophy, its hero and martyr, with someone that preaches the false to know the true, and even worse, someone that shows that we are condemned to falsehood since truth cannot be known. He had necessarily to be killed, he who preached an antilogic, for example in the Parmenides dialogue where every proposition and its contrary is both tenable and untenable. If the false is true and the true is false, we don't know anymore where we stand, we don't know anymore if we exist: the carpet has been pulled from under our feet. But what amazing freedom is given to us: the right to think the unthinkable, all the way into absurdity. Nevertheless, the agonistic dimension of this otherness, the crossing over on the other side of the mirror, the fragmented 'this sidedness' of reality which refuses the establishment of any system, of any conceptual and ethical map, is unbearable for both the common man and the knowledgeable man, since both compose, as raw or cultured as they are, the hierarchy of self evidence and good horse sense, a worldview where coherency has to be granted.

The cynic, with its total lack of respect for anything and anyone, provides in this context an interesting historical example: it is the rare case of a philosophical school whose name is used as well as a moral condemnation. Alongside with nihilism, although someone like Nietzsche will try to show that contrary to the appearance, the nihilists are not the ones who appear so to the superficial understanding. And what both cynicism and nihilism indicate, what they have in common with the Socratic method, is their power of denial, their heavy

dose of contempt. It is not so much here the place to learn, but the place to unlearn. One should not teach principles, but on the contrary corrode those principles in order to think. Knowledge is here largely conceived in opposition to thinking, the former conceived here as a possession of fixed ideas that crystallizes, rigidifies and sterilizes mental processes. So the main task of the teacher, if teacher be, is to untie or break the knots that knowledge represents, a knowledge that is characterized as opinion – be it common opinion or educated opinion, as Socrates distinguishes – in order to free the mind and allow thinking. Just like in eastern practices such as Zen, what is needed is to short circuit the usual paths of thoughts, seize them through some shock effect, by mean of some conceptual paradox, critical analysis or some strange behavior, which should hopefully produce some illumination. And when the mind will wake up to itself, it will know where to go, since mind is naturally inclined to think, unless it is hindered in its proper activity.

Methods

'It is not doubt which makes one crazy, it is certitude' says Nietzsche. Even though the Nietzschean abrupt interpellation is definitely not the Socratic laborious questioning, they both agree on this idea that one's mind should not be jailed within its own thoughts. The thoughts we entertain necessarily stop us from having other thoughts, especially if those thoughts are the kind of general principles that determine what is acceptable and what is not. This has an echo in Heidegger, when he writes: 'What gives the most to think in our time which gives us a lot to think is that we do not think yet.' So we have to become a stranger to ourselves in order to think, we have to alienate ourselves in order to be.

The way Socrates operated this cognitive shock was through questioning, provoking the interlocutor into discovering his own incoherency and ignorance, a process which allowed the person to give birth to new concepts: *maieutics*. For Heraclites, the struggle of contraries engenders being, so the emergence of those contraries allowed us to think and to be. For the cynics, man is so deeply entrenched in conventions that the only way to get him to think is to behave in the most abrupt fashion toward him: by fornicating in public, eating with the hands, going around naked or living in barrel, by pretending men are not men, etc. All these theatrics should affect the individual mind more than any speech should do. In the Far East, the master would produce a strange paradox, or act in a strange way, and the student should by himself meditate on the meaning of it, without any explanations ever given to him. And in some schools, the master would not hesitate to become violent in order to produce the desired 'pedagogical' effect. A rather rash perspective which comes as a repellent for those that think philosophical practice is geared at making one feel at ease or happy! And a very 'unethical' posture indeed since the individual does not constitute his own end anymore: he is the mere instrument of truth. In a more subdued and formal fashion, Kant's antinomies are a conceptual reduction from the same inspiration.



THE CASE OF NASRUDDIN HODJA

There are different reasons why among a number of case studies of the negative way or antiphilosophy figureheads we chose Nasruddin Hodja.

The first reason is that he did not exist as an actual person, and one of the requirements of our practice is precisely to develop the capacity of the person not to exist. Nasruddin is a myth more than anything else, even though in the city of Akshehir (Anatolia) in Turkey, some will pretend to show you the grave where he was apparently buried in 1284. If such a historical being did exist, he was only the starting point for a very large body of stories. The hero of those numerous funny and absurd tales encounters many situations and can alternately be a peasant, an imam, a boatman, a roaming preacher, a doctor, a teacher, or a judge, he can have no wife, one wife, two wives and does not hesitate to practice homosexuality, but more conclusive on the mythical aspect of his existence is the fact he is portrayed periodically as the jester of Tamerlane, when the latter conquered Turkey only at the end of the fourteenth century. Like Ulysses, Nasruddin is no one and everyone, he represents a tradition – oral and written – more than a specific person, from which he draws his strength as a school of life more than as a petrified hero or a petrified opus, a nature that is more conform to his being. Even his name changes totally, since in his fame around the Mediterranean he will come to bear different names such as: Jiha in Maghreb, Afandi in China, Nastradhin Chotzas in Greece and Herschle in Israel. And even his original Turkish name Nasruddin is very common in this part of the world: it means ‘glory of religion’, Hodja referring to the vague title of ‘master’.

The second reason we chose him is the popular aspect of his person and what is told about him, for the nature of the tales that are told easily make him a folk hero, if only because they are funny and lively, and therefore efficient and pedagogical. Out of those stories, each listener will hear and understand what he can, with his own means, a phenomenon that is interesting to watch when one tells those different tales to different public. The reactions to the different contexts, to the degrees of subtleties, to concreteness or absurdity, will reveal more than many words who the listener is and how he thinks. Even the incomprehension of the story will be useful, since it will send back each one to his own ignorance or blindness.

The third reason is the width of the field covered by those stories, precisely because they represent a tradition more than a particular author. Questions of ethics, of logic, of attitudes, existential issues, sociological issues, marital issues, political issues, metaphysical issues, the list is long that can be drawn of the type of far ranging problems or paradoxes posed to the person that comes in contact with this body of critical knowledge. The apparent lightness of many of them reveals and hides a profound understanding of the reality of being, even if one can easily remain on a superficial external apprehension of them. But if the ‘classical’ philosopher will claim that the conceptualization and analysis – like the one we indulge in – is necessary in order to constitute philosophizing, one can as well respond that this formalization of the content can accomplish a sterilizing function and give the illusion of knowledge. But let’s leave for another occasion the debate about the nature and form of philosophy. Although one hint that can be useful as a contextual information, is the close relationship of Nasruddin to the Sufi tradition, the latter which helped transmit the stories of Nasruddin, contemporary and neighbor of the great mystique poet Rumi.

The fourth reason is the terribly provocative personality of this living myth. At a moment where political or philosophical correctness tries to promote ethics and ‘good behavior’ to varnish the civilized brutality of our society, Nasruddin can be very useful, since he is endowed with about all major defaults of character. He is a liar, a coward, a thief, a hypocrite, he is selfish, gross, abusive, lazy, stingy, unreliable and impious, but especially he is an idiot and a fool, and a very accomplished one. But he generously offers all those grotesque traits of character to the reader, who will see himself just like in a mirror, more visible in its exaggerated deformity. He invites us to examine, accept and enjoy the absurdity of our self, the nothingness of our personal being, as a way to free our own mind and existence from all those pretensions that are geared at giving us a good conscience, but that do more to induce personal and social compulsive lies than anything else. His way of being deals a terrible and appropriate blow to the idolatry of the individual self, so characteristic of our occidental modern culture, to our factitious and permanent search for identity and happiness. Through his atrocious ‘small lies’, Nasruddin helps us set up in broad daylight the ‘big lie’. And little by little, we would like to take the place of his best and eternal friend: his donkey.

Insert written by Jacques Nicolais

Other times, other places

The Good Soldier Svejk

Picaresque¹ heroes abound in European literature. Rather an anti-hero than a hero, the picaresque hero is an eternal wanderer who has a lot of adventures. He is most often employed by a master (or several masters) and must be resourceful and inventive to survive and deal with the mundane business of masters engaged in more 'noble' tasks (that is to say, who are unfit to deal with everyday material life). Examples of the picaresque hero are: Sancho Panza, Simplicius Simplissimus, Candide, or Jacques the Fatalist...

In the early twentieth century, Jaroslav Hasek published *The Good Soldier Svejk*. Hasek was a Czech writer born in 1883. Enlisted in the Austrian army in 1915, he fought on the Russian front where he was taken prisoner. An anarchist and then a communist, he placed himself in the service of the Soviets in 1918 and at the same time joined the Czech legion,² a politico-military organization seeking the independence of the Czechs in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Returning to Prague in 1920 he created the popular character of Svejk developed in the four volumes of *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Svejk*, which unfortunately he did not complete (he died in 1923). Honest, but not too honest, Svejk appears to be an idiot, but is he really? The absurdity of what he comes up against and the solutions he adopts make us laugh, but at the same time make us reflect. Is Svejk's attitude less logical than our reactions would be in similar situations? Hasek's favourite targets are the administration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire,³ in particular the Army and the Church, and in general all conformist and hypocritical attitudes. Hasek's work met with great success among the Czech public, very fond of this kind of humour.

¹ A folk hero from a literary genre that comes from Spain. Often of humble origin, both brave and cowardly, a boorish but expressing both common sense and reason.

² Troops constituted by Czechs and Slovaks who were prisoners and deserters from the Austrian army. Unwilling to fight the Russians, the Slavic brotherhood led them to fight on the side of the Entente to obtain the independence of Czechoslovakia.

³ At the end of the First World War, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was dismantled after the 1919 Peace Conference. Czechoslovakia became one of the new independent states of Central Europe.



Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

<p><u>Understanding the text</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What is the negative way?</i> • <i>In what respect can cynicism be an ideal?</i> • <i>What characterizes Nasruddin Hodja's educational model?</i> • <i>Why have Nasruddin Hodja's stories enjoyed such success?</i> • <i>In "The Preacher", why are the faithful so anxious to receive a sermon?</i> • <i>In "The Key", what is the point in going to look further afield for what is nearby?</i> • <i>In "The Turban", why is Nasruddin Hodja angry with the innkeeper?</i> • <i>In what respect is the character of Nasruddin Hodja universal?</i> 	<p><u>Educational exercises</u></p> <p><i>Exercises in interpretation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Divide the participants into four groups and assign a different story to each group: group 1: "The Preacher" group 2 "The Key" group 3 "The Two Wives" group 4 "The ill-conceived world".</i> • <i>Write on the board four words: "truth", "teaching", "reasoning" and "autonomy".</i> • <i>Ask the participants from each group to read and analyse their story and then to choose one of the words on the board that they feel is capable of giving a meaning to their story, then discuss messages illustrated by the story in question.</i> • <i>Discussion with the other participants on these choices of words and messages.</i> • <i>Ask the participants to find common elements in the four stories and to note them on the board.</i> • <i>Explain the concept of "the negative way" and anti-philosophy together with the character of Nasruddin Hodja, explaining the five reasons given by the author.</i> • <i>Explain the interpretations of each story given by the author and compare with the interpretations given by the participants.</i>
<p><u>Entering into dialogue with the text</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Does Nasruddin Hodja offer a good educational model?</i> • <i>Do you consider Nasruddin Hodja to be really a philosopher?</i> • <i>In the story "The Key", which of the two characters is right?</i> • <i>Do you consider "The Two Wives" to be a moral tale?</i> • <i>In "The World is Badly Made" do you agree with Nasruddin Hodja's conclusion?</i> • <i>Do you know people who react like Nasruddin Hodja in "The Turban"?</i> • <i>Why do people often recount the stories of Nasruddin Hodja without giving much thought to their content?</i> <p><u>Suggested teaching method:</u> <u>validation criteria</u> <i>A question is chosen. Each participant replies individually in writing to the chosen question. The name of a person is drawn by lot, and a moderator writes his or her answer on the board. The group considers whether the answer is acceptable, identifying the criteria used, which are written one by one on the board. As a starting point, we propose the following criteria: in order to be accepted, an answer must be clear, relevant, coherent, reasoned, sufficient. If any one of these criteria is not met, the answer should be rejected. The group then considers a second answer, to which the same criteria are applied. It is nevertheless suggested that the criterion of difference should be added: the second answer should be substantially different from the first, otherwise it serves no purpose. The same process begins again for a third answer. If the moderator considers that there are a sufficient number of answers, the group analyses the results, particularly, where appropriate, the differences between the various answers. Once the analysis has been completed, another question is taken up and the process starts up again. The group reviews the work and the exercise.</i></p>	

The fifth reason is his free relationship with authority, whatever its nature. In front of religious, political, judiciary, academic or even domestic authority, Nasruddin remains at once free and respectful. He is not afraid of revealing the hypocrisy or the lies of the ruling power, be it big or small – Foucault spoke of ‘micro-powers’ – and still acknowledges its real and necessary status. When he criticizes Tamerlane, it is for the latter to act with more justice or reason. When he criticizes the believers or an imam, it is in order that they better conform to the spirit of religion. When he criticizes a scholar, it is to invite him to be wiser. For, to Nasruddin, the real question of authority is that of self authority, the authority we grant ourselves, on the basis of truth and authenticity and not on artificial, arbitrary and conventional bases.

But for now let us cut short the rationalization of our own choice in order to comment and analyze some key stories of Nasruddin Hodja, from which we can get a sense of the significance of his philosophical content and the implications for life and understanding. Let us note however that the philosophical dimension has often been eclipsed by the mere narrative dimension. But our hypothesis is that the pleasure we experience in this *vis comica* includes an intuitive perception of the issue at stake, the transmission of popular but deep wisdom.



SOME OF NASRUDDIN'S STORIES

Teaching: The Preacher

Nasruddin on a trip stops by a small town where the imam just died. Hearing he is a preacher, a group of faithful comes to get him in order to give the Friday sermon. But Nasruddin does not really want to do it, he feels tired and protests. But the people insist and he finally accepts. Once on the pulpit, he asks 'Dear brothers, do you know what I will talk about?' And everybody answer in one voice: 'Yes!' So Nasruddin answers: 'Well then, there is no use for me to stay here!' and he leaves. But the people, frustrated of the good word, fetch him once more in spite of his resistance, and when he asks again the question 'Do you know what I will talk about?' everyone answers 'No!'. To this, Nasruddin answers with a tone of anger: 'Then what I am doing with such a bunch of infidels and pagans!', and he leaves in a huff. But another time again, the faithful, somewhat irritated fetch him, in spite of his protests, and he comes back. Everybody is ready for his terrible question. 'Well, do you know what I will talk about?' asks he for the third time. 'Yes!' shouts half the crowd. 'No!' shouts the other half of the crowd. So Nasruddin answers: 'Well I propose that the ones who know explain everything to the ones who don't know!' and he leaves.

The preacher is a very interesting story that poses the paradox of teaching in a Socratic way. The postulate of it is that a teacher can only teach what the students already know, implying for example that it is not worth teaching someone if the ideas involved do not speak already to him, and if it does, he can teach himself. For this reason, the students actually do not need a teacher, as tries to show Nasruddin when by three times he leaves the assembly. And the only way the group can teach itself is through discussion, a sort of mutual teaching, where each student is a teacher. The lazy teacher, or foolish teacher, is therefore a good teacher: he gets the students to be active and 'force' them to mobilize their own knowledge and be creative, therefore practicing Socratic maieutics. And of course he does not explain this to his students: he expects them to figure it out, because he trusts them, even though he treats them in an apparently 'rude' way, which can hurt their 'feelings'. And he should not be worried that they merely stay at the level of appearance: his laziness. That is the risk to take. No teaching, even the 'best', guarantees understanding anyhow, especially when there are long explanations.

In our work as a philosopher, many interlocutors will act as the faithful and expect from us the good word, if not the truth itself, especially when they have difficulties they want to resolve, or simply because they want to be charmed by a 'beautiful speech'. And they will be very unhappy if they do not get what they want, not understanding that the 'man of knowledge' does not do his duty. But our work here is to teach them to

trust themselves, not by explaining this to them, which would prolong an infantile relationship to the authority, but by posing a paradox that will make them become conscious – by themselves – of their own heteronomy, the statute of minority that they impose on their own self. This situation is even more acute when someone is looking for 'motherly' consolation, asking for a soft touch that will make them feel better: for those, such a behavior is actually intolerable, it will make them feel rejected, and maybe rightly so. Nasruddin's practice is pitiless, a lack of mercy that might just have its own legitimacy. It might make one angry, but on the long run, it might make him think in a more profound way.

The truth: The Key

Late at night, Nasruddin and his neighbor come home from a feast. While trying to open his door, Nasruddin drops his key on the sidewalk. Hearing this, his friend comes to help him find it. But Nasruddin leaves him in the dark and start searching in the middle of the street, where beams a beautiful moonshine. His neighbor, surprised, asks him: 'Why are you looking for your key over there? You lost it over here!'. To which Nasruddin answers: 'Do as you wish! I prefer to search where there is light!'

This story is very famous in various forms under different climates. It has sometimes lost some of its strength and significance by loosing the context, when it is known for example as the story of a drunken man. The fact it comes from Nasruddin, known as wise even though foolish in appearance, invites the listener not just to laugh at the silliness, but to search deeper, behind the surface. And indeed this story about light and dark, the key and the opening, deals directly with the question of truth. For often, when he is in need, man prefers to look where he thinks the desired object is, instead of where he has a better chance of finding it. But the paradox would be too simple, if it was not that as well we can affirm that man, just like Nasruddin, searches for truth where it is more comfortable, where he prefers it to be, even though he has no chance to find it in this very place. So Nasruddin, depending on the interpretation, is behaving in the correct way – although appearing foolish – or he is behaving in an outright foolish way. But maybe in this incertitude lays the crux of the matter: truth maybe necessary of a paradoxical nature, and we never know what is light and what is darkness since both are as blinding one as the other.

In our practice, we have noticed that incertitude is one of the most unbearable situation the human mind knows. We want to know 'for sure'. Many ideas come to us, and because we feel uncertain, we claim we don't know, or even that we can't know, a certitude from which comes despair. But we prefer this certitude of

ignorance, including the profound sense of impotence and the resentment that comes with it, to the incertitude of knowing, to the anguish of indetermination. Thus to avoid this problem, most of us will cling to certain ideas or principles, that we will repeat forever like some incantatory mantra, and whenever we will be asked to look elsewhere and envisage different ideas, we will forcefully refuse to relinquish what we consider 'our ideas' like a snail so attached to his shelter that he will shrivel up inside his shell whenever anything strange or new seems to threaten him. Our main task as a philosopher is to invite our interlocutor to allow himself to think bold and daring thoughts, thoughts which are bold and daring merely because we are not used to think them. We call this 'thinking the unthinkable'. And once these thoughts appear, the problem is to hear them, accept them and even enjoy them, for even if those thoughts come from itself, the individual mind wiggles and giggles in order to avoid those ideas and reject them, because our own thoughts, like unwanted children, make us feel uncomfortable.

Choice: The Two Wives

Nasruddin has two wives, his older wife Khadidja and her young cousin, but both quarrel a lot to know which one their husband loves best. They regularly ask him which one he prefers, but Nasruddin, who likes peace in the household and does not want to risk himself in such a dangerous endeavor, cautiously prefers to avoid answering their questions, answering that he loves both. But one day, the two women, tenaciously try to corner him and ask him the following question: 'Suppose that the three of us are in boat and both of us fall in the water. Which one do you help first?' Nasruddin hesitates then answers: 'Well Khadidja, I think that at your age, you must know a little bit how to swim!'

Once again, this story captures a number of different issues. In appearance, Nasruddin is a coward, lying in order to avoid problems, since we 'discover' he actually prefers his younger wife, choosing the 'newer' being a classical choice, like children do. And a most common way to lie is to deny having preferences, refusing to recognize our own tendencies and subjectivity, thus avoiding making decisions by claiming a certain neutrality in order to detain everything at the same time. Choosing is full of consequences, and any particular choice implies the finitude of self. Hence Nasruddin is very human again by claiming he has no preference. At the same time, the parallel issue is the one of recognition, for if we don't like to choose, at least not in a conscious way, on the reverse not only do we like to be chosen, but also we want at all cost to be chosen, one way or another, like the wives of the story. To be the elected one is to be special, it

gives importance to our self and meaning to our life. Otherwise, we blend in the generality of humanity, feeling utmost loneliness, a perspective that is equivalent to a symbolic death. To be loved, or its equivalent, to be the first, or to be the only one, remains therefore a major existential issue. But although Nasruddin acts as a coward by not answering, as a liar for not admitting his choice, as a macho for not taking in account the sensitivity of his wives and as a brute for answering the way he does, he actually points out in a profound way to the resolution of the problem raised: autonomy – knowing how to swim – is here the key concept. Indeed, being 'older', Khadidja should know better than look for outside recognition. She should have less worries about other's opinion of her, be more distant about the perception of her self, and deal with reality in a more autonomous way.

A frequent reason why one looks for the philosopher's company is the seeming meaningless of one's life. This absence of significance is often due to the feeling a lack of recognition: by the parents, the children, the mate, society, working place, peers, with the consequence of lack of recognition by one self. Many questions that will be asked, many issues that will be raised, have this situation as a background or as the only reason. At the same time, the reverse can be said, that the reason we look for recognition is that we don't accept or love our own self. And this is generally the case because we have a number of entrenched ideas about what we should be and what we are not. The role of the philosopher in all this is first to dedramatize the issue, but bringing in the reality principle in order to deflate the balloon, so actual thinking can take place in all sobriety. Especially since in general those issues, when one comes to discuss them, have taken quite an obsessive turn in the mind of their beholder. We are what we are, and life is not what our desires and fears make out of it. We know how to swim, don't we? We just forget that we know, and that is why we are often capable to drown ourselves in a glass of water. And like a drowning person who refuses to be helped, whom motivated by panic even threatens and molests the helping hand, the needy mind will throw every stick and stones at her disposal to everyone around in order not to think, before admitting that this was nothing but a big 'schwärmerei', as Hegel calls it. The hustling and bustling of whirling emotions that looks like thoughts, but actually completely hinder any actual thinking. Therefore, how can the philosopher on those premises avoid being straightforward and rude? If in order to think one has to stop thinking – an excellent guiding principle – any indulging in a 'nice discussion' might only reinforce the non-thinking. The reality principle is then an excellent master and guide.

Reasoning: An ill-conceived world

Nasruddin was thinking as he walked. On seeing a pumpkin growing on a small plant and an apple on a big apple tree, he thought that the world had been ill-conceived, for it would be logical for the pumpkin to grow on the big apple tree and the apple on the small plant. Then, as his philosophical stroll had tired him, he fell asleep in the shade of an apple tree, where he was eventually woken up by an apple falling onto his head. When he realized what had happened to him, Nasruddin exclaimed: 'Thank you, God, for not listening to me when you devise things! Just imagine what it would have been like if a pumpkin had fallen from the tree!

Proud as he is of his rational faculty, man thinks he is endowed with knowledge, he thinks he can reason. He knows, and proud of his certainties, he does not hesitate to pass judgement and lay down the law. Now and again, however, when he is willing to, he realizes how stupid and crazy he is. What he took to be thinking was just mouthing opinions and quibbling. For there are many reasons why our wild imaginings cannot get anywhere near the fullness of reality, let alone exhaust it. In the tradition, however, two books teach us how to think, two books that are at the origin of all we know. One is the book of the world, the other is God's book. On the one hand, nature lets us see and understand the reality of all existing things. On the other, the holy book, the Prophet's sayings, tells us that there is a reality beyond the immediate reality that surrounds us: there are principles, causes, an origin, which are all truths putting our knowledge and our being in perspective. In the above-mentioned story, as in many religious messages, the logic of man collides with 'God's logic'. Of course, Nature is true to 'God's logic', because it is its immediate expression. In other words, science does not contradict faith, since the history of science questions established knowledge. As Nicholas of Cusa wrote, 'every positive human assertion of the truth is a conjecture'. Popper spoke of a 'principle of fallibility'. We have every right to think and think we know, but we must keep in mind that our knowledge is scanty, limited and fragile. It is so first because many pieces of information are missing from our personal 'encyclopedia', so that we leave out facts; secondly because our reasonings are tortuous, false or badly formulated so that even if we had all the information, our mental processes would still lead us to the wrong conclusions. That was the case with Nasruddin, as usual, because he could see only one aspect of the problem: that of the matching sizes, without thinking that the biological processes are far more complex. But at the same time, the lesson he is taught sounds even more ridiculous: he thanks God and only discovers his own limitations because he was not knocked out by a pumpkin! In other words, he discovers that God is great thanks to the most incongruous, limited and absurd observation and logic. And there lies the paradox that makes us laugh: the disproportion between the discovery itself and the reason why he made it. Once again, we do not know whether Nasruddin is stupid or brilliant, and the strength of the story lies in this ambiguity or paradox, as it provokes a cognitive dissonance in our minds.

We usually turn to the scholar or the philosopher so that they may give us the appropriate information, tell us about the reality of things and thinking. We listen to them so that we too can become wise and learned. On the contrary, Nasruddin invites us to become stupid as a condition for becoming wise. This confusion that he creates in our minds is the condition for thinking according to Plato. We do not know what to make of this story, but it gives us food for thought, as an infinite meditation, all the more so as its *vis comica* deeply affects us.

Indeed, even though no scholarly analysis of the story is carried out, everyday language may refer to this story to put a message across. Thus one might say: 'It's like Nasruddin's apple'. It remains to be seen if philosophy consists in using the narrative to elaborate concepts or rather in evoking it in everyday life as a lesson to be learnt again and again. Opinions diverge, but we think that that philosophy must retain this double nature: creating concepts as well as mirroring and guiding man's existence.

Fault: The Turban

Nasruddin while on a trip stops late at night at the inn. There is only one room left, with two beds, one of which is already occupied. No problem, says our man. Just wake me up at dawn: I have to leave early. And don't make the mistake, I am the one with the turban, adds he, while taking it off and putting it on the chair next to the bed. At daybreak he rushes out and leaves on his donkey. At midday, seeing a fountain he wants to quench his thirst. While bending over, the water mirrors him, and he notices his head is bare. 'What an imbecile this innkeeper!' exclaims he, irritated, 'I told him explicitly: the one with the turban. And he woke up the wrong person!'

'I am fine and the world is wrong.' Or 'It's their fault,' is a recurrent theme in the Nasruddin corpus, to shed light on a typical human mental habit. Especially when this takes place in the context of intense activity, when the busy little beings we are have no time to think, take no time to think. The 'other' is the easy way out, like little children 'He made me do it!'. Other form, very classical, the Cassandra syndrome: 'I told them and they did not listen to me!'. Once again, the form of the 'argument' or its internal localized 'logic' is very coherent. After all, Nasruddin did tell the innkeeper to wake up a man with a turban, and he did not: he woke up a bare headed man... You really cannot trust anyone. What is at stake here, beside the question of avoiding personal responsibility and taking the time and liberty to think? It is once more the problem of universality, of objectivity, of reason, of reality. The tendency for each one of us is to produce a speech that fits us, that makes us feel comfortable. This usual speech, we don't even have to think about it, it comes naturally, as a defense mechanism, as a sort of conatus of our ego who wants to survive and protect itself: we are ready to think and say just about anything in order to rationalize our little self and the image it projects. And if someone

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



Reflecting on the text

- > *What importance does the author attach to the “unsaid”, to “ambiguity”, to the “ludic dimension of words” and to the “negative way” to help meaning to emerge with its multiple representations?*
 - > *How, in the author’s view, do “negative philosophy”, “cynicism” and “nihilism” help to awaken the spirit?*
 - > *Compare a similar approach in Far Eastern initiation practices.*
 - > *Observe how Nasr-ud-din Hoja’s anti-philosophical personality draws its strength: from his historical non-existence, from his down-to-earth nature, from the range of subject matter covered by his stories, from the provocative personality of this “living myth”, from his attitude to authority.*
 - > *The teacher-pupil relationship throughout history: “The Preacher”.*
 - > *Where should the truth be sought or how should one “think the unthinkable”: “The Key”.*
 - > *Re-establishing one’s relationship with oneself or self-sufficiency: “The Two Wives”.*
 - > *Opening oneself to the fullness of reality through the “book of the world” and the “book of God”.*
 - > *When the Other becomes the alibi, or the need to step back from one’s own self in order to think: “The Turban”.*
 - > *In what way, in the author’s view, do the tales of Nasruddin Hoja constitute a genuine therapy?*
-

dares attempt to interrupt it, either we claim his speech makes no sense, or we just send him back to his own reduced subjectivity, which is not more legitimate than ours: it is just his opinion. His against ours.

The insight or help Nasruddin provides here to the philosophy practitioner is the understanding of the gap or discrepancy between any ‘particular reason’ and the wider ranging reason which Descartes claims is ‘the most widely shared thing in the world’. When someone comes to meet the philosopher, he outlines a ‘home made’ rationality, a sort of personal architecture that he inhabits, in which he might just be a blind prisoner. So the role of the counselor here is to invite his interlocutor to momentarily step out of himself, by proposing to conceive some other imaginary self which would think

otherwise, or that would have to entertain a discussion with the neighbor, with the common man, with a group or persons. At that point, it can be hoped that the guest will glimpse the arbitrariness or foolishness of his own path, the limitedness of it. And if for some reason, which may seem legitimate or not for the practitioner, the interlocutor wants to maintain his position, he will do it with a more conscious mind, and that is the whole point. The requirement here is therefore to dedouble oneself, as Hegel invites us to do, as a condition for consciousness: in order to think, we have to see oneself thinking. The mind has to become an object to itself, on which it can act. It has to dare see itself thinking, in particular in all those little ratiocinations it knows so well how to concoct. And the role of the philosopher is here nothing but to create the conditions of this visibility.



THE PUNCH LINE

There is general paradox in the character of Nasruddin. He is terrible with us, he is devastating and pitiless with our egos, but we love him for it. In a period where reigns philosophical correctness, where we are supposed to be so nice and make everyone happy, when there is so much discourse on ethics probably because there is so little ethics, Nasruddin does not try to 'value' the individual and make him feel good. To philosophize is for him to show the nothingness of the particular being, so egocentric and blind. But then, why do we accept from him the kind of terrible criticisms we would not accept even from our best friend? One reason might be that he is actually pitiless for himself as well, which makes him our own brother, our better self. A brother that sacrifices himself to show us how foolish we are, who laughs at himself in order to laugh at us, a thwarted and funny kind of compassion. As a sort of inverted Christ like figure, who goes one step further than Socrates on the irony, as a good humored cynic, he takes on his own back all the stupidity, lies

and mediocrity of the human species. But we should beware of making a martyr out of Nasruddin, for he would laugh at us for such a silly and sentimental idea. Just one more trick we invent to feel good! At the same time, let us entertain silly ideas about him. For it seems to us that the Nasruddinian perspective is not so much that men won't be fools anymore, but that they will know a little bit they are great fools. The question here is not to cure, if only because there is no way to cure, or because there is nothing to cure...

There is nothing left to do but to watch the wonderful spectacle of the pathology, and to enjoy it as a Punch and Judy show, as grand theatre. Let us be entertained by this comedy of errors, let us laugh at the human drama. Much to do about nothing. That would be an excellent title. So let's keep on being foolish and enjoy it. Maybe something will come out of all this joke and laughter. Maybe true therapies come in the least expected form...



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Medina of Marrakesh (Morocco) © UNESCO/Yvon Fruneau
It is in Marrakesh that died the great thinker Averroes on 10 December 1198.

AVERROES AND THE INTERPRETATION OF THE LAW

CONSIDERED AS THE “SPIRITUAL FATHER OF EUROPE”, AVERROES, AS THE LATINS CALLED HIM, IBN RUSHD FOR THE ARABS, WAS AN ANDALUSIAN PHILOSOPHER OF THE TWELFTH CENTURY. HE MANAGED TO CARRY OUT A SYNTHESIS BETWEEN A LEGAL READING OF THE HOLY TEXT AND A SCIENTIFIC READING OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY, IN PARTICULAR ARISTOTLE’S. RELYING ON MAN’S RATIONAL DISPOSITIONS, AVERROES MADE OF DEMONSTRATION A MODEL OF KNOWLEDGE, WITHOUT NEGLECTING THE BASIC FORMS OF REASONING THAT MOST MEN RESORT TO IN EVERYDAY LIFE. THE IMAGES AND EXAMPLES THAT ARE TO BE FOUND IN THE HOLY TEXT HAVE CORRESPONDENT FORMS IN DEDUCTIVE KNOWLEDGE. BY PLURALIZING THE WAYS OF ACCESS TO THE TRUTH, AVERROES WAS ABLE TO RECONCILE HIS FAITH IN ISLAM WITH HIS KNOWLEDGE OF THE PAGAN PHILOSOPHY INHERITED FROM THE GREEKS.

PHILOSOPHY BETWEEN WISDOM AND DIVINE LAW

Averroes (Ibn Rushd) was a judge, a physician and a philosopher. He was critical of theology, but not of religion, although his detractors have tried to conflate the two. His occasionally violent criticism of theology stemmed from his twin vocations: as a jurist and as a philosopher. It was as a Muslim judge, a man of the law who enforced standards, that Averroes attacked speculation by theologians, which was based on an exclusive method; it was as a philosopher that he challenged their method, deeming it homonymic, in the Aristotelian sense, meaning that it was likely to use sophistic and eristic reasoning by playing on the ambiguity of terms. In his work, *The Decisive Treatise*, translated twice in the last century in France,¹ he is

seen to associate the methods of the judge and the philosopher using a tool they have in common: syllogism. He also contrasts this method with that of the dialectic theologians; the dialectic word *jadal* here meaning “dispute” and taken in the pejorative sense.

Averroes mentions several kinds of arguments, which can be grouped into three types: dialectic, rhetoric and demonstrative. Demonstrative arguments are given prominence, but only concern the elite. Dialectic arguments come in two forms: one is close to sophistry, and the other is similar to demonstration. Rhetorical reasoning (use of images and enthymemes - informally stated syllogisms) has an educational

focus: transmitting to the masses that which is not readily accessible to them.

His procedure is the same, both in writings on religious methodology and in the commentaries on Aristotle: mention the different points of view, refrain from adhering to any one school, weigh the arguments and, with regard to law, leave it to the reader-participant to draw conclusions concerning all cases of legal controversy.

The two cognitive operations, conception and assent, apply to these three forms of argument. In this context, it should be noted that there is no double truth for Averroes, but there is a double audience: there are those who have access to demonstration and are nourished by philosophy and wisdom – they are primarily concerned with acceptance of truth and falsehood; and there are the masses, who have access only to rhetoric and the pleasures of poetry, though this does not mean they are beyond reason (their assent is

probable, if not certain). For Averroes, therefore, there are two points to be illustrated:

- Since we are all beings “created” by God, God gives salvation and reason to all. This is the inclusive sense, which was not current among the Greeks: reason was the preserve of Greeks, not barbarians; of citizens, not slaves, etc. Averroes sees reason as common to all and the religious message as containing nothing that one cannot obtain through deductive reasoning. It is only theologians’ passion for ambiguity that creates divisions which are absent from the face-to-face between demonstration and rhetoric.

- The religious message is perfectly suited to those who do not have access to demonstration. That is not to say they have less reason, rather that they boast a basic, rudimentary reason that is present in rhetorical terms of phrase and poetry. Religion is just as reasonable as any other cognitive practice; it is only the forms of expression that change.



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The Quran: a programmatic text

Sophists and bad poets were to Plato what theologians were to Averroes, so much so that in his commentary on Plato's *Republic*, he does not hesitate to cite as an example of individuals who are harmful to the *polis*, instead of poets who would have us believe that it is the gods who incite us to commit evil acts (Book II, 379b), dialectical theologians who uphold the sophistry that all actions relating to God are good; Averroes here refers to the attributes of God as the attributes of acts, and these divide theologians because some believe them to be adventitious and others do not. In both cases, it is a matter of contesting those who claim to know and those who profess wisdom, for "injuries from a friend are more severe than injuries from an enemy".²

At the beginning of the *Fasl al-maqal (Decisive Treatise)*, the Quran is presented as a text that can be read as a project for attaining knowledge, not in the sense that one finds knowledge in it, but that it is a summons to seek knowledge. For Averroes, the Quran is a programmatic text. It contains a call to seek knowledge, the primary consequence of which is an opening up of knowledge, which must not be limited to religious knowledge and practice. According to Averroes, insofar as it is impossible for one person know everything and other peoples have a certain knowledge, the (religious) Law incites us to read what our non-coreligionists have produced.³ The Quran is thus more a programme for seeking knowledge than a compendium of knowledge in itself; and the way to increase knowledge is through syllogism, drawing out the unknown from the known. Averroes cites the analogous syllogism, used in jurisprudence, and the demonstrative syllogism, which is the most perfect form, and is consequently the most suitable for learning about the most perfect being: God, presented as the artisan of all that exists and the ultimate aim of knowledge. In so doing, Averroes is opposed to theologians who do not acknowledge the legitimacy of such human knowledge.

Practical syllogism and theoretical syllogism

In law, a frequent problem is extending a rule governing a particular case to analogous cases. Religious law cannot foresee all situations. The difficulty with analogy is not a problem of interpretation; it is a problem which new situations pose to the text, not the meaning of the text. The text is put to the test by new situations. It then becomes a matter of finding similarities between the situation described by the law and the new situation that is to be legislated on. Just as in the metaphysical order where we have the essential being and its accidental forms, in the legal order, we first have the Law, and then analogies of attribution or proportion which make it possible to relate, or more precisely to reduce, a new situation to an old one; the important thing is not to increase the number of laws.

The Islamic legal syllogism (*qiyas shari*) is based on a four-part analogy: (1) the original case, (2) the derived case to be assimilated thereto, (3) the cause or similarity on which the legal qualification is based, and (4) the legal judgement (*hukm*) or ruling. The ruling on the original case prescribed in the texts (*hadith*) is transferred to the assimilated case (new situation for which there are no provisions) when the two cases are considered comparable because they share the same cause. The formal similarity between this reasoning and syllogism is greater than it would appear at first sight: the middle term in a syllogism is equivalent to the cause in an analogy; the relationship between the middle term and the minor and major terms is the same as that which exists between the cause and the original and assimilated cases. Everything that is required to establish the truth or certainty of the universal premise in a syllogism is also required to prove that the cause is concomitant to the judgment. Such proof remains in the domain of the probable, wherein analogy has an advantage over syllogism. An analogy mentions the particular premise from which the conclusion is drawn, which is not the case with a syllogism. The idea that a given particular implies another particular is felt to be more consonant with natural intelligence than the idea that any particular subsumed under a universal proposition performs leads to a conclusion.

Given the similarities between the Aristotelian syllogism and the legal analogy, syllogistic reasoning cannot be condemned as a heretical activity which interferes with the reading of the religious text. Indeed, the text is illuminated by such a method of reasoning in the same way as the law is clarified by a judge's interpretation; one must not give preference to legal analogy and condemn Aristotelian syllogism on the grounds that syllogistic reasoning is imported:

"It cannot be objected: 'This kind of study of intellectual reasoning is a heretical innovation since it did not exist among the first believers.' For the study of legal reasoning and its kinds is also something which has been discovered since the first believers, yet it is not considered to be a heretical innovation. So the objector should believe the same about the study of intellectual reasoning."⁴

Both the legal parts and speculative parts of the sacred text require the application of methods of investigation which rely primarily on the intellect. The sacred text is there to be read; it is therefore necessary to develop reading methods which are conducive to embracing it.

Other times, other places

The continuation of Averroes' thought in the Western world

Galileo

Galileo considered that every time reason and experience seemed to contradict the Holy Book it was when the latter had been wrongly interpreted literally, because the translator had not understood that it had been written for ignorant people. The task of scholars is therefore to discover the hidden meaning of the Scriptures. He thus distinguished between two truths, that of the Scriptures, which is allegorical and that of scientific knowledge, which is based on experience: *"I should have added only that, though Scripture cannot err, nevertheless some of its interpreters and expositors can sometimes err in various ways. One of these would be very serious and very frequent, namely, to want to limit oneself always to the literal meaning of the words; for there would thus emerge not only various contradictions but also serious heresies and blasphemies, and it would be necessary to attribute to God feet, hands, and eyes, as well as bodily and human feelings like anger, regret, hate, and sometimes even forgetfulness of things past and ignorance of future ones. Thus in Scripture one finds many propositions which look different from the truth if one goes by the literal meaning of the words but which are expressed in this manner to accommodate the incapacity of common people; likewise, for the few who deserve to be separated from the masses, it is necessary that wise interpreters produce their true meaning and indicate the particular reasons why they have been expressed by means of such words."*

Galileo Galilei, 2008, Letters on Copernicanism and Scripture, Letter to Castelli, in *The Essential Galileo*, ed. and trans. by M. A. Finocchiaro, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, p. 104.

Newton

Newton's vision is more archaic, it is much more cautious about there being an allegorical reading of the Scriptures. He calls for a separation of science and the philosophy of religion.

"[Rule 5]: To acquiesce in that sense of any portion of Scripture as the true one which results most freely and naturally from the use and propriety of the Language and tenor of the context in that and all other places of Scripture to that sense. For if this be not the true sense, then is the true sense uncertain, and no man can attain to any certainty in the knowledge of it. Which is to make the scriptures no certain rule of faith, and so to reflect upon the spirit of God who dictated it. He that without better grounds than his private opinion or the opinion of any human authority whatsoever shall turn scripture from the plain meaning to an Allegory or to any other less natural sense declares thereby that he reposes more trust in his own imaginations or in that human authority than in the Scripture. And therefore the opinion of such men how numerous soever they be, is not to be regarded. Hence it is and not from any real uncertainty in the Scripture that Commentators have so distorted it; and this hath been the door through which all Heresies have crept in and turned out the ancient faith."

Isaac Newton, Rules for interpreting the words & language in Scripture, in *Untitled Treatise on Revelation* (section 1.1), <http://www.newtonproject.sussex.ac.uk>.

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- What means does Averroes use to criticize theology?
- Identify three major points of conflict between Averroes and the theologians.
- What characterizes Averroes's approach?
- Why does Averroes maintain that "reason is commonly shared"?
- Does Averroes promote an elitist view of thinking?
- What is the difference between an analogy and a syllogism?
- What is the difference for Averroes between esoteric teaching and exoteric teaching?
- What relationship does Averroes establish between philosophy and religion?
- Does Averroes prize ambiguity in the reading of a text?
- Is human reason trustworthy for Averroes?
- What are the advantages of rhetoric for Averroes?
- What does al-Farabi recommend in order to understand the Qur'ān better?
- Why does Averroes prefer syllogism to demonstration or dialectics?
- What is sharia for Averroes?
- What is the middle way advocated by Averroes with regard to the problem of human freedom?

Entering into dialogue with the text

- Do think that reason can be shared?
- Do you consider analogy a trustworthy mode of knowledge?
- Do you consider syllogisms a trustworthy mode of knowledge?
- Do faith and reason go hand in hand?
- Do you give a positive or negative value to the concept of ambiguity?
- Should one trust human reason?
- Do you consider rhetoric a trustworthy practice?
- Should one and can one seek certainty in thought?
- Do you think that it is useful or worthwhile to determine "an order of the universe"?

Suggested teaching method: the art of questioning

A question is chosen.

Each participant replies individually in writing to the question chosen.

The group is divided up into three-person teams.

Three functions are established: interviewer, interviewee and observer. The interviewee gives his or her answer to the first question, the interviewer asks that person to develop or rethink his or her answer, without trying to reply in his or her place. At the end, the observer comments upon the preceding dialogue.

Roles are changed and the procedure is repeated.

Roles are changed again so that each participant will have performed all three functions.

If possible, begin again with other questions.

The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Playing with metaphors

- Open a discussion on the importance and purposes of the use of metaphors and analogies.
- Asked the participants to read also the worksheet "From demonstration to poetry: logic, the key issue in Arabic philosophy".
- After a discussion of the worksheets, ask the participants to split into teams of three, with each team being requested to read a poem.
- Each team then discusses the meaning of the poem and possible logical links with reality.
- Collective discussion on the different interpretations and on the power of metaphors.
- Ask each team to choose a subject and to create a metaphor or analogy to explain it.
- Each team presents its metaphor and the other participants propose interpretations on possible links with reality.
- Discussion of the importance of metaphors and of poetry as an aid to communication in Islam.
- Discussion with the participants on various key aspects of the text: exoteric/esoteric relationship, appreciation of diversity, understanding of faithfulness/unfaithfulness and the search for harmony.

ARISTOTLE'S PHILOSOPHY AND THE QURANIC TEXT

As is the case for a great many medieval works, the title of Averroes's *Decisive Treatise* is a long one: *The Decisive Treatise Determining the Nature of the Connection between Divine Law and Wisdom*. Both the French translation by Marc Geoffroy (1996) and the English translation by George F. Hourani (1976) substitute 'religion' for 'divine law' and 'philosophy' for 'wisdom'. This substitution is indicative of the generally accepted reading of the treatise, a reading which has it that Averroes wrote about the connection between philosophical reason and religious faith. We have

inherited this reading from a medieval misinterpretation concerning Averroes: the famous thesis of the double truth, the truth of reason and the truth of faith. But in fact, as Leo Strauss points out: "*The doctrine of the double-truth does not occur in Averroes himself or in his predecessors. Instead, we find in Islamic philosophy a relatively ample use of the distinction between exoteric teachings, based on rhetorical arguments, and esoteric teaching, based on demonstrative or scientific arguments.*"⁵

THE ESOTERIC AND THE EXOTERIC

The shift in emphasis concerning the problem at issue is based on arguments present in *The Decisive Treatise*. A demonstrative paradigm is at work here, and all knowledge whatever its nature is brought into relation to it. Averroes, faithful to the Arab logical interpretative tradition of Aristotle's works, according to which there is a continuity between scientific demonstration and rhetorical persuasion, shows how there exists a connection between the esoterics of 'the demonstrative class of men' and the 'exoterics' of the mass of believers. This connection involves sharing the same faith and possessing a degree of knowledge corresponding to one's intellectual capacity. The interpretation of verse 7 of Sura 3, quoted in paragraph 73 of Hourani's translation of *The Decisive Treatise* (Averroes, 1976), an interpretation whereby Averroes locates the esoteric within the domain of knowledgeable men is instructive in several respects. Here is the verse: "*He it is Who has revealed the Book to thee; some of its verses are decisive – they are the basis of the Book – and others are allegorical. Then those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part of it which is allegorical, seeking to mislead and give it*

(their own) interpretation. And none knows its interpretation save Allah, and those firmly rooted in knowledge. They say: we believe in it."

According to Averroes's reading, the verse associates God with 'those firmly rooted in knowledge',⁶ unlike those who would insert a full stop after the word 'God' and put the syntagm 'those firmly rooted in knowledge' in the part of the sentence that talks of mere belief, with no sharing of knowledge with God. For Averroes, 'those firmly rooted in knowledge', like God, are quite capable of rendering the 'allegorical' verses 'decisive'. They can explain them because, as they belong to 'the demonstrative class of men' they are in possession of the proof. On the other hand, the adepts of theological sects underline the allegorical nature of the holy text and offer no other explanation. They use dialectics polemically and forget that this logical art should be employed, as Aristotle points out in the *Topics*, as a preparation for science: dialectics, in its noble sense, is a mental exercise aimed at choosing the premises of reasoning.



DEMONSTRATION, DIALECTICS, RHETORIC

The verse quoted to create a correspondence between the three forms of Aristotelian reasoning (demonstration, dialectics, rhetoric) and the methods that can be induced from the holy text is as follows: 'Call to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the best manner' (Sura 16-125). 'Wisdom' refers to demonstration, 'argument' to dialectics and 'goodly exhortation' to rhetoric. Of the three syllogistic arts of demonstration, dialectics and rhetoric, the latter, by its elliptical nature, is the most appropriate for general use, and the Quran is often seen as reasoning in a nutshell: the long chains of reasoning are absent and there are frequent cases of ellipsis. For Averroes, if knowledge is to be measured by the perfect syllogism of demonstration, the basic rhetorical and poetic reasoning procedures used by the vast majority must nonetheless be taken into account, for meaning is essentially formed in address. *"When something of these allegorical interpretations is expressed to anyone unfit to receive them, especially demonstrative interpretations because of their remoteness from common knowledge – both he who expresses it and he to whom it is expressed are led into unbelief."*⁷

The unbelief comes about because the method exposed is inappropriate for the public concerned: it is therefore difficult to convince the majority of believers that God is incorporeal or that his attributes, though inherent to his essence, do not reside within it. To speak of apparent meaning and hidden meaning does not mean that there are intrinsically apparent things and hidden things. It is only in the address that this distinction acquires a certain value: The apparent meaning is what everyone can work out, the hidden meaning what 'those firmly rooted in knowledge' decipher. Thus, there is not one single method to understand the text, because of the diversity of addressees: *"They did not know which are the methods common to everyone, through whose doors the Law has summoned all people [to enter]; they supposed that there was only one method. Thus they mistook the aim of the Legislator, and were both in themselves in error and led others into error."*⁸

In reality, there are three methods which the holy text itself speaks of: wisdom, goodly exhortation and argument. As divine law concerns the vast majority, it is their own methods of assent that apply: that is, the rhetorical method and the dialectical method,⁹ the first being more widespread than the second, it is therefore more suitable. Indeed, one must be cautious with the dialectical method as it presupposes the equal abilities of the questioner and the respondent, even though here the respondent is the public, who do not possess the means to invalidate the conclusion the questioner is seeking to reach, and so dialectics is a method that can easily stray towards sophistry. Furthermore, one must avoid asking the vast majority of questions that

require demonstration (such as on the details of future life).¹⁰ However, theologians speculatively ask such questions. For Averroes, this leads to confusion, as few are capable of demonstration and, more particularly, few are capable of comprehending demonstration. In this respect, in the same way as with respect to God, associationism must be avoided. Theologians cannot consider themselves to be on the same level as those engaged in demonstration without jeopardizing them. Nor can they give their arguments an apparently demonstrative turn without prejudice to the greater number. On the contrary, a discourse addressed to the public must be regarded from that public's point of view in order to ascertain its suitability. Therefore, instead of justifying the interpretative method for reasons inherent to the obscurity of the text, one must always start with the public when seeking such a justification.

The pioneering work of al-Farabi should be mentioned here: to approach the Quran, good knowledge of the language is needed, as well as knowledge of the state of the language at the time of the revelation, and one must take into account the modifications and alterations that occur over time. This is a necessary injunction for the judge in particular, as al-Farabi stresses in *The Book of Religion*.¹¹

The judge must know "the language in which the first ruler spoke, the usage the men of the period made of their language, what was used to designate something from a metaphorical point of view, which in reality was the name of something else, in order to avoid supposing from the thing to which the name of another thing has been applied as a metaphor, that in uttering this word, was meant the original thing, or to presume that this thing had become the other. In addition to this, he needs to be extremely insightful as to what is used in the absolute when the author's objective was more specific, as to what is used, judging by the appearance of discourse, in a specific way when the author's objective was more general, and what is used in a specific, general or absolute way when the author's objective is indeed what it appears to designate. And he must know well-known facts and those which are custom, as well as having the ability to distinguish the similarities and differences between things, an ability [to discern] what is implied by something and what it does not imply (which can only be acquired by an excellent innate disposition and the experience acquired by such an art), and he must study the words of a legislator in all that he has legislated through discourse, as well as his actions that he legislated, by act and without pronouncement, either by witness or by hearsay, whether companions of this man existed at this time, that is, through the traditions (and these traditions are either well-known or hidden, and in both cases they are either well written or not well written)".

The limits of the dialectical method

At best, dialectical reasoning as practised by theologians only yields an opinion bordering on certainty, not of full certainty.¹² Dialectical discourse uses commonly known premises. Such premises yield an assent based on the experience of everyone or of the majority, rather than on the nature of the thing itself (as is the case with demonstration). Dialectic assent is founded solely on the fact that others share the same opinion, not on the fact that the opinion is a piece of knowledge. It follows that dialectic premises may be false. It also follows that they may not have a specific subject, but that, as in rhetoric, they form a predicate and subject not by patterning themselves on their composition outside the soul – in other words, not in accordance with the way things are in and of themselves – but merely based on what is generally admitted of those things. Averroes delivers a detailed critique of induction in order to counter the arguments of the theologians; he seeks to demonstrate that the degree of certainty is not as great with induction as with syllogisms. Take, for instance, the following argument: all bodies are created because most of those that we know of are created. That leads to the conclusion that the world is created because it is a body. Inductive reasoning goes from the specific to the general, whereas with syllogisms, one of the premises is necessarily universal. In inductive reasoning, however, the argument is as powerful as that of a first-figure syllogism, but without the universal premise: “Fire, air, water and earth are bodies; they are created; so all bodies are created.” (This example is intended to refute the creationism of the Ash’aris.) Furthermore, even if inductive reasoning is complete, it does not tell us whether the predicate necessarily belongs to the subject. This connection may be accidental, i.e. in our example, creation could be an incidental aspect of bodies. This is why inductive reasoning can only claim to achieve assent to what is shared jointly; inductive reasoning used in demonstration can only point in the direction of certainty, not produce it. A notable difference thus exists between what is used to guide us in demonstration and what is used to serve as itself. For Averroes, demonstration requires inductive reasoning in two cases only: when the subject of the premises is an experience and when a large number of people do not recognize the universality of a premise, but do recognize an instantiation thereof. For example, a person can admit that illness and health are part of the same science without admitting that the science of opposites is a science, as long as this has not been demonstrated to the person using inductive reasoning. Once it has been, the person can be certain about the universal premise.

However, dialectic reasoning does not provide the same degree of certainty as demonstrative reasoning. Theological discussions presuppose metaphysical inquiry and demonstrative means which dialectical reasoning cannot satisfy. Because dialecticians do not ask *what something is*; since they are not seeking essence, they are not obliged to rule out homonymy. What they are seeking to do is merely to get from their interlocutor, with whom they share the same knowledge, one of two contradictory propositions in order to force them into a contradiction: “Is every pleasure a good thing or not?” There we have the two terms of a contradiction: pleasure is a good thing; pleasure is not a good thing. The respondent only needs to grant one of the two propositions for the questioner to push them into the contradiction; the point for the one being to get the other to grant one of the two premises, and for the other not to grant it. The nature of pleasure is not the issue; the goal is refutation, even though the person forced into contradiction can always say that they did not understand pleasure in that way, and will refuse to be forced into the absurdity sought by the questioner. Hence the polemical change inherent in dialectical reasoning, which can either produce a reinforced homonymy of meaning or a joint search for univocity of meaning, and hence a reduction of homonymy. Dialectical reasoning can thus, at best, be a preparation for science in the sense that it can turn a commonplace (*topos*) into a premise which may appear in a syllogism. Most of the time, however, dialectical reasoning sinks into disputes and merely gives rise to preferences rather than knowledge.

In his commentary on *Topics*, Averroes seeks to link dialectical reasoning closely to the science of demonstration. This connection is based on the theory of definition, which Averroes clearly prefers not to leave to geometers, whose task is simply to prove existence, not essence. As commendable as their demonstrations may be, they must not be asked to make definitions; nor should they be used as models, as pre-Aristotelian dialecticians were tempted to do.

In adopting demonstration as an instrument with which to measure the *topoi* examined in the *Topics*, Averroes helped to systematize the idea of a dialectic which cannot be reduced to mere discussion, and even less to the establishment of what is generally shared. This irreducible dialectic, which is proposed as an alternative to the methods of the geometers, goes hand in glove with demonstration.¹³



Reflecting on the text

- > *Why does the author recall that Averroes' criticism is aimed at theology, not religion?*
 - > *On what is this philosopher's approach based?*
 - > *Does Averroes defend a "double truth" or does he take account of the various means of access available to the public?*
 - > *Evaluate the philosopher's stance, as compared with that of the Greeks, that salvation and reason are available to all.*
 - > *What do you think of Averroes's view that the Quran is an injunction to learn, not a fixed body of knowledge. What do you think of his appeal to seek knowledge wherever it may be found?*
 - > *Why does the philosopher wish to submit the text of the Quran to the test of new situations?*
 - > *How does he justify the reliance on rational judgement together with legal judgement?*
 - > *How do you explain the "mediaeval misinterpretation of Averroes" relating to the link between divine law and wisdom?*
 - > *In Islam, how does faith form a bridge between "reason" and "religion", the "esoterism" of the elites and the "exoterism" of the masses?*
 - > *How does Averroes approach the Quran so as to take account of the range of audiences to which its message is addressed?*
 - > *How does Averroes catch theologians out on the subject of dialectics?*
 - > *Why does Averroes interpret the word sharia to mean path rather than law, and on what does he base his view?*
 - > *How does Averroes elucidate prejudices concerning the fatum mahometanum?*
-

THE METHOD, THE LAW AND THE COSMOS

It is well worth repeating that the demonstrative paradigm enables one to place the holy text in a loftier perspective, which the simple doctrinal notes concerning the dogma invariably lack. So, unsurprisingly, the verses selected by Averroes in the *Treatise* are mostly verses concerning the cosmos and not human beings. The word 'charia' itself is by no means used in a merely judicial sense: the 'charia' is not so much a law as a method, a path, an order of the universe established by God. At no point in the *Treatise* is the charia related to precise rules of law. Divine law is understood to be a set of first principles likely to inspire human law but not the law of a particular country at a particular time. Its anhistorical character derives from its being a principle and not a transcendence which should, willy-nilly, be integrated in the human order.

By placing divine law in the domain of the theory of knowledge, Averroes succeeds in reconciling it with the philosophical theses defended by the Greeks. Such a conciliatory move means that he is seeking a harmony, i.e. the preservation of a duality, but not a strongly dissonant one. There are philosophical theses on whether the world is eternal or not. Either thesis can be defended without showing unbelief or respect

for orthodoxy, for we are speaking of knowledge here, and knowledge accepts a diversity of viewpoints, an absence of consensus. The thesis of the beginning of time (Plato) or the eternity of the world (Aristotle) are not in opposition, but "*Thus the doctrines about the world are not so very far apart from each other that some of them should be called irreligious and others not. For this to happen, opinions must be divergent in the extreme, i.e. contraries such as the theologians suppose to exist on this question; i.e. [they hold] that the names "pre-eternity" and "coming into existence" as applied to the world as a whole are contraries. But it is now clear from what we have said that this is not the case.*"¹⁴

How is the opposition between these two theses resolved? By having recourse to the major philosophical tools mentioned by al-Farabi in his *Book of Agreement between the ideas of the two philosophers, the divine Plato and Aristotle*: philosophy would be an empty word if the expressions 'insofar as' and 'in a certain respect' were to disappear. Here is an example: 'insofar as' the world is related to beings that begin and end one day, it is seen as being adventitious; 'insofar as' it is related to a timeless first cause, it is seen as being eternal.





THE FATUM MAHUMETANUM

There is this intimate knowledge, including of logic (the three methods studied above), but action is no less important. Let us use Averroes to examine the fatalism that is often ascribed to Muslims. Leibniz speaks of the fatum mahumetanum (Muhammadan destiny) with relation to Muslims in combat. This is to be distinguished from the Stoic fatum and, by extension, the Christian fatum. The fatum mahumetanum is a way for Leibniz to rebaptize the “lazy argument” condemned by the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus. It is expressed thus: “If the future is necessary, that which must happen will happen, whatever I may do”. This, for Leibniz, was “Turkish fatalism” where soldiers do not avoid danger, nor do they leave “places infected with plague”.¹⁵ There is no longer a place for good advice or foresight. However, this is a misunderstanding of necessity. To give it proper consideration is to give one’s assent to the events that happen without refraining from devoting maximum attention to them, within the limits of one’s ability. This, however, is the Stoic fatum, according to Leibniz a Christian-like fatalism, but which only gives “tranquillity”. Only the Christian fatum makes us “content”, because what happens has been ordained by a “good master” who does everything for the best; we are not in a state of “forced patience”, but of genuine contentment.

One can clearly see that Leibniz reduces the fatum mahumetanum to the level of prejudice. Averroes does not position himself at this level of “non-philosophical probability” which is prejudice, although he does not ignore the problem. He acknowledges that there is a real ambivalence in the religious text, and this is one of the reasons why theological schools as different as the Jabri and Mu’tazili schools could come about, the former being necessitarianist and the latter believing in

free will and developing a theory with central principles entirely compatible with Leibniz’s *Theodicy*: God works for the best, He allows evil to exist, but does not create it, and His power is bounded by His reason.

Both of these schools are rooted in and refer to the Quran. How is that possible? Averroes holds that it is a text that can be interpreted differently for different purposes. In the Quran, he says, “we find many verses that indicate that everything is predestined and that man is determined to act, and at the same time we find many verses which indicate that man earns credit for his actions and that his actions are not determined”.¹⁶ These two approaches led to the emergence of numerous theological schools. Averroes sides with none of them: “We say that it is clear that the purpose of the revelation is not to dissociate these two beliefs, but rather to unite them in a middle-of-the-road position which constitutes the truth in this matter.” We must therefore give their due to the powers within us – our own capabilities – but also to the external causes that, in their own way, preside over the advent of a situation: “our will is restrained and determined by external causes. This is what the divine word refers to: ‘For his sake there are angels following one another, before him and behind him, who guard him by Allah’s commandment’” (ibid. and Quran, 13:11). While there are verses that imply one thing and others that imply the contrary, one should not be blinded by this, taking only what one fancies from the various verses; the point is rather that it is the action itself, without its inner structure, that is ambivalent. When we act, our “will is restrained and determined by external causes” and though it may be easy to recognize what does and does not depend on us, from the point of view of the action itself it is difficult to disentangle these two points of view.

¹ There is a translation by Léon Gauthier, reprinted in 1988 by Sinbad publishing house and a recent translation by Marc Geoffroy (1996) published by Flammarion.

[Reviser’s note: English translations are: Averroes, *Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory*, C. Butterworth (ed. & transl.), Brigham Young University Press, Provo, Utah, 2001; Averroes, *On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, A translation, with introduction and notes, of Ibn Rushd’s *Kitab fasl al-maqāl*, with its appendix (*Damima*) and an extract from *Kitab al-kashf ‘an manāhij al-adilla*, by George F. Hourani, Luzac & Co., London, 1976; Averroes, *On the Harmony of Religions and Philosophy*, in *Arabic Kitab fasl-maqāl*, with its appendix (*Damima*), appended is an extract from *Kitab al-kashf ‘an manāhij al-adilla*, published and translated as *The Philosophy and Theology of Averroes: tractata translated from the Arabic*, trans. Mohammed Jamil-Rahman, A.G. Widgey, Baroda, 1921.]

² *The Decisive Treatise*. Trans. Geoffroy. Paris: Flammarion, 1996, p. 171.

³ *Ibid.*, page 114.

⁴ *The Decisive Treatise*, op.cit.

⁵ L. Strauss, 1989, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: an Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, *Essays and Lectures*, selected and introduced by T. L. Pangle, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 225.

⁶ Reference to the Quran is to Maulana Muhammad Ali’s translation (2002), which best matches the French version used by the author of this paper. Hourani refers to ‘those grounded in science’. To make his reasoning clear however, we will keep Maulana Muhammad Ali’s terminology, mutatis mutandis (Translator’s note).

⁷ Averroes. 1976, *The Decisive Treatise, Determining the Nature of the Connection between Religion and Philosophy*, trans. by George F. Hourani, London, Luzac & Co. Publ., § 165.

⁸ Averroes, 1976, op. cit., § 187.

⁹ Averroes, 1976.

¹⁰ One must avoid asking in a dialectical manner (or poetic or rhetorical) speculative questions such as those concerning the details and characteristics of future life, but keep such questions in demonstrative form, otherwise one may jeopardize both faith and wisdom.

¹¹ Al-Farabi, *Philosopher à Bagdad au Xe siècle*, French translation, Seuil, 2007.

¹² Short Commentary on Aristotle’s Topics.

¹³ On this subject, see article by Charles E. Butterworth, *Comment Averroès lit les Topiques d’Aristote*, in *Penser avec Aristote*, Érès, 1991.

¹⁴ Averroes, 1976, § 104.

¹⁵ Leibniz, G.W., *Theodicy*, The Echo Library, 2008.

¹⁶ Clarifying the systems of proof in the beliefs of the nation, paragraph 284, translated as Faith and Reason in Islam: Averroes’ Exposition of religious arguments. Translated with footnotes, index and bibliography by Ibrahim Y. Najjar with an introduction by Majid Fakhry, Oneworld, Oxford, 2001, p. 105.



Celestial sphere, Iran, 17th century © IMA/Savel
This brass globe represents the Earth stridden by the equator, its parallels, the meridians and the ecliptic that indicates the names of the Zodiac signs.

PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE IN ISLAM: A FRUITFUL COHABITATION

PHILOSOPHY WAS PRESENT FROM THE EARLY STAGE OF ARAB SCIENCES, THAT IS WHEN TRANSLATIONS WERE ENABLING MUSLIMS TO APPROPRIATE THEIR INDIAN AND GREEK HERITAGES. AND AMONG THE FIRST ACTORS OF ITS INTRODUCTION INTO THE FIELD OF KNOWLEDGE IN ARABIC WERE PEOPLE FAMILIAR WITH SCIENTIFIC TEXTS: AL-KINDI, AL-FARABI. THE MAJOR SCIENTIFIC BOOK WHICH WENT DOWN IN HISTORY DID NOT DEAL WITH ONE SCIENCE IN PARTICULAR BUT WITH ALL THE SCIENCES THAT WERE PRACTICED IN THE TENTH CENTURY. THE SMALL BOOK ENTITLED *KITAB IHSA AL-ULUM* [THE BOOK OF THE CATEGORIES OF SCIENCE] IS MORE THAN A MERE CLASSIFICATION OF SCIENCES REFLECTING MORE OR LESS THE GREEK CONCEPTIONS OF SCHOLARLY KNOWLEDGE. IT IS RATHER AN ASSESSMENT OF THE NEW INTELLECTUAL ACTIVITIES RESULTING FROM THE TRANSLATION PHENOMENON IN THE EIGHTH AND NINTH CENTURIES. AMONG THOSE ACTIVITIES, SOME, LIKE GEOMETRY, MEDICINE OR MECHANICS, WERE A CONTINUATION OF THE GREEK AND INDIAN HERITAGES. OTHERS WERE NEW, AND APPEARED FOR THE FIRST TIME IN A CLASSIFICATION OF SCIENCES. THIS WAS THE CASE WITH ALGEBRA, WHICH DID NOT EXIST, AS A DISCIPLINE, BEFORE THE BEGINNING OF ISLAM, AND APPEARED FOR THE FIRST TIME WITH THE PUBLICATION BETWEEN 813 AND 833 OF THE *KITAB AL-MUKHTASAR FI HISAB AL-JABR WA L-MUQABALA* [THE COMPENDIOUS BOOK ON CALCULATION BY COMPLETION AND BALANCING] WRITTEN BY AL-KHWARIZMI (D. 850). THUS, FOR CENTURIES, PHILOSOPHY WORKED ALONGSIDE THE EXACT SCIENCES, AND THE LATTER FUELLED THE PHILOSOPHERS' REFLECTION. THIS COOPERATION TOOK PLACE IN THE CONTEXT OF A CIVILIZATION THAT ABSORBED ANCIENT KNOWLEDGE AND THE TOOLS OF GREEK THINKING, AND THEN, QUITE SIMPLY AND WITHOUT LIMITING THE SCOPE OF THEIR REFLECTION, BROUGHT THEM TO FRUITION. AS EARLY AS THE NINTH CENTURY, IT CONTRIBUTED TO THE EMERGENCE OF THE FIGURE OF A SCIENTIST WHO MASTERED THE TECHNIQUES OF SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINES, WAS WELL VERSED IN PHILOSOPHY, WELL EQUIPPED WITH INVESTIGATIVE TOOLS AND INSTILLED WITH AN APPROACH OF A UNIVERSAL NATURE.

INTRODUCTION

When looking at the contents of the notices that Arabic bio-bibliographers have written on Islamic philosophers, one is struck by the importance of science among their activities. On the other hand, the scientific sources show that a number of physicists, astronomers and mathematicians handled the philosophical devices so skilfully that they cannot be denied the status of philosophers, or at least of seasoned practitioners of philosophy. The existence of these two profiles, so typical of the learned community in the Arab-Muslim civilization from the ninth to the thirteenth century, together with the many interactions between science and philosophy as the documents that are accessible today show, bear witness to a truly original tradition. The first elements of this tradition started to appear as early as the end of the eighth century, and inaugurated a continuous development that went on until the end of the thirteenth

century, in a context of intercultural exchanges and confrontations of ideas. Before some representative figures of this phenomenon and their scientific contributions are presented, along with examples of interactions between exact sciences and philosophy are set out, it may be necessary to evoke briefly the genesis of the Arabic philosophical tradition.

First, one must note that philosophy was present from the early stage of Arab sciences, that is when translations were enabling Muslims to appropriate their Indian and Greek heritages. Among the first actors of its introduction into the field of knowledge in Arabic were people familiar with scientific texts. This was the case with Hunayn Ibn Ishaq (d. 873)¹ who not only brilliantly translated into Arabic the works of Aristotle (d. BCE 322) and Plato (d. BCE 348) but also practiced science as a

physician and writer of medical books, translating or summarizing Greek texts in this discipline, in particular those of Galen. It is therefore with the culture and the viewpoint of a scientist that he apprehended the texts he was translating into a language that had neither philosophical tradition nor scholarly practice yet. He is even considered as the principal architect in the elaboration of Arabic philosophical and medical terminologies. His knowledge in philosophy was sufficiently sound, as he was invited to take part in debates in the presence of the caliph al-Wathiq (842-847) and of his successor al-Mutawakkil (847-861).

His son, Ishaq Ibn Hunyan (d.910)² followed in his steps but added to his father's approach an interest in mathematical texts. He is indeed famous for his translation of Euclid's *Elements* (third century BCE), the reference book par excellence for all Islamic mathematicians, and more particularly for those who were interested in geometry and number theory.

At the same time, in the early ninth century, two new types of Arabic-speaking intellectual figures appeared on the scene: the first was that of the scientist who specialized in one or several disciplines but was also versed in philosophy, mastering its tools and immersed in its ways of approaching things. Thabit Ibn Qurra (d.901) is the most ancient representative of this type.³ A Sabian, perfectly fluent in Greek and Arabic, he was also a translator. He is mostly known as a great mathematician and astronomer whose works contain very original conclusions continuing the Greek tradition in these two disciplines. But – and this part of his activity is less well known – he also practiced philosophy and published books on some of the topical themes of his time. His excellent knowledge of Aristotle's writings probably enabled him to comment some of his books, such as *The Categories* and *Analytics*. Thanks to his profound knowledge of Greek geometry he even went so far as to criticize Aristotle's and Plato's conceptions of motion.⁴ Thabit Ibn Qurra was also known to be an adept of philosophical and even theological debate, taking part in discussions on such metaphysical issues as that of the finite or infinite number of souls.⁵



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PHILOSOPHERS AND SCIENTISTS IN THE NINTH CENTURY: THE EXAMPLE OF AL-KINDI

The second type of figures is that of the philosopher acknowledged as such on account of his works, who published scientific books that did not interact with his special field but who made use of his philosophical tools to discuss sciences at large or their specific contents. The oldest representative of this type, which was still present in the following centuries, is the famous al-Kindi (d. Circa 873).⁶ His philosophical works are well known, while those he dedicated to themes or disciplines related to exact sciences are much less so. Yet, ancient bibliographers attributed to him about a hundred texts on scientific matters whereas he was simultaneously credited with fewer than forty texts on themes that have more or less to do with philosophy. Thus, he published works on astronomy, physics, mathematics, music, geology, meteorology, geography, climatology and even cryptography.

In the field of physics, one may mention in particular his texts on optics, the *Kitab al-manazir*, famous in medieval Europe under the title *De aspectibus*, and the *Kitab al-maraya al-muhruqa* [The Treatise on Burning Mirrors].⁷ The two books were based on works in the Greek tradition and enriched them with new ideas. In the field of mathematics, he is credited with thirty-seven texts. One part of them deals with geometry and is a continuation of Euclid's works, more specifically of *Elements*. But he also published various studies on number theory and arithmetic. He even took an interest in certain playful aspects of mathematics, like the parlour game commonly played among the cultured circles of his time that consisted in thinking of a number. In the field of music (then considered to be a mathematical discipline), he wrote seven texts, two of which are about musical theory in general, two on melody and one on rhythm.⁸ In the field of meteorology, he studied tidal phenomena and the various types of bad weather.⁹

But of all his writings it was his work on medicine, especially pharmacology, that reached the widest public and were most talked about, in particular in the medical

circles at various times. We are talking here about the theory he expounded in his *Risala fi marifat quwwat al-adwiyya al-murakkaba* [Epistle on the Knowledge of the Action of Composite Drugs]. Starting from the ancient Greek medical theory that all drugs are a combination of four qualities (coldness, warmth, dampness and dryness) each having four possible degrees of intensity, he refuted what had so far been taken for granted concerning the relation between the increase in intensity of a drug and the increase in degree. He claimed that the intensity of a drug increased geometrically while the degree increased arithmetically. Thus, a first degree medicine is twice as intense as a temperate medicine; a second degree medicine is four times as intense (three times according to the ancient theory); a third degree medicine eight times (instead of four), etc.¹⁰

As for al-Kindi's posterity, especially beyond the borders of the Muslim empire, it is interesting to note that unlike other Islamic scholars, he had little influence as a philosopher on the intellectual circles of medieval Europe, probably because, from the twelfth century on, such a small number of his writings were translated into Latin. He was better known for his scientific books in the circles of European mathematicians, physicists and physicians. One example is his book on optics and his epistle on the composition of drugs, studied by such eminent scholars as Roger Bacon (d. 1294), John Peckham (d. 1292) and Thomas Bradwardine (d. 1349).

After al-Kindi, sciences reached their cruising speed. This is manifest in the increasing and diversified interactions between scientific practices and philosophical reflections. Of course, the philosophers or the scientists who were versed in philosophy at that time correspond to the profiles of the pioneers we have just mentioned. But they were also typical products of their respective times and environments and, as such, their works reflect the evolution of their disciplines as well as the interactions between them and the preoccupations of the elites of that time.



المقالة الاولى

١٤

وليس عليه شئ من الكواكب ، ولهذا سمي اطلسا ، وهو محيط بجميع الافلاك ، ويدير ما تحته
 من الافلاك في 24 ساعة التي هي عبارة عن اليوم بلييلة دورة واحدة من المشرق الى
 المغرب بامر الله جل جلاله ، وقد قلنا ان تحت فللك القمر دائرة اخرى يقال لها فللك النار
 وتحت فللك النار دائرة اخرى يقال لها فللك الهوى ، وتحت دائرة اخرى يقال لها فللك
 الماء ، وهذه الدوائر والافلاك قد احاطت بالارض كما احاط قشر البيضة بالصغار
 ، وصورته على هذا المثال الموضوع امامك والله اعلم .



Other Roger's Book

times, other places

It is the result of the meeting of an Arabic scholar, Al Idrisi with an enlightened prince, the Norman king of Sicily, Roger II. The latter asked al Idrisi to make a huge silver planisphere (which has been lost since) and above all to write the geographic commentary to go with it. It took al-Idrisi eighteen years to complete it...

Al Idrisi was born in Ceuta around 1100 and died between 1164 and 1180.

He probably travelled in North Africa and Spain, possibly also in Asia Minor, and apparently studied the geography and the flora of those regions. In 1138, he went to Palermo, in Sicily and met the Norman king Roger II of Sicily. What became of him after 1158, the year in which he completed the work, is not known. Historians suppose he died between 1164 and 1180...

Since the beginning of the twelfth century, Sicily, occupied by the Arabs, had been conquered by the Normans. A handful of formidable warriors, the Normans under the command of William 'Iron Arm' were mercenaries serving the Byzantine Empire endeavouring to recover Sicily. But in the end they completed the conquest for themselves after eliminating the Byzantines. Once in power, they proved very clear-sighted and made use of the Muslim people and structures of the former regime for their new administration. William's nephew, Roger II, exploited the competences of the Arab people he kept in his service in a most intelligent manner. His successors continued this practice, and taking up the Arabic ways they turned Sicily into a prosperous and powerful kingdom (See Ibn Djubayr's text). Sicily was at the height of its power, a time when tolerance and cooperation prevailed, which lasted until the end of Frederic II Hohenstaufen's rule.

Norman Sicily as described by Al Idrisi

"We say that Sicily is the pearl of the age because of its qualities and bounties and of the uniqueness of its towns and inhabitants... Its kings are the greatest kings, on account of their power, the consideration they are surrounded with, the nobleness of their concerns and the glory of their rank. In the year 453 of the Hegira, the most illustrious, the most valiant, the most brilliant of all kings, Roger, son of Tancred, the greatest Frankish king conquered the best towns in Sicily and with the help of his companions, succeeded in defeating the tyranny of its prefects (wilat) and reducing its armies... his victories giving him command over the whole island, conquered region after region, pushing the frontiers (tahgr) back, within the space of thirty years.

When the country was under his command and he had set up his kingly throne, he spread the benefits of justice on the inhabitants, maintained their religions and their laws and ensured the preservation of their possessions and their lives as well as those of their families and their children. Thus he ruled all his life until his death whose date was fixed by fate, which occurred in the year 494 when he was in the fortress of Melito, in Calabria, where he was buried."

Al-Idrisi, *Nuzhat al-mushtaq fi ikhtiraq al-afaq* (Roger's Book), 1154
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The cooperation between the Muslims and the Norman king as described by Ibn Djubayr

"The finest town in Sicily and the seat of its sovereign is known to the Muslims as al-Madina, and to the Christians as Palermo. It has Muslim citizens who possess mosques, and their own markets, in the many suburbs. The rest of the Muslims live in the farms (of the island) and in all its villages and towns, such as Syracuse and others. But the great city where king William resides is the most important and considerable; Messina only comes next... The attitude of the king is really extraordinary. His attitude towards the Muslims is perfect: he gives them employment, he chooses his officers among them, and all, or almost all, keep their faith secret and can remain faithful to the faith of Islam. The king has full confidence in the Muslims and relies on them to handle many of his affairs, including the most important ones, to the point that the Great Intendant for cooking is a Muslim... This King possesses splendid palaces and elegant gardens, particularly in the capital of his kingdom, al-Madina [Palermo]. In Messina he has a palace, white like a dove, which overlooks the shore. He has a great number of page boys and slave girls. No Christian king is more splendid in his kingliness, better off and more magnificent than he is... One of the most remarkable things told of him is that he reads and writes Arabic."

Ibn Jubayr, *Travels*, 1184.

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- *What sciences have a relationship with philosophy in the text?*
- *Give an example in each case.*
- *Did you notice in this text anything of intellectual interest which is more specific to the Islamic intellectual tradition?*
- *Can you make a connection between one or more scientific concerns referred to in the text and the religious sphere?*
- *Identify some significant features of the scientific approach in Islamic tradition.*
- *What relationship do you see between art and science in this text?*
- *What are al-Farabi two approaches to geometry?*
- *Can you cite three innovative scientific approaches in what the text describes?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *In the relationship between philosophy and science, find three points of convergence and three points of divergence.*
- *Can philosophy and science sustain religious faith?*
- *In what way may certain scientific or philosophical conceptions conflict with religious conceptions?*
- *Find three ideas that you consider to be open to criticism in this text.*
- *Does the view of philosophy described here match your idea of philosophy?*
- *Does the view of science described here match your idea of science?*
- *Do you think that Islamic philosophy allows sufficient room for subjectivity?*

Suggested teaching method: the art of questioning

A question is chosen.
Each participant replies individually in writing to the question chosen.
The group is divided up into three-person teams.
The functions are established: interviewer, interviewee and observer. The interviewee gives his or her answer to the first question, the interviewer asks that person to develop or rethink his or her answer, without trying to reply in his or her place.
At the end, the observer comments upon the preceding dialogue. Roles are changed and the procedure is repeated.
Roles are changed again so that each participant will have performed all three functions.
If possible, begin again with other questions.
The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Outline representations

- *Ask the participants to read also the worksheet "Arab science: know-how, experimentation and theoretical knowledge".*
- *Divide the participants into groups.*
- *Ask the following question: How do Arab-Muslim scientific approaches proceed?*
- *Each group outlines the Arab-Muslim experimental approach, illustrated with comparative examples drawn from other experimental models.*
- *Each group presents its work with the help of its outline.*
- *Ask the groups to engage in a discussion along the lines "observation – experimentation – analysis of findings – construction of a model or a theory".*
- *Questions to be put to the participants:*
 - How do these compare with other scientific models?*
 - What is the example of optics and the various practical applications?*
 - What are the relationships between medical science, psychology and mental illness?*
 - God, emotions and science: dualism or harmony?*
 - Rationality and logic; what influences on the West?*
 - How do the Greek and Arab-Muslim civilizations differ in their scientific outlooks?*
 - For Arab-Muslim civilization, what is the relationship between music and science?*

AL-FARABI AND SCIENCES IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TENTH CENTURY

There is of course no denying the exceptional intellectual talents of al-Farabi (d. 950), but he certainly appears to be a product of his century, that is of a prosperous time for studying philosophy and publishing new books in this domain. It was also the time when new orientations continued the ancient heritages (in geometry, mechanics, optics and medicine) and initiated new scientific disciplines: algebra, trigonometry and the scientific study of time.¹¹

More than his predecessor al-Kindi, al-Farabi benefited from all these new developments and was an attentive actor. His non-philosophical writings clearly bear witness to his sound training in various domains of exact sciences: mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, medicine, music (which was considered as a branch of mathematics at the time). Some of his publications, like those dealing with chemistry, medicine and zoology, did not circulate much. Others were as important as his philosophical works, at least in the eyes of his contemporaries and those of the readers in the following centuries. Like al-Kindi, he produced two kinds of scientific works: the works of a man of science who kept within the boundaries of each of the disciplines he dealt with, and the works of a philosopher who used his knowledge of logic, of which he was a specialist, to reflect upon sciences in general and the contents of some of them in particular.

He wrote two books on geometry: *Kitab al-mudkhal ila l-handasa al-wahmiyya* [Introduction to Imaginary Geometry] and *Kitab fi l-hayyiz wa l-miqdar* [The Book on Boundaries and Measure], which have not come down to us. He also published two major commentaries of a philosophical nature on part of Euclid's *Elements*, the reference book of all geometers from the Antiquity to the seventeenth century. These commentaries circulated either separately or together as *Sharh al-mustaghlaq min musadarat al-maqala al-ula wa l-khamisa min Uqlidis* [Commentary on the Difficulties of the Introductory Matter to Books 1 and 5 of Euclid's Treatise]. In these two epistles, he analysed with astuteness and a critical mind geometrical notions and in particular the difficult notion of 'the ratio of two quantities'. But his analysis is epistemological, not technical.

In the text on Euclidian geometry; al-Farabi analysed the notions of point, line, plane and body fundamental in the elaboration of Euclidian geometry, and he did so as a philosopher, using the tools of logic. In particular, he showed that there were two ways of understanding these notions in their relation to one another. The first one, which is analytical, and could be called 'intuitionist', is justified by the pedagogical necessities al-Farabi himself mentioned. It starts from the object that is most accessible to the senses, the body, to infer from it the plane as the limit of the body and the point as the limit of the line. The second one is the synthetic approach, and starts from the simplest object, the point, to work back up to the body.¹²

Al-Farabi's second text deals with the definition of the part that measures the whole, the notion of ratio and proportional quantities, that is, the fundamental elements which constitute the basis of the theory of proportions of Book 5 and the theory of irrational magnitudes of Book 10 of Euclid's *Elements*.

In the field of astronomy, al-Farabi is the author of a *Sharh al-Majisti* [Commentary of the Almagest] and above all a *Kitab al-lawahiq* [Book of Appendices], conceived of as a complement to the contents of Ptolemy's Almagest (second century), insofar as al-Farabi solves astronomical problems with the help of the new trigonometric tools elaborated in Baghdad in the ninth century from Indian elements. In the field of astrology, he published a *Risala fi ibtal ahkam an-nujum* [Epistle against Astrology] in which he criticizes the contents and bases of this discipline, which was very much in fashion at the time, although it repeatedly incurred the wrath of the theologians and philosophers.¹³

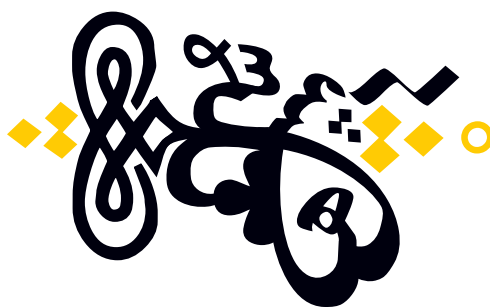
Although the contents of some of al-Farabi's writings mentioned above were important, they were overshadowed by two other scientific books that received much attention after the tenth century. The first one was his *Kitab al-musiqi al-kabir* [The Great Book of Music], the most important contribution to the study of music in Islam. This was a genuine treatise representing in fact the crowning achievement of a very rich work which encompassed all the historical, theoretical and instrumental aspects of music, some of which were

developed in two lesser writings: *al-Mudkhal fi l-musiqa* [The Introduction to Music] and *Istiqsar ilm al-musiqa* [A Precise of Music]. In his Great Book, al-Farabi shows both his command of the theoretical aspects inherited from the Greek musical tradition and his profound practical knowledge of the instruments used at the time. More precisely, he deals with the physical aspects of sound (its production, transmission, high and low pitches), the notions of notes, intervals (and their various subdivisions), melodies and rhythms. He also studied in depth some instruments, like the lute, the *tunbur*, the flute and the *rabab*. It is important to note that unlike his predecessors Ibn Sina (d.1037) and Nasir ad-Din (d.1274) who considered music from an essentially mathematical viewpoint, the philosopher al-Farabi took into account its human dimension. Thus, in the 'second discourse' of the part entitled 'The book of composition', he studied singing in depth and concluded with a chapter entitled 'The effect of melodies, their enrichment and relation to passions'.¹⁴

The second scientific book, which went down in history, did not deal with one science in particular but with all the sciences that were practised in the tenth century. The small book entitled *Kitab ihisa al-ulum* [The Book of the Categories of Science] is more than a mere classification of sciences reflecting more or less the Greek conceptions of scholarly knowledge. It is rather an assessment of the new intellectual activities resulting from the translation phenomenon in the eighth and ninth centuries. Among those activities,

some, like geometry, medicine or mechanics, were a continuation of the Greek and Indian heritages. Others were new, and appeared for the first time in a classification of sciences. This was the case with algebra, which did not exist, as a discipline, before the beginning of Islam, and appeared for the first time with the publication between 813 and 833 of the *Kitab al-mukhtasar fi hisab al-jabr wa l-muqabala* [The Compendious Book on Calculation by Completion and Balancing] written by al-Khwarizmi (d. 850).

Al-Farabi's book presents the disciplines in the following order: the science of language, logic, mathematics, physics, metaphysics, politics, Law and speculative theology. In fact, all the disciplines that corresponded to 'exact' sciences are grouped together under the heading of mathematics: arithmetic, calculus, geometry, optics, astronomy, astrology, music, the science of weights and the 'science of ingenious devices'. The last one included several disciplines aiming at the application of theoretical aspects of the mathematical domains listed previously. Thus, according to al-Farabi, the result of the combination of the science of number with geometry is algebra, which is the art of manipulating the quantities already studied in Book X of Euclid's *Elements*. This science of 'know-how' also includes architecture, measuring devices, designing astronomical or musical instruments, building automatons or war weapons and making optical instruments, such as magnifying instruments and burning mirrors.¹⁵



PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE IN THE EAST AFTER THE TENTH CENTURY

The period extending from the beginning of the eleventh century to the end of the thirteenth century and corresponding to the times of Ibn Sina, Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1041), al-Khayyam (d. 1131) and Nasir ad-Din at-Tusi was extremely fruitful in the domain of philosophy and gave those who practised this discipline (be they philosophers or scientists) the opportunity to tackle scientific issues, in particular in mathematics and astronomy. They resorted to philosophical and logical tools in order to give their point of view on the foundations of these subject matters, to pass judgement on this or that scientific approach, and even resorted to some of those tools when strictly scientific approaches did not succeed in solving a problem.

For instance, there were major philosophical interventions relating to the foundations of mathematics. In arithmetic, they concerned the concepts of unit and number. In geometry, they concerned some of the premises of Books I, V and X of Euclid's *Elements*, and more specifically the fifth postulate of Book I (which states that there is one and only one straight line parallel to another passing through a point)¹⁶ In this domain, Ibn Sina's contributions are very instructive. As a scientist, he merely dealt with these notions in a classic way, in the summary of Euclid's *Elements* which he included in his *Kitab ash-shifa*.¹⁷ But it was as a philosopher that he resumed the study of certain mathematical notions. Thus, in his *Metaphysics* and in his *Logic* he dealt with the notions of angles and figures in relation to those of quality and quantity. He also gave thought to the best way of defining the other fundamental entities of geometry. Finally, following Aristotle's steps, he analysed the concepts of the one, the many and the infinite.

As for al-Khayyam, he tried to make mathematical constructions and demonstrations conform to the criteria of Aristotelian logic. He also introduced philosophical notions, like the attributive principle or the causal principle, which can already be found in Ibn Sina's *Kitab ash-Shifa* or *Isharat wa t-tanbihat* [The Book of Remarks and Admonitions].

As second very fruitful approach was initiated by Thabit Ibn Qurra and continued by Ibn al-Haytham. These contributions constituted the first steps of what was later called 'intuitionism' in Europe. It introduced *motion* in the definition of certain geometrical objects. Thus, to make sure that two straight lines run parallel to each other, Thabit Ibn Qurra imagined a rigid cylinder inside which a segment moved, thereby drawing a parallel line whose existence was guaranteed by the presence of the cylinder. In an effort to avoid bringing in the notion of the infinite, which is difficult to perceive, Ibn al-Haytham resorted to mechanical devices and to motion to show that a straight line can be indefinitely continued. Introducing as they did the criterion of constructibility, these two approaches broke away from the Platonic conception of ideal mathematical objects.¹⁸ As a matter of fact, they provoked a strong reaction from al-Khayyam and Nasir ad-Din at-Tusi, who blamed Ibn al-Haytham's incompetence in philosophy. Apart from the occasionally remarks exchanged in the controversy, the debate was a philosophical one, conducted by mathematicians who had a certain command of philosophical tools.

Another mathematical domain that encouraged the intervention of philosophical tools was that of the theory of quantities. The application of arithmetical operations to quantities that were no longer integers or fractions and that the astronomers often faced in their calculations and measures, had to be accounted for. This led Islamic mathematicians to criticize some of Euclid's definitions and to suggest others. Al-Khayyam went farthest in this work, explicitly referring to Aristotelian philosophical concepts. They enabled him to criticize the Euclidian notion of the equality and inequality of two ratios and replace it with what is supposedly a more accurate notion called *anthyphaeresis*. He also borrowed from Aristotle's *Physics* the principle of the infinite divisibility of a continuous quantity to get a result Euclid had not mentioned in his book.¹⁹ In doing so, he paved the way for Nasir ad-Din at-Tusi, who then formulated, very satisfactorily for the time, a difficult notion, which, much later in Europe, was called 'positive real numbers'.



- > *What was original about the connection between philosophy and science in Islamic countries?*
- > *How did the “multicultural” birth of Arab philosophy come about?*
- > *Discover in al-Kindi the figure of a ninth century multidisciplinary philosopher.*
- > *Note the extent of this scholarly philosopher’s influence in Europe until the fourteenth century.*
- > *Another multidisciplinary philosopher: al-Farabi.
Comment on his originality in applying logic to his scientific activities.
A philosopher and musician: a theoretician and practitioner.
Comment on his innovation in studying the link between music and human passions.*
- > *Note the publication of a new study, The Book of the Enumeration of the Sciences.*
- > *Comment on this leap forward between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries:
the scholarly philosophers laid the basis of a “scientific method”.*
- > *The contribution of Andalusia: Ibn Bajja, philosopher, scholar and politician.
An important figure cited by Maimonides. His innovations in mathematics.*
- > *Comment on this wonderful example of scientific enquiry: a mathematical problem (relating to curves) first posed by the Greeks, subsequently pursued by the Arabs and finally resolved, 20 centuries later, by the Europeans.*
- > *Evaluate in context the scientific ethical guideline laid down by the scholar Ibn al-Haitham (d. 1041):
“Our aim in all that we make subject to inspection and review being to employ justice, not to follow prejudice,
and to take care in all that we judge and criticize that we seek the truth and not to be swayed by opinion.”*

PHILOSOPHERS AND SCIENCE IN AL-ANDALUS IN THE ELEVENTH AND TWELFTH CENTURIES

Even today, when the name of Ibn Bajja (d. 1138) is mentioned, what mostly comes to mind is his unfinished philosophical work. Yet, what remains of his multifarious contributions, and what we know about the intellectual milieu in al-Andalus in the eleventh and twelfth centuries show that he was an exceptional scientist who was not only well-informed about the state of sciences in his time but had also contributed to stimulating some of them. One may even assert that if his activities in these domains had been carried through, or if what he had already written had been taught and distributed, this philosopher would have gone down in history as a biologist, a musicologist, an astronomer and even a mathematician.²⁰

Ibn Bajja received his training as a scientist in Saragossa, which had been under the rule of the Banu Hud dynasty since 1010. Thanks to two of them, al-Muqtadir (1046-1081) and his son al-Mutaman (1081-1085), the city had become one of the leading scientific and philosophical centres in al-Andalus.²¹ But it was also a strategic place coveted by the northern Castilian power and it was eventually absorbed by its Christian neighbours. This was the main reason for Ibn Bajja leaving his home town and settling temporarily first in Valencia, then in Seville and then Fes. He was very productive intellectually throughout his life but he was also very active politically, which led him to jail more than once and may account for his assassination in Fes in 1138.

To get an idea of the level of his scientific training, one need only read what he wrote in his correspondence with two of his friends, Ibn al-Imam, who lived in Grenada, and Ibn Hasday, who lived in Cairo. In one of his letters he wrote: *"As for the art of music, I practised it until I reached a standard that I felt satisfactory, I then practiced the art of Astronomy... After I had completed its study, I devoted myself to speculation about Physics."*²² In another letter, he mentioned his top-rate training in mathematics with a great professor, Ibn Sayyid, who taught in Valencia.²³

According to the facts in our possession, we can say that Ibn Bajja made original contributions in certain domains, like music, astronomy, botany and mathematics. In the first domain mentioned, the bio-bibliographer al-Maqqari described the book Ibn Bajja apparently wrote as 'representing in the West what Abu Nasr al-Farabi's book represented in the East.'²⁴ He added that he was credited with the most famous melodies in the repertoire of al-Andalus. He was also known to have taught singing and the lute, which he played brilliantly.

In the domain of astronomy, Ibn Bajja carried out theoretical research and made numerous observations, in particular that of the eclipse of Jupiter by Mars in 1101. He also offered an opinion on the position of some planets in relation to the sun, in particular Mercury and Venus. His opinion was considered as sufficiently important for the great Jewish thinker Maimonides (d. 1204) to mention it explicitly in his *Dalalat al-hairin* [The Guide for the Perplexed].²⁵ Ibn Bajja also took part in the 'debate of the century' about Ptolemy's planetary models (second century), which led to their rejection and replacement by new models, in the thirteenth century. The criticism was based on the need to respect the fundamental principles of the physics of the time, namely those defined and defended by Aristotle on the nature of motion and the forms it took in the universe. It is therefore yet another example of the intervention of philosophy in a purely scientific issue. Following in the steps of Ibn al-Haytham in his book entitled *ash-Shukuk ala Batlamyus* [Doubts about Ptolemy], Ibn Bajja apparently questioned (from a letter mentioned by Maimonides but as yet not found) the geometrical models of the Greek astronomer. It would seem that he also elaborated a model that did not resort to the famous 'epicycles' that seemed so problematic to the Muslim astronomers of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries.²⁶ Ibn Bajja's questioning of Ptolemy's models was the starting point of a reflection continued by two other Andalusian philosophers, Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185) and Ibn Rushd (d. 1198).

In the field of mathematics, it was long believed that, though Ibn Bajja had a sound basic knowledge of arithmetic, geometry and algebra, he had not practised these disciplines as an author, even less so as a researcher. Yet, some of his letters, analysed less than thirty years ago, show an unsuspected facet not to be found in any other philosopher of Islamic civilization, that of a researcher concerned with as yet unsolved problems. Indeed, after he had perfectly assimilated the contents of the very original works of his professor Ibn Sayyid, he endeavoured to establish new results. As he wrote in a letter to Ibn al-Imam: *"I had already said that it has reached you that Abd ar-Rahman Ibn Sayyid had discovered geometrical demonstrations of a kind none of his predecessors on whom we are informed had imagined, and that he had not consigned them in writing... And it has also reached you that I had added complements at the time when he discovered them... And my intention is to write a book containing them and to add problems about which I had told you I had elaborated demonstrations during my second time in prison."*²⁷

Ibn Bajja's mathematical works concerned the study of new geometrical curves in view of using them to solve difficult problems that neither the Greek scientists nor those of the Muslim East had solved. In a second letter to his friend, he underlines the fact that the works of his professor and his own stemmed from the study of Apollonius' famous book entitled *Conic Sections* (third century BCE). The curves studied in this book had enabled the Muslim mathematicians of the East to find geometrical solutions to algebraic problems of the third and fourth degrees. But they could not solve problems of a higher degree. Consequently, new more complex curves had to be imagined and studied. This Ibn Sayyid had partly done and Ibn Bajja had apparently completed the work. The new tools were supposedly used to solve two famous problems inherited from the Greek tradition, which, between the ninth and the eleventh century, numerous attempts all failed to solve. We are talking here about the problem of the division of a triangle into n parts, and that of the determination of n quantities with equal ratio to two given quantities. These new results were only established again in the seventeenth century by the new European school of mathematics.

Thus, for centuries, philosophy worked alongside the exact sciences, and the latter fuelled the philosophers' reflection. This cooperation took place in the context of a civilization that absorbed ancient knowledge and the tools of Greek thinking, and then, quite simply and without limiting the scope of their reflection, brought them to fruition. As early as the ninth century, it contributed to the emergence of the figure of a scientist who mastered the techniques of scientific disciplines, was well versed in philosophy, well equipped with investigative tools and instilled with an approach of a universal nature that time has not eroded, and which summed Ibn al-Haytham summed up as follows: "Our aim in all that we make subject to inspection and review being to empty justice, not to follow prejudice and to take care in all that we judge and criticize that we seek the truth and not to be swayed by opinion."²⁸

- ¹ Ch.-C. Gillispie (ed), 1970-1980, *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, New York, Scribner's Son, vol. 6, pp. 230-249.
- ² Gillispie, op. cit., vol. 6, pp. 236-237.
- ³ Gillispie, op. cit., Vol. 13, pp. 288-295.
- ⁴ Thabit Ibn Qurra, n.d., *Maqala fi talkhis ma ata bihi Aristotalis fi kitabih fi ma bad at-tabia* [Treatise on the Concise Exposition of What Aristotle Presented in his Book *Metaphysics*], Ms. Hyderabad, University, n° 1402 ; Istanbul, Aya Sofya, n° 4832/14.
- ⁵ S. Pines, Thabit Ibn Qurra's conception of number and theory of mathematical infinite, in 1968 *Actes du Onzième Congrès International d'Histoire des Sciences*, 1965, Wrocław, Ossolineum, pp. 160-166.
- ⁶ Ch.-C. Gillispie, op. cit., vol. 15, pp. 261-266.
- ⁷ R. Rashed (ed. and trans.), 1997, *L'Optique et la Catoptrique d'al-Kindi*, Leiden, Brill.
- ⁸ A. Shiloah, Un ancien traité sur le 'ūd d'Abu Yūsuf al-Kindi, *Oriental Studies*, 4, (1974), pp. 179-209; R. Lachmann & M. al-Hafni, 1931, *Jaquib ibn Ishaq al-Kindi, Risala fi khubr talif al-alhan*, [On the Composition of Melodies], Beirut.
- ⁹ F. Sezgin, 1978, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, Band VII, Astrologie bis ca 430 H., pp. 241-261.
- ¹⁰ L. Gauthier, 1938, *Antécédents gréco-arabes de la psychophysique*, Beirut, Dar al-Mashriq.
- ¹¹ A. Djebbar, 2004, La phase arabe de la trigonométrie, in *Les instruments scientifiques dans le patrimoine : quelles mathématiques ?* (acts of the Rouen Conference, 6-8 April 2001), Paris, Editions Ellipse, pp. 415-435.
- ¹² G. Freudenthal, La philosophie de la géométrie d'al-Fārābī, son commentaire sur le début du 1^{er} Livre et le début du V^e Livre des *Éléments* d'Euclide, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, n° 11 (1988), pp. 104-219.
- ¹³ B. A Rosenfeld and E. Ihsanoğlu, 2003, *Mathematicians, Astronomers and other Scholars of Islamic Civilization and their Works (7th-19th c.)*, Istanbul, I.R.C.I.C.A., pp. 75-78.
- ¹⁴ See the French translation of the text: Al-Farabi, 1930, *Kitab al-musiqi al-kabir / Grand traité de la musique*, trans. by R. d'Erlanger, Paris, Paul Geuthener.
- ¹⁵ Al-Farabi, 1968, *Kitab ihṣā al-ulum* [The Book of the Categories of Science], ed. by U. Amine, Cairo, Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop, pp. 93-110.
- ¹⁶ Euclid, 2007, *Elements of Geometry*, trans. into English by Richard Fitzpatrick, Austin, Richard Fitzpatrick, p. 7. See also the French translation *Les Éléments*, trans. by B. Vitrac, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1990, pp. 175-178.
- ¹⁷ Ibn Sina, 1967, *Usul al-handasa* [The foundations of geometry]. In *Kitab ash-shifa*, ed. by A. Sabra and A. Lutfi Muzhir, Cairo, 1967.
- ¹⁸ A. Djebbar, 1984, *Quelques remarques sur les rapports entre philosophie et mathématiques arabes*, Actes du Colloque de la Société Tunisienne de Philosophie (Hammamet, 1-2 Juin 1983), *Revue Tunisienne des Etudes Philosophiques*, March 1984, n° 2, p. 9.
- ¹⁹ Al-Khayyam, 1961, *Umar al-Khayyam, Musadarat Uqlidis* [Euclid's Premises], ed. by A. I. Sabara, Alexandria; A. Djebbar, 2002, L'épître d'al-Khayyām sur 'L'explication des prémisses problématiques du livre d'Euclide', *Farhang* (Tehran), Vol. 14, n° 39-40, pp. 79-136.
- ²⁰ D. M. Dunlop, 1957, *Remarks on the life and works of Ibn Bajjah in Proceedings of the Twenty Second Congress of Orientalists*, Leiden, Brill, Vol. II, pp. 188-196; *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, 1968, entry Ibn Bajja, new ed., Paris, Maisonneuve & Larose, pp. 750-751, Ch.-C. Gillispie (ed.), 1970-1980, *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, op. cit., Vol. 1, pp. 408-410.
- ²¹ A. Djebbar, Deux mathématiciens peu connus de l'Espagne du XI^e siècle : al-Mu'taman et Ibn Sayyid, in M. Folkerts et J.P. Hogendijk (eds.), 1993, *Vestigia Mathematica, Studies in medieval and early modern mathematics in honour of H.L.L. Busard*, Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA, pp. 79-91; G. T. Beech, 2008, *The Brief Eminence and Doomed Fall of Islamic Saragossa*, Madrid, Instituto de Estudios Islamicos y del Oriente Proximo, pp. 99-177.
- ²² See J. Alaoui, 1983, *Rasail falsafiyya li Abi Bakr Ibn Bajja* [The Philosophical Writings of Ibn Bajja], Beirut, Dar ath-thaqafa, Casablanca, Dar an-nashr al-maghribiyya, p. 78.
- ²³ Alaoui, 1983, op. cit., p. 88.
- ²⁴ al-Maqqari, 1968, *Nafh at-tib fi ghusn al-Andalus ar-ratib* [The Perfumed Smell of the Tender Branch of al-Andalus], ed. by Ihsan Abbas, Beirut, Dar Sadir, Vol. III, p. 185.
- ²⁵ Maimonides, 2008, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. by M. Friedländer in 1903, Charleston, Forgotten Books, p. 323.
- ²⁶ Maimonides, 2008, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, op. cit., p. 374.
- ²⁷ J. Alaoui, 1983, *Rasail falsafiyya li Abi Bakr Ibn Bajja*, op. cit., p. 88.
- ²⁸ Ibn al-Haytham, 1989, *The Optics of Ibn al Haytham, Books I-III*, trans. by A. I. Sabra, London, Warburg Institute, p. 6.



A drawing on a wall saying "Come on. Let's go to school!" Official campaign to promote education. (Afghanistan) © UNESCO/Christophe Buffet

Afghanistan has initiated a campaign to promote education in order to encourage parents to enroll their children to school. Its slogan says: "Come on. Let's go to school!"

EDUCATION, SENSE AND ESSENCE

BE IT IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS OR AT THE UNIVERSITY, ISLAM IS PRESENTED BY SOME AS A NATURAL RELIGION, THAT IS, THE RELIGION PEOPLE MUST ABSOLUTELY BELIEVE IN AND OBEY IF THEY WANT TO ACHIEVE HUMANITY. CONSIDERED FROM THIS VIEWPOINT, IT IS AS IF ISLAM ALONE SHOULD BE THE ULTIMATE FOUNDATION OF ANY DISCOURSE ON THE HUMAN CONDITION. BUT IS THE 'REVEALED TRUTH' OF ISLAM THE INTANGIBLE AND INDISPUTABLE MATRIX OF ALL KNOWLEDGE? OPPOSING THIS RIGORISTIC MODEL, WHERE IN THE MUSLIM WORLD COULD ONE FIND AN EFFORT TO THINK BY ONESELF? THE SUFIS, THOSE MYSTICS OF ISLAM THAT HAVE OFTEN BEEN TROUBLED BY RELIGIOUS ORTHODOXY, SUGGEST A MODEL OF INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM AIMED AT AWAKENING THE DISCIPLES TO THE COMPLEXITY OF THE REAL. NO MATTER WHAT THE RIGORISTIC PROGRAMMES SAY, THANKS TO ONE OF THE GREATEST AMBASSADORS IN HISTORY, TAHA HUSSEIN, AN EGYPTIAN WRITER OF THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, EDUCATION IN ISLAM PROVES CAPABLE OF GETTING OVER ITS BLOCKS TO LEAD THE INDIVIDUAL TOWARDS A SECOND BIRTH – FREEDOM, REASON, CONSCIENCE – TO WHICH EACH HUMAN BEING IS CALLED BY NATURE.

"The lad then knew of the sheikh and was pleased at the prospect of going to his circle and hearing him. How happy he was when he put off his shoes at the door of the mosque and walked first on the straw-mat, then on the marble and then on the thin carpet, which was spread over the floor of the mosque! How happy he was when he took his place among the circle on this carpet by the side of a marble pillar. He touched the pillar and liked its glossy smoothness, pondering for a long time on his father's remark, 'I hope I may live to see your brother a judge and you lecturing by a pillar in Al-Azhar.'" ¹

This traditional almost timeless scene of teaching in Islam showing a young student who has come to sit in

a corner of the mosque at the feet of the master to listen to his teaching is taken from Taha Hussein's autobiography, *The Days*.² In this *Bildungsroman*, which has become a classic, the great Egyptian writer, born in 1889, describes the different stages of his education, from the Quranic school of his Middle Egypt village to the University of Islamic Sciences in Al-Azhar, the new modern secular university of Cairo recently created on the European model, and thence to the Sorbonne in Paris. How different the methods of teaching practiced in those different places were for him to take in!

He began by learning the Quran by heart, the most classic way of doing it for many children throughout the past and present Muslim world. Recalling those hours

spent in front of 'Sayedna', the strict master, he writes, speaking about himself: "Our friend pictures himself, as described above, sitting on the ground playing with the shoes around him, while 'Our Master' hears him recite *Surat-ar-Rahman*" and "He remembers very clearly the day on which he concluded his study of the Quran, and 'Our Master' telling him some days before how pleased his father would be with him..."³ After learning over six thousand verses in this manner, a feat of the memory that cannot but be noticed, Taha Hussein, then only nine years old, was called 'sheikh', 'for who memorises the Quran is a sheikh whatever age he be.'⁴

But what he learnt so fast, in such a mechanical way, without thinking about the meanings of the text and its symbols, was just as soon erased from the memory of the young 'sheikh'... The story of the humiliation he felt when his father discovered how he had forgotten it all is one of the most striking passages of the book, because it sounds both tragic and comic, but also because it is an implicit criticism of this traditional method of rote learning by which Islamic education cultivated slavish repetition instead of forging a critical mind and the faculty of invention. Let us read this beautiful extract, in which the child's forgetting of what he had learnt may be interpreted as an act of his unconscious, in the Freudian sense of the word, through which the mind shows the refusal to be imprisoned by teachings that ossify the mind instead of vitalizing it: "Our friend used to go to the village school

and return from it without having done any work, confident that he had learnt the Quran by heart, while 'Our Master' was equally assured that he had learnt the Quran until the fatal day... and it certainly was a fatal day, in which for the first time our friend tasted the bitterness of failure, humiliation, degradation and hatred of life. He returned from the school in the afternoon of that day, calm and self-assured, but he had hardly entered the house before his father called him, addressing him by the title of sheikh. He went to him and found him and found him with two of his friends. His father came to meet him, bade him sit down in gentle tones and asked him some customary questions. Then he asked him to recite 'The Sura of the Poets'. This request fell on him like a thunderbolt. He began to reflect and meditate. He uttered the customary phrase, 'I take refuge with God from the accursed Satan' and also 'In the name of God the Beneficent, The Merciful,' but after that all he could remember of 'The Sura of the Poets' was that it was one of the three that begin with *Ta Sin Mim*, so he began to repeat *Ta Sin Mim* over and over again, without being able to arrive at what came after. His father prompted him by telling him some of the words which followed, but in spite of that he could not proceed at all. So his father said, 'Recite the Sura of the Ant, then.' ... but this time his father did not prompt him at all. Instead he said quietly, 'Go! I thought that you had learnt the Quran?' Our friend stood ashamed while the perspiration poured forth."⁵



The author

Abdenour Bidar is a French philosopher and writer. His main works include *Un islam pour notre temps* (Paris, Seuil, 2004), *Self islam* (Paris, Seuil, 2006), *L'islam sans soumission, Pour un existentialisme musulman* (Paris, Albin Michel, 2008), *L'islam face à la mort de Dieu* (Paris, Jeanne Bourin, 2010).

'Black evening,' 'hateful evening,' concludes Hussein, who later learnt the Quran just as quickly, but who, through this training, continued to exercise his critical mind about an educational method whose limits he very accurately gauged. Thus, he realized that the name of Sheikh that even his parents gave him out of 'pride and satisfaction with themselves' (p. 17) was above all an object of pride and social distinction. From that he bitterly deduced that 'life was full of injustice and deceit' (p. 18). And this first experience fostered his distrust and vigilance as regards all that is learnt for the sake of prestige and power rather than for its own sake. This scepticism became second nature to him and led him much later to retort to one of his university professors who was getting carried away with his own words: 'Chattering at length has never established any truth or deleted a mistake!'

Have things changed in the Muslim world since? Has the education of minds become an awakening of critical minds, or it is still the teaching of a set of dogmas with learning the Quran by heart as the lasting archetype? This is the question raised by the Tunisian scholar Hamadi Redissi in his book entitled *L'exception islamique* (The Islamic Exception): 'What about education in Islam today?' His answer brooks no concessions: be it in primary and secondary schools or at the university, 'Islam is presented as the natural religion', that is, the religion people must absolutely believe in and obey if they want to achieve humanity. And all the disciplines that have to do with the knowledge of humankind and the meaning and conduct of life, that is, all the so-called human sciences, or 'humanities' (history, civics, philosophy) are, he writes, considered from the viewpoint of this reference to Islam, as if Islam alone should be the ultimate foundation of any discourse on the human condition. Is the 'revealed truth' of Islam the intangible and indisputable matrix of all knowledge? Referring to the works of Mohammed Charfi, a jurist, a philosopher

and the Tunisian minister of education from 1989 to 1995, Hamadi Redissi writes: "*The Islamic school ... installs the same 'traditional rapport' between the pupils – already socialized in an Islamic family – and the teachers working in collusion with the other components of the Muslim society. One might as well say that the Islamic socialization at school is a smooth seamless continuation of the Islamic cultural socialization, and that the school carries on the work of the family... Charfi has shown how the basic school curriculum propagates the most reactionary Islam. All the textbooks indulge in the cult of 'true religion', whose five pillars must be scrupulously respected for fear of disciplinary action against the recalcitrants, in conformity with the sharia [religious law].*"

To a diet of dogmatic religious truth and rote learning of the Quran, which stuffs one's head full of facts but does not develop a good mind, and to the empty eloquence of beautiful rhetoric, which seduces and impresses more than it teaches, Taha Hussein always preferred the personal thinking of one who seeks and doubts. And it is with enthusiasm that he recounts these moments of perplexity when his young mind was disconcerted by some idea or sentence or other. "*There was one sentence in particular. How many sleepless nights it cost him! How many days of his life it overcast! Sometimes it tempted him to miss an elementary lecture – for he had understood his first lessons without difficulty... The sentence which took possession of him in this way was certainly a remarkable one. It would fall echoing in his ears as he lay on the threshold of sleep, and drag him back to a wakefulness which lasted all night through. This was the sentence: 'Right is the negation of negation.' What could these words mean? How could negation be negated? What might such negation be? And how could the negation of negation be right? The sentence began to whirl round in his head like the ravings of a delirium in a sick man's brain.*"⁶



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But where in the Muslim world could one find the model for such an effort to think by oneself? Probably in the school of the Sufis, those mystics of Islam that have often been troubled by religious orthodoxy precisely on account of their intellectual, moral and spiritual freedom. However, before describing the way their teachings could initiate so many minds to freedom, one needs to say that this Sufism must not be idealized in this respect: in the course of its history, it too sometimes engendered dogmatism and mental imprisonment. This can still be seen today notably in the personality cult maintained in their disciples by 'spiritual masters' who are more like manipulative gurus demanding from them blind submission in the name of their alleged saintliness than true awakens. There is only one criterion by which one can distinguish between these two kinds of masters and that is whether the disciple is allowed to criticize – or not – the advice, orders or judgements coming from the master or his henchmen.

Apart from these recurring cases of degeneration, the Sufis best expressed the value of experiencing such perplexity as Hussein experienced. Indeed, when such perplexity takes hold of individuals, it is the sign that they are beginning to look beyond established certainties, deeply rooted convictions, dogmatism, and become aware of the profound complexity of the world and the mysteries of existence. Thus, they feel freer and more profound. They become aware that the truth can never be possessed, only aimed at, that knowledge must for ever be built or rebuilt, and that consequently both imply humility. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Moroccan sheikh al-Arabi ad Darqawi wrote a collection of letters intended for the disciples of the Shadhilite Order of which he was a master. In them, he regularly insisted on the virtue of perplexity: *"And we advise you: if you are in a state of perplexity (hayrah), do not hasten to cling to anything... therefore when it descends upon you, defend yourself no longer and do not be concerned with searching for some remedy, lest you drive away the good which comes toward you freely... Our Master used to say when someone was overcome with dismay: 'Relax your mind and learn to swim.'"*⁷

In order to create this state of perplexity, the teachings of the Sufi masters constantly resort to paradox, which precisely compels the mind not to rely on the false evidence of the simplicity of things. In this respect, the education they give to the disciples is based on a particularly important verse of the Quran in which God says about himself: 'He is the First and the Last and the Manifest and the Hidden' (57: 3). The Sufis used this verse to convey the idea that the truth is the coincidence of opposites, that is 'yes' and 'no' concurrently; it is infinitely complex, and as such always beyond whatever human discourse can assert. For any assertion is a negation: to assert something about an object – that is to predicate something on it, to express what the object is – is concurrently to deny that it is the opposite of what is asserted about it. For instance, to say that so and so is sincere is to deny that he is a hypocrite. For the Sufis, this is the limit inherent in all human judgement: as soon as one asserts one thing, enounces such or such opinion, conviction or certainty, the individual simplifies the real and misses its complexity; the individual who is considered sincere, for example, may indeed be so up to a certain point,

or in most circumstances, but at the same time, and contradictorily, one must admit that he/she may well resort to lying on other occasions; and in its turn this hypocrisy cannot be judged unilaterally, but rather in its complexity, according to whether it is ill-intentioned or on the contrary dictated by specific requirements, as is the case with the doctor concerned with not overwhelming his/her patient with an unbearable truth about his/her health.

It is with the aim of awakening the disciples to the complexity of the real and training them to get beyond easy and obvious Manichean views that the Sufis practice the art of paradox. The wise man is the one who knows that appearances are often misleading. Ad Darqawi thus wrote in one of the letters in which he expounds his teachings: *"Certainly all things are hidden in their opposites – gain in loss and gift in refusal, honour in humiliation, wealth in poverty, strength in weakness, abundance in restriction, rising up in falling down, life in death, victory in defeat, power in powerlessness and so on. Therefore, if a man wishes to find, let him be content to lose; if he wishes a gift, let him be content with refusal; he who desires honour must accept humiliation and he who desires wealth must be satisfied with poverty; let him who wishes to be strong be content to be weak; let him who wishes abundance be resigned to restriction; he who wishes to be raised up must allow himself to be cast down; he who desires life must accept death; he who wishes to conquer must be content to be conquered and he who desires power must be content with impotence."*⁸

All these pieces of advice are disconcerting, and all are meant to make one understand that the way one conceives of things a priori, when one lacks experience, maturity, wisdom, often runs contrary to what these things really are. Teachings in life, teachings from life, teachings on its unpredictability and constant novelty: at the end of a process, a situation, an adventure, one realizes that things were not what one thought they were to start with.

To create this liberating perplexity, the Sufis also like to tell anecdotes that the masters pass on to their disciples over the centuries. The following two stories are among the most revealing examples of this educational process, which, in a picturesque, entertaining and witty way, that is, subtly and allusively, consists in disconcerting the mind to teach it to beware of certainties that may have been too quickly or definitively acquired.

The first anecdote is about one of the caliph of Baghdad's courtiers. One day, the goddess of death came to see the caliph, and while she was there she stared at this courtier several times. He was scared and no sooner had the goddess left than he asked the caliph to provide him with the fastest possible means of transport: 'See to it, he begs him, that I can travel to India as fast as lightning, for I have a nasty feeling that death's staring at me like that was a warning that she would soon be coming for me. Help me flee and save me!' Disconcerted and sympathetic, the caliph immediately provided his courtier with the most considerable means, and the following day, the latter found himself in the farthest reaches of India. Safe from

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturally

Understanding the text

- What is the main challenge of education in this text?
- Why does Taha Husain's father feel humiliated?
- Was Taha Husain traumatized by this childhood event?
- Is there room for critical thinking in Islamic education?
- Name three basic principles of Sufi education.
- What use is made of paradox in Sufi education?
- Why do Sufi go in for story-telling?
- Why, according to al-Ghazali, were only a few cycles of prayer (raka "kneeling") useful?

Entering into dialogue with the text

- Is learning by rote to be rejected at school?
- Does the concept of the "teacher" create a problem?
- Is it right to call someone who was learnt the Quran by heart shaikh?
- Is it legitimate for a religion to set itself up as an absolute value?
- Does the study of paradoxes form part of your basic education?
- In what way is the principle of paradox contrary to basic education?
- Do you use stories in your basic education?
- Choose among the eight pieces of advice given at the end of the text two that you consider very useful and two that seem hardly or not at all useful, giving reasons for your choice.
Give names to the four pieces of advice chosen.
- Try to transpose the idea of "a few cycles of prayer" to your everyday practice, citing an example.

Suggested teaching method: analysing questions

Three different questions are chosen.
Each participant answers them in writing.
Each participant considers the questions and the answers that he or she has given, in order to determine the purpose and function of the questions and assess their relevance and usefulness.
Each participant reads his or her assessment to the group in order to compare analyses.
The group collectively ranks the initial questions from the most useful to the least useful.
If possible, begin again with other questions.
The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Quotation exercise

- Ask the group to read also the worksheet "Adab and the formation of men".
- In subgroups, ask the participants to analyse the text individually, and then to exchange their points of view.
- Ask the participants to distinguish between the two worksheets and their characteristics.
- Ask each participant to consider and explain, in their respective subgroups, the various educational experiences that they have had with their parents and teachers.
- Compare these experiences with the texts.
- Prepare quotations on various expressions and definitions of adab on sheets of plasticized paper.
- Distribute four or five quotations to each group.
- Each group chooses one quotation and develops arguments in support of that quotation as an explanation of adab.
- Each group explains its quotation and the definition of adab. It illustrates by situations or examples in education.
- Discussions on the differences and similarities between the quotations.
- General discussion on educational goals, teaching models and methods, and consequences or the Arab-Muslim world.

Other times, other places

Montaigne and ‘the education of children’

The problems concerning education raised in this document evoke the concerns of the humanists of the sixteenth century in the West.

Here is an excerpt of what Montaigne wrote in his *Essays* on ‘educating children’:

The profit we possess after study is to have become better and wiser. As Epicharmus said, that which sees and hears is our understanding; it is our understanding which benefits all, which arranges everything, which acts, which is Master and which reigns. We indeed make it into a slave and a coward by not leaving it free to do anything of itself. Which tutor ever asks his pupil what he thinks about rhetoric or grammar or this or that statement of Cicero? They build them into our memory, panelling and all, as though they were oracles, in which letters and syllables constitute the actual substance. ‘Knowing’ something does not mean knowing it by heart; that simply means putting it in the larder of our memory. That which we rightly ‘know’ can be deployed without looking back at the model, without turning our eyes back towards the book. What a wretched ability it is which is purely and simply bookish! Book-learning should serve as an ornament not as a foundation – following the conclusion of Plato that true philosophy consists in resoluteness, faithfulness and purity, whereas the other sciences, which have other aims, are merely cosmetic.

(Montaigne, 2003, On educating children, *Essays*, trans. by M. A. Screech, London, Penguin, p. 171.)

The questioning of traditional teaching criticizes rather the lack of critical thinking and reflection than learning by heart. The latter method, if the only one used, is considered inadequate. Montaigne was here thinking along the same lines as the Muslim modernist reformers when they criticize in the same terms the Sufis for advocating the traditional education based on learning the Koran by heart.

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death? Some time later, the goddess came back to Baghdad. Curious to know the outcome of the story, the caliph questioned her. He asked her why, during her previous visit, she had stared at his courtier in such an a priori fatal way. To this, death, amused, replied: 'I was with you, Caliph, when indeed my gaze fell on this man. And to my great surprise, he was here, in Baghdad, which was incomprehensible and prodigious because, according to the Book of Destiny, which tells me when and where each person will die, I was to make him die in India the following day...'

The second story is shorter, and just as skilfully suggests that the truth is not what one thinks it is. One day, a master ordered each of his disciples to catch or buy a bird and then go and kill it in a place where no one would see him. Each of them set about looking for the most secret and remote places: one of them chose a cave, another one a desert, yet another one even went as far as to enter an old tomb. Thinking they had found the best possible hiding place, they all killed their birds. All, except one, who came back with his bird perfectly alive. He was mocked by all the others, who were waiting for the master to decide who was the best, but to their surprise the master questioned this apparently incapable disciple. 'Why didn't you kill your bird?' he asked. 'Because I could not find a place where God was not looking at me.' Was the master pleased with the reply? After all, it does not matter, for the story plays the part it is meant to play: to disrupt certainty. For it shows that the order given by the master required to be questioned, thought about, and not blindly obeyed – it shows that what the disciple thinks is the appropriate attitude towards the master may be wrong. On the other hand, it also encourages one to think about God's nature. Who is he, indeed? A superior being residing beyond the starry skies? Or the deep conscience of human beings, their moral and spiritual conscience that judges them and forbids them to kill the bird, teaching them to respect and love life in all its forms?

This Sufi teaching is closely akin to what could be called experience gained from universal wisdom concerning the relationship between human beings and appearance, truth, certainty, those things that are beyond their understanding and require that they be prudent and modest. Such wisdom made Socrates say: 'All I know is that I know nothing' and Lao-Tzu's *Tao*: 'The way, which is a way, is not the Way.' The same warning against the relativity and limit of all the knowledge one can acquire and be tempted to boast about can be found in the teachings of the greatest minds of the Muslim world.

In this respect, al-Ghazali, the wise man of Baghdad (1058-1111) is a major reference. In his famous *Letter to a Disciple*, he wrote: "It is told that Junayd, the mercy of Allah (upon him), appeared in a dream after his death, and it was said to him, 'What is the news, O Abu Qasim?' He replied, 'Perished are the explanations, and vanished are the allusions, nothing benefited us except the prostrations which we made in the middle of the night.'"⁹ Out of this acute awareness of the vanity or uselessness of

what is known, al-Ghazali tried to list the elements of truly useful knowledge and endeavoured to give the disciple he was writing to a certain number of sensible recommendations and words of practical wisdom. He wrote: 'O youth, verily I admonish you in eight things; receive them from me lest your knowledge become your adversary in the day of resurrection. Perform four of them and avoid four of them.'¹⁰

Of these eight recommendations, let us note the main ones: 1. 'it makes no difference whether the truth is revealed by your tongue or the tongue of another'; 2. 'to guard against and shun becoming a preacher and warner'; 3 and 4. 'not to mix with the princes and Sultans' and 'not to accept anything of the gifts and presents of princes'; 5. 'that you make your dealings with Allah the Exalted such that, if your servant acted thus with you, you would be pleased with him and you would not withdraw your good will from him nor become angry'; 6. 'in all your dealings with people, treat them as you would be pleased to be treated by them, because the faith of a worshipper is not complete until he loves for other people what he loves for himself'; 7. 'if you read or study science, it must be a science which corrects your heart and purifies your soul' and 'not a single day or night passes upon the worshipper but that it is possible his death may occur in it'; 8. 'do not gather from the world more than the sufficiency of a year.'¹¹

If one were to infer from this list the exact nature of the virtues it advocates, this is what it would be like: 1. stop claiming to know the truth; 2. stop trying to impose on other people one's beliefs regarding the good or the truth; 3 and 4. stop being servile towards anyone, and idolizing anything, but always keep one's independence of mind and honour; 5 and 6. practice the essence of religion, what al-Ghazali identifies as 'perfect faith' and defines as the necessity to behave towards others as you would want others to behave towards you, that is not only with respect, but also compassion, concern, uprightness, friendship and love; 7. make sure that knowledge is not merely speculative and theoretical, but a true education of one's mind with a view to becoming a better human being. 8. Finally, he gives advice as to the moderation of desire, and, like the Stoics and Epicureans, exhorts one to be content with little and be happy with what one has and, still with a view to happiness, not to imagine life in the future but enjoy the present.

Is there anything simpler and at the same time more universal than these ethical recommendations? Though they are occasionally expressed in the language of religious belief, they appeal to the conscience of any human being concerned with conducting his/her life in as moderate a fashion as possible in relation to what the human condition requires and permits. Thus, thanks to one of the greatest ambassadors in history, education in Islam proves capable of getting over the blocks mentioned previously, which made Taha Hussein suffer so much, and of leading the individual towards a second birth – to freedom, to reason, to conscience – to which each human being is called by nature.



- > Note the characteristics of a certain type of sterile traditional education.
- > How do socialization at school and socialization through culture come together to propagate a retrograde form of Islam?
- > Comment and illustrate: Truth is the destruction of destruction.
- > What is an Islamic framework that offers the individual a model of thinking for oneself?
- > What value does perplexity have in the quest for truth?
- > How can the complexity of reality be grasped?
- > What do you think of the paradox of liberating perplexity?
- > How does Sufi teaching connect with universal wisdom?
- > Comment on the presence of that wisdom in the works of al-Ghazali.

¹ T. Hussein, 1981, *An Egyptian Childhood: the Autobiography of Taha Hussein*, trans. by E. H. Paxton, London, Heinemann, p. 75.

² T. Hussein's autobiography was first published as three separate books in English: *An Egyptian Childhood, The Stream of Days and A Passage to France*. It was then published again in one volume as *The Days*.

³ T. Hussein, 1981, *An Egyptian Childhood*, op. cit., p. 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

⁶ T. Hussein, 1948, *The Stream of Days: A Student at the Azhar*, trans. by H. Wayment, London, New York, Toronto, Longmans, Green and Co., p. 15.

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⁹ Al-Ghazali, [Letter to a Disciple] O Son, trans. by G. O'Shraer, <http://www.ghazali.org/works/oson.htm>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, § XXIII.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, § XXIII-XXIV.



I said to the wind: Do you have a soul through which I can see mine
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MUHAMMAD IQBAL

NICKNAMED 'ALLAMA' IQBAL, THE WISE IQBAL, MUHAMMAD IQBAL IS FAMOUS FOR HIS CONSTANT ATTEMPTS TO RECONCILE ISLAMIC AND EUROPEAN THINKING – HE HAD ACQUIRED PROFOUND KNOWLEDGE OF THE LATTER WHEN STUDYING PHILOSOPHY AND LAW AT THE UNIVERSITIES OF CAMBRIDGE, LONDON AND MUNICH AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY. HE THUS SUCCEEDED IN SUGGESTING SOME FOUNDATIONS FOR A HUMANISM THAT ISLAM AND THE WESTERN WORLD COULD SHARE, THAT IS, A COMMON SENSE OF THE DIGNITY AND GOALS OF HUMAN LIFE.

IQBAL'S TEXTS ARE AN INDISSOLUBLE BLEND OF POETRY, MYSTICISM AND PHILOSOPHY, BECAUSE HIS MEDITATIONS ON HUMAN NATURE TOOK THE FORM OF VERSE.

MORE PRECISELY, HE DEVELOPED INFINITE VARIATIONS ON THE THEME OF EACH HUMAN BEING'S RESPONSIBILITY AS REGARDS HIS/HER OWN POTENTIALITIES. HIS INSISTENCE ON THE FACT THAT HUMAN BEINGS MUST LEARN TO SHOW DISCERNMENT AND CULTIVATE THEIR POWER TO BE AND ACT STEMS FROM A MAJOR INTUITION: WE ARE DESTINED, HE WROTE, TO BECOME AWARE THAN AN INFINITE EGO LIES WITHIN EACH ONE OF US.

ACCORDING TO HIM, THE ULTIMATE FINALITY OF RELIGION IN THE HISTORY OF HUMANITY IS TO REVEAL HUMAN BEINGS TO THEMSELVES.

Muhammad Iqbal was one of the greatest Indian poets and philosophers of modern times. In his own way, he belonged to the trend of 'reformism' or 'modernization' of Islamic thinking, which developed from the nineteenth century under the influence of Western thinking. This led him to write that it was essential that Islam be able to 'receive a new inspiration on modern thinking and experience.' Nicknamed 'Allama' Iqbal (the wise Iqbal), he is thus famous for his constant attempts to reconcile Islamic and European thinking –he had acquired profound knowledge of the latter when studying philosophy and law at the universities of Cambridge,

London and Munich. During that stay in Europe (1905 to 1908), he met in particular the Orientalist Louis Massignon and the philosopher Henri Bergson. And – the fact is unusual enough to be mentioned – his reflection on Islamic religion was later based on a constant dialogue with western thinkers, from the most classic ones like Plato or Zeno to the most modern, Bergson of course, but also Whitehead, James, Russell, Einstein, etc. It was in the light of such ways of thinking that were foreign to Islamic culture that he examined the Quran in a totally new and daring way, just as he equally surprisingly and creatively endeavoured to confront the works

of Nietzsche, Kant and Hegel with those of the great Muslim mystics. In *Metaphysics in Persia*, for instance, he analysed at length the profound similarity between Hegel's German idealism and the sufi al-Jili's metaphysics, to conclude that for both of them 'the material world is but the objectification of the Absolute Being',¹ which means that Nature is the manifestation of God's being as perceived by the senses: 'Nature is the idea of God, a something necessary for His knowledge of Himself.' (p. 121) In the same way he also imagined a strange dialogue between Goethe and Rumi: 'In Paradise the German seer / Encountered his Iranian peer-' (*Message from the East*, 1923).²

Yet another sign of his ambition to integrate the thought of the East and the West in a new synthesis is the fact that he wrote in English as well as in Urdu or Persian. With what result? The greatest quality of his major philosophical work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* is that it succeeds in suggesting some foundations for a humanism that Islam and the Western world could share, that is, a common sense of the dignity and goals of human life. For example, he knows how to speak of God from a humanistic viewpoint that appeals to a believer of any denomination, Muslim, Jewish, Christian or Hindu, as well as to a non-believer: when he writes that 'loyalty to God virtually amounts to man's loyalty to his own ideal

nature', the point of his conception is indeed to underscore the fact that the idea of God is of use to all human beings, whatever their vision of the world, because first of all it refers to a culminating point in human nature and thus, whether it is only symbolic (for the atheist) or real (for the believer) does not make any difference, since in both cases it can enable man to tend towards the highest possibilities of his own being.

As one can see, if Iqbal's intention was to rethink the question of Islam, he managed to show it in such an open-ended way that eventually his thinking could satisfy any mind concerned with human condition. As a consequence, his philosophy, profoundly Islamic though it was, constituted one of the first elaborations of what may be called a 'philosophy for the world'. This desire for his words to be heard beyond the boundaries of his civilization is continually present in his work. It is also visible when, considering the state of the West at the beginning of the twentieth century, confined in scientific rationalism and bruised by the world war, his poetic inspiration prompted him to write the following wonderful lines: "O morning breeze, convey this to the Western sage from me / With wings unfolded, Wisdom is a captive all the more / It tames the lightning, but Love lets it strike its very heart / in courage Love excels that clever sorcerer by far".



The author

Abdenour Bidar is a French philosopher and writer. His main works include *Un islam pour notre temps* (Paris, Seuil, 2004), *Self islam* (Paris, Seuil, 2006), *L'islam sans soumission, Pour un existentialisme musulman* (Paris, Albin Michel, 2008), *L'islam face à la mort de Dieu* (Paris, Jeanne Bourin, 2010).

A MAN IN THE MARCH OF HISTORY

What is of most interest in Iqbal's life is his implication in the history of his time. When he was born in 1877 in Sialkot, the city was then in India, in the province of Punjab, which, with the partition of India (August 15, 1947), was divided between the Indian Punjab and Pakistan. Iqbal's hometown thus became located in Pakistan, and in this new state in search of a cultural identity, the thinker was soon considered as one of the 'founding fathers'. His very origins – he was born in a family of Brahmans that had converted to Islam centuries before – particularly predisposed him to be used as a symbol of the assertion of Islamic identity as opposed to Hinduism and British colonialism alike. It was as a visionary figure that he was called upon, after his death in 1938, to exalt and cement the sense of national and religious belonging in the extremely difficult context of the partition, when nine million Hindus and Sikhs left the Islamic Republic of Pakistan while conversely six million Muslims left India.

What part exactly did he play in this march of history? Was the poet philosopher also a political theoretician of the partition and autonomy? One should refrain from taxing him too soon with 'nationalism', keeping in mind that he lived and thought at a time when the model of the Nation-State still bore the hopes of emancipation of many peoples vis-à-vis the old Empires. His personal stance was made clear in the *Letters* that, during the years of struggle for independence, he addressed to Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who later became the *Quaid-i-Azma*, the 'Great Leader' who founded Pakistan. It would seem that Iqbal conceived the idea that a free Pakistan, rid of the double trusteeship of India and the British Empire, was a moral and spiritual necessity for the renewal of Islamic culture. Indeed, he considered that it was threatened with irreversible decline by two combined factors: first, the trusteeship of the Hindus and the British, secondly the stagnation or fossilization it had undergone for centuries. The political demand

for the creation of an Islamic State thus appeared to him above all as the opportunity for the Muslim community to leave the larger whole in which its identity was somewhat lost and to endeavour to build itself up on its own. He saw it as a historical opportunity for it to regain a creativeness, a sense of innovation that had remained buried under centuries of foreign domination and immobilism. This last point is a crucial one for Iqbal: in fact, it would seem that it was his fear to see Islam falling deeper and deeper into decline that led him to take up the political cause of autonomy.

The idea of a nation in which the Muslims would regain command of their collective history and rebuild the consciousness of their identity in a more modern fashion is what he intended in his famous address to the annual session of the Muslim League in Allahabad, on December 29, 1930. In particular, he quoted Ernest Renan's definition of a nation: 'A great aggregation of men, sane of mind and warm of heart, creates a moral consciousness which is called a nation.' He was even more straightforward when he declared: "*Self-government within the British Empire, or without the British Empire, the formation of a consolidated North-West Indian Muslim State appears to me to be the final destiny of the Muslims, at least of North-West India.*" And in order to account in depth for his stance, Iqbal insisted on the idea that the message and the life of the Prophet Muhammad were 'individual experience creative of a social order', adding further that 'The religious ideal of Islam, therefore, is organically related to the social order which it has created.' In other words, according to him there is, in Islam, no conceivable separation of religion and the State. Consequently, the Muslims needed a nation in which what he considered as the genius of this tradition, that is the fact that it is an instrument of both individual and collective spiritual progress, could fully be expressed.

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Other times, other places

Gandhi and the Partition of India

After the Second World War, it was clear that India was going to gain independence. Britain reluctantly agreed to it, and Lord Mountbatten,¹ as the last viceroy of India, conducted the negotiations for Britain.

Gandhi was against Partition, but the Muslim League² pressed hard for the creation of a Muslim State: Pakistan.

Many Muslims and Hindus were in favour of a single state in which they would live together. The religious difference had no ethnic basis, the same peoples and the same languages were found in the two communities.

There were several reasons for Gandhi's opposition to Partition. According to him, the religious differences were not enough; he saw the Partition as the colonizers manoeuvring to divide and rule and weaken the new state. Gandhi was suspicious of states created on a religious basis (what became of the minorities?). The creation of two separate states would lead to a huge movement of populations and create a real gap between the different communities.

But the Muslim League insisted on the creation of Pakistan. Jinnah³ based his argumentation on the situation of the Muslims who would be a minority in a vast Indian state dominated by the Hindus.

What would happen to them after Gandhi's death?

The Congress decided against Gandhi and the Partition took place in a terrible atmosphere. The population movements were accompanied by violence. Gandhi refused to take part in the Independence celebrations and fasted in the hope that Pakistan and India would guarantee equal rights and safety for the followers of all religions.

Though Gandhi was a Hindu, he was not hostile to the Muslims. In India, his birthday is a national celebration. The UN General Assembly has declared this date as International Day of Non-Violence. Here is what Gandhi said about religions:

"Hindu defects were pressingly visible to me. If untouchability could be a part of Hinduism, it could but be a rotten part or an excrescence. I could not understand the raison d'être of a multitude of sects and castes. What was the meaning of saying that the Vedas were the inspired Word of God? If they were inspired, why not also the Bible and the Koran? As Christian friends were endeavouring to convert me, so were Muslim friends. Abdullah Sheth had kept on inducing me to study Islam, and of course he had always something to say regarding its beauty"

"The sayings of Muhammad are a treasure of wisdom, not only for Muslims but for all of mankind"

"Yes I am [a Hindu]. I am also a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist and a Jew".

¹ Appointed Viceroy of India in 1947, Lord Mountbatten was responsible for leading the colony towards Independence. In favour of the partition of India into two independent states, he supported Jinnah against Gandhi and encouraged the creation of Pakistan. The situation he left behind him was explosive (especially as regards the status of Kashmir) and still unsolved. He was killed in 1979 when the IRA blew up his boat.

² Created in 1906 to defend the fundamental rights of Muslim Indians, it was rather in favour of the colonizer, as it feared the weight of the Hindu majority. In 1913, it fought for the independence of a united India in which the different religious communities would live together. But in 1940, it opted for a separate Muslim state.

³ Jinnah, 1876-1948 had been the leader of the Muslim League since 1934. He worked for the creation of Pakistan, which he obtained on August 14, 1947. He was the founder and first governor of the state of Pakistan, where he was known as 'Father of the nation'.

This political dimension makes of Muhammad Iqbal something quite different from a philosopher withdrawn in his ivory tower, cut off from the world and history. It shows him to be a major actor in the modern Islamic reflection on the relation between the political and the religious- an issue tirelessly taken up in the Muslim world through the following question: must Islam only be a faith, or can it also be a political system? Can Islam be secularized? Certainly, Iqbal did not think, as some fundamentalists claim today, that 'The Quran is our Constitution.' But he seems to have given credence to the ideal of an Islamic State. That is

why the man who is revered as the *Muffakir-e-Pakistan* (the Thinker of Pakistan) and the *Shair-e-Mashriq* (the Poet of the East) still remains a key figure today. His birthday – commemorated as *The Iqbal Day* – is thus celebrated officially. In Lahore, where he spent most of his life, the tomb of his red sandstone mausoleum is visited by hundreds of devoted followers, and every year the highest State dignitaries come to pay homage to him. On one of the inner walls, the words of the poet still resound: 'I can fly so high up that a thousand times the angels in the skies have set up an ambush for me.'



THE POET PHILOSOPHER

Iqbal was first famous for the quality of his poetry. Learnt by heart of all even by the illiterate because it was recited in public, it soon became a major literary reference in Urdu of Islamic culture in Pakistan as well as in India. Amid the richness of the themes evoked, the need for man to cultivate his soul is among the fundamental ones. Iqbal expressed it in a very singular way, through what he called *The Secrets of the Self* (the title of one of his major works): "*The luminous point whose name is the Self / Is the life-spark beneath our dust / By Love it is made more lasting / More living, more burning, more glowing / From Love proceeds the radiance of its being / And the development of its unknown possibilities.*"³

Iqbal's texts are an indissoluble blend of poetry, mysticism and philosophy, because his meditations on human nature took the form of verse. More precisely, he developed infinite variations on the theme of each human being's responsibility as regards his/her own potentialities. His insistence on the fact that human beings must learn to show discernment and cultivate their power to be and act stems from a major intuition: we are destined, he wrote, to become aware that an Infinite Ego lies within each one of us (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*). Unlike Heidegger, whose stance has so deeply marked modern Western culture, Iqbal did not believe that we are only 'beings-toward-death'... In complete contrast to this conviction of our finiteness, Iqbal took up the idea, already developed by those who are called Sufis (the mystics of Islam), that in every human being there is a small part of absolute and eternity. But he did so with much originality and daring, at odds however with those thinkers, elaborating what constitutes a real 'modern mysticism'. Indeed, while most Sufis considered that the human beings who journey thus to the centre of themselves eventually find God, Iqbal considered that the end of the journey is the discovery of the Self or of the infinite Ego – and that at this stage, God is absorbed into the individual's self-awareness. In other words, this is the

moment when the human being becomes aware that he is the absolute. What is even more unexpected is that he seemed to think that this may be the historical destiny of the human species, as if we were the species where life eventually wins the fight – until then always lost – against death. In the universe, Iqbal wrote, man is 'the candidate for immortality.'

Numerous specialists of Iqbal's thinking saw in it a correspondence with Nietzsche's idea of the superman. But according to Professor Souleymane Bachir Diagne (University of Columbia), this connection only makes sense if one considers that Iqbal's superman 'is not the representative of a superior humanity. He is man but a perfect one.' And he adds: 'the notion of overman as it appears in Iqbal's work ... is first and foremost Quranic', with 'the sole intention of being the purpose of the tension towards the creation within him of divine attributes that makes up man's life and grandeur.' In other words, once again Muhammad Iqbal tried to give human beings a renewed confidence and hope in their immense capacities. He thus promised them, in his *Book of Eternity*: "*The lustre of a handful of earth one day shall outshine the creatures of light / Earth through the star of his destiny one day shall be transformed into heaven / His imagination, which is nourished by the torrent of vicissitudes / One day shall soar out of the whirlpool of the azure sky / Consider one moment the meaning of Man; what thing do you ask of us? / Now he is pricking into nature, one day he will be modulated perfectly / So perfectly modulated will this precious subject be that even the heart of God / Will bleed one day at the impact of it!*"⁴

One needs to estimate at its true value in Islam the revolutionary nature of Iqbal's inspiration according to which human beings harbour within themselves what could make 'the heart of God ... bleed at the impact of it!' Muhammad Iqbal thus risked bringing upon himself the angry response of an orthodoxy that always most

virulently condemned any comparison between Allah and his creatures. For according to the Quran, God is incomparable and 'None is like Him' (112:4). It is also with great courage that Iqbal laid himself open to criticism when he wrote that Heaven and Hell do not refer to real places beyond death, but must be understood as mere metaphors: Heaven as the image of an inner state that one reaches by developing to the extreme one's action and being, in life and love, thanks to one's 'personal effort', thus succeeding in becoming immortal, while Hell is the image of the inner collapse of one whose life was dissipated and wasted in frivolous aims.

Iqbal's singularity also lies in the way he considers religious words –God, Heaven, Hell – as symbols or images one must be careful not to take literally. Indeed, even God is the Ideal image onto which human beings have projected the realisation of the greatest number of possibilities of their own nature. It may be noted that this conception also reveals the ability of Muhammad Iqbal's thinking to dialogue with the West, where, a century earlier, the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach wrote with the same intuition: "*Consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge... God is the manifested inward nature, the expressed self of a man, - religion the solemn unveiling of a man's hidden treasures the revelation of his intimate thoughts, the open confession of his love-secrets.*"⁵

Muhammad Iqbal similarly developed the theory that the ultimate finality of religion in the history of humanity is to reveal human beings to themselves. According to him, religious life may be divided into three periods: in the first period, human beings invent divinities who transcend them and command them without their understanding the purpose of that command; in the second period, each religion elaborates metaphysical theories about the nature of the gods; in the third period, human beings understand that religion indeed has given them the imaginary, intellectual and ritual means to get in touch with the highest possibilities lying within them. In the third period, metaphysics is displaced by psychology, and religious life develops the ambition to come into direct contact with the Ultimate Reality (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, § Is religion possible?)

This call for a modern transformation of the understanding that religion had always had of itself certainly made of Muhammad Iqbal a thinker of the future. For his reflection brought grist to the mill of one of the deepest and most urgent questionings of today's Eastern and Western societies: what will the destiny and the meaning of religion be in tomorrow's world? In keeping with the most salient aspect of his thinking, Iqbal encouraged us to free our creative imagination as regards this issue, as with all the other issues he tackled: "*If only man could walk free / Emancipated from the chains of the past! / If imitation was a good thing / The Prophet would have followed / In the steps of the ancestors too.*"⁶



Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturally

Understanding the text

- *What does Muhammad Iqbal wish to reconcile?*
- *What does Muhammad Iqbal wish to teach the West?*
- *How can Muhammad Iqbal's nationalism be justified?*
- *What was the political role of Muhammad Iqbal?*
- *What is Muhammad Iqbal's conception of nature?*
- *What is the relationship between God and man according to Muhammad Iqbal?*
- *Does Muhammad Iqbal support the idea of an Islamic State?*
- *What is the Self for Muhammad Iqbal?*
- *What is the human ideal for Muhammad Iqbal?*
- *How does Muhammad Iqbal define religion?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *Does Muhammad Iqbal seek to reconcile the irreconcilable?*
- *Can the religious message of Muhammad Iqbal be translated into secular terms?*
- *Identify three different visions of the concept of God.*
- *What can Islam teach the West?*
- *What does Muhammad Iqbal wish to teach the West?*
- *Can Eastern and Western thought be combined?*
- *Can an Islamic State be a legitimate political concept?*
- *What is the reality of the Self?*
- *Do you consider Muhammad Iqbal a realist?*
- *Can religion embody the human ideal?*

Suggested teaching method: **identifying problem areas through objections**

*One or more questions are chosen.
Each person replies individually in writing to the questions chosen.
Each person reads his or her answers to the group.
Each person chooses a statement in which he or she sees a problem, then formulates one or more reasoned objections to be put to the author of the statement.
In turn, each person reads his or her objection to the person chosen, who responds orally to the problem raised.
The group collectively decides whether or not the answer is satisfactory.
A new problem is raised. The same process resumes.
The group reviews the work and the exercise.*

Educational exercises

Case studies

- *Begin with a discussion with the participants about their political representations of the Arab-Muslim world.*
- *Ask the participants to read also the worksheet "Political thinking in the Muslim world".*
- *Divide the group into five subgroups; each group assumes a different political character:
Group 1: the Kharijis and the Zaidis
Group 2: the Ismailis
Group 3: the philosophers
Group 4: the doctrines of the udaba'
Group 5: the compromise of the classical age.*
- *Each group discusses and lists characteristics by imagining political approaches in relation to questions of style of governance, legal aspects, social and economic policies, military affairs, foreign relations, etc., while reflecting on the advantages and limits of the approach.*
- *The five groups are brought together and hold a discussion on the diversity of approaches.*
- *General discussions around the "four modern moments" and the consequences explained in the card.*
- *Discussion on the approach of Muhammad Iqbal and political conceptions today in the Arab-Muslim world.*

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



- > *What is your view of Iqbal's approach consisting of reform based on East-West dialogue and involving thinkers and mystics?*
- > *How can Iqbal's humanism be defined?*
- > *What image does Iqbal have of his country, Pakistan?*
- > *What relationship does Iqbal establish between poetry, mysticism and philosophy?*
- > *What is the difference between Nietzsche's "superman" and Iqbal's "perfect man"?*
- > *Did Iqbal consider Paradise, Hell and God to be "inner states" or should they be taken literally?*
- > *What, in Iqbal's view, were the three periods of the "religious age"?*
- > *How did Iqbal see the future of religion?*

¹ **M. Iqbal, 1908, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, London, Luzac and Co., p. 121.**

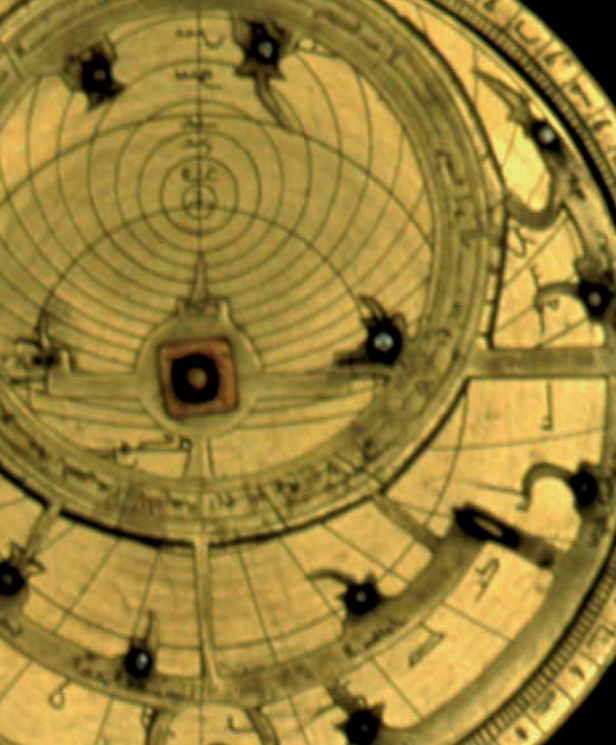
² *Message from the East*, trans. H. Hussain, Lahore.

³ *The Secrets of the Self*, by Muhammad Iqbal, tr. by Reynold A. Nicholson, [1920], London, Macmillan, p. 28.

⁴ **M. Iqbal, 1966, *Song of the Angels, Javid Nama [The Book of Eternity]*, trans. from the Persian and ed. by A. J. Arberry, London.**

⁵ **Ludwig Feuerbach, 1855, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. By M. Evans, New York, Calvin Blanchard, p. 33.**

⁶ **Last lines of *The Message from the East*.**



Yemenite astrolabe, 15th century © IMA/Savel
The planispheric astrolabe allows the calculation of the distance of the stars and their movements for a given latitude. Thanks to this complex but transportable tool, travelers could find their bearings during the night.

ARAB SCIENCE: KNOW-HOW, EXPERIMENTATION AND THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE

ARAB SCIENCE, THAT IS ALL THE SCIENTIFIC ACTIVITIES EXPRESSED IN ARABIC BETWEEN THE EIGHTH AND THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, DEVELOPED FROM A MANY-SIDED MESOPOTAMIAN, PERSIAN, INDIAN, AND ABOVE ALL GREEK HERITAGE, WITH PROBABLE CONTRIBUTIONS FROM EGYPT AND CHINA. MEDICINE BOTH DEVELOPED AS A KNOW-HOW AND A THEORETICAL DISCIPLINE. MATHEMATICS, WHICH WERE BEGINNING TO BE PUBLISHED IN ARABIC FIRST IN BAGHDAD THEN IN THE LARGE REGIONAL CENTRES, WERE COMPOSED OF A SET OF ARITHMETICAL AND GEOMETRICAL DEVICES MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE MERCHANTS, ACCOUNTANTS IN THE CENTRAL OR REGIONAL ADMINISTRATIONS OR JURISTS IN CHARGE OF THE DISTRIBUTION OF LEGACIES BETWEEN THE LEGAL SUCCESSORS. BUT FROM THE END OF THE EIGHTH CENTURY, THE ARABIC TRANSLATIONS OF A CERTAIN NUMBER OF FUNDAMENTAL GREEK TEXTS, SUCH AS EUCLID'S ELEMENTS, ARCHIMEDES' MEASUREMENT OF A CIRCLE AND APOLLONIUS' CONICS, REVEALED A NEW, PURELY THEORETICAL FIELD, WHICH SOON ACQUIRED ITS FOLLOWERS AND SPECIALISTS.

INTRODUCTION

Arab science, that is all the scientific activities expressed in Arabic between the eighth and the seventeenth century, developed from a many-sided Mesopotamian, Persian, Indian, and above all Greek heritage, with probable contributions from Egypt and China. According to the sources, this heritage consisted of raw results, the fruit of accumulated technical experience, ways to solve various problems, theoretical

elaborations and investigative or experimentation methods validated by practice but not always justified by theoretical tools.²

This already rich background served as a basis for the emergence of a new tradition greatly imbued with the contents of the heritages recovered, capable of taking them further and occasionally departing from

them to follow new directions. From the ninth century this creativity in both contents and procedures started to have concrete effect simultaneously in several domains, as original results were established, new approaches taken, and subjects that did not exist before tackled. This was generally backed up by further developments in the theoretical approaches specific to mathematics, to physics and to certain sections of astronomy. But, as we shall see further, it also led to the assertion of a new paradigm: experimentation as an indispensable stage in the study of natural law and as a category of proof as valid as the tools elaborated in the context of the Greek sciences.

In this article, we intend to identify, in the ancient documents that have reached us and have been analysed, the most significant elements illustrating the presence of the different approaches just mentioned. To do so, we have singled out scientific disciplines (medicine, mechanics, physics, mathematics, astronomy) that have shown considerable progress in Islam but have also benefited from important research over the past decades. For lack of space, however, we shall not be able to expound, if only broadly, the essential stages in the history of each of these disciplines, but we shall certainly place what each contributed in the context of the general development of sciences and their interactions.



The author

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MEDICINE, AN ART INSPIRED BY THEORY

From the early days of civilisation in Islam, and for centuries, two types of medicine coexisted, each inspiring the other. The first one was a medicine based on plants that was sometimes accompanied by the use of magic. It resulted from observation and a certain amount of empirical experimentation. It was a local sort of medicine because it depended for the greater part on natural produce growing where the practitioner and the patient lived. In the eighth century, it was elaborate enough and sufficiently well defined to deserve the name of 'medicine of the Prophet' because in the days of predication (610 - 632) it was the prevailing sort of medical activity, and because Prophet Muhammad mentioned several aspects of it on many occasions.²

After the advent of scientific medicine, thanks to the translation of some Indian books but mostly of many written works by Hippocrates (d. BCE 370) and Galen (d. circa 201), the first sort of medicine was not marginalized. It was still used alongside the new type of medicine because the lower classes of society resorted to it. With time, some of its components, especially pharmacopoeia, were assimilated by the new medicine. Indeed, the diversity of plants in the Muslim empire was an important factor in the enriching of the traditional pharmacopoeia, thanks to the analysis and testing of hundreds of plants that grew naturally in certain regions and not in others. Thus, in the twelfth century, the botanist Ibn al Baytar (d. 1248) indexed and described over four hundred new plants that he had selected during his peregrinations throughout the vast empire,³ in addition to the species already studied by Dioscorides (d. circa 90).

The second aspect of Arab medicine is not exactly related to experimentation but rather to observation and comparative study. Starting from the results obtained by Galen, Muslim practitioners tried to refine or check these results by describing animal and human anatomy and considering the functioning of different organs – possibly thanks to clandestine dissection. These examinations enabled them to acquire better knowledge of the parts of the body and a better understanding of some of its internal mechanisms. Thus, thanks to observation,

the physician Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi (d. 1231) spotted an element of the human skeleton that had not been listed before, and Ibn al-Nafis discovered the minor circulation of blood, described in his commentary on Ibn Sina's *Canon of Medicine*⁴ (Ibn Sina, d. 1037).

Physicians in Islam could have limited themselves to the practical aspects of their art and could have dealt exclusively with diagnosis, treatment and occasional surgical operations. But the documents that have reached us show how some of them were concerned with the theoretical aspects of their discipline in order to both shed light on their practices and make them more efficient. As the theoretical contributions came from Greek medical written works, they started from this knowledge, which they developed and enriched whenever necessary. They thus achieved a medical synthesis in which theoretical and practical aspects are clearly identified. They introduced philosophical notions borrowed from Aristotle (d. BCE 322) to give more coherence to the descriptions of the diseases and therapies and was a first venture into a domain known today as psychophysiology.⁵ Taking a broad view of pathologies, they considered that the pathologies of mentally disabled people related to the soul and thus called for a specific medical protocol. Indeed, they took this into account when they designed hospitals with specific wards for patients of this kind.⁶

As for pharmacopoeia, drugs were indexed, after the fashion of the Greek physicians, according to the qualities composing them, that is taking into account the proportions of coldness, warmth, dampness and dryness combined in it. But they added the notion of degree to each quality. We even have evidence of the philosopher al-Kindi (d. 873) trying to formulate in mathematical terms the relation between the intensity of a drug and the increase in degree. In his *Epistle on the Knowledge of the Action of Composite Drugs*, he claims that, contrary to what Galen and his successors taught, the intensity of a drug must progress geometrically from 1 to 2, 2 to 4, 4 to 8, etc... when the degree progresses arithmetically respectively from 1 to 2, 2 to 3, 3 to 4, etc.⁷



Observatory in Jaipur, Eighteenth century ©A. Clemente-Ruiz
In the 18th century in Jaipur, an observatory was built near the palace in order to allow the scientists to perform calculations of great precision thanks to the immense size of the used tools.

Insert written by Jacques Nicolais

Other times, other places

Where did the scientific development of Europe emerge from?

The scientific development of Europe since the late middle Ages did not come from nowhere. There is no such thing as spontaneous generation in this domain. This development is based on a (re) discovery of the scientific heritage of antiquity. It would not have been possible to acquire such knowledge without contact with the Arab-Muslim world. It was in the libraries of Cordoba, Toledo and elsewhere that Westerners discovered (in Arabic) the ancient texts that had first to be translated.

But they did not only discover the ancient texts. The Arab-Muslim world was not a simple transmitter ... it was creative in all intellectual disciplines, from implementation (technologies) to theorization. The crucial development of the ancient heritage of the Arab world led to the creation of new sciences such as algebra or trigonometry or to important progress in others such as medicine...

The European Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is not only a return to ancient culture but also an appropriation of the many advances made by scholars and intellectuals of the Arab-Muslim world.

Document

The Arab-Muslim contribution to European science as seen by a French historian.

The Arab civilization and that of the West came into contact along common borders and in the Mediterranean. This influence spread out first from Baghdad, and then, increasingly, from Spain, and from the thirteenth century onwards, from Sicily.

A list of Arab scholars – some of them Jews or Christians of Arabic culture – established by R. Arnaldez¹ can be summarized as follows:

	Total	Oriental	Arabs from Spain
Second half of the eighth century	8	8	0
ninth century	39	39	0
tenth century	34	31	3
eleventh century	30	21	9

These great men attracted disciples from all over Christendom. One cannot just give a dry list of names. The key fact is to note this osmosis, which from Arab lands or their borders (Salerno, Cordoba, Sicily), affects the whole of Europe. Once Toledo was re-conquered, it also became a remarkable centre of intellectual influence.

It must not be forgotten that the Arabs had preserved works written in Greek and Latin and had translated them. For all works, then, where the thought expressed is more precious than the style, the role played by the Arabs in the transmission was enormous. With R. Arnaldez, we can conclude that the Arabs did more than pass on the science they had, they stimulated a taste for science, they developed it, they exercised their critical minds, and started to compare the Greek concepts with experience. Their tendency, which is quite modern, to develop techniques and practical applications, worked greatly in their favour. We are indebted to them, in astronomy, mechanics and chemistry, for the invention of useful tools, and in medicine, for the development of the first great hospitals, the maristans, where patient care was associated with the training of young doctors and purely scientific observations...

Jean Baptiste Duroselle, 1990,
L'Europe: histoire de ses peuples, Paris, Perrin.²

¹ Roger Arnaldez, French Islamologist (1911-2006). Editor of *Philon d'Alexandrie*. Author of *Grammaire et théologie chez Ibn Hazm de Cordoue* (Paris, Vrin, 1956), *Jésus, fils de Marie, prophète de l'Islam* (Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1980), *Trois messages pour un seul Dieu* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1991), *À la croisée des trois monothéismes* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1993) *Hallâj ou la religion de la croix* (Paris, Plon, 1963).

² J. B. Duroselle (1917-1994) historian of international relations, professor at the Sorbonne from 1964 to 1983, author of numerous books including *Histoire des relations internationales de 1919 à nos jours*, in collaboration with A. Kaspi.

MECHANICS: WHEN KNOW-HOW GIVES BIRTH TO NEW CONCEPTS

Most of the countries conquered in the name of Islam already resorted to the use of mechanics, especially to catch and convey water to the fields for irrigation or to the cities for the inhabitants' consumption. With the advent of the Umayyad dynasty, in order to improve the capacity of the Muslim armies that continued the conquests, an effort was made to improve the current military technologies and invent new ones. The third – and final – remarkable development in mechanics took place during the Abbasid dynasty. It concerned all the techniques involved in making three dimensional automatons meeting two different kinds of needs: the first category was intended for the sole entertainment of caliphs, princes and court people. The second category, that is water-clocks, comprised instruments that were both functional and artistic and could fill those who watched them with wonder.⁸

The first Arabic book on mechanics, entitled *The Book of Ingenious Devices*, is almost entirely devoted to automatons. Its contents are inspired from Greek constructions but new devices are also presented, which reveal the great ingenuity and know how of the authors, the three Banu Musa brothers (ninth century). Their creations were not based on pre-established theoretical results; they were rather elaborated thanks to observation combined with an inventive mind and experimentation through all kinds of tests and adjustments.⁹

There were also technical and scientific contributions regarding automatons and water-clocks in al Andalus, as al-Muradi's *Book of Secrets about the Results of Thoughts* (eleventh century) shows. But part of the only available copy of this book is missing, so that we cannot tell whether the purely technical account came after theoretical reflections on the principles at work in the mechanisms described.¹⁰

The third well-known book, published at the end of the twelfth century by al-Jazari (d. 1206), testifies to the theoretical dimension of innovations, as they make use of new mechanical concepts that showed potential for development and were indeed developed, though in a different scientific context, Renaissance Europe. In this treatise, entitled *A Compendium on the Theory and Practice of the Mechanical Arts and Automata*,

the concepts of camshafts, cranks and pistons are described for the first time. It also gives confirmation, through experimentation, of the possibility of transforming circular motion into intermittent back and forth motion.¹¹ This latter achievement is all the more valuable as it goes against the Aristotelian theory of motion according to which circular motion cannot be 'converted' into rectilinear motion. Indeed, Aristotle considered that they were two qualitatively different motions relating to two distinct worlds: the supra lunar world of planets, which move uniformly on circular trajectories, and the sublunar world characterized by 'generation' and 'corruption'.

The Arab tradition of mechanics continued after the twelfth century with the same concern for innovation, but it was more and more directed towards designing and making large scale water clocks like those made in Iran, Syria, al-Andalus and Maghreb in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. They were in fact purely technological constructions made for experimental purposes, requiring many tests and adjustments so that each system might work perfectly.

The last contributions in the field of mechanics are those of Taqiy ad-Din Ibn Maruf (d. 1585), described in *The Book of the Sublime Processes on Magnificent Instruments*. They belong to the same tradition of mechanics, with an ultimate innovation which was not followed up in Muslim societies but was continued in Europe from the end of the seventeenth century: the use of steam as a driving force to operate a mechanical system.¹²

As a conclusion, one must point out that those who designed the systems mentioned knew that, to make them work, they needed an external force or energy. No wonder then that certain scientists should have raised questions as to the possibility of devising systems producing motion without resorting to external energy. Thus, researches were carried out on what was called the 'perpetual motion' of a mechanical system without external help. These investigations may well have been inspired by the observation of the movements of certain visible planets whose uniform and 'perpetual' motion had been sanctioned by Aristotle's cosmology.¹³

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- *What differences may be noted between the two forms of medicine?*
- *What are the main fields for the development of mechanics?*
- *What are the two conceptions of gravity that were unified?*
- *What could be a convincing argument in favour of the scientific approach in Islamic countries?*
- *What aspect of optics was of particular interest to Muslim scientists?*
- *What were originally the practical concerns of mathematics?*
- *What characterizes the second stage in the development of mathematics?*
- *What is the relationship between science and religion?*
- *Does Islamic science have a critical dimension?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *Does the West also have two medical traditions?*
- *Do we find several different scientific traditions in the history of humanity?*
- *Does science carry an ideological or a philosophical message?*
- *Does science in Islamic countries have specific features?*
- *Is religion necessarily in opposition to science?*
- *Do you think that Islam facilitated or hindered scientific development?*
- *Is Islam historically different from Christianity in its relationship to science?*

Suggested teaching method: **thinking and observing**

The full group is split up into two equal teams: A and B. First, group A discusses and group B observes. A question is chosen. Group A hold a discussion in order to answer the question, while group B observes. A given amount of time is set in advance for the discussion, for example, 10 minutes. When group A thinks it has finished, group B describes what it observed during the discussion. It comments on the ideas, behaviour and role of those concerned. Another possibility is to put together specific pairs of persons from groups A and B, who analyse each other's respective responses. When the assessment has been completed, group B answers and group A observes. Group A comments. If possible, begin again with other questions. The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Outline representations

- *Ask the participants to read also the worksheet "Philosophy and science in Islam: a fruitful cohabitation".*
- *Divide the participants into groups.*
- *Ask the following question: How do Arab-Muslim scientific approaches proceed?*
- *Each group outlines the Arab-Muslim experimental approach, illustrated with comparative examples drawn from other experimental models.*
- *Each group presents its work with the help of its outline.*
- *Ask the groups to engage in a discussion along the lines "observation – experimentation – analysis of findings – construction of a model or a theory".*
- *Questions to be put to the participants:*

How do these compare with other scientific models?

What is the example of optics and the various practical applications?

What are the relationships between medical science, psychology and mental illness?

God, emotions and science: dualism or harmony?

Rationality and logic; what influences on the West?

How do the Greek and Arab-Muslim civilizations differ in their scientific outlooks?

For Arab-Muslim civilization, what is the relationship between music and science?

ARAB PHYSICS AND THE PARADIGM OF EXPERIMENTATION

Continuing the activities of their Greek predecessors, Islamic physicists were mostly concerned with statics, hydrostatics, hydrodynamics and optics. They also collaborated with mathematicians and philosophers to analyse the theoretical aspects of the notion of 'motion'. In each of these domains, they enriched the Greek heritage, now continuing it, now delving deeper into things, now surpassing it as they introduced significant changes in the conceptions and approaches.

In theoretical statics, they studied the notions of force, weight, gravity and lever. When it came to applying their knowledge, they were concerned with determining the specific weights of a great number of materials, studying different types of scales (scales with equal or unequal arms, hydrostatic scales) and solving the problems posed by alloys. More precisely, they reconsidered the Greek studies on levers and centres of gravity to examine them more thoroughly. Thus, they extended Archimedes' axioms to bodies rigidly connected to one another. This was carried out by al-Kuhi (tenth century) and Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1041). As for al-Isfizari (eleventh century), he elaborated the theory of centres of gravity applied to a system of three-dimensional objects.

In the domain of gravity, Islamic physicists unified the two notions which were under study: the universe's centre of gravity and gravity affecting the suspension arm of a lever. They also put forward a major hypothesis: the variation of gravity in a body according to its distance from the centre of the Earth.¹⁴

Thabit Ibn Qurra (d. 901) went farthest in the study of forces, extending the study of the combination of two forces to that of an infinite number of equal forces applied to a lever, and determining the kinetic moment of a homogeneous bar. To do so, he was led to resort to a mathematical device invented by Archimedes and used to calculate the area of a parabolic segment.¹⁵

In the field of optics, after Aristotle's studies on the physical and metaphysical aspects of vision were mastered, followed by Euclid's and Ptolemy's studies on its purely geometrical aspects and Galen's on the anatomical and physiological aspects, innovating approaches were made in the tenth century, and developed until the thirteenth century. These approaches by specialists of the discipline combined observation, experimentation and the mathematical formulation of phenomena and laws. It led these specialists to claim that, contrary to the ancient Greek conceptions, light had an existence of its own and vision resulted from light rays being reflected on the object that is lit up, entering the eye and being processed by the brain, where the image is created. As one can see, in this new analysis of the phenomenon of vision, the physiology of the eye now plays an important part. This was made possible thanks to the progress achieved in the study of this organ and the understanding of the workings of its components.

Many experiments and measurements carried out in the study of the trajectory of light rays led to new results: the notion of deviation angle was replaced by the notions of incidence and refraction angle, and tabs of the sines of the angles were used. As a matter of fact, all these studies had been motivated by a question that was of the highest interest for the Muslim state: how to possess an efficient weapon capable of neutralizing part of the potential of the opposing army from a distance. Burning mirrors were to be the answer. Studies had to be carried out both on the theoretical and practical level to find the best solution for making mirrors capable of setting fortresses and enemy ships on fire. Apparently the technological solutions were not found, but the research led to major theoretical advances, such as the study of spherical, parabolic, and hyperbolic reflecting surfaces and refracting surfaces, like spheres and lenses.¹⁶

One must also mention the contribution of Muslim scientists to solving the difficult issue of the scientific explanation of the rainbow. After several unsuccessful attempts, in particular those of Ibn al-Haytham, Kamal ad-Din al-Farisi (d. 1319) managed to provide a correct and complete theory on this phenomenon. It was made possible thanks to the hypotheses put forward by his predecessors, like Ibn Sina and ash-Shirazi (d. 1311), and to the analysis of Ibn al-Haytham's failure. Al-Farisi's approach derived from a series of experiments in which each raindrop was likened to a sphere filled with water. The result of his observations enabled him to confirm the mathematical analysis of the problem.

Characteristically, and at various degrees, the activities of the Muslim physicists mentioned switched back and forth between observation, experimentation, result analysis and eventually the elaboration of a model or a theoretical explanation. Ibn al-Haytham was the one who went farthest in this logic and accounted for the need to associate the different approaches to found scientific investigation. No wonder then, according to this viewpoint, the experimental approach came to be considered indispensable and established as a new norm of proof according to classical demonstration.¹⁷

The last Arabic contribution in physics is to do with the different problems raised by the concept of motion. Here too, studies were carried out at different levels. On the theoretical level, philosophers and mathematicians tried to clarify the concepts and explain the phenomena observed. The former based their inquiries on Greek experience, in particular Aristotle's theory and John Philopon's more fruitful one (sixth century). The most elaborate reflections were those of Ibn Sina.¹⁸

In mathematics, optics was the most important field for the study of motion, through light travel. Over and above the purely geometrical study of light rays, reflected or refracted on different kinds of surfaces, Ibn al-Haytham asserted the light is propagated at high speed and not instantaneously. He also compared light travel to the movement of a solid ball thrown against an obstacle. Al Farisi, for his part, put forward the contrary hypothesis of an analogy with sound travel.¹⁹ For other

aspects of motion, the bibliographical references and manuscripts that have reached us testify to contributions on the rectilinear or circular motion of concrete or virtual objects. Ibn al-Haytham's *Epistle on the Sphere Moving on a Plane*,²⁰ the *Treatise on the Rolling Motion and the Relation between Horizontal and Inclined Planes*, possibly by Nasir ad-Din at-Tusi,²¹ and al-Kuhi's *Epistle on the Possibility of Infinite Motion in Finite Time* (tenth century).²²

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



- > *What are the Arab sciences?*
- > *What two kinds of medicine were practised in the Muslim empire, and what were their links and their origins?*
- > *Did this science develop through experimentation or observation and comparative study?*
- > *Name a few discoveries made by Arab physicians.*
- > *Note the discovery of psychophysiology.*
- > *What are the three categories of mechanics?*
- > *Name a few discoveries made in this field.*
- > *What are the various branches of Arab physics?*
- > *Name a few discoveries made in this field.*
- > *Note the birth of "scientific investigation" with Ibn al-Haitham.*
- > *What are the various branches of Arab mathematics?*
- > *Follow the birth and development of a science via the discipline of mathematics.*
- > *What was the nature of Arab scholars' "rebellion" in astronomy against the Greeks?*
- > *Note the two new debates about the movement of the Earth and its place in the Universe.*

MATHEMATICS AND ASTRONOMY: THE COMINGS AND GOINGS BETWEEN CALCULATION, MEASURING, MODELLISATION AND THEORETICAL JUSTIFICATIONS

In their early days, the mathematics that were beginning to be published in Arabic first in Baghdad then in the large regional centres were composed of a set of arithmetical and geometrical devices meeting the needs of the merchants, accountants in the central or regional administrations or jurists in charge of the distribution of legacies between the legal successors. These various professions thus disposed of a collection of techniques (inherited from previous civilisations or invented locally) to solve problems of everyday life. They included arithmetical operations (adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing and extracting square roots), procedures for measuring and sharing out arable land, arithmetical algorithms to calculate the share of each beneficiary in a legacy, methods for determining tax bases or levelling land for water delivery, etc.

But from the end of the eighth century, the Arabic translations of a certain number of fundamental Greek texts, such as Euclid's *Elements*, Archimedes' *Measurement of a Circle* and Apollonius' *Conics*, revealed a new, purely theoretical field, which soon acquired its followers and specialists. It was the beginning of hypothetical-deductive mathematics in the Arabic scientific tradition. After the contents of the books mentioned and others of the same sort were mastered, commentaries and criticisms followed, together with initiatives aiming at improving the contents of the corpus available or adding new results.

This was the case with geometry and number theory. The former was the object of a certain number of orientations inspired by the contents of the translated works: the geometry of plane and space figures continuing Euclid's contributions, spherical geometry for astronomers, geometry of second degree curves (parabolas, ellipses, hyperbolas), measurement geometry based on Archimedes' specific device for calculating the areas of certain figures, such as circles, ellipses and parabolic segments, or the volumes of certain solids, such as paraboloids.

Number theory was a completely speculative field insofar as it was not developed to meet needs or demands. It is a perfect example of the reactivation of a threefold Greek tradition involving the study of the properties of integers without considering the application of the results that might follow from these studies. Some Islamic mathematicians also took an interest in the neo-Pythagorean tradition thanks to a book by Nichomachus of Gerasa (second century), entitled *Introduction to Arithmetic*. Others studied Euclidian arithmetic exposed in Books 7, 8 and 9 of *Elements*. Then, after parts of Diophante's *Arithmetics* were discovered and translated, a new subject, later called Diophantine analysis, appeared with the works of Abu I-Wafa (d.997), al-Khazin (tenth century) and Ibn al-Haytham.²³

Concurrently, and in close relation to the development of arithmetic and astronomy, new orientations came about. Disciplines which had not existed before started developing with their specific objects, devices and methods of investigation. This was the case with algebra and trigonometry. The former both continued and marked a break with arithmetic. Indeed, it appeared from the outset as a collection of devices and technical procedures to be used to solve more rapidly, and above all more 'automatically' a whole category of problems relating to the various kinds of transactions taking place in Muslim cities from the eighth century: buying and selling, working out profits, measuring, distributing legacies, etc. But the theoretical bases of the new discipline were at odds with those of arithmetic as they implied manipulating abstract objects that were the unknown factors of a problem.²⁴

As for trigonometry, it appeared in the context of astronomical activities, as a collection of concepts and theoretical devices first used to formulate long-standing problems of Greek astronomy. They were later used to solve new perfectly concrete problems, such as determining in which direction Mecca was, calculating the times of daily prayers and predicting when the moon was visible. But this subject came to be sufficiently developed, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to convince some of its promoters in the ninth century of the need to dedicate books to it, apart from the discipline in which it had been operative up to then, namely astronomy.²⁵

A last mathematical subject illustrates perfectly well the interactions that had been possible between domains quite distant from one another: combinatorial activities, which, to begin with, were the concern of linguists and lexicographers who wanted to list and count all the words in the Arabic language. But faced with the theoretical difficulty of the problems raised, mechanical solutions were sought to find the relevant words, bearing in mind the constraints of pronunciation. Purely mathematical solutions were only found at the end of the twelfth century. Ibn Munim (d.1228), a mathematician from Marrakech who was born in al-Andalus, provided the complete solution to the problem raised in the eighth century by the linguist al-Khalil Ibn Ahmad (d.795). But as is often the case in theoretical domains, the solution to the problem did not bring research to an end. New results were obtained by one of his successors, Ibn al-Banna (d.1321) and a whole range of applications was opened up for the mathematicians of the time.²⁶

Finally, we must mention certain specific aspects of Arabic astronomical activities from the ninth to the fifteenth century. In addition to what we have already said about the role astronomy played in the development of trigonometry, two activities specific to this discipline should be mentioned, as they illustrate even better the close links that came to be forged between algorithmic and hypothetical-deductive approaches.



First, intense activity focused on measuring of a certain number of parameters and elaborating astronomical tables for various uses. The greater part of the results of this long-term job met concrete needs (establishing calendars, precisely drawing the components of an instrument, making astronomical calculations, etc.). But in the ninth century a set of measures, observations and calculations led to some of the dogmas on which Greek astronomy was based being challenged: the Greeks thought the axial tilt was invariable, the precession of the equinox constant, the apogee of the sun immobile and annular eclipses impossible.

Contrary to those activities closely related to measuring and calculating, the Islamic astronomers were concerned with the theoretical aspects of their discipline. They first did so thanks to the study of the planetary models that Ptolemy elaborated to explain geometrically the apparent movements of the seven visible planets. Secondly, purely philosophical considerations led to the elaboration of a set of critiques aimed at the coherence of the Ptolemaic model. Among the actors of this 'rebellion' were Ibn al-Haytham in the East, Ibn Bajja (d. 1138), al-Bitruji (d. circa 1204) and Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) in the Muslim West. These critiques probably paved the way for the Eastern astronomers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, in particular

Nasir ad-Din at-Tusi (d. 1274), al-Urdi (d. 1266) and Ibn ash-Shatir (d. 1375), who elaborated new models considered to be more satisfactory.²⁷

Finally, a major theoretical debate that took place in the first half of the eleventh century deserves attention: it concerned the foundations of astronomy as they had been adopted by Greek scientists, expressed as follows: the Earth is in the centre of the universe, it is immobile on its axis and in relation to the seven visible planets that rotate around it.

The first debate, summed up by al-Biruni (d. 1051), had to do with the hypothesis of the Earth rotating around its axis. This hypothesis, he wrote, was supported by some scientists of his time and rejected by others.²⁸ The second debate was about the motion of the Earth in the universe. Al-Biruni was once again the one to provide elements of this debate. He did so quite objectively, setting out the arguments in favour of this hypothesis before he gave his own.²⁹

Interestingly, in the two debates, the arguments put forward by the different participants were all scientific ones, that is, they reflected the state of sciences at the time rather than the contents of the different opinions with cultural or ideological connotations in the general sense of the word



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- ² See Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, 1997, *at-Tibb an-nabawi* [The Medicine of the Prophet], Beirut, Dar al-fikr.
- ³ Ibn al-Baytar, 1987, *al-Kitab al-jami li mufradat al-adwiyya wa l-aghdhiyya* [The Book of Simple Medications and Alimentations], Paris, I. M. A.
- ⁴ See F. Boustani, 2007, *La Circulation du sang entre Orient et Occident : Histoire d'une découverte*, Paris, Philippe Rey; A. Chadli and A. E. Barhoumi, 2006, *Abrégé du canon d'Avicenne et Commentaire de l'anatomie du canon d'Avicenne d'Ibn al-Nafis*, Tunis, Edition Simpact.
- ⁵ See D. Jacquart and F. Michaud, 1990, *La Médecine arabe et l'occident médiéval*, Paris, Maisonneuve and Larose.
- ⁶ See A. Isa, 1981, *Tarikh al-bimaristanat fi l-Islam* [A History of Hospitals in Islam], Beirut, Dar ar-raïd al-arabi.
- ⁷ See L. Gauthier, 1938, *Antécédents gréco-arabes de la psychophysique*, Beyrouth, Dar al-Mashriq.
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- ⁹ See Banu Musa, 1979, *The Book of Ingenious Devices*, D. Hill (trans.), Dordrecht, Reidel Publishing Company; Banu Musa, 1981, *Kitab al-hiyal* [The Book of Ingenious Devices], A. Y. Al Hasan (ed.), Alep, I. H. A. S.
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- ¹⁴ M. Rozhanskaya, *Statics*, in R. Rashed (ed.), 1996, *Encyclopedia of the History of Arabic Science*, London, Routledge, Vol. 2, pp. 275-298.
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Colorboxes of the dyers in the Medina of Fes. (Morocco) © UNESCO/Yvon Fruneau
The dyers, such as those of the Fes Medina in Morocco, need great quantities of water in order to obtain such bright colours. The techniques used for the supply of water to these areas were therefore essential.

TECHNOLOGY IN THE SERVICE OF PROGRESS: THE EXAMPLE OF HYDRAULIC TECHNOLOGIES

IT IS A VAST AND HISTORICALLY RICH DOMAIN IN THE CONTEXT OF ARAB-MUSLIM CIVILIZATION. BEYOND THE DIVERSITY IN THE CONTENTS, THIS WHOLE INCLUDING ALL THE KNOW-HOW INHERITED FROM THE PAST AS WELL AS THE SUBSEQUENT IMPROVEMENTS AND INNOVATIONS HAVING TO DO WITH WATER MAY BE DIVIDED INTO TWO MAIN CATEGORIES: THEORETICAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE IN THE SERVICE OF WATER (CATCHMENT, CONVEYING, STORAGE, DISTRIBUTION, ETC.) AND KNOWLEDGE USING WATER FOR A SPECIFIC PURPOSE (CLOCKS TO TELL THE TIME, AUTOMATONS FOR ENTERTAINMENT, MILLS TO TURN ONE PRODUCT INTO ANOTHER, ETC.). STARTING FROM KNOW-HOW FROM DIFFERENT REGIONS OF THE MUSLIM EMPIRE AND FROM THE CONTENTS OF LEARNED BOOKS ON THE TRADITIONS OF MECHANICS IN GREECE, MUSLIM SPECIALISTS IN MECHANICS ENGAGED IN HYDRAULIC ENGINEERING, FOLLOWING TWO ORIENTATIONS: THE FIRST ONE, SUPPORTED BY FIELD HYDRAULICS SPECIALISTS, ONLY HAD TO DO WITH CONCRETE ACHIEVEMENTS. THE SECOND FELL WITHIN THE GENERAL DEVELOPMENT OF THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE. NUMEROUS BOOKS WRITTEN IN ARABIC BETWEEN THE NINTH AND THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES DEAL WITH THE VARIOUS ISSUES TO DO WITH WATER PROSPECTING AND MANAGEMENT, AS WELL AS ITS USE FOR RECREATIONAL PURPOSES (FOUNTAINS AND AUTOMATONS) OR SERVICES (WATER CLOCKS, MILLS).

INTRODUCTION

If we take hydraulic technologies broadly, that is as a whole including all the know-how inherited from the past as well as the subsequent improvements and innovations having to do with water, it is a vast and historically rich domain in the context of Arab-Muslim civilization. Beyond the diversity in the contents, this whole may be divided into two main categories: theoretical and technological knowledge in the service of water (catchment, conveying, storage, distribution, etc.) and knowledge using it for a specific purpose (clocks to tell the time, automatons for entertainment, mills to turn one product into another, etc.). These are the divisions we shall adopt when we come to present the different achievements of this civilization, some of which were still unknown only a few decades ago.

But we must first evoke the contribution of earlier civilizations to the development of water technologies in Islamic countries, so as to assess the achievements of hydraulics specialists from the ninth to the sixteenth century. First, it can be observed that, as was the case with techniques related to working the land, know-how in all its forms, which was often anonymous, was as important as learned engineering, especially during the first phase in the development of theoretical sciences. Indeed, the Conquest had given the Muslims control of immense territories where water had been a major concern for both the farmers, the inhabitants of the cities and the states governing them. This was the case in Egypt and Mesopotamia, where rivers have a steady flow. It was also the case in the regions of Asia Minor,

the Maghreb and the Iberian Peninsula that, each in their own way, had to perfect the management of water over time, because of a low rainfall, the irregular flow of rivers and the high percentage of arid or semi-arid

areas. No wonder then if, in all the domains where water is an essential element, those civilizations designed and built increasingly sophisticated mechanical devices to catch and store the precious liquid or use its energy.

Insert written by Jacques Nicolais

Other times, other places

Christopher Columbus's caravels

Sagres Cape Saint-Vincent. A maritime technopolis created by Henry the Navigator.¹

"In the fifteenth century, its golden century, Portugal appeared to be a confident small power, determined to conquer the distances and compete with Castile, its rival, for overseas territories such as Madeira and the Azores. An inventor of new worlds that he did not visit, but towards which his mind drifted, full of the absolute and of golden dreams, Henry the infante, the son and brother of a king, was the instrument of this ambition. When he died in 1460, he had put to good use the progress of nautical science that the Arab, Christian and Jewish astronomers had bequeathed him, and shown the audacious the way to the seas."

Extract from Daniel Bermond's article in *Lire*, May 2000

Christopher Columbus's discovery of America was the result of an accumulation of technological progress of various origins. The *stern rudder* renders the ships easier to manoeuvre especially during rough weather. Developed in the West in the thirteenth century, the stern rudder was used in the Baltic and in Persia at the beginning of the eleventh century, but its origin is unsure, as Persia was perhaps a relay between China and the West.

Like the stern rudder, the *compass* came from China. Arab merchants encountering Chinese junks probably brought it back to the Mediterranean, where it was then adopted by Italian ships (*bussola* = little box in Italian).

The *lateen* or *latin-rig* had been known in the Mediterranean since Antiquity and it was very common in Egypt and in the Red Sea during the Middle Ages (on the *dhow*s, sailing boats that are still used nowadays). It is extremely convenient when it is necessary to tack, especially close to the wind, unlike the square veil that was used at that time. It had been more or less forgotten in the West, but was adopted by Italian ships during the Middle Ages when they encountered Arab merchant vessels (from Cairo or from Alexandria for instance).

From the thirteenth century onwards, thank to these new advances, *carracks* were built: big ships equipped with two castles, one in the bows and the other in the stern. Note that the name carrack originated from the syriac *karak*, which means fortress (like the famous *krak* of the Knights Hospitallers in Syria). With several masts and a rounded hull that reinforced its stability, it could sail on the high seas. The same was true of the *caravels* (whose name probably came from the Arab-Andalusian *qarib*), which used the same technologies as the carracks and had strengthened sides allowing them to face the waves of the Atlantic.

Columbus's first expedition included a carrack, The Santa Maria, and two caravels, la Nina and la Pinta.

But evidently, this expedition, like many others of the time, would not have been possible if knowledge of the science of cartography, inherited from the Arab-Muslim world and conscientiously accumulated by Prince Henry, had not been acquired.

¹ Henry the Navigator 1394-1460 created at Cape St. Vincent what would now be called a 'technopolis' with a naval arsenal, an observatory and a school of geography and navigation. He appealed to Jehuda Cresques, a Jewish cartographer of Majorca, who had fled persecution in Aragon. The latter gathered the knowledge of his time, which came largely from the Arab-Muslim world where he was born. The first result of these efforts was the rediscovery of Madeira archipelago, which was colonized by the Portuguese. A new ship, the caravel, was designed.



ANCIENT HERITAGES

The first Muslim horsemen who set out to conquer Central Asia must have been impressed by the sight of the *qanats* of Iran and the neighbouring regions. It is a very old local technique supposedly dating back to the eighth century BCE. It enables water to be conveyed over great distances by underground canals which then deliver water to the fields and the cities that are a long way away from natural water reserves. The Muslim conquerors also discovered a specialized hierarchical corporation whose activities ranged from detecting springs to digging mother shafts, levelling the *qanats* and carefully distributing the air vents.

They also noted the presence of numerous dams used either to produce hydraulic energy or to catch the river water and redistribute it by canals, thus continuously irrigating the areas under cultivation. Most of these dams were small constructions made by the farming communities themselves. But at the time of the Muslim conquest, there were still big dams that had mostly been designed, built and maintained by the Romans in the provinces they had ruled over, that is in Syria, North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula and Iran. In the latter region, for military and political reasons (the capture of the Roman emperor Valerian (253-260) and his army by the Persians), a transfer of technology took place, enriching the pre-existing know-how. It led in particular to the construction of two imposing dams on the river Karun, one at Ahwaz and one at Shushtar, supplying Shushtar's hydraulic system by means of two headraces.¹

Besides these great achievements, there were other modest but numerous systems whose origins go back a long way: they were all the instruments or devices used to catch water and store it in reservoirs in order to irrigate or fill the canals. The oldest one was probably the *chadouf*, in Mesopotamia and Egypt, which had already been in use for over two thousand years when the Muslims arrived in those two countries. It lasted so long because it was made of basic materials (wood, stone, rope, hide) and the mechanism keeping it working was quite rudimentary.

The second system is almost as old as the first and also comes from Egypt, though its current name is Arabic, the *saqiya* (the irrigator). It is a rather sophisticated machine composed of over two hundred parts and powered by animals (donkeys, mules or oxen). It was mostly used to irrigate the fields. The yoked animal turned in a circle round the device driving a potgarland that plunged into the river. The pots scooped up the water which was then poured into a tank for filling the irrigation ditches.

The third system is called the drum system. It had appeared in Egypt a thousand years earlier. It was essentially used to drain out the water accumulating in the mines. It consisted of the section of a cylinder which was wider than it was deep. The inside of it was split up into compartments by eight planks with an opening in each of them to let through the water that was to be drained out as the cylinder rotated. On one side of the drum, there were openings to let the water out. When the mine was very deep, several drums were used, one on top of the other, each in turn filling with the water from the preceding drum and taking it up to the following one.

The fourth system is Archimedes' screw (Archimedes d. BCE 212), which was still used in the seventh century to pump water from the Nile. It consists of a screw set around an axis inside a cylinder, the bottom end of which is in contact with the water while the top rests on the edge of the tank. When the screw is tilted at an appropriate angle, it enables the water to be scooped and carried up to the upper level where it flows into the tank.

Probably at the same time, farmers in the Middle East or Central Asia who cultivated land close to a strongly and steadily flowing river conceived of a completely autonomous *saqiya*, its driving force being that of the river itself. This is what we call today a *noria* (from the Arabic *noura*), which bore several names according to the regions where it was used (*qadus*, *ghurafa*, *dawlab*, *sanya*). It too consists of a wheel provided with paddles or buckets which can be up to several metres wide. It is fixed above a waterway, the lower part being totally immersed so that the force of the current may cause the wheel to rotate continuously.²

Before leaving this utilitarian domain, we may also mention the mills using water as a driving force. Certain types were known before the beginning of Islam. One sort was operated by a paddle wheel whose lower part was immersed in the river, so that the current pushed each of the paddles in turn, thus rotating the wheel, which transmitted the energy to the mill thanks to a system of cogs. The second sort, whose principle resembles the first, was operated by water flowing from a ditch situated above the paddle wheel. Other more sophisticated models based on the same principle were also used.³

The second facet of the pre-Islamic heritage as regards hydraulic technologies can be found in the Nabataean or Greek writings translated into Arabic from the end of the eighth century. The first tradition is represented by the *Chapter on the Extraction of Water and its Engineering*, which is part of the *Book of Nabataean Agriculture*. The second tradition consists mainly of two books: the first and older of the two is the *Book on Devices Operated by Air or Water Pressure*, by Philo of Byzantium (third century BCE)⁴ whose Arabic title is *Book on Air Operated Devices, Water Devices, Bowls and Ewers*. Among other things, he describes siphons, intermittent fountains, vases with regulated flow and water wheels. The second book is the famous treatise by Hero of Alexandria (first century) on *Mechanics*,

translated into Arabic by Qusta Ibn Luqa (d. 910) as the *Book on the Raising of Heavy Objects*.⁵

Starting from know-how from different regions of the Muslim empire and from the contents of learned books on the traditions of mechanics in Greece, Islam's specialists in mechanics engaged in hydraulic engineering, following the two orientations corresponding to the twofold heritage just mentioned. The first orientation, supported by field hydraulics specialists, only had to do with concrete achievements. The second fell within the general development of theoretical knowledge and gave rise to books developing and renewing the Nabataean, Greek and Persian traditions in this domain.



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HYDRAULIC ACHIEVEMENTS IN ISLAMIC COUNTRIES

During the transition period, which stretches from the middle of the seventh century to the end of the eighth, it was still the old hydraulic techniques that were used to solve the problems regarding the exploitation of water, in particular in the agricultural areas that were remote from the big cities. The existing systems were reinforced and other similar ones were built. But from the ninth century, growing needs of water arose because of the increasing population in the old cities and the arrival of new inhabitants in Baghdad and in the regional capitals, like Samarkand, Shiraz, Kairouan and Cordoba, and later Cairo and Marrakech. In close relation with this phenomenon of rapid urbanization, there was a significant expansion of cultivated land under irrigation and a multiplication of water consuming factories (weaving and paper mills, sugar refineries). The traditional devices – chadouf, drum, Archimedes'screw, saqiya – could no longer suffice, even though, simple and ingenious as they were, even though farmers went on using them for centuries. It was in fact the beginning of a time of major achievements, which only the central State or the regional powers could commission, finance, manage and maintain.

In Syria, and especially in Iraq, the caliphs considerably developed the existing irrigation system (partly inherited from the time when the Persians ruled over a part of the country). To do so, they financed the widening and extension of the old canals between the Tigris and the Euphrates – especially the Nahrawan canal – and ordered the construction of new ones linked to the two main rivers or to local rivers. They built all the hydraulic facilities required to supply water to Damascus and Baghdad and surrounded Basra with an important network of canals that did not exist before. But all these projects could only be achieved, operated and maintained by skilled specialists and qualified officials. Those trade associations dealing with 'the water economy' were very important, especially between the ninth and the eleventh century, as shown in the anonymous work s entitled *The Comprehensive Book on the Activities and Calculation Rules in the State*.⁶

As for the catchment of river water, it was left in the care of private individuals who built hundreds of saqiya and norias according to their needs. In the sole region of Hama, in Syria, there were fifteen of them within the city and seventy-one in the vicinity. Baghdad operated up to a hundred saqiya to supply drinking water to private individuals.⁷

In the field of the construction and maintenance of dams, both private individuals and States were involved in the construction of small diversion dams more appropriate in some regions. But only the States undertook to build and maintain big dams. They first restored those made by the Romans, as in Syria, and they built new ones, like the one that caught and distributed the water from the river Uzaym. At the end of the tenth century, the State, in the person of the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim (996-1021) also flirted with the idea of building a huge dam in Aswan to regulate the Nile floods. According to the very reliable biobibliographer Ibn al-Qifti (d. 1248), Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1041), the greatest mathematician and physicist of his time, was responsible for the study on the feasibility of the project. Apparently, he went to the south of Egypt with a group of experts in hydraulic engineering. But when he had studied the topography of the place and observed the Pharaohs' monumental achievements, he judged that the technology of his time was not advanced enough, compared to that of ancient Egypt, for such a project.⁸

Keeping to this part of the empire, we must also note the role played by the State in building, operating and maintaining hundreds of mills used to grind various sorts of cereals, ores and sugar cane, or to hull rice, etc. Some of these mills were built on barges or on the river banks, and their millstones were driven by the current, except in Basra, where the driving force was the ebb tide.

Some regions of al-Andalus, for example those of the Guadalquivir, Valencia, Toledo, Cordoba and Granada, benefited from the help of the successive governments to finance the great hydraulic projects involving local techniques inherited from the Roman period or coming directly from Syria. Among these achievements, we may mention the aqueducts of Merida, of Roman origin, which were restored and reinforced by the Umayyad government, the aqueduct that conveyed water to Madinat az-Zahra, the new capital founded by Abd ar-Rahman III (912-961), as well as many other small dams around Valencia, catching water from the Turia to distribute it thanks to a whole network of canals. As in Syria, and thanks to specialists who had come from that country, norias were set up in different parts of al-Andalus. There were some in Toledo, on the Tagus, until the end of the twelfth century, in Cordoba, on the Guadalquivir and at Alcantarilla in Murcia. There were also big water mills, in particular those of Cordoba, to grind cereals, and the paper mills of Jativa.

In Persia, the famous network of *qanats* was reinforced and extended over several thousands of kilometres, in order to meet the demands of increasing urban populations and of more land under cultivation. For the same purpose, imposing irrigation systems were set up in Khurasan, around Merv and in the province of Soghd around Bukhara and Samarkand. As for dams, besides the constructions inherited from the Sassanid period, the region benefited from the achievement of new large-scale projects: the Pul-i Bulayti in Shushtar on the river Karun drove several mills; the Dezful bridge/dam delivered water to the city with the help of a big noria; the Band e-Amir was built over the river Kurr, between the cities of Shiraz and Istakhar.⁹

In the Maghreb, the first constructions were made around Kairouan, the first Muslim metropolis in the region. They were used to catch, convey and store water. For this latter activity, the Aghlabids (800–909) financed the construction of big catchment basins still visible today outside the city. They also used the aqueducts built by the Romans and later exploited by the Byzantines. In the arid and semi-arid areas, an ingenious system (called *kriga* in Ifriqiya, *foggara* in Central Maghreb and *khattara* in the Extreme West) was set up after the region became part of the Muslim empire. It worked according to the same principle

as the *qanats* in Central Asia, and, just like them, consisted of hundreds of underground pipes extending over thousands of kilometres. Considering the relatively fast circulation of ideas and techniques, it is most likely to be an adaptation to the arid Saharan environment of the old Persian system of *qanats*.

Later, cities like Marrakech and Fes were equipped with many infrastructures to deliver spring and river water to the factories, market and pleasure gardens. Among the achievements which impressed the people of the time, one may mention the big noria of al-Jadida, built at the request of the Merinid king Abu Yusuf al-Mansur (1258-1286), by Ibn al-Hajj (d. 1314), a Sevillian specialist of hydraulic systems.¹⁰ It was also the city with the greatest number of watermills, 360 of which still worked in the fifteenth century according to al-Himyari.¹¹

In the rest of the Extreme West, the sugar industry played a part in the development of the network of aqueducts (with lengths ranging from 800 to 2400 metres), derivation dams, hydraulic wheels and very efficient irrigation canals that remained in use until the sixteenth century. The results of archaeological digs carried out in the 1960s show that no less than fourteen sugar factories worked in that part of Maghreb.¹²



Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- *Why is the question of water particularly important in the Islamic world?*
- *Compare three irrigation systems and their respective advantages.*
- *Why in the ninth century did the central States start concerning themselves with water problems?*
- *Name five different fields of application of hydraulic techniques, explaining their value.*
- *In hydraulics, what distinguishes scientific engineering from customary practice?*
- *What is the relationship between mathematics and hydraulic problems?*
- *What technological advances in hydraulics were not dictated by utilitarian concerns?*
- *In what way is water a source of energy?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *Why is water usually such an important resource?*
- *What are the various reasons why human beings wish to measure time?*
- *Why is entertainment a driving force of technological progress?*
- *Does progress depend more on innovations in themselves or on their general adoption?*
- *What is it that most surprises you in the description of hydraulic technologies in the Islamic world?*
- *What are the main reasons for technological and scientific progress?*

Suggested teaching method: **interpreting**

The group is divided up into three-person teams. A question is chosen. Each team must write out two or three different ways of understanding or interpreting the question. An answer is written down for each interpretation. If no difference in interpretation is provided, the group must justify or explain in writing why not. One team reads out the results of its work to the entire group. The listeners are invited to make criticisms and objections. The team of authors must respond to them and decide whether or not they intend to modify their initial work, in what way and why. One by one, each team reads out what it has written, and each time the procedure starts over again. Time permitting, other questions are addressed in the same way. The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Visual representations

- *Ask the participants to also read the worksheet "Arab agronomy: from the science of the soil and the plants to the art of the garden".*
- *Divide the group into subgroups.*
- *Distribute to the participants sheets of A3 paper and felt-tip pens of different colours.*
- *Each group draws a "garden" that can satisfy economic, medical and aesthetic needs.*
- *The groups present their gardens and support their own view of why they would answer needs.*
- *In pairs, the participants discuss the economic, technological and cultural aspects of the texts.*
- *Exchange of views within the entire group.*
- *Questions to be put to the participants:*
 - What are the consequences for technological development and culture?*
 - How do technical needs make the various sciences interdependent?*
 - In what way are sciences in Arab-Muslim civilization guided by Islam?*
 - What are the similarities and differences with technological developments in the West?*

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF SCHOLARS TO HYDRAULIC ENGINEERING

Numerous books written in Arabic between the ninth and the eighteenth centuries deal with the various issues to do with water prospecting and management, as well as its use for recreational purposes (fountains and automatons) or services (water clocks, mills). Some of these books only give general information, others describe technical devices (old and new); yet others adopt a more 'scholarly' approach, resorting to diagrams, scientific explanations and even real mathematical demonstrations.

Techniques used to catch and convey water

The Banu Musa brothers did not tackle this topic in their *Book of Ingenious devices*, but we know that caliph al-Mutawakkil (841–861) commissioned them to design two major hydraulic projects: the *al-Jafari* and *Amud Ibn al-Munajjim* canals. So they may have written a scientific document which has not reached us. Similarly, Ishaq ash-Shaybani (d.818), one of their immediate predecessors, may have examined hydraulic systems in his *Book of Ingenious Devices*.¹³ In any case, the oldest known Arabic book about water and its extraction dates back to roughly the same time. It is *The Book of the Well*, by al-Arabi (d.845), rather in keeping with the philological tradition, as it gives a comprehensive list of the terms relating to shafts, their digging, the different qualities of water and the techniques used to extract it.¹⁴ The second book was edited by Ibn Wahshiya (d.early tenth century), the Arabic translator of the above-mentioned *Book of Nabataean Agriculture*. It is called *The Book on the Causes of the Accumulation of Water and its Extraction from Unknown Soils*, and deals with detecting springs, catching and conveying the water. It was around the same time that al-Kindi (d.873) wrote a commentary on the *Book on the Transportation of Water* attributed to Philemon.¹⁵

In the tenth century, the bibliographers record two contributions. The first one is ash-Shatawi's *Book of Ingenious Devices*, whose contents are unknown.¹⁶ The second is the *Book on the Extraction of Concealed Waters*, by the great Persian mathematician al-Karaji (d.1029). This book, which deals with all the aspects of water prospecting, catchment and conveyance is the most technical one. It consists of twenty-eight chapters dealing in particular with the following themes: signs of the presence of water according to the geology of the area and the plants growing there, the different types of water and their gustative qualities, the natural elements which can prevent the digging of underground galleries, the devices used to convey water from the spring to the place of consumption, the topographic measurements and techniques for digging wells. This last chapter on measuring instruments reveals al-Karaji's scientific expertise, in particular when it comes to the description of an instrument

which he invented, to be used in the process of leveling, and which had three purposes: measuring the level of the water in the mother shaft, measuring the incline of the gallery to be dug and determining the place where water must emerge from underground.¹⁷

In the eleventh century, in a book entitled the *Book of Secrets in the Results of Ideas*, the Andalusian engineer al-Muradi describes two instruments used for the extraction of water from a well (n° 25 and 26 in his account)¹⁸ (al-Muradi, n.d.). However, the most important contributions were written by the Syrian engineer al-Jazari (d.after 1206), and date from the twelfth century. In his treatise entitled the *Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices*, he devotes a chapter to the description of 'five devices to raise water from a shallow shaft or a stream of water'. Four of them are saqiya, which raise water from a reservoir or a shaft to a higher tank. One of them is a typical bucket wheel combined with a paddle wheel. Two others work by rotating a sort of ladle, first clockwise then anti-clockwise; in one, the rotation is carried out by a wheel with cogs on one quarter of the perimeter; in the other it is a crank that operates the ladle. In both cases, the ladle scoops up the water, carries it up and empties it before falling back into the reservoir. In the fourth machine, al-Jazari resorts to the same principle, but four partially cogged wheels are set in a row. The output is increased fourfold and the flow of water is steadier.

The fifth device is a noria consisting of a paddle wheel driven by the force of the river and transmitting this force thanks to an axle mounted with a cogwheel. This wheel meshes with a second cogwheel equipped with a connecting rod. The rod transforms the rotation into a translation movement working on two opposite pistons. As they go one way and the other, the pistons suck in the water from the river in turn and deliver it through a vertical pipe. A valve system prevents the water from flowing back into the pipe. As can be seen, this complex device combines two concepts that were quite new at the time: the rod and crank system and the double-acting reciprocating system.¹⁹

The last books in the tradition of scientific hydraulic mechanics to have reached us are *Natijat ad-dawla si ikhtira* by Hafiz al-Isfahani (fifteenth century) and *The Book of the Sublime Processes on Magnificent Instruments* by Taqi ad-Din Ibn Maruf (d.1585). Their contents are the continuation of al-Jazari's works, but they do not simply repeat or comment on them. This leads us to think that, as was the case with the know-how already mentioned, the scholarly tradition was not interrupted and some day we may unearth books bearing witness to the vitality in this domain over the centuries separating al-Jazari from these two authors.

In al-Isfahani's book, only two devices relate to the topic of our study, one of them being a water-driven oil mill.²⁰ In Ibn Maruf's book, four devices are

mentioned. Two were typical at the time: Archimedes' screw and al-Jazari's double-acting system. But he also mentions two original contributions. One is a 'chain pump' similar to what Agricola (d. 1555) had described a few years before in his *De Re Metallica*.²¹ The second one, with its six pistons, is a remarkable improvement on al-Jazari's. The cogwheel driven by the force of the stream or by an animal rotates an axle fitted with six cams placed in such a way that each cam activates one of the six pistons in succession. The water-tight cylinder containing the pistons fills with water, which is then forced through the delivering pipe connected with the cylinder. A good synchronization of the pistons and valve-opening ensures that the water is sucked up and delivered continuously.²²

Alongside such technical preoccupations, interest in problems to do with water was also shown among the scientific circles and more generally among the literati in Islam at least until the end of the eighteenth century, as some writings affirm. In the tenth century, the astronomer Abd ar-Rahman as-Sufi (d. 986) showed how to use an astrolabe to determine the depth of a well, giving geometrical proof to support the operation.²³ In the fourteenth century, Ibn al-Banna (d. 1321), a mathematician from Marrakech, mentioned a problem of distribution of water about which his contemporaries showed some concern. He explained why the procedures in use at that time were not only wrong but consequently unfair, and gave proof of it.²⁴ Still in the Maghreb, Ibn Ghazi (d. 1513), a mathematician from Meknes, summed up in a few lines the mathematical procedure for the distribution of water among the inhabitants of Fes. This was later taken up and explained by al-Fishtali (d. 1649).²⁵ Al-Attar (d. 1773), another mathematician, studied the hydraulic network of Damascus and wrote a book entitled *Epistle on The Science of Calculation of Running Water in Damascus*, in which he set out the legal, technical and arbitrational aspects of the distribution of water among the various users in the city.²⁶

Water in the service of automatons

What may sometimes be considered as 'non essential' fashions and needs are nonetheless at the origin of the development of certain scientific and technical activities. This was the case, in the ninth century, in Baghdad, when the elites of the city (the caliphs, the princes, the courtesans and high ranking officials), followed later by the same elites at the regional level, started to take an interest in the entertainment potential of sciences and techniques. This could explain the emergence of activities and publications relating to mathematical games ('think of a number' games), playful physical objects (distorting mirrors) and mechanical systems arousing surprise or wonder.

The first known initiative in the latter domain is that of three brothers, Ahmad, Muhammad and el-Hasan (ninth century) who had a passion for making automatons. Their contribution is an important collective work inspired by the Greek heritage but continuing it with original technical achievements. Ahmad, who was exceptionally skilled in mechanics, was the instigator of the book. It is called *The Book on Ingenious Devices*, and describes a hundred and three machines, among which are nine fountains and over eighty more or less sophisticated containers that fill with water or release it automatically according to the initial impulse given to them. To make these devices, which impressed those who ordered them and their guests, the Banu Musa brothers combined different principles according to the models: simple or double siphons, U-bends, conical valves, float valves, wheels, cranks, pulleys, etc.

According to the historians of mechanics, the systems devised by the three brothers are rather more complex than those of the Greek tradition, and often more effective thanks to the controlled variation of air and water pressure and an ingenious combination of the movements within the mechanisms. This was made possible by improving the application of certain old physical or mechanical principles and introducing new ideas.²⁷

The three authors also designed an automatic water-powered musical instrument. It is described in *The Epistle on the Instrument that Plays Music by Itself*. It shows the same ingeniousness in the association of physical and mechanical principles in order to produce harmonious continuous sounds.²⁸

There is no information as to possible publications or achievements, in the ninth and tenth centuries, that might have been inspired by the innovations of the Banu Musa brothers or might have completed them. In the eleventh century, the engineer al-Muradi, previously mentioned for his contributions in hydraulic systems, described five of his achievements as being along the same lines as those of the pioneers of Baghdad, but the poor state of the only known copy of his book does not enable one to grasp how they worked.²⁹ In the twelfth century, the great Persian physicist al-Isfizari revised the Banu Musas' book. But it was al-Jazari who renewed the art of automatons. About one third of his book is devoted to them. He describes various types of basins from which flow drinks of different colours, figures (slaves, old people or waiters) handling jugs and glasses, fountains and automatic flutes, etc. His explanations and diagrams are so precise that it was possible to reproduce a great number of these models.³⁰ The last known Muslim representative of this long tradition of hydraulic automatons is Ibn Maruf, who, in his *Book of the Sublime Processes on Magnificent Instruments*, described three flutes, four fountains and eleven other automatons similar to those designed by his predecessors.³¹



- > *What are the two main types of hydraulic technologies in Islamic countries?*
- > *Identify the heritage from Antiquity: Romans, Persians, Egyptians, Greeks, Middle Easterners and Central Asia.*
- > *Identify the systems that enable water to be captured and stored.*
- > *Follow the development of hydraulic engineering from the pre-Islamic heritage.*
- > *Note the influence of urbanization on that development.*
- > *And the role of the State in that field, and especially the constitution of various “building trades” to manage the “water economy”.*
- > *Discover an attempt to dam the Nile at Aswan as early as the eleventh century.*
- > *Mills powered by energy from the marshes.*
- > *Achievements in Syria, Iraq, Persia, the Maghreb and Andalusia.*
- > *Numerous works describing techniques for capturing and distributing water.*
- > *Water measurement instruments and pumps.*
- > *Mathematics applied to water management.*
- > *Three ingenious brothers and 103 devices.*
- > *An automatic musical instrument powered by water.*
- > *Water clocks.*
- > *A description of the famous clock of the Qarawīyīn Mosque and of the famous clock of Damascus.*

Water in the service of measuring time

As was the case with the systems for catching and conveying water, the tradition of hydraulic clocks existed before ancient books dealing with this topic were translated. Considering the relatively early interest shown by the governing and social elites in playful activities and technical innovations, and considering how dependent on time economic and religious practices were, the conception and creation of such clocks took place no later than the beginning of the ninth century, as a result of what was probably a reactivation of Persian or Byzantine know-how. This would validate the information we have about the water-clock supposedly sent by Harun ar-Rashid (785-809) to the emperor Charlemagne (768-814). In any case, it was during this period, characterized by scientific and technological developments of all sorts that the mathematician al-Khwarizmi (d. 850) edited three books about three different clocks: a device for the determination of equal and unequal hours, 'clepsydras called pebble ones' and 'wheel clocks'.³²

In the tenth century, the interest for hydraulic automatons had not weakened, as the encyclopedist al-Khwarizmi al-Katib showed in his book *The Keys to the Sciences*, devoting a whole chapter to mechanics and more specifically to water-operated instruments.³³ A few decades later, the great Iraqi scientist Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1041) designed a clepsydra, perhaps to meet an order, since it was an isolated achievement in his work as a mathematician and physicist more specialized in optics.

In the same period, al-Muradi devoted a few chapters of his book to water clocks. He describes nineteen models. In one of them, water is replaced by mercury. In another, the author introduces a system of gears involving for the first time segmental cog wheels and epicyclic ones. The high level of sophistication of the mechanisms described allows us to think that his work is the result of a long tradition which started in the East and was carried on in al-Andalus, probably from the tenth century. But we have no other written work about this tradition and al-Muradi's book remains to this day the oldest text on hydraulic clocks in the Muslim West.³⁴

It is interesting to note that in al-Andalus too theoretical works seemed to lead to practical developments, although there is no certainty as to the direct causal link between these two aspects of mechanics. It is indeed at that same period that the great astronomer az-Zarqali built two big clocks in Toledo, one of which worked until the beginning of the twelfth century. Thanks to a description given in the *Libros del Saber de Astronomia*, a compilation of Arabic scientific texts translated into Castilian at the request of king Alfonso X of Castile (1252-1284), we know that an anonymous engineer had designed and built a clock operated by water flowing from one vessel into a second one equipped with a float that indicated the time as it moved.³⁵

The tradition was carried on until the fourteenth century, in the Maghreb, with the activities of two specialists, Ibn al-Fahham in Tlemcen and al-Lajai (d. 1370) in Fes. The first one was a contemporary of Ibn Khaldun

(d. 1406), the famous author of the *Muqaddima*. He is mentioned by Ibn Khaldun's younger brother, Yahya (d. 1379) in his biographical work on the Abd al-Wadides' dynasty (1235-1556).³⁶ He is mentioned as the project manager for the famous clock of the Bou Inaniya Madrasa, financed by the Merinid king Abu Inan (1348-1358) some parts of whose structure are still well preserved. The second one is a well-known mathematician, a student of Ibn al-Banna (d. 1321), a famous scientist of Marrakech. What remains of his clock can still be seen in a room in the al-Qarawiyyin mosque. The mechanism consists of a float and a set of pulleys and cables. The steady flow of water is ensured by a pressure compensation device. The dial is divided into twenty-four hours, represented by twenty-four brass cups and as many brass doors which open and close. There is also a four-minute to four-minute gradation. Thus, whenever this unit of time has elapsed, a marble falls into one of the cups, and you can hear the time. Then, on the hour, a bigger ball falls into the cup and one of the wooden doors closes, so that people standing some distance away can see the time if they fail to hear the balls falling.³⁷

Thousands of kilometres away from Cordoba and Fes, Persian scientists also continued the learned tradition of clocks that had started in Baghdad with al-Khwarizmi's writings. The oldest known contribution is that of al-Khazini (twelfth century), probably preceded by concrete achievements, as in the other parts of the Muslim empire. A whole chapter of the great Persian physicist's *Book on the Balance of Wisdom* is devoted to clepsydras. One of them, the 'universal clepsydra' worked night and day and gave the time to the minute thanks to the combination of two movable weights suspended from the unequal arms of a fulcrum.³⁸

In Syria, the tradition of clocks had continued without interruption since the ninth century. But the most important accounts of it date back to the twelfth century. As regards concrete achievements, one can mention al-Saati's great clock in Damascus. All historians of science know this clock, because when it broke down after being in use for a few years, Ridwan al-Saati (d. 1221), the inventor's son, undertook to repair it and get it working again. It was probably out of a concern for the preservation of the clock that he wrote his *Treatise on the Construction of Clocks and their Use*, which contained the description of the mechanisms composing it. The clepsydra worked according to the same principle based on the flow of water, the propulsion of a float and a steady outflow to balance the pressure. But there were some notable improvements. Revolving doors gave the time during the day. On each hour, two falcons dropped a little ball into a cup, making a sound. Above the doors, a crescent moon moved along a gradation marked with forty-eight golden nails, each corresponding to a quarter of an hour. For the night hours, twelve holes on a dial placed on the top of the clock lit ups in succession on each hour.³⁹

In terms of theory, al-Jazari's work is the most important in the thirteenth century, as the sophistication of the gears and the precision of the mechanisms devised represent a major progress. In *The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices*, he describes a few clepsydras, all different from one

another. One is in the shape of an elephant. A mahout is sitting on its back, holding a stick which he moves along a plate with forty-eight divisions, thus indicating half-hours. In the tower borne on the back of the elephant, a second character raises his right arm on each hour and his left arm on the half-hour. The shape of the float and the hole in it activate three other figurines (a bird and two snakes), which in turn at the right time pull on the right arm of the mahout, who cracks his whip and, with his left arm, beats a drum.

To conclude, let us add that the learned tradition of hydraulic clocks lasted well after the thirteenth century in Syria as well as in other parts of the Muslim empire. To give a few examples, let us mention, in the fourteenth century, *The Epistle Informing on the Draught of Clepsydras*, by the Egyptian Shams ad-Din al-Misri (d. 1494)⁴⁰ and in the sixteenth century, two works by Ibn Maruf (d. 1585), *On the Science of Clepsydras* and *The Brightest Stars for the Construction of Mechanical Clocks*, as well as a chapter in *The Book of the Sublime Processes on Magnificent Instruments* already mentioned.⁴¹

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Of water is made all that is living © Calligraphy by Karim Jaafar

ARAB AGRONOMY: FROM THE SCIENCE OF THE SOIL AND PLANTS TO THE ART OF THE GARDEN

IN THE EAST AS EARLY AS THE EIGHTH CENTURY, NAMELY AT THE TIME OF THE Umayyad dynasty (661-754) AND DURING THE SUBSEQUENT Abbasid period (754-1258), THE PEOPLE IN POWER, THE RICH LANDOWNERS AND THE FARMERS PAID GREAT ATTENTION TO ARABLE LAND, AND TO GARDENS IN PARTICULAR. A WEALTH OF LITERATURE DEALING WITH ALL THE ACTIVITIES RELATED TO WORKING THE LAND DEVELOPED FIRST IN BAGHDAD AND THEN IN OTHER CITIES OF THIS VAST REGION OF THE EMPIRE. HOWEVER, IT WAS IN THE WESTERN PART OF THE MUSLIM WORLD, AND MORE PARTICULARLY IN AL-ANDALUS, THAT THE SCIENCE OF AGRICULTURE AND THE ART OF THE GARDEN DIVERSIFIED AND INTENSIFIED AGRONOMIC RESEARCH TO THE GREATEST EXTENT, WITH THE PUBLISHING OF BOTH THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL TREATISES AND THE DEVELOPING OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF CROPS AND ORNAMENTAL PLANTS: ROYAL OR PRINCELY KITCHEN GARDENS, PLEASURE OR BOTANICAL GARDENS, NURSERIES, ORCHARDS. IN SCIENCE, THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDICINE LED TO THAT OF A PHARMACOPOEIA AND OF BOTANY, TWO FIELDS THAT RELY ON EARTH SCIENCES. THIS ENCOURAGED NEW STUDIES: THE CLASSIFICATION OF PRODUCTS FROM THE LAND ACCORDING TO THEIR DIETARY QUALITIES OR THERAPEUTIC PROPERTIES; THE STUDY OF THE MEDICAL PROPERTIES OF ALREADY LISTED PLANTS AND THE ACCLIMATIZATION OF NEW PLANTS TO EXPAND THE CURRENT PHARMACOPOEIA. ONE MUST STRESS THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION (RELATED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF URBAN POPULATIONS), THE TECHNOLOGICAL DIMENSION (WHAT WAS DONE IN THE FIELD OF HYDRAULICS) AND THE CULTURAL DIMENSION (WITH THE MULTIPLICATION AND THE DIFFUSION OF ORCHARDS, KITCHEN AND FLOWER GARDENS, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PARKS, RIYAD AND THEIR LIKES THROUGHOUT THE ARAB-MUSLIM WORLD).

INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of agriculture in the Fertile Crescent and throughout the subsequent periods in the history of humanity, gardens and, generally speaking, all the areas where the land was tilled to be productive, have progressively become the meeting point of knowledge and know-how, which combined to turn them into production tools, places for living and sometimes artworks. These spaces relate to chemistry because, first of all, they result from the land being cultivated, looked after and enriched. Their productivity depends on the vagaries of the weather or on a good control of water supplies. Their upkeep is the result of man's know-how as regards techniques of cultivation, but also of the efficiency of the tools he can resort to – that is, of the current agricultural technology. They cannot be conceived of without animals – those used for ploughing and harvesting and those that live there throughout the year and give the land a new form of life. At the end

of the natural process and of these many operations, certain types of gardens appear before our eyes in so many combinations of shapes and colours, every one of which is a picture.

As early as the eighth century in the East, at the time of the Umayyad dynasty (661-754) and during the subsequent Abbasid period (754-1258), the people in power, the rich landowners and the farmers paid great attention to arable land, and to gardens in particular. A wealth of literature dealing with all the activities related to working the land developed first in Baghdad then in other cities of this vast region of the empire. However, it was in the Muslim Western world, and more particularly in al-Andalus, that the science of agriculture and the art of the garden diversified and intensified agronomic research to the greatest extent, publishing both theoretical and practical treatises and developing different

types of crops and ornamental plants: royal or princely kitchen gardens, pleasure or botanical gardens, nurseries, orchards, etc.

The theme is so rich that it is impossible to write a detailed history of it within the framework of Arab-Muslim civilization or to describe the various forms in which the fields of knowledge directly or indirectly contributed to the creation of the different types of parks listed in the history of this civilization. We will only describe the basic elements that favoured the birth and the further development of a powerful agricultural tradition and give examples of achievements.

However, we first need to make a few remarks about the distinctive features of this vast field of study. First, agronomical practices in Islamic countries are related to the economic features, habits of consumption, and culinary cultures in the different regions and even fashion trends among well-off people.

Secondly, the domains that relate to working the land did not develop the way other sciences typically develop – that is, first a period of know-how drawing on local experience, then a scholarly approach based on books from pre-Islamic times and expressed in ‘theoretical’ works. In fact, from the beginning, the two approaches existed side by side in written records and enriched one another.

Thirdly, the directions taken by activities related to working the land were not solely influenced by natural factors such as the diversity of soils, climate and local hydraulic data. They were also influenced by lifestyles,

by the demography of cities, by the need for products destined for various uses and by those required to provide the workshops. More specifically, we have evidence that to meet the increasing demand for exotic goods – at first reserved for the elite of the courts of the caliphs and princes – goods that were exotic at the time, like watermelons, lemons, oranges, bananas and mangoes came to be acclimatized and then produced on a large scale. In connection with economic activity, the production of cotton, silk, wool and flax was increased for the textile industry, hemp and cotton for making paper, sugarcane for the sugar industry.¹ Certain guilds were supplied with products from the land too: weavers, dyers, manuscript illuminators, miniaturists, painters and ceramists. All these craftsmen used dyestuffs such as madder, indigo, saffron and henna.²

In the domain of science, the development of medicine led to that of a pharmacopoeia and of botany, two fields that rely on Earth sciences. It encouraged new studies: the classification of products from the land according to their dietary qualities or therapeutic properties; the study of the medical properties of already listed plants and the acclimatization of new plants to expand the current pharmacopoeia.

Lastly, it must be mentioned that population increase, the development of new social strata and the diversification of manufacturing activities led decision-makers and landowners to be concerned with the issue of crop yield according to the nature of the soil. The major consequence of this, in some regions like al-Andalus, was the financing of agronomic research to solve the problem.



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ANCIENT HERITAGES

During the first two centuries of Islam, there was apparently no remarkable change in the way the land was worked or what was grown. The farmers in each region of the empire preserved ancestral habits and know-how. But with the new developments in science initiated in Baghdad with the translations of works dealing with various fields, people began enthusiastically to unearth ancient works on botany, agriculture and husbandry. The books that were thus unearthed came from different sources. There do not seem to be many writings concerning the Persian and Egyptian traditions. From the former tradition, there is a report of an anonymous book entitled *Kitab Waruznamah*. The Egyptian tradition is only described in the *Geoponika* of Democritus (second century BCE). The second source, relatively more important quantitatively than the other two, is Roman, then Byzantine/prolonged by the Byzantines. The Muslims had access to about half-a-dozen writings from this double source, among which Anatolius of Berytus's *Treatise on the Fertilization of Soils*³ (fourth century CE), Varron's *De re rustica libri* (first century BCE) and Cassianus' *Treatise on Byzantine Agriculture* (sixth century CE). The third source is Greek, with two different sorts of books. The first ones deal with plants in general: Aristotle's *History of Plants* (fourth century BCE), Theophrast's *Natural History of Plants* and *Enquiry into Plants* (third century). The second group of books deals with medicinal plants: Galen's *Treatise on Plants* and, most of all, Dioscorides' famous *Materia Medica* (first century CE).⁴

However, the greatest influence on the development of the Arab agronomic tradition came from Mesopotamia. This heritage was transmitted to the Muslims in a single book entitled *Treatise on the development of the land, the cultivation of cereals, trees and fruit and their protection against calamities*,

better known as *Nabatean Agriculture*. It was presumably written by Qutami (third to fourth century) and translated by Ibn Washshiyya (who died at the beginning of the tenth century), a version of which has reached us. The modern edition of this book is over 1500 pages long and is a collection of various elements of agronomic know-how among the peoples of Iraq and Syria in pre-Islamic times.

After introducing the main features of agriculture (different types of soil, the best time to plant and harvest, modes of planting, treating plants etc.), the author presents the agronomic knowledge of his time, classifying plants as follows: floral and odoriferous plants, ornamental shrubs and shrubs giving essential oils, fruit trees (with particular studies devoted to olive trees, vines and date palms), leguminous and graminaceous plants, vegetables. He also gives the main morphological features of the plants, studying their genesis and origin and the constitution of odours, flavours and colours. Besides these strictly agronomic observations, the treatise gives valuable information on water: looking for springs, catchment techniques, ways of conveying the precious liquid to the place where it is needed. There are also precise observations on the nature, the virtues or impurity of different sorts of water.⁵

The last heritage worth mentioning is a continuation of pre-Islamic studies on produce from the land and deals with domestic animals (description, reproduction, breeding, care, etc.). Important Greek books on these subjects were translated towards the end of the eighth century. It was the case with Aristotle's *History of Animals*, Hippocrates' *On the Nature of Animals*, Theomnestus' *Treatise on Veterinary Surgery*, as well as certain chapters from Apollonius of Tyana's *Treatise on Agriculture* (sixth century).⁶



Other times, other places

Le Nôtre and the Versailles gardens

In all civilizations, gardens have fulfilled both a symbolic and a practical function. The garden is first a provider of food; it can also heal with medicinal plants. By domesticating nature and removing from it what may be hostile to humans it can also evoke the garden of Eden. It represents man's domination of nature. This aspect can but appeal to political power, which seeks in gardens only the image of the hold it has over society.

No wonder that in France, the art of gardening attained great heights when the monarchy was at its peak...

As early as 1662 Louis XIV commissioned Le Nôtre to create a new park to be based on Louis XIII's original garden at Versailles. Near the castle, Le Nôtre designed two large flowerbeds, one to the north and one to the south, remodelled the main east-west axis, which he intended to extend to form a grandiose perspective. While preserving the natural slope of the land to the north, he used manpower to remodel all the rest of the land.

Le Nôtre (1613-1700) was appointed king's gardener in 1645, then Controller-General of the Royal Buildings. He designed many plans for gardens including, as well as Versailles, Vaux-le-Vicomte, Marly, Meudon, Sceaux, St. Cloud ... he invented the French formal garden style or *jardin à la française*.

Le Nôtre was primarily an architect who drew up plans: at Versailles, the principal alleys are intersected by secondary walks that demarcate the copses; trellises and bowers form vast walls of greenery that accentuate the perspectives. Using all the water resources, he exploited effects of light and shade, going from dark areas (copses) to brighter areas (flowerbeds). The flowerbeds and main walks are lined with statues and yew trees trimmed into the most surprising forms, which make Versailles a Mecca for the art of pruning.

The gardens of Versailles are a collective work: these working sites involved a great variety of technicians: gardeners, like Le Nôtre, the Mollets, La Quintinie,¹ flower growers, hydraulics engineers, like the Francine brothers,² Ricquet,³ hydraulics entrepreneurs, astronomers.

In order to keep the gardens permanently in flower, in all types of weather and seasons, new types of plants are used. Exogeneous plants (mulberry, lentisk, orange tree, lemon tree, oleander, laurustinus...) are also acclimatized or stored in winter in the many orangeries specially built for that purpose. Finally, a variety of evergreen trees that Le Nôtre particularly liked, such as the fir, the spruce, the yew, the holm oak... are stored to keep the borders and wood edges leafy and green in all seasons.

This continuity throughout the year also concerns fruit and vegetables, especially the early fruit and vegetables such as those grown by La Quintinie in the Versailles kitchen garden. When the gardens were the size of Le Nôtre's creations, more people were employed than ever before, especially since it took a long time to complete them, more than thirty years for Versailles and since they covered vast areas (up to about 500 acres). 36,000 people are said to have worked at Versailles in 1685, to look after the castle and garden! This required a considerable budget, and only the great sovereigns could embark on such a project.

The refinement and the complexity of the science and techniques used realize this great garden evoke the creations of the great gardens of the Middle East, the Maghreb and al-Andalus. But it took several centuries for Europe to master these techniques.

¹ John Quintinie (1624-1688), director of all the king's fruit and vegetable gardens. His experience enabled him to lay down some rules of thumb for the transplantation and the pruning of fruit trees. Jean De Quintinie did not envisage a kitchen garden without walls, which probably explains the architecture of the property and the name it has borne for over a hundred years. He made perfect gardening tools and introduced espalier gardening.

² Francois Francine (died 1688): in 1664-1665 he designed the fountains of the grotto of Thetis, his first major hydraulic achievement in Versailles: songbirds controlled by an organ made the water spout up or cascade down. Although it was destroyed in 1676, the grotto remained alive in people's memories. Supplying the pond with water was the constant concern of the king and his hydraulics engineers and for this purpose they even envisaged diverting the Eure. An extensive network of aqueducts and underground or outdoor pools was designed around Versailles. From Rambouillet to the Seine, where the famous 'machine' of Marly was built, all the ponds and rivers helped to supply the reservoirs with water but the demand was never fully met.

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THE FIRST ARAB STUDIES OF PLANTS

Unlike other scientific disciplines, the study of plants began before translations of works belonging to non Arab traditions became available. Indeed, as early as the eighth century, a certain number of authors took initiatives concerning the following different aspects: naming plants, describing their characteristics, mentioning the places where they grow naturally and those where they are cultivated, classifying them according to colour, shape, leaves. The authors of these first writings were linguists and lexicographers, and their approach was more cultural than scientific. Some of them devoted one or more chapters to this theme: al-Khalil Ibn Ahmad (d. 796) in his *Book of ayn* and Ibn Shumayl (d. 819) in his *Book on Forms in Language*. Others, more numerous, devoted whole books to the study of plants in the Arabian peninsula and the Fertile Crescent. Among these are *The Book of Rare Things* by al-Kilabi (d. 820) and *The Book of Plants and Trees* by al-Asmai (d. 831).

A new direction was taken from the beginning of the ninth century, with the publication of more scientific works like *The Book of Plants* by ad-Dinawari (d. 896), which describes and studies the evolution of several hundreds of plants coherently classified.⁷

In the same period, in Baghdad and other regional centres, as a result of developments in medicine, physicians were exclusively presented with publications about the therapeutic virtues of plants. Hunayn Ibn Ishaq, a translator and physician, along with his son Ishaq and his nephew Hubaysh were pioneers in this domain, as each wrote a book on the subject. The phenomenon intensified to meet the demand of both patients and practitioners. Among the most prominent books are *The Book of Pharmacopoeia*, by al-Biruni (d. 1051), whose specificity lies in the description of plants coming from Central Asia and Northern India, *Journey to the Orient* by al-Rumiyya (d. 1239) and especially *Index of Simple Medicines and Food Items* by Ibn al-Baytar (d. 1248), a student of al-Rumiyya. Born in Malaga, he is perfectly representative of Islamic scholars who were not content with their knowledge acquired from books or from local professors. He left al-Andalus, visiting numerous regions –the Maghreb, Asia Minor, Syria, Iraq and Arabia – to gather information on the plants he was studying. He was soon appointed Egypt's chief herbalist by sultan al-Kamil (1218-1238). One of the specific features of his work is his description of hundreds of plants that had never been recorded before, as well as his concern to look beyond the local and regional perspectives by giving the names of plants in different languages (Persian, Greek, Latin, dialectal Arabic, Berber or late Vulgar Latin).⁸



THE BIRTH OF AN ARAB AGRONOMIC TRADITION

All types of agricultural activity had been included in the field of scholarly knowledge as early as the ninth century. They were considered either as parts of a real science, as parts of an art, or as a corpus of techniques. They encompassed the methods of agriculture, the factors of production, the description of plants and animals, husbandry techniques, maintenance and management of production units. In spite of the similarities in the titles of Arab books dealing with this vast domain (they often contain the word *filaha*), the themes are not identical. To the topics already mentioned, one may add detailed studies on hydrology, meteorology and botany.

Certain books dealt with a single type of produce: *The Book of the Vine* and *The Book of the Date Palm*, by as-Sijistani (d. 868). But most books are about the

different varieties of plants that had been grown in the Fertile Crescent for centuries. Among them, one may quote *The Book on Cereals, Plants, Palms and Species of Trees* by Ibn Salama (d. 920). After the tenth century, written work of this sort was published in Central Asia and al-Andalus.

The field of industrial agriculture also developed significantly although it does not stand out sufficiently in the bibliographical references that have reached us. Thus, sugarcane, flax, cotton and hemp were grown to provide the textile industry with raw materials (also supplied with silk from sericulture and wool from sheep farming). 'Sea silk', a seaweed used to make luxury fabrics, was also harvested. Certain areas were even redeveloped to grow plants used in the fabrication of paper.⁹

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



Reflecting on the text

- > *What factors contributed to the development of Arab agronomy?*
- > *List the various heritages that gave rise to that development.*
- > *How did the study of plants develop?*
- > *Note the example of a learned explorer, Ibn al-Baitar, known as the "chief herbalist".*
- > *What are the various "land-working activities"?*
- > *Note the appearance of "industrial crop-farming".*
- > *What is sea silk?*
- > *Evaluate the inventiveness of the Andalusians in the various fields of agronomy.*
- > *Note the scholarly profile of "agronomists".*
- > *Discover the various topics in a classical work, the Book of Agriculture.*
- > *Appreciate the discovery of the drip-irrigation technology.*
- > *What is the "Water Tribunal", an institution which persists to this day in Andalusia?*
- > *Note the lavish art of the garden: the appearance of landscape gardeners and of public gardens.*



AGRONOMY IN AL-ANDALUS

As in most other parts of the empire, the inhabitants of al-Andalus were obliged early on to show concern about the consequences of the semi-aridity of part of their land, poor yield, archaic agricultural techniques along with the rising urban population and increasing demand for agricultural products of all sorts. As early as the tenth century, initiatives were taken to meet those multifaceted challenges, to support the economic development and to meet the ever increasing needs in essential commodities as well as exotic goods highly rated in the well-to-do circles of society.¹⁰

Thus, princes, high-ranking civil servants, rich landowners, farmers and even physicians took an interest in this or that aspect of agriculture: acclimatizing new plants from other parts of the empire or neighbouring countries, experimenting with grafting to improve the local species and increase their yield, numerous tests with manuring, irrigation, fallowing and crop rotation to have a better understanding of soils and improve productivity.

It is essential to point out that these activities were not limited to practical aspects. They were followed – and later accompanied – by the publication of major works on all the aspects just mentioned. Such writings inform us, sometimes in great detail, about all the initiatives taken in this field. Some authors were basically specialists in agriculture in charge of the management or the development of princely estates. This was the case with Ibn Bassal, who managed the gardens of al-Mamun (1043-1075), along the Tagus, near Toledo. After the city was reconquered by the Castilians in 1085, Ibn Bassal settled down in Seville where he was in the service of king al-Mutamid Ibn Abbad (1068-1095). His experience and know-how were reported in his *Treatise on Purposes and Demonstration*. In it, he shows a vast knowledge of the art of working the land, exclusively based on practice and experience (Ibn Bassal, 1955).

Those who constitute the second category of authors may, for the greater part, be considered as what we would call today *agronomists*, insofar as the knowledge they display in their books combines, and sometimes synthesises, theoretical knowledge drawn from the above-mentioned ancient writings, with their day-to-day observations and experiments. In fact, they keep going back and forth between theoretical knowledge shedding light on their daily practices and

field experience enabling them to adjust and sometimes modify certain theoretical assertions, either because they are thought to be wrong or because they do not apply in certain specific situations as experienced by these specialists.¹¹

Among the most representative authors in this category are Ibn Hajjaj (ninth century), al-Tighnari (twelfth century) and Ibn al-Awwam (thirteenth century).¹² They all belonged to the elite in the society of al-Andalus, all had sound training in the most widely taught subjects of the time, mathematics, law, theology and arts, and had read the great Greek or Arabic classical texts on agronomy. The themes treated in their books tackle the fundamental issues of agriculture, husbandry, irrigation and vegetable or animal produce. More specifically, the thirty-four chapters of al-Awwam's very representative *Treatise on Agriculture* expound the following themes: the nature of soils, irrigation techniques, working the land according to its specificities, grafting, cultivation of fruit trees, market, vegetable and flower gardening, pruning and trimming, etc. As in certain Eastern treatises, certain chapters also dealt with animal husbandry. Ibn al-Awwam also contributed writings on drip irrigation, rice farming, artificial fertilization of date palms and acclimatization of vegetables or spices from far-off countries, like cucumbers, gherkins and saffron.¹³

As regards the fertilization of soils, agronomists in al-Andalus took up traditional techniques but improved them and introduced new ones. Thus, besides the use of plants as fertilizers, they resorted to human and animal manure for certain soils. Above all, they improved the technique of crop-fallow rotation.¹⁴

Finally, one may mention the management of water and all the techniques used to catch it, convey it and, more importantly, rationalize its use. Given the relatively low rainfall in most parts of al-Andalus, the high density of population resulting from the demographic growth in cities and the development of a water consuming industrial sector (paper and weaving mills), managing the water had become central to agricultural and economic activity in the region.¹⁵ On the technical level, such great achievements as those in Cordoba and Valencia were financed to provide certain big cities with drinking water. Rational distribution of water among users was also taken care of thanks to clever devices like Valencia's so-called 'Water Court'.¹⁶

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturally

Understanding the text

- *What naturally accompanies the advent of agriculture?*
- *What are the specific features of agricultural development in Muslim countries?*
- *What are the important elements of the Mesopotamian heritage in the agricultural sphere?*
- *What was the new trend that developed in the ninth century in the study of plants?*
- *How are Andalusian agronomists trained?*
- *What do Andalusian agronomists focus on?*
- *What is the difference between the work of agronomists and that of landscape designers?*
- *What do gardens represent in Islamic culture?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *What aspects of Islamic agronomic development do you consider the most innovative?*
- *What aspects of Islamic agronomic development do you consider the most culturally specific?*
- *What criticism could be made of the large-scale development of private gardens?*
- *Is geographical specificity the main determinant of agricultural development?*
- *Do agronomic ideas reflect political ideas?*
- *Do agronomic ideas reflect philosophical ideas?*
- *Are gardens a luxury or a necessity?*

Suggested teaching method: assessment in question

*Three questions are chosen.
Each participant replies in writing.
One volunteer reads his or her work.
Each participant drafts a short assessment of the work and assigns a grade.
The volunteer asks five persons to read out their assessment.
A discussion begins in which each person, except the author of the initial answer, comments on the assessment made, specifying which comments appear appropriate or inappropriate.
The group is given an average grade.
The author of the initial answer closes the discussion with his or her comments on the proceedings, and decides whether or not he or she agrees with the grade. The same task is given to another person. If that does not seem useful, the participants move on to other initial questions.
The procedure begins again.
The group reviews the work and the exercise.*

Educational exercises

Visual representations

- *Ask the participants to also read the worksheet "Technology in the service of progress: the example of hydraulic technologies".*
- *Divide the group into subgroups.*
- *Distribute to the participants sheets of A3 paper and felt-tip pens of different colours.*
- *Each group draws a "garden" that can satisfy economic, medical and aesthetic needs.*
- *The groups present their gardens and support their own view of why they would answer needs.*
- *In pairs, the participants discuss the economic, technological and cultural aspects of the texts.*
- *Exchange of views within the entire group.*
- *Questions to be put to the participants:*

What are the consequences for technological development and culture?

How do technical needs make the various sciences interdependent?

In what way are sciences in Arab-Muslim civilization guided by Islam?

What are the similarities and differences with technological developments in the West?



THE ART OF THE GARDEN

As was the case with scientific or technical domains, garden landscaping and management benefited from ancient heritages, in particular those of Persia and Mesopotamia, where, at different periods of time, a great tradition had developed in this domain. One could also add to them the Byzantine achievements in the first centuries of Islamic civilization. But the archaeology of these transient monuments is in its early stages and information is still fragmentary.

This being said, given the rapid integration of Persia into the Muslim geopolitical landscape, the first Umayyad caliphs may well have had information about Persian achievements prior to the seventh century, like the gardens of Cyrus the Great (559-529 BCE) and of his son, or the flower gardens and orchards of Khosrow II (590-628 CE) to which some Sassanid bas-reliefs still bear witness.¹⁷

These Caliphs also most certainly knew about Byzantine achievements in this domain. There is historical or literary evidence that the Byzantine political elites, especially the emperors, developed different sorts of gardens cultivated for consumption or for pleasure: orchards and kitchen gardens, public parks, imperial gardens around the palaces or private ones adjoining the monasteries and rich people's houses. The first Muslim conquerors managed to salvage some of these works when they occupied the northern part of the Fertile Crescent and part of Asia Minor. Merchants, diplomats, and possibly even translators who were sent to the capital at the end of the eighth century to look for Greek manuscripts were able to visit the gardens of Byzantium.

In any case, the reliable accounts of the gardens of Damascus that have reached us definitely confirm both the strong presence of a pre-Islamic heritage (particularly in the gardens of the Ghouta) and the will of the caliphate to enhance the architectural achievements of the capital of the Muslim empire with floral and tree gardens patiently tended and renewed. We also know that although Damascus was no longer a capital after 754, the inhabitants and rulers of the city maintained this tradition of cultivation for centuries, as confirmed by Ibn Jubayr (d. 1217). As he says about its gardens, they 'encircle [the city] like the halo round the moon and contain it as it were the calyx of a flower' and then continues 'If Paradise be on earth it is Damascus without a

doubt; and if it be in Heaven, Damascus is its earthly counterpart and equivalent!'¹⁸

With the coming to power of the Abbasid dynasty (754-1258) and the increasing enrichment of the Muslim power elite, extravagant expenses increased and caliphs, princes and rich private individuals multiplied gardens rivalling one another in terms of refinement and ostentation. When the political power was split up with the rise of regional kingdoms, vassals of the Abbasids, or of caliphates that were totally hostile to them, initiatives became more decentralized and the creation of fruit and flower gardens profited greatly from emulation.

Depending on the period or the local dynasties, real works of art were thus designed and subsequently laid out: the Umayyad gardens of al-Andalus (ninth to tenth century) in Cordoba as well as those of the Taifa kings (eleventh century) who succeeded them, those of the Seldjukids (eleventh to thirteenth century) in Iran, in the Fertile Crescent and in Anatolia; the Almohad gardens in Marrakech (twelfth to thirteenth century), the Timurid gardens in Samarkand (fourteenth century), and finally those of the Safavids in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in Ispahan. This 'garden culture' became concurrently popular within more and more levels of society. As a consequence, nature and its different components (flowers, trees, water, birds) was incorporated into the living space which varied in extent and refinement according to the means of the owners.

The history of the gardens of al-Andalus is relatively well-known, and may serve as an example of the way the idea of 'royal garden' was born in Cordoba, in the second half of the eighth century, under the impetus of the first Umayyad king, Abd ar-Rahman I (756-788). In Rusafa palace, he decided to recreate the setting of his princely childhood, which the dreadful Abbasid repression against his ancestors' dynasty had compelled him to forsake.

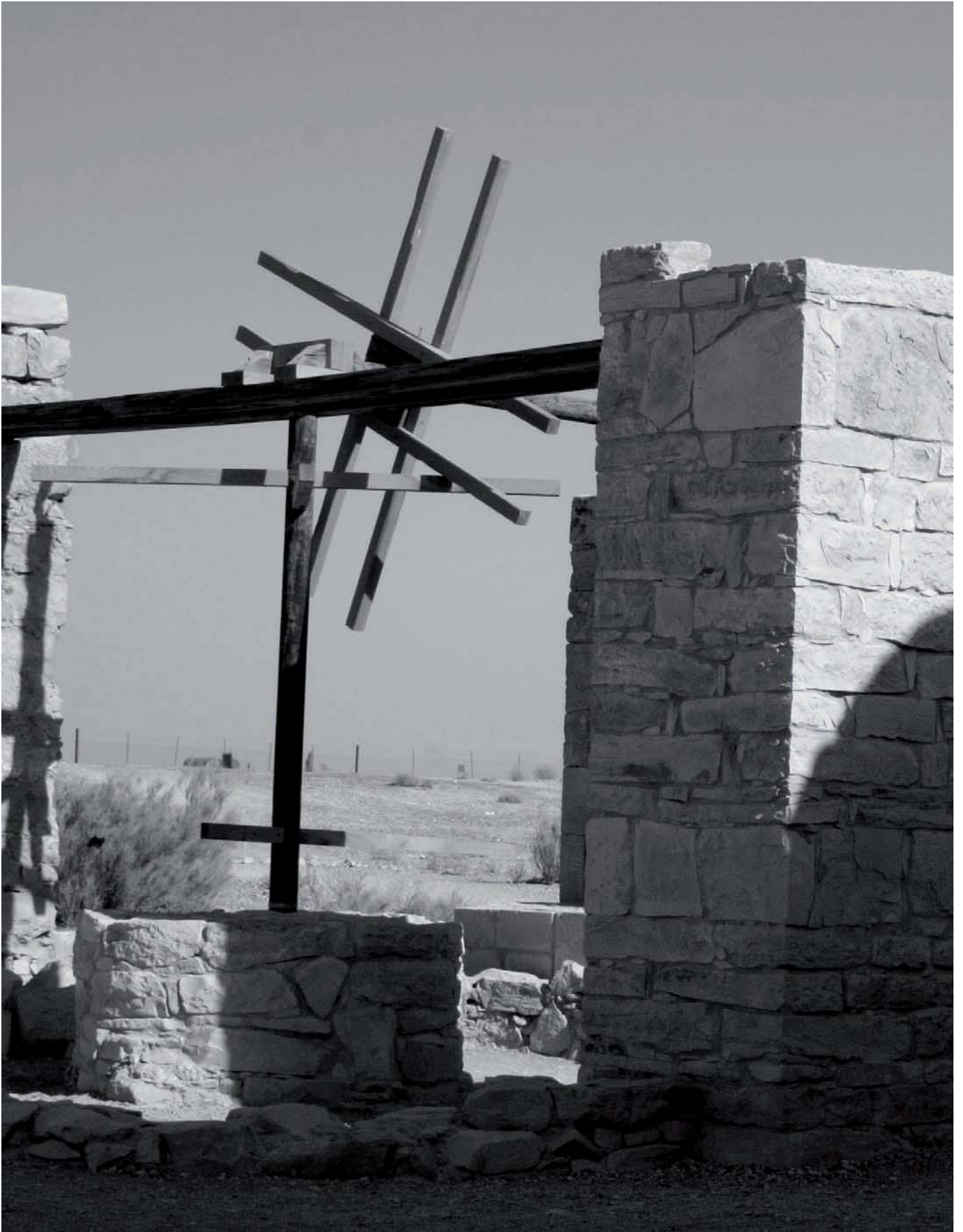
His initiative was backed up and even developed by the different ruling powers. This encouraged the emergence of two professional groups, agronomists and landscape gardeners who specialized in the management of royal and princely gardens as well as those of rich private individuals. After the fall of the Umayyad caliphate at the end of the tenth century, the

Taifa kings took things over, trying to imitate their former suzerains. It resulted in a period in which royal kitchen and pleasure gardens multiplied. Thus, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a dozen such gardens were recorded in various cities of al-Andalus and the Maghreb, among them *Jannat as-sultan* in Toledo *Jannat al-buhayra* in Seville, the garden of al-Sumadihiya in Almeria, the garden of the Jafariya palace in Saragossa and that of Ibn Mardanish (d. 1172) in Majorca. Besides these very costly princely achievements, a greater number of projects was financed by private individuals, like that of az-Zajjali (eleventh century) who bequeathed his garden to the city, so that it might be turned into a public garden.¹⁹

The great number of these private achievements is indeed confirmed by the advice given by agronomists for the design and management of these gardens. Such advice is typically what was given by Ibn Luyun (d. 1349), one of the last authors to write about working the land. In his *Treatise of Aesthetic Creativity and Extreme Fertility According to the Art of Agriculture*, he devoted a whole chapter to 'the proper arrangement of gardens, residences and farms'.²⁰

Between 1147 and 1269, following on from the achievements of eleventh-century al-Andalus, the Almohad caliphs financed major agronomical and hydraulic projects in Marrakech, the capital, and its immediate surroundings. Besides the flowerbeds and orchards that embellished their palaces, they built *agdals*, immense gardens sometimes stretching over hundreds of acres and supplied with water from the nearby mountains: among them were the *Menara*, supposedly created by Abd al-Mumin (1133-1163), the first caliph of the dynasty, or the gardens in Seville, by his son Abu Yaqub Yusuf (1163-1184). Luxurious residences were also built for the princes, the dignitaries and the rich merchants. These '*riyad*', as they were called, were protected from the outside by high walls and built around an inner garden.²¹





System of wells in Qusayr Amra, Jordan © A. Clemente-Ruiz
Princely and agricultural residences were built in the Syro-Jordanian desert during the Umayyad Dynasty. At Qusayr Amra, there are still remnants of these systems of wells, basins and water conveyance for the lands that surrounded the buildings.

CONCLUSION

As we reach the end of this rapid survey of the history of agronomy in Islam, it is important to emphasize a few characteristic features of this long and rich tradition. Firstly one must stress the economic dimension related to the development of urban populations, the increase and the diversification of the consumption resulting from the emergence of new richer social strata. All these combined factors called for the development of larger expanses of cultivated land, a rational management of water and soils and, consequently, real progress in agriculture, in the improvement of local plant species and in the acclimatization of those from other parts of the world.

Secondly, we intentionally left aside the technological dimension although it was present throughout this long period of history. It concerns mostly what was

done in the field of hydraulics, described in detailed studies like those of al-Karaji (d. 1029)²² and al-Jazari (d. 1204).²³ These high-quality science books bear witness to the significant innovations in the techniques to catch and convey water. They also record the know-how inherited from pre-Islamic traditions and still prevailing in different parts of the Muslim empire.

Last but not least, one must stress the cultural dimension. Indeed, the multiplication and the diffusion of orchards, kitchen and flower gardens, public and private parks, *riyad* and their likes appear as the expression of a shared culture – adjusted to the means at hand of course. They also bear witness to the progressive establishment and adoption of a lifestyle taking nature in all its forms into account.

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Page from *Shāhnāmah*, Iran, circa 1560 © IMA/Ph. Maillard
A complex political system is established in the Arab world where the advisors to the sovereign play a major role. This page of the *Shāhnāmah* illustrates King Zahhak consulting scholars and astrologists after having dreamed of his own assassination.

POLITICAL THINKING IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

FAITH AND HISTORY MAKE UP WHAT COULD BE CALLED THE MUSLIMS' COMMON LEGACY. THEY CONSIST OF A BODY OF MYTHS, REFERENCES AND CONCEPTS THAT HAVE NURTURED PEOPLE'S IMAGINATION AND THINKING, AND INFLUENCED THE INSTITUTIONS, PRACTICES AND DOMINANT ATTITUDES IN MUSLIM CONTEXTS, BUT ALSO THE PERCEPTIONS OF OUTSIDE OBSERVERS. THE DE FACTO AUTHORITIES THAT HAD PREVAILED SINCE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE FIRST MUSLIM DYNASTIES WERE MOST OFTEN BEEN IN THE HANDS OF HEREDITARY MONARCHIES SET UP WITH THE HELP OF THE MILITARY. THE TRANSMITTERS OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE, THOSE WHO MEMORIZED THE QURAN, THE *HADITH* AND VARIOUS TRADITIONS CONSIDERED TO BE NORMATIVE, ALONG WITH SOCIETY AS A WHOLE, LEARNT TO LIVE IN THE SHADOW OF DE FACTO REGIMES. THEY DEVELOPED CONCEPTIONS, ATTITUDES AND REGULATIONS WHICH PRESERVED AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE A SOCIAL LIFE IN KEEPING WITH THE RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLES. POLITICAL THINKING IN THE CLASSICAL AGE DEVELOPED UNDER THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, AND DE FACTO AUTHORITY WAS FINALLY ACCEPTED AS A NECESSARY EVIL. THE MODERN STATE CAN BE DISTINGUISHED FROM THE STATE INHERITED FROM THE CLASSICAL AGE BY SEVERAL ESSENTIAL ASPECTS, SUCH AS A WIDESPREAD CONTROL OVER A WELL-DEFINED TERRITORY, THE AMBITION TO ACHIEVE A FULL INTEGRATION OF THE POPULATION THROUGH THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A NATIONAL CULTURE, THE ADMINISTRATION OF VARIOUS ASPECTS OF COLLECTIVE LIFE: EDUCATION, ECONOMY, SOCIAL MATTERS, ALL THIS IN A CONTEXT CHARACTERIZED BY A DESIRE FOR PROGRESS, DEVELOPMENT AND THE EMANCIPATION OF SOCIETY AND INDIVIDUALS.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

What is meant by 'the Muslim world'?

The Muslim world has been characterised by its great diversity in space and time. This diversity shows in the variety of languages, cultures and forms of social and political life. The idea that the peoples and societies making up what is called the Muslim world, constitute a

vast unit, emerged intermittently in history at times when people generally thought in terms of oppositions (Islam against Christendom, Islam against Western world). Today, the idea of unity is as predominant outside Islam, among non-Muslim observers, as inside Islam, among Muslims themselves. The theme of unity and diversity has been recurrent, though formulated in diverse ways, in the works devoted to the past and present realities of what may be called the 'Muslim world'. This unity is

considered to be much more than a superficial resemblance and it is often related to the specificities ascribed to Islamic faith or to given aspects of the Muslims' history.

Faith and history make up what could be called the Muslims' common legacy. They consist of a body of myths, references and concepts that have nurtured people's imagination and thinking, and influenced the institutions, practices and dominant attitudes in Muslim contexts, but also the perceptions of outside observers.

To understand the political thinking in this particular 'world', two things should be examined, the religious teachings and the historical practices. The distinction between the two is in itself one of the major issues in today's discussions. The relations between Islam as a religious message (faith, creed, ethical principles, commandments, etc) and Islam as a 'world' and as history do not seem to be conceived of or considered in the same way by everybody. Many protagonists and thinkers, be they Muslim or not, see no difference or



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He has contributed widely to studies on the relationships between Islam, modernity and democracy. His recent publications include *Réformer l'islam ? Une Introduction aux débats contemporains*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003; *Par souci de clarté : à propos des sociétés musulmanes contemporaines*, Casablanca, Le Fennec, 2000.

discontinuity between the two, and often use the same term, Islam, to refer to specifically religious matters as well as to the events of Islamic history (perhaps we should say histories). The American historian Marshall Hodgson, the author of an important book on Islamic history suggested adopting terms like *Islam*, *Islamdom* and *Islamicate* in order to make a sharp distinction between the objects in question and avoid misunderstandings often caused by 'lumping together' different realities. The first term refers to religion itself, the second

refers to the societies that have organized themselves in accordance with the teachings of religion and the third to what these societies express in the domain of culture.¹ Contemporary Islamic thinkers such as Ali Abderrazik or Adbelmajid Charfi also insisted on the necessary distinction between message and history, to avoid confusions with serious consequences. One consequence is the tendency to consider historical moments or institutions as sacred and to put them on the same level as elements of faith. We shall develop this question further.



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Other times, other places

The Edict of Nantes (April 1598)

In the Christian world, particularly in Western Europe, the relationship between state and religion was special. Since the emperors Constantine and especially Theodosius, one model stands out: one prince, one religion. The Church united all believers, to fight against pagans and the heretics. In Western Europe during the Middle Ages, there was no longer any political unity, but the Church had a leader, the pope. He had at his disposal a formidable weapon, even against the powerful: excommunication.¹ In the sixteenth century, the situation changed. The rise of nationalism and the strengthening of the princes' power weakened papal authority. The Protestant Reformation began in Germany, against the pope, accompanied by cries of 'Long live Luther, long live Germany.' In France, the wars of religion began; they were civil wars between the Catholic King and Protestant lords who challenged the political and religious authorities. Each side attracted part of the people, and the number of atrocities and massacres increased.² France was in danger of splitting apart just like the Netherlands, where the Protestants created an independent state in 1581: the United Provinces. In 1589, Henry of Navarre, a Protestant prince, converted to Catholicism to become king of France under the name Henry IV. To end the religious wars that ravaged the country, he decided to restore peace by tolerating the existence of Protestants in the kingdom. It was what the famous Edict of Nantes ensured in 1598. Here are some excerpts:

'... if it hath not yet pleased [God] to permit it to be in one and the same form of Religion, that it may at least be with one and the same intention, and under such regulations that there should arise no tumult or disturbance on account of it among you...'

Preamble of the Edict of Nantes

'Article 6. And that all occasion of troubles and differences among our subjects may be taken away, we have permitted and do permit persons of the pretended reformed religion to live and remain in all the cities and places of this our kingdom, and countries under our authority, without being questioned, vexed or molested, or constrained to do any thing with regard to religion contrary to their conscience, nor on account of it shall they be searched for in their houses and places where they desire to dwell, provided they comport themselves in accordance with the provisions of our present edict.'

Article VI of the Edict of Nantes

This edict was not well accepted by Catholics, including the Catholic League.³ Yet the Catholic religion was confirmed as the dominant one, Protestantism was merely tolerated and many restrictions remained in particular concerning places of worship... The king had to show authority, even issue threats, for the edict to be accepted: *'I gave [the edict] for the sake of peace, which, as I have obtained abroad for my kingdom, it is my intention to establish within my realm. [...] Allege not to me your zeal for the Catholic faith! I am more orthodox than you, being the eldest son of the Church.[...] I am a king, and I speak to you as your king. My officers of the High Courts are, it is true, my right arm; but if this said right arm is affected with gangrene, of necessity it must be severed by the left. When my regiments mutiny I break them!'* The rest is history. Henry IV was assassinated by Ravaillac, a Catholic fanatic, in 1610... Louis XIV, Henry IV's grandson, yielding to public opinion and his personal feelings and believing it would strengthen his political power, decided to put an end to the Edict of Nantes. By 1680, he took action to eradicate Protestantism from the country, multiplying anti-Protestant measures and dragonnades. Many Protestants left the country to emigrate to Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland... those who remained had to convert or go into hiding. Finally, on October 18, 1685, in his palace of Fontainebleau, King Louis XIV totally revoked the Edict of tolerance signed by his grandfather in Nantes in 1598, by signing a new edict. It was not until the late eighteenth century with the Revolution that religious tolerance was accepted in France. In 1905 the law separating church and state made France a secular state.

Bibliography > J. Garrison, 1985, *L'Édit de Nantes et sa révocation: histoire d'une intolérance*, Paris, Seuil.
> J. Lecler, 1955, *Histoire de la tolérance au siècle de la Réforme*, Paris, Aubier.
> A. Dumas, 1997, *La reine Margot*, trans. by D. Coward, Oxford, Oxford World's Classics.

¹ For example, the German Emperor Henry IV in conflict with Pope Gregory VII, had to do penance at Canossa in 1077 to lift the excommunication affecting him and which the barons of his empire used as a pretext to revolt.

² The most notorious example is the massacre of St. Bartholomew: on the marriage of Marguerite de Valois, daughter of Catherine de Medici, with the Protestant prince Henry of Navarre, later Henri IV, the decision to assassinate the leaders of the Protestant party was taken in obscure circumstances by Catherine de Medici and Charles IX on August 24, 1572. The military operation degenerated into a widespread massacre of all the Protestants, regardless of age, sex or social status. As often happens in cases like this, the most extreme elements led the operations, and the most fanatical Parisians got carried away by fear and violence. Violence continued in the provinces. It is estimated that there were nearly 30000 victims.

³ The Catholic League or Holy Union gathered supporters for a merciless struggle against the Protestants, it was supported by Spain, the Pope, the Jesuits...and the most fanatical Catholics. It was a force of opposition to Henry IV and the spirit of the League did not disappear with the return of peace. Many among them, regarded the king as a heretic.

The religious legacy as object of a new conflict of interpretations

Therefore it is important to underline the following point from the outset: the Islamic legacy has been the object of conflicts of interpretations, which are formulated in new terms today. As a rule, the interpretation of the religious teachings has always been subject to different, often conflicting approaches. Very early on there were similar conflicts in Islamic history. Indeed, the divergences between Muslims over the nature of their religious obligations and over the way they should behave as regards the running of their community appeared immediately after the Prophet's death. Other divergences emerged in the modern period and it is important that one should be aware of them in order to avoid regarding as facts what may be just a version elaborated with a view to defending one interpretation among others. Actually, there are never such things as 'hard facts', they are always 'distilled', filtered, arranged to fit a given interpretation. We shall try in this dossier to emphasize the main terms around which the conflicts of interpretations have revolved in the past and in the present.

Politics becomes an autonomous domain: a turning point in modern history

Before undertaking this task, another remark has to be made. Politics became an autonomous domain in human societies only a short time ago. Even if the use of the word *siyasa* dates back a very long time in history, it rather meant something like management of state affairs, most often management of the subject people.

It was self-evident for everybody before the eighteenth century that such management had to be subordinate to a higher global vision, deriving from religious principles (God's will as regards human societies). Only a tiny elite was capable of imagining that such a view could draw its inspiration from philosophical conceptions devised by human beings. Therefore politics as an autonomous domain established itself recently in Islamic contexts with the emergence of modern states.

An idea often heard nowadays is that the specificity of Islam is to combine religion and politics in an inextricable way, and to amalgamate them to such an extent that one cannot adhere to one (religion) without adopting the attitudes, opinions or institutions peculiar to the other (politics). This idea is often expressed as an observable fact to be noted from the start. After examining a certain number of categories, notions and wordings found in the textual sources (Quran, *Hadith*), one then abruptly goes on to evoke historical institutions and notions that appeared in various historical situations and wordings suggested by Muslim theologians. Some have even gone as far as saying that Islam proposes a blueprint for a determined socio-political order. Others, anxious to take everything into consideration, suggest distinguishing between notions as they appear in the texts and the practices adopted by various communities, from the very first one, instituted and supervised by the Prophet, to some very recent ones, with different forms of organization but referring to the Islamic norm. Thus, with a balanced outlook one can show that the norm is debatable and that the lessons drawn from it have always varied throughout history. To assess the diversity of interpretations and practices, it is necessary to examine the factors invoked by people and to understand the general situation created by the interactions between interpretations and practices.



FOUNDING MOMENTS

'The Constitution of Medina'

One of the factors supporting the highly political character of Islam is the fact the Prophet actually became the leader of a community of Muslims, the first in history, and that this marked a turning point in his preaching. The year when the community established itself in the oasis city of Yathrib, which later became *Madinat an-Nabi*, or *al-Madina*, Medina in English, was the first year of the Islamic calendar of the Hegira – the prophet's emigration –, and the starting point of a new history.

The original community established in Medina was formed of two rival tribes that had rallied to the Prophet's message, and of a number of Jewish tribes that had kept their belief and their autonomous living habits. The relations between the tribes were originally ruled by a document sometimes called the Constitution of Medina. In fact, this name is 'heavily connoted' since the quite brief document of only two pages has nothing to do with a constitution in the modern sense of the term. Indeed, its goal is rather limited: to define how to settle conflicts in an area where autonomous tribes shared the same space. The most remarkable element in the document is the declaration that everybody who lived in the Medina area belonged to one *umma* (community) no matter what their religion was. The word *umma* was to have an important function in Islamic history. It came to designate the community of Muslim believers, and for people who considered that Islam offered a political solution or that Muslims should be united under the same authority, the basis for a state or an Islamic political entity.

The first Caliphate: the virtuous caliphs

What has been retained from that period is the idea that Islam proposes both a religious faith and regulating principles for life in a community, that it represents, as is generally agreed, *din wa dunya* (religion and worldly matters), and that to live one's faith fully, one also needs to live a life in the community of believers. In fact, throughout history, this idea has not been considered as something that can be taken for granted. Immediately after the Prophet's death a debate took place: some wished to dissociate their Islamic faith from their worldly life, or at least give up the idea of one Muslim community. They were treated as apostates. The debate went on between various candidates for the succession to the Prophet, and revealed different conceptions of what a life in keeping with Muslim faith involves, how it should be conceived of and organised.

The compromise that was quickly adopted by a group of believers led to the appointment of a series of four 'successors' to the Prophet, who were considered as *Khulafa Rashidun*, shrewd or virtuous lieutenants

('well-guided' is too literal a translation). This improvised succession allowed the work of the Prophet to be continued, with the Prophet considered not as the preacher of a new religion but as the leader of a community of believers trying to survive and to resist its enemies. To do that, it spread its influence to the detriment of rival groups, Arab tribes that remained hostile to the new religious message, then over the neighbouring areas. It must be borne in mind that, for Muslims, the revelation was 'sealed' with Prophet Muhammad. He is considered to be the last Messenger sent by God to the human beings. His successors can only be subordinates carrying out the orders and prescriptions he bequeathed on the community of believers. The first four caliphs were co-opted among the Prophet's companions, following different procedures in each case. In subsequent history, this group, contrary to the episodes that followed, was regarded, by Sunnis in particular, as a sort of golden age, a period when the Islamic norm had been respected, since the appointment of 'successors' did not follow the dynastic principle as in hereditary monarchy. Apparently, the caliphs who were appointed in this way did not behave as kings or autocrats but as leaders anxious to preserve the moral and religious character of the community and to act solely with a view to strengthening and expanding it.

The 'Great Upheaval' and the imposition of monarchy

The episode of the shrewd caliphs was abruptly interrupted when the then governor of Syria seized power, having made sure he was supported by substantial military forces and bureaucratic apparatus inherited from the ancient empires. So it was then that the first dynasty was born, and the regime change which took place at the end of a civil war (*Fitna Kubra*, The Great Upheaval) was a deep traumatic experience for the Muslims, who felt something tragic had occurred, namely that the community had lost control of its affairs. The greatest schisms in Islamic history occurred at that time, depending on how people reacted to the usurpation of power by tribal leaders and the imposition of a dynastic system. Those who had fought with Ali ibn Abi Talib, the last legitimate caliph, formed the core of the *shia* (or followers, that is, followers of Ali). Most of the others, who were later called Sunnis, eventually resigned themselves to the situation, and adopted neutral or pacific attitudes, since they preferred to endure – and control to a certain extent – the illegitimate power rather than commit themselves to murderous fighting, of doubtful outcome. Others, even more radical, adopted solutions that involved choosing and controlling the caliphs according to extremely strict criteria of uprightness (*Kharijites*).

Since then de facto authority has most often been in the hands of hereditary monarchies set up with the

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

<p><u>Understanding the text</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What conceptual distinctions need to be made to understand Islam better?</i> • <i>What was it that enabled politics to emerge as a field of activity in its own right?</i> • <i>Does Islam have an essentially political character?</i> • <i>What is the origin of the Islamic concept of community?</i> • <i>What was the first important historical schism in Islam?</i> • <i>What are the various options of traditional Islamic political thought?</i> • <i>What is the "compromise of the classical age"?</i> • <i>What does "reformism" mean in modern times?</i> • <i>What are the main stakes in contemporary Islamic politics?</i> • <i>What is the "culturalist" theory?</i> 	<p><u>Educational exercises</u></p> <p>Case studies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Begin with a discussion with the participants about their political representations of the Arab-Muslim world.</i> • <i>Ask the participants to read also the worksheet "Muhammad Iqbal".</i> • <i>Divide the group into five subgroups; each group assumes a different political character: Group 1: the Kharijis and the Zaidis, Group 2: the Ismailis, Group 3: the philosophers, Group 4: the doctrines of the udaba', Group 5: the compromise of the classical age.</i>
<p><u>Entering into dialogue with the text</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Are European political concepts transposable to Islam?</i> • <i>Is democracy a universal concept?</i> • <i>Is there more than one form of democracy?</i> • <i>Should democracy be imposed?</i> • <i>Should politics be detached from all religious affiliation?</i> • <i>Can political life in Islamic countries be judged from the outside?</i> • <i>Is the "modernization" of political life an inevitable fact?</i> • <i>Can the West accept Islamic ideals that do not match its own?</i> • <i>How might the balance of power be ensured in Islamic countries?</i> • <i>Is Islam opposed to the concept of the nation?</i> • <i>Does sharia law have a future?</i> • <i>Can Islam provide for some countries an alternative to the liberal model?</i> <p>Suggested teaching method: question or objection</p> <p><i>One or more questions are chosen. Each participant replies on a loose sheet. The moderator gathers up the sheets and redistributes them at random. Each participant reads what is written, then asks one or more questions or raises one or more objections to what is written, specifying whether a question or an objection is intended. It cannot be both at the same time. Each participant takes back his or her sheet. All the participants assess what has been proposed to them and reply. When that has been done, the sheets are handed out again and the process begins over again a second time, then a third time. Once he or she has replied to three persons, each participant analyses the exchanges and what may have changed in his or her answers. Everyone reads out their conclusions. A general discussion takes place in which the analyses are compared. The group reviews the work and the exercise.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Each group discusses and lists characteristics by imagining political approaches in relation to questions of style of governance, legal aspects, social and economic policies, military affairs, foreign relations, etc., while reflecting on the advantages and limits of the approach.</i> • <i>The five groups are brought together and hold a discussion on the diversity of approaches.</i> • <i>General discussions around the "four modern moments" and the consequences explained in the worksheet.</i> • <i>Discussion on the approach of Muhammad Iqbal and political conceptions today in the Arab-Muslim world.</i>

help of the military. These have been hard to get rid of in Islamic history. The transmitters of religious knowledge, those who memorized the Quran, the *Hadith* and various traditions considered to be normative, along with society as a whole, learnt to live in the shadow of de facto regimes and developed conceptions, attitudes and regulations which preserved as much as possible of a social life in keeping with the religious principles. Political thinking in the classical age developed under these circumstances, and de facto authority was finally

accepted as a necessary evil. People reacted in different ways: the *kharijites* chose self-exclusion, fleeing to places where communities which were in conformity with their ideal could be maintained; the *Shiites* alternated overt rebellion with concealed hostility; and the *Sunnis* accepted the de facto authority but used various means to try to 'contain' it. In fact, according to the historian Marshall Hodgson, throughout this long history, political thinking explored five 'options'.

Insert written by Khaled Roumo



Reflecting on the text

- > *What distinction does the author draw between Islam as a faith, Islam as a city and Islam as a culture?*
- > *Are conflicting interpretations of the founding texts inherent in Islam?*
- > *What were the characteristics of the first Muslim community?*
- > *How did issues of power lead to the establishment of hereditary succession?*
- > *Identify an exception to that rule.*
- > *In what context did political thought develop?*
- > *Follow the establishment of an "Islamic standard" that contained the germ of an "implicit constitution".*
- > *How did Europe's intrusion into the Muslim world shake the "compromise of the classical age"?*
- > *Identify its consequences: the abrogation of the Caliphate, reformism and nation-State.*
- > *Discover the thinking of new political theoreticians.*
- > *What were the adverse effects of the polarization on Islam?*
- > *What, in the author's view, were the three explanations for the political movements?*



THE 'FIVE OPTIONS' THE MUSLIMS ARE THOUGHT TO HAVE TRIED OUT IN HISTORY

Kharijis and Zaidis

The first prevailed among the *Kharijites* (a group which stemmed from the refusal to arbitrate between legitimate caliphs and 'usurpers' of power) and *Zaidi* Shiites. It involved the setting-up of communities in which direct relationships could be established between its members and the leaders, as well as the caliph's absolute personal responsibility for the community as a whole. There were few communities which tried to put this ideal into practice, and they often lived in outlying areas.

Ismailians

The second was developed by Ismailian Shiites (a minority though influential branch of Shiism). The idea of *batin* (a hidden meaning, which could only be understood by the spiritual guide of the community) was considered to be fundamental. It led to the organization of a community and a political system in which there prevailed a hierarchy based on levels of access to learning, and centred on the community imams (spiritual guides).

The philosophers and their 'utopias'

The third was explored by the *falasifa* (philosophers). Following the Greek philosophical tradition, they often considered religion as a system of myths meant to legitimize, in the eyes of the public, a State that should be conceived and run by philosophers. In fact, this formulation covers a great variety of views and doctrines. The philosophers who are most often cited here are al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd. The former wrote a book on the Virtuous City (*Al-Madina al-Fadila*) in which he developed his conception of an ideal political system. The latter made various remarks in his commentaries on the major works of the Greek philosophers.

The doctrines of the *Ubada* (men of letters appointed to courts)

The fourth was introduced and developed by 'civil servants' who belonged to the *ubada* category, that is writers and men of letters often appointed to royal or princely courts. They tended to see political order as a means of setting up an authority that would enable a learned elite to prosper by 'managing' or subjugating illiterate masses. Refined elitist culture was somehow the ultimate end of the political order, which involved being masters in the art of manipulating the masses and using power. These writers' views have often been expressed in the so-called 'Mirrors for the Princes'.

The 'compromise' of the classical period

The fifth, which predominated among the Sunnis and the Twelver Shiites, was subsequently considered as typical or even normative, that is as an implementation of the most specific Islamic norm. Here we find the idea of an implicit constitution, or 'blueprint', which is often advocated nowadays by certain contemporary scholars and conservative Muslims. It is based on an acceptance of de facto authority, considered to be legal even when it is not totally legitimate. The approval of the community is supposed to derive from the so-called *bayah* (a formal act of allegiance), which is a sort of contract granting power to an individual (a caliph, a sultan or an emir) and putting him in charge of the protection of the community against enemies from outside and of the enforcement of the law within the community. In fact, through this arrangement, the full legitimacy that had been granted by the Sunnis to the first four caliphs, and to the imam by the Shiites, was abandoned and in its place a system was legalized in which the power was now shared between the political leaders in charge of the defence and the police, and the religious leaders and judges in charge of preaching, education and the administration of justice. Those in power found that their roles had been restricted, in the sense that they became mere agents carrying out the regulations formulated by the *ulama*. As regards the *ulama* themselves, they were in charge of the enforcement of the norm as well as of justice and education.



THE TURNING POINT OF MODERNITY

Contact with Europeans and moving away from popular religion

The 'compromise of the classical age', as this fifth option might be called, prevailed for centuries in most Islamic countries and was eventually considered as the Islamic norm *par excellence*. It started to be put in a difficult position with the arrival of the Europeans and their intrusion into the political, economic and social life of Islamic societies. This turning point had huge consequences, as for example integration into the world economy, the colonisation and resulting weakening of the established political regimes, among other major developments. The evolutions that took place in different parts of the 'Islamic world' between the late eighteenth century and the early twentieth century, all led, in one way or another, to the collapse of the socio-political order inherited from the classical period, and to the emergence of the modern nation-state which was a decisive context for all aspects of the social and political life.

Emergence of the nation-State: a new framework for thinking and actions, in which politics becomes autonomous

The modern State can be distinguished from the State inherited from the classical age by several essential aspects like a widespread control over a well-defined territory, the ambition to achieve a full integration of the population through the establishment of a national culture (the model for the modern nation), the administration of various aspects of collective life: education, economy, social matters, all this in a context characterized by a desire for progress, development and the emancipation of society and individuals. In particular, the modern nations are far more bureaucratic than the nations of the classical age. They also have a modern legal apparatus working in parallel with the traditional legal structures, which have kept within their remit social affairs such as family law.

One of the most significant contemporary events was the abrogation of the caliphate in 1924. Mustapha Kemal Ataturk, who came to power in Turkey and led a resistance war against European countries, put an end to what had become a symbol inherited from the classical age. This symbol had a certain effect on the way people perceived things in some Islamic countries, but had no tangible influence on the reality of power. Islamic political thinking made a fresh start, started a new life, in which four major moments, which were superimposed rather than simply successive, can be discerned



Four 'moments'

Reformism (1850-1920)

The first is called reformism. It started in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as an immediate reaction against the European intrusion into areas that had so far been dominated by traditional Islamic regimes. Thinkers proclaimed that the Islamic founding ideal was compatible with the modern values of rationality, freedom and morality. It combined an admiration for the progress achieved by the Europeans with a praise of Islamic fundamental values. In fact, it often established points of convergence between the two: rationality, moral discipline and an interest in science were considered as values advocated by Islam but they had apparently been given up or forgotten by the Muslims who lost their bearings in popular religious practices combining superstition, fatalism and ignorance. Supposedly, the Europeans succeeded because they had adopted these values. The main thinkers who emerged at that time were Jamal Ed Din al Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and Abderrahman Kawakibi.

Today this period is often judged quite severely. The reformist thinkers are blamed for adopting the attitudes of an apologist (they declared that modern values were of Islamic origin) and for having no discernment regarding the political traditions that prevailed in Islamic contexts. A minority of contemporary observers consider that the little influence these thinkers had resulted from the way they were perceived at the time (R. Schultze, M. Sedgwick).

Fundamental questionings (1920-1940)

The second moment saw the emergence of fundamental questions on the interpretations of Islamic traditions during the centuries when the 'compromise of the classical age' prevailed'. During the twenties and the thirties, Islamic thinkers who had little or no access to modern political philosophy, raised fundamental issues as to the political implications of the Islamic legacy. They questioned the traditional interpretations, especially the typical model (the compromise of the classical age). Among these thinkers, Ali Abderraziq (1888-1966) and Maaruf ar-Rusafi (1877-1945) can be mentioned. In 1925, only one year after the abrogation of the caliphate by Mustafa Kamal Ataturk, Ali Abderraziq published an essay which challenged the link that is traditionally established between Islam and politics. After a rereading of the founding texts (Quran and *Hadith*) and of the history of the first Muslim community, he came to the conclusion that Islam does not prescribe any specific political formula and does not require the community of Muslims to adopt any system whatsoever. Maaruf ar-Rusafi, in a similar approach, rewrote the biography of the Prophet based on a new reading of ancient sources, and came to the conclusion that the dominant notions about what the nature of the message is, including its political implications, had little to do with what can be understood from the ancient texts. Even if the Prophet's preaching aimed at establishing a social and political organization of a new kind (a community

based on a common faith rather than on the sense of belonging to a nation, a social regulation based on ethical principles rather than on a balance of power), it can in no way justify what the Muslims have developed in its name throughout history.

At the same time, in the 1920s and the 1930s, others started to explore the means of redefining what the Islamic 'normative model' might mean, within the framework of a modern nation-state. This gave birth to the idea of an Islamic state and to the founding principles of what would later be called Islamic fundamentalism. This trend, which was destined to become popular among the mass movements and to fascinate those in the Western world who were in search of Islamic specificities, was born with thinkers like Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), the founder of the organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), the author of works that defined the broad outline of an 'Islamic alternative' to the modern social and political systems.

Modernist ideologies (1940-1980)

From the 1930s to the 1980s, modern political conceptions were very successful in the Islamic world: nationalism, socialism, communism had their own followers and thinkers. The effects of these themes can still be perceived, even if they are concealed by the attention given by the media to the fundamentalist phenomenon, and by the worldwide loss of interest in 'ideologies' (except for the liberal ideology).

Rise of fundamentalism (1980-?)

Since the 1980s, there has been a rise in mass movements claiming to be the followers of some version or other of the fundamentalist alternative. The triumphant Iranian revolution in 1979, the collapse of the Shah's regime and the coming to power of a cleric, Imam Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989) paved the way for the realization of the idea that Islam could inspire modern alternatives to the social, political and economic systems developed in modern times. In the Twelver Shiite context, the concept of *vilayet-e-faqih* (the power of the cleric) was put forward for the first time and incorporated into a constitution setting itself up as an attempt to give concrete form to the Islamic model. The other mass movements which appeared in the Islamic world afterwards, most of all among the Sunnis, were unable to seize power and consequently neither could they draw up and implement their own versions of the Islamic model. Yet they managed to rally large segments of the population and to symbolize in the eyes of the masses the rejection of the West, of its hegemony and of the underlying conceptions and values of modern democracies. The literature of ideas produced by and about the so-called fundamentalist trends and about them is impressive. The attention given by the media to themes related to fundamentalism hampered reflection on the political perspectives of established states in the Islamic world, but also overshadowed the basic issues, often taking the form of acute crises which Islamic societies are faced with at political, economic and social levels.



INTERPRETATIONS AND QUESTIONINGS

Discussion about the Muslim world today focuses on political aspects. Many writers give explanations making a connection between present-day developments in the Muslim world and the political thinking expressed throughout the history of Islamic societies. The various interpretations cover a large spectrum, in which some 'families' based on theoretical preferences or hypotheses can be identified. Among other possible classifications, one may consider that there are basically culturalist approaches, explanations referring to specific historical itineraries and forms of thought which emerged in Islamic countries, and others seeking possible interpretative keys in readings of social and political movements affecting modern societies.

'Cultural' explanations

The followers of these approaches consider that Muslims have their own political culture, defined by categories or concepts derived from the prescriptions of their religion and from the practices of those who inspire them (the Prophet, caliphs, theologians and thinkers). The fact that they have a *political language* is proof of this. (*The Political Language of Islam* is the title of a book by Bernard Lewis, one of the most eminent representatives of this trend), as is the fact that they have developed attitudes and types of behaviour which cannot be reduced to those which emerged in the West. Thus Muslims are supposed to be unable to adopt modern political ideals, which are rooted in Western culture. An elite educated in the West tried to impose the Western ideals on their original milieu, but they have been backing off and giving way to the people with 'authentic' Islamic ideals.

Historical and political explanations

Throughout history, the Muslims developed specific systems which guaranteed a certain balance between the different authorities and the autonomy of societies. The *ulama*, the arbiters of *sharia* law and of jurisprudence had a real control over the political authorities. The emergence of modern states would seem to have destroyed this balance, by weakening the body of the *ulama* and abolishing the *sharia*, which reduced their power of control and encouraged the emergence of extreme despotic powers, unknown in Islamic history, that ignore all norms and laws. The strength of fundamentalism apparently comes from the Muslims' vivid memories of models of power restrained or contained by the *sharia*, and by the clerics' active participation.

Sociology of modern ideological movements

A third family of interpretations considers political movements in the contemporary Islamic world as ideological movements affecting modern societies whatever their traditions or legacies are. Mass movements, driven by ideologies promising a bright future (sorts of 'secular religions' promising 'worldly salvation') are, so they say, a modern phenomenon that can be seen in different contexts and can be explained by typical developments of modernity. The followers of these explanations believe they are able to prove that Islamic societies are on the road to modernity just like all other societies, even if the slogans brandished by their ideologists refer to notions, ideals and hopes which are more familiar in Islamic contexts. Therefore, modern fundamentalist movements are thought to be really distinct from the millenarian movements that characterize pre-modern societies.

¹ Marshall Hodgson. *The Venture of Islam*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1974.



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THE *NAHDA*: THE ARAB RENAISSANCE

THE EXCHANGES IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY WERE QUICKLY FOLLOWED BY THE ARRIVAL OF A GREATER NUMBER OF EUROPEANS, WHO EXERTED MORE PRESSURE ON THE MUSLIM SOCIETIES AND REGIMES. ON LEVEL OF THE IMAGINATION, NEW MODELS, DIFFERENT FROM THOSE PRODUCED BY MUSLIM SOCIETIES, WERE IMPOSED BY THE EUROPEANS. THE CONFUSION IN THE PEOPLE'S CONSCIENCES - THE CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE TO BORROW AN EXPRESSION USED TO DESCRIBE A PERIOD OF EUROPEAN HISTORY - AFFECTED ALL MILIEUS, FROM THE POLITICAL ELITES WHO FELT THEIR POSITIONS TO BE IN GREAT DANGER, TO THE POPULAR MASSES WHOSE CERTAINTIES AND LIVING CONDITIONS WERE SERIOUSLY UPSET. THE *NAHDA* WAS THOUGHT OF AS THE RENAISSANCE OF A NATION AND THEREFORE OF A CULTURE AND OF A LANGUAGE, THROUGH THE REJECTION OF INSTITUTIONS AND ESSENTIALLY RELIGIOUS THOUGHT PATTERNS THAT STIFLED THE CREATIVITY AND GENIUS INHERENT TO ARABIC CULTURE. THE *ISLAH* (REFORMATION) ON THE OTHER HAND WOULD TRY TO REFORM THE RELIGIOUS CONSCIENCE OF THE MUSLIM MASSES, MAKE THEM GIVE UP THE SUPERSTITIONS AND PRACTICES THAT HAD BEEN ADDED TO THE CREED AND GET THEM TO REVERT TO THE PURITY, SOBRIETY AND RATIONALITY OF THE ORIGINAL FAITH. TODAY THE *NAHDA* MAY WELL LOOK LIKE A SHATTERED DREAM, IN THE SAME WAY AS THE MORE RECENT ASPIRATIONS FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND POLITICAL EMANCIPATION. IT IS NONETHELESS TRUE THAT MAJOR CHANGES DID HAVE A LASTING EFFECT ON THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORDER AND THE DOMINANT CONCEPTIONS.

THE WORD *NAHDA*, ITS ANTONYM *INHITAT* AND THE 'NEIGHBOUR' *ISLAH*

The word *nahda* itself constitutes a sort of manifesto. It implies that the Muslims (or Arabs) lived through a period of decadence (*inhitat*) which lasted around six centuries (between the thirteenth and the nineteenth centuries) and that they entered a new phase of their history around the nineteenth century when they experienced a recovery, revival or renaissance (all possible translations of the word *nahda*).

Should we say 'Arabs' or 'Muslims' here? In the narratives composed afterwards, the *nahda* was considered as a non-Muslim Arab phenomenon, and it is important to understand the reasons for this 'restriction'. In an even more restricted usage of the term, the *nahda* was perceived as a literary movement which proclaimed new ideals or announced a new era, and at the same time introduced new forms of writing, new literary genres,

new styles, hence introducing and imposing a new form of aesthetics. *Despite such restrictive usages*, it is hard to imagine the *nahda* and to understand its evolution without the help of another concept also used to refer to reform processes that took place in the same period – that of '*islah*', usually translated by religious reform (the movement which advocated *islah* in the nineteenth century is generally called Muslim *reformism*). Both were surveyed separately or sometimes contrasted since, as was only belatedly pointed out, the former fell within the scope of the nascent nationalism and developed new conceptions of collective identity and

of its corresponding heritage, and favoured forms of secularism, while the latter had as a background to its development a religious legacy, common to the peoples and cultures of that area (the Arab world, Turkey, Iran) which, according to some researchers, led to a rejection of or indifference towards secularism. In fact, the two notions are closely connected since both reject the forms of expression inherited from the near-past (popular religion, despotism, rigid traditions) and both adopted ideals and aspirations having their roots in modernity.



The author

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He has contributed widely to studies on the relationships between Islam, modernity and democracy. His recent publications include *Réformer l'islam ? Une Introduction aux débats contemporains*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003; *Par souci de clarté : à propos des sociétés musulmanes contemporaines*, Casablanca, Le Fennec, 2000.



THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE MUSLIM WORLD AND ITS 'AWAKENING' TO MODERNITY

A precise date is often mentioned as the starting point for a new era in the region (the Arab and/or Muslim world): 1798. That was the year when Napoleon led a French army corps made up of soldiers but also of scholars and administrators to Egypt and according to major historical accounts, aroused from its sleep a society confined by age-old traditions. The consequences of this first contact have been subject to much controversy among historians: was this what set the ball rolling, the meeting of two worlds which had ignored each other so far, even though they were very close to one another from historical and geographical viewpoints? Indeed, Europe was bubbling over with scientific, technical, economic, political and social ideas, whereas the Muslim world was still stuck in forms of thinking and social and political organizations belonging to another age. More precisely, the meeting brought face to face European scholars, full of insatiable curiosity, and possessing research methods and conceptions of the world where there was no room for the supernatural, and Muslim scholars who were theologians trained to reproduce mechanically set formulas which they considered to be rooted in established truths. It was believed that such a meeting was bound to have consequences.

Whatever effect the meetings actually had, it is nonetheless true that, in the course of the following century, there was an unprecedented prodigious development of exchanges between European and Muslim learned elites, which took many different forms, with large numbers of travellers, missionaries, ambassadors, merchants, and students who journeyed

between the two geographic areas. These exchanges brought about major consequences in the European as well as Muslim contexts: faced with 'the other', some elites started to question their own identity, heritage and future within the new relationships that were being built up between the various societies which had recently come into contact. In the Muslim backgrounds in particular, the intellectual elites who had discovered Europe started to differentiate themselves from the traditional learned elites. This resulted in a split in the intellectual elites, which had, and still has, decisive consequences.

These encounters also triggered off profound crises within the political systems which prevailed in the Muslim backgrounds and which had inherited their general organization from the classical age, that is to say political systems based on a distribution of roles among power holders and clerics and on a power that based its legitimacy on religious categories – see the dossier on Islamic political thinking. Their economic and political bases, their legitimization, their military apparatus were shaken by the European intrusions. More specifically, the emergence of a new political principle, the idea that belonging to a cultural and linguistic community was the basis of collective identity, namely the nation in the modern sense of the word, contributed to a major change in attitudes and mentalities. The Muslim states of that period, weakened by the attacks of European powers, had to face, in the territories they controlled, the rise of *nationalism* – an ideology according to which the state and the cultural identity it is supposed to serve and represent have to coincide.

THE MAJOR CHANGES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The exchanges in the early nineteenth century were quickly followed by the arrival of greater numbers of Europeans, who exerted more pressure on the Muslim societies and regimes. The European attacks made breaches in North Africa and in various parts of the Ottoman Empire, and in the Iranian and South-East Asia regimes. On level of the imagination, new models, different from those produced by Muslim societies, were imposed by the Europeans in the fields of politics, arts, and techniques, and these models were clearly successful and proved their superiority. This was highly disturbing for societies that had lived under the impression they had reached the ultimate stage as regards religion and its resulting social organization. The confusion in people's consciences – *the crisis of conscience* to borrow an expression used to describe a period of European history – affected all milieus, from the political elites who felt their positions to be in great danger, to the popular masses whose certainties and living conditions were seriously upset. In the intellectual circles, the contacts with Europe provoked both fascination and repulsion, which combined in various ways, and the effects of the split between the scholars who had been in contact with European culture and the ones who had remained within the limits of traditional cultures were manifest. Along with these 'growing dangers' came other changes which perturbed both the material living conditions and how people were conscious of these changes. The local economies were increasingly integrated into the networks of international trade controlled by the European powers: agricultural produce destined for export, the introduction of new means of communication but also of printing, publishing and mass circulation, not to forget

the advent of the written press. Those latest developments had capital consequences. The role of written works and the different forms of communication were considerably affected and they in turn affected just as much the collective conscience, and the ways people mobilized, and paved the way for the *nahda* and the idea of a reform of religious attitudes.

The first effects of nationalism, which also came from Europe, were the destabilization of the provinces with a non-Muslim majority that were integrated into Muslim empires (Bulgaria, Greece), and then it affected the Muslim societies themselves (the Arabs and Turks integrated into the Ottoman Empire). What is important in nationalism is not only the fact that it changes the object of fundamental loyalties (religious affiliation is replaced by ethnic and cultural identities), religion being considered of secondary importance in the way the forms of community life are defined, but also the fact that it brings along new aspirations. The idea of progress took hold of people's minds along with claims for demands to participate in the political life of the country and for a more equitable distribution of the economic resources within the national community. In the specific situation of the region, one idea in particular found an echo: that of a constitutional regime, a government with prerogatives limited by clear rules and responsible for its actions. Muslims and Arabs immediately reacted favourably to this idea since it could easily be linked up with 'contractualism', a legacy of the Classical Age, which obliged potentates to abide by the terms of the *Baya*, an act of allegiance vesting them with powers.



Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- *Why was there a need for a renaissance in the Arab-Muslim world?*
- *What is there in common between nahda and islah?*
- *What is the difference between nahda and islah?*
- *What were the intellectual consequences of the Napoleonic invasion for the Arab-Muslim world?*
- *What are the main constituent elements of the nahda?*
- *Was the nahda a success?*
- *In what way does Islam clash with modernity?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *Can a foreign invasion be beneficial for a people?*
- *Is it meaningful to speak of the decadence of a people?*
- *What does a renaissance consist of?*
- *Does the contribution of the Enlightenment have a universal value?*
- *Can there be modernization while advocating a return to one's origins?*
- *Are the cultural and economic spheres necessarily in opposition?*
- *What transformation seems more legitimate for Islam: nahda or islah?*

Suggested teaching method: assessing the questions

A question is chosen.

Each participant replies individually in writing to the question.

A first volunteer reads out his or her answer.

Each participant drafts a question aimed at clarifying or expanding on the answer given.

Each participant reads out his or her question to the group. The volunteer chooses three questions which he or she answers orally.

If a participant considers that the volunteer has not answered, he or she can raise the problem at any time. However, "not answering" should be distinguished from "not agreeing".

Each participant drafts a further question concerning what has been stated. The volunteer again chooses three questions and answers them.

The work performed is reviewed by the group as a whole in order to determine to what extent the volunteer has or has not answered the questions, whether or not the questions were useful, etc.

Another volunteer is called upon and the procedure is repeated. Variant: the first volunteer chooses the next one.

If possible, begin again with other questions.

The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Intercultural simulation

- *Explain that you are going to attempt an intercultural simulation around a debate on the subject "What model of society is conducive to a happy life?".*
- *Ask the participants to read also the worksheet "The great figures: al-Afghrani, Muhammad Abduh and al-Kawakibi".*
- *Divide the participants into three cultural subgroups.*
- *Group A is a dominant Western culture based on scientific, economic, military and political rationality.*
- *Group B is a traditionalist culture based on religion and spiritual values: a faith-based community, a transcendent vision.*
- *Group C is the same traditionalist culture as group B, except that the members of group C support nahda or islah and have a reformist attitude towards their culture.*
- *Allow time for each group to prepare its position and its strategies for debate, explaining that any solution/proposal is possible.*
- *Start the debate with the whole group, reminding them that the topic is "What model of society is conducive to a happy life?".*
- *After the debate, compare opportunities and difficulties during the discussion: changes of position, obstacles and frustrations.*
- *Discussion on the ambitions and difficulties of reformists. What consequences for today's Arab-Muslim world?*

Other times, other places

The heirs of the Nahda

The weight of tradition remains strong in the Arab-Muslim world. Is the spirit of the Nahda dead, trapped between authoritarian regimes and the rise of Islamism?

The reformers of Islam are everywhere in the Muslim world but also in the West, where there are large Muslim communities. Dispersed, not always organized, they have difficulty making their voices heard. The media, always on the look-out for a scoop or an 'event', are not necessarily interested in them. But the relatively discreet nature of their action is not necessarily a handicap in this basic work.

This movement is characterized primarily by its being international. Arabic-speaking authors are now readily translated into English and French. Most of these writers live in the Arab world but many also in Europe and the United States... Internationalization is intensified by censorship and repression, which is common in Arabic-speaking countries. The reformers try to get published abroad, because they cannot express themselves freely in their own country.

One of their main lines of thought is: what status is to be given to religious texts? They reply by respecting the spirit not the letter of the Koran. The contribution of individual and collective interpretative reflection takes precedence over recitation by heart of the religious text.

As Soheib Bencheikh, the imam of Marseille, explains: *'When the Prophet says 'Teach your children horse riding, swimming and archery' nowadays this means 'teach them English, computer science and Internet': the objective is to master the skills of the century. Similarly, the Qur'an prescribed the veil to protect women. Today it is school that protects them.'*

They incorporate into the analysis of religious texts, the ways of thinking of the Nahda and the West. They do not reject everything that is not Muslim as is the case in the Islamist movement. Better still, they consider cooperation with the 'other' to be necessary and profitable.

'The Quranic language, like all religious languages, uses myth, parable and symbol. We must apply to the Quran the same reading methods that Christians have applied to the Gospel,' said Rachid Benzine, who declared he was influenced by his years of dialoguing with Father Christian Delorme, with whom he co-authored a book in 1998 (*Nous avons tant de choses à dire*, Paris, Albin Michel).

One of the fundamental statements is 'no constraint in religion'.¹ This does not mean depriving the Quran of its religious message, for it is possible to reach the essence of this message. The secularization² of Islam appears to be a possible solution (as the secularization of Christianity worked out, for example, in Europe) and more easily adoptable than secularism when presented in a more radical fashion.

The believer is one who, with great modesty, says he cannot know the truth because only God possesses it. He has a conception of truth but he does not seek to impose it. The Quran is very clear on that: 'no constraint in religion,' says Mohamed Taibi, formerly dean of the University of Tunis, who admits to being a devout Muslim and whose book, *Plaidoyer pour un Islam moderne*, was published in Morocco (Casablanca, Le Fennec, 1998).

Another battle being waged by the progressive reformers concerns the law; they are fighting for a modern positive law that takes into account current social, scientific and technical developments and against obsolete Sharia advocated by reactionary Islamists – a law that recognizes that men and women are equal. A society that wants to reform itself and progress cannot do without 'half the sky'. Once again the spirit prevails over the letter, but the fight is difficult and often defensive...

'The issue of women is one of the first questions raised by the Islamists. Here, we felt that this movement was gaining ground in society, questioning the benefits acquired by women. We responded by creating this association' (Khadija Cherif, president of the Association of Democratic Women of Tunisia).

The intellectual circles are the transmitters of this modern evolution. Tolerance and open-mindedness are once again the heart of the matter. Having often worked in the West, these scholars have become familiar with the world and learnt to respect the different religious and philosophical options, including atheism. Finally, it is the struggle for democracy that has often been lacking in their home countries. They come up against a double obstacle: the Islamists, who want to impose a theocratic totalitarianism and those in power, who have no scruples about defending an exaggerated populist religious policy in order to remain in power.

'The West believes that our governments are obliged to be antidemocratic because opposite them there are the Islamists. But this is not true: they are the allies of the Islamists', the Egyptian Alaa al-Aswany, author of The Yacoubian Building, declared.
(*'Those who want to modernize Islam'* Le Monde 2, No. 173, June 9, 2007)

¹ Religion when it is under constraint, can serve as a pretext and an instrument of persecution in order to establish the absolute power of a caste or small group of unscrupulous individuals. This leads to disastrous results.

² There is nothing ambiguous about this term, but there is no total break with religion, which, however, remains in the background

NAHDA AND ISLAH: PARALLEL DEVELOPMENTS?

The two notions, *nahda* and *islah*, were often considered separately, sometimes even independently of each other. The supporters of either notion apparently approved of such practices, since, in some of their aspects, the ideals of the one appeared to be the negation or the rejection of those of the other. The *nahda* was thought of as the renaissance of a *nation* and therefore of a culture and of a language, through the rejection of institutions and essentially religious thought patterns that stifled the creativity and genius inherent to Arabic culture. The *islah* on the other hand would try to reform the religious conscience of the Muslim masses, make them give up the superstitions and practices that had been added to the creed and get them to revert to the purity, sobriety and rationality of the original faith. *Nahda* and *islah* were rivals and did their best to ignore each other. They were two movements with competing visions but very similar objectives: to pull 'Oriental' societies out of their state of backwardness, decadence and weakness with respect to the other, the European powers.

The *nahda* movement was led by writers who managed to send their message well beyond the traditional scholarly milieus. Among the pioneers were Rifaa al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), Khayreddin Pacha who died in 1890 and Butros al-Bustani (1819-1883). Each of these three thinkers had the opportunity to be in direct contact with the cultures of Europe and its ways of life, institutions, and the scientific, literary and artistic creations that had developed there, and each became the spokesman for a cause, that of the emancipation of his people. They thus defined a new profile, that of the intellectual campaigning in favour of the renaissance, advocating the values of universal modernity in a non-European language and in relation to a non-European heritage, the language and heritage of the newly created/imagined national community.

Khayreddin, more than the other two, was caught in a dilemma as regards the *nahda* and the *islah* and his case underlines how difficult it is to separate the two categories. Butros al-Bustani also became a powerful role model, that of the Arab but non-Muslim intellectual who studied the Arabic language and culture independently of the religious contents they helped to spread. He forged a link with ideals that turned their backs on the religious values and traditions, ideals of universal

thinking and science, and connected the *nahda* with the values of the Enlightenment, to which it was much closer than to the European Renaissance of the sixteenth century.

Rifaa Rafii al-Tahtawi was an outstanding pioneer on account of his original position (an *alim*, an old-style theologian), his career and his work. He took advantage of a stay in Paris where he had been sent as a 'chaplain' for a group of Muslim students to learn French and to engage in the reading of the press and of various intellectual works. Upon his return home, he set about translating into Arabic a large number of European works deemed useful for the renaissance of his country and the reform of the educational syllabus.

In the subsequent decades, thinkers and writers followed in the footsteps of these pioneers. Thus new forms of writing flourished: essays or press lampoons but also novels which appeared in the wake of the *nahda*, and then questionings and scholarly inquiries carried out on new bases and focusing on crucial aspects of the heritage. The most striking examples of these initiatives consist of such works as Qasim Amin's (1863-1908) which questioned the lot of women in the social situations of the region and Ali Abderraziz's (1888-1966) which touched upon the subject of relations between the religious and the political fields in the Muslim territories. As for Taha Hussein (1889-1966), he was probably the champion of the *nahda* insofar as it was a movement for a renaissance of the Arab world seen as an attempt to link up with the movement towards modernity. The writer, while creating works of art and trying to satisfy aesthetics aspirations, considered himself to be an activist taking action to free his society from the chains of the superstition and the tradition that had imprisoned it and blocked its creativity for centuries, just as much as any form of despotism and colonial intervention had done. All this was done in the name of the universal values of the Enlightenment. His works also show an interest in the non-Arab sources of universal culture. Antiquity was not dismissed as a *jahiliya* (a term used by the Muslims to describe the Arabs' way of life before Islam, a life of ignorance and darkness) as advised by the Muslim clerics, but considered as a period when men created artistic forms with everlasting values, which are time-free, culture-free and language-free.

'TESTING THE LIMITS OF THE POSSIBLE'

One can only really enter into the spirit of the *nahda* and understand the stir it caused if we evoke two specific episodes, occurring in rapid succession, which deeply shook public opinion, and the political and legal systems as well, in Egypt, which became the throbbing 'heart' of the Arab-Muslim area and the active centre of the *nahda*. Together, the two represent both a high point and the start of a retreat or decline of the movement as a whole. We are talking here of two 'affairs' that stirred up the most violent controversies in the contemporary history of the Arabs. The first was brought about by the publication of Ali Abderraziq's essay (*Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm (Islam and the Foundations of Power)*, Cairo, 1925), and the second by the publication by Taha Hussein of a study on pre-Islamic poetry (*Fi al-Shir al-Jahili*, Cairo, 1926)

The two works sparked off fierce debates in the press and caused, in quick succession, a governmental crisis, legal proceedings instituted before the disciplinary commission or the civil courts, street demonstrations, and, what was perhaps the most important thing in the long run, a sharp division of public opinion and among the intellectual elites into two fiercely opposed sides (the conservatives and the modernists). It was at this high point that there appeared trends of thinking favourable to a re-actualization of the religious heritage and its adoption as an alternative to the modernity 'imported' from the West.

In the case of Ali Abderraziq's essay, the Arab reader has to deal with the first direct challenge to the interpretations, which had prevailed for centuries, considering that Islam is both a religion and a political system. The founding moments of the Muslim community, the beliefs that merged therefrom, are subjected to a detailed examination, which brings back to mind a large number of 'forgotten' facts' and goes back over the genealogy that had become an integral part of the orthodox dogma. The author shows that such conceptions made their appearance in the history of the Muslims after the death of the Prophet and were not founded in the corpus (the Quran and the *hadiths*) he left behind him. Ali Abderraziq pushes to the extreme limit certain tendencies that had appeared with the *islah* and *nahda* movements, questioning established 'truths' and prevailing attitudes in the Muslim societies by having recourse to historical investigation freed from any attachment to dogma and to direct questioning of conceptions that were taken for granted. At one point he does not hesitate to ask the question: *Was the Prophet a king?*, placing his readers before a difficult choice and inciting them to get the measure of the inconsistencies characterizing their most firmly

rooted beliefs. As a result his essay immediately undermines the use of religious precepts to legitimize the political and opens the way for other forms of legitimization, founded instead on popular choice, rationality, and effective systems of government. Ali Abderraziq was brought before the Al Azhar university disciplinary commission, stripped of his title of 'alim' (qualification of jurist and theologian) and of his functions in the educational and judicial systems. His book was the victim of violent press campaigns and numerous 'refutations' by prominent theologians. What was the most remarkable at this stage was that there were no street demonstrations: the population seemed to appreciate his attack on despotism and the havoc it had caused in the history of the Muslims.

Quite the contrary happened when, a year later, Taha Hussein published his *Fi al-Shir al-Jahili* (Cairo, 1926). The subject was theoretically not such a sensitive one, since it was a matter of literary history, but in fact when the author re-examined the widespread conceptions of ancient poetry in pre-Islamic Arabia, he challenged the historical truth of certain narrative passages in the Quran and revealed how literary history was used for apologetic reasons by the theologians of the past. That was enough to rouse the press, mobilize public opinion and unleash a 'storm' with the gravest of consequences, including violent demonstrations in the streets of Cairo. The author, when brought before a civil court, retracted his statements. He later published a modified version of the work (with a new title, *Fi al-Adab al-Jahili*), in which the incriminating passages were withdrawn. In later works, he turned to themes drawn from Islamic history, but this did not prevent him from publishing, twelve years later, what no doubt constitutes the manifesto, belated though it may have been, of the *nahda* movement: *Mustaqbal al-Thaqafa fi Misr (The Future of Culture in Egypt)*, Cairo, 1938). In this essay, Taha Hussein expresses the great orientations towards which all the thinkers and writers of *nahda* strove, namely to distance themselves from the religious heritage, to produce a national culture founded on the universal values of the European Enlightenment, to adopt political systems (democracy, freedom of opinion) and educational institutions which had proved their value in Europe and to open up to European languages and cultures, with which Egypt would forge links. This vision completely separates the *nahda* movement from that of the *islah* and, just as much as Ali Abderraziq's approach, brings about a radical opposition, whose effects can still be felt today, between conservatives and modernists, fundamentalists and defenders of secularism.

THE AWAKENING: AN ASSESSMENT OF A 'SHATTERED DREAM'?

The overall impression in the milieus that were involved (academics, activists, journalists) was that the *nahda* failed just as much as the *islah*, that its effects were short-lived and that it had been just a sort of 'Midsummer night's dream'. There are many ways of accounting for this failure, and various possible interpretations. We shall list a few of them, even though they are not necessarily the ones that are in the foreground, but rather those which are based on a historian's approach.

To start with, the major transformations that contributed to the emergence of the ideals of the *nahda* are still present, even more so today than in the past. The written press still has readers, even if it is in competition with satellite television channels and now, on a smaller scale, with the Internet. The massive urbanization, education and the media have even increased the public interest in politics and few governments today would dare to ignore public opinion. Mass movements are still possible. The major change has affected the ideals and conceptions that govern people's attitudes, that is to say, there has been a growth of Islamism and a withdrawal or a decline in nationalism and socialism. Islamism seems to have swept aside both the *nahda* and the *islah* since the main idea is that the Muslims and the Arabs have nothing to learn for from European modernity and that reverting to forms and ideals born in the glorious golden age of the first Muslim communities should be enough to overcome the problems facing the present-day Muslim societies.

Why has there been such a loss of interest in the ideals of the *nahda*? Why did the *nahda* fail to produce an Arab renaissance? Over and above the change in the feelings and attitudes of the masses, historians stress the collapse of economic development projects and loss of aspirations for better living conditions.

Reinhardt Schultze¹ pointed out that what he calls 'code switching', which was tried out by the pioneers of the *nahda* was countered as much by the Western countries as by the Muslim Conservatives. What he means by *code switching*, a phrase borrowed from the linguists, is the possibility of changing languages to improve communication. The idea of appropriating the ideals of modernity by assigning them an origin in the Islamic heritage was unable to take root since both sides (the Western countries and the Muslim Conservatives) insisted on underlining the intractable specificity of the Islamic heritage. The *Shura* for example, considered by the reformers as a first Islamic attempt at democracy, was declared to be a tribal practice and could not be an antecedent or a basis for democracy. Hence the idea that each side, Europe and the Arab world, has a really specific, irreducible and untranslatable idiom.

Ira Lapidus² drew attention to the fact that one can no longer accept the idea of a unique and universal modernity affecting all human societies one after the other, in the same way and replacing the religious heritage, the superstitions and prevailing representations, with the ideas of rationality, progress and distancing. Instead of this, theories of multiple modernities would seem to have appeared according to which even if the material basis changes in the same way in all social and cultural situations (the triumph of science and techniques, and of capitalism), the ways people have reacted to change, the ways they have undergone it are different. While in Europe the rationality inherent in the sciences and techniques was adopted to redefine the overall vision of the world and of the institutions governing the social order, this was not the case in Muslim societies. In some societies, Muslim societies in particular, the elites found cultural and political answers to the economic influences.



Insert written by Khaled Roumo



Reflecting on the text

- > *What is the difference between the two movements of awakening (the nahda and the islah) in nineteenth-century Arab-Muslim societies?*
 - > *What event was the trigger for them?*
 - > *How did the meeting between the Oriental and Western worlds come about?*
 - > *What distinction does the author draw between the two kinds of elite steering those changes?*
 - > *Why did the subsequent political crisis give birth to a new national identity?*
 - > *What was the substance of the “crisis of conscience” that shook those societies?*
 - > *What changes in material life were brought about by the meeting of the two worlds?*
 - > *How do you explain the new aspiration to a redefined identity and the establishment of a constitutional regime?*
 - > *Note how a “cultural renaissance” often runs in tandem with a “reform of religious awareness”.*
 - > *Sketch the profile of a “militant intellectual” at that time.*
 - > *Follow the emergence of new literary genres and of a new generation of intellectuals.*
 - > *What are the various explanations that account for the failure of this movement?*
 - > *Draw up an account of them with the author.*
-

Finally, some contemporary Arab and Muslim thinkers consider the persistence of a fixed intellectual vision inherited from the recent past to be the ultimate cause of situations which, today, have reached deadlock. According to Falzur Rahman,³ the Muslim 'intellectualism' of the Classical Age has lingered on in the educational system and has prevented people from adopting a real (and lasting) attitude of open-mindedness to modern approaches and to a religious spirit marked with fundamental Islamic values. According to Mohammed Arkoun,⁴ this intellectual tradition built up a sphere of what is thinkable by gradually dismissing questions and perspectives because they were considered contrary to the dogma.

Today the *nahda* may well look like a shattered dream, in the same way as the more recent aspirations for economic development and political emancipation. The idea of rapid, profound change, which would

have brought the Arab and/or Muslim societies in line with European or North American societies, has been contradicted more than once. It is nonetheless true that major changes did have a lasting effect on the social and political order and the dominant conceptions. The aspirations for progress and cultural and political emancipation, a public with a sharp eye for fluctuations in religion, politics and economics may perhaps be included among the effects sought by the champions of the *nahda*. However, the educational and cultural policies carried out by the countries in that region have been unable to provide the masses with modern quality education, and have failed in their mission to free their societies from visions and approaches derived from ideologies claiming to represent a greater religious and cultural authenticity. That is the reason why neither intellectuals of the *nahda* nor those of the *islah* have succeeded in turning their ideals into reality.

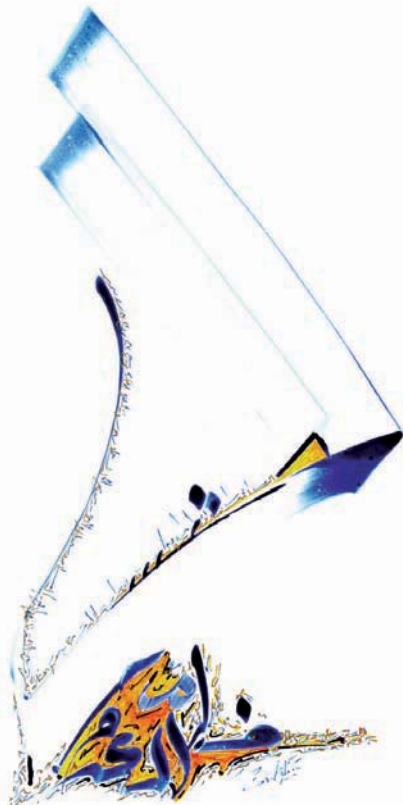


¹ Reinhardt Schultze, 1998, *A Modern History of the Islamic World*, London, I.B. Tauris and Co.

² Ira Lapidus, 2002, *A History of Islamic Societies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

³ Falzur Rahman, 1982, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. Chicago, The University of Chicago.

⁴ Mohammed Arkoun, 2005, *Humanisme et Islam : combats et propositions*. Paris, Vrin.



Tolerance © Calligraphy by Karim Jaafar

THE GREAT FIGURES: AL-AFGHANI, MUHAMMAD ABDUH AND AL-KAWAKIBI

A GREAT MOVEMENT OF INTELLECTUAL AND SOCIAL LIBERATION DEVELOPED IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, ESPECIALLY IN EGYPT. ACCORDING TO ITS SUPPORTERS, IT WAS NECESSARY FOR THE ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION TO REFORM ITSELF IN DEPTH AND ADAPT THE WESTERN KNOWLEDGE TO ITS SPECIFIC GENIUS, IN ORDER TO BE ABLE TO COUNTER WESTERN MODERNITY WITH ITS OWN MODERNITY. AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, ALL THE REFORMIST THINKERS OF THE MUSLIM WORLD WERE ABSORBED BY THIS PROJECT, WHICH CAN BE DEFINED AS AN ATTEMPT TO APPROPRIATE MODERNITY. THE MAIN THEORY OF THIS ARAB-MUSLIM REFORMISM CONSISTS IN ASSERTING THE COMPATIBILITY OR PROFOUND UNITY BETWEEN GOD'S WORD AND THE PRODUCTIONS OF HUMAN RATIONALITY. BY PROCLAIMING THE NECESSITY OF THE APPROPRIATION OF SCIENTIFIC ACHIEVEMENTS, THE GREAT FIGURES OF THIS MOVEMENT INTENDED TO MAKE ROOM FOR THE SPIRITUAL ASPIRATIONS OF HUMAN BEINGS. ACCORDING TO THE REFORMISTS OF THE *NAHDA*, ISLAM WAS NOT FUNDAMENTALLY HOSTILE TO RATIONALITY. THE MODERN WESTERN WORLD IS SEEN AS THE PLACE WHERE SCIENTIFIC RATIONALITY, A RATIONALITY THAT HAD ALREADY SEEN THE LIGHT OF DAY IN MEDIEVAL ISLAM UNDER SIMILAR FORMS, IS EMERGING ANEW.

The movement called Arabic Renaissance (*Nahda*) was born in the nineteenth century of the Muslim world's attempt to react at the intrusion of an often violent, military and colonialist European modernity (we can mention for example the conquest of Algeria from 1830 onwards or the occupation of Egypt by the British in 1882). Faced with such expansionist Western countries, Islamic consciences, felt disconcerted and puzzled and wondered what should be done in the face of these aggressors whose violence was intolerable and called on people to resist, but who also demonstrated such a clear superiority in many fields, especially in the fields of science and techniques, and who brought radically new ideas as regards political or economic organization. And, admittedly, the Muslim world had to resist and defend themselves since the intrusion was brutal or even destructive. On the other hand, was there nothing else to do but send the Western

aggressors back home, assuming it was possible? It was not very long before some thinkers became aware that the only possible long-term resistance was assimilating European modernity: it was necessary for the Islamic civilization to reform itself in depth and adapt the Western knowledge to its specific genius, in order to be able to counter Western modernity with its own modernity and to vie with it as an equal. At the turn of the twentieth century, all the reformist thinkers of the Muslim world were absorbed by this project, which, to be as accurate as possible, can be defined as an attempt to *appropriate and resist* modernity.

Here is how Henry Laurens who is Chair of History of the Contemporary Arab World at the *Collège de France* described the commitment of Jamal al-din al-Afghani, the main reformist figure, who was a Shia Persian born in 1838 in Iran but passed himself off as a

Sunni Afghan in Turkey and Egypt where in the 1870s and 1880s he became the intellectual guide for a whole generation: “[This] political adventurer with a tumultuous life can be considered as the first anti-imperialist fighter in history. He was best able to express what growing numbers of Muslims felt after the humiliation imposed on them by the Western countries. He combined a demand for reforms with a will to organize overall resistance to the European conquest, while taking over the enemies’ instruments of their success and trying to integrate them into the Islamic world of that period, through a game of deceit and manipulation.” What does this ‘game of deceit and manipulation’ mean? Al-Afghani was a rationalist who considered science to be superior to religion but who was aware of the risk he was running if he declared this in public in the Islamic world of that period... He never forgot the scandal he had triggered off when he claimed that ‘today’s scholar is superior to the Prophet’. Therefore he compromised and clothed his praise of reason, philosophy and science in ‘traditionally correct’ views. As Henry Laurens wrote: ‘in public, he showed himself as a devout Muslim while in private he claimed the superiority of philosophy.’

This strategy of deceit might seem to be justifiable in so far as it was meant to make the change acceptable by the largest possible number of people. Al-Afghani was clever enough to understand it was no use clashing head-on with the conviction, widespread in the Muslim world, that the religion sent by God is superior to all human knowledge. He chose rather, in a very skillful way, to show that the Islamic religion is rational in essence, in other words that revelation and reason are compatible. This is what he did for example in his *Lecture on Teaching and Learning* in which he used Ghazali’s authority to demonstrate the compatibility or profound unity between God’s word and the productions of human rationality: “As for [Abu Hamid Muhammad] Ghazali [1058-1111], who was called the Proof of Islam, he says in the book *Munqidh min al-dalal* (*The Deliverer from Error*) that someone who claims that the Islamic religion is incompatible with

geometric proof, philosophical demonstrations, and the laws of nature is an ignorant friend of Islam. The harm of this ignorant friend of Islam is greater than the harm of the heretics and enemies of Islam. For the laws of nature, geometric proofs, and philosophic demonstrations are self-evident truths. Thus, someone who says ‘My religion is inconsistent with self-evident truths’ has inevitably passed judgment on the falsity of his religion. The first education obtained by man was religious education, since philosophical education can only be obtained by a society that has studied some science and is able to understand proofs and demonstrations. Hence we can say that reform will never be achieved by the Muslims except if the leaders of our religion first reform themselves and gather the fruits of their science and knowledge. If one considers, one will understand this truth, that the ruin and corruption we have experienced first reached our ‘ulama’ and religious leaders, and then penetrated the rest of the community.”¹

One of the best-known texts by al-Afghani is his answer to Ernest Renan who declared in a lecture at La Sorbonne that the Muslim religion was fundamentally incompatible with the practice and the development of rational thinking. Al-Afghani’s answer was published on 18 May 1883 in the *Journal des débats*: “Realizing, however, that the Christian religion preceded the Muslim religion in the world by many centuries, I cannot keep from hoping that Muhammadan society will succeed someday in breaking its bonds and marching resolutely in the path of civilization after the manner of Western society, for which the Christian faith, despite its rigors and intolerance, was not at all an invincible obstacle. No I cannot admit that this hope be denied to Islam. I plead here with M. Renan not the cause of the Muslim religion, but that of several hundreds of millions of men, who would thus be condemned to live in barbarism and ignorance. No one denies that the Arab people, while still in the state of barbarism, rushed along the road of intellectual and scientific progress with a rapidity only equalled by the speed of its conquests, since in the space of a century, it acquired and



Abdenour Bidar is a French philosopher and writer. His main works include *Un islam pour notre temps* (Paris, Seuil, 2004), *Self islam* (Paris, Seuil, 2006), *L’islam sans soumission, Pour un existentialisme musulman* (Paris, Albin Michel, 2008), *L’islam face à la mort de Dieu* (Paris, Jeanne Bourin, 2010).

assimilated almost all of the Greek and Persian sciences that had developed slowly during several centuries on their native soil, just as it extended its domination from the Arabian peninsula up to the mountains of the Himalayas and the summit of the Pyrenees...it is permissible, however, to ask oneself why Arab civilization, after having thrown such a live light on the world, suddenly became extinguished; why this torch has not been relit since; and why the Arab world still remains buried in profound darkness...Religions, by whatever name they are called, all resemble each other. No agreement and no reconciliation are possible between these religions and philosophy. Religion imposes on man its faith and its belief, whereas philosophy frees him of it totally or in part. How could one therefore hope that they would agree with each other when the Christian religion, under the most modest and seductive forms, entered Athens and Alexandria, which were, as everyone knows, to the principal centers of science and philosophy, trying to stifle both under the bushes of theological discussions, to explain the inexplicable mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Transubstantiation? It will always be thus. Whenever religion will have the upper hand, it will eliminate philosophy; and the contrary occurs when it is philosophy that reigns as sovereign mistress. So long as humanity exists, the struggle will not cease between dogma and free investigation, between religion and philosophy; a desperate struggle in which, I fear, the triumph will not be for free thought, because the masses dislike reason, and its teachings are only understood by some intelligent members of the elite, and because also, science, however beautiful it is, does not completely satisfy humanity, which thirsts for the ideal and which likes to exist in obscure dark and distant regions as the philosophers and scholars can neither perceive nor explore."²

The interest of this major text lies in the complexity it reveals in al-Afghani, who began by manifesting a deep sense of history, when he recalled the fact that it had taken the Western civilization centuries to impose the demands of rationality in the face of Christianity, and, instead of condemning the Islamic civilization too early in the name of a supposed fundamental inability to receive the expression of that rationality, one must be aware that this type of transformation is a process taking place over a very long time. Therefore he called on people to be patient with the Islamic civilization, which had only just come into contact with the dimen-

sions of modern rationality in the branches of science, philosophy, politics and economics, and what's more, in the form of a brutal invasion.

It is also to be noted that he also showed an acute understanding of the general links between religion and philosophy. This was not, he explained, a specific problem of Islam, but a question that would not be settled for human civilization as a whole as long as it had not found a superior form of wisdom. As a matter of fact, science and philosophy do not completely satisfy humanity 'which thirsts for the ideal and which likes to exist in obscure dark and distant regions as the philosophers and scholars can neither perceive nor explore.' In this respect, he was much more modern than many Western thinkers, his contemporaries of the late nineteenth century when numerous scientists and intellectuals expressed the 'positivist' conviction that science would soon answer all the questions posed by humans. Faced with this scientism, al-Afghani anticipated the problem we are confronted with today: what sort of discourse can be invented which could assume responsibility for man's aspirations to give his life a transcendent meaning?

Against Renan who wanted to assert his subjective conviction of the superiority of the Western countries, al-Afghani showed on the one hand that in fact the two civilizations were faced with similar problems, and on the other hand that Islam was not fundamentally hostile to rationality. To him, this exercise of reason and the practice of science had already seen the light of day in the crucible of medieval Islam, during the period called the golden age of Arab science (the title of a book by Ahmed Djebbar, a professor of history of sciences) between the eighth and the fifteenth centuries AD, and was only emerging anew in the modern Western world.

This type of logic - namely that what exists today in the West is only the rediscovery of a more ancient spirit - characterized most of the Islamic reformist talk of that period. Its main idea was that in fact Western modernity had invented nothing at all, but that everything it promoted was already contained in the original essence of the Islamic Revelation. In this case, the rationality demonstrated by the Western countries also found its expression in the Quran. Regarding this

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Other times, other places

The paths of rebirth

Example 1:

What is described in the document was accomplished in its principle by Japan in the nineteenth century. In 1868, the new emperor of Japan decided to modernize his country to face the threat of Europeans and Americans wanting to extend their hegemony in Asia (it was called the 'Gunboat Diplomacy'...¹)

A quiet but dazzling revolution

The young Meiji Emperor Mutsuhito, and his advisers opened Japan not only to Western ideas and trade but to all the currents that agitated the nineteenth century. The Meiji Restoration was like the bursting of a dam behind which age-old energies and forces had accumulated. Japan set out to achieve in only a few decades what it had taken centuries for the West to develop: the creation of a modern nation, endowed with modern industries and political institutions, and a modern pattern of society.

Young Samurai changed their Japanese dress for top hats and dark suits and sailed off to Europe and America to study Western ways of governing and industrial techniques – and war. In a tour de force of modernization, the Meiji revolutionaries enabled their country to match the Western powers in less than forty years – without sacrificing Japan's traditional culture...

Education was made compulsory; all restrictions were lifted on Japanese going abroad; Christianity was permitted; vaccinations, postal service, telegraphs, and steamships were introduced; torture was abolished; European dress was prescribed for officials, and European and American advisors were freely employed.

UNESCO Courier, September 1968.

It should be noted that Japan's modernization was accompanied by a democratization of the institutions and structures of the country, at least to begin with... for Japan also came to copy the negative aspects of the great powers of the time: militarism, expansionism, fascism...

Example 2

The document about the great figures raises an issue: should Islamic civilization be distinguished from the Muslim religion? The question raised is that of secularism in Muslim societies and more generally that of tolerance and democracy. A parallel can be drawn with the Western states of Europe in the eighteenth century when enlightened philosophers had led the fight against religious obscurantism as well as political absolutism (often linking the two fights). This took time (a good part of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). This was what al-Afghani expressed in his answer to Renan. But the world moves faster today than it did two centuries ago; hence perhaps the current difficulties of progressive reformers to reform Muslim societies.

Example 3

The return to original Islam advocated by modernists carries the risk of a drift towards fundamentalism (what the author of the document calls *retrograde reformism*). Early twentieth century Egypt, in which modernist reformism developed, also saw the birth of a reactionary reformist movement. In 1927, Hassan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood, which had two million followers in 1949, and has spread to many Muslim countries today. Al-Banna exploited the frustration of his countrymen under British occupation and blamed all the misfortunes of the Muslim community on the West.

'... Islam is a comprehensive Law to lead this life and the other ...' the Muslim Brotherhood write in their first newspaper in 1930. This conception of society excludes everything that is foreign to Islam. If it makes sense within the colonial context of the time (in London and Paris, this was the time of the great colonial exhibitions...), it can be dangerous for religious minorities (the Copts, for example) and result in a break with the rest of the world. The double game played by certain big powers and multinational companies has often played in favour of these retrograde reformists.

¹ In July 1853, Admiral Perry's American 'black ships' invaded Edo Bay (now Tokyo) and in 1858 the United States compelled Japan to sign the Treaty of Amity and Commerce which opened the Japanese harbours until then closed to Western ships. Similar trade agreements were signed with Great Britain, Russia, the Netherlands and France. These disruptions upset the economy of Japan and violent conflicts arose between the conservatives and the reformists. Tokugawa, the last shogun, who then exercised the power, had to hand it over to the fifteen year old emperor Mutsuhito. On November 19, 1867, the new emperor Mutsuhito acceded to the throne and put an end to seven centuries of feudal regime, two and a half centuries of which had been controlled by the Tokugawa family. That was the beginning of the Meiji era (the era of enlightenment).

point, al-Afghani wrote that 'today, the Europeans who have laid their hands on the whole world' are only the new guardians of a 'science which once more claims its grandeur and majesty everywhere.' Therefore what the West demonstrated, which enabled it to dominate the world, was not its own specific superiority but the superiority of science itself: 'there is no doubt that the sovereignty has never left the kingdom of science, since the monarch has occasionally changed capitals. The capital has been transferred in turn from the Orient to the Occident and from the Occident to the Orient.' Therefore, if the Islamic countries could reinterpret themselves rationally and if they united around a rationalised interpretation of the Quran, then they would be able to resist the Occident, as the latter would lose the exclusivity of the rational faculties that ensured its superiority over the Muslim world.

Back to the origins of Islam! Back to its essence considered as a vehicle for all the ideals the modern Western world claimed to have discovered when in fact they had merely been updated. This seemed to be the slogan of that reformist movement, and it was true for science and philosophy and their idea of rational knowledge, as has just been mentioned, but it was also true for politics and its idea of justice. In this field as well, the reformists were convinced that Islam had forgotten its founding genius and had degenerated, and the Western invasion, far from bringing something which did not belong to the essence of the Islamic civilization, had come in fact to arouse it from its long sleep and given it no other choice than to find itself again, in order to survive. It was in the name of this re-discovery of oneself that another major figure of this reformist movement, Syrian Abderrahman al-Kawakibi (1849-1902) who settled in Egypt in 1899 fought against what he considered to be the collapse of the Muslim world in the despotism embodied by the Ottoman Empire. Once more, Western novelty was put into perspective. As Professor Yadh Ben Achour pointed out in *Aux fondements de l'orthodoxie Sunnite*,³ when al-Kawakibi analysed the French Charter of 1814, he wanted to show that 'it is based on the principles of liberty and equality that are nothing else than what the Arabs call justice and equity (*adl* and *insaf*).' This inspired him with the idea that the Caliphate of original Islam was based on these ideals, and that consequently, liberty, equality, law, constitutional state were notions that could be found in the very history of Islam and need not be borrowed from the West. Al-Kawakibi as well as the other reformist authors kept rereading the Quran, the Hadith and ancient authors such as Ibn Khaldun to find a trace or the roots of all these ethical values and of all these political principles, according to the idea that true Islam was their matrix. As Yadh Ben Achour wrote: "the true meaning of Islam", "authentic Islam", "well understood Islam" are all labels used by practically all the authors of the reformist movement, whatever their tendencies, to legitimize the new hermeneutics', that is to say the new interpretation of the sources of Islam 'in at least three major spheres, those of individual rights and liberties, anti-despotic activism and feminist activism.'

It must be added that this political reformism was simultaneously a form of Islamism and of Arabism, that is to say it was centred both on the idea of a return

to early Islam and to its Arab ethnical origins. Rida who also settled in Egypt, the real centre of modernity and intellectual effervescence, expressed most clearly the link between those two theses. As Henry Laurens pointed out, Rida 'advocated a return to early Islam, which amounted to asserting the Arabs' pre-eminence in Islam', and as with al-Kawakibi, blaming the Ottoman Empire for being responsible for the drift towards tyranny, and for the 'backward state of the Muslim world'. 'The reason why the Muslim religion was led into decadence, was because non-Arabs converted to Islam, the Turks in particular' and therefore 'the control of Islam should logically go to the Arabs, the guardians of the Quranic language and of a greater political morality than the Turks.'⁴

But the 'first explicit statement that the caliphate should be transferred from the Turks to the Arabs, and the first theoretical essay on pan-Arabism' according to Historian of Islam Bernard Lewis in *The Return of Islam*, was to be found in the work of al-Kawakibi 'today generally considered to be the ideological pioneer of pan-Arabism'. The most striking characteristic in al-Kawakibi's criticism of the Ottoman Empire was especially due to 'his idea of a spiritual caliphate likely to leave politics and government to a secular authority different from the religious authority and jurisdiction, and totally confined to the sphere of human decision and action'. 'That,' Lewis explained, 'was a decisive step towards secular nationalism'.

Islamic reformism raised a critical question: the distinction between political and religious powers, namely the independence of the state with regard to religion, Islamic law and its interpreters. And once more they instinctively wanted to get support from that possibility in the history of the origins of Islam – the reformist thinking of that period was above all characterized as *a paradoxical attempt at modernity through a return to origins, or a return to the future*. The Egyptian Ali Abderraziq illustrated in the most radical manner this attempt at showing that the secular or at least profane conception of power prevailed in early Islam. The major work by this theologian and jurist at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo, *Al-islam wa uqul al-hukm: bahth fi al-khilafa wa al-hukuma fi al-ilsam* (*Islam and the Fundamentals of Government*), published in 1925, immediately raised a controversy because he declared that the Prophet Muhammad had never been a worldly leader but only a spiritual guide, and that the idea of Islam as a political religion was without historical or theological bases.

He put the problem in the following terms: 'the question we intend to deal with focuses on the exact nature of the Prophet's mission: was he or was he not the head of the state and of the government in the political sense of the terms, and was he also a Messenger in charge of religious preaching and the spiritual leader of a community of believers?' And as he was quite aware of the enormous reservations that he was likely to provoke by asking such a question, which many considered sacrilegious, he immediately added: 'we must not feel terrified at the idea of trying to determine whether the Prophet was a king or not. There is no reason to consider that such an undertaking presents a danger for the religion or that it is likely to shake the faith of the believers.'

Then he began cautiously to set out his answer: 'In the history of the prophets, we actually know few men in whom God combined the qualities of prophet and king. Was Prophet Muhammad one of them, or was he simply a prophet and not a king? As far as we know, no theologian has given a clear-cut opinion on the subject and none of them has even undertaken to bring it up. However, by making simple deductions, we may affirm that ordinary Muslims tend to believe that the Prophet was a 'King-Messenger of God', that, by means of Islam, he established a state in the political and civil sense of the word, of which he was the king and the master... The argument put forward by Ibn Khaldun in his *Muqaddimah* is also in keeping with this theory since it considers the caliph as a law-maker's deputy meant to 'protect the faith and... rule the world, thus including the prerogatives of royalty and incorporating that function into the caliphate'. Abderraziq's answer to this was that 'there is no doubt that the Prophet's government comprised a certain semblance of worldly government and an appearance of monarchic power', but if one wishes to go beyond appearances and look into the historical sources available, there is no scientific proof showing that there had been a real 'system of government in the time of the Prophet'. Nothing proves that the decisions he made in arbitration or the missions he assigned were really institutionalized. What prevailed, Abderraziq concluded, 'was an impression of confusion, shortcomings or lack of transparency', so much so that one must finally admit that the representation of an original Islamic state in Medina and of the political nature of Islamic religion is just an a priori construct, a myth of origins built up by some worldly power or other claiming to be the descendants of the Prophet to establish their legitimacy. Therefore, 'Muhammad was only a messenger of God, responsible for passing on a purely religious appeal unmarked by any sign of power-seeking, an appeal completely different from a campaign aimed at building up a kingdom... he was neither king nor founder of an empire, nor even a preacher committed to building a kingdom'.

We understand that this vision of a non-political Islam is opposed to that which was supported by Rachid Rida or Abderrahman al-Kawakibi. These two reformists clash here, though they start from the same basic premise that it is necessary to return to the example of the Prophet to fight against the tyrannies established in the name of Islam: for Abderraziq, this return to origins was necessary to make the political power's claim to govern by 'divine right' illegitimate, while for

Rida and al-Kawakibi, the same return to origins was carried out to bring Islam back to a virtuous conception of politics, composed of a spirit of justice, equality and even democracy. The idea that 'the return to a purified Islamic model' was the solution to the challenge posed by Western modernity is the creed fervently supported by the Syrian Rachid Rida, according to the explanations of the contemporary philosopher Abdou Filali-Ansary in the *Introduction* to his translation of Abderraziq's book: 'The refusal of tyranny, conformity with the people's will and the respect of fundamental ethical norms' are for him 'the main characteristics' of an 'Islamic model' which 'has only been applicable in past history for very short periods' but which 'is nevertheless the best in his eyes, the most likely to meet the demands of modern societies' because 'its legislation is of divine origin' and as such 'never subject to arbitrariness, short-lived passions and error.' 'The main advantage of the Islamic system compared with the Western systems is that it is rooted in God's word, that is to say in a form of preaching of superhuman origin and an ethical system based on God's will. Therefore, the legitimacy that is put forward is absolute and does not depend on men's will.'

What has become of the thesis of a necessary return to origins? It seems that it has been partly responsible for postponing the emergence and the construction of a real Islamic modernity or a real appropriation of modernity by the Muslim world. In fact, the vast majority of Muslims remain convinced that the answer to present questions is to be found in the past; an illustration of this can be found in what is advocated nowadays by the Salafi movement, which claims that a strict enforcement of Prophet Muhammad's living habits is the only possible way of pursuing virtue and understanding Islam: 'according to Salafi Muslims, it is above all the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad – a collection of his words, actions, and practices – that should be used for an interpretation of the Quran, and not the exercise of individual reason.'⁵

We may wonder whether the development of this paradoxical type of 'backward-looking reformism' throughout the twentieth century did not contribute to betraying the spirit of the reformers that have been presented here. Indeed, although they were torn between their wish for a return to origins and their concern for progress, they were acutely aware of the need for Islam to be more 'outward-looking' and 're-invent itself'.

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturally

Understanding the text

- Describe the paradoxical relationship between the Arab world and Europe in the nineteenth century.
- What is at the heart of al-Afghani's strategy?
- How does al-Afghani reconcile revelation and reason?
- What historical relationship does al-Afghani establish between Christianity and Islam?
- According to al-Afghani, what must Islam do to withstand Western domination?
- What are al-Kawakibi's arguments to explain the problems of Islam?
- Explain the idea of "modernity through a return to origins".

Entering into dialogue with the text

- Can Islam be apolitical?
- Is it possible to reverse a centuries-long historical trend?
- Should the West find inspiration in the Islamic model?
- Is the history of humanity a fight between faith and reason?
- Can politics be separated from ideology?
- Should all theocratic principles be condemned?
- Is the history of Islam comparable to the history of the West?

Suggested teaching method: assessing a piece of work

Three questions are chosen.
Each participant replies on a sheet of paper.
The moderator gathers up the sheets and redistributes them at random.
Each participant receives a sheet, which he or she must assess, with comments and a grade.
The moderator redistributes the sheets a second time, for a further assessment.
The moderator redistributes the sheets a third time, for a further assessment.
All the participants take back their original sheets and analyse the work done and decide whether or not and in what way they wish to change their initial answers.
If possible, begin again with other questions.
The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Intercultural simulation

- Explain that you are going to attempt an intercultural simulation around a debate on the subject "What model of society is conducive to a happy life?".
- Ask the participants to read also the worksheet "The Nahda, the Arab renaissance".
- Divide the participants into three cultural subgroups.
- Group A is a dominant Western culture based on scientific, economic, military and political rationality.
- Group B is a traditionalist culture based on religion and spiritual values: a faith-based community, a transcendent vision.
- Group C is the same traditionalist culture as group B, except that the members of group C support nahda or islah and have a reformist attitude towards their culture.
- Allow time for each group to prepare its position and its strategies for debate, explaining that any solution/proposal is possible.
- Start the debate with the whole group, reminding them that the topic is "What model of society is conducive to a happy life?".
- After the debate, compare opportunities and difficulties during the discussion: changes of position, obstacles and frustrations.
- Discussion on the ambitions and difficulties of reformists. What consequences for today's Arab-Muslim world?



- > In what way can the Arab renaissance be viewed as a movement of “reappropriation and resistance”?
- > How does al-Afghani embody this movement?
- > What link does this movement establish between science and religion?
- > Note how, as early as 1883, al- Afghani anticipates the “return of religiosity”.
- > How is “Western superiority” perceived?
- > Is any meeting possible between “authentic Islam” and “modern Western values”?
- > How was “secular nationalism” born?
- > Analyse the paradoxical attempt to modernize by means of a “return to one’s origins”.
- > What is apolitical Islam?
- > Compare nineteenth-century reformism with twentieth-century Salafism.

¹ Sayid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, *Lecture on teaching and learning*, 8 Nov 1882, Albert Hall, Calcutta, in Charles Kurtzman (ed.), 2002, *Modernist Islam 1840-1940, a sourcebook*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 106.

² Answer of Jamal al-Din to Renan, *Journal des débats*, May 18, 1883, in N. R. Keddie, 1968, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press.

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⁴ V. Cloarec and H. Laurens, 2000, *Le Moyen-Orient au XX^e siècle*, Paris, Armand Colin.

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Heritage 2001. Bas-relief, woman's head, Egypt © UNESCO/W. Denker

WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND WOMEN ON THE MOVE IN THE ARAB-MUSLIM WORLD

THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, WOMEN ARE THE OBJECT OF UNIVERSAL DISCRIMINATION. IN THE ARAB-MUSLIM WORLD, THIS DISCRIMINATION IS FORMULATED IN LEGAL TERMS REGARDING THEIR PERSONAL STATUS. IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, WOMEN WERE ONE OF THE ISSUES OF THE MOVEMENT OF INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM KNOWN AS THE *NAHDA*. A CONSENSUS IS REACHED ON THE QUESTION OF EDUCATION: IT MUST BE AVAILABLE TO ALL AND ALL WOMEN MUST HAVE ACCESS TO IT. EDUCATION IS THUS CONSIDERED BY THE GREAT FIGURES OF THIS MOVEMENT (QASIM AMIN) AS ONE OF THE PILLARS OF ARABIC CULTURAL RENAISSANCE: WOMEN MUST TAKE PART IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE BY GOING TO SCHOOL THEN WORKING OUTSIDE THEIR HOME. ONLY A CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL PROJECT CAN ACCOUNT FOR WOMEN BEING CONFINED IN THE PRIVATE SPHERE. TODAY, THE SCHOOLING OF GIRLS HAS MADE MUCH PROGRESS, AND THE FERTILITY RATE HAS DROPPED SIGNIFICANTLY. BUT THE RATE OF EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN STILL REMAINS LOW. VIOLENCE AND WARS RESTRAIN THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE GLOBAL SOCIAL PROJECT, IN SPITE OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COLLECTIVE ACTION OF WOMEN TOWARDS THE IMPROVEMENT OF THEIR SOCIAL CONDITIONS AND THEIR RIGHTS. THE INTERACTION BETWEEN SOCIAL CHANGES AND THE INCREASING INTERVENTION OF WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE DEEPLY UPSET THE REPRESENTATION OF THE PART THEY PLAY IN SOCIETY.

The Arab-Muslim world is made up of more than thirty countries. This territory can be defined to include twenty or more countries where Arabic is the main language and other countries where Islam is the religion practised by a large part of the population as in Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan... This definition allows cultural and religious minorities to be included, as for example Algerian and Moroccan Berbers, Kurds, Armenians and Turkomans in various countries of the Middle-East or Asia...

In these countries, which account for over a billion people, women share common characteristics with all the women in the world: they are not greatly represented in politics, earn lower incomes than men and are victims of specific acts of violence. However, the discrimination formulated in legal terms regarding their personal status is special. It is through this crucial point that the pressure groups that wish to block the situation of women express themselves.

This group of countries is characterized by a great diversity of situations: some states have a very high GDP per inhabitant,¹ and at the bottom of the scale other states have a GDP which is one hundred to one hundred and fifty times lower.² Differences can also be perceived within countries, between rural and urban areas. But beyond the variety of situations and rate of change, certain common tendencies can be seen. In these countries, women are actively engaged in obtaining a transformation of their living conditions. Their

aspirations to justice and liberty are considered as a will for society as a whole to be improved. They showed this first in colonial times through their commitment to the liberation of their countries, when they proved their loyalty to the national cause sometimes even at the cost of their own rights, then, after independence, when they pushed for political, economic, social and cultural improvements for the benefit of society as a whole by denouncing discriminations and fighting against poverty.



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FOLLOWING IN THE STEPS OF FORERUNNERS

Outstanding women figures are important landmarks in history for women's movements. Without going back to the great women figures – poetesses, political leaders or scholars – who have marked the history of this part of the world, the development of a movement firmly committed to changing the situation of women can be observed in the nineteenth century.

Indeed, the discussions on that issue intensified during the period of the *Nahda* (renaissance). We may well ask why, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the trauma of the colonial years, they were so much behind the times (*taakhour*). By the end of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, the works on that question and the proposals of reform multiplied. Political, social and cultural issues such as the reform of the state, of economy and women's situation came up for discussion.

Regarding women, there was a broad consensus on the subject of education. Rifaa Rafi el-Tahtawi (1801-1871) and Sheikh Mohammad Abdu (1849-1905) considered the rights of women to education as one of the pillars of Arab cultural renaissance. In 1873, the viceroy of Egypt founded the first girls' school. On the other hand, the veil issue aroused controversial views. Mohamed Abdu, a prominent figure of the movement, considered the veil as '*the most abject form of servitude*'. But the Iraqi poet Jamil Al-Zahawi was imprisoned in 1911 for advocating the removal of the veil and women's emancipation.

Egyptian jurist Qasim Amin (1863-1908) went even further. In his works *Tahrir el mara* (women's liberation) published in 1899 and *El Mara el jadida* (The New Woman) published in 1900 in which he endeavoured to demonstrate that Islam cannot be held responsible

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for this situation, he attacked a society which was not organized on a mixed basis and denounced the fact that it was impossible for women to fulfil their functions and tasks in life as long as gender segregation persisted. He considered women suffered from *istibad* (despotism) and he established a link with political tyranny: 'women are veiled under the yoke of men and men under the yoke of governments. When women enjoy individual freedom, men enjoy political freedom – the two situations are interdependent.' Mansour Fahmy (1886-1959) was an Egyptian student who defended his PhD dissertation *La condition de la Femme en islam*³ (The Condition of Women in Islam) under the direction of Professor Lévy Bruhl at La Sorbonne in 1913. Upon his return to his country, he was accused of defending a line that was hostile to Islam and he was excluded from the university.

Although in the historical narrative of the *Nahda* male thinkers were most often mentioned, women also took part in the discussions not simply because they wrote and held salons but also because they were active in meetings, campaigned for education, and the right to vote and performed heroic actions. Huda Sharawi from Egypt (1879-1947) is the best-known of these women. Besides raising the problem of education, she also raised the question of the veil, of women's seclusion and of civil and political rights. She founded the *Egyptian Feminist Union* on 16 March 1923. In the same year, upon her return from an international conference in Rome, Huda Sharawi and Saiza Nabaraoui (1897-1985) unveiled their faces at the Cairo railway station. The crowd of women started to applaud. Huda Sharawi led gatherings of women at the opening of Parliament in January 1924 and submitted a list of requests such as raising the legal age of marriage for men to 18 and for women to 16, judicial divorce and a restriction of polygamy. She also asked for the right to vote.⁴ These claims were ignored by the Wafdist government,⁵ which entailed her resignation from the Wafdist Women's Central Committee.⁶ In 1925 she founded *L'Égyptienne. Revue mensuelle. Féminisme. Sociologie-Art* (a feminist monthly journal entitled *The Egyptian*) in which she was the editor and which was published until 1945. 'Its women authors are the champions of women's material independence, political and social equality with men and cooperation between Arab and European feminists.'⁷

In Syria, Nazik-al-Abid (1887-1959), a well educated woman who wrote in various journals and took part in several congresses of Arab women, led an active armed resistance to the French troops, which earned her exile. In Turkey with the *Tanzimat* (reforms), women were granted the right to vote long before some Europeans.

Regional rallies were arranged. In 1930 in Damascus the first Oriental Women's Congress was held to call for a series of reforms in the spirit of gender equality. Then "in 1944, the Arab feminist Conference which convened in Cairo gathered delegates from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Transjordan initiated the ideology of Pan-Arab feminism and mainly formulated fifty-one resolutions with a view to achieving equality between the sexes, including the feminisation of language within Pan-Arab unity. Soon after, in 1945, the Arab Feminist Union was created."⁸

The *Nahda* theories also circulated in the Maghreb. In 1924, Manoubia Wertani condemned the veil. In the same year, Nadjet Ben Othman uncovered her face when she stood up to speak at a meeting of the *Destour* party. On 8 January 1929 Habiba Menchari⁹ gave a speech without a veil in front of an audience of nearly one thousand in favour of the abolition of the veil and of polygamy.

In 1930 Tahar Haddad (1898-1935) published *Notre femme dans la législation musulmane et dans la société (Our Women in the Sharia and Society)*, a plea for an enlightened rereading of the Quran and the *hadiths*. His work was a basis for the content of the Code of Personal Status (CSP) after independence, the most advanced laws regarding women's rights in family relationships. In Algeria, the debates and discussions connected with this movement were held within the Ulemas association founded in 1931. There was total agreement on education for girls and thanks to the association, many girls avoided illiteracy.¹⁰ All over Algeria where illiteracy was widespread,¹¹ especially with girls, *medersates* (schools) were created from 1931 onwards. In them Arabic was taught, while in the colonial school system it was not. Between January 1938 and June 1939, another party called la Fédération des Elus (Federation of the Elect) launched a debate on the condition of women and the veil in a few issues of its weekly newspaper *L'Entente* between January 1938 and June 1939, but it mostly focused on the demand for education for girls.

Women were both teachers and activists. They considered the two activities were indissociable. Anissa Boumedine, a primary school teacher and president of the Algerian Girl's Association spoke in favour of women's right to go to school, calling on them as follows: "It does not depend on you alone but it depends on you first to get away from this state of inferiority which is imposed upon you ... since you have understood that the Muslim woman who is truly faithful to the precepts of her religion will not accept to wallow in her own ignorance. If she does, she ignores her duties and strays from God's book."¹²

In the 1950s, imprisoned for nationalist activities, they went on teaching their fellow inmates of other nationalist parties how to read and write Arabic and French.

That period was marked by the explicit acknowledgement of the specific conditions in which women had to live, by the birth of subjectivity and the public emergence of strong women figures with emancipation projects. Women demanded a better access to education for girls and questioned the obligation to wear a veil. The issues concerning marriage and repudiation were not so popular, which may partly be explained by the fact that the nationalist movement as a whole was supported by religion, which strengthened the cohesion of the colonized people in order to make it distinct from the colonizer. Therefore, through a shift in meaning, personal status became the symbol of all Islam.

Since the 1960s, massive social changes in women's lives have occurred, which in some fields are comparable to genuine transformations. In some

Insert written by Jacques Nicolaus

Other times, other places

The suffragettes

The first to be called 'suffragettes' were the women in England who demanded women's suffrage. The term was then extended to all women who claimed that right in Anglo-Saxon countries. The first woman to use it was Emmeline Pankhurst in Manchester. In the nineteenth century, liberal democracy became established in most developed capitalist countries, particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries. This type of democracy was incomplete because it was reserved for men. Only the latter could vote and be elected. The suffrage was not universal and it was only by a misuse of language that that it was so called at that time.

Thanks to their courageous and resolute struggle women activists would eventually obtain the right to vote. They were victims of the prejudices of society and men's mockery. There was a deep-rooted idea that women were less intelligent than men and above all that they were incapable of getting involved in politics.¹

It was in New Zealand that women were allowed to vote for the first time, in 1893. Kate Sheppard (1847-1934) was one of the most famous suffragettes of that country. She founded the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, which fought against alcoholism² and demanded the right to vote for women in order to facilitate protective legislation for women and children. It led to a petition that was passed in Parliament in 1893. She continued her action by encouraging women to use the right to vote. Sixty-five per cent of them voted in the parliamentary elections of 1893. In 1919 the New Zealand Parliament approved the eligibility of women.

In England, the feminist movement was boosted by the situation in New Zealand. The great figure here was Millicent Fawcett, who, in 1897, founded the National Union of Women's Suffrage and claimed the right to vote for women. Fawcett had to succeed in convincing men, for they alone had the power to give the right to vote to women: women had to obey the law and therefore should have the right to be involved in their creation. The Great War (1914-1918) was the turning point. While the men were fighting at the front, women demonstrated that they were capable to handle production and could exercise responsibility. In 1918 (the Representation of the People Act, 1918) they were granted the vote, but in a very restrictive manner,³ and it was only in 1928 that they obtained the same rights as those of men in this domain.

The United Kingdom was the eighth country to give the right to vote to women. Women were granted the vote in Australia (1902), Finland (1906), the United States (1919) at the federal level ... France only granted the vote to women in 1944.⁴

¹ This was true in many fields, the arts, sciences and all positions of responsibility... This opposition to feminism was expressed quite openly at the time. Nowadays such arguments are no longer used publicly, but prejudices die hard...

² Alcoholism was rampant in proletarian areas. For women and children, this could have dramatic consequences, leading to violence, finding it hard to make ends meet.

³ The vote was granted to women over thirty years old, to landowners or tenants with an annual rent of over five pounds, or whose husband did, as well as to graduates of British universities

⁴ A project had fizzled out in 1920; was voted by the Chamber of Deputies but rejected by the Senate (1922) and eventually abandoned. In 1936, the Popular Front government included three women ministers. These women held important government posts but could not vote.

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- *What is different and what is similar in the status of women between the Arab- Muslim world and other cultures?*
- *What parallel does Qasim Amin establish between the status of women and that of citizens?*
- *What argument does Anissa Boumedine use to justify the education of women?*
- *What are the feminists' main demands in Islamic countries?*
- *Why do nationalist rebellions handle religious issues with caution?*
- *Is it possible to find a link between the economic situation and the situation of women?*
- *What difference is to be seen in school enrolment between girls and boys?*
- *What are the characteristics of women's work in Islamic countries?*
- *What consequences does war have for women's work?*
- *What are the two main trends in the fight for women's emancipation?*
- *What is the difference between sharia and fiqh?*
- *Cite the three most important historical advances concerning the status of women in Islamic countries.*
- *What is "honour killing"?*
- *What have been the main changes in feminist demands in Islamic countries?*
- *What are the main types of feminist action in Islamic countries?*

Entering into dialogue with the text

- *Can a woman be free while having to wear the veil?*
- *Is wearing the veil a symbol of humiliation?*
- *Should polygamy be abolished?*
- *Can feminism and Islam be combined?*
- *Why is there sometimes a higher rate of school enrolment among girls than among boys?*
- *Is universalism a guarantee of emancipation for women?*
- *In what respect does Islam promote respect for women?*
- *Should religious traditions be respected?*
- *What main differences are seen in feminist demands between the West and Islamic countries?*

Suggested teaching method: assessment in question

Three questions are chosen. Each participant replies in writing. One volunteer reads his or her work. Each participant drafts a short assessment of the work, and assigns a grade. The volunteer asks five persons to read out their assessment. A discussion starts up in which each person, except the author of the initial reply, comments on the assessment made, specifying which comments appear appropriate or inappropriate. The group is given an average grade. The author of the initial reply closes the discussion with his or her comments on the proceedings, and decides whether or not he or she agrees with the grade. The same task is given to another person. If that does not seem useful, the participants move on to other initial questions. The procedure begins again. The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Simulation of an NGO campaign

- *Explain to the participants that the object of the exercise is to mount a campaign to enhance the status of women in a situation in which their rights are not recognized.*
- *Divide the participants into groups, explaining that each group represents an NGO for women's rights.*
- *Each group thinks about the campaign and develops it. It chooses themes, strategies and methods.*
- *Each group presents its campaign using a paper writing board.*
- *Start a discussion on similarities and differences between the campaigns presented and the degree of realism in coping with the imagined constraints.*
- *Discussion with all the participants on the various contexts, time periods, themes and strategies used by women's movements in the Arab-Muslim world.*
- *Compare the results of the work done by the various subgroups.*

countries progress is much greater due to their resources. Indeed, according to the 2007 HDI report (Human Development Index), Kuwait is ranked thirty-first, Qatar thirty-third and the United Arab Emirates thirty-fifth while Mali is ranked one hundred and seventy-eighth and Afghanistan one hundred and eighty-first. If one considers the gender-specific indicators of HDI established according to criteria of women's health, access to education and living standards, the rankings are practically the same: Kuwait is ranked thirty-third, Qatar thirty-seventh, the United Arab Emirates thirty-ninth while Mali is ranked one hundred and seventy-third, Sudan one hundred and forty-seventh and Mauritania one hundred and thirty-seventh.

Without doubt it is in the domain of education that progress has been really fast. After independence, illiteracy was widespread in the population, particularly among women. The consequences of this situation are still visible with women over fifty.

Nowadays in some countries almost all girls go to school and there is just a slight difference between urban and rural areas. Over the last ten years, Libya has closed the gap between boys and girls. In other countries like Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia, the average school enrolment rate for girls is higher than for boys. Everywhere the drop-out rate is lower for girls than for boys, and since their achievements are higher, they are equal or even ahead of boys at university in Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Qatar and Tunisia. The main differences between genders are found in low-income countries like Somalia Mauritania and Yemen, where a correlation between the small number of girls going to school and the lack of schools can be seen.

A quick drop in the fertility rate is another common characteristic of Arab-Muslim societies where the number of children per woman has dropped considerably over the last generation. After a period of high fertility, the demographic transition started in the region thirty years ago. The rate of population growth fell from 2.9% in 1980-1984 to 2.3% in 1990-1994 and to 1.9% in the early 2000s.¹³ In Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco for example where the average fertility synthetic index used to be on an average seven children per woman in the seventies, it has dropped to two children per woman nowadays. This quick transformation is due to the rise in marriage age for women – in some countries women get married much later than in Western countries, as in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia where the average marriage age rose from 18 in 1965 to over 30 today. The average marriage age in Libya is 30 and 27 in Jordan. Two other factors may also account for the drop in the birth rate, that is more years spent in education and a steadily increasing rate in the use of contraceptives, close to 40% on average according to estimates. Despite differences between countries or between the regions of these countries, there is no doubt that the slowing down in the birth rate is a real one.

However, although the employment rate of women shows a certain progression, it is not increasing rapidly. Indeed, in most of the above-mentioned countries, the unemployment rate remains high. According to the 2005 PNUD report,¹⁴ women's participation in the work force is 33.3% while, throughout the rest of the world, it is on an average 55.6%. Yet the institutes for statistics have certainly underestimated this rate. For one thing, it does not take into account unofficial employment in which large numbers of women are usually involved (social care in particular); moreover, their employment in the rural sector is not always included in the statistics. Women's ambition to have a paid job is manifest as proves the rising unemployment rate among women, which reflects their demand.

There are plenty of women entrepreneurs in most of these countries. Lalla Khadija who was the first wife of the prophet and a shrewd business woman serves as role model for the Arab-Muslim community. In addition, marital division of community property allows women to run their own firms. Owning a business is also a means of getting round career obstacles for women in the job market

These characteristics are not valid in countries like Iraq where conflicts wreak havoc and have greatly deteriorated women's living conditions. Not only is the rate of progress slower than in other countries, but they are even falling behind in terms of education, health and women's rights. Thus, the condition of women declined in many respects in Iraq, one of the most developed countries in the region because it experienced war (1980-1988), an embargo (1990-2003) and invasion (2003-2009). The military occupation and the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine have led to the impoverishment of women and worsening daily living conditions due to restrictions on the use of water and electricity. Besides, rising Islamic conservatism has been encouraged by war violence; as a consequence, women's movements and activities have been severely restricted in the public sphere. In Palestine many women drop out of school before taking their *tawjihi* (high-school diploma) and get married early (under twenty-five) out of fear of being raped by soldiers. In Iraq, because of the embargo between 1990 and 2003 and the American invasion in 2003 women's living conditions have declined at all levels: schooling, health situation. Over 9% of the female population are widows. That is why it may be asserted that women are the main victims of the pernicious effects of conflicts.

WOMEN GET ORGANIZED

Better education, fewer children per woman and an increase in employment rate are creating favorable conditions for women's capacity for collective action. Thus women's organizations and collectives aiming at improving their status and living conditions and getting rights have multiplied over the last thirty years. Despite unfavorable political conditions, women are getting

organized in order to capitalize on progress in the political, economic social and cultural fields. Two logical methods of approach can be seen, whose objectives are not contradictory: one seeks to establish that Islam is not responsible for the devalorisation of women in society, and the other uses the universalist argument of gender equality.

FIRST APPROACH: RE-READING THE HOLY TEXTS

In Iran, Egypt, Morocco and Malaysia some women have taken the liberty to re-read the holy texts, the Quran and the *hadiths* in order to question women's role in Muslim societies today and to demonstrate that Islam is not responsible for the oppression of women. In her essay *Le Harem politique*¹⁵ (*The Political Harem*) Fatima Mernissi tried to show that the religious foundations on which gender discrimination is based in order to exclude women from decision centres are man-made. In the 1990s *Zanan (Women)*, an Iranian women's magazine,¹⁶ published articles on the patriarchal interpretations of the Quran and the need for women to write their own critical interpretation of it. This is the argument of anthropologist Zia Mir Hosseini's¹⁷ who makes a distinction between *shariah* and *fiqh*, that is between the holy texts and men's interpretation of them, which is liable to change according to historical context. To this way of thinking, the Quran, as regards

duties towards God, makes no difference between men and women: all believers, be they men or women, and all souls are equal in spirit and accountable to God for their acts. They consider themselves to be feminists. The first International Congress on Islamic Feminism was held in Barcelona from 27 to 29 October 2005, and was followed by a seminar in Paris organized by UNESCO and la *Ligue des droits de l'Homme* in 2006.¹⁸

These movements are calling for equality at the social level, as well as religious rights such as the right to lead the prayer. Indeed, Amina Wadud, a Professor of Religion and Philosophy in Quranic studies¹⁹ at Virginia Commonwealth University, in a symbolic action on 18 March 2005, dared to lead a mixed-gender Friday prayer service in New York, which she repeated on 17 October 2008 in England, opening up the way for the right of women to be imams.



SECOND APPROACH: IN THE NAME OF THE UNIVERSALITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Most women's movements campaigning for a better quality of life for women claim to represent the universality of human rights to equality, justice and dignity. Contrary to what is generally put forward by their critics, these rights stem from their own history and are not copied from Western movements. Ibn Rochd himself (Cordoba 1126 – Marrakech 1198) declared in his commentary on Plato's work: "*We know that women, insofar as they are like men, must needs share men's ultimate aims. If man's and woman's natures are the same and if identically constituted individuals must exercise the same precise social activity, it is obvious that in this type of society, women must perform the same tasks as men.*"²⁰ These demands are also the consequences of their concrete cultural lives and experiences.

Nawal es-Saadawi, a psychiatrist, has been a prominent figure in these movements. In 1977 she published *The Hidden Face of Eve* and in 1982 she established the Arab Women's Solidarity Association²¹ which has chapters in several Arab countries. Its magazine, called *Noon* (noon is the first letter of the word *nissa*, i.e. women in Arab), gives an account of women's situations and their actions in favour of change. Women's organizations have multiplied since the 1980s. They demand equality, in accordance with the principle set forth in most Constitutions (except in Saudi Arabia's fundamental law). Besides, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has been ratified by practically all Arab and Muslim States except by Iran, Somalia and Sudan. However, they added reservations to provisions related to women's personal status, which, according to the initiators of the campaign, make the convention meaningless. That is why the *Equality without Reservation* campaign was launched in 2006 in a few countries of the Maghreb, the Middle-East and the Gulf areas, for the withdrawal of reservations and the ratification of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW allowing citizens to report violations of the Convention. On 10 December 2008 for the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the King of Morocco announced the lifting of the reservations expressed regarding the CEDAW when it was ratified in 1993.

In most Arab-Muslim countries, outright discrimination is legal and materializes in the conception of women's personal status. Indeed, many laws concerning family relationships put husbands before their wives in marriage as well as in divorce issues, tolerate polygamy, grant parental rights to fathers only and unequal inheritance rights. Turkey since 1923 and Tunisia since 1957 are exceptions. Many groups of women have been working hard to improve the laws as keys to change. After prolonged battles and campaigns, progress has been made. In Morocco in 2004, for example, the *Muddawanna* reform which suppressed the function of the wali (male guardian whose permission was required for a woman to be allowed to marry), gave men and women equal responsibility within the family; abolished women's duty of obedience, laid

conditions on polygamy and put an end to repudiation. In Algeria since the 2005 revision of the 1984 family code, the duty of obedience has been abolished and polygamy has been subject to the authorization of a judge. Bahrain adopted a personal status code in 2009 for Sunnis, stipulating that women should be allowed to consent to their marriage, giving them the right to insert clauses in the Prenuptial Agreement and to be provided with a separate residence in the event of polygamy.

In Iran the *Campaign for Equality* was launched to gather over a million signatures, the necessary condition according to the Constitution to establish a bill against discrimination. In Saudi Arabia, a journalist, Najeha Al Huweidar, is the leader of a movement calling for the abolition of the *mahram*, a guardian without whose authorization women cannot travel or carry out administrative acts on their own.

A few years ago, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, the main women's organization launched a campaign for equality in inheritance, a right which has not yet been acknowledged by the Tunisian Personal Status Code.

Reforms have given mothers the right to transfer their nationality to their children, or even to their husbands in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Iraq. In some countries, women's organizations have succeeded in having sexual harassment penalized (Algeria and Tunisia in 2004, Jordan in 2008). Kuwaiti women were eventually granted the right to vote in 2006.

Organizations have also been mobilized into struggling to eliminate of all forms of violence against women. In Jordan, after years of campaigning, women's organizations won the case against honour killing, which until then had been insufficiently punished. The Family Protection Law adopted in 2008 introduced special courts to judge these crimes. In Algeria, after women living alone for employment reasons in the oil city of Hassi Messaoud had been gang-raped, women's associations stood up for the plaintiffs in an exemplary trial. In many countries such as the Maghreb, Bahrain, Lebanon and Jordan for example, there have been more and more organized protests against domestic violence. Women's organizations have been supporting women's complaints, opening shelters and fighting for deterrent punishment or laws.

It may be noted that some of the original demands of these women's movements have disappeared or evolved: a ban on veils is no longer called for, for example, since the veil does not restrict women's movements in public. They can study and work while wearing a veil, and try to take part in political life. The main obstacles are rather economic and/or political and social. Schooling rights have changed the approach, which now focuses more on the fight against poverty since what usually stops some girls from going to school is the lack of schools in some areas. That is why many women's organizations involved in a fight against

poverty established production cooperatives so as to enhance the value of their know-how.

The pressure on women's movements goes beyond the economic sphere. States producing discriminatory legislation or refusing to enforce egalitarian laws, growing Islamist movements opposed to the cause of women are common obstacles. Therefore women's groups make use of all possible means likely to get results or achieve reforms even though the latter may seem to fall short of their declared aims. Laws, public awareness campaigns, putting pressure on institutions, regional and international solidarity, lobbying with women close to heads of states²² are all part of their arsenal. Their achievements in the cultural field are noteworthy: the essays, novels and films²³ produced by women bear witness to their intellectual vitality and have been constituting a fund of ideas and opinions to support their cause.

In the Arab-Muslim world strongly determined by Islamic culture, no matter how strict one's individual religious observance is, is there room for people and most of all women aspiring to justice, equality, freedom, which is what feminist ideals are yearning for? Islamists or conservative Ulama denounce the issue as a Western pattern which is being applied, and thus reject such claims.

Besides, it is all too easy for them to demonstrate the failings of the pattern of 'Human Rights' when the principles are trodden underfoot and thus lose their universal value. They oppose Islam to the demands

for rights, or rather readings of the religious corpus established by centuries of jurisprudence. However, since the late nineteenth century, many Muslim scholars have denounced the loss of meaning of 'an Islam aiming at freedom'.²⁴ Men and women have introduced failings into the successive strata and shown, as Khaled Roumo did, that 'granting freedom and dignity to all citizens [was] in keeping with Muslim ethics'.²⁵ So why should the field of referents be opposed to one another when the objectives are similar?

No matter what referents are put forward, these women of action all aspire to equality and justice. For Ghais Jasser, in this dynamic they are *"called to face a big challenge and make a two-fold break: on the one hand with the oppressive elements of their cultural heritage, and on the other with the feminist movement perverted by racial positions in the West. They should also consolidate their links of solidarity based on the nourishing parts of their humanist heritage and carry out a joint fight with their natural allies, namely all feminists who defend the principle of gender and culture equality."*²⁶ The various movements back reform of society as a whole and thus accompany the dynamic process leading to the establishment of a legitimate state. In many countries, women's rights activists are also involved in the defence of individual and public rights as corollaries of their feminist activism. The interaction between social changes and the growing part played by women in the public sphere have been challenging the representations of their role not only in their societies but abroad as well, where they are often considered as the passive victims of medieval practices.



YEAR	ARAB-MUSLIM WORLD	YEAR	WESTERN WORLD
		1791	Olympe de Gouges wrote the <i>Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen</i> in which article 1 stipulates: 'woman is born free and lives equal to man in her rights'.
		1901	In Germany, Norway, Spain, women were allowed into universities.
		1910	Clara Zetkin, a German socialist leader proposed the first 'International Women's Day' on 8 March to commemorate the strikes of American women textile workers in 1857.
1923	Huda Sharawi founded the Union of Egyptian Women and published <i>The Egyptian</i> magazine in 1925.		
1923	The Congress of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance was held in which representatives of forty countries and of the Union of Egyptian Women took part.		
1926	Turkey's Civil Code was enacted, prohibiting polygamy and securing women's rights in divorce.		
1934	Women were granted the right to vote in Turkey.		
1938	The Conference of Asian Women was held.		
1944	The Arab Feminist Conference was held in Cairo with delegates from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Transjordan.	1944	The Algiers ordinance of 21 April granted French women the right to vote and be elected.
1945	The Arab Feminist Union was created.	1949	Simone de Beauvoir published <i>The Second Sex</i> .
1956	The Code of Personal Status was promulgated in Tunisia. Polygamy was banned, repudiation abolished.		
1963	The law allowing abortion for mothers of five was generalised to all women in 1973 in Tunisia.	1966	Women were allowed to hold a job without their husbands' permission and to manage their own affairs in France.
		1967	Contraception was legalized in France but the decrees enforcing the law were only promulgated in 1971.
		1975	Abortion was decriminalized in France.
		1976	All women were granted the right to vote in Portugal. Since 1931, only University graduates had been allowed to vote.
1977	Nawal es-Saadawi published <i>The Hidden Face of Eve</i> in which she denounced patriarchy clad in the colours of religion.		
1979	The General Assembly of UNO adopted The International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)		
1981	Hundreds of women demonstrated against a project of a discriminatory family code in Algeria.		
1987	Fatima Mernissi published <i>The Political Harem</i> in which she recalled the part played by women in politics when Islam was introduced.	1990	Women were granted full right to vote in Switzerland after the last canton accepted it.
		1992	The law on sexual harassment was enacted in France.
		1995	Divorce was legalized in Ireland.
		2000	The law on equality of political representation enacted in France.
2004	Law on sexual harassment enacted in Tunisia and Algeria.		
2005	Women were granted the right to vote in Kuwait.		
2006	Women were granted the right to vote in the United Arab Emirates.	2009	Abortion was legalized in Portugal.
		2010	Abortion was legalized in Spain.



Insert written by Khaled Roumo

Reflecting on the text

- > How does the author define the Arab-Muslim space, and what characteristics does it share with regard to the condition of women?
- > Within that space, what was the starting-point for women's movements in the modern era?
- > Identify some male and female figures among the movement's trailblazers.
- > What is your view of this observation made by an Egyptian feminist in 1899: Women are veiled under the yoke of men, and men under the yoke of governments. When women enjoy individual freedom, men enjoy political freedom; the two things are interdependent.
- > Evaluate, in the context, the following symbolic gesture: on their return from an international feminist congress in 1923, two women unveiled themselves at the train station.
- > What were the claims of the feminists?
- > Note the extension of those claims to the entire Arab world: The Arab Feminist Conference was held in 1944.
- > Compare this with the movement in the Maghreb.
- > Evaluate and illustrate this appeal by an Algerian feminist to every woman in the early 1940s: (...) since you have understood that the Muslim woman who is truly faithful to the precepts of her religion will not accept to wallow in her own ignorance. If she does, she ignores her duties and strays from God's book.
- > What were the characteristics of the "change" that took beginning in the 1960s?
- > How does war affect women's rights in such countries as Iraq, Afghanistan or Palestine?
- > How do women's collective actions appropriate the founding texts of Islam?
- > And in parallel thereto, how are women's claims raised in the name of universal human rights?
- > In what way does the traditional "personal status" damage woman?
- > Observe, in the context, the transformation of some demands.
- > Evaluate the obstacles to women's emancipation constituted by poverty and by Islamist movements.
- > How does the commitment of Muslim women change their image in their own societies and abroad?

¹ Qatar : 94, 387\$, United Arab Emirates : 55,028\$

² Yemen : 1,171\$, Mali : 657\$, Afghanistan : 416\$ (IMF, October 2009)

³ Mansour Fahmy's thesis was published by les Editions Allia in 2002 (144 p).

⁴ M. A. Fay Mary, 2008, International feminism and the women's movement in Egypt 1904-1923. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* - Volume 4, N° 1, pp. 1-5, http://www.mediterraneas.org/article.php?id_article=74.

⁵ The Wafd is the Egyptian nationalist party created during the First World War.

⁶ M. Badran, 1987, *Harem Years : the Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*, New York, University of New York.

⁷ G. Jasser, 2006, Voile qui dévoile. Intégrisme, sexisme et racisme. *Nouvelles Questions féministes*, Vol 25, n°3, p.85.

⁸ O. Glacier, 2007, Le féminisme arabe, *Relations* (719), pp. 30-31.

⁹ On the controversy over the veil in Tunisia, see S. Bakalti, 1996, *La femme tunisienne au temps de la colonisation*, Paris, L'Harmattan.

¹⁰ In 1949 in the schools created by the Ulemas there were 16,286 students including 6,696 girls. *El Basair*, n°173-174, 15 October 1951.

¹¹ The schooling rate of Muslim school-age children reached 5% in 1914, 10% in 1950, 15% in 1955 and 30% in 1962 according to G. Pervillé, *La 'francisation' des intellectuels algériens: histoire d'un échec?* Website: guy.perville.free.fr

¹² *La République algérienne* n°140, 27 August 1948, p. 4.

¹³ D. Tabutin and B. Schoumaker, 2005, La démographie du monde arabe et du Moyen-Orient des années 1950 aux années 2000. *Population*, N° 5-6, pp. 609-724.

¹⁴ UNPD : The Arab Human Development Report 2005. *Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World*.

¹⁵ F. Mernissi, 1989, Paris, Albin Michel.

¹⁶ The magazine has been banned since January 2008 on account of its positions.

¹⁷ *Towards Gender Equality : Muslim Family Laws and the Shari'ah*. in *Wanted : Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family*, ed. by Zainah Anwar. Site : musawah.org

¹⁸ *Qu'est-ce que le féminisme musulman ?* 18-19 septembre 2006. http://portal.unesco.org/shs/fr/files/9965/11593649079programme_fr.pdf

¹⁹ A. Wadud, *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*.

²⁰ Exposition de « La République » de Platon, premier Traité, in Averroes, *Petite anthologie*, *Le Courrier*, Unesco monthly magazine, September 1986, p. 19.

²¹ The AWSA was banned in Egypt in 1991 after Nawal es Saadaw took a stand against the Gulf War.

²² Queen Rania of Jordan played a major part in the promulgation of the 2008 law; Saudi Arabia's Princess Adelah bint Abdallah is a prominent supporter of women's issues in her country.

²³ Ankara's women's film festivals *The Flying Broom* or Bahrain's *Women Views* are bringing to light Arab women's movies.

²⁴ This refers to a book by the Sudanese theologian and politician Mahmoud Mohamed Taha (1908-1985): M. M. Taha, 2002, *Un islam à vocation libératrice*, trans. by M. El Baroudi-Haddaoui and C. Pailhe, Paris, L'Harmattan.

²⁵ K. Roumo, 2009, *Le Coran déchiffré selon l'amour*, Paris, Editions Koutoubia, p. 241.

²⁶ Jasser Ghaiss. *Voile qui dévoile. Intégrisme, sexisme et racisme*. NQF n°3, 2006.



Tchehel-Sotoum Palace (with 40 columns)
detail of Persian frescoes © UNESCO/Abbe, André
This fresco of the Tchehel-Sotoum Palace in Isfahan (Iran) shows a battle
in which cavalymen confront each other in an incredible brawl.

STRAIN, STRUGGLE AND STRIFE

LYING AS IT DOES WITHIN THE SCOPE OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY, OUR APPROACH IS AN ATTEMPT TO FIND THE REASONS WHY, WITH THE ADVENT OF ISLAM, WAR – *AL-HARB* – WAS SUBSUMED UNDER A NOTION – *AL-JIHAD* – BEARING BOTH THE VISION OF HUMAN EXISTENCE AS A PERMANENT STRUGGLE AND AN ETHICS IMPLYING ENDURANCE, CONSTANT EFFORT AND SELF-IMPROVEMENT. WHILE THE ARABS USED THE TERM '*HARB*' BEFORE THE ADVENT OF ISLAM TO REFER TO WARFARE, IN THE EARLY SEVENTH CENTURY THE QURAN USED A VOCABULARY CONNECTED WITH FIGHTING AND STRUGGLING (*QITAL*, *JIHAD*) TO REFER TO THE SAME NOTION. THIS TRANSFORMATION IN ITSELF MARKED AN IMPORTANT SEMANTIC EVOLUTION. IT DOES NOT LEAD HOWEVER TO MORE AGGRESSIVENESS. CONSIDERING THE QURAN AS A WHOLE AND COMPARING THE DIFFERENT PASSAGES, IT WILL BE OBSERVED THAT IN NO PASSAGE ARE WARFARE AND MILITARY ACTION SUBORDINATE TO THE PROPAGATION OF THE ISLAMIC MESSAGE. BESIDES, THE PRINCIPLES OF JUSTICE, EQUITY AND FULFILLING ONE'S COMMITMENTS ARE INTEGRATED INTO AN ONTOLOGY OF STRUGGLE FORBIDDING HUMAN BEINGS TO BE INACTIVE AND BANNING REST UNLESS THEY HAVE DONE ALL THEY CAN TO IMPROVE THEIR CONDITION.

THE QUESTION OF WAR

Whenever the theme of war in Islam is mentioned, especially nowadays, what first comes to mind is the image of terrorism, blind violence, and the struggle being fought in the name of religion. This image is based on transformation undergone by the notion of 'jihad' in the Arab Muslim world over the past fifty years or so, and even more radically and globally since the '9.11' event. By isolating elements of the real world and providing a reading grid for everything connected with war, enemies and security problems, the event has become, to quote the title of a book by J. Habermas

and J. Derrida, a genuine 'concept'.¹ However, it has only attained this status thanks to another notion, formed in and by Islamic civilization, which has become not only its corollary but something that enables it to be perpetuated, made operative and terribly effective. Thus these two notions symbolize the emergence of a new enemy figure, i.e. the *jihadist*, an elusive enemy claiming to represent a terrifying doctrine called 'jihad', the latter based on martyrdom and on violence that can strike any time anywhere, without any respect for the codes of regular warfare.

Broadly speaking, these changes have led to the setting up of three approaches from different fields of study, which attempt to account for the issue of war in Islam and to answer the questions it raises. Indeed, there is first an approach we may call “essentialist, because it tends to reduce all the thinking about war in Islam to a fixed, undifferentiated schema, that of a perpetual war fought in the name of religion and leading to victory over the other beliefs. According to that approach, war has always been and will always be waged in the same way, because of religious determinations placing that activity at the heart of sacred and transcendent considerations. Certain authors, as for example H. Redissi, consider that the doctrine of war in Islam has gone through two phases: first, that of *jihad* as a bloody fight, the aim being Islam’s triumph over the other religions by violent means, and the second being a more praiseworthy *jihad*, i.e. the fight against oneself after Islam’s armed forces have been worn out.

‘Unfortunately’, H. Redissi says, ‘it turns out that [Islam] has always been undermined by extreme violence - terrorism, assassination and suicides -, and it is legitimate to wonder whether this may be rooted in its culture’.² Therefore, according to that author, even though Islam managed to develop an ethical and moral sense of warfare, it has been caught up by its essential belligerence. This approach, which is widespread in the media, has been fuelled by certain thinkers’ readings of the holy texts as well as by extremist literature that started to thrive in the sixties and the seventies - Qob, Mawdudi, Abd al-Rahman. This approach considers that Islam continues to have one unique, undifferentiated idea of war, according to which the latter is to be waged in the name of God. According to that interpretation, military action has received holy unction and is based on the barbarisation of the other and on the

ontologisation of the enemy. The latter is already predefined, singled out by his religious difference or by his radical otherness. This approach has it that the theory of war in Islam makes no concession to peace, and holds out as the only possible horizon open uninterrupted warfare till the end of time.

In the second place, another approach falling within the framework of the sociology of international relations tries to tackle the ways of fighting against terrorism, the transformations of international law and the problems posed by the emergence of the new figure of the deterritorialized irregular combatant - the *jihadist* - who destabilizes established governments and targets civilian populations. This approach merely identifies those protagonists considered as dangerous and assesses how dangerous they may be for domestic or foreign security. The works by G. Kepel are broadly representative of this approach. However balanced and attentive to historic changes it may be, this approach presents no critical perspective and no reflection on the notions and concepts involved. Thus, in the conclusion of his book *Fitna. Guerre au Coeur de l’Islam*, G. Kepel sticks to a definition of the notion of ‘jihad’ that is close to the views of extremist authors, as though Islam had produced nothing but that unique, undifferentiated vision of war. According to him, that notion ‘refers to the effort required by each believer so as to expand the field and influence of the religious norm, to regulate individual passions as well as social organisation, or even the global order – in order to subject reluctant humans to the sacred laws of the Quran. When that effort is carried to extremes, it leads to a holy war of conquest or defence. It is the driving force of the propagation of faith, carried out ‘with the sword and the Holy Book’, as the saying goes.’³



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Thirdly, there are numerous works mainly carried out by contemporary Arab Muslim jurists, Al-Buti and Al-Rikabi⁴ in particular, who long before the radicalization of that vision of war with '9.11' criticized that new conception of *jihad* based on blind violence and terrorist attacks aimed at civilians and public services in the 1980s and the 1990s, especially in Egypt and Algeria. The importance of this approach lies in the fact that it challenges the theological presuppositions and the interpretations made by *jihadists* by going back to the sources of the holy texts they claim to follow, and to the references they exploit. However, in their eagerness to get rid of the negative image of war in Islam, their works sometimes simply tend to reduce the meaning of *jihad* to defensive war, which makes it impossible to account for the wars of conquest fought at the beginning of Islam. Concurrently, they often lapse into a seraphic and apologetic vision of Islam as a religion of peace, justice and humanity, thus denying the real existence of warlike practices or legal doctrines that legitimized fighting in the name of the struggle against impiety and polytheism.

Lying as it does within the scope of political philosophy, our approach is an attempt to find the reasons why, with the advent of Islam, war – *al-harb* – was subsumed under a notion – *al-jihad* – bearing both an ontology (the vision of human existence as a permanent struggle) and an ethics (endurance, constant effort, self-improvement). Indeed, how do the ethical and ontological determinations of jihad tie up with its warlike meaning? Are they two distinct aspects or do the categories of morality and religion overlap politics (war)? Then we shall explain, as we develop a series of points, how the legal doctrine of war was drawn up in the Middle-Ages and how it was reactivated by certain contemporary protagonists to justify new forms of military violence.



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JIHAD AND HARB

While the Arabs used the term '*harb*' before the advent of Islam to refer to warfare, in the early seventh century the Quran used a vocabulary connected with fighting and struggling (*qital*, *jihad*) to refer to the same notion. This transformation in itself marked an important semantic evolution, because while the root HRB is mentioned six times in the text, the roots QTL (referring to murder) or JHD (meaning struggle and effort) are by far the most frequently used to describe warfare. Eager to discover the original meaning common to the words from each root – a sort of semantic sedimentation bringing together the nuances of all the meanings contained within them and referring them back to their primary source –, Arab lexicographers of the Middle-Ages considered that the root JHD referred to the basic meaning of effort and strain. On account of that linguistic meaning, *jihad* roughly relates to the notion of struggle. However, this meaning is by no means the only one, and the fields covered are numerous: social and political (for the good of the community or the nation), moral (a fight fought by an individual on his own level against his baser instincts, his inclinations and the passions of his soul) and military (the fight against an enemy). The two fundamental meanings which were developed in the classical age of Islam are first armed struggle since *jihad* as a legal notion eventually came to mean military action, and secondly a moral meaning (the fight against the passions of one's soul). Although it has often been translated by 'holy war', this term cannot be reduced to this notion, but they may overlap, as we shall demonstrate soon. Three fundamental remarks are to be made about those two meanings:

1) In some works about *jihad* there is a tendency to imagine a historical evolution of the notion; *jihad*, according to these works, had first referred to armed struggle, as illustrated by the history of Arab conquests in the seventh century, and then the meaning had changed to become the struggle of man against his soul's passions. The violent meaning had thus become, around the ninth or tenth century, a peaceful, non-violent one, thanks to the mystics, who underlined a meaning that had been relegated to a position of secondary importance because of the Conquests. Even though a close examination of the military history of Islam tends to back up such an analysis, we consider that things are much more complex because of the fact that the moral and ontological meaning of the struggle developed and thrived even before the Muslims' military decline. The political literature of the Mirrors for Princes, whose spiritual father was Ibn al-Muqaffa (720-757), who translated the famous *Kalila and Dimna*, shows that as early as the seventh century, and even before, the term 'jihad' had this moral signification of the struggle against the passions of anger, envy, hatred, and revenge. In *The Comprehensive Book of the Rules*

of Conduct, Ibn al-Muqaffa did not hesitate to use the word 'jihad' to refer to that struggle against one's inclinations and baser instincts.⁵ In accordance with this meaning, whoever is unable to engage in this 'jihad', i.e. who is unable to govern himself is unable to govern others. In other words, whoever proves unable to exert control over himself first, by governing his passions and managing to make his actions and decisions correspond to those of a well governed soul that has regained its composure, will be unable to rule others. The early use of this notion in the ethical-political literature shows that the moral meaning of 'jihad' coexisted with the technical meaning of military combat that developed at the same period among Islamic jurists.

2) From that point of view, *jihad* encompasses all human life and has a deep ontological meaning that makes human life a permanent struggle to improve on a human level as well as to defend a social, political, or other cause. This ontological meaning is well-developed in the Quran, which encourages man to struggle not just against his body but also against his possessions.⁶ In practically all the passages in which the word *jihad* is to be found, the text appeals to the values of constancy and endurance and insists on the link between that ontological conception that turns life into a permanent battleground and the metaphysical reward connected with that conception.⁷ It might even be claimed that the metaphysical meaning of peace (eternal peace) and its ethical meaning (the soul's inner peace) are the fruit of that conception that turns human life into a permanent struggle, from birth till death. In accordance with this meaning, peace derives from the need to be active, wide-awake, in constant action. It is a feeling of tranquillity achieved through anxious restlessness, a peace of mind brought about by a summoning up of the vital forces of an individual who decides to give up lethargy and inertia.

3) It seems to us that this existential meaning of *jihad* in its warlike acceptance is just one among a multiplicity of fights through which the individual discovers himself by forging his self. As military activity, it is first subsumed in that comprehensive vision of existence, that doctrine of action which allows the individual no rest unless it is well-deserved. This represents precisely one of the major meanings brought by Islam to the signification of military combat. In fact, if the text of the Quran chooses the terms 'jihad' or 'qital' to describe the effort made in the display of military action, it is because warfare takes on a new meaning with the advent of Islam. The change may be inferred from an analysis of the meaning of the word that prevailed with the Arabs to describe war only - *harb* - whose basic meaning is despoilment or dispossession.⁸ This meaning is confirmed by the very finality that

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

Understanding the text

- What today is the common meaning of jihad?
- What are the three learned approaches to jihad?
- How has the term jihad evolved?
- What was the historical political function of jihad for the Arab world?
- What, according to the Quran, authorizes war?
- Does the Quran advocate war for religious reasons?
- In what way did the 'Abbasids conquests modify the concept of jihad?
- Is jihad a holy war?
- What are the main issues at stake in the contemporary concept of jihad?

Entering into dialogue with the text

- What can be the legitimacy of the concept of jihad?
- What would be five valid reasons for making war?
- Should those in power legislate in order to remain in power?
- Can a war be "holy"?
- Can there be a "good war"?
- Can war be a reason for living?
- Is war historically necessary?
- Do human beings need violence?

Suggested teaching method: assessing a piece of work

Three questions are chosen.
Each participant replies on a loose sheet.
The moderator collects the sheets and redistributes them at random.
Each participant receives a sheet, which he or she must assess, with comments and a grade.
The moderator redistributes the sheets a second time, for a further assessment.
The moderator redistributes the sheets a third time, for a further assessment.
All the participants take back their original sheets and analyse the work done and decide whether or not and in what way they will change their initial answers.
If possible, begin again with other questions.
The group reviews the work and the exercise.

Educational exercises

Critical analysis of newspapers

- Go around the table asking each participant to answer the question "What does the concept of jihad suggest to you"?
- Ask the participants also to read the worksheet "The notion of peace in Arabic Mirrors for Princes".
- Start a discussion comparing concepts of jihad in the text and the preconceptions of the participants: stereotypes and prejudices.
- Discussion with the group on the notion of peace and of the "just war"; exploration of their personal views on the subject.
- Divide the participants into subgroups (four participants to each group).
- Distribute newspaper articles dealing with a current conflict (one article per group and each group receives a different article).
- Ask each group to read the article and to analyse it while comparing it with the outlook proposed in the text of the worksheet "The notion of peace in Arabic Mirrors for Princes".
- Ask the participants to analyse what was not said in the article and why.
- Each group presents and discusses their analysis in comparison with the texts.
- General discussion on the notion of war and peace from the standpoint of the Arab-Muslim world. What media image and what changes in representations?

the Arab tribes assigned to war before they were unified under the authority of a single Islamic leader. Indeed, tribes mainly fought against each other for economic reasons (to seize pasture, cattle, goods) whereas, with Islam, that economic activity became subordinate to the political will of a leader and to a more or less centralized power. So warfare started to take on a political significance it did not have before, and that was, to our way of thinking, was the main change in the lives of the Arabs of that period. From then on, war might be said to meet Clausewitz's definition, that is a continuation of politics by other means. This meaning proved to be true during the lifetime of the Prophet of Islam himself, because it was with him that the process of political centralization started and carried on after his death, since the

first caliph, Abu Bakr (573-634) fought the secessionists who would not acknowledge this centralization of political power and refused to pay the tax they owed him. '*hurub al-ridda*', the wars of Apostasy), as they were called, were merely wars fought against those who wished to return to a tribal form of organization, hostile to political unity, though in most cases they still accepted Islam. If there was a drastic change in the meaning of warfare with the advent of Islam, a change we have considered existential, ethical and political, how then should we understand the Quranic expressions referring to warfare in the name of God, insisting on several occasions that polytheists and unbelievers should be killed, criticizing other beliefs or even irrevocably condemning them?

THE TEXT OF THE QURAN

The question to be asked from the outset to get a clear idea about the legal formulation of war in Islam in its relation with the Quran is the following: does the Quran command believers to wage war against others in the name of their beliefs? The answer is no. Considering the Quran as a whole and comparing the different passages, it will be observed that in no passage are warfare and military action subordinate to the propagation of the Islamic message. Whenever a real war (military operations between two enemies) is mentioned in the Quran, a reason is put forward to justify the military action taken by the Muslims. Generally speaking, wrong doing is presented as the *casus belli* allowing the group to resort to military action against an enemy defined as the wrongdoer. Even though it may be poles apart from the usual readings, this statement rests on several arguments which can be summarized in three points:

1) The Quran connects warfare with the issue of the persecution of Muslims, the new religious movement in the early seventh century. In 16:41, it is said that people who had been unfairly driven out of their homes and cities because of the humiliations and persecutions in Mecca, were perfectly right to redress the wrongs done. Historically, Islam, in its beginnings, at first resisted the oppression in a pacific way (as did Christianity) and then, when the balance of powers between the two groups started to change, resorted to military confrontation. But this military combat is always motivated by the enemy's repeated aggressions. In this case, the enemy is the one who declares himself as such, who becomes threatening, tries to eliminate you, etc. and therefore cannot be an enemy in the absolute sense of the word.

2) The second form of injustice justifying war is linked with 'freedom of conscience'. In this respect, the text refers to the term *fitna*, which should be understood as 'pressure exerted upon someone so as to oblige him to give up his beliefs or principles.' It is a recurring theme in the Quran, and it has a strong historical dimension connected with the issue of the founding of Islam. Indeed, if the group had not defended its religious convictions, if there had been no resistance to the pressure exerted by the opponents of the new religion, it could not have existed. In 2:193 for example, it is clearly said that war must prevent *fitna*. That word cannot be translated by 'discord', 'conflict' or 'civil war', even though it took on that meaning at the beginning of the Great Upheaval, which took place in the middle of the seventh century.

3) Finally, according to the writings dealing with the Quranic revelations, the first text giving the right to fight a war against the 'enemies' of the new community can be found in Sura 22, verse 39. The text denounces the persecution of groups in the name of their beliefs, and allows the victims of injustice, whether they are Muslim, Jewish, Christian or other, to take up arms so as to put an end to that unjust situation. Thus, while it is unfair to be oppressed for one's own convictions and principles – and it is necessary to fight to get rid of that type of injustice – the passage shows that the diversity of beliefs is an unquestionable principle and that to dispute this is wrong. Hence, we may say that in the Quran the political link is set above the religious link, and that the decision to make peace with or war against others depends on whether you are well or badly

treated. That principle is confirmed in 29:46 where the relationships with the People of the Book are determined on the basis of 'means better than mere disputation, unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong and injury.' Even with unbelievers and pagan Arabs, the text commands the forming of political alliances on the basis of justice and equity.⁹

Those principles (justice, equity, fulfilling your commitments) are integrated into an ontology of struggle forbidding human beings to be inactive and banning rest unless they have done all they can to improve their conditions. Apart from the fact that these ethical and political norms belong to a religious system guaranteeing them some transcendence and turning them into divine commandments to be observed, they are connected with another level opposing believers and Muslims on the one hand, and on the other hand the notions the text tries to change or amend – notions such as *kafir* (unbeliever), *mushrik* (polytheist), *munafiq* (hypocrite), *ahl al-kitab* (People of the Book, mainly Jews and Christians). Thus a dichotomy is introduced to refer to fundamental or partial disagreements between the two sides on a dogmatic level, especially concerning the issue of the representation of God. As it strives to reach the truth in these respects, the text attacks the other beliefs on that basis and endlessly repeats what will happen to them in the hereafter, but that dogmatic condemnation is not followed by a call for any military action to be taken against them. In many passages, the ethical and political condemnation of the enemy and the denunciation of his wrongs lead to a theological and metaphysical condemnation. This is quite obvious with Sura 9, the most virulent one concerning the groups who opposed a nascent Islam, and above all those who broke political pacts involving their security. Even though that Sura specifies that war is waged for political reasons against those who have not respected the pact, war is quickly covered up by dogmatic divisions, and the opposition between the two belligerents then becomes radicalized. But that step is

only taken once the political reasons (in particular the aggressions or wrongs perpetrated by the enemy) have been called up and put forward. The political relation is thus covered up by the religious opposition and it is because of this covering up of politics by religion that injustice is made to belong to a religious category instead of an ethical or political one. Therefore, justice and injustice become dichotomies like right and wrong, good and evil, believer and unbeliever, Muslim and polytheist, etc. This fact raises crucial issues regarding the interpretation of the Quran, for it is easy to shift from one sphere to the other, in particular for a reader in his quest for truth. In fact, a reader who pays little attention to the nuances in the text might establish oppositions based on beliefs rather than on political antagonisms.

The covering up of the political by the religious does not prevent considerable differences in what it means to belong to a religious group. This can be seen in the difference between *muslim* (a Muslim, submissive to God) and *mumin* (a believer, one of the faithful), which is proclaimed several times in the text in order to refer to those who have adhered to the nascent political community and to those who are utterly convinced by the new religious message.¹⁰ What this shows, contrary to certain fashionable literature, is that the text itself has given up the image of Islam as an exclusive community of believers. Therefore the political connection is proclaimed for what it is and it outflanks the religious connection, as is testified by a passage of capital importance (49:9) calling on believers to react against the unjust group in the event of a conflict. Justice and injustice are thus placed beyond any dogmatic adherence to a group. To conclude, the political connection transcends the religious connection in the Quran, and justice – the supreme political principle – determines and justifies, if need be, military action against those who are defined as enemies, irrespective of their religious beliefs. But how then can we account for what we learn from the legal doctrine on war, which mainly based the *casus belli* on religious motives?



Other times, other places

The conception of the war according to Christian doctrine and the Catholic Church

The example of St. Augustine

St. Augustine, with his concept of a just war (and not a holy war), intended to respond to the violence and persecution suffered by the Church by a war against the infidels in order to make them 'advance in the truth' and forsake 'their vain opinions'. There is no question of the Church putting anyone to death, as Augustine made it clear that he rejected the death penalty for all heretics. His conception is rather a defensive one, and goes against a crusade or holy war. It merely expounds a political view according to which when the Church is threatened, it is normal that the state should guarantee its protection. Likewise, he is in favour of war when it leads to the obtaining of peace. It should be noted however that forcing infidels to convert is considered just because the point is to bring them into the 'City of God' (thus to save souls).

'[Finally the Church] persecutes her enemies and arrests them, until they become weary in their vain opinions, so that they should make advance in the truth; but they, returning evil for good, because we take measures for their good, to secure their eternal salvation, endeavour even to strip us of our temporal safety, being so in love with murder, that they commit it on their own persons, when they cannot find victims in any others. For in proportion as the Christian charity of the Church endeavours to deliver them from that destruction, so that none of them should die, so their madness endeavours either to slay us, that they may feed the lust of their own cruelty, or even to kill themselves, that they may not seem to have lost the power of putting men to death'.

Excerpt from Letter 185 from Augustine to Count Boniface, a Roman general in charge of the repression of the Donatists.¹

Since then, the thinking of the Catholic Church concerning conflicts has evolved. In the twentieth century, after the carnage of the Great War of 1914-1918, the church has adopted pacifist positions: 'War on War!' said Pius XII (1939-1958) at Christmas 1944, 'never again war, never, it is peace which must guide the destinies of peoples and of humanity' Paul VI (1963-1978) proclaimed when addressing the United Nations in 1965 'War is an adventure without return,' John Paul II warned in his Christmas message in 1990. The church has repeatedly tried to mediate between warring parties often with mixed results. In 1914-1918, the church encountered problems related to the patriotic commitments of Catholics who were on both sides, and this put it in an awkward position. How can one reconcile such opposing views? In 1937, Nazi anti-Semitism led Pope Pius XI to pick sides clearly and condemn the doctrine of Nazism in the encyclical 'Mit brennender Sorge',² but the more conciliatory attitude of his successor during the war was criticized.

If, as a general rule, the Catholic Church sought to develop peace and avoid war, it was not always listened to. However it remains an important moral agent in contemporary international life.

All the terrible conflicts that have shaken the world since the beginning of last century have led the Catholic Church to define a concept of a 'just war': If one refers to the 'Catechism of the Catholic Church' (No. 2308-2309), the texts of Vatican II ('Gaudium et Spes' in particular) and to the speeches of recent Popes, the use of force, and so war, can be considered legitimate in certain carefully specified cases:

- war must serve a just cause and exclusively defend a common good.
- it must be prompted by an upright intention (to redress an unfair situation).
- It is up to the legitimate authority, the State to decide on war, as it is responsible for the common good and must oppose force to violence.
- war should only be used as a last resort after exhausting all other means.
- it can be declared only if victory is a reasonable probability.
- the means used must be proportional what is at stake. War should not lead to greater evils than those it seeks to remedy.

¹ Named after Donatus Bishop of Carthage in the fourth century who brought about a schism in the African Church by saying that the validity of the sacraments depended on the holiness of the person who distributed them.

² Which means 'With burning anxiety'. This Encyclical was written in 1937 in German, which is exceptional.

THE JUDICIAL DOCTRINE

The judicial literature on the subject of war goes by two different names. The first term (*maghazi, ghazawat*) derives from GHZW referring to the conquest (*ghazw, razzia*), whereas the second derives from SYR. and may be understood in two different but complementary ways: either getting troops on the move (*sayr*) or studying the behaviour of the Prophet and his disciples during their wars so as to deduce laws from it. It was the second pronunciation (*siyar*) that prevailed in most of the books of law about war with authors like Al-Fazari, Al-Awai and above all Al-Shaybani, in the seventh and eighth centuries. That literature deals with the way in which Muslim leaders led their armies and with the typically ideal types of behaviour (*sira/pl. siyar*) related to questions of army command, frontiers and pacts or truces with the enemy as well as questions broaching the problem of the fate of prisoners of war and the wounded, the sharing of loot, or trade between belligerents in wartime. Of all the authors of that period and those immediately following, Al-Shaybani, who was one of the founders of the Hanafite school, distinguished himself as a real thinker who codified war jurisprudence. Nicknamed the Grotius of Islam in the Orientalist tradition, he took an interest not only in the motives of war but also in the role of law in warfare, in common with the Western jurists of the seventeenth century, Grotius in particular, who usually made a distinction between the *jus ad bellum* (right to war) and the *jus in bello* (right in war), thus paving the way for a consideration of humanitarian questions during conflicts. With al-Shaybani and his debates and discussions with the other specialists of the Prophet's and his successors' military expeditions there appears, from a judicial point of view, a representation of territoriality defined in political and religious terms: the territory of peace or islam (*dar al-islam*) on the one hand and the territory of war or impiety (*dar al-harb*) on the other, with the possibility of having buffer territories, defined as part of the pact (*ahd*) or truce (*sulh*). Generally speaking, in this judicial literature, war is considered as a duty falling on the community and not on the individual (*fard kifaya*), and it is to be conducted under the authority of the prince or his representative. That is why it serves the political, even though the latter, as it is defined everywhere in this kind of literature, which makes belief the fundamental criterion for warfare, is in turn subject to theological imperatives.

War, according to that doctrine, must serve what is called the *dawa*, the propagation of the message of Islam, which is no longer conciliatory but is carried out through a military confrontation. From that point of view, the 'Other' from a religious point of view, if he is a polytheist (*mushrik*), is encouraged to convert to Islam, and if he refuses, war is waged against him, or he is incited to pay tribute if he belongs to the People of the Book (Jews, Christians). In this second case, he is given the opportunity to join the Islamic territory and he is granted protection – 'dhimma'. Apart from that first category of enemies abroad, the judicial writings also refer to enemies at home, who fall into three categories: dissidents, apostates and bandits. Two fundamental remarks are required here to grasp the contents of these doctrines.

1) The first concerns the context in which they were elaborated – roughly at the end of the Umayyad period (662-756) and especially at the beginning of the Abbasid Caliphate (756-1258). Most of the jurists previously mentioned, as well as those who were the founders of famous law schools (Malik, Abu Hanifa, Shafii and Ibn Hanbal) lived in the eighth and early ninth centuries.¹¹ Concurrently, some of them were members of the Caliphate administration, like Al-Shaybani who was appointed judge of the city of Ar-Raqqah by Harun al-Rashid. Historically, this context may be described as one of the highlights of political, military and cultural triumph of Islam. It followed the major events of the Great Controversy that took place in the middle of the seventh century, and the period of political power of the Umayyads, during which they were unable to erase completely the signs of divisions within the developing community, or to integrate culturally and politically the populations of the conquered provinces. Yet, the Abbasids inherited from the Umayyads this imperial orientation – the main characteristic of the regime – and it made them the inheritors of the great empires of Antiquity. It was therefore a context in which the Abbasids were at the height of their military, cultural and ideological glory (eighth century). That period is considered to be the continuation of the initial triumph of Islam, and above all of its extraordinary expansion. The dominant feeling of the period was that the divine promise had been fulfilled, that the nation of Islam had been chosen and reigned supreme over the other nations. The jurists of that period considered it as the continuation of the triumphs of Islam at its beginnings and thought they could perceive in it the confirmation of God's prediction. It led them to interpret the Quran in the light of the conquests and the *Fitna*, and they even went as far as to abrogate the judicial effect of several verses touching on an entente cordiale with other religions or relating war to injustice, in order to highlight the Verse of the Sword (9:5), which, removed from its original context, urges believers to 'slay the idolaters'.

It was because of this state of affairs that the historical paradigm that inspired the formalization of war jurisprudence was that of the conquests, expressing the military and theological supremacy of Islam over the conquered nations. Characterized by a normative bias, those texts seldom considered the possibility of the military weakness of the Muslim authorities, because for the princes to be successful in the *jihad* against unbelievers every year,¹² they had to be powerful from an economic, military and political point of view. Nothing could disturb that imperial vision of international relations but the threat of discord and of new divisions within the community. Hence the condemnation of rebellions and political opposition in these judicial texts, and above all in the collections of prophetic traditions devoted to discord.¹³ The conjunction of these two historical aspects (the establishment of the Empire and the painful memory of civil war) influenced the theory of war, which bore the stamp of that imperial and absolutist vision of power. From that viewpoint, the reflection on war is similar to the ideas developed by the Western jurists and theologians of the seventeenth century, who thought out the conditions for the limitation of the harmful effects of the Wars of Religion by defending

the kings' absolute powers. They also considered the conquest and discovery of new continents – America – as being a means of getting rid of internal war. In Islam, despite the nuances and differences we found within the judicial doctrines on the subject of war, these doctrines are at one with the glorification of the power of Islam on the one hand, and the fear of discord, on the other.

2) This leads us to claim that history was what inspired Islam's jurists, and that the reading of the Quran itself was overdetermined by the events of the conquest and of the civil war. This appears clearly through the transformations of such notions as 'jihad', which became synonymous with holy war,¹⁴ or 'fitna', which, in those texts, referred rather to discord and dissensions within the community than to the persecution of a religious group. Other notions like 'baghy' and 'adl' clearly show this transformation. While in the Quran they mean injustice and justice, and in one of the verses (49:9) the fight against the unjust is justified even though they are part of the community of believers, we note, alongside the jurists, a major transformation defining the just as individuals respecting and obeying the ruling power, and the unjust as those who have gone astray. That is why the historical paradigm used to understand that passage is the birth of the Kharijite group who embodied par excellence dissidence towards the ruler, in this case, Ali, the fourth caliph. The political condemnation of dissidence or mere opposition to the ruler was supported by a theological condemnation of rebellion. Thus the idea of *khuruj* – rebelling or acting as a dissident – is forbidden. From that major

historical transformation onwards, the just and the unjust no longer defined in terms of ethics but rather in terms of other criteria referring to their opposition or submission to the government of the ruling prince. This conforms exactly to the pattern of the warlords' absolute power, and the part played by the jurists was precisely to stop all possibility of rebellion or opposition to the ruling power, in order to maintain the group's cohesion and the fear of conflicts and dissensions.

3) Apart from this point, which has to do with the correlation between political theory and the right to war, there is a problem related to the definition of the notion of 'jihad' itself. The notion is always presented as a war against the 'Other' from a religious point of view. However, that vision is challenged by the previous points, since it is also a fight against groups considered as enemies inside *dar al-islam*. This theory of a fight against the enemy at home may even lead to the justification of war against firmly established Muslim States. We may give here as an example the *fatwa* issued by al-Ghazali (1058-1111) in the late eleventh century in favour of the Almoravide government in order to fight against the kings of the taifas who were considered as unbelievers responsible for the discord between citizens of al-Andalus. Even though that point had been noted by A. Moravia who defined it as a sort of inner form of *jihad*, he did not look for a translation for it other than 'holy war'.¹⁵ In fact, as Ibn Khaldun described it in the fourteenth century, the whole history of Islam shows that there were more wars among Muslims than between them and other religions. Consequently, is it still possible to carry on translating 'jihad' as holy war?

THE REACTIVATION OF *JIHAD* BY ISLAMISM IN THE PRESENT DAY AND SOME JURISTS' CRITICISM OF THIS

After the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, the end of the Caliphate and the emergence of numerous Arab-Muslim States in a context characterized by colonisation and decolonisation, the thinking on the subject of war was transformed due to the presence of a new political and international context. While the nationalist leaders who led the fight against colonisation in the Maghreb or the Mashriq sometimes considered their activities as a 'jihad' aiming at liberating the homeland, the real transformation of the thinking about war was initiated by Islamic thinkers¹⁶ who reacted in a negative way towards the notion of a nation-state and towards the secularization process that was starting to affect society in the Arab-Muslim world. Two authors, Maudoudi and Qotb, had considerable influence over the thinking on the subject of war in the twentieth century and even beyond. Of Indo-Pakistani origin, Maudoudi (1903-1979) led an intense fight

against the model of the nation-state of Western origin and advocated pan-Islamism instead. To him, 'Islam is a moral and political revolution aiming at the abolition of tyranny and injustice on earth. The duty of the Muslim is to 'clear humanity of oppression, meanness, disorder, immorality, tyranny and the illegal exploitation through the use of weapons. It is their objective to break the myth of semi-gods and false divinities and to reintroduce Right in the place of Wrong.'¹⁷ The theme of a global *jihad* appeared in the first half of the twentieth century, in countries on the way to being decolonized, in an attempt to block the introduction of the model of the nation-state and its government, its political system founded on parties, its laws and values, which he called semi-gods, resembling the idols Islam had struck down with all its might when it was founded. That is why Maudoudi considered that the terms offensive or defensive *jihad* did not make sense. 'The jihad in Islam is

offensive because it challenges hostile ideologies and it is defensive because Muslims have to become heads of states in order to propagate Islamic principles. Muslims have no homeland to fight for, they have principles to protect and fight for. They do not attack countries, but ideologies. Their objective is not to force people to give up their principles but to abolish the government which supports such principles.¹⁸

The second author, Sayed Qotb (1906-1966) may be considered as the most influential thinker among the Islamists of the Arab world in the twentieth century. A member of the Muslim Brothers movement, he wrote *In the shade of the Quran* in the early 1960s, in which he reactivated *jihad* as the basis of any political and social project. Inspired by Maudoudi's thinking, he undertook to fight against Nasserism and its ideological apparatus socialism, secularity, and the party. Qotb denounced twentieth century Muslim society as a pagan, ungodly society, similar to that of 'pre-Islamic ignorance'. He claimed that Muslims worshipped symbolic idols from abroad. He examined two notions 'hakimiyya' (power belongs to God alone) and 'ubudiyya' (worship belongs to God alone). By reason of a misuse of language, he quoted some verses from the Quran claiming that *hukm* belongs to God alone (12:40 for example) and analysed the notion of *hukm*, which meant 'judgement' in the Quran and in the Middle-Ages, by referring to its modern meaning, which is 'power'. Thanks to that shift in meaning, he could debase and condemn all human power on the pretext that it was different from God's power. The conception of the world expressed through this emphasis on God's monopoly on Sovereignty is a theocratic vision of power, in which men are considered as simple managers of the holy. Here Islam is considered as a total, comprehensive ideology. But what characterized Qotb's works was above all the fact he accused all Muslim and Western societies of impiety, and both his radical thinking and his activism led Nasser's regime to execute him in 1966 after a fifteen-year prison sentence.

Generally speaking, with Islamist thinkers, the theories about war rest on the idea that the real Islam was founded only in the seventh century with the Prophet and his companions, and that a new foundation is necessary after several centuries of obscurantism, ignorance and impiety. The programme of Islamization of society is faithful to the beginnings of Islam: the objective is to start with one's family and friends and end up with total warfare. Therefore, the founding period is considered as a creative and stirring utopia, and the representation of the Prophet's society as an ideal society results in the 'barbarizing' of contemporary society. Consequently, the *jihad* becomes part of a vision of the struggle against a barbaric and decadent society. The advocates of this radical model generally quote the Verse of the Sword (9:5), thanks to which medieval jurists justified the principle of perennial

warfare against the ungodly. Is it possible to draw a parallel between the jurists' theories on war in the Middle Ages and the Islamists' theories inspired by them? To answer that it is, would be seen as a most flattering simplification by the Islamists, since there are major differences. As far as the relation between violence and politics is concerned, the conception of the place of the State is different: in the classical texts, *jihad* is considered as a means the State can use, and the State has the monopoly on armed violence. On the other hand, with the Islamists, *jihad* becomes the instrument used to overthrow governments considered unreligious. While, for classical authors, war is the prerogative of the State, it is the instrument of its destruction for Islamists. Besides, the position of jurists in the Middle-Ages was extremely balanced regarding the definition of the enemy, since some of them considered that what justified the *casus belli* was a hostile and aggressive attitude, and not beliefs. As Ibn Rushd (Averroes) showed in his *Jurist's Primer*, it was Al-Shafi who had the greatest tendency to consider impiety as a justification of warfare and therefore, of all war jurisprudence.¹⁹ But beyond the question of the motive of war, what may be noted, as Ibn Rushd pointed out in his text, is that the jurists of that period unanimously banned the murder of their enemies' wives and children.²⁰ The reason is precisely a distinction between soldiers and civilians. Such a distinction, which considers that the enemy is the soldier, is at the basis of modern humanitarian rights, as one of its major concerns is the distinction between soldiers and the civilian populations who need to be protected.

Beyond such divergent opinions, the critical views of some contemporary jurists focused on the theory of political power and on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of dissidence. Therefore, the position of contemporary professionals of law was to establish a parallel between Islamist activists and the figure of the dissident, who was politically and theologically condemned, as shown above. The criticism of that radical conception of war also focused on the rehabilitation of the moral and spiritual sense of *jihad*, as demonstrated in two books about *jihad* in Islam, written by two Syrian jurists, a Sunni and a Shiite.²¹ These works were written after the events that took place in Egypt (the assassination of President El Sadat in 1981) and Algeria (in the 1990s). In spite of their legal conservatism and the references to outdated notions such as 'imamat', 'dar al-harb' and 'dar al-islam', these authors' approaches propose an inner criticism of jihadist doctrines, insofar as they work on the interpretation of the holy texts and start to think about peace in Islam and the nature of legitimate struggle. According to al-Buti for example, the latter should be defensive or a retort to displays of hostility. Therefore, the purpose of *jihad* is not conversion or expansion, but it is motivated by a counterattack to aggression, and considered as a just war aiming at protecting religious freedom or defending a territory.



Reflecting on the text

- > What changes has jihad undergone in the past 50 years?
- > Compare the three approaches to jihad that the author analyses.
- > What is his own analysis?
- > What is the difference between the pre-Islamic concept of “war” (harb) and that of “striving” (jihad) introduced by Islam?
- > Note the term’s twin “material” and “spiritual” meanings.
- > Is peace the opposite of or the culmination of jihad?
- > What is the “existential” meaning of jihad?
- > Does the Quran command war against others because of their beliefs?
- > Against what enemy is war waged in the name of Islam?
- > What distinction does the author make between “dogmatic condemnation” and “military action”?
- > Does Islam call for a “political” community or a “religious” one?
- > What scope is there for “legality in war” and “humanitarianism”?
- > What negative influence did the conquests have on Islamic principles?
- > How were the concepts of “just” and “unjust” distorted to meet the political authorities’ needs?
- > What link is there between the present-day “revival” of jihad and certain political and ideological agendas?
- > To what ends do Islamists use jihad?
- > How can the moral and spiritual meaning of jihad be rehabilitated?

¹ J. Habermas and J. Derrida, 2005, *Le ‘concept’ du 11 septembre*, Paris, Galilée.

² H. Redissi, 2004, *l’Exception islamique*, Paris, Seuil, p. 83.

³ G. Kepel, 2004, *Fitna. Guerre au cœur de l’islam*, Paris, Gallimard, p. 335.

⁴ Authors of two books bearing the same title, *Le Jihad en Islam*, see below.

⁵ Ibn al-Muqaffa, 1991, *Al-Adab al-kabir [Great Ethics]*, Sousse, Dar al-Maarif, p. 128.

⁶ See verses 9:20; 41: 88 and 49:15.

⁷ See for example verses 3:52, and 16:110.

⁸ This does not mean that looting disappeared from warfare, but it became strictly controlled and dependent on the warlord’s authority.

⁹ See for example 60: 8-9.

¹⁰ See capital verse 49:14 : ‘The dwellers of the desert say: We believe. Say: You believe not, but say, We submit; and faith has not yet entered into your hearts.’

¹¹ In Shi’ism, which suffered political persecutions until the advent of the Buyid dynasties in Baghdad and Fatimid dynasties in Tunisia then in Egypt, the right of war was not mentioned until much later, around the 10th century, with jurists like Ibn Babawyh al-Qummi and al-Nu’man.

¹² It is one of the rules determined by jurists for the political powers.

¹³ A historical and theological genre called ‘al-fitan wa l-malahim’ (discords and dissensions) appeared for a type of literature announcing the end of time following internal divisions, civil wars and the end of all form of political and military security.

¹⁴ Here, this notion refers to any war fought for the triumph of religion.

¹⁵ A. Morabia, 1993, *Le Jihad dans l’Islam médiéval : le ‘combat sacré’ des origines au XII^e siècle*, Paris, Albin Michel.

¹⁶ This notion refers to those who relied on an interpretation of the history of Islam or of the holy texts to fulfil an ideological and political programme, disregarding whether this led to violence or not. This definition integrates all the well-known historical movements, from the Muslim Brothers, the Jamaa islamiyya in Egypt, to the wahhabis and neo-salafis in Saudi-Arabia, Pakistan or Algeria.

¹⁷ A. Al Maudoudi, 1989, *Le Jihad en Islam [Speech given on April 13, 1939 in the Town Hall of Lahore]*, Firminy, CEDI, p. 10.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 12.

¹⁹ Ibn Rushd, 1999, *Bidayat al-mujtahid*, Beirut, Dar Ibn Hazm, p. 315.

²⁰ Ibn Rushd, 1999, p 314. See also the following debate about old people, peasants, workers and other categories of society who had been dismissed from the battlefield because they could not be considered as enemies despite their ungodly beliefs.

²¹ Al-Buti, 1997, *Al-Jihad fi l-Islam*, Damas, Dar al-fikr al-muasir; Al-Shaykh al-Rikabi, 1997, *Al-Jihad fi l-Islam*, Damas, Dar al-fikr al-muasir.



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THE NOTION OF PEACE IN ARABIC MIRRORS FOR PRINCES

ONE OF THE DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE BOOKS ON *ADAB SULTANIYYA* (MIRRORS FOR PRINCES) IS THAT THEY DID NOT SIMPLY GIVE THE PRINCE SPIRITUAL ADVICE AND REMIND HIM OF THE CONDUCT IN ACCORDANCE WITH RELIGIOUS LAW. SUCH CONTENTS CAN INDEED BE FOUND WITH SOME WRITERS, BUT MOST OF THEM CONSIDERED THE GENRE AS EQUIVALENT TO POLITICAL SCIENCE, WHOSE RULES AND PRECEPTS WERE TO BE DRAWN FROM THE HISTORY OF GREAT EMPIRES AND GREAT KINGS, IN PARTICULAR AMONG THE PERSIANS AND THE GREEKS. WAR IS A CENTRAL THEME IN THESE TEXTS, BUT IT IS CONSIDERED NEGATIVELY: THEY DISCUSS THE MEANS TO AVOID WAR, AS IT REPRESENTS A KIND OF EXCEPTION FROM A NORMAL STATE OF PEACE AND SECURITY. THE MEDICAL PARADIGM THUS ENABLES ONE TO GRASP THE NATURE OF WAR IN ITS RELATION TO POLITICS, AND SHOWS THAT IT IS ONLY A CURE FOR THE ANOMALIES THAT MAY AFFECT THE BODY POLITIC. AS IN THE UNIVERSAL TRADITION OF MIRRORS FOR PRINCES, THE DESCRIPTION OF THE VIRTUES OF THE LEADER CONSTITUTES THE FOUNDATION OF THE GENRE IN TREATISES WRITTEN IN ARABIC. THE TEXTS GENERALLY INSIST ON ETHICAL EXEMPLARITY AND JUSTICE AS THE CORNERSTONE OF ALL THE QUALITIES OF THE PERFECT PRINCE. THE WISH TO AVOID GOING TO WAR AT ALL COSTS ALSO CONVEYS A VISION THAT SEEKS TO HUMANISE WAR. THE AUTHORS TAKE NOT THE FORCE OF WEAPONS BUT THE FORCE OF INTELLIGENCE AS THE ABSOLUTE CRITERION OF SUCCESS OR FAILURE IN WAR. THE IMPORTANCE OF STRATAGEMS IN THIS TRADITION FITS INTO A UNIVERSAL LITERATURE DATING BACK TO THE ANTIQUITY AND PRAISING POLITICIANS AND STRATEGISTS WHO WERE ABLE TO ACHIEVE VICTORY THANKS TO INTELLIGENCE RATHER THAN FORCE. IT MAY BE CONSIDERED AS A TRADITION THAT DEFINES WAR IN RELATION TO NON WAR, RECALLING THE CHINESE TRADITION ILLUSTRATED BY SUN TZU'S *ART OF WAR*.

The tradition of Mirrors for Princes emerged very early in the history of Islam, at the end of the Umayyad dynasty and the beginning of the Abbasid dynasty, with texts translated from Greek or Persian. Three major texts shaped what was to become the political science of the Arabs and would be referred to as the *adab sultaniyya* (the conduct of power) or the *adab al-muluk* (the conduct of Kings). The first text is *The Letters of Aristotle to Alexander the Great*, a selection of texts wrongly attributed to Aristotle and collected by Salim Abu l-Ala, a secretary of the Umayyad administration, at the beginning of the eighth century.¹ One of these texts, 'Aristotle's letter to Alexander the Great about politics towards cities', was often included in manuscripts dealing with

politics together with the famous *Secret of Secrets*, which enjoyed a long period of success in the Orient and the Occident during the Middle Ages. The second text is a collection of Indian fables translated by Ibn al-Muqaffa (720-757) in the middle of the eighth century and completed by an introduction evoking the figure of Alexander the Great and his conquest of India. The last text is *The Testament of Ardashir*, written in the third century by a Sassanid king who managed to unite the royal power in Persia after many centuries of political crises and fragmentation of power. Ardashir handed down to his son a *Testament* containing numerous maxims on the art of governing, which was later used by Abbasid caliphs as a handbook of political science.

The entire tradition of Arabic Mirrors for Princes, which lasted up to the Ottomans, is indebted to these founding texts, which open up a real reflection on kingship (*al-mulk*), power (*al-sultan*) and government (*siyasa, tadbir*). One of the distinctive features of the books on *adab sultaniyya* that appeared in the wake of these founding texts is that unlike the western Mirrors of the Middle Ages, they did not simply give the prince spiritual advice and remind him of the conduct in accordance with religious law. Such contents can indeed be found with some writers,² but most writers of this tradition considered the genre as equivalent to political science, whose rules and precepts were to be drawn from the history of great empires and great kings, in particular among the Greeks and the Persians. Such a positive and pragmatic orientation of these handbooks on the art of governing accounts for a major difference between these and Western Mirror treatises, a difference which boils down to the question of war. For while this question was practically absent in Western texts, and while Machiavelli deeply shocked political and philosophical tradition when he painted a new portrait of the prince, henceforth armed and chiefly concerned with war, in the Arab tradition the theme was already a central one in the writing of Mirrors as early as the eighth century. In certain texts, as for example in *The Book of the Crown* attributed to al-Jahiz, or *The Book of Politics*, by al-Muradi, the eleventh century Andalusian writer, one can indeed find short chapters on war and on the importance of stratagems in military strategy. In larger

treatises like *The Lamp for the Princes* by Andalusian al-Turtushi (1059-1126) or *Traces of the Ancients in the Preservation of the States* by al-Abbasi (d. 1316), the theme of war takes up much more room,³ while other works deal exclusively with military strategy, weapons and stratagems employed by the great monarchs to defeat their enemies at a lesser cost. *Luf al-tadbir fi siyasat al-muluk* (The Delicateness of Management in the Policies of Kings), written by al-Iskafi (d. 1029), and *Mukhtasar siyasat al-hurub* (Précis on the Conduct of War), written by al-Harhami, one of the generals of al-Mamun (786-833), and dedicated to the latter, are among such works. Finally, there is a certain number of books specialized in the art of warfare, which are close to the Mirror genre. One example is al-Harawi's *Discussion on the Stratagems of War*, addressed at the beginning of the thirteenth century to one of the Ayyubid princes who succeeded Saladin, or al-Ansari's *Manual of War* addressed to one of the Mamluk sultans of Egypt in the fourteenth century. Drawing on the spirit of the *adab sultaniyya*, particularly as far as the themes of advice, the prince's skills, and spying are concerned, these two texts offer valuable information on strategy, army divisions and, among other things, assault, defence and siege techniques. One can see here the importance of the mobilization of such sciences as chemistry, dynamics and the use of mechanical devices (*hiyal*), as well as that of veterinary knowledge needed to look after and care for horses. The approach of the writers of these warfare handbooks is that of specialists



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of the art of warfare, as is the case with al-Harthami, al-Mamun's general, or of the scholars who worked as secretaries and knew the machinery of state very well. Thus, it is more of a scientific and positive approach to warfare, essentially based on the history of great politicians and the ways they founded their empires, got rid of their enemies or remained in power.

Of course, these writers sometimes quote the holy texts or mention the point of view of religious law on lying in warfare or the moral status of stratagems. However, their approach remains distinct from that of jurists who often relate war to the history of Islam, especially the Conquests and the civil war. To illustrate this divergence in the treatment of the topic of war, one may quote an important passage in which al-Abbasi defines war as an accident affecting the lives of states just as diseases affect the body. In the seventh chapter of the part devoted to war, he gives the following definition of it: "*Wars are like diseases that occur by accident in time, just as being safe and sound represents bodily health. Thus, health should be preserved thanks to political matters and, when a disease breaks out, thanks to warfare matters. However, applying oneself to preserve health so as not to cause a disease is preferable to neglecting this task.*"⁴ This definition of war shows that it represents a kind of exception from a normal state of peace and security. The medical paradigm thus enables one to grasp the nature of war in its relation to politics, and shows that it is only a cure

for the anomalies that may affect the body politic. The description of the different sorts of wars, in the same chapter, confirms this scientific way of dealing with war and peace, as wars are divided into seven types: 1) war aimed at founding a state, 2) war aimed at strengthening a burgeoning state, 3) war that a just state wages against an unjust state, that is a war waged against dissidents and rebels, 4) war between two religious communities, 5) annexation by one state or a kingdom of another state or kingdom, be they just or unjust, 6) looting and plundering for no political purpose, 7) tribal wars fought for trivial causes.

This typology views war as a universal human phenomenon and, as the developments in the different chapters show, calls on universal human history, regardless of moral or religious categories, on the simple grounds of historical observation of the wars fought by peoples and states. This does not mean that no ethical horizon determines these writers' reflections. On the contrary, according to their texts, the prince has to follow certain rules deduced from the examination of the conduct of the great monarchs of antiquity and Islam, even though his actions are guided by the context, the situation and the contingent elements of history rather than by obedience to a preset or enforced norm. This absence of obedience to a prescribed norm enables one to get the measure of the very nature of political and military art, which is fundamentally contingent.



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Insert written by Jacques Nicolaus

Other times, other places

An unfair peace: The Munich Agreement

In September 1938, Daladier, Chamberlain, Mussolini and Hitler¹ met in Munich to settle the fate of the Sudetenland. The Sudetenland was a part of Czechoslovakia along the border between Czechoslovakia, Germany and Austria,² which Hitler had just annexed. The Sudetenland was mainly inhabited by a German minority who had long lived there and were in Hitler's opinion victimized by the Czechs.³ The Führer called for the annexation of these territories by Germany. The four statesmen eventually reached an agreement. The Sudetenland was assigned to Germany, and the Czechs who lived there had to evacuate immediately. It was a great victory for Hitler. Daladier and Chamberlain made enormous concessions, thinking it would save peace. On September 30, 1938, the headlines of *Le Figaro* went: 'Peace is saved', and *Paris-Soir*: 'Peace!' It was an important event regarded as positive (peace as the supreme value). One could also read 'Daladier at *Le Bourget*: a huge crowd to acclaim him'. But the Munich Agreement was a fool's deal and a defeat, all the more severe as it took place without a fight.

How can the attitude of the French and British leaders be accounted for? Things were not all that simple: according to the newspapers, Daladier was acclaimed at *Le Bourget* by a 'huge crowd', as the carnage of the First World War had significantly developed pacifism. Daladier followed Chamberlain's policy of 'appeasement' in order to reinforce his solidarity with England and not risk the diplomatic isolation of France. After all, these politicians, who had been democratically elected, represented quite accurately the state of mind of public opinion, averse to another war. However, these arguments did not weigh heavy in front of the cession⁴ of a democratic country to the Nazis. Moreover, how could the Jewish community in Czechoslovakia, an estimated 90,000 people according to a census conducted in 1941, possibly have been abandoned to Nazi anti-Semitism?⁵ There were few immediate reactions against this Agreement. Chamberlain thought that Hitler was a 'gentleman' who would be true to his commitments. He was quickly disillusioned. Daladier was rather against this Agreement, but he did not want to risk being forsaken by England; Leon Blum was a pacifist, but was aware of the disaster. Churchill was the most clear-sighted of the statesmen at the time and strongly disapproved of the Agreement. The Munich Agreement is now unanimously condemned as an unjustified abandonment. It is a typical example of an unjust peace.

¹ Respectively the French Prime Minister, the British Prime Minister, Italy's Duce and the German Führer. That is, the 'Anschluss', which had been prohibited by the Treaty of Versailles. France and England had not responded.

² Czechoslovakia, established in 1919 following the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire signed a treaty of alliance with France and England. This was a centrepiece of the Little Entente, an alliance designed to prevent any German attempt at revenge. Czechoslovakia was an industrial power and a liberal democracy.

³ This abandonment was all the more appalling as it was carried out without prior consultation with the Czechoslovakian leaders and in spite of the solemn commitments of the treaties that had been signed.

⁴ On March 15, 1939, the Nazis occupied the rest of Bohemia (now the Czech Republic) without any reaction from the English and the French.

The Munich Agreement, September 1938: Documents

'War is a fearful thing and we must be very clear, before we embark on it, that it is really the great issues that are at stake'.

Neville Chamberlain, radio broadcast, September 27, 1938.

'The war is probably ruled out. But in such conditions as I who have been relentlessly fighting for peace can feel no joy and am torn between cowardly relief and shame'.

Leon Blum, in *Le Populaire*.

'The partition of Czechoslovakia under pressure from England and France amounts to the complete surrender of the Western Democracies to the Nazi threat of force. Such a collapse will bring peace or security neither to England nor to France. On the contrary, it will place these two nations in an even weaker and more dangerous situation. The mere neutralisation of Czechoslovakia means the liberation of twenty-five German divisions, which will threaten the Western front; in addition to which it will open up for the triumphant Nazis the road to the Black Sea... The belief that security can be obtained by throwing a small State to the wolves is a fatal delusion... They had the choice between dishonour and war. They chose dishonour. And they will have war'.

Winston Churchill, statement to the press, September 21, 1938



THE PRINCE'S WEAPONS IN THE MIRRORS

As in the universal tradition of Mirrors for Princes, the description of the virtues of the leader constitutes the foundation of the genre in treatises written in Arabic. The texts generally insist on ethical exemplarity and justice as the cornerstone of all the qualities of the perfect prince. Over and above its ethical content, the virtue of justice is presented by al-Mawardi, among other writers, as one of the major weapons a prince can resort to in war. Victory over his enemies may depend on his conduct in regard to his subjects, depending on whether they consider it 'just' or 'unjust'. There are three possible scenarios: in the first one, the prince is more just than his enemy, and behaves properly towards his subjects. In this case, he can be sure of victory. In the second scenario, the enemy outmatches him in terms of justice and honest behaviour towards the subjects: the prince can be sure that his military undertakings will be compromised by a population waiting for the right moment to get rid of him. The third scenario characterised by a balance of forces between the prince and his enemy (the forces being justice and honest behaviour), and calls for the consideration of the *hal al-zaman wa l-awan*, 'the quality of time and the state of the collaborators'.⁵ According to these developments, the chances of success or failure in war depend on the ethic exemplarity of the prince and the state of justice in his estates. Thus, it is only when there is a balance in what is the basic criterion for winning or losing a war (that is, justice and upright behaviour) that an exogenous factor connected with the historical circumstances and context of the conflict emerges and comes into play.

Besides justice, prudence is the virtue most directly related to the question of war and peace in the Mirrors. Of course, this virtue contains elements, like proper deliberation and a long experience of human matters, the characteristics of *phronimos* as described in Book 6 of *The Nicomachean Ethics*. However, in addition to this aspect, one can see a shift in this virtue towards a specific meaning relating to circumspection and even mistrust and suspicion. Most treatises on the art of warfare open with a chapter urging the prince to show prudence and suspicion even when he feels firmly established in his estates. The authors generally write an introduction to these treatises on the developments

of the '*hadbar*', the fact of being cautious about something, of being constantly watchful and wary. The prince must always be vigilant even when the situation is completely safe; he must be suspicious of his soldiers and generals, and not place too much trust in them, and he must be prepared for a possible betrayal on the part of his collaborators. The choice of this virtue, which can be considered as the cardinal virtue of the political chief, may be accounted for by the overall view of humanity pervading the texts of Mirrors. Although no pessimistic or optimistic anthropology describes human beings as naturally good or evil, the authors insist on the idea that they are constantly tormented by baser instincts that often prevent them from acting as reason dictates. These considerations on human nature do not necessarily imply an essentialization of human beings, but such passions as the craving for glory, jealousy and envy are constantly at work and not easily stifled, especially in political circles. Because evil passions are rooted in human nature, all political constructions are artificial and carry within them the seeds of their own destruction. As Ibn al-Maqaḥfa's, al-Turtushi's or al-Mawardi's texts show, the feeling of envy is what is most often described as the source of a whole range of actions and types of behaviour responsible for permanent conflicts within society. These ontological considerations give rise to a vision present in the Mirrors, namely that conflict is permanent and latent within society. Therefore, in concrete terms, we live in a permanent state of war since conflicts are consubstantial with politics. The acute awareness of this phenomenon in the Mirrors leads the authors to think that political power is in constant need of maintenance and preservation. As the chapters on the preservation of power show, this implies that power suffers from some original flaw which requires that it be forever re-established, renewed and that this is more important which is more important than the simple fact of conquering or seizing it.

Knowledge of the nature of those human passions that are a constant source of conflict aiming both at constructing and deconstructing the political bonds encourages the prince to make warfare his primary concern. Suspecting the ambitions of his rivals both at home and abroad, he must be ready to face dangers,

Teaching proposals: living and thinking interculturality

<p><u>Understanding the text</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What differences are found in the advice to princes, in the West and the East?</i> • <i>Why would justice be an asset in the art of warfare?</i> • <i>Why would prudence be an asset in the art of warfare?</i> • <i>What evil passions are at the origin of conflict?</i> • <i>What is the role of information in the art of warfare?</i> • <i>Cite three strategies capable of ensuring peace.</i> • <i>What might humanize war?</i> 	<p><u>Educational exercises</u></p> <p>Critical analysis of newspapers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Ask the participants also to read the worksheet "Strain, struggle and strife".</i> • <i>Go around the table asking each participant to answer the question "What does the concept of jihad suggest to you"?</i> • <i>Start a discussion comparing concepts of jihad in the text and the preconceptions of the participants: stereotypes and prejudices.</i> • <i>Discussion with the group on the notion of peace and of the "just war"; exploration of their personal views on the subject.</i> • <i>Divide the participants into subgroups (four participants to each group).</i> • <i>Distribute newspaper articles dealing with a current conflict (one article per group and each group receives a different article).</i> • <i>Ask each group to read the article and to analyse it while comparing it with the outlook proposed in the text of the worksheet "The notion of peace in Arabic Mirrors for Princes".</i> • <i>Ask the participants to analyse what was not said in the article and why.</i> • <i>Each group presents and discusses their analysis in comparison with the texts.</i> • <i>General discussion on the notion of war and peace from the standpoint of the Arab-Muslim world. What media image and what changes in representations?</i>
<p><u>Entering into dialogue with the text</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Is it a good thing to teach princes how to make war?</i> • <i>Do you think that justice is always an asset in the art of warfare?</i> • <i>Do you think that prudence is necessarily an asset in the art of warfare?</i> • <i>Can one really prevent war by using the means proposed in the text?</i> • <i>Do you agree that duplicity can be a moral quality?</i> • <i>Classify by order of importance seven different reasons for making war and justify your classification.</i> • <i>Can war contribute to the development of society?</i> <p>Suggested teaching method: conceptualization</p> <p><i>A question is put to the group. All the participants draft individual answers on a sheet of paper. From these answers, they must produce a single term which they should establish as the key concept in their answers. The list of concepts is written out on the board. The moderator asks the participants if one of them would like to eliminate any particular concept. When a participant speaks against a concept, he or she must give reasons for his or her choice. The concept is discussed and then the group decides by a majority whether the concept is to be excluded or retained. A further criticism is proposed; a discussion ensues and is followed by a further decision. The discussion is over when there remains only one concept on the board. The corresponding answer is read out and consequently becomes the final answer. The group assesses its validity and the relevance of the concept used. An analytical discussion concludes the work on this question. If possible, start the process again with other questions. The group reviews the work and the exercise.</i></p>	

and, to do so, assemble the necessary means in preparation for the event of war. Controlling information occupies a central position in this strategic plan, and requires an excellent intelligence service (postal service, pigeon post) to ensure the fastest possible transmission of information. The same pragmatic rationality aimed at efficiency orients the developments about spies. Spies must be endowed with many qualities, such as a good knowledge of the language and geography of the country in which they work; they must be clever, sincere, cunning and capable of enduring what sufferings the enemy might inflict on them, should they be flushed out. Conversely, Mirrors warn the prince against possible betrayals on the part of spies, which explains why he must not let them be in touch with his soldiers. It is the only way to avoid the possibility

of a plot hatched by spies in possession of information liable to overthrow the government or the dynasty with the help of the army. Having spies who work independently from one another is also the only means for the prince to check the truth of the information brought by each of them. By pretending he knows nothing about what the spy is telling him and by merely listening to him without the least expression of joy, rage, anger or sorrow, the prince makes sure that the situation, thanks to his composure, remains in his control. For if the spy is working for both sides, the emotions the prince might betray will be exploited for the benefit of the other side. Finally, the prince must be aware that he too is being spied on and that only secrecy and an efficient counterespionage could help him govern the State properly.

THE PRINCE'S STRATEGY: TO WANT PEACE AND PREPARE FOR WAR

At this point in the study, one might think if we were dealing with a tradition that praises the merits of war, because it sees enemies everywhere and, to a large extent, reduces the art of governing to the art of stabilising the state and preserving power. But in fact, and in spite of this realistic policy based on the assembling of instruments of power, war must be considered as the last means the prince may resort to, and such means should only be resorted to when he has exhausted all the resources of intelligence and diplomacy which could enable him to solve the conflicts peacefully. This doctrine, which seeks all possible means of preventing the wheels of war from rolling, advocates a certain pacifism (avoid attacking other States, and provoking other rival princes) and a systematic resort to diplomatic means, without however rejecting the perspective of an intensification of the conflict and a declaration of war. This leads to the elaboration of a strategy to set up peace while insisting on the need to prepare constantly for war.

To illustrate these ideas, let us turn to an Andalusian writer of the eleventh century, al-Muradi, who dedicated a whole chapter of his book entitled *On Politics* to war and peace. He considers that there are three stages in the behaviour the king must adopt towards his enemies. First, the enemies must be treated properly, peacefully, with gentleness and forbearance. This first stage aims at not breaking the bonds between the two States because this would irremediably lead to an intensification of the conflict and to an exclusion of the third party that might help solve it. If the situation changes or if the enemy shows that he does want peace, if he persists in his aggressions, the prince must make a second move and opt for tactics, traps and stratagems such as, for

example, provoking internal sedition in order to weaken the enemy at home, or fighting through an intermediary. Although it may seem based on calculating self-interested rationality, this second stage of strategy shows how concerned the prince is with preserving his people and his army from the slaughtering inherent in war. In this respect, al-Muradi quotes the maxim found in many Mirrors which says that 'the monarch must exhaust all the possible means before going to war. For the wise men said that the clear-sighted ones are those who do not pitch into war as long as there are other ways of solving the conflict. For in war souls are wasted when other ways would only waste goods.'¹⁶ The last stage is the breaking of all possible bonds with the enemy and the absence of any means of finding a way out of the crisis, and this leads to war.

This threefold pattern can be found in almost all the books of Mirrors; it originates more particularly in *Kalila and Dimna*, in which most of the fables praise stratagem and intelligence and condemn the use of brute force and the recourse to blind violence. The wish to avoid going to war at all costs also conveys a vision that seeks to humanise war, and this may be viewed as great moral progress when compared to the time when these texts were written. One should point out that the humanization of war by no means suggests its suppression and replacement by a seraphic view praising the merits of peace under whatever conditions. As we made clear at the beginning of this study, there is a realistic view of politics based on the empirical knowledge of the passions that motivate human beings and spur them into action. The Mirrors are thus far from reflecting the idea of a pacifism unable to face up to the realities of war and politics. But at the same time they are poles

apart from a warmongering aggressive policy seeking actively to engage the enemy without quite considering the tragic consequences of such action. If war ontologically comes first according to these authors, if there is a latent state of nature in all human societies, we can contend that peace springs from war, which is why al-Muradi, for instance, claims that peace or reconciliation (*sulh*) is a form of war, because constructing peace may resemble Sisyphus' task, a real *jihad* in one of the classical meanings of the word.⁷ The decision

not to resort to war as long as conflicts can be solved by other means is even presented by al-Abbasi as a feature of the firmness of the prince's policies. 'The firmest monarch', he writes, 'does not solve problems with the enemy by resorting to fighting, as long as other ways are available.'⁸ According to this definition, which presents war as the continuation of politics, the prince must keep the military option as a last choice to which he can only resort when forced to.

STRATAGEMS AND APOLOGY OF NON-VIOLENCE

A famous saying by Muawiya (603-680), the founder of the Umayyad dynasty, goes like this: 'I do not apply my sword where my lash suffices, nor my lash where my tongue is enough. And even if there be one hair binding me to my fellow men, I do not let it break. When they pull, I loosen, and if they loosen, I pull.'⁹ This saying gave rise to a famous phrase, 'Muawiya's hair', which embodies the art of negotiation, and above all the desire never to break the bond with one's adversaries. It also suggests achieving one's ends thanks to stratagems, subtlety and gentleness. This major feature of political art, which all the texts of Mirrors support, shows the need for the prince to adapt his policies to the various situations, in order to fit into the contingencies of reality. This is why Muawiya is often mentioned in these texts as the model of the cunning and calculating monarch (*dahiya*). Along with other such figures as Vahram Gor, Alexander the Great or Khosrow Parviz, he provides the necessary historical matter for a reflection on stratagems. In *The Book of the Crown* attributed to al-Jahiz, the author even considers that 'resorting to stratagems in warfare is one of the rules of conduct for kings'.¹⁰

What characterizes the treatment of the theme of stratagems in the Mirrors is that the authors take not the force of weapons but the force of intelligence as the absolute criterion of success or failure in war. The importance of stratagems in this tradition fits into a universal literature dating back to the Antiquity and praising politicians and strategists who were able to achieve victory thanks to intelligence rather than force. How is this notion presented in the Arabic political tradition, and how does it fit in with the general strategic system? First, the notion of stratagem is not defined precisely, as the authors rather underline its protean character because it includes, as al-Muradi writes, all 'that thought and experience produce'.¹¹ Looking up the etymology of the word in Arabic, one can see that the

root HYL refers to the fact of turning around something so as to reach one's goal. It has to do with hedging, looking for roundabout ways, not getting straight to the point and using indirect means to achieve one's ends. Here are some of the kinds of behaviour mentioned by the authors of Mirrors, which may shed light on the contents of the notion:

- Using false documents,
- Corrupting the generals of the enemy and spreading confusion among his troops,
- Making him believe that other enemies conspire against him, so that he will turn all his attention and action away from the real enemy about to attack him,
- Manoeuvring under cover of darkness and in the utmost secrecy so that the enemy will not know from which side the attack will take place,

According to al-Muradi, the highest degree of strategy consists in seeming to be the exact opposite of what one really is.¹² The prince must look incompetent, silly, unintelligent, when in fact he is in complete control of the ins and outs of the fight. The gap between being and seeming is welcome in this sort of situation because it creates a surprise and has a totally unexpected effect. It is a form of hypocrisy and duplicity with nothing pejorative about it because it is not a question of feigning virtue or moral rectitude, but of showing the enemy that one is completely naive, overtaken by events and ignorant about warfare, when in fact one is controlling the situation perfectly and is just getting ready for the right moment to act efficiently.

Those few examples show that this world was Machiavellian before the word existed. Machiavelli's famous words stating that the prince must 'know how



Reflecting on the text

- > *What sources shaped the discipline that was to become the political science of the Arabs?*
 - > *What orientation is given to the art of governance?*
 - > *What place is given to war and according to what approach?*
 - > *What is the link between war and peace?*
 - > *War through the prism of human history.*
 - > *What are the virtues of a leader?*
 - > *What is a realistic strategy and what is it based on?*
 - > *How can a midway position be found between “pacifism” and “warmongering”?*
 - > *How can war be avoided thanks to the perspicacity of the prince?*
 - > *What links are there between morality and political and military behaviour?*
 - > *In what way do the texts of the “Arab Mirrors” connect with world literature on politics and war?*
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to make good use of the nature of the beast [and the nature of the man] resort to the metaphor of the lion and the fox to illustrate the attitude of the prince, “For the lion cannot defend itself from traps and the fox cannot protect itself from wolves. It is therefore necessary to be a fox in order to recognize the traps and a lion in order to frighten the wolves.”¹³ The lion and the fox represent the two criteria of the politician’s action, namely force and tactics, and, according to Machiavelli, it is because men are bad that princes may be justified in resorting to these two means and have the right to simulate and dissimulate. Machiavelli breaks new ground in Western political tradition because he describes what he calls the ‘effectual truth’ of politics, in spite of the Christian moral legacy and the teachings of humanism, both of which strongly opposed this vision of policies resorting to unfair behaviour to achieve their ends. How do things appear in the *adab sultaniyya*? Does the fact that resorting to stratagems leads to deception, hypocrisy or dissimulation mean that, in these texts, ethics are divorced from political and military behaviour?

In the Arab tradition of warfare, this question is seldom raised, but it does not mean that Islam as a religion approves of cheating, lying, being hypocritical, etc. On the contrary, in terms of religion, the positions of Islam and Christianity or other religions are the same. Moreover, the Mirrors call on a moral ideal which insists on the prince’s sincerity, on the need to keep one’s word, on ethical exemplarity, etc. But on the military level, resorting to deception is justified by the overall notion of war. For the resort to these means is justified by a pre-existing aggression or hostile relation which nothing but war can remedy. Al-Ansari, who is one of the few authors to give the question careful consideration, shows that the use of stratagems is as legitimate from the point of view of religious law as it is from the point of view of reason. As regards religion, a textual argument is available, a saying of the Prophet stating that ‘war is ruse’, which authors quote to justify the use of stratagems and deception in war. Stratagems are also justi-

fied thanks to rational arguments because, al-Ansari writes, all the wise men, all the Ancients agreed with the idea that winning without massacre and carnage, sparing the armies the sufferings of war was preferable to engaging in a fight whose consequences were always disastrous and whose outcome was uncertain.¹⁴

This leads us to the last point, the defence of the superiority of stratagems over force. In the wake of *Kalila and Dimna*, which is a real plea for their use, al-Muradi declares that subtle stratagems are more efficient than material means.¹⁵ Most authors, as is the case with al-Abbasi, like to quote the following lines by al-Mutanabbi, a famous poet of the tenth century known for the panegyrics in which he praises the virtues of Sayf al-Dawla, the Emir of Aleppo, described as a perfect prince. In these lines, al-Mutanabbi specifies the link between intelligence and force and their respective status:

*Judiciousness precedes the courage
of the courageous which is second
And when the two blend in one free soul it reaches
everywhere in the heavens.*

Thus, to those who wish to rank among great men, force alone does not suffice; it must be supported by intelligence. This shows that the texts of the Arabic Mirrors were closely akin to a universal literature which, since Antiquity, had described the beauty of stratagems, possibly because of the belief in the superiority of the mind over the body, of art over brute force, of subtlety over crude means. The cunning man is an expert schemer; he is clear-sighted, capable of anticipating the moves of his adversary, creating a surprise, winning thanks to means that are not considered to be important, trapping or deluding an enemy to get rid of him. All this is the product of a form of intellectual refinement that humanizes warfare and keeps it away from the barbarity resulting from the clash of weapons.



CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, it is important to bear in mind the significance of a tradition aiming at humanizing war by drawing on the universal principles of political science and by giving these principles a new lease of life which enables them to integrate into the founding texts of Western political modernity. If, for the Islamic jurists, this humanization involves a reflection on the laws of war – in particular as to the distinction between combatants and non-combatants (women, children, farmers, old people, etc.), the writers of the Mirrors relate the humanization of war to a different process, based on a strategic reflection turning on the will to avoid war. As such, it may be considered as a tradition that defines

war in relation to non war, recalling the Chinese tradition illustrated by Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. The major difference between these two traditions is that the description of the cosmological aspects the strategist must know and win over is missing in Arabic texts. But the two are similar in the will to assert the primacy of stratagem and intelligence over brute force, which makes them theories that, by acknowledging war to be a human phenomenon, can envisage its limitation, rather than vilify it on moral grounds, believing in its possible disappearance while at the same time ready to trigger off hostilities on the slightest pretext.



¹ See M. Grignaschi, 1965-1966, Les 'Rasâ'il Aristâtâfisa ila-l-Iskandar' de Sâlim Abû-l-'Alâ' et l'activité culturelle à l'époque omeyyade, *Bulletin d'Etudes Orientales*, Vol. 19, 1965-1966, pp. 7-83.

² It is the case with al-Ghazali's *Nasihât al-Muluk* (Advice to Kings). Contrary to a commonly held opinion, this text by no means embodies the spirit of the genre.

³ For more details about these texts, see Makram Abbas, 2009, *Islam et politique à l'âge classique*, Paris, PUF (Collection Philosophies), pp. 19-121.

⁴ Al-Abbasi, 1989, *Les traces des Anciens en matière de conservation des Etats*, Beirut, Dar al-Jil, p. 328.

⁵ Al-Mawardi, n.d., *Tashîl an-nazarî akhliq al-malik wa siyisat al-mulk* [Ethics of the Ruler and Governance of the Realm], ed. by R. al-Sayyid, Beirut, Dar al-ulum al-arabiya.

⁶ Al-Muradi, *Kitab al-siyasa* [On Politics], 1981, Casablanca, Dar al-thaqafa, p. 149.

⁷ Ibid. p. 150.

⁸ Al-Abbasi, 1989, op. cit., p. 328.

⁹ Al-Thaalibi, 1990, *Adab al-muluk* [Rules for Kings], Beirut, Dar al-gharb al-islami, p. 83.

¹⁰ Al-Jahiz, (pseudo-), 1914, *Kitab al-Taj* [The Book of the Crown], Cairo, Al-Khizana al-zakiyya, p. 175.

¹¹ Al-Muradi, 1981, op. cit., p. 156.

¹² Ibid., p. 157.

¹³ N. Machiavelli, 1984, *The Prince*, trans. and ed. by P. Bondanella and M. Musa, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 58

¹⁴ Al-Ansari, 1961, *Tafrij al-kurub fi tadbir al-hurub* [The End of Worries in the Conduct of Armies], Cairo, Manshurat al-jamia l-amarikiyya di l-qahira, p. 27.

¹⁵ Al-Muradi, 1981, op. cit., p. 156.



TIMELINE

This timeline is centred on the Arab-Muslim world. It is certainly not an exhaustive timeline and except for the Arab-Muslim world, it limited to facts and names with a direct or indirect link with this civilization, or those

mentioned in the pedagogical worksheets contained in the present publication. The objective is to give a general framework and some references milestones in time and space.

The Arab-Muslim world is on the centre of the timeline. It is divided into three parts: the Maghreb, Spain and Egypt; the Mashreq and Turkey; and finally, Persia and Central Asia.

This geographical rationale has been adopted in order to facilitate and simplify the chronological reading of the timeline. It is important to notice, however, that one event mentioned in a particular geographical area can obviously have repercussion in other geographical areas.

Events that concern the Arab-Muslim world are indicated with a green mark. ●

Lifespan of the mentioned figures is sketched with coloured lines according to the civilization to which they belong.

● 1805-1848: Mehemet Ali, vice king of Egypt ●

Events that concern the Western world are indicated with a blue mark. ●

● 1790-1832: Champollion ●

Events that concern the South and the East of the Arab-Muslim world are indicated with a red mark ●

● 1869-1948: Gandhi ●

Historical periods are indicated by means of thicker lines.

● 1281-1923: Ottoman Dynasty ●

Discontinued lines indicate more indeterminate periods.

● - - - Beginning of the Renaissance - - - ●



L'auteur

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