

## Translator's Introduction

Philosophical Instructions: An Introduction to Contemporary Islamic Philosophy is a textbook compiled for the purpose of introducing the students of the Islamic seminaries in Qom to the rudiments of Islamic philosophy. It is arranged in the form of seventy short lessons which cover the breadth of Islamic philosophy, including discussions of the history of philosophy, epistemology, metaphysics and philosophical theology.

The lectures were originally presented by the author to students and taped at the Dar Rah-e Haqq Institute in Qom in 1981 and 1982, the transcriptions of the tapes were revised and edited by Prof. Misbah and published in two volumes by the Islamic Propagation Organization in Qom. In the Persian edition, titled *Amuzesh-e Falsafeh*, first printed in 1985–86, each lesson is followed by a summary and review questions, but the lessons themselves are so concise that we decided to omit these materials from the translation.

The book was not written for an English speaking audience, and for this very reason it serves that audience as a very good introduction to Islamic philosophy as it is seen from within the seminaries of Qom. The author, Ayatullah Misbah Yazdi, is one of the most highly respected clerics in the Shi'i world, and a revered professor of philosophy.

His *Philosophical Instructions* is a unique work, not only because of its survey of the topics of Islamic philosophy, but because the author self-consciously attempts to defend his considered views from opponents at home and abroad. So, the work is polemical as well as instructional. What is defended is a controversial way of looking at Islamic philosophy as a foundation for religious thought.

Philosophy and the interpretation of the Qur'an, like mysticism, 'irfan, are looked upon with suspicion by many Shi'i clerics who teach Islamic law and jurisprudence, fiqh and usul, although the situation has improved somewhat since the Islamic Revolution due to the fact that Imam Khomeini promoted these areas of learning, and due to the esteem in which 'Allamah Tabataba'i is held, whose works in these areas have become standards. [1](#)

What are at issue are not so much the methods of philosophy as the doctrines with which it is associated

in the Islamic world. Among the scholars of Islam, philosophy is not merely a tradition of thought extending from ancient Greece, winding its way through the Neoplatonists, Muslims, Christians, modern Europeans and leading to the contemporary academic study of philosophy of science, religion, law and politics.

In the Muslim world, philosophy has always been more than a method and set of topics with a history; it has always demanded the acceptance of specific doctrines which have been considered by some to be inconsistent with Islam. The philosophers of Islam, like the sufis and the Shi'ah (and important thinkers often claimed allegiance to all three of these forms of esotericism), proposed non-literal interpretations of various verses of the Qur'an and narrations attributed to the Prophet and his folk (S). The reaction from the literal minded is predictable: charges of heresy, deviation and infidelity.

In the Qur'an, we seem to be presented with the concept of a personal, if not anthropomorphic deity, while the philosophers and sufis claimed that God is existence itself, or the truth of existence, or absolute existence, being. Islam apparently teaches that in the temporal period following death, various physical rewards and punishments are to be encountered.

The philosophers and sufis claimed that the rewards and punishments were somehow simultaneous with our current lives. The resurrection of the body has also been given various mystical and philosophical interpretations which are anathema to the literalists. The literalists are not to be dismissed as stubborn narrow minded people who insist on the authority of the Word of God over the use of human reason.

Christian fundamentalism does not find a precise analogue in Islam. In the quarrel with philosophy, both sides have employed subtle philosophical arguments to defend their positions, at least since the time of Ghazali (d. 1111). The charge of the literalists is often that it is unreasonable to interpret the scriptures as suggested by the mystics and philosophers, and no matter how much we might like to side with the non-literalists, it must be admitted that philosophers and mystics have often provided interpretations of the texts which are hard to swallow.

In the Shi'i milieu, however, esoteric interpretation of texts is an intrinsic part of orthodoxy, for the Imams ('a) themselves revealed various levels of esoteric knowledge passed down to them from the Prophet (S) along with their status of trusteeship (walayah). This esoteric knowledge pertains to the interpretation of the Qur'an and to doctrine, but it is rarely directly pertinent to the details of ritual law.

For the Shi'i scholars of the law, the fuqaha, whose business is providing clear textual evidence in support of legal judgments as to what actions are obligatory, recommendable, neutral, discouraged or forbidden, it is natural to develop a preference for a natural common sense reading of the texts. So, there is a hermeneutic tension to be found in the Shi'i seminaries.

On the one hand, there is a special sensitivity to the esoteric encouraged by the pronouncements of the Imams ('a), and on the other hand interest in the juristic studies fosters a tendency toward literalism and common sense reasoning. The situation is further complicated if we consider the split among the Shi'i

jurists into the Akhbariyyun and Usuliyyun.

With respect to exegesis, there are two fundamental issues dividing these two groups: first, how to distinguish authentic from inauthentic narrations attributed to the Prophet and his folk ('a), and second, how to derive juridical rulings on the basis of the authentic narrations. The Akhbariyyun tended to accept the entire corpus of ahadith or to adjudicate authenticity on the basis of the text of the narrations, while the Usuliyyun sought to derive the authenticity of a report first by estimating the reliability of its chain of transmission and then considering the text itself.

Once the authentic reports have been identified, the Akhbariyyun would let them speak for themselves to answer questions of law, while the Usuliyyun argued that various principles (usul) of jurisprudence must be used in order to provide answers to many legal questions, and in these principles common sense and reason are prominent.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Akhbariyyun had virtually disappeared, and the usuli attitude toward exegesis, favoring common sense and rationalism, has come to dominate not only studies of Islamic law and the principles of jurisprudence, but the Islamic sciences generally. The literalism associated with the study of the law is a moderate literalism that emphasizes the place of reason and common sense.

Philosophical Instructions displays a balance between usuli literalist and esoteric tendencies in the context of a defense of Islamic philosophy. The charge of misinterpreting sacred texts is obviated by the absence of any significant reliance on scripture at all. Reason, as understood from within the scholastic tradition of Shi'i learning, is the sole standard to which appeal is made, and it is recognized that scriptural language is often used in figurative ways so that esoteric interpretation dictated by reason must finally be accepted to reconcile philosophy with religion.

The Islamic philosophy defended is one that derives from the works of Sadr al-Din Shirazi (d. 1641), commonly known as Mulla Sadra and usually referred to in this work by the honorific title, Sadr al-Muta'allihin, the pride of the theosophists. Sadr al-Muta'allihin was himself a synthesizer who built a system called Hikmah al-Muta'aliyyah (transcendent theosophy) which includes elements of the thinking of Ibn Sina (d. 1037), Suhrawardi (d. 1191), Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) and such great Shi'i theologians as Khwajah Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 1274) and 'Allamah Hilli (1325), and he was also subjected to the assaults of those who considered his esoteric interpretations of doctrine to be heresy, to whom he exasperatingly responded with a pointed moral invective in his only Persian treatise.<sup>2</sup>

Sadra's influence gained ground only gradually after his death, but by the nineteenth century his thought had established itself among Shi'i students of philosophy, and the Sharh al-Manzumah of Hakim Sabzavari (d. 1878), which is in agreement with all of the major theses of Sadra's transcendent theosophy, became a standard text for students who privately studied philosophy in the seminaries.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the ulama were confronted by an increasing interest in Marxism among the youth, and they sought to meet this philosophical challenge with an elucidation of the

principles of transcendent theosophy. It is for this purpose that ‘Allamah Tabataba’i wrote his *Usul-e Falsafah va Ravish-e Ri’alism* (The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism) in Persian, and following his lead, in Najaf, Shahid Baqir Sadr wrote his *Falsafatuna* (Our Philosophy).<sup>3</sup>

‘Allamah Tabataba’i had studied philosophy in Najaf, and came to Qom shortly after World War II with the express intention of reforming the beliefs of the students of the seminaries and “combating the false doctrines of the materialists and others.” When he began openly teaching Mulla Sadra’s *Asfar*, the leading cleric of the time, Ayatullah Burujirdi threatened to cut off the stipends of ‘Allamah’s students.

Ayatullah Burujirdi confessed that he himself had studied the *Asfar*, but privately. He had no objection to the continuation of private lessons in philosophy, about the subject was considered dangerous, and it was feared that if publicly taught, it would give rise to unorthodox beliefs. ‘Allamah responded that after consulting the poetry of Afiz by random selection of a poem, he was convinced that he must not abandon his teaching. The poem beings:

*I am not the rascal to abandon,  
The beauty nor the goblet,  
The guard knows that this deed,  
I would not do.*

Furthermore, he explained that the students of the seminary did not arrive in a state of ideological purity, but were in need of such teaching to quell the doubts they already had and to prepare them for combat with materialism, and that for this reason he would continue his teaching unless officially ordered by Ayatullah Burujirdi to stop. After this, Ayatullah Burujirdi never again tried to interfere with ‘Allamah’s teaching, but thereafter always treated ‘Allamah with courtesy, and even gave him the gift of a fine copy of the Qur’an.<sup>4</sup>

The resistance to the public teaching of philosophy did not always stem from disagreement with philosophical principles, but often from religious scruples. It is considered a grave sin to weaken the faith of a Muslim, and philosophy has been viewed as being dangerous because it can plant doubts in the minds of the insufficiently subtle from which they may be unable to extricate themselves.

This idea is even expressed by Ibn Sina, who warns the casual reader not to read any further after the discussions of logic have been completed and philosophy is to begin in his *Remarks and Admonitions*.<sup>5</sup> It is not uncommon to find such warnings in the works of the philosophers and ‘urafa of Islam that a proper background and training is needed before a correct appreciation of the teaching can be expected. Indeed, was this not the point of the inscription above the door to the Academy?

In addition to the public teaching of philosophy, the ideological war between Marxism and Islam led to several innovations in Islamic philosophy. Until the twentieth century, works in Islamic philosophy were written in order to answer questions posed by Muslim thinkers within the context of Islamic culture.

No reference was made to modern European thought. With the threat of Marxism, however, Muslim philosophers addressed themselves to questions raised by the Europeans, especially to epistemological questions. While classical Islamic philosophy was primarily concerned with issues of metaphysics, an important feature of twentieth century Islamic philosophy is its attention to epistemology.

‘Allamah Tabataba’i’s *Usul-Falsafah* is the first work of Islamic philosophy to contain a prominent and extended discussion of the epistemological issues associated with modern Western (particularly Marxist) thought, and a similar sort of attention is given to the same issues in Baqir Sadr’s *Falsafatuna*. In these works, as in Prof. Misbah’s *Philosophical Instructions*, skepticism is attacked and the capacities of reason are defended. The modern European rationalists, with attention given primarily to Descartes, are clearly preferred to the empiricists and Kant.

Another reason for the attention given to modern European philosophy and its problems is that Western philosophy had begun to make its way into the curricula of the universities of the Islamic world (where Islamic philosophy, unfortunately, was, and, more unfortunately, continues to be, largely ignored), and translations of several works on European philosophy began to appear in Arabic and Persian.

One of the first traditional masters to study in the West in the twentieth century and return to the seminaries was Sayyid Muhammad Kazim ‘Assar, who studied in France and then taught at Najaf and later at the University of Tehran.<sup>6</sup> ‘Allamah Tabataba’i apparently became acquainted with Western philosophy through Arabic translations that had made their way to Najaf.

In Iran, Western philosophy was taught at the University of Tehran since its founding, roughly fifty years ago, and even earlier, among the Shi’i scholars, we have evidence that some discussions of Western philosophy were beginning.<sup>7</sup> Prof. Misbah also made use of the Persian translation of several volumes of Copleston’s history, and Furughi’s *Sayr-e Hikmat*, a three volume history of Western philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Although Furughi held a ministerial post in the government of Reza Shah (r. 1925–41), his work is widely esteemed for its accuracy and the introduction of the apparatus of scholarly references.

While the primary aim of ‘Allamah’s *Principles of Philosophy* was to meet the challenge of Marxism, one finds evidence in its pages of a deeper attention to Kant and Hume. So, ‘Allamah’s project of basing a reform of doctrine in the seminaries on transcendent theosophy was begun with an eye toward Western thought generally, and attention was also paid to the natural sciences.

Likewise, in *Philosophical Instructions* we find an attempt to provide a philosophical foundation for religious belief based on transcendent theosophy and able to quell the doubts of those acquainted with Western philosophy and science. In order to achieve these aims, certain departures from traditional Islamic philosophy are deemed necessary.

For example, for nearly a thousand years cosmology has held a central place in Islamic philosophy. The emanation of the world from Allah was held to occur by means of intermediary intellects, often identified with angels or associated with the celestial spheres. The rejection of the medieval system of the celestial

spheres by modern astronomy is an embarrassment to Islamic philosophy.

The solution posed in *Philosophical Instructions* is to remove astronomy from Islamic philosophy. Given its long association with the subject, however, this is no easy task. Some principle must be found from within the tradition of Islamic philosophy itself on the basis of which the excision can be justified.

The principle proposed in *Philosophical Instructions* is the exaltation of reason. Reason alone, it is held, is nearly sufficient to serve as a foundation for a philosophy capable of supporting religious doctrine. Furthermore, the only element in addition to reason that is needed can be found through introspection. The concerns of philosophy are solely with what can be discovered by reason and introspection alone. Whatever remains is to be conceded to the empirical sciences.

It may be helpful for the Western reader to compare the strategy employed here with some trends in Christian theology. In some ways, the program initiated by 'Allamah Tabataba'i and continued in *Philosophical Instructions* is similar to that of neo-Thomism, but with Sadr al-Muta'alihin playing the role of Aquinas.

In both theologies there is a defense of traditional proofs for the existence of God, or natural theology, presented in the context of a philosophical system that retains some features of Aristotelian thought as developed and modified within a religious tradition. In both theologies there is a defense of the ability of reason to justify religion.

If anything, the emphasis on reason is stronger in contemporary Islamic philosophy than among many neo-Thomists, and this is seen as an inherent advantage due to the superior rationality of Islamic doctrine in comparison to Christian beliefs. On the other hand, although liberal Protestant theology has tended to be skeptical about traditional philosophy, both the liberal Christian and the Muslim philosopher find themselves faced with a contradiction between medieval doctrine and the modern sciences.

Both respond with a protective strategy that would isolate religion from natural science, and both propose that introspection may serve as a focal center for religious thought. However, while introspection is seen by Schleiermacher (d. 1834) as a way to religious experience that is prior to and independent of both theoretical and practical reason, Prof. Misbah views introspection as a way to knowledge by direct apprehension of causal relations and their terms.

These direct apprehensions are then to be understood by means of the conceptual apparatus provided by pure reason. Liberal Protestant theology came to emphasize religious experience and faith, and to disparage reason as fallen and sinful. Islamic philosophy, on the other hand, makes an appeal to the standards of reason, without which religious belief could be dismissed as ungrounded, supplemented with knowledge by presence.

Both Schleiermacher and Prof. Misbah find a complete dependency of human existence through introspection, but while Schleiermacher would eschew the doctrines of any philosophical theology in

favor of the experience of this dependency, Prof. Misbah finds through introspection all the data needed to complete a natural theology consonant with transcendent theosophy in which the existence of God is to be proved through rational reflection on direct acquaintance with existence itself.

- [1.](#) His interpretation of the Qur'an is the twenty volume *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* (Tehran: Dar al-Kitab al-Islamiyyah, n.d.). The English translation by Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi, has reached eight volumes published in Tehran by the World Organization for Islamic Services, the first volume of which appeared in 1983. His major philosophical texts are *Bidayah al-Hikmah* and *Nihayah al-Hikmah* both published in Qom by Mu'assisah al-Nashr al-Islami and by Daftar Tablighat Islami. A. Q. Qara'i has translated the former which has been serialized in Vols. IX–XI of the journal *Al-Tawhid*. While 'Allamah has not written any systematic work in Islamic mysticism, his views pertaining to this topic have been influential in the works of Ayatullah Javadi Amuli and Ayatullah Husayni Tehrani.
- [2.](#) *Seh Asl (Three Roots [of Evil])*, ed., Seyyid Hossein Nasr, (Tehran: University of Tehran Press).
- [3.](#) 'Allamah Tabataba'i's *Usul-e Falsafah va Ravish-e Ri'alism*, 2nd ed. (Tehran: Sadra, 1368/1989) with the extensive annotations of Shahid Mutahhari was completed in 1332/1953. Baqir Sadr's *Fasafatuna*, 10th ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Ta'aruf, 1980) was completed in A. H. L. 1379 (c. 1959).
- [4.](#) See 'Allamah Ayatullah Sayyid Muhammad Husayni Tehrani, *Mihr-e Taban* (Tehran: Baqir al-'Ulum, n.d.), pp. 60–62.
- [5.](#) Ibn Sina, *Al-Isharat wa al-Tanbihat*, ed. Sulayman Dunya, (Beirut: Mu'assassah al-Nu'man 1413/1992), Vol. II, p. 147.
- [6.](#) See the article on Islamic philosophy in modern Persia by Mehdi Aminrazavi in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 2 vols., ed., Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 1995), 1037–1050.
- [7.](#) A few pages are devoted to a discussion of modern Western philosophy in the *Risa'il Hikmiyyah* of Ayatullah Mirza 'Ali Akbar Mudarris Yazdi Hakami (d. A. H. L. 1344 (c. 1926), (Tehran: Vizarat-e Irshad-e Islami, 1365/1986).
- [8.](#) Muhammad 'Ali Furughi, *Sayr-e Hikmat dar Urupa (The Course of Philosophy in Europe)*, (Tehran: Zavar, 1360/1981).

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