

[Home](#) > [Contemporary Topics of Islamic Thought](#) > Human Thought, Divine Wisdom, And Islamic Philosophy

Human Thought, Divine Wisdom, And Islamic Philosophy

In order to steer a middle course between two extreme positions to be found among contemporary Muslim thinkers similar to hard rationalism and fideism in Christian thought, it is suggested that reflection on the universality of philosophical speculation with respect to religion reveals that the rational philosophical defense of religious thought should not be abandoned, but that philosophy must be understood as including much more than that which is associated with the famous ancient Greek philosophers and their legacy.

In order for Islamic philosophy to flourish and to serve Islam, it should be developed beyond the confines of its own heritage without neglecting that valuable heritage. It should aspire to the wisdom and humility exhibited by the prophets, ever since Hadrat Adam, peace be with all of them.

The word 'philosophy' is derived from Greek, but what is denoted by this word is something whose origins cannot be confined to the Greek city-states of the millennium before the life of Hadrat 'Isa, not even if we construe philosophy rather narrowly.

Often, Thales of Miletus (c. 640–546 B.C.) is taken to be the first philosopher of ancient Greece. A descendant of Phoenician immigrants to Greece, he taught that even stones and seemingly dead matter were full of life. He had a mystic's appreciation of nature, and claimed that everything was full of gods.

Some historians conjecture that his most famous belief, “that the universe began from water”, was something he adopted from Egyptian lore.¹ Regardless of whether or not it is proper to regard Thales as the first ancient Greek philosopher, we can be sure that he was not known by the term 'philosopher' in his own time, for the term was coined by followers of one of the most important students of Thales, Pythagoras.

Thus the inventors of the word 'philosophy' were the members of a secret cult of ascetic mystics, the Pythagoreans.

Ancient Greek philosophy is often divided between pre-Socratic philosophy and that which came afterward. Others consider Socrates to have been the first real Greek philosopher. In either case, Socrates is certainly one of the most important of the ancient Greeks to have become known as a philosopher, that is, a lover of wisdom.

While the etymology of the word philosophy provides some clue to its proper meaning, this meaning has become rather more specific than that suggested by the simple love of wisdom. Ancient Greek philosophy is the foundation upon which the history of Western philosophy, the sciences and the humanities all rest.

Because of its foundational position for Western thought, some writers define philosophy as that chain of ideas which includes the giants of modern European thought, such as Descartes, Hume and Kant, and which can be traced back through the Christian medieval period to Greece, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, or Thales, one of whom is to be designated as the originator of genuine philosophical thought.

But if we begin to wonder about the origins of Greek philosophy, and if we try to find some reason for choosing one of the above figures above the others as the true father of philosophy, then the definition of philosophy as the chain of thought including the well known greats will not be satisfactory.

The earliest links of the chain seem so different from the later links that it seems impossible to say whether any particular ancient Greek thinker should be included or not.

In order to answer the question of which Greek should be considered the first philosopher we must abandon the definition of philosophy solely in terms of the chain of teachers and pupils and turn instead to the question of what characterizes philosophical thought.

Finding the essential character of philosophical thought is no easy matter. Certainly it should not be characterized as any particular set of doctrines, although there have been periods in which such an identification was popular.

Thus, when Ghazali wrote his *Tahdūt al-Falāsifah* he was not attempting to refute philosophy as a topic or set of topics for reflection and investigation, but to refute specific doctrines associated with the mix of neo-Platonic and Aristotelian thought whose major champion was Ibn Sina. As far as method and subject matter are concerned, Ghazali was no less a philosopher than Ibn Sina or Ibn Rushd.

It would have been more precise if Ghazali had titled his book *Tahafūt al-Falsafah Ibn Sina*, but the thought of Ibn Sina had so come to dominate the philosophical thought of the Islamic world that philosophy itself was identified with the doctrines taught by Ibn Sina and his followers. This line of thought was a form of rationalism which Ghazali branded as heresy (*bid'ah*) because he considered the conclusions it advanced as dictated by reason to be not only contrary to religion but based upon faulty arguments in which reason overstepped its own limits.

The idea that philosophers make unwarranted claims on behalf of the intellect became the object of

Mawlavi Jalal al-Din Rumi's sarcasm in the Mathnavi.[2](#)

Mawlavi claims that the philosophers sin in two ways: first, they overestimate the power of the rational intellect; and second, they fail to appreciate the importance of a more direct form of knowledge through illumination.

*The philosopher is in bondage to things perceived by the intellect;
the pure rides as a prince on the Intellect of intellect.
Know that knowledge consists in seeing fire plainly,
not in prating that smoke is evidence of fire.
O you whose evidence, in the eyes of the Sage,
is really more stinking than the evidence of the physician,
Since you have no evidence but this,
O son, eat dung and inspect urine!
O you whose evidence is like the staff in your hand indicating that you suffer from blindness!
Noise and pompous talk and assumption of authority (means)
"I cannot see: excuse me."*[3](#)

The object of Mawlavi's ridicule is not just any form of philosophy, but is the same form of philosophy against which Ghazali inveighed. The association of philosophy with medicine in the second passage quoted above recalls the fact that Ibn Sina was as famous a physician as a philosopher.

Clearly, Mawlavi does not mean to include Socrates among those he finds guilty of 'noise and pompous talk', for Socrates, like Mawlavi, was engaged in exposing the ignorance of those who proudly but falsely claimed to know. Plato, as well, does not seem to fit Mawlavi's image of the philosopher, for he was just as emphatic as Mawlavi about the importance of illumination over finding evidence and engaging in syllogistic reasoning.

Even Aristotle does not entirely fit with the image Mawlavi portrays of the philosopher, for he was much more concerned than the medieval Aristotelians to point out problems (*aporiai*) for which he could offer no clear cut solution (like the problem of substance in the central books of the *Metaphysics*, or the problem of future contingents in *De Interpretatione*).

The most interesting question that is raised by these reflections is how neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism came to be considered as an official philosophy, a rationally authoritative set of doctrines, rather than the tentative speculation suggested by the Greek thinkers. How did the unresolved problems that were so important for Aristotle move to the sidelines so that bold claims for reason should dominate? How did philosophy become corrupted, dogmatic and proud, when it began in wonder? However, to pursue these questions would be to abandon the task we have set for ourselves of characterizing philosophy.

Philosophy can neither be defined in terms of a single chain of teachers and pupils, nor can it be defined

in terms of a set of doctrines. At the same time it is important to try to characterize philosophical writings in such a way that we might distinguish them from religious texts and from what is sometimes referred to as wisdom literature.

Of course, we do not wish to claim that no religious texts are to be considered as philosophy, nor should we deny the philosophical content of some wisdom literature. We are looking for a way to distinguish falsafah from Hikmah, philosophy from wisdom, while allowing for the possibility that the two may overlap.

Since we have already ruled out historical succession and doctrinal content as means to identify philosophy, there appear to be two alternatives left to us: subject and method.

Since the time of Aristotle, metaphysics, or first philosophy, has been defined as the science of being qua being, and the Muslim philosophers generally accepted this definition. This definition, however, does not provide a means to include all the branches of philosophy.

Philosophy has the following branches: metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, logic, and aesthetics. There are other branches of philosophy as well: the philosophy of law, the philosophy of language, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of medicine, social and political philosophy, philosophical anthropology, the philosophy of mind, etc. The 'etc.' is important.

There seems to be no way to eliminate it, no list whose claim to being exhaustive could not be undermined by the development of a new branch of philosophy. We need some way to know when a new branch of human inquiry should be considered as a kind of philosophy, and when it is something else, psychology, ideology, or cultural criticism, for example. We may hope to find some criterion by turning to method.

Philosophers differ from sages because of their employment of reason, it is sometimes said. While the sages draw wisdom from folklore, religion, mythology, and other elements of culture, the philosopher is held to rely on pure reason. But surely the sages employ reason as well. This seems to be implied by Mawlavi's claim that the pure ones ride on the Intellect of intellect.

Sometimes it is said that although all science makes use of rational principles, philosophy is unique in relying on reason alone, with no appeal to empirical findings. Two objections will be raised here. First, there are sciences other than philosophies that rely on reason alone, the sciences of pure mathematics, such as number theory and Euclidean geometry.

Secondly, philosophy, or at least some of its branches, on close inspection does not turn out to be completely immune from empirical discoveries and the ideas abstracted from them. There is no clear line that divides the philosophy of mathematics from pure mathematics, or pure mathematics from applied mathematics.[4](#)

Reason seems to be used in the same way or perhaps to shift only gradually as we move from a particular science to the philosophy of that science. Metaphysical theories have been proposed on the basis of philosophical reflection on elementary particle physics, cosmology, and even biology.⁵

The questions seem to be different. The questions of a science are internal questions, questions that seem to presuppose that their answers can be found through a continuation and extension of the methods currently employed in the field.

Questions concerning a particular science seem to break out of the confines of established modes of inquiry in two directions: at one end there is the matter of applications, and at the other, philosophy. Reason, however, is relied upon equally throughout the spectrum; it is equally vital to the design of a machine and to speculation about the nature of being.

Since philosophy is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the applied sciences, it is tempting to define philosophical method as non-empirical in some sense, even if it is granted that no theorizing is completely immune from ideas that spring more directly from reflection on observation and measurement.

Even if philosophy does not rely entirely on reason alone, and experience can be an avenue for uncovering philosophical truth as well as rational reflection, still, philosophers do not attempt to formulate their theories in ways designed to allow for empirical confirmation or refutation.

In the end, it seems that if we are to be honest, we must admit that we cannot provide an exact definition of philosophy which will include all that is traditionally considered to belong to the field while excluding the special sciences. Perhaps we do not really know what philosophy is, or maybe we do know what it is, but only in a vague way which eludes our attempts at exact definition.

The closest we seem to be able to come to identifying philosophy is by means of its subject and method, by saying that philosophy includes metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, logic, and inquiries into the foundations of the special sciences.

The method of philosophy is rational as opposed to empirical, but this does not mean that empirical investigations are irrelevant to philosophy. For example, the results of empirical investigations have led to the development of quantum theory, which has raised a number of interesting philosophical questions about the nature of matter and energy, and the displacement of Newtonian physics by relativity theory has done much to undermine some of the central theses of Kant's philosophy.

To admit that philosophy must be cognizant and responsive to developments in the empirical sciences is not, however, to say that the method of philosophy is empirical. The tool of the philosopher is reason, but this is not very informative, for it is a tool used by students of the natural sciences and the humanities. There is no film that does not require reason.

The methods of philosophy are analysis and synthesis, and in both special attention is paid to logical rigor. Synthesis is an attempt to provide explanations at a quite general level often by constructing a theory or model, or by advocating a project through which such explanations are to be given. For example, materialism is a theory the acceptance of which requires a rejection of all explanations that contain an eliminable reference to non-material entities.

This requirement creates special difficulties in the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of mathematics, and many other areas. Thus materialism generates a program of attempting to provide a uniform type of explanation for various phenomena in all the fields of human inquiry.

Utilitarianism in ethics provides another example of a programmatic theory by means of which explanations are to be provided for the various moral features of life. Each broad philosophical thesis or theory generates its own problems.

The successful defense of a philosophical thesis requires that the thesis be shown to be free from contradiction, that it can be integrated within a general philosophical outlook, that the problems it generates are interesting and seem susceptible to solution, that the thesis can be applied in various areas and that it provides interesting insights into the areas in which it is applied.

The application of a thesis to a specific area of inquiry often requires the employment of the other major philosophical method, analysis. Analysis can take a number of forms. There is linguistic analysis, conceptual analysis, and other types of analysis. Perhaps they can all be lumped together as ways to analyze problems.

When Socrates asked 'What is justice?', he was extending an invitation to engage in philosophical analysis. Some will respond by speaking of how the word 'justice' is used, and of its etymology; others may respond by considering how people generally think about justice; still others will try to explain what justice is by placing it within a broader philosophical theory. So, the methods of synthesis and analysis are complementary.

By synthesis theories are constructed through which problems are to be analyzed; and analysis proceeds by providing an account of a problem in accord with a more general theory, or by showing how the problem may be solved by means of the theory.

So, for example, Heidegger will provide an analysis of a problem by sifting through the etymologies of the relevant terms involved, picking out the most salient issues thus suggested, and then providing some thesis about the problem which incorporates the points brought out in his analysis, often by extending a train of thought to be found in several thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition.

The process of philosophical analysis and synthesis takes place in a context of criticism. At each stage, the work of the philosopher is subject to the criticisms of others working in the same area. Objections are raised when a theory has counterintuitive consequences, when it contains a logical flaw, or when the

arguments produced in its support are found to be unsound.

Philosophical theories are also criticized for their inability to handle important problems, or even when they lack elegance. The main method of philosophical criticism is the analysis of arguments. Here the importance of logic comes to the fore, since it is by logic that arguments are identified and evaluated as valid or invalid. Logic, however, is not always capable of providing insight regarding the truth of the premises upon which a given argument is based.

For the evaluation of premises, sometimes an appeal will be made to empirical investigations, sometimes to rational intuitions, and sometimes further argument will be suggested. A complete characterization of the philosophical methods sketched here would require a text on logic and critical thinking.

Indeed, such books are numerous, and have been throughout the history of philosophy, which they have helped to shape. However, enough has been said to indicate in a rough way what may be understood as philosophy.

Philosophy is that field of inquiry which includes the subjects of metaphysics, epistemology, etc. and which employs the method of analysis and synthesis in a context of logical criticism. Given this understanding of philosophy, we are sufficiently armed to challenge the claim that the exclusive origin of philosophy lies in ancient Greece.

Philosophy can be found in ancient China, India, and Africa. By philosophy here we do not mean only the wise pronouncements of sages or religious figures, but the critical employment of reason in analysis and synthesis directed to some of the central issues of metaphysics, ethics, etc.

A word should be said about religious thought. Some religious thought is devotional, and some of it expresses illuminative insights, some of it concerns pronouncements of doctrine, but sometimes also it is philosophical. The meeting place of religious and philosophical thought is sometimes described as the philosophy of religion and sometimes as philosophical theology.

Occasionally these can be distinguished. The philosophy of religion can be understood analogously to the philosophy of mathematics, or the philosophy of history. It is philosophical inquiry into the most foundational questions concerning religion: the nature and attributes of God, the relation between religion and ethics, and apparent paradoxes involved in religious belief. Edgar Sheffield Brightman, who advocates a very broadly understood empiricism (including inner experience as well as sense perception), defines philosophy of religion as follows:

Philosophy of religion is an attempt to discover by rational interpretation of religion and its relations to other types of experience, the truth of religious beliefs and the value of religious attitudes and practices.

Philosophy of religion is a branch of metaphysics (specifically of axiology) which interprets the relations

of man's experience of religious values to the rest of his experience.[6](#)

Philosophical theology is the employment of philosophical method to address important questions of theology under the assumption that a given theological creed is correct. The term, "philosophical theology" is used in other senses by various writers: for some it is equivalent to the philosophy of religion, for others it is the same as natural theology, some insist that philosophical theology, qua theology, must limit its attention to a particular creed, although it may include attacks as well as defenses.

However, even in the rather narrow meaning employed here, in which philosophical theology has a specific creed as its topic, the credibility of which is defended by what passes for a philosophical style of argumentation, real philosophy often arises out of philosophical theology. As theologians employ critical methods to debate differences of opinion among those who accept a given creed, eventually critical attention may be turned to the most basic assumptions shared by those who confess a common faith; these assumptions may well include ideas about reality, truth, rational belief, value, and other topics of philosophical controversy.

We must be careful, then, not to dismiss all theological discussions as unphilosophical. In the Islamic tradition, for example, there is much true philosophy to be found in kalam. The early mutakallimun owed much in their perception as well as their analysis of the problems that they addressed to the concepts developed by grammarians of the Arabic language.

By the end of the third century after the hegira, one of the central occupations of the mutakallimin of Basra was the systematic explanation of the ontological implications associated with the use of Arabic predicates, *sifat*.

While they were certainly interested in specifically theological questions about the nature and attributes of God, they developed much more general theories about the existence of things indicated by subjects and predicates.[7](#)

The tradition that began in ancient Greece is especially distinguished by its length and the volume of literature it has produced, by the number of its branches, and by the depth of insights which continue to attract new students.

The glory of the Western philosophical tradition, which includes Islamic philosophy as one of its most important branches, must not, however, blind us to the existence of traditions of philosophical thought which developed independently of Greek philosophy. Of these, the most notable are Chinese and Indian philosophy.

Centuries before Socrates began his philosophical career, the Indians of South Asia were reflecting critically on their universe and doing metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and philosophical theology.[8](#) Chinese and Buddhist philosophers who were contemporaries of Socrates also developed a

philosophical dialectic based on a tradition of thought which extended back for some centuries.

In many ways the critical reflections of Eastern philosophers are similar to those of Western philosophers. Both Eastern and Western philosophers are preoccupied with questions about the nature of man, the universe, reality, and the ultimate. There are also more specific areas in which similarities between Western and Eastern philosophy are especially obvious.

Early in both traditions materialism asserted itself as a philosophical alternative to the more prevalent modes of thought, and in both traditions thinkers are to be found who placed more emphasis on experience or on reason for acquiring human knowledge. Finally, both groups also saw in this questioning a great opportunity for self-improvement.

One of the most important areas of philosophy to have been developed independently in Greece, India and China is logic. The earliest known work in the Indian tradition on logic is the *Tarka-Sastra* of Gotama, which has been estimated to have been composed in 550 B.C.

This work included two subjects, the art of debate (*tarka*), and the means of valid knowledge (*pramana*). By the second century C.E., the subjects of syllogistic reasoning and the examination of contemporaneous philosophical doctrines had been added to Gotama's work and the whole became known as the Nyaya sutra.

While some have speculated that the syllogism in Nyaya may have been influenced by the Aristotelian syllogism, which may have come to India through Alexander, this is highly conjectural, and most contemporary historians seem to think that the Indian syllogism developed independently of Greek thought.⁹ This work served as a foundational text for the subsequent development of Indian logic among various Buddhist and Jain as well as other Hindu philosophers.

Logic is said to have originated in China with the work Motzu of Mo-ti who is believed to have died before 400 B.C. Mo-ti discusses truth and falsity, affirmation and denial 'with a view to produce order and avoid disorder.'¹⁰

He describes a method of philosophical analysis and comparison of elements as well as a method of synthesis. Analysis comes from reason and ends with evidence. Synthesis groups together various facts and ends in a conclusion.

Practical and theoretical reasoning are also distinguished. The discussions to be found in the Mo-tzu are not merely the pre-philosophical fragments of a sage, but display a highly refined degree of logical sensitivity.

The philosophy developed by Mo-ti influences a long line of Chinese philosophers known as Moists and they interacted with thinkers of other Chinese schools of thought by criticizing them and being criticized.

There is also some speculation that Greek thought may have entered China by way of Bactria and the

Alexandrian conquest, but again, this is highly speculative, and in any case Mo-ti's work was completed long before Greek or Indian influence would have been possible. [11](#)

Only those who are ignorant of the logical discussions in the Nyaya school of Indian philosophy or the Moist school of Chinese philosophy and the dialectic which took place between the advocates and critics of these schools could claim that philosophy as it has been defined above has its exclusive origins in Greek thought. Excuse for such ignorance is no longer possible since a number of books have been published in which Indian and Chinese philosophy are described in addition to those mentioned above. In addition to books, there are several philosophical journals in which new research in these areas is published: Chinese Studies in Philosophy, the Journal of Indian Philosophy, and Philosophy East and West.

In recent years a number of studies of African philosophy have also been published, although it is difficult to make any definite pronouncements about ancient African philosophy since it was carried out in the context of an oral culture.

Nevertheless, to declare that ancient Africa was without philosophy, without reasoned analysis and theorizing about various issues in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, etc., is to commit the fallacy *ad ignorantium*, to conclude that something is not the case simply because we have no positive evidence.

Even Dr. Shari'ati, despite his familiarity with Fanon and his commitment to the oppressed, complains of those Europeans who are ignorant of the rich culture of Iran and imagine Iran to be without culture, 'like Africa'.

It seems to have been a slip, but it is one that is all too common; and even if such remarks are not motivated by a latent nationalist sentiment, misplaced pride or racism, they are certainly capable of fueling vicious attitudes. This is the dark side of the denial of non-Western philosophies: it may be an indication of something more sinister than ignorance.

In pride, the philosopher says that only I have the ability to understand deep truths, to make fine distinctions, to appreciate great subtlety; only I can reason. And since reason is the specific difference of the human, it follows that only I am human—I and my teachers in the line stretching back to ancient Greece. In the language of many tribes, the word for a member of the tribe and the word for man are the same.

In opposition to this exclusivist denial of the universality of philosophy, we may speak of the philosophy of Hadrat Adam (Peace be with him). This alludes to the fact that it is characteristic of human nature to raise questions about reality, knowledge, goodness, beauty, soundness of reasoning, and to seek to find foundations. And it is characteristic of human nature to pursue answers to these questions through the methods of reason: dialectic, analysis, synthesis, criticism, speculation.

It is written in the Qur'an:

“And He taught Adam the names, all of them...” (2:31).

According to Ibn 'Arabi, these names are the Names of God, although the commentators sometimes claim that for reasons having to do with Arabic grammar the names cannot be of attributes, but must be of living things. The argument is not decisive, since it is possible that the attributes are personalized as a figure of speech.

If Adam's knowledge was of the Names of God, this could be taken to be a symbol of analysis through which the divine reality is understood in terms of the multiplicity of Names. The Names are multiple while the essence of God is simple and unitary. By learning the Names, Adam learns to analyze the divine simple unity in terms of its relations with created things as a multiplicity of attributes.

Even if the names Adam was taught are not to be understood as the Divine Names, but of some other realities, the originality of Adam's position with respect to the One Creator, and the knowledge given of a multiplicity of names certainly suggests the problems of the one and the many, of naming and reference, and of human knowledge. These allusions add to the propriety of allowing that the wisdom of Adam was, at least in part, philosophical.

Adam was the first philosopher. This means that philosophy, as we have described it above, is characteristic of human nature, and that philosophical problems may be associated with the knowledge given by God to Adam as related in the Qur'an.

Mulla Sadra has described the wisdom of Adam as follows:

Know that wisdom (Hikmah) originally began with Adam and his progeny Seth and Hermes, i.e., Idris, and Noah because the world is never deprived of a person upon whom the science of Unity (tawhid) and eschatology rests. And it is the great Hermes who propagated it (Hikmah) throughout the regions of the world and different countries and manifested it and made it emanate upon the "true worshippers". He is the "Father of the philosophers (Abu'l-hukuma') and the master of those who are the masters of the sciences. [12](#)

To speak of Adam as a philosopher is to go beyond the claim of the universality of philosophy and to introduce a religious element to the discussion. The philosophy of Adam is religious. From the secular Western point of view this sort of claim will sound odd to the point of absurdity.

Not only atheists, but also Western Christians who consider themselves enlightened, think of Adam as a mythical figure, a character from the tales of the ancients with no relevance to the rational analysis of philosophical problems and the scientific cast of mind typical of the modern philosopher.

On the other hand, those religious people with a narrow sense of piety will consider it contrary to religion and debasing to the prophet Adam to describe him as a philosopher. Prophetic knowledge, they will argue, is by revelation and has no need for the paltry methods of reason.

We may respond to the attack on our Western flank by pointing out that philosophy has a mythic dimension that is overlooked by those with a positivistic outlook. Philosophy is a kind of quest motivated by love. The traces of this original love can even be found in such irreligious Western thinkers as Russell and Sartre.

It is the desire to free themselves from the recognized illusions of past thinkers that motivates their rejections. It should come as no surprise that the love of truth might inspire one to deny the truth.

The mythic dimension of the philosophical quest for truth is a recurrent theme in the philosophical literature of the Western tradition. Many authors have already emphasized the point that what makes for myth is not falsehood.

Important truths may be contained in myths. A story, like the story of Adam, may be called a myth because it is legendary, it has been passed to us from antiquity rather than having been discovered through scientific historical research; but this does not mean that it is false! Rather it is a falsification to deny the mythic dimensions of the philosophical quest and to deny its points of contact with the religious journey.

With respect to those who would deny the philosophy of Adam from a religious point of view, if they persist in their objections even after our explanations of what we mean by this attribution and they understand that we do not mean to claim that we know the position of the first prophet, Peace be with him, on a number of controversial philosophical questions, nor do we make any positive claim even to the effect that the prophet had any philosophical views on any particular philosophical issues, if they nevertheless persist in their opposition even after this, then we shall begin to suspect that their opposition stems from a desire to protect religion from rational inquiry.

There are many theologians and philosophers of religion in the West today who share this sentiment. They are called fideists. They hold that there are higher standards than those of reason by means of which beliefs are to be evaluated, and that with respect to such standards; religious beliefs are to be dearly valued even if they are in opposition to the standards of reason.

One of the most important Christian philosophers to espouse fideism was Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). It is important to understand that Kierkegaard's fideism springs from a rejection of the claims on behalf of reason made by Hegel.

During Kierkegaard's age the followers of Hegel seem to have thought that reason by itself was sufficient to show the place of man and God in the universe and to provide the foundations for religious faith. In reaction against the excessive claims made on behalf of reason, Kierkegaard seems to have gone to the opposite extreme of denying any relevance of reason or philosophy to religion.

Particularly important with respect to Muslim–Christian dialogue is Kierkegaard's attitude toward the Bible. Muslims have traditionally reminded Christians of the dubious historical evidence for the

authenticity of the Bible, and have compared lack of information about the origins of the Bible with the relative abundance of data about the revelation of the Qur'an. The response of Christians has often been surprisingly nonchalant.

Of course, a significant number of Christian theologians are engaged in extensive historical research about the origins of the Bible. However, I believe one more commonly encounters a lack of interest in the question, and in some cases even hostility. Such reactions are not simply expressions of unreflective dogmatism, but of the widespread theological view that religious matters are independent of objective truth, and may even be opposed to it.

The lesson taken from modern forms of biblical criticism is that the spiritual value of Scripture is independent not only of the shortcomings of its literal interpretation, but of any claim to objective historicity. This view finds strong expression in the works of Kierkegaard. He argues that even if the Bible were proven absolutely authentic, it would not bring anyone closer to faith, for faith is a matter of passion and is not the result of academic investigations.

Furthermore, he claims that the scientific establishment of the authenticity of the Bible would actually be detrimental to faith, because passion and certainty are incompatible. On the other hand, Kierkegaard claims that even if the Bible were shown to be inauthentic, that its books were not by the supposed authors, and that it lacked integrity, it would not follow that Christ never existed, and the believer would still be at liberty to retain his faith.

Karl Barth, perhaps the most influential Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, takes a remarkably similar view. He is willing to accept historical criticism of the Bible, but claims that faith does not depend on the historical accuracy of beliefs. Christ transcends history. The danger here is that in the rejection of historical, scientific, philosophical or rational criticism, one ensures that no evaluation from outside can threaten one's religious beliefs. Narrow mindedness is protected.

The second most important philosophical influence on contemporary Christian fideism is Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). Wittgenstein's fideism is in some ways more moderate than Kierkegaard's. He holds that in different areas of life different 'language games' are played, and that confusion results when the rules of one game are applied to another game to which they are not applicable. The rules of science do not apply to religion.

According to Wittgensteinians, the proper place for reason is in science. In religious belief something else appears to be operative. Against this view one may point out that both religious and scientific discussions tend to obey the logical laws characteristic of rational thought. Where they differ is in the relevance of empirical findings, particularly those of a quantitative nature.

However, it is not at all clear why philosophical reason should be considered the province of that which depends on empirical data and the formal sciences instead of on revelation. The logical principles that are shared by different scientific, religious, and other traditions seem to violate the idea of strict

autonomy that Wittgenstein defends.

Perhaps the greatest problem for the Wittgensteinian idea of the autonomy of religious belief is that of incommensurability. Wittgenstein himself complains that he is not sure how religious and non-religious people are able to understand each other. Since it is clear that they are able to understand each other, religious and non-religious languages are not completely independent.

But if they are not completely independent, then the possibility of mutual criticism arises, which the doctrine of autonomy denies. If we are to have spiritual progress, we must be willing to face challenges, not to cut ourselves off from the possibility of challenge. If our religious ideas are to have sufficient flexibility to find proper application in all the spheres of our lives, religion must be permitted to leak out from the confines of ritual procedure and otherworldly preoccupation.

Finally, there is the problem of demarcation. Where does one language game end and another begin? If religion is a form of life analogous to science, how are the various religious traditions to be treated? Are they like competing scientific theories? There is good reason to think not.

Buddhism and Judaism are so disparate that it does not make much sense that they are alternative attempts to describe the same reality. Perhaps they are as different from each other as each is from quantum theory. Perhaps they are like different branches of science. But this is wrong, too. The various religions do compete with one another in some sense.

The Qur'an speaks not only to Muslims, but directly addresses Jews and Christians, idolaters and infidels, and if the Qur'an employs its own specific concept of rationality, it is one which others are expected to be able to understand. Furthermore, the different branches of the sciences merely focus on different aspects of what is agreed by all to be a common reality.

In any case, there is little one can find in Wittgenstein or his followers to assist in determining how traditions of thought are to be classified, when they are to be seen as competitors and when they are to be seen as autonomous. To the contrary, the very existence of the philosophy of religion and philosophical theology indicate that there is no line of demarcation that separates religious from philosophical thought.

In practice the two often merge. Indeed, the philosophical critique of religious ideas is necessary if we are to adequately defend our beliefs, even privately within our own souls, from the charge that we have gone astray, that religious emotion has prompted us to accept absurdities. Like every other area of culture, if isolated from intellectual commerce, religion will suffer the depression of a ghetto economy.

Against our rejection of fideism, we might imagine the protest of Mawlavi: when the mother offers milk to her child, is the child to seek evidence that this is in fact nourishing milk, and that it is offered by its own mother? The immediate recognition of the truth needs no evidence. We can grant the insight of Mawlavi without going as far as he seems on occasion to have done, without rejecting the relevance of

philosophy to religion.

It may be admitted that there are circumstances in which it is inappropriate to look for reasons and evidence, not only in religion, but also in the sciences and mathematics, and in virtually all the areas of human inquiry. A large part of wisdom in philosophical investigation is to know what things are to be questioned and what things are to be accepted without further questioning. An unregulated demand for reasons and evidence only brings skepticism.

Philosophical reason is a tool, a vehicle. By itself, it can go nowhere. Syllogisms can be constructed ad nauseam without taking one a step closer to the truth of any matter, but the judicious use of logical technique and the other methods of philosophy may transport us distances which we would otherwise be unable to traverse in security.

For the key to the religious element in the philosophy of Adam we may turn again to the Mathnavi. Adam's employment of reason was combined with humility. Even though he was taught the names and the angels prostrated before him on account of his knowledge, when he sinned he admitted his mistake and turned in humble repentance toward God.

Mawlavi contrasts this attitude with that of Iblis, who uses his reason in order to excuse his disobedience. The philosophy of Iblis is a philosophy tainted by pride. The philosophy of Adam is a philosophy purified by humility.

Today, in the Muslim world as well as among Christians, there is a discussion of what role philosophy can play vis a vis religion. On the one hand, there are those who hold that philosophy provides a rational foundation for religious belief and a general framework for the interpretation of religious beliefs through which the truth of basic religious beliefs may be demonstrated.

This has been the dominant view among Muslim philosophers from Ibn Sina to those inspired by the teachings of 'Allamah Tabataba'i. [13](#) Another school of thought among Shi'i scholars, known as maktab-e tafkik, denies that philosophy can or should serve as a basis for religion (the word tafkik indicates the separation of religion from philosophy). [14](#) Both groups seem to have valuable points to make, although both can also easily pass beyond the limits of plausibility.

The exaggerated claims of rationalist philosophers to be in possession of deductive proofs for religious claims which must be accepted by all reasonable persons invites the response that given the fact that atheists seem to be no worse at logic than theists, faith must be independent of reason. But to abandon reason is to deny the birthright we inherit from Hadrat Adam (AS).

What we must deny and seek to separate from religion is Iblisi philosophy, the pride that overextends the claims of human reason. What we must seek is the wisdom of the prophets (AS), including the latent philosophical reasoning to be found there, a humble reason, but one which keeps a firm hand on the reins of the passions and emotions, not to stop them, but to direct them on the straight path, insha'Allah!

- [1.](#) Cf. Peter Gorman, *Pythagoras: A Life* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 35.
- [2.](#) This subject is the topic of a paper delivered by Dr. Abd al-Karim Soroush at the 1992 Conference on Greek Orthodox Christianity and Islam in Athens. The topic is also addressed by William C. Chittick in *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi*, (Offset Press, 1974), and later in his *The Sufi Path of Love*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983).
- [3.](#) *Mathnavi*, Bk. vi, 2505 f.
- [4.](#) See Morris Klein's *Mathematics: The Loss of Certainty* (New York: Oxford, 1983).
- [5.](#) For example, see Elliott Sober's *From a Biological Point of view* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- [6.](#) Edgar Sheffield Brightman, *Philosophy of Religion* (fifth printing) (New York: Prentice Hall, 1947), 22.
- [7.](#) Cf. Richard M. Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978), p. 14.
- [8.](#) Cf. R. T. Blackwood and A. L. Herman, eds. *Problems in Philosophy: West and East*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1975), p. 7. Most of this paragraph is paraphrased from the introduction to this work.
- [9.](#) See the article 'Logic' in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards. For the conjecture of the Greek connection, see Satis Chandra vidyabhusana, *A History of Indian Logic*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971).
- [10.](#) Cf. Leo Wieger, S.J., *A History of the Religious Beliefs and Philosophical Opinions in China*, Edward Chalmers Werner, tr., (New York: Paragon, 1969), p. 213.
- [11.](#) Cf. Weiger, p. 286.
- [12.](#) *Risalah fi'l-huduth*, in *Rasa'il fadr al-Din Shirdzi*, (Tehran, 1302), p. 67. The passage is cited and translated by S. H. Nasrin "Hermes and Hermetic Writings in the Islamic World" in his *Islamic Studies* (Beirut: Librairie Du Liban, 1967), p. 69.
- [13.](#) One of the most prominent of these philosophers is Prof. MisbahYazdi, whose *Amuzesh-e Falsafeh* has been translated as *Philosophical Instruction: An Introduction to Contemporary Islamic Philosophy*, tr. M. Legenhausen and 'A. Sarvdalir (Binghampton: Global Publications, 1999).
- [14.](#) See Muhammad Riga Hakimi, *Maktab-e Tafsik* (Qom: Markaz-e Barressiha-ye Islami, 1373/1994).

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