

The Significance of Comparative Philosophy for the Study of Islamic Philosophy

by

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BEFORE discussing the role and significance of comparative philosophy for the study of Islamic philosophy, it is necessary to define exactly what we mean by comparative philosophy, for only too often today facile comparisons are made between Oriental metaphysical doctrines of a sacred nature and secular modern philosophies without the least consideration for the basic difference in the nature of the ideas involved and their source of inspiration.¹ In fact if the term philosophy is used in its purely modern sense, it is not possible to speak of Oriental philosophy, whether it be Islamic or otherwise. Only if the meaning of philosophy is extended to embrace the metaphysical doctrines contained in the different formulations of the *philosophia perennis* is it possible to speak legitimately of the comparative philosophy of East and West. In any case the basic distinction between Oriental metaphysics and modern philosophy with whatever metaphysical pretensions it might have must be kept in mind.² Furthermore, an intermediate domain must be recognized, which is that of a systematic philosophy that is rational and at the same time based upon metaphysical intuition and closely allied to revealed truths. As examples of such a philosophy one could cite Latin scholasticism and

¹ We have already dealt with the necessary conditions for a truly meaningful comparative philosophy in our essay, "Conditions for Meaningful Comparative Philosophy", *Philosophy East and West*, January 1972, pp. 53-61.

² On the basic distinction between Oriental metaphysics, which is wedded to a spiritual discipline, and profane philosophy see R. Guènon, *La métaphysique orientale*, Paris, 1939 ; translated by J. L. Cooper, "Oriental Metaphysics", *Tomorrow* (London) vol. 12, 1964, pp. 6-16.

early Peripatetic philosophy in Islam. This type of philosophy is related on the one hand to pure metaphysics based solely on intellectual intuition and illumination and on the other hand to systematic and rational philosophy as currently understood and the later development of philosophy in the West. For it must be remembered that this later development of Western philosophy is based essentially on the gradual "decomposition" of the concept of being, which was central to medieval European philosophy, and the gradual estrangement of reason, the tool *par excellence* of modern European philosophy, from the light of the Intellect.³ In view of these facts comparative philosophy should come to mean the comparison of ideas belonging to similar and corresponding orders in different civilizations and also the bringing out of the *contrast* between ideas developed in different civilizations and belonging to different orders of reality and inspiration. This latter aspect is especially important in the case of comparisons between the traditional doctrines that have emanated over the ages from the traditional civilizations of the East and the West and the rationalistic, humanistic and profane ideas that have been brought into being in the West during the past four centuries.

Seen in this light, comparative philosophy can have a great deal of importance for the study of the history and doctrinal context of Islamic philosophy as well as of the pure metaphysics contained in the writings of the Sufis and gnostics ('*urāfa'*). Because of the integrating power of Islam and the fact that it was destined to cover the "middle-belt" of the world, it came into contact with many modes of thought, including the Graeco-Alexandrian, Iranian, Indian and even to a certain extent Far Eastern. The basis of Islamic intellectual life was therefore cosmopolitan and international in conformity with the world wide perspective of Islam itself and the universal nature of the fundamental Islamic doctrine of unity (*al-tawhid*).⁴ Moreover, because it is the last revelation and therefore the synthesis of the messages of the traditions before it, Islam developed an extremely rich intellectual life in which was integrated much of the intellectual heritage of mankind

³ See E. Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, New York, 1937.

⁴ See S. H. Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, Cambridge (U.S.A.) 1968, and New York, 1970 introduction.

that had preceded it, a heritage that became transformed by the light of Unity and converted into a building block in the new edifice of Islamic thought. Therefore, Islamic philosophy, if considered in its totality and not only in terms of the Peripatetic school known in the West, is extremely rich and possesses schools that can be compared to most of the intellectual perspectives and traditional philosophies of the East, of the ancient Mediterranean world and of medieval Europe. Comparative studies would be fruitful as an adjunct to historical methods of research and would be basic in bringing out the morphological structure of the different Islamic schools by comparing and contrasting them with similar schools elsewhere. Sometimes even these two approaches, namely the historical and the comparative, could be combined as for example in the case of the study of atomism in *Kalām* and a comparison of it with Buddhist schools of atomism, which could clarify the historical roots of the idea⁵ and also bring out the similarities and differences between the atomism of *Kalām* and that of the Buddhist schools. There are many pages and passages in the history of Islamic philosophy which could be clarified in this way.

Comparative philosophy can also play an important function for Muslims themselves by drawing their attention to non-Western traditions and re-establishing the balance destroyed by the unilateral domination of Western civilization over the East during the past century. Today for most people in the East, not only Muslims but also Hindus, Buddhists and others, comparative philosophy means comparing the philosophy of their own civilization with that of the West and in fact only the modern West. Rarely does one find serious comparative studies made of Islamic philosophy with those of India and the Far East.⁶ The cultivation of comparative philosophy in the field of Islamic philosophy could make Muslims aware of the vast riches of the traditional doctrines of India and the Far East and through them could put Western philosophy in a more just perspective.

⁵ This has been already attempted by S. Pines in his well-known *Beiträge zur islamischen Atomenlehre*, Berlin, 1936.

⁶ As far as the Far East is concerned the study of T. Izutsu, *A Comparative Study of the Key Philosophical Concepts in Sufism and Taoism*, 3 vols., Tokyo, 1966-67, is unique. For India there are a few studies made mostly by Indian scholars and one or two by Persians but most of them deal with historical influences rather than morphological comparisons.

Moreover, the very awareness of Oriental doctrines; precisely because of the nature of these doctrines, could help Muslim scholars discover other aspects of the Western intellectual tradition neglected greatly in the Islamic world until now. Such a process could help make Muslims aware of the fact that it is much more meaningful to compare Rumi with Eckhardt, Suhrawardi with Roger Bacon and Mulla Sadra with the Cambridge Platonists than to carry out the erroneous and misleading comparisons so prevalent today in which a figure like Rumi is compared with Nietzsche, Suhrawardī with Bergson or some other modern "intuitionist" and Mulla Sadra with the existentialists. The sapiential nature of Oriental doctrines and the very depth of their metaphysical teachings could be instrumental in a direct fashion in making the awareness of the Western intellectual tradition among Muslims more profound. It could thereby provide for Muslim scholars a key to the better understanding of the West and the sapiential teachings contained in the writings of such groups as the early Church Fathers, the apophatic theologians of the Eastern Church, the school of Chartres, representatives of intellectual currents of medieval and renaissance Christian mysticism, especially of the school of Eckhardt and Angelus Silesius, Western alchemy and Hermeticism and the German school of *naturphilosophie*. In any case to introduce comparative philosophy in the serious sense into the domain of Islamic philosophy would influence the concept of the relation of Islamic philosophy to Western thought held by Muslims themselves.

As far as the effect of the comparative approach for a better understanding of Islamic philosophy itself is concerned, the extent of its possibilities is evident to anyone acquainted with the structure of Islamic thought. A few illustrations will bring out the role comparative philosophy can play in different areas. As far as the Graeco-Alexandrian tradition is concerned there are of course outstanding problems of a historical nature which deal with the roots of many aspects of Islamic philosophy in the Greek sources and the survival of important elements of the Graeco-Alexandrian heritage, particularly of the late period, in Arabic. This is a subject for historical research and many scholars in both East and West have devoted themselves to both aspects

including the study of Islamic sources for a better knowledge of Greek philosophy.⁷

But in addition, morphological comparisons could play an important role in bringing out the differences as well as the similarities between the Greek and the Islamic traditions and reveal how the elements of Greek thought that were accepted by the Muslims were transformed by them into elements of a new intellectual structure possessing a significance beyond what the purely historical method of tracing influences could reveal. A comparative study of Hermetic philosophy in Alexandria and alchemical philosophy in Islam, of Greek sapiential and gnostic teachings of the Middle and Neo-platonists, especially Plotinus himself and the masters of Islamic gnosis like Ibn 'Arabi, of the Greek Pythagorean teachings of a Nichomachus and the Muslim Pythagoreans like the Ikhwān al-Safā' and many other instances would reveal the structural similarities and also differences between doctrines of a similar or corresponding order in traditions possessing differing structures.

In the Graeco-Alexandrian case comparative studies should complement the historical. The historical method would reveal the historical roots of many ideas adopted by Islamic philosophy from the Greek heritage and the comparative method would cast light, because of the living nature of the Islamic tradition and its esoteric and gnostic teachings, on certain forgotten features of the Graeco-Alexandrian tradition. It could be especially helpful in enabling Western scholars to re-evaluate their own judgment of Greek philosophy, in which they usually make no distinction between purely human philosophy and a wisdom of a supra-human inspiration. If the West were to understand the true nature of Ibn 'Arabi's doctrines, these doctrines in turn would serve as a key for an understanding of a Plotinus or Proclus, metaphysicians and gnostics who are usually innocently classified away with modern academic philosophers. As for Muslims, the comparative method could reveal much more to them of the true structure and nature of the Graeco-Alexandrian antiquity than could facile translations of standard Western

⁷ The writings of Bergstrasser, Walzer, Badawi, Goerr and many others have brought into the open the significance of Islamic philosophical sources for material lost in the original Greek including especially the writings of the Alexandrian commentators and Galen.

histories of Greek philosophy, works that are usually coloured by current and passing modes and fashions of thought.

A somewhat similar situation exists *vis-à-vis* the intellectual tradition of pre-Islamic Iran. Here also there are certain historical influences whose understanding is important for a full grasp of the genesis of Islamic philosophy. But the comparative method can reveal another dimension which in this case is also a key for an understanding of the spiritual and intellectual destiny of the Persian peoples.⁸ To compare the angelology of Suhrawardi with that of Zoroastrianism or the story of Kay Khusraw with the visionary narratives of Suhrawardi is more than anything to penetrate into the way in which the universe of the pre-Islamic Persians was transformed into the Islamic one. Many of the profounder reasons for the continuation of the life of Islamic philosophy in Persia after its cessation in the Western lands of Islam can be understood through the comparative method. Moreover, many of the deepest characteristics of the tradition of Islamic philosophy in Persia can be discovered with the help of a comparative study of Islamic philosophy and the *Weltanschauung* of the pre-Islamic Persians.⁹

The situation of the Mediaeval West in relation to Islamic philosophy is somewhat similar to that of Islamic philosophy *vis-à-vis* the Greek heritage. Needless to say there are extensive historical relations and the work that has been done during the past few decades in making better known the Latin corpus of the writings of Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd, as well as other Muslim authors, and their influence in the West is of course precious. Without it one would not be able to understand the genesis of Latin scholasticism. But there are studies of a profounder nature based upon the comparative method which could enable Westerners to better understand Islam and *vice versa*. If one could make a comparative study of such figures as Eckhardt or Jacob Boehme and Ibn 'Arabī or Rūmī, Erigena or other Western Illuminationists and Suhrawardi or St.

⁸ See for example H. Corbin, *Terre céleste et corps de résurrection*, Paris, 1961 ; also S. H. Nasr, "The Life of Mysticism and Philosophy in Iran: Pre-Islamic and Islamic", *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Autumn 1971, pp. 235-240.

⁹ A notable example of this kind is Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 4 vols., Paris, 1971-72, where comparative studies are also made with Taoism and the Graal tradition in the West.

Augustine and al-Ghazzali one could gain a greater insight into the structure of the Islamic and Christian traditions respectively than if one were to seek merely to discover lines of influence.

As for the Asian world, it presents an arena of almost unlimited possibility for the application of the comparative method. As far as the Indian world is concerned, besides such historical influences as that of Buddhist and Hindu moral philosophy and possibly atomism upon early Islam, and Sufism upon certain medieval *bhaktic* schools in India, there is the whole world opened by the movement of translation and comparison during the Moghul period. The *Majora 'al-bahrayn* of Dārā Shukuh and the commentary of Mir Findiriski upon the *Yoga Vāsistha* are already in themselves based upon morphological and structural comparisons. Many other works of this kind also exist which need to be studied and explored. Moreover, the rich intellectual structure of Hinduism and Buddhism present many resemblances to Islamic intellectuality, resemblances which can be understood profitably only through the comparative method. The *Advaita Vedanta* school of Sankara can best be understood by a Muslim through comparisons with the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* of Ibn 'Arabi and his followers. In fact there are variations of the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* and *wahdat al-shuhūd* developed by Indian Sufis precisely because of the challenging presence of certain Hindu metaphysical doctrines. The correlation and correspondence that exists on the purely metaphysical level can also be detected on the level of the cosmological sciences and of natural philosophy, and comparative studies can be made with great profit between the other *darshanas* such as the *Samkhya* and the corresponding Islamic schools.¹⁰

As for the Far East, it represents a domain that in relation to Islamic philosophy should be studied nearly completely from the vantage point of comparative philosophy, for here, except for certain early alchemical ideas that reached eastern Islam from China and certain exchanges of ideas during the Mongol period, the whole relation is morphological rather than historical. For a Muslim to understand Lao-Tzu or Chuang-Tzu

¹⁰ See for example, D. Shayegan, Les relations de l'hindouisme et du soufisme d'après le "Majma 'al-Bahrayn" (These de 3e cycle, Sorbonne, 1968).

there is no better way than making a comparative study between Taoism and Sufism or particular doctrines of the two traditions which present striking resemblances between them such as the doctrine of the Universal Man.¹¹ This is nearly a virgin field which could be explored extensively to make the Far Eastern tradition better known to Muslims and the Islamic intellectual tradition more comprehensible for the people of the Far East and especially those of Japan where there now seems to be a genuine interest in Islamic philosophy.

In conclusion then, it can be said that for Muslims themselves the method of comparative philosophy can play a basic role in making them aware of the great civilizations of the East and also in making the Western intellectual tradition more readily understandable in its true nature. It can be an instrument to combat the inferiority complex towards the West that has developed among so many modernized Muslims and a necessary shock to awaken them from their hypnotic trance before the modern West. For non-Muslims interested in an understanding of Islamic philosophy the comparative method can be instrumental in removing the erroneous conception of Islamic philosophy as merely a phase in the transmission of ideas to the West. This method can also help to reveal the immense treasures contained in the Islamic intellectual tradition and to make manifest the true structure of this tradition as it stands between the traditions of the Orient and those of the Mediterranean world and the West. For these and many other reasons the comparative approach deserves to be applied to Islamic philosophy in many of its phases. It cannot but enrich present day knowledge of a tradition many of whose aspects remain still unexplored.

¹¹ The masterly study of T. Izutsu alluded to above is an outstanding model for the comparative method in this field and demonstrates the remarkable results that can be attained if both true intellectual discernment and exact scholarship are present.

To be capable of knowing God, and to wish and hope to know him, is the road which leads straight to the Good; and it is an easy road to travel. Everywhere God will come to meet you, everywhere he will appear to you, at places and times at which you look not for it, in our waking hours and in your sleep, when you are journeying by water and by land, in the night-time and in the day-time, when you are speaking and when you are silent; for there is nothing which is not God.

Hermes