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## Discussion and Debate Forum

# Neo-Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy: An Interview with Professor Mohammed Rustom

**Abstract:** After attending Professor Rustom's advanced seminar on Ibn Sina at Carleton University in winter 2017, doctoral candidate Soroosh Shahriari of McGill University, Canada, "brought up the possibility of ... [posing] some 'hard' questions concerning the contemporary study of Islamic philosophy." Rustom's in-depth knowledge of the method and spirit of traditional Islamic education and Islamic metaphysics helps us navigate the complexities inherent in the study of Islamic philosophy in the modern academy. What follows is an edited version of this interview, which took place in Ottawa, Canada, February 2017.

### Introduction

Mohammed Rustom is associate professor of Islamic studies at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada and Library of Arabic Literature Senior Fellow at the New York University (NYU), Abu Dhabi Institute. Born in Toronto, Canada in 1980 to a Muslim family from East Africa, he completed his Ph.D. in 2009 in the University of Toronto's Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations and has learned from such esteemed scholars of Islamic thought as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Todd Lawson, William Chittick, and the late Michael Marmura. He credits these teachers as being the main catalysts for his abiding interest in Islamic philosophy and Sufism. Professor

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**Mohammed Rustom** is associate professor of Islamic studies at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. He is the author of the award-winning book, *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mulla Sadra* (SUNY, 2012); co-editor of *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (HarperOne, 2015); translator of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's *The Condemnation of Pride and Self-Admiration* (Islamic Texts Society, 2018); and author of *Inrushes of the Spirit: The Mystical Theology of Ayn al-Qudat* (SUNY, forthcoming). Rustom was the recipient of the Ibn Arabi Society Latina's 2016 Tarjuman Prize for contributions to scholarship on Ibn 'Arabi, and for the 2018–2019 academic year will serve as Library of Arabic Literature Senior Fellow at the New York University Abu Dhabi Institute.

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Rustom's Ph.D. thesis was on Mulla Sadra's philosophical Quranic hermeneutics and formed the basis of his first book, *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mulla Sadra* (SUNY, 2012). This work has received much critical praise, having been translated into Albanian and Turkish and awarded Iran's 21st Book of the Year Prize in 2014. Rustom has recently completed a comprehensive study of the thought of 'Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadani entitled *Inrushes of the Spirit: The Mystical Theology of 'Ayn al-Qudat* (in press), and has also published *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (HarperOne, 2015), alongside a distinguished team of Islamic studies scholars headed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. He is currently working on several projects in the fields of Sufi virtue ethics and Islamic metaphysics.

## Interview

**Students who have attended your classes know of your critical attitude towards “Neo-Orientalism” in the study of Islamic philosophy. May you explain to us what Neo-Orientalism is?**

Neo-Orientalism is best described as an approach to Islamic materials which privileges rationalism, and by that I mean a certain form of Enlightenment rationalism which still dominates the sciences today. So Neo-Orientalists are those who are affected by the assumptions and worldview of classical Orientalists, and from this perspective they are no better. But, those whom we would identify as Neo-Orientalists today are not hostile in the way that many Orientalists were.

Many Neo-Orientalists are quite innocent to the deeper, ideological assumptions that they are bringing to the table in their studies. And that is the essential problem with Neo-Orientalism as a phenomenon—Neo-Orientalists come to the study of Islamic philosophy with a spirit of free inquiry and good will towards the subject matter, but they are often unable to hang the coat of their own assumptions at the door, so to speak. This perpetuates many misunderstandings.

Let us take, for example, the recent wave of scholarship on the post-Avicennian Islamic philosophical tradition. There, it is common to find a good deal of talk about “Islam and the rational sciences.” But someone like Fakhr al-Din al-Razi's understanding of reason was quite different from Enlightenment notions of rationality. Ignoring this important point, the Neo-Orientalists in question think that, by investigating the likes of Razi and his “rational methods of inquiry,” they are getting at some kind of “rational” tradition that is part and parcel of high Islamic intellectual culture and which itself necessarily mirrors 18th and 19th century forms of European rationalism, which is the Neo-Orientalists' privileged starting point. The net effect is one in which other forms of learning in Islam which do not have their “acceptable”

modern European counterparts, such as the high-level discussions in *'irfan* or philosophical Sufism, are seen as unintelligent, or uninteresting, or of little more than historical value. Unfortunately, such an approach has also affected Muslim scholars of Islamic studies, and some of them have sought to understand the history of Islamic philosophy on the basis and within the paradigm of European rationalism.

I should however note that there are major exceptions to this kind of characterization I have given here. Not all historians of Islamic philosophy are Neo-Orientalists, and not all of them have a particular rationalistic or rationalizing project in mind vis-à-vis the study of Islamic philosophy. Indeed, a number of my colleagues are not necessarily committed to the Islamic intellectual tradition as such, but we do share a similar vision concerning the distinctively philosophical value of such underrepresented traditions as philosophical Sufism.

### **What are the main differences between Neo-Orientalist and traditional approaches to the study of Islamic philosophy?**

We must understand that there is a significant difference between, for example, learning Islamic philosophy in a secular university, and learning it at the feet and tutelage of Muslim sages. The difference between these two methods of studying Islamic philosophy or even theology is like comparing apples to oranges—though both are fruits, they are entirely different in form and substance. This is because the aims of the two institutions which house these perspectives are at odds with one another, rooted as they are in two totally different understandings of the methods and goals of transmitting knowledge.

The only people who really understand this difference are those who have first-hand experience of both learning environments. Although I do not identify with Ash'arism, studying with Ash'ari teachers taught me many important things. Later on I became acquainted with the work of Professor Nasr and Professor Chittick, and through contact with them I gained a greater understanding of the differences in the transmission of knowledge between these two approaches.

The main differences as I mentioned are the methods and aims which students and teachers envisage in these two institutions respectively. In secular universities the ultimate goal of writing and publishing scholarship on Islamic philosophical works is not well thought out, nor is their meaning and effect on one's life. In such institutions, nobody is concerned with whether your study of Ibn Sina and his philosophy has a positive effect on your life outside of the university. By contrast, consider the case of Henry Corbin, who was one of the most knowledgeable and insightful Western philosophers of the past century. He was responsible for introducing Heidegger to the Francophone world, and Sartre's first reading of Heidegger was in fact through Corbin's French

translation of his *Was ist Metaphysik*? Corbin was also thoroughly versed in the Latin scholastic tradition. Given his intellectual background and awareness of the limitations of the forms of philosophy in vogue in his day, he saw in Islamic philosophy a way out, as it were. Engagement with the Islamic philosophical tradition for him thus became a journey of truth-seeking and self-discovery.

Now, compare this approach of Corbin to that of a historian of Islamic philosophy, specializing in the thought and influence of any given intellectual giant in the tradition. The latter is, first of all, more of a philologist and a historian than a philosopher *per se*, and therefore his research is focused on the outward form and historical significance of the Islamic philosophical tradition without paying much attention to its meaning and philosophical significance.

It is only natural that the final product of these two kinds of approaches will be significantly different as they enshrine very different goals in studying Islamic philosophy: in one approach, Islamic philosophical texts are subjected to precise philological and historical dissection and analysis without looking to their purpose and importance beyond historical research. In the other approach, the concern is primarily with the existential *meaning* and *purpose* of these texts.

Despite mastery of the Arabic language and Islamic intellectual history, a person coming from a perspective like that of the historian of Islamic philosophy is not, *qua* historian, able or willing to go from the *zahir* (outward) to the *batin* (inward) aspect of Islamic philosophical texts. As a result, he is unable to get to the heart of why these texts were written, and for whom they were written.

One of my teachers said that “True wisdom does not lie in being able to read black lines on a white page; rather, true wisdom lies in being able to read the white page upon which the black lines are written.” Some are only concerned with philology and critical analysis of texts and their historical contexts. On the other hand, others pay attention to the goal and purpose of reading these texts. In the first approach, the study of Islamic philosophy is reduced to the study of a few texts without any connection or relevance to today’s world beyond academic interest. In the second approach, Islamic philosophy is considered as a living tradition, which, as was the case in the past, has very meaningful answers to our contemporary predicaments and questions.

**Are non-Muslim scholars of Islamic philosophy the only ones whom we can say are superficial in their understanding of the Islamic intellectual tradition, or can this criticism extend to Muslims as well?**

Do not get me wrong: what I have said has nothing to do with whether one is a Muslim or not, or is from the East or the West. Corbin, after all, was not a Muslim, and few would be willing to say with a straight face that he did not understand Islamic philosophy in both its form and meaning. As a matter of fact, the views

of Muslim scholars of the Islamic intellectual tradition who live and work in the East can often be closer to that aforementioned superficial view of the Islamic intellectual tradition. When I see a Muslim scholar whose understanding of Islamic philosophy is influenced by Neo-Orientalism and is grounded in forms of Western epistemic colonialism, I am very disappointed.

In Professor Nasr's book *Islamic Life and Thought* there is a profound essay entitled, "The Pertinence of Studying Islamic Philosophy Today." When I read this article as a young student of Islamic philosophy I was dumbfounded to learn of the subtle level of politics involved in the development of the modern study of Islamic philosophy. In this article, Professor Nasr points to the fact that a glance at the contemporary history of the formation of the modern Islamic world shows us precisely how European versions of philosophy entered into the self-perception of the Muslim intellectual elite in these rapidly changing societies.

In India (and later Bangladesh and Pakistan), the British presented their version of philosophy to South Asian Muslims, and this meant that such trends as logical positivism and analytic philosophy were presented to them as "normal" philosophy. In the first half of the twentieth century in Egypt, philosophy was taught by way of the works of French authors who were steeped in existentialism. Educated Muslim Egyptians thus encountered philosophy through the lenses of French existentialists and Marxists. This explains why across the Muslim world there have been generations of Muslim intellectuals who have viewed their own philosophical tradition as being of little value when compared to the "true" and "normal" philosophies that were presented to them by their European "superiors."

Let us look at the case of "mysticism" for a moment. Mysticism for many is totally non-rational, and can thus have nothing to do with the objective nature of reality as such. Today, intellectually colonized Muslims readily accept this kind of a view. This is because their understanding of Islamic philosophy is filtered to them through Eurocentric, rationalistic perspectives which necessarily denigrate any form of intellectual activity among Muslims that do not have a counterpart in contemporaneous forms of European thought. At best, therefore, the Muslim philosophers of the past are seen by these Muslims themselves as having played the role of transmitters who rescued the science of philosophy out of obscurity and returned it to its rightful heirs, the Europeans.

Even in cases when Muslim scholars have been fully aware of the fact that the Islamic philosophical tradition is still a living reality, Western notions of philosophy have still dictated their intellectual horizons and the manner in which they have interacted with the Islamic philosophical tradition. There are many examples of this tendency today. But let us look at one noteworthy, earlier example, namely the great Islamicist Fazlur Rahman. To his credit are a number of important books on various aspects of the Islamic tradition. I benefited

immensely as a first-year undergraduate student from his *Major Themes of the Qur'an*. This work gave me a good window into just how underhanded and ideologically laden modern scholarship on the Qur'an can be.

When it comes to Rahman's rather excellent book on the philosophy of Mulla Sadra, for all of its merits, some major problems cut right through the entire work. In particular, he has a difficult time coming to terms with Sadra's spiritual insights when they are combined with his philosophically rigorous ideas. In the absence of an equivalent type of philosopher or philosophical category in contemporary Western thought, Rahman struggles with categorizing Mulla Sadra as a type of rationalistic philosopher who relied upon "intuitive" insight. But to call Sadra an "intuitive" philosopher does a gross injustice to the *objectivity* of Sadra's worldview.

**May you elaborate in greater detail on what you deem to be the alternative and effective approach to the study of Islamic philosophy?**

For starters, it really does not matter where one "is," geographically speaking. In other words, it is possible to correctly engage in and teach Islamic thought right here in the West. What is important to keep in mind are the following caveats: first, scholars and students should take the Islamic philosophical tradition seriously and recognize it as a dynamic, living tradition. Second, Islamic philosophy should be studied on its own terms, free from the hegemonic Eurocentric frameworks of the modern academy.

Unfortunately, most Muslim youths who attend a university in hopes of learning Islamic philosophy are totally unaware of the many epistemological biases which inform its study, and if they end up learning anything worth their while, it will usually be limited to the history of philosophy. At best, they will become good textual historians and philologists, walking away with a rather exoteric and superficial understanding of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

As the great Muslim sages of the past would put it, a discipline that does not have as its goal the perfection of the human soul, and is not concerned with issues such as the encounter with the divine after death, cannot qualify as *philosophia*.

Therefore, the correct approach is to first of all take the texts of the Islamic philosophical tradition seriously on every level, and this includes the historical and philological conditions which surround these texts. But one must go beyond these latter confines and attempt to delve into the depths of the texts in question. A true engagement with Islamic philosophy connects one to the present moment, and that which connects one to the present cannot be a text that has "died" a thousand years ago. This means that these texts address issues of abiding human concern, and thus are just as relevant to us today as when they were written in times, places, and languages very different from our own.

I must emphasize that in the study of Islamic philosophy we are to utilize established, modern academic tools and methods of textual analysis. Indeed, I am primarily trained as a *Western* historian of Islamic philosophy, and know full well how important and useful these methods are. But it is more of a question of being able to discern the *essential* from the *non-essential*.

Many of the historical questions surrounding Islamic philosophical texts are rather non-essential, but not entirely useless, of course. Knowing where the non-essential lies and being able to engage with it on its own level is an art in itself. But that should not be taken for what is essential. The essential aspects of the thought of Ibn Sina, for example, would hinge on the following kinds of questions: why is it that whenever Ibn Sina was faced with a logical problem, he would attend the *masjid* and pray for an answer? Why has he written such profound commentaries upon parts of the Qur'an? Why would he dedicate an entire treatise to a discussion on the reality and meaning of love? The non-essential approach is unable to answer these kinds of questions, and is not concerned with them. Because it is not concerned with these questions and does not seek to address them, it nevertheless does not mean that these questions are not there, and that they are unworthy of our careful attention.

**How does your critique of rationalism match up with the criticisms we find in Continental philosophy, which as an enterprise also sees right through the holes of rationalism and its claims to so-called “objectivity?”**

I think many of the Continental philosophers and those sympathetic to that tradition can see right through this intellectual hypocrisy in academia, but they unfortunately subscribe to other forms of intellectual hypocrisy (sometimes more subtle and problematic), resulting in philosophies which are rather self-congratulating and egotistical. Even this can at times help seekers out of the usual academic's “objectivity” rut, but it more often than not leaves them in other places that are just as dark. Yet those Continentals, too, are often in the same boat as someone such as myself, since we both work against the current. The major difference is that I do not attempt to critique modern totalitarian forms of reasoning from within the residual, intellectual (largely Eurocentric) paradigms of intellectual inquiry that have helped shape the modern academic institution into what it is today.

One of the strangest things is when Continental philosophy is brought into conversation with Islamic philosophy or Islamic thought more generally. A number of books have been written in this respect, and each one of them has been very problematic (if occasionally useful) in its own way. This calls to mind a time when I was a graduate student. I had a dear friend who was interested in Continental philosophy. He was an American of Iranian descent, and used to

keenly read the works of Derrida, Levinas, Nietzsche, etc. At times he would discuss various fashionable ideas in Continental philosophy with me. He was seriously committed to this school of thought. Yet he would also intensely read the poetry of Rumi, and would constantly try to reconcile these two worlds.

One day, in a graduate seminar on Rumi's *Masnavi*, he made a presentation in which he attempted to analyze some of the stories in the *Masnavi* from the perspective of Derrida. The topic had to do with Derrida's understanding of "the gift," and of "gift-giving," and my friend somehow managed to read Rumi in this light. After he finished his lecture I told him quite frankly that it is rather senseless to try to shoehorn Rumi into Derrida's framework. Why not do the opposite? Why not use Rumi to read and critique Derrida? Nothing stops us except for Orientalism (and racism) in a new garb! After all, failing to understand Rumi on his own terms and then subjecting him to Derrida's worldview simply replicates an all-too-familiar act of colonial subjugation.

My friend did not care much for my comments and probably thought that they were wrong-headed. But, years later, when we reconnected, he told me that he had come to see that the Continental philosophical tradition with which he had been so enamored was ultimately futile and pointless, amounting as it did to nothing more than a bunch of sophisticated words. Indeed, Rumi has said it best:

*ziraki befrush o hayrani bekhar / ziraki zannast o hayrani nazar*

Sell cleverness and purchase bewilderment!

For cleverness is conjecture, and bewilderment true vision.