

From the Periphery to the Center

MOHAMMED RUSTOM

Carleton University, Canada (mohammed.rustom@carleton.ca)

This article recounts one contemporary Muslim philosopher's journey into the discipline of philosophy, detailing the importance of diversifying the study of philosophy to take it beyond its Anglo-American and Eurocentric borders along the way.

Key words: Islamic philosophy; Sufi metaphysics; contemporary Islamic thought; Ibn 'Arabī; Mullā Ṣadrā; 'Ayn al-Qudāt

Nothing can be more important for the discipline of philosophy today than its diversification, thereby taking it beyond the Anglo-American and Eurocentric borders within which it is largely ensconced. Readers of the *Journal of World Philosophies* undoubtedly have their stories to tell of their unique travails and experiences in this regard, and I would like to thank Professor Kirloskar–Steinbach for her invitation to write this small autobiographical essay in which I can recount my own.

I was born in Scarborough (Ontario, Canada) in 1980 and grew up in Richmond Hill. My parents are immigrants from East Africa (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania) and belong to the Khoja diasporic community with roots in Karachi. Like my ancestors and my father, I was primed for a career in commerce, which was much of my focus as a high school student. Although I was admitted into the University of Toronto's Bachelor of Commerce program for the fall of 1999, my heart was elsewhere: I had fallen in love with the humanities in high school, largely on account of having read Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and A. J. Arberry's translation of the Quran.

In January 1999 I mustered the courage to approach my father and tell him of my interest in the humanities, and of my intention to switch into an Honours BA program in religion and philosophy in time for the start of the fall 1999 semester. Although he did not understand why I would ever choose a life of scholarship over inheriting a lucrative family business, he completely supported my decision on the condition that I excel in whatever I do.

I received an Ontario Scholar Award in 1999 and was admitted into the University of Toronto's Faculty of Arts and Science undergraduate program with a C. L. Burton Open Scholarship. As an undergraduate I studied philosophy and Islamic civilization, with particular focus on classical Arabic, classical Persian, and premodern Islamic thought.

My earliest encounter with philosophy was in a first-year introduction to philosophy course. I felt a strong attachment to ancient philosophy (we studied Plato's *Crito*, *Meno*, and *Euthyphro*) and a kind of aversion to modern philosophy (we read Descartes' *Discourse on Method* and some Bertrand Russell). The former seemed so warm and welcoming, and the latter rather cold and disinterested. Walking away from that experience, I wondered what the relationship of philosophy was to religion in general and Islam in particular. That is, were there any people who were Muslims and also philosophers? If

so, why had I not heard of them after a year of studying philosophy at so distinguished an institution as the University of Toronto?

As I continued in my Islamic studies courses, I eventually came to learn that there was indeed a vibrant Islamic intellectual tradition that inherited knowledge from Late Antiquity and made its own strides in various fields, from logic and metaphysics to cosmology and psychology. Despite the profundity of these premodern Muslim thinkers, they were studied as only historical figures who had a role to play in the history of human thought but whose insights were no longer relevant, meaningful, or worthy of serious attention. Indeed, apart from one advanced undergraduate Islamic philosophy course in the philosophy department (taught every two years), the Muslim philosophers I had learned of in my Islamic studies courses were not a part of the philosophy curriculum in any serious way.

I pressed on with my studies in philosophy, finding myself somehow in an undergraduate course entitled “Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.” In hindsight, I probably only took the course because the names of the philosophers sounded “cool.” But much more happened than I had expected. I became quite enamoured by Nietzsche, especially since his writings were critical of absolutist claims to reason and yet poetic and artistic at the same time. However, the more I read him, the more emptiness I felt. This emptiness was the exact antipode of the joy and elation I had experienced in my other courses, reading Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus.

I have recounted elsewhere¹ that one of the turning points in my philosophical life took place on a bench one beautiful autumn morning after my class on Kierkegaard and Nietzsche had ended. The professor had been explaining to us how Nietzsche views all things as subject to interpretation, and how there is no underlying meaning or truth to our absurd and meaningless world. Dreading by this possibility, I looked up just as the sun had shone onto the leaves that were on the ground, creating a sea of gold that seemed as distant as it was near, and as ungraspable as it was palpable. The thought occurred to me that the fullest expression of a philosophical life should be like the image before my eyes, that is, something both rigorously rational and poetically profound.

Not long thereafter, a dear friend of mine—who was also a student of philosophy and religion and today is a leading scholar of Sufism—gifted me a copy of *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*,² which is one of the titles in the famous Library of Living Philosophers. I read this book and Professor Nasr’s *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*³ with great interest. In more ways than one, these works clearly allowed me to witness firsthand a living Islamic philosophical tradition of which Professor Nasr is a part, with an unbroken chain of teachers stretching back to Mullā Ṣadrā and all the way to Avicenna. I am thus indebted to Professor Nasr in ways that words cannot explain; and I am very fortunate to still be in contact with him and to continue to collaborate with him on various projects.

My discovery of Professor Nasr’s works led me to the writings of some of the greatest minds of premodern Islamic thought, particularly Ibn ‘Arabī, Suhrawardī, and Mullā Ṣadrā.⁴ Halfway through the third year of my undergraduate studies, I had given up on the thought of studying these great figures in my philosophy classes and thus switched almost exclusively to Islamic studies. There, I had the opportunity to read some of the main texts of Islamic philosophy and Sufism in the original languages with such fine scholars of Islamic thought as Todd Lawson (who would later become my *Doktorvater*), Sebastian Guenther, and the late Michael Marmura.⁵

Another turning point in my intellectual and spiritual life was a period of immersion in the Quran. I was blessed to have had a wonderful Quran teacher in my early twenties under whom I memorized a good part of the Quran. I was completely captivated by the Quran and put aside almost all of my books. I would read the Quran in the original Arabic, spending my days mesmerized by its sounds, crying over its words, contemplating its verses, and meeting my teacher in order to be tested on my readings. Those were unforgettable days and nights.

Having swam in the vast ocean of the Quran for so many years, I then studied a little bit with traditional Muslim scholars, focusing particularly on Arabic logic, Islamic law, Islamic rational theology, and Arabic grammar. This was useful preparation for my encounter with Ibn ‘Arabī, which quite literally changed my awareness of things in a deep and lasting way. The one book that I credit for this shift in perspective is William Chittick’s *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination*.⁶ This is by far the single best introduction to Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought in any language. In this book, Professor Chittick translates over 600 passages from Ibn ‘Arabī’s magnum opus *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Openings)* and provides a smooth-flowing commentary throughout, explaining key technical terms and concepts and making wider connections with ideas encountered throughout the book in a straight-forward and unpretentious manner. As Professor Chittick’s long-time student and an avid reader of his writings, I have tried to employ this method in some of my own works, particularly my book entitled *Inrushes of the Heart: The Sufi Philosophy of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt*.⁷

My University of Toronto doctoral dissertation brought together my interests in the Quran and Islamic philosophy. It was a study of the philosophical scriptural exegesis of Mullā Ṣadrā and was published under the title *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā*.⁸ In addition to being awarded Iran’s World Prize for the Book of the Year in 2014, the findings presented in this book concerning the nature of philosophy in Islam and its relationship to disciplines such as Sufism and scriptural commentary have generated a great deal of interest in academic circles in both the east and the west.

I took up an Assistant Professorship at Carleton University in 2009, right after I had defended my dissertation. Despite facing the usual microaggressions non-white scholars encounter in the modern academy, my time at Carleton has been pleasant. I have over the years had the opportunity to teach a wide variety of courses in the College of the Humanities, from specialized seminars on Avicenna, al-Ghazālī, Ibn ‘Arabī, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, and Rūmī, to more general courses in comparative mysticism, Islamic thought, and global philosophy.

From the time of my engagement with Suhrawardī’s haunting Persian symbolic treatises,⁹ I have always sought to highlight the importance of the intimate relationship between philosophy and literature. To this end, I spent several years at NYU Abu Dhabi as a Senior Research Fellow where I had the opportunity to translate and edit a major Sufi philosophical literary text by ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt for the Library of Arabic Literature (which recently appeared as *The Essence of Reality: A Defense of Philosophical Sufism*¹⁰). Both my time at NYU Abu Dhabi and the various intellectual exchanges and scholarly collaborations I have been engaged in with cross-cultural philosophers in Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America have presented me with a number of new opportunities to advance education in global philosophy.

Chief among these is my Global Philosophy series with Equinox.¹¹ The series' flagship text that I am editing (to be published in 2024) is a six-hundred-page sourcebook that brings together contributions from over sixty leading philosophers such as Peter Adamson, Jay Garfield, Alexis McLeod, Sachiko Murata, and Bryan Van Norden, in order to highlight the depth, diversity, and creativity of non-western philosophies and cultures. It does so by featuring in translation the central ideas, themes, and arguments of over seventy philosophical and religious texts from fourteen different languages (namely, Arabic, Aramaic, Chinese, Classic Mayan, English, French, Hebrew, Japanese, Judeo-Arabic, Korean, Maasai, Persian, Sanskrit, and Tibetan). It is my hope that this volume will contribute in some way to diversifying teaching and research in philosophy.

Some of my more recent intellectual activity has been devoted to expanding the notion of the philosophy of religion which has traditionally been defined by Christian problem sets and categories and approached mainly through the perspective of analytic philosophy. My colleague Professor Muhammad Faruque and I were recently awarded a Templeton Foundation Global Philosophy of Religion grant to hold a conference and publish a book on the topic with particular reference to Islamic philosophy.¹² The conference proceedings will soon appear in Routledge's Studies in Islamic Philosophy as *From the Divine to the Human: Contemporary Islamic Thinkers on Evil, Suffering, and the Global Pandemic*. The contributions in the volume take a distinctive approach to the field of the philosophy of religion by exploring traditional accounts of theodicy alongside other forms of evil and suffering in the world today, from COVID and issues in climate change on the one hand, to problems in palliative care and mental health on the other.

Aside from scholarship, translating texts of Islamic thought into English, and the occasional interview,¹³ I have also attempted to tackle several philosophical problems (such as the hard problem of consciousness¹⁴ and theodicy¹⁵) from the perspective of Islamic philosophy, and not only through the medium of prose but also poetry and even fictional dialogue.¹⁶ Some may see these contributions as original Islamic philosophical inquiries, but I would prefer to see them as reapplications of the time-honored principles of Islamic philosophy to new contexts. To paraphrase a statement by Professor Nasr, the only sense in which a Muslim philosopher should seek to be "original" is that of going back to the *origin* from whence he came.

Mohammed Rustom is Professor of Islamic Thought at Carleton University and Director of the Carleton Centre for the Study of Islam. An internationally recognized scholar whose works have been translated into over ten languages, Professor Rustom's research focuses on Islamic philosophy, Sufism, Quranic exegesis, and cross-cultural philosophy. He is author of *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mulla Ṣadrā* (2012), co-editor of *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (2015), translator of Al-Ghazālī, *The Condemnation of Pride and Self-Admiration* (2018), translator of 'Ayn al-Qudāt, *The Essence of Reality: A Defense of Philosophical Sufism* (2022), and author of *Inrushes of the Heart: The Sufi Philosophy of 'Ayn al-Qudāt* (2023).

¹ See Mohammed Rustom, "Islam and the Density of Man," *Sacred Web* 46 (2020): 56–76.

- ² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, eds. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, and Lucian W. Stone, Jr. (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).
- ³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968).
- ⁴ Helpful introductions to the Islamic philosophical tradition include Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World: A History of Philosophy without any Gaps, Volume 3* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); William Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Toshihiko Izutsu, *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things* (Ashland: White Cloud Press, 1994); and Cyrus Zargar, *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (London: Oneworld, 2017).
- ⁵ For Professor Marmura's life, work, and influence, see "In Memoriam: Michael E. Marmura, 1929–2009," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2010): 177–84; obituary by Mohammed Rustom (177–80), bibliography by Thérèse Anne-Druart (181–84).
- ⁶ William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).
- ⁷ Mohammed Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart: The Sufi Philosophy of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2023).
- ⁸ Mohammed Rustom, *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012).
- ⁹ For an English translation, see Suhrawardī, *The Philosophical Allegories and Mystical Treatises*, trans. Wheeler Thackston (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1999).
- ¹⁰ Mohammed Rustom, *The Essence of Reality: A Defense of Philosophical Sufism* (New York: NYU Press, 2022).
- ¹¹ For which, see <https://www.equinoxpub.com/home/global-philosophy-2/>
- ¹² Lectures from the conference can be viewed here: <https://www.sufferingpandemicconference.org/lectures>
- ¹³ See, for example, Soroosh Shahriari, "Neo-Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy: An Interview with Professor Mohammed Rustom," *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 3, no. 1 (2018): 112–19.
- ¹⁴ Mohammed Rustom, "The Great Chain of Consciousness: Do All Things Possess Awareness?," *Renovatio* 1, no. 1 (2017): 49–60.
- ¹⁵ Mohammed Rustom, "On Listening: Hearing God's Voice in the Face of Suffering," *Sacred Web* 45 (2020): 36–43.
- ¹⁶ See, respectively, Rustom, "The End of Islamic Philosophy," *Sacred Web* 40 (2017): 131–67 and Rustom, "The Student and the Sage," in *From the Divine to the Human: Contemporary Islamic Thinkers on Evil, Suffering, and the Global Pandemic*, eds. Muhammad U. Faruque and Mohammed Rustom (New York: Routledge, 2023), chapter 11.