

# Remembering Toshihiko Izutsu: Linguist, Islamicist, Philosopher

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## 1 Introduction

The publication of this *Festschrift* in honor of Professors William Chittick and Sachiko Murata coincides with the 30-year death anniversary of Toshihiko Izutsu, who was one of their teachers and one of the most remarkable scholars of Islam of the last century. Like Henry Corbin (d. 1978), with whom he forged a close friendship, Izutsu saw himself first and foremost as a philosopher, and in his own particular case, as a “metaphysician of the word.”<sup>1</sup> The designation symbolized both his fascination with language and a lifelong preoccupation with the nature of Being to the extent that it emerges as a Word (through the *kun fa-yakūn*, the creative fiat) out of the silence of the formless Absolute, Beyond Being, Non-Being, or Void. In conventional academic parlance, Izutsu might also be described as a philosopher of language, a designation not wholly inaccurate as long as we keep in mind the intricate, intimate relation he believed to exist between human speech, on the one hand, and Being as a repository of meaning, on the other.

Born in Tokyo in 1914 to a businessman who was also deeply committed to Zen and the art of calligraphy, in his early adulthood he gravitated towards the study of language and Greek philosophy. At least some of this impulse stemmed from a reaction to the austere and demanding forms of meditation his father imposed on him in childhood, not to mention his devaluation of thinking, although the precise nature of Izutsu’s early relation with Buddhism remains unclear.<sup>2</sup> It was this appreciation for the magic of language that stirred in his

1 Wakamatsu, Eisuke, *Toshihiko Izutsu and the philosophy of word: In search of the spiritual Orient*, trans. Jean C. Hoff, Tokyo: International House of Japan, 2014, xii.

2 On Izutsu’s early relationship with both Zen and his father, see Makino, Shinya, “On the originality of ‘Izutsu’ Oriental philosophy,” in Sayyid J. Āshtiyānī et al. (eds.), *Consciousness and reality: Studies in memory of Toshihiko Izutsu*, Leiden: Brill, 2000, 253–254; Nakamura, Kojiro, “The significance of Toshihiko Izutsu’s legacy for comparative religion,” in *Intellectual Dis-course* 17.2 (2009), 147–158, 147–148; Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 3–6.

heart a desire to learn Arabic, a wish later fulfilled when he met Abdurreshid Ibrahim (b. 1857) in his early 20s. A Russian Tatar who traced his descent to Bukharans who had migrated to Western Siberia, he moved to Japan in the early 1930s after an initial visit in 1909. Having been imprisoned in the Russian Empire on more than one occasion for his anti-colonial, pan-Islamic activities, Japan seemed like an ideal refuge. The nation had proven itself remarkably resilient in the 1904–1905 war with Russia,<sup>3</sup> and its cultural and moral ethos, in his eyes, was deeply compatible with Islam. Having studied in Medina, Mecca, and Istanbul, the man who had served as *qāḍī* in his own country, was no insignificant figure. Among Japanese journalists, he was sometimes introduced as “the former president of Muslims in Russia.” Even though no such office existed, he held a prominent place in the eyes of his co-religionists.<sup>4</sup> Conversant in Japanese, it was perhaps only natural that he would become the first imam of the Tokyo Mosque.<sup>5</sup>

Although Ibrahim had initially declined the young Izutsu's requests for a meeting, he eventually agreed but stubbornly refused to teach him Arabic. When they met, the elderly gentleman said to him, holding an English biography of the Prophet Muhammad in his hand, *hādha kitāb jā'a min Amrika, afahimta?* (This book has just arrived from America. Do you understand?).<sup>6</sup>

3 In a speech delivered in Japan on his visit in 1909, Shaikh Ibrahim described the plight of his community under Russian rule, along with his newfound fascination with the country, in the following words: “Frankly, before the Russo-Japanese War I knew almost nothing about Japan. Japan's great success in this war affected me so much that I decided to come to Japan. I am sure we can learn many things in Japan which are developing day by day like the rising sun. As to our Tatar people, words cannot describe the various kinds of oppression that we suffered during 450 years under Russian rule. The Russian government has not permitted us to learn our own history. They do not want to have enlightened Muslim subjects; for example, last year alone 15 Tatar schools, built by the people's own efforts and expense, were closed down by the order of the government. You can understand everything by this simple example.” Cited in Komatsu, Hisao, “Muslim intellectuals and Japan: A pan-Islamist mediator, Abdurreshid Ibrahim,” in Stéphane A. Dudoignon, Hisao Komatsu and Yasushi Kosugi (eds.), *Intellectuals in the modern Islamic world: Transmission, transformation, communication*, London: Routledge, 2006, 273–288, 277.

4 Komatsu, “Muslim intellectuals” 274.

5 On the intersecting political and religious nature of Ibrahim's relationship with Japan, see Esenbel, Selcuk, “Abdürreşid Ibrahim: ‘The world of Islam and the spread of Islam in Japan,’ 1910,” in Sven Saaler and Christopher W.A. Szpilman (eds.), *Pan-Asianism: A documentary history*. I. 1850–1920, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011, 195–203; Esenbel, Selcuk, “Japan's global claim to Asia and the world of Islam: Transnational nationalism and world power, 1900–1945,” in *AHR* 109.4 (2004), 1140–1170, 1148–1154. See also Komatsu, “Muslim intellectuals” 273–288. On the Tokyo Mosque, see below.

6 Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 50–51.

Izutsu would later recall the “tremendous thrill” he felt on hearing the sound of classical Arabic. The excitement must have impressed itself on him, since he agreed to teach Izutsu, but on one condition: that he also learn the faith of the majority of those who speak it. Originally, the arrangement between them was for Izutsu to come once a week for lessons. Instead, he ended up attending almost every day. Two years later, he had become so immersed in the universe of Islam that Ibrahim could say to him, “You are a natural-born Muslim. Since you were a Muslim from the time of your birth, you are my son.”<sup>7</sup> Izutsu’s wife, Toyoko, later described her husband’s teacher as “an engaging and affable man who ... had a penchant for proverbs.”<sup>8</sup> Abdurreshid Ibrahim died in exile in Japan in 1944, in his early 90s—in the same year as Izutsu’s father.

It was through the Tokyo Imam that Izutsu would meet one of his protégés, Musa Jarullah (b. 1875), also a Tatar Russian involved in the political and religious resistance movement against the Russians for their incursion into and annexation of Muslim territories.<sup>9</sup> A scholar trained in Maturidi theology and Hanafi law in the *madrasas* of Bukhara in modern Uzbekistan, and having served for some time as the imam of the Great Mosque of St. Petersburg,<sup>10</sup> he was also an advocate of women’s rights, promoted a doctrine of universal salvation, and argued that the *‘ulamā* had fallen short of their responsibilities as custodians of the faith.<sup>11</sup> While he (like Ibrahim) has often been described as a *jadīdī* or Muslim reformer,<sup>12</sup> he objected to the term because it was often used as a term of reproach by his critics.<sup>13</sup> In fact, his own thought appeared to combine strands of both traditionalism and reform, conservatism and reconstruction. It was under his tutelage that Izutsu studied the grammar of Sibawayh (d. 180/796), pre-Islamic *jāhili* poetry, and a range of other

7 Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 51.

8 Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 51.

9 The most comprehensive study of his life and influence in English is to be found in Altuntas, Selcuk, *How to be a proper Muslim in the Russian Empire: An intellectual biography of Musa Jarullah Bigiyev (1875–1949)*, Madison (PhD Diss.): University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2018.

10 Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 53.

11 Albayrak, Ismail, “The reception of Toshihiko’s Izutsu’s Qur’anic studies in the Muslim world: With special reference to Turkish Qur’anic scholarship,” in *JQS* 14.1 (2012), 73–106, 97n3; Altuntas, *How to be a proper Muslim* 4–5 and 11–13.

12 On the Russian Jadidists, see Fuller, Graham E., *A world without Islam*, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010, 173–177. On the fluctuating plight of Muslims in Russia, see ch. 8. As the former vice-chairman of the National Intelligence Council at the CIA, the author brings a unique perspective to his analysis of political Islamic movements.

13 Altuntas, *How to be a proper Muslim* 3.

classical Arabic texts.<sup>14</sup> It was also through Musa Jarullah that Izutsu came to learn of the prodigious powers of memory that were produced in the educational centers where the *‘ulamā’* were trained. Once he came to visit Izutsu when he had fallen sick. Noticing his large collection of books, he asked him what he did when he moved, to which the student replied, somewhat sheepishly, that he packed them in a basket and carried them “like a snail.” Musa laughed and said a genuine scholar could teach and write anywhere, empty-handed. On one occasion, Izutsu brought some Arabic texts for his teacher. A few days later, when he returned, to his surprise Musa had memorized them all.<sup>15</sup>

Musa would eventually depart Japan, making his way to Cairo where he passed away some years after WWII, in 1949. A decade before his own death, Izutsu penned a short essay in Japanese in his memory, entitled *The wandering pilgrim teacher*. Activist, intellectual, conservative, reformer, Izutsu always respectfully referred to him as “Professor Musa.” The man who had traveled throughout the Islamic world after his exile from Russia appeared unable to stay in one land. In a novella by Toyoko featuring her husband, he would say to Izutsu, “To become like a tree rotting in the place it was planted—what a boring life.”<sup>16</sup>

While Japan did not have a developed Islamic studies tradition, Izutsu’s scholarship of Islam did not emerge, within a Japanese academic context, out of a total vacuum. One formidable influence was Shūmei Ōkawa,<sup>17</sup> director of the East Asian Economic Research Bureau, a think tank for whose journal (*New Asia*) Izutsu regularly contributed. Ōkawa, as Izutsu would state, had a “deeply personal interest” in Islam.<sup>18</sup> As the author of an early introductory book on the subject in Japanese, *Outline of Islam*, he saw the faith as a culmination of the Abrahamic religions, a bridge between East and West, and yet also a manifestation of the “Oriental spirit.”<sup>19</sup> While he was familiar with Western scholarship on Islam, he objected to what he felt was the underlying prejudice that animated much of it, rooted in centuries of military conflict with the Muslim world.

14 Albayrak, “The reception” 74.

15 Wakamutsa, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 53.

16 Wakamutsa, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 52.

17 The Japanese convention of placing the last name before the first has not been followed in this paper, for purposes of creating consistency with the citation of non-Japanese names.

18 Cited in Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 56. For a Saidian analysis of the apparent tensions in his views of Islam, see Aydin, Cemil, *The politics of civilizational identities: Asia, West and Islam in the pan-Asianist thought of Ōkawa Shūmei*, Cambridge, MA (PhD Diss.): Harvard University, 2002, ch. 6.

19 See more on this complex question below.

Some of these attitudes had even percolated into Japanese culture, such as the belief that the religion's founder came with the Quran in one hand and the sword in the other, offering death or conversion. For Ōkawa, the Prophet's earnest desire was not war but peace, and he only resorted to violence as a last resort. "Unfortunately," he wrote, "as a result of Christianity's hostility to all things non-Christian, Islam is always painted black."<sup>20</sup> Ōkawa also pointed out that Muslims developed a pattern of religious toleration wherever they went, unprecedented for the scale and size of their civilization. What particularly attracted him to the faith was the manner in which it sought to synthesize the political, social, economic, private, and spiritual spheres of life into a single rubric.

Although Ōkawa has been described as one of the founders of Islamic studies in Japan,<sup>21</sup> he was not, to be clear, a professionally trained Islamicist. Born in 1886, in high school he had been captivated by Western philosophy. By the time he entered university, however, his interest had shifted to pre-modern Japanese thought, Buddhism, and ancient India. He eventually graduated with a thesis on Nāgārjuna.<sup>22</sup> Largely self-taught when it came to Islam,<sup>23</sup> he published an essay on Sufism in 1910,<sup>24</sup> and a series of articles on "Mohammed and his religion," shortly afterward.<sup>25</sup> His most important works on the faith would only come out closer to the end of his life, including (apart from his introductory book) a translation of the Quran<sup>26</sup> that was completed before his death, not

20 Cited in Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 56.

21 Aydin, *The politics* 173.

22 Takeuchi, Yoshimi, "Profile of Asian minded man X: Ōkawa Shūmei," in *Developing Economies* 7.3 (1969), 367–379, 370. For a critical appraisal of Takeuchi's article, and some important corrections, see Usuki, Akira, "A Japanese Asianist's view of Islam," in *Annales of Japan Association for Middle East Studies* 28.2 (2013), 59–84. Ōkawa's studies of Indian philosophy took place under the direction of Masaharu Anesaki (1873–1949), the founder of the discipline of Religious Studies in the country. Krämer, Hans M., "Pan-Asianism's religious undercurrents: The reception of Islam and translation of the Qur'ān in twentieth century Japan," in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73.3 (2014), 619–640, 627.

23 It should be noted that he too had studied with Shaikh Ibrahim, although it is hard to determine the extent of it in the available secondary literature.

24 Usuki, "A Japanese Asianist's view" 66.

25 Usuki, "A Japanese Asianist's view" 82.

26 While he had studied Arabic in his younger days, he was not fluent enough to produce a direct translation and had to rely instead on the available ones in the languages he was fluent in. Describing the process of producing his own rendition of the sacred text, Ōkawa wrote, "I asked that the Arabic edition of the Koran and copies of more than ten foreign translations of the Koran such as Japanese, classic Chinese, English, French and Dutch translations be brought into my study room and my hospital. I began to read them ... My illness didn't affect my understanding. On the contrary, I could understand more clearly

long after he had recovered from a mental illness that forced him to become hospitalized at the Matsuzawa Hospital. In his memoir, he said this was the most peaceful time of his life. Curiously, he also reported having visions during this period of the Prophet, “dressed in a green mantle and a turban” declaring “there is only one God: and Muhammad, Christ and the Buddha are all prophets of the same God.”<sup>27</sup> He left behind a biography on him that was published posthumously.

Ōkawa’s scholarly career cannot be disentangled from his political activities as a Pan-Asianist who saw in Pan-Islamism an ally against Western imperial encroachment—a view shared by many in the government. His fascination with the faith, bordering at times on Islamophilia, was at least partially grounded in the role he felt it could play in the formation of a united Eastern front against the West, with imperial Japan at the center. The seeds for Izutsu’s deep sympathy for Islam and his later association, though indirect, with the Traditionalist school, known for its critique of the “desacralization” of the world brought about through secular modernity, may well have been planted, in this respect, by the political and cultural climate of pre-WWI Japan, as well as his close relation to thinkers associated with anti-colonial, anti-Western movements. These were figures with profoundly existential interests in religion and who were grappling with how to preserve tradition in the modern world without at the same time succumbing to the domination of the West.<sup>28</sup> On this question, however, there is a need for more research—research that does not at the same time ignore the truly ecumenical, global vision of Izutsu’s own scholarship,<sup>29</sup> and the seeming distance he kept from politics.

Izutsu began to write on Islam and related themes early in his life. His first major article, in Japanese, came out in 1939. It was on Arabic linguistics. A year later, he published another essay on the ethics of the Mu‘tazilite Quran commentator al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144). Then in 1941, when he was only 27,

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most of the passages that I couldn’t understand when I first read them.” Cited in Usuki, “A Japanese Asianist’s view” 76–77.

27 Cited in Esenbel, “Japan’s global claim” 1162.

28 See Esenbel’s observations in “Japan’s global claim” 1145–1146.

29 Takeuchi notes the vision of a global community, of a united East and West, that may have emerged in Ōkawa’s own thought and intellectual career near the end of his life, where Islam played the role not just of an ally of the East, but of a bridge that could bring the two worlds together. “It is conceivable,” writes Takeuchi, “that the Islamic religion was a subject of greater interest to Ōkawa than either Christianity, Buddhism or Japan’s indigenous religions. Ōkawa had an image of a sphere in which were united religion and politics, of a place which was the point of encounter between East and West; for him, Islam was the manifestation of this ideal. As his research progressed, he became more and more captivated by the Islamic religion. For that very reason, his Islamic studies are outstanding, and even today are a valuable legacy.” Takeuchi, “Profile” 373.

he wrote his first book, again in Japanese, *A history of Arabic thought: Islamic theology and philosophy*, a survey that ended with Averroes (d. 595/1198).<sup>30</sup> His scholarly output at this stage took place within an intellectual milieu that saw a rise of Japanese publications on Islam, an outgrowth of deepening relations between Japan's pan-Asianists and anti-colonial Muslim pan-Islamists. The highpoint of this period lay between 1939 and 1941, when according to one count a total of 673 books, articles, and pamphlets were printed on the subject.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, this three-year span followed the erection of the Tokyo Mosque in 1938 on the occasion of the Prophet's birthday. Built in the style of classical Central Asian architecture, and funded in part by the Japanese government including major corporations such as Mitsubishi, at the opening of the mosque delegates from a range of Muslim countries were present. They included the crown prince of Yemen, envoys from Mecca, Chinese Muslims, and emigres from the USSR.<sup>32</sup> Ibrahim who was invited to assume the role of the mosque's imam, was also present. It was here that Izutsu would often come to continue his studies.

## 2 The Years Following the Second World War

Five years after the catastrophic tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Izutsu became an Assistant Professor at Keio University, although he began working as a researcher and later lecturer at the institution from 1937 onwards. Then in 1952, when he was 38, he wrote a biography of the Prophet (*Mahometto*) in Japanese. However, in the words of Wakamatsu, this work, by Izutsu's own confession, was not strictly speaking a historical study but "a hymn of praise to his spiritual hero and a confession of his inner thoughts."<sup>33</sup> Yet Izutsu also later said of this work on a figure whom he referred to as "the hero of the spiritual world"—the "spiritual world" being, for Izutsu, reality—that it was his "pure starting point."<sup>34</sup> In the same year he married Toyoko, the woman that would become his life-long companion. From 1957–1958, he produced a Japanese translation of the Quran. It was no doubt his painstaking analysis of the

30 Wakamatsu described the study as "the first serious history of Islamic philosophy in Japan-ese." See Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 307–308.

31 Aydin, *The politics* 174n2.

32 Esenbel, "Japan's global claim" 1164–1165; Komatsu, "Muslim intellectuals" 282–283.

33 Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 156. See also Nakamura, Kojiro, "Islamic Studies in Japan," in Gerrie ter Haar and Yoshio Tsuruoka (eds.), *Religion and society: An agenda for the 21st century*, Leiden: Brill, 2007, 261–265, 263.

34 Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 2, 123, and 156.

scripture that accompanied this task that set the stage, in 1959, for his first English book on Islam, *The structure of ethical terms in the Quran: A study in semantics*. This would lay the foundation for the development of a linguistic method of analyzing the text, and lead to the publication in 1964 of *God and man in the Quran*, and then in 1965, of *The concept of belief in Islamic theology: A semantic analysis of imān and islām*. Along with *Ethico-religious concepts of the Quran* (a revised version of the earliest of the triad), Izutsu's studies of the language and worldview of Muslim revelation would establish him as an Islamicist of international stature, not to be ignored. It was a testament to his linguistic versatility that, as a scholar entirely trained in Japan, he was able to compose such innovative, ground-breaking studies entirely in English. This is not to say there was no pushback from certain quarters in the West in response to an outsider writing about the faith of Muslims (a subject over which many Orientalists in the guild traditions felt they exercised monopoly). Even when his work was praised, a certain civilizational hubris might lurk in the background, as when one American professor observed in the pages of a leading journal, in what amounted to a backhanded compliment, that one "may perhaps be more surprised to find a Japanese scholar writing on Islamic subjects than to find that he does it well."<sup>35</sup>

Izutsu's Japanese translation of the Quran was the first to be based on the original Arabic. There were at least two others (besides Ōkawa's<sup>36</sup>) that appeared earlier, relying on European languages.<sup>37</sup> The first of these came out in 1920 at the hands of Ken'ichi Sakamoto (d. 1930), a prolific public intellectual responsible for a number of works on European history and a 2,500-page *World history*, not to mention a biography of the Prophet Muhammad published in 1899. For his knowledge of Muslim beliefs, practices, and tradition, he seems to have depended exclusively on Western scholarship, making use of Rodwell's 1861 English Quran for his own. His aim was to render knowledge of the history and religions of the world available to the Japanese middle-class.<sup>38</sup> The other version was completed by Gorō Takahashi (1856–1935) and Amado Ariga (1868–1946). The former was an experienced translator of European religious and philosophical literature, commissioned by the latter, a Japanese convert to

35 Partin, Harry B., "Semantics of the Qur'ān: A consideration of Izutsu's studies," in *History of Religions* 9.4 (1970), 358–362, 358. One problem his work encountered was that it was not operating on the premises of the deeply historicist nature of Western scholarship on the Quran.

36 See fn 26.

37 As noted earlier, Ōkawa made use of a Quran in classical Chinese.

38 Krämer, "Pan-Asianism's religious undercurrents" 621–622.



Islam, to help in producing a Quran that was more accessible than Sakamoto's, which, for Amado, had the unfortunate feature of being too expensive and difficult to understand. He wanted one that could be of "general use" so it could better serve his needs of making the sacred text of Islam accessible to his countrymen and women.<sup>39</sup>

An intriguing figure in the history of Islam in Japan, Amado was born Bunhachirō Ariga, but adopted the name "Ahmad" ("Amado" being a Japanized version) following his conversion, which took place closer to the end of his life. He had been introduced to the religion in India as a young man at the end of the 19th century while serving as a foreign trade representative. An Indian Muslim merchant by the name of Haydar Ali, whom he encountered in his travels, left a deep impression on him, planting the seeds for a formal entry into Islam decades later.<sup>40</sup> Active in Japan's small but growing Muslim community, and part of Ibrahim's broader network, he played a role in the construction not only of the mosque of Tokyo, but also of Nagoya and Kōbe. Like other Japanese converts, he felt that Shinto and Islam were deeply compatible. "In our country's Shinto," he wrote, "we believe in the Great God Amenominakanushi; this deity is identical to the only God in which we [Muslims] believe. For this reason, I think that those people who believe in Amenominakanushi are by nature identical to us believers."<sup>41</sup> This impulse to see in the theology of Islam deep structural simil-

39 Krämer, "Pan-Asianism's religious undercurrents" 624–625.

40 Misawa, Nobuo, "Shintoism and Islam in interwar Japan: How did the Japanese come to believe in Islam?," in *Orient* 46 (2011), 119–140, 130.

41 Cited in Krämer, "Pan-Asianism's religious undercurrents" 627. Generally speaking, Amado was lukewarm about pressing the similarities between Shinto and Islam, unlike another prominent Japanese convert, Nur Muhammad Ippei Tanaka (1882–1934). Some have accused the latter of stressing the converges between the two faiths to the point of syncretism. This was certainly not how he saw it. And even if there were some syncretism present, it probably could not have gone very far, considering his close relation with and tutelage under Shaikh Ibrahim. It should perhaps be noted here that Tanaka had engaged in a deep study of Islam while in China, having been inspired by Liu Zhi's (d. 1730) Chinese biography of the Prophet Muhammad which he translated into Japanese. In many respects, he sought to look at Islam through the lens of Shinto in much the same way that Chinese Muslims had often looked at Islam through the lens of Confucianism. Generally speaking, there is a tendency in much of the secondary literature to overstate the political reasons for Japanese conversions to Islam in the pre-WWI period, while calling into question the knowledge these converts had of the faith they adopted. Misawa's treatment of this problem helps rectify the tendency, at least in some respects, but falls into its own traps. Misawa, "Shintoism and Islam" 119–140. For more on Tanaka, see Dufourmont, Eddy, "Tanaka Ippei: 'Islam and pan-Asianism,' 1924," in Sven Saaler and Christopher W.A. Szpilman (eds.), *Pan-Asianism: A documentary history. II. 1920–Present*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011, 87–91.

arities with the religions of the Far East, a sentiment found among Muslims in this part of the world, would emerge also in Izutsu, although in a much more refined, developed, and nuanced form. Naturally, Izutsu's own translation of the Quran would outstrip all those that preceded it both in its precision and quality for self-evident reasons. Only a scholar of his erudition and mastery of classical Arabic could produce a version of such a caliber, made all the more popular since it was written not in formal literary but colloquial Japanese.<sup>42</sup>

Many have argued that the waning of Japanese interest in Islam after the second world war is proof that it was simply rooted in the geopolitics of the day. While some of this was inevitable as Japan reconfigured its global alliances, and reconstructed its own post-war identity (politically, socially, intellectually, and culturally), the decline of interest was not as steep as often made out. For one thing, the number of works on Islam published from 1950 to 1959 suggests otherwise. There were just a little more than 900 articles, books, and pamphlets produced in those years, almost the same number that emerged between 1905 and 1930.<sup>43</sup> The period is significant since it was after all in the aftermath of Japan's victory over Russia in 1905 that relations began to develop between representatives of Japanese Pan-Asianism and Muslim anti-colonial pan-Islamism.<sup>44</sup> "That interest in Islam endured," observes Krämer, "clearly indicates that Islam was more than a political expedient for at least some Japanese."<sup>45</sup> This was certainly the case with Izutsu, who was on his way to becoming the nation's leading expert on the faith, and who would come out with some of his most lasting scholarly contributions in the decades following WWII.

Izutsu's academic trajectory may appear somewhat unconventional when we consider that he only received his doctorate in 1959, five years after being appointed professor at the Faculty of Letters. It was a mere formality, however, aided by a close friend in the university, to ensure no obstacles would stand in the way of his scholarly work abroad, since his own institution did not require the degree.<sup>46</sup> Two of his previously published works (one being his Quran translation) were submitted in lieu of the dissertation. As for research outside Japan, this was facilitated through a Rockefeller Foundation award that allowed him to travel for the first time beyond the borders of the country of his birth. He visited Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, experiences that marked his first direct contact with the Islamic world and which afforded him an opportunity to engage

42 Krämer, "Pan-Asianism's religious undercurrents" 632.

43 Aydin, *The politics* 174n2.

44 Esenbel, "Japan's global claim" 1140–1141; Koyagi, "The hajj" 851–852.

45 Krämer, "Pan-Asianism's religious undercurrents" 632.

46 Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 200.

in dialogue with scholars of Islam from the Middle East. He then traveled to Germany where he met the linguist Leo Weisgerber (1899–1985) whose theories of language he had employed, and would continue to develop, in his own studies of the Quran.<sup>47</sup>

### 3 The Years at McGill and the Imperial Academy of Philosophy

In 1960 Izutsu visited McGill's Institute of Islamic Studies, established less than a decade earlier by Wilfred C. Smith (1916–2000), a pioneering Canadian scholar of comparative religion and of Islam. In 1962, he took up the position of visiting professor at the Institute, traveling back and forth between Canada and Japan, until he was appointed professor there seven years later. It was in 1962 upon attending a lecture by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who had come to visit McGill, that an entirely new trajectory of thinking opened up to him. The talk was on the Safavid philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640). It was a watershed moment for Izutsu, catalyzing a new phase of scholarship that would turn his attention to the later Islamic sapiential tradition.<sup>48</sup> If Ṣadrā was, historically speaking, the “synthesizing point” in whom a particular conception of existence was articulated that arrested the mind of Izutsu, then Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) was its point of origin.<sup>49</sup> It was only natural that in order to adequately grasp this vision of reality, he would have to begin with a careful, meticulous study of the Andalusian mystic. If we are to believe a widely circulated story at McGill, in order to better understand Ibn ‘Arabī, Izutsu plunged into a three-month *khalwa* or solitary retreat where he only read him and did nothing else, with Toyoko bringing meals into his study so as not to interrupt the ascent of her husband's mind into the spiritual world of the *walī*. The impact that his immersion into the *weltan-*

47 Along with Weisgerber, we cannot also ignore the influence of the American linguists Sapir (1884–1939) and Whorf (1897–1941) on his thinking.

48 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, “Preface,” in Sayyid J. Āshṭiyānī et al. (eds.), *Consciousness and reality: Studies in memory of Toshihiko Izutsu*, Leiden: Brill, 2000, xi–xv, xi.

49 “This concept, unity of existence, goes back to a great Arab mystic-philosopher of Spain of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240). It exercised a tremendous influence upon the majority of Muslim thinkers, particularly in Iran, in the periods extending from the thirteenth century down to the 16th–17th centuries, when the tradition of Islamic metaphysical thinking found its culminating and all-synthesizing point in the thought of Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, commonly known as Mullā Ṣadrā (1571–1640).” Izutsu, Toshihiko, “The basic structure of metaphysical thinking in Islam,” in Toshihiko Izutsu, *Creation and the timeless order of things: Essays in Islamic mystical philosophy*, Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1994, 1–37, 2.

*schauung* of arguably Islam's most important Sufi thinker had on Izutsu cannot be underestimated. "Had he not encountered this mystic philosopher," wrote Wakamatsu, "Izutsu's thought would likely have been completely different."<sup>50</sup> In fact, his Japanese biographer went so far as to state that Izutsu's own personal philosophy can be traced to "a line of descent that stretches back to Ibn 'Arabī."<sup>51</sup>

While Izutsu was already familiar with the mystic before he came to Montreal, having published an essay in Japanese on his ontology in 1944,<sup>52</sup> it was through his encounter with Nasr and then two years later, Corbin's student Hermann Landolt, who became his colleague in 1964, that he was able to tread into the universe of Ibn 'Arabī through a doorway quite different from that of conventional Western scholarship. There is no doubt that the captivating and synthetic nature of Nasr's lecture, where he would have outlined the significance of Ibn 'Arabī for Ṣadrā, drawing on a living Persian *'irfānī* tradition with which he was in direct contact in Iran, would play an instrumental role in directing Izutsu into the Akbarian school. He had intuited beforehand the momentousness of this new phase of his intellectual life: describing his move to McGill he admitted that he was "urged on by what seemed like an unstoppable existential impulse."<sup>53</sup>

The first significant fruit of this development appeared in 1966–1967, with the two-volume publication of *A comparative study of key philosophical concepts in Sufism and Taoism: Ibn 'Arabī and Lao-Tzū*.<sup>54</sup> While, as the title indicates, it was a comparative study, the section on Ibn 'Arabī alone (a good two-thirds of the study) was a full monograph in its own right. Along with Corbin's *Creative imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*, and the lengthy treatment of the mystic in Nasr's *Three Muslim sages*, these three works were the best introductions to Ibn 'Arabī thus far in the West.<sup>55</sup> In many ways, they complemented each other well. Nasr presented a panoramic view of Ibn 'Arabī's life and thought, Corbin focused on the significance he gave to the *mundus imaginālis*, and Izutsu outlined the mystic's worldview with special attention to the *Fuṣūṣ*

50 Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 206.

51 Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 206.

52 Izutsu, Toshihiko, "The ontology of the Islamic mystic philosopher Ibn 'Arabī," in *Tetsugaku* 25–26 (1944), 332–357.

53 Cited in Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 337.

54 Republished in 1983 as *Sufism and Taoism: A comparative study of key philosophical concepts*.

55 On the limitations of early Western scholarship on Ibn 'Arabī, see Khalil, Atif and Shiraz Sheikh, "Sufism in Western historiography: A brief overview," in *Philosophy East and West* 66.1 (2016), 194–217, 202–203.

and its later commentary tradition. If Corbin offered an inroad into Ibn ‘Arabī through the Western tradition (or to be more precise, through what it had lost of the science of the *imaginal*), Izutsu did so through the Far East, by means of the inspired, shamanic (= “prophetic”) wisdom of Taoism. It would remain for William Chittick, a student of these three giants, to take Akbarian studies to new heights with his magisterial *The Sufi path of knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s metaphysics of imagination* (1989), arguably the most utilized work in the field of Ibn ‘Arabī Studies. *SPK* would be followed by *The self-disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s cosmology*, and a number of other books and articles.<sup>56</sup>

Nasr observed that Izutsu had the rare gift of mastering the major languages of three major civilizations: Western, Islamic, and Far Eastern.<sup>57</sup> If anything, *Sufism and Taoism*—a study of Chinese and Arabic texts authored in English by a Japanese thinker—was a fitting illustration of this. By all accounts, Izutsu was a linguistic prodigy. There were rumors among students at Keio University that he knew 200 languages. When my own professor Todd Lawson, a student of Landolt at McGill, asked him how many he actually knew, to put the speculations to rest, he replied, “thirty-two,” wryly adding, “but I make fewer mistakes in my Japanese.”<sup>58</sup> Surprisingly, in middle-school Izutsu was a poor student who hated English. But matters took a turn the day he learned that unlike Japanese, English distinguished between the singular and the plural. In a moment of awakening, it dawned on him that people who speak different languages might well experience the world differently. The simple insight stoked a thirst that was never quite quenched. “The absurd notion kept running through my mind,” he wrote, “that I would master all the languages in the world, every single one of them.” “As a result of that momentary experience, I stepped into the scholarly world. The fascination of that mysterious thing called scholarship took hold of me as if in premonition of what lay ahead.”<sup>59</sup>

The trajectory of Izutsu’s acquisition of languages unfolded something like the toppling of dominoes, and was closely tied to his yearning to read the religious, philosophical, and literary classics of the world, in their original forms.

56 We also cannot overlook here the pioneering works of Michel Chodkiewicz (d. 2020).

57 Nasr, “Preface” xii.

58 The question was posed some time in the 80s, in the context of a seminar Izutsu gave at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London on al-Birūnī’s (d. 430/1048) commentary on Patanjali’s *Yoga-Sutra*. He read the Arabic text alongside the original Sanskrit. See also Landolt, Hermann, “Remembering Toshihiko Izutsu,” in *Zindaḡī nāma wa-khadamat-i ‘ilmī wa-farhangī-yi Purūfīsūr Tūshihikū Izūtsū*, Tehran: Anjuman-i Āthār wa-Mafākhir-i ‘Ilmi, 2006, 1–11, 8–9.

59 Cited in Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 41.

Plato and Aristotle led him to Greek, Dostoyevsky to Russian, the Old Testament to Hebrew. We may assume that it was the Quran that drew him to Arabic. This, after all, would explain his eagerness to study both together with Shaikh Ibrahim. The title of Izutsu's first English book, *Language and magic: Studies in the magical function of speech* (1956), fittingly captured how deeply the subject arrested his imagination.

Despite his fascination with and mastery of languages, at McGill Izutsu was remembered for the aura he carried of an unassuming silent sage, distinguished, according to his colleague Landolt's account, for his *khāmūshī*.<sup>60</sup> And yet it could be colorfully interspersed with the sound of roaring laughter coming out of a classroom where he might be teaching. His predilection for silence also did not prevent him from an occasional debate, as occurred with the fiercely opinionated Turkish sociologist Niyazi Berkes (1908–1988), who taught at McGill from 1952 to 1975.<sup>61</sup> As a Kemalist who supported the abolition of the caliphate and the eradication of the *sharī'a*, he was often at odds with Izutsu, who while certainly not an Islamist, had a soft spot for the idea of the “world of Islam”—traces perhaps of the relationship he forged with Shaikh Ibrahim and Musa Jarullah (erstwhile pro-Ottomans), as well as Ōkawa, who felt Atatürk had gone too far in the direction of secularization. While Izutsu was not a simple anti-modernist, he recognized the dehumanizing effects of contemporary industrialized, highly technologized societies, where the human being had lost a sense of meaning and purpose;<sup>62</sup> the threat of nihilism that lurked behind much of modern Western thought;<sup>63</sup> and the “spiritual crisis”

60 Landolt, “Remembering” 2.

61 Shared through personal correspondence with S. Esenbel.

62 Consider Izutsu's following statement: “The technological agglomeration of the life-order in highly industrialized modern society in the West has thrown man into an incurable isolation. The life-order created by technology is in reality a disorder in the sense that it is a vast and elaborate system of meaninglessness or absurdity. Man is forced to live in a huge dehumanized mechanism and meaning he himself does not understand and, which, moreover, constitutes a standing menace to his individuality and personality. In such a situation, modern man necessarily becomes alienated from Nature and his own self.” Izutsu, Toshihiko, “Existentialism East and West,” in Toshihiko Izutsu, *The concept and reality of existence*, Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1971, 25–33, 26. In the same essay, Izutsu also highlights the dangers of not articulating the Islamic philosophical tradition in a way that is relevant to the needs of the modern world. To fail to revive the “creative energy contained in this philosophy” is to ensure that “it will find itself utterly powerless in the presence of contemporary problems.” Izutsu, “Existentialism” 32.

63 See Nakamura, “The significance” 149.

of the modern world.<sup>64</sup> It is a curious feature that in many of Izutsu's pictures, whether lecturing or immersed in study, he dons a traditional Japanese kimono. It would be naïve to suggest that this was mere nativism on his part. More than anything, it seems to have reflected his desire not to relinquish the sacred mores of his own tradition, thoughtlessly discarded by his contemporaries in response to the encroachment of secular modernity. In a picture taken of Izutsu in 1949, where he was honored with the Fukuzawa award for his book on the mystical element in Greek philosophy, he stood out as the only one among the dozen photographed to be adorned in classical Japanese garb.<sup>65</sup>

In the same year that Izutsu was appointed full-time professor at McGill, the university opened up a branch of its Institute of Islamic Studies in Tehran, in a beautiful Qajar house. Izutsu took up residence here, a move that allowed him to devote his attention to later Islamic philosophy and mysticism in an environment more conducive to such research because of the presence of important authorities of that tradition. With Mehdi Mohaghegh, an Iranian colleague from the Institute, he authored an English translation of a section of Sabzawārī's (d. 1295/1878) *Sharḥ-i manẓūma* (*Commentary on the Poem on metaphysics*), eventually published in 1977 as *The Metaphysics of Sabzavārī*. This was preceded by their collaborative production of a critical edition of the text eight years before. In 1977, he also published, with Mohaghegh and others, Mir Dāmād's (d. 1040/1631) *Kitāb al-Qabasāt* (*Book of embers*). Two years before both of these works saw the light of day, however, Nasr invited him to join the teaching staff as a full-time member of the Iranian Academy of Philosophy which had recently been founded under the patronage of Queen Farah Pahlavi. Izutsu accepted, joining Corbin as part of its international faculty, where he would teach courses on Islamic and Far Eastern philosophy. At the recommendation of Nasr, with whom he traveled to many conferences abroad, he wrote *Toward a philosophy of Zen Buddhism* in English, published

64 In 1981, he delivered a paper in Rabat entitled, "Oriental philosophy in face of the spiritual crisis in the contemporary world." Āshtiyānī, Sayyid J. et al. (eds.), *Consciousness and reality: Studies in memory of Toshihiko Izutsu*, Leiden: Brill, 2000, 449. The sentiment was shared by many of his colleagues at Eranos, including his friend Mircea Eliade who was deeply influenced by Guénon, but kept this influence private. Hakl, Hans T., *Eranos: An alternative intellectual history of the twentieth century*, trans. Christopher McIntosh, Montreal: Routledge, 2013, 231. On Izutsu's regular participation in these conferences, beginning with his first lecture in 1967, and continuing involvement for fifteen years thereafter, see 229–230; cf. Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* xviii and other relevant pages.

65 <https://www.keio.ac.jp/en/keio-times/features/2021/4/> (last accessed: 25 June 2021).

by the Academy in 1977.<sup>66</sup> While Izutsu recognized that Zen stood opposed to speculative philosophy in the conventional sense, it was nevertheless possible, as he argued in the introduction of the book, to produce a philosophical expression—a “philosophization”—of the Zen experience, and that is what he set out to accomplish in the short work.<sup>67</sup>

The intellectual and spiritual friendship that grew between Nasr and Izutsu, from the time of their first meeting, was perhaps best exemplified by their joint translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, undertaken at the suggestion of Izutsu after an old manuscript of the text was discovered in a Chinese imperial archaeological site. Their schedule was to meet periodically in a beautiful garden in the courtyard of the Academy. Izutsu would first translate from Chinese into English, and then Nasr from English into Persian, taking into consideration Izutsu’s exegesis as they proceeded along. By the end, not only did they have a Persian translation, but also an English one as a byproduct of their exercise in cross-cultural philosophy. When Nasr left Iran for a few weeks in 1979, unbeknown to him at the time that he would never return due to the outbreak of the revolution, this was the only work in progress he took with him on the flight. His intention was to continue plugging away at it in his spare moments. The upheavals that followed in the wake of the political events that took the world by surprise prevented him from bringing the project to completion. Now, after more than four decades, this work has been published along with Nasr’s Persian commentary.<sup>68</sup>

One of the most significant consequences of Izutsu’s stay in Iran was that he was able to train some very important scholars (among them Gholamreza Aavani, William Chittick, James Morris, Sachiko Murata, and Nasrollah Pourjavady), many of whom would play a significant role in charting the trajectory of Islamic studies both abroad and in Iran. Part of their experience as students included reading classical texts with Izutsu line-by-line, such as the *Fuṣūṣ*, which they began in the early 70s and completed some eight years later. His exacting attention to detail, both grammatical and philosophical, must have left an indelible mark, as can be seen from the impressive quality of their scholarship in the years that followed. Murata in particular, as a Japanese student proficient in both the languages of the Islamic world and the Far East, perhaps best exemplifies the legacy of Izutsu. It has been noted that unlike Western scholars, Izutsu’s encounter with Islam came through a mind molded

66 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, “Intellectual autobiography,” in Edwin Hahn et al. (eds.), *The philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, Chicago: Open Court, 2001, 1–85, 52.

67 Izutsu, Toshihiko, *Towards a philosophy of Zen Buddhism*, Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977, repr. Boulder: Prajna Press, 1982, x.

68 Laozi, *Tā’ū tih ching: Ṭariq wa-fadā’il-i ān*, English trans. Toshihiko Izutsu and Seyyed Hossein Nasr; Persian trans. and comm. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Tehran: Intishārāt-i Ittilā’āt, 2021.



and shaped by the traditions of the Far East. Nowhere is such an encounter more visible, among those who studied under him, than in Murata's *The Tao of Islam* (1992), an encyclopedic *tour de force* that examines gender in Islam not through the axioms and categories of Western feminism (which is usually the lens through which this thorny subject is broached) but through the "backdoor" of Chinese cosmology, with special attention to the complementary principles of yin-yang. Murata would later explore the development of the Islamic *ḥikma* tradition in China, or more specifically, its encounter with and assimilation of Confucian social teachings, Neo-Confucian metaphysics, Buddhism, and Taoism in *Chinese gleams of Sufi light* (2000). More recently, she published *The first Islamic classic in Chinese* (2017), a translation with introduction and commentary of Wang Diu's *Real commentary on the true teaching*, the first major pre-modern articulation of Islamic thought in Chinese. Like Izutsu, Murata has also written about Islam in Japanese. With his help, she translated the *Ma'ālim al-ūṣūl (Principles of Islamic law)*, a 10th/16th-century text on the principles of jurisprudence, published in 1985 as *Isurāmuḥō riron josetsu*. The subject reflected her early interest in law, which she studied as an undergraduate student at Chiba University just outside of Tokyo before moving to Iran to study *fiqh*.<sup>69</sup>

The Iranian years were for Izutsu a time of great productivity. Even as law-and-order began to break down with the unfolding of the early stages of the revolution, Izutsu unremittingly continued his scholarly activities. "Aided by superb colleagues," he wrote, he proceeded with "editing and annotating unpublished Islamic philosophical texts ... In an unusually tense atmosphere, we held regular meetings and enthusiastically pressed ahead with our research."<sup>70</sup> When it became clear that it was too dangerous to remain, Izutsu boarded one of the last Japanese rescue missions and left Iran, never to return. Even though the decision was forced on him by circumstances outside of his control, he would later recount being free of the "slightest feeling of regret," not because he had a personal wish to depart a nation for which he had grown fond, or because he had been treated badly by its people, but due to his belief in an ever-present Agency that guides our lives, especially at key junctures separating different phases.<sup>71</sup> Echoing the Islamic idea of *tawakkul*, of complete and total

69 For some important biographical details about the intellectual interests that brought her to Iran, and her studies with Izutsu, Nasr, and important religious authorities in the country, see Murata, Sachiko, *The Tao of Islam: A sourcebook on gender relationships*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992, introduction.

70 Cited in Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 257.

71 Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 257.

reliance on and trust in God, he had once even described himself as a “fatalist.” Had it not been for the tumultuous events that brought Imam Khomeini (d. 1989) into power, it seems improbable that he would have bade farewell to the country in the foreseeable future.

#### 4 Return to the Homeland

On his return to Japan, Izutsu decided that he would now dedicate his intellectual energies to the elaboration of “Oriental philosophy,” as he conceived it, primarily in Japanese. This philosophy was not, as sometimes misunderstood, that of the Far East, but of an Orient that included the realms of Islam, particularly Persia. After all, the *ḥikma* of the Ishrāqī “Illuminationist” school of al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191) formed part of the “wisdom of the East.”

To be clear, Izutsu recognized, before Edward Said, that the so-called East was anything but a repository of a single, unified vision of reality—a single Oriental essence. “There is in the East,” he wrote very explicitly, “no ... uniformity. We can only speak of Eastern philosophies in the plural.”<sup>72</sup> However, he also felt there were deep conceptual overlaps that could allow for the development of a metaphilosophy of Eastern modes of thinking, one that could serve ultimately as a bridge between East and West, and beyond that, as a pathway to the articulation of a universal vision of reality (curiously also an aim of Ōkawa<sup>73</sup>). Within the confines of the Orient itself, *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being) was crucial to the formation of such a model. While he recognized the doctrine was simply one among a number of non-Western philosophies, he also felt it had within it the resources for the development of an overarching metasystem or conceptual umbrella that could accommodate various other subsystems of Eastern thinking. If the “fundamental structure” of *waḥdat al-wujūd* could be adequately explicated, it could, he felt, “provide a basic conceptual model by which the majority of Oriental philosophies will be brought up to a certain level of structural uniformity concerning ... their most fundamental aspects.” The doctrine and the philosophical possibilities it contained were, to quote his own words,

representative of a basic structure which is commonly shared by many of the Oriental philosophies going back to divergent historical origins,

72 Izutsu, Toshihiko, *The concept and reality of existence*, Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1971, 1.

73 But without the political implications (see note 29 above).

like Vedantism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. The structure of the philosophy of *waḥdat al-wujūd* would in this perspective be seen to represent one typical pattern—an archetypal form, we might say—of philosophical thinking which one finds developed variously in more or less different forms by outstanding thinkers belonging to different cultural traditions in the East.<sup>74</sup>

As we can glean from the passage, *waḥdat al-wujūd* was, for Izutsu, not exclusive to Islam. But his deep study of the Quran, Arabic, Ibn ‘Arabī, and the Islamic philosophical heritage allowed him to discern the presence of such a mode of thinking elsewhere. When Masataka observed about Izutsu, that it was “his long-term research in speculative, philosophical Sufism which enabled him to rediscover a similar tradition in Buddhism,”<sup>75</sup> he was only partially correct. It allowed him to discover similar traditions across the entire spiritual and philosophical landscape of the East.

Izutsu retained an active regimen of writing and scholarship when he returned from Iran. He composed ten books in Japanese from 1979 onwards—at least half of them on (or directly related to) Islam.<sup>76</sup> Only two were in English, *The theory of beauty in the classical aesthetics of Japan* (co-authored with his wife Toyoko), and *Sufism and Taoism* (a revised version of his earlier work). The articles he published in Japanese (twelve in total), and in English or European languages (fourteen), covered a wide range of subjects, with his interest in a metaphilosophy of the East now squarely at the center. Islam was still present, but it was as if what he had synthesized intellectually from his years at McGill and the Imperial Academy was now being used to help him understand the Orient as a whole in a much deeper light.

It was also in this third phase of his life in Japan that Izutsu began to develop an interest in postmodernism. He met Derrida, the French philosopher of deconstruction, who penned a short essay for Izutsu (*Letter to a Japanese friend*) where he provided some schematic reflections on his own terminology. Some, however, have made more of this interest than it warrants, because

74 Izutsu, *Concept and reality* 36–37.

75 Masataka, Takeshita, “Toshihiko Izutsu’s contribution to Islamic Studies,” in *Journal of International Philosophy* 7 (2016), 78–81, 81.

76 *Birth of Islam* (1979), *A fountainhead of Islamic philosophy* (1980), *Islamic culture* (1981), *Reading the Quran* (1983), and *Scope of words: God and man in Judeo-Islamic philosophy* (1991). See Iwami, Takashi, “Bibliography of Toshihiko Izutsu’s writings,” in Sayyid J. Āshtiyānī et al. (eds.), *Consciousness and reality: Studies in memory of Toshihiko Izutsu*, Leiden: Brill, 2000, 441–442. It is unlikely the first of these was published before he left Iran, though he may well have written most if not all of it before his return to Japan.

Izutsu was if anything a conventional postmodernist. In fact, the aspects of this outlook he was most attracted to were those that grew out of the years he spent meditating on the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī: an awareness of the relative nature of truth, the ineffability of the Real, the limits of reason, and the mind’s incapacity, on its own, to fully grasp Reality. But Izutsu’s understanding of these matters (like the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*) went far beyond anything postmodernism could offer, since it recognized not just relativity, but a relativity that was itself a mysterious expression of what Meister Eckhart referred to as “the ground of being.” And this is why he could more accurately be described, as one writer has done, as a “post-postmodernist,” since beyond Maya’s play of words and ideas, there lay an Absolute which, for him, was the object of all human yearning and desire, the alpha and omega of all that is, was, and could ever be. Izutsu was, in this respect, as far from being an agnostic on metaphysics as one can imagine.

The Japanese scholar-sage passed away unexpectedly on the morning of January 7th, 1993, the consequence of a brain hemorrhage after a minor fall at home. But death, as he knew all-too-well, was far from the end. If one had prepared for it in the true mystical sense, through catharsis, knowledge, and inner-illumination, it was a liberation. As he had written years earlier in a meditation on human mortality in words that call to mind the famous couplet of the mystic martyr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922):

While the body lives, the spirit sinks down into the darkness of death; therefore, so long as the body does not die, the spirit cannot live. Until one dies in the flesh, one cannot live in the spirit. For a person to be able to live a life truly worthy of that name, the spirit must first be freed from the tomb of the flesh. As the tragedian Euripides says, ‘Who knows but that life be death and death be life?’; to be alive in this world is, in fact, to be dead, and to be dead in this world, conversely, is to be truly alive.<sup>77</sup>

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77 Cited in Wakamatsu, *Toshihiko Izutsu* 321.

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# Islamic Thought and the Art of Translation

*Texts and Studies in Honor of William C. Chittick  
and Sachiko Murata*

*Edited by*

Mohammed Rustom



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# Contents

Foreword	XIII
<i>Seyyed Hossein Nasr</i>	
Preface	XVI
Acknowledgements	XX
List of Figures	XXI
Notes on the Contributors	XXII
Books by William C. Chittick and Sachiko Murata	XXVI

## PART 1

### *Sufism in Persianate Contexts*

1	‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s <i>Tamhīdāt</i> : An Ocean of Sufi Metaphysics in Persian	3
	<i>Masoud Ariankhoo and Mohammed Rustom</i>	
2	The Life of the Breath of Life in Rūmī	18
	<i>Kazuyo Murata</i>	
3	Mirrors in the Dream of the Alone: A Glimpse at the Poetry of Bīdil	30
	<i>Ali Karjoo-Ravary</i>	
4	Sufi Gleams of Sanskrit Light	55
	<i>Shankar Nair</i>	
5	Re-reading the Quranic Maryam as a Mystic in Nuṣrat Amīn’s <i>Makhzan-i ‘irfān</i>	77
	<i>Maria Massi Dakake</i>	

## PART 2

### *The Akbarian Tradition*

6	Some Notes on Ibn ‘Arabī’s Correlative Prophetology	97
	<i>Gregory Vandamme</i>	

- 7 Beautiful-Doing (*ihsān*) as the Station of No Station (*maqām lā maqām*) and the Genesis of the Perfect Human (*al-insān al-kāmil*) 117  
*Alireza Pharaa*
- 8 Fear, Deeds, and the Roots of Human Difference: A Divine Breath from al-Qūnawī's *Nafaḥāt* 135  
*Justin Cancelliere*
- 9 Being with a Capital *B*: Ibn Turka on Ibn 'Arabī's Lettrist Cosmogony 150  
*Matthew Melvin-Koushki*
- 10 Jāmī and the Wine of Love: Akbarian Sparks of Divine Light 178  
*Marlene DuBois*
- 11 Al-Qushāshī and al-Kūrānī on the Unity of God's Attributes (*waḥdat al-ṣifāt*) 202  
*Naser Dumairieh*
- 12 The Akbarian Tradition in Hadhramawt: The Intellectual Legacy of Shaykh Abū Bakr b. Sālim 225  
*Omar Edaibat*
- 13 A Sufi Vocabulary from the Sokoto Caliphate: Shaykh Dan Tafa's *Poem on Sufi Nomenclature* (*al-Manzūma li-l-iṣṭilāḥ al-ṣūfīyya*) 260  
*Oludamini Ogunnaike*

### PART 3

#### *Islamic Philosophy and Cosmology*

- 14 Neoplatonic Prayer: The Isma'ili Hermeneutics of *ṣalāt* according to al-Sijistānī and Nāṣir-i Khusraw 277  
*Khalil Andani*
- 15 The Necessity of the Return (*al-ma'ād*): Avicenna on the Posthumous States of the Human Soul in *Aḍḥawīyya* 6–7 298  
*Davlat Dadikhuda*

- 16 Greek Philosophy and Sufism in Mecdi's Ottoman Turkish *Gardens of Peonies* 311  
*Rosabel Ansari*
- 17 Sufism and Philosophy in the Mughal-Safavid Era: Shāh Walī Allāh and the End of Selfhood 323  
*Muhammad U. Faruque*
- 18 Light/Darkness Dualism and Islamic Metaphysics in Persianate Context 371  
*Sayeh Meisami*
- 19 Asad Allāh Qazwīnī's Cosmology of the *ahl al-bayt*: A Study and Critical Edition of *Kitāb-i Walāyat-i muṭlaqa* 389  
*Cyrus Ali Zargar and Alireza Asghari*

#### PART 4

### *Hermeneutics and Cross-Cultural Translation*

- 20 Observations on Embodiment and Cross-Cultural Translation 419  
*Amer Latif*
- 21 Translating Islamic Metaphysical Texts: Some Reflections on Knowledge Transmission 429  
*Mukhtar H. Ali*
- 22 Historical Imagination: Voicing Silences in Early Sufi Texts through Narrative 441  
*Laury Silvers*
- 23 The Tao of *ma'rifa*: Adam's Encounter with Hell in Paradise 467  
*Mohammed Mehdi Ali*
- 24 A Supplication for God's Mercy on the Day of 'Arafa by the Fatimid Chief *Dā'ī al-Mu'ayyad al-Shīrāzī* 491  
*Tahera Qutbuddin*

- 25 Made in God's Image: A Contemporary Sufi Commentary on Sūrat  
al-Insān (Q 76) by the Moroccan Shaykh Mohamed Faouzi  
al-Karkari 516  
*Yousef Casewit*
- 26 Remembering Toshihiko Izutsu: Linguist, Islamicist, Philosopher 528  
*Atif Khalil*
- Index of Names and Technical Terms 551