

Book Reviews

Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Islamic Philosophy From its Origin to the Present*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006. 380 pp. \$26.95 pb. ISBN 0791468003

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Islamic Philosophy From its Origin to the Present provides a survey of Islamic philosophy with respect to the relations between philosophy and prophecy in Islamic thought. In this volume, philosophy is treated not only as something historical but also as a living tradition, especially in contemporary Iran. Nasr takes the term prophecy in a broader sense, such that it has not only “legal, ethical and spiritual significance but also ... a sapiential one concerned with knowledge” (1). As Nasr presents it, prophecy has different degrees but mainly consists in “bringing a message from another world or another level of consciousness” (5). In its narrower sense, prophecy indicates the messengers of God as envisaged by Islam; in Nasr’s broader sense, however, prophecy also includes some forms of inner, esoteric, knowledge. As far as Islamic philosophy is concerned, Nasr argues, this knowledge is related to the inner dimension of the Quranic revelation. Nasr’s enterprise in this book concerns prophecy in both the narrower and the broader senses of the term, as it has been understood by intellectuals in Islamic civilization. Hence Nasr wants to show how Islamic philosophy—its major themes and the historical figures contributing to its formation—“functions in a world dominated by prophecy” (8).

Nasr’s book is divided into four major parts addressing different questions regarding Islamic philosophy and its relation to prophecy. Part one provides an overview and evaluation of the study of Islamic philosophy in the West. Nasr considers the meaning of the term philosophy, surveys its application to various intellectual currents, and examines the relation between *al-Hikma al-Ilahiyya* (a synthesis of rational philosophy, illumination, gnosis, and Islamic teachings) and Islamic theology in its Sunni and Shiite branches. Western studies in

Islamic philosophy are also discussed from Nasr's well-known traditionalist point of view. Nasr praises Corbin's *Histoire de la philosophie Islamique* (1964), which was written in collaboration with Nasr himself and Osman Yahya, for taking into account the relationship between philosophy and revelation; Corbin's book is, in Nasr's view (27), a major turning point in this regard. Nasr even seems to think it the only proper history of Islamic philosophy "written by Europeans and their Muslim imitators" (107), which is a highly objectionable assumption indeed.

Having criticized the manner in which Islamic philosophy is studied and interpreted by Western and Muslim scholars, Nasr devotes the rest of the book to discussing "philosophical questions and ideas of particular Islamic philosophers ... seen from the point of view of the Islamic philosophical tradition itself" (29–30). In the second part, Nasr discusses some prevalent topics in Islamic philosophy, such as existence, quiddity, and the relations among intellect, reason and intuition; he also explains how these topics have given rise to a range of positions adopted or rejected by various figures in the tradition. Nasr underlines that Muslim philosophers did not see a dichotomy between intellect and intuition but considered them to make a hierarchy within the totality of the sources of human knowledge. He discusses the limits of theological schools and philosophers who restrict knowledge to that which is attainable by demonstration.

Part three is devoted to the history of Islamic philosophy, treating that history in a manner that remains faithful to the reality of the Islamic intellectual tradition, unlike "histories of philosophy written by Europeans and their Muslim imitators" (107). In this part, which draws a framework for the study of Islamic philosophy, Nasr discusses theological, philosophical, and spiritual or Gnostic movements. His exposition concentrates on the philosophico-theosophical movements developed in Iran and Azerbaijan, such as the school of Isfahan and the school of Tehran. Nasr devotes a chapter specifically to Mulla Sadra's thought, which is the best example of the prophetic philosophy in Islam. This is because Mulla Sadra

sought to unify the knowledge received through *burhân* or demon-

stration, ‘*irfân* or contemplation, intellectual intuition and gnosis and Qur’ân ... thereby giving full expression to philosophy cultivated in the land of prophecy. (224)

Despite this emphasis on movements in Iran and Azerbaijan, however, Nasr talks about all groups and important figures in the Muslim world. His aim is not to give a full-fledged account of the thought of each and every person or group, but to study their thought insofar as it is related to the issue of the relationship between philosophy and prophecy.

In the last part, Nasr tries to identify the modern western understanding of philosophy and compares it to that understanding of philosophy which is Islamic or traditional. He points out the revival of interest in premodern Islamic philosophy despite the fact that in academic circles the philosophical activity is generally separated from prophecy.

Nasr’s book certainly provides a good overview of the story of intellectual movements in Islamic societies. Whatever topic he chooses to deal with, he paints a fantastic picture, as he does when highlighting the etymology of such words as *wujud* (existence), *wajd* (being enraptured), *hastî* (existence) *ist* (is), and so on. He writes with the erudition and vision indicating the culmination of years of experience and thought in Islamic philosophy. This can be seen, for example, in his explanation of the sense in which Avicenna understands existence to be accidental (69–71), or when he traces the adventure of ideas from one generation of thinkers to another or from one perspective to another. The fact that he introduces the ideas of well-known figures and groups alongside those of the less known or misunderstood shows the breadth of his knowledge. Due to the fact that some of the material in this book consists of revised versions of articles written for different occasions, topics of different chapters overlap and the book is not quite systematic. Nevertheless, Nasr’s work is quite a valuable source for pondering Islamic philosophy with regard to the relation between philosophy and prophecy.

One key problem in the volume is the author’s use of the terms “Islam” and “Islamic” in a manner that seems to over-interpret the data. Consider, for example, his statement about the divine essence: “Islamic metaphysics places the Absolute above all limitations,” and “It knows that the Divine Essence ... is Non-Being or Beyond-Being” (63). It

might be true that for some people, for example Ibn Arabi (90) and some Ismaili thinkers (148), God is beyond being, and non-being comprehends being. But it is quite difficult to generalize and call this Islamic metaphysics. Passionately defending a certain interpretation of Islamic thought, Nasr tends to suppress the diversity. He talks about authentic Islamic philosophy (65) as if there were a Platonic idea of “Islamic Philosophy” on the basis of which one may discriminate whether one’s philosophical activity is authentically Islamic or not. Defending a certain interpretation or a certain school of thought is not objectionable in itself. However, Nasr seems to implicitly identify that which is “Islamic” with the interpretation that he favors. Although in principle he welcomes the contribution of all parties, such as Sunni theologians or rationalistic philosophers like al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, Nasr prefers what might be called Gnostic-theosophical trends. On this preference he makes unwarranted generalizations about Islamic philosophy.

Nasr’s evaluation of attempts to write Islamic philosophy is another example of misuse of the term “Islamic.” Nasr mentions two attempts to write a history of Islamic philosophy “from the Islamic point of view” (107). What does it really mean to write a history of Islamic philosophy from an Islamic point of view? Does religion in the narrower sense, i.e., the Quran and the Prophetic tradition, have anything to do with writing a history of Islamic philosophy? Does he mean Islam as the religion announced and exemplified by the Prophet, or does he mean Islam as understood and lived by people in general? It is difficult to find a clear-cut, one-to-one relation between Islam in either sense and a certain manner of writing a history of philosophy.

Attempting to interpret the whole Islamic intellectual heritage from a traditionalist viewpoint, Nasr seems to operate with false dichotomies and to make big generalizations. His conception of *homo Islamicus* provides a telling example (265–67). Contrasting *homo Islamicus* with the modern conception of man, Nasr states that the Islamic conception of human being is similar to the conception of man in other traditions, such as Christianity, Hinduism etc. If he is talking about Islam as a religion, and about *homo Islamicus* as something prescribed by Islam, then the dichotomy might rather have been between Islam and other

religions. This Nasr does not accept. If he is talking about Islam in a broader sense, as the interpretation and implementation of the religion by its followers, then the dichotomy is roughly between interpretation of Islam by some traditional figures and interpretation by some contemporary or modern figures. But this time, both instances of interpretation of Islam should be welcome and deserve the rubric “*Islamicus*.”

This might be because of Nasr’s use of the terms in senses different from their ordinary meanings. However, Nasr does not assign new and different meanings to terms by mistake. On the contrary, he is fully aware regarding his use of these terms, because they are crucial for his interpretation of Islamic philosophy. He uses the terms modern and traditional as opposites and religion and tradition as synonymous (260). Then by definition that which is modern cannot be compatible with religion. But in fact it is difficult to clearly identify the teachings of Islam with the philosophical outlook of the ancient or medieval world, and it is also difficult to find exact opposition between the teachings of Islam and the modern philosophical outlook. Nasr certainly takes the conception of man that culminated in the later development of Islamic philosophy as the criterion of that which is Islamic. However, this is simply one way of being a Muslim. It is not something exactly prescribed by religion, but something cultivated and assumed by some Muslims. Similarly, as far as our modern world is concerned, no Muslim is obliged to assume blindly the anthropomorphism, secularism, or lack of metaphysical principles identified by Nasr as the characteristics of modern thought (267).

The role Nasr ascribes to prophecy with regard to philosophy in Islamic civilization also seems problematic. In general it is true that Muslim thinkers did pay attention to prophecy. But is it true that they all more or less had the conception of prophecy identified by Nasr? It is true that some philosophers and theologians welcomed both the broader and the narrower meanings of prophecy. For some others, however, accepting prophecy in the narrower sense meant rejection or severe modification of prophecy in the broader sense. One must pay attention to the fact—which is also attested by Nasr’s exposition—that there was no uniform understanding of prophecy in Islamic intellectual

history. For example, the way Asharite theologians understood prophecy is not easily compatible with the Ismaili or Ishraqi conception of prophecy. Hence the relation between philosophy and prophecy must be carefully treated before identifying one orientation with “Islam” and “that which is Islamic.”

Nasr looks at Islamic philosophy from different viewpoints, and he not only writes about well known figures of Islamic thought but also provides useful information about less known figures. He explains how different figures or intellectual trends in Islamic societies took prophecy into account and considered it as something related to or even as the ground of intellectual activity. None of this is a surprise. Everything in Nasr’s book is consistent with the ways he approached and analyzed Islamic philosophy in previous work. His main theses will receive divergent reactions, and they definitely deserve to be considered and discussed carefully. His emphasis on the metaphysical dimension of Islamic thought is likewise important, but his scorn for non-traditionalist historians of Islamic philosophy and his assumption that certain schools of Islamic philosophy represent the criterion of being Islamic are quite open to discussion.

References

Corbin, Henri

1964 *Histoire de la Philosophie Islamique*. Paris: Gallimard.