

---

# The Place of Philosophy of Islam in the History of Knowledge and its Role Today in the Modern World Falsafa-e-Islam

Rasheed Araeen\*

---

The present crisis of the Muslim world is not entirely due to external forces but also what is internal within the common understanding of Islam. Internally, it is not only theological or religious but essentially philosophical. While the West denies Islam its place within mainstream philosophical system, there has not been adequate attention paid to this by the Islamic scholarship itself and then to assert Islam's historical place and role within the history of philosophy. However, I do not separate philosophy from religion, but it is important to emphasise the central role of philosophy of Islam in the history of human knowledge. This role has been somewhat marginalized or has become submerged under the weight of the primacy of and emphasis on religious ceremonies, which are essential but they are only a way of reaching what Qur'an demands from us in relation to humanity at large. It is in fact due to the somewhat forgetfulness of this fundamental responsibility that most of the Muslim world seems to have now fallen into the abyss of pathetic condition of ignorance (jehalit), confusion and disillusionment. This abyss is so deep that mere dedication to fundamental religious practices, or what have become obsessive ceremonies, cannot save us from what may be an impending catastrophe. Only true knowledge, of ourselves and others, can lead us not only to the true path of our salvation as Muslims but also of humanity as a whole.

---

\*. Rasheedaraeen@googlemail.com

It is unfortunate that the Muslim scholarship has not paid enough attention to, if not in fact somewhat ignored or marginalised, the philosophical aspect of Islam, which was historically an advance idea ahead of what emerged in the West following the Renaissance and then the Enlightenment. What I am suggesting or enunciating here is historically an extremely complex issue, for whose full comprehension would require at least a book or books. My aim here is, in this brief text, only to point to this important issue by outlining it, and to draw its attention of particularly those who are involved in Islamic scholarship. What is now needed, urgently, is to look at the whole history of human development and the knowledge it has produced, particularly in the area east of the Mediterranean from which had emerged three religions not only with specific revelations but also philosophical systems, not separately but in sequence of one after another, determining historically a progressive movement in which the divine ultimately appeared not only different from the earlier ones but also with different ideas and messages to put humanity on the right path (sirat-ul mustaqeem). However, in order to grasp this we will have to see and consider Islam not only through or with what is generally understood by the word 'Allah'. Even when in fact the very specific divinity of 'Allah' contains the philosophical essence of Islam, what then articulated and elaborated by the ideas produced by Muslim philosophers, these ideas were

not sufficiently externalized and placed within the historical trajectories of human knowledge and presented to the world as an advance and progressive philosophical system.

As I have pointed elsewhere, humanity began its journey with what I call primitive consciousness, its own and of the divine. This consciousness initially emerged essentially from the experience of what was visible to the eye, what was then could be made visible in imaginary forms or man-made images, contemplated or/and worshiped. The divine then would appear only through this consciousness and what it produced as images. But this consciousness could not remain fixed or static, it had to move and move forward as the human ability to grasp things intellectually grew, historically and ideologically; and in fact it reached the stage when it did not need something visible, in the form of an image or images, for contemplation or/and worship. It was at this historical moment that the divine revealed itself to be what was not visible to the eye, in fact what could not be visible, looked at, represented and contemplated. This shift from the early or initial human consciousness to what liberated it was not only theologically but also philosophically significant. Now the human imagination thus became free from the burden of what demanded its subordination to the experience of the eye, of objects or forms which the eye could perceive and contemplate, particularly

those which represented or which could be represented by the human and/or animal images. It was this unique idea of the invisible divine which went beyond what was already there and accepted, historically and ideologically, that put Islam ahead of all existing philosophical systems.

If Islam represented an advance and progressive idea within the historical trajectory of human developments, why was it then overtaken by an idea which was still trapped in the earlier form of consciousness? Why was then the (Christian) West able to present itself to the world as the most advance and progressive idea, the only idea for the ultimate salvation of humanity, and then it thus becoming globally dominant? The answer to these important questions lies not in one thing or other but multiplicity of historical events, both internal and external to Islam, whose complexity demands that we should go beyond the common rhetoric of blaming others and look at what caused this through the rationality of history and its philosophy. What is important here is however to recognise that what prevails today as the dominant history is not the true history of humanity; and therefore its rationality cannot be our guide in our attempt to recover what has been somewhat lost in history.

Most of the problems of the world today are indeed due to what has been imposed upon the world by the West. But the purpose of this brief article, however,

is not to deal with them in their complex enormity and/or confront the West. There is already a large body of critical material around in this respect, particularly produced by the postcolonial discourse. My aim here is only to focus on two aspects of the problems faced particularly by the Muslim world today: internally, it is the so-called Shia-Suni problem; and, externally, its relationship with the West. Both have produced conflicts which are not merely religious, as being presented and pursued by political forces. This combination of religion and politics has in fact created enormously unending violence with extreme brutality even against women and children.

What can we then do? First, it must be recognized that the issue is not merely of religion and therefore it cannot alone resolve it, let alone the ideas of so-called 'fundamental Islam' and what has emerged from it in the form of the misguided juveniles who are now creating havoc in Iraq and Syria, destroying violently everything which they find in their way. What is missing from here is the recognition of the historical knowledge without which we would remain trapped in this situation, in perpetuation of more and more human brutality and violence.

It was the great Muslim thinker Ibn Rushd (1126–1198 ) whose philosophical work, following the footsteps of great Muslim thinkers like Al-Farabi ( 872 – 950) and Ibn Sina (980 –1037), removed the presumed conflict between religion and

philosophy. This, in fact, opened the way for the European enlightenment. Europe at the time was living in the darkness of its religion, and it was the rationality of philosophy which took it out from this darkness, and put it on the way to what we today call modernity. But what emerged in and came from Europe as modern ideas, creating and dominating the world in which we live today, has now become bankrupt. Its presumed enlightened vision has now collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions, creating a new age of darkness. As for the enlightened ideas of

the philosophy of Islam, it seems they went into and have remained in hibernation for the last six hundred or so years. But they still possess radical ideas and a vision for the advancement and betterment of whole humanity, and can re-emerge from this hibernation and guide the world again. This however cannot happen by itself but needs great human efforts, an intellect and imagination which can transcend what merely attracts and seduces the eye; only then can humanity come out of what now has become the darkness of the modern age.