

The End of Islamic Philosophy*

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Over the years, scholars of Islamic philosophy have been discussing the deep need for a greater engagement with the broader intellectual scene, not just in terms of historical interest, but as a way of bringing this branch of Islamic thought into the arena of public discourse as a living reality. Of course, one of the greatest challenges facing anyone who wishes to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Islamic philosophy is that of language. Seyyed Hossein Nasr summarized the problem several decades ago, and also offered a way of approach:

[I]slamic traditional teachings are couched in a language which is not easily understood by many contemporary men, especially those with a modern education. The old treatises were usually written in a syllogistic language which is no longer prevalent today. What must be done is to disengage the content of Islamic philosophy from the language which is now not well received and to present it in terms more conformable to the intellectual horizon of our contemporaries. What is needed essentially is a re-presentation of the whole body of Islamic wisdom in a contemporary language. Thus those who seek for various problems the solution offered by this form of wisdom will find it without the barrier of unfamiliar language or thought structure.¹

* This article has greatly benefited from the suggestions provided by a number of friends and colleagues who are far too many to be named here. A few parts of this piece expand upon sections of my earlier article, "The Great Chain of Consciousness: Do All Things Possess Awareness?," *Renovatio* 1, no. 1 (2017): 49-60 (particularly pp. 50-53 and p. 57). The latter can be read here: <https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/the-great-chain-of-consciousness> (accessed April 28th, 2017).

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Albany, 1981), pp. 155-156. See also the pertinent remarks in Caner Dagli, "On the Possibility of an Islamic Philosophical Tradition in English" in Mohammad Faghfoory (ed.), *Beacon of Knowledge: Essays in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Louisville, 2003), pp. 65-72.

Thankfully, today there are a number of examples of works in English, from a variety of perspectives, which have sought to achieve this goal.² I have chosen the medium of poetry, along with a commentary on this poem, as my primary vehicles of expression. Although the use of poetry as a didactic tool is unconventional amongst Muslims writing in English,³ this does not hold true for older Islamic languages such as Arabic and Persian, where poetry was commonly employed for pedagogical purposes. There are scores of texts in medieval Islamic civilization on Arabic logic, rhetoric, prosody, medicine, music, and grammar, as well as texts in Islamic law, the Quranic and Hadith sciences, theology, mysticism, and philosophy which present the fundamentals of these sciences in poetic form, and which are usually elucidated upon by their authors (and/or other authors) through a commentary (*sharh*).⁴ There are also many examples where a primary text (*matn*) in the Islamic sciences was put into versified form (*nazm*) in order to facilitate memorization of that text.

This piece intends to outline the main goals and contemporary relevance of philosophical thinking in Islam in what is certainly now an Islamic language, namely English. In a sense, I seek to emulate the style of these aforementioned medieval texts because of their great pedagogical efficacy. An ancillary intention is to engage in an artistic mode of presenting philosophy, just as many of the Muslim philosophers

² See, in particular, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur, 1995); William Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afdal al-Din Kashani* (New York, 2001), chapters 2-3; Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World* (Oxford, 2007); Dagli, "On Beginning a New System of Islamic Philosophy," *Muslim World* 94, no. 1 (2004): 1-27; Mehdi Ha'iri Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence* (Albany, 1992); Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origins to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (Albany, 2006), parts 1-2 and 4; Rustom, "The Great Chain of Consciousness."

³ Some exceptions include Muhammad Legenhausen, [http://qom.academia.edu/Muhammad Legenhausen/Poems](http://qom.academia.edu/MuhammadLegenhausen/Poems) (accessed April 15th, 2017) and Nasr, *The Pilgrimage of Life and the Wisdom of Rumi* (Oakton, 2007), part 1 and *Poems of the Way* (Oakton, 1999).

⁴ With respect to medieval Islamic philosophy in particular, the philosophical poetry of Nasir-i Khusraw, Omar Khayyam, Afdal al-Din Kashani, and Mulla Hadi Sabzivari come to mind. See, respectively, Alice Hunsberger (ed.), *Pearls of Persia: The Philosophical Poetry of Nasir-i Khusraw* (London, 2012); Mehdi Aminrazavi, *The Wine of Wisdom: The Life, Poetry and Philosophy of Omar Khayyam* (Oxford, 2005); Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy*, pp. 127-135; 141-143; 145-147; 153; 159; 161-162; 168-170; Sabzivari, *The Metaphysics of Sabzivari*, translated by Toshihiko Izutsu and Mehdi Mohaghegh (Delmar, NY, 1977).

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