Islam and Philosophy: Lessons from an Encounter

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Hegel is the great denier of the meeting and dialogue between civilizations and, contrary to every idea of hybridization as the very spirit of culture, he carefully undertook a thorough ethnic cleansing of history: from the Greek beginning to the European ending the circle is continuous even when it went through other spiritual universes. They could scarcely have the breadth to confront the movement of Reason carried along by the idea of its goal. So it mattered little to the making of its history that philosophy spoke Syriac then Arabic.

But today it matters to us, we who have learnt to dissolve History in histories and make a full assessment of the importance of encounters. On the African continent especially it is important for us to read the lessons of the encounter between Islam and Greek and Hellenistic thought, which meant philosophy was written in Arabic by Al Kindî and Saadia Gaon, Al Farâbî and Ibn Sînâ, Al Ghazâlî, Maimonides and Ibn Rushd. What was this encounter and the movement of translation/hybridization it gave rise to? What can we learn from it today, particularly in Africa?

The fear of philosophy

If we needed to see in the encounter between Greek philosophy and the spiritual universe of Islam the effect of a word that promised well, it might be this one, which is attributed to the prophet Muhammad: 'the word of wisdom is the lost property of Muslims. So wherever they find it, they have more right to it than anyone.'

That there might have been a 'word of wisdom' outside the world created by the revealed Text, and that Muslims should receive it, was not easy to accept for those who specialized in the sciences that had developed in the Islamic world and sketched out a whole intellectual landscape centred around the Koran. Thus the Commentary (*Tafsîr*) on the sacred Word was science itself, while the disciplines associated with the language of revelation, grammar, philology or eloquence, were

also consecrated among the 'sciences of religion', because their purpose was first of all to be tools for the Commentary. Study of the history of Islam was also an instrument, especially the biography of its prophet, his sayings, customs, behaviour, attitudes and decisions in this or that situation: thus the science of *hadith* (Muslim traditions) was supposed to clarify the meaning of revelation and the direction it indicated to the community of believers.

Above all there was the science of jurisprudence, *fiqh*. This art of drawing on the revealed Book, the prophetic tradition or precedents established in Islam's very first period became quite early on the 'queen' of the religious sciences. Indeed it was responsible for being the guardian of divine law and ensuring that every decision on any case that presented itself should be organically linked to the origin. The main function of jurisprudence was thus to ensure faithfulness seen as repetition, as identical as possible, and closed in on itself.

Finally there was speculative theology or *kalâm*, a discipline that arose from discussion and thus contained within it the possibility of meeting that gives rise to opening: since it allotted to itself the task of defending and illustrating the articles of the faith using rational arguments, it thus had first to reconstruct those articles rationally. Consequently it could not be a simple repetition of the text. That was precisely the danger of speculative theology in the view of those who feared nothing more than to see the use of rational discussion veer off into rationalism, and that reason might come to be given precedence over tradition in order to establish the criterion of truth. And so it is reported that Abu Hanifa (died 767), the founder of one of the chief Muslim legal schools, forbade his son to engage in debates with the *kalâm* folk. 'Why do you forbid me to do what you are doing yourself?' his son then asked. 'Because when we got involved with those questions we all held our tongue for fear of seeing a speaker fall into error, while you, you got into those discussions with each one of you hoping to see a friend slip and fall into unbelief. People who hope for that fall into the same trap themselves.'

This fear of eristics, of *disputatio*, was the terror of seeing rational speculation in the service of the faith, as *kalâm* defined itself, turn into self-exaltation of reason and then lead to unbelief. And so it was also fear of encounter, fear of philosophy. But fortunately this would be overcome.

From translation to hybridization

It was the rapid expansion of the Muslim world that led to its encounter with centres where ancient philosophical tradition had been kept alive. Less than ten years after its founder's death Islam had conquered the lands of Syria, Persia and Egypt, where philosophical thought had been preserved. Thus on the one hand pagan philosophy was still in existence among the sect called the Sabeans of Harrân. On the other hand Christian schools of thought, such as the Nestorians and the Jacobites, had preserved in their monasteries the core of Aristotle's legacy. These monasteries were veritable centres for teaching philosophy, dialectic and logic, where people kept going by study the theological controversies about the trinity, monophysism and other questions. And so it was a living tradition (at Harrân) and

a 'surprising but lively use of philosophy'[1] that Muslims of the mid-seventh century found themselves faced with.

Adopting an attitude that might support the position of a conquering religion that was certain it was right, should they think this was a Greek discipline, alien to a world completely organized around the revealed Word? Or was it the moment to hear the message left by the prophet that 'the word of wisdom', even if it was pagan, contained something that might illuminate that very revelation?

It transpired that a sovereign, the Abassid caliph Al Ma'mun (813–33), lent support and the legitimation of authority to the intellectual movement whereby the Muslim world could open up to philosophy and appropriate the rationality of the Greek 'word of wisdom'. The symbol of this support and legitimation was the decision he took to create a centre, in 823, in the capital Baghdad, where the best specialists would be brought together to translate the works of Greek philosophy into Arabic. The founding of this *bayt al hikma*, as it was called, that is 'House of Wisdom', can thus be seen as the true starting point of a living philosophical tradition on Islam's territory which was quite different, *pace* Hegel, from just a petrified moment in the history of ideas. In fact the encounter between rationalities produced the best effects of proliferation and development that might be expected of a veritable *appropriation*: 'philosophy on Muslim soil', writes Alain de Libera, 'could follow the thread of all its previous histories to form its own history: a Muslim history of course, but also a Christian history and a Jewish history.'[2] Indeed it is most remarkable: the encounter between the philosophical tradition and Islam's spiritual universe, between Greek and Syriac and Arabic, was one of the conditions for many other encounters, for a bundle of histories that became intertwined. It is Alain de Libera once more who describes this profusion of encounters: 'philosophy on Muslim soil was not the philosophy of Muslims but the history of the philosophies that Muslims produced or allowed to be produced after the conquest – pagan, Christian, Muslim, Jewish; Muslim philosophy carried out by religious clerics, "secular" philosophy done by philosophers; eastern and western, Mediterranean or continental, Arab or non-Arab philosophies, Persian philosophies and Turkish philosophies.'[3]

The first translations from philosophical science into Arabic were made from their Syriac versions by Christian and generally Nestorian masters. Thus a Christian family distinguished itself notably heading the House of Wisdom; this was the Hunayn family in which the son Ishâq and the nephew Hubaish were also renowned translators. And so the ancient, and in particular Aristotelian, philosophical corpus became accessible in Arabic thanks to translation. A crucial effect of this movement of *translatio studiorum* from the ancient world to Baghdad, capital of the Abassid caliphs, was to make Arabic a philosophical language: Aristotle in Arabic was the living proof that nothing in the essence of philosophy itself required that it should speak Greek or even an Indo-European language. On this point the fear of philosophy had become the terror of grammarians faced with the effects of translations and what was happening to the language of revelation; the transformation of Arabic into a language of philosophy meant not only the appearance of philosophical neologisms but also certain 'violence' done to the customary modes of expression when it came, for instance, to translating into a language that, unlike Greek, does not

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use the copula *to be*, the canonical form of the proposition in Aristotle: S *is* P, the predicate P is attributed to the subject S.

The famous dispute, known as the 'Baghdad controversy', between Abû Bishr Mattâ and Abû Sa'îd al-Sîrâfî, is the dramatization and most perfect illustration of this confrontation between grammarians, the guardians of the language, and Hellenizing logicians. This public dispute, which took place in the vizir's presence in 938, had specifically the grammarian al-Sîrâfî criticizing the philosopher Mattâ for ignoring the fact that the philosophers' logic was the illegitimate claim to the universality of what, on examination, was only the product of the language categories peculiar to Greek: he maintained therefore that for Arabs true logic could only be their own grammar.[4] This position was equivalent to denying the encounter between rationalities: they should merely continue on their way in parallel, unable to communicate, with each justifying itself solely within its own context. What was happening to the Arabic language was the *de facto* counter-argument that could be used against al-Sîrâfî: after going through translation the encounter had become hybridization of the language and original creation. Now the language of the Koran was also the language of philosophy, not only for the Muslims al Ghazâlî (Algazel), Ibn Sînâ (Avicenna) or Ibn Rushd (Averroës), but also for the Jews Saadia Gaon or Maimonides, who were living in the same universe of theologico-philosophical questions, and all of them are monuments of the universal history of philosophy.

Lessons

The history of the encounter between the Greek 'word of wisdom' and that of Islam contains a number of lessons. From the outline of it that has just been given we can draw two: the first for Islamic modernity, the second for the development of philosophy in Africa.

The lesson for Islamic modernity is the one the Indian philosopher-poet Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) drew from his meditation on the encounter that formed *the history of philosophy in the Muslim world.*[5] From this he concluded that the religious thought of Islam needs again today to carry out a veritable 'reconstruction' of itself as a philosophy of the autonomous individual and of action in an open world yet to be made. It will do so by being able to repeat, in quite a different context of course, and according to modalities that can only be totally different, the gesture by which it managed to overcome its fear of philosophy in order to meet Greek philosophy. Nowadays, says Iqbal, who says he is sorry he is not writing in the time of the caliph Al Ma'mun, Islam's modernist thinking and its renewed reading of the Koran needs to be able to feed as well on the encounter with Leibniz, Kant, Bergson or Nietzsche. Henri Bergson in particular, with his thinking about time as duration as well as about 'creative evolution', has been, in Muhammad Iqbal's view, 'the word of wisdom' that Islam today should appropriate as its 'lost property' in order to be able to read in the light of this its own text and see in it the conditions for its own updating, its own modernity as thought about autonomous subjects that have to invent themselves in and through an act of transforming an open world that is still emerging.[6]

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The lesson for philosophy in Africa still remains to be pondered. First because the intellectual history of Africa is very largely still to be written and the African library still remains to be established. We can see this from the way the debate on Africa has developed mainly in ignorance of the *intellectual* (and not only religious and political) significance of the encounter between Africa and the graphic rationality of Islam, which has been taking place since the 11th century at least. Thus many manuscripts preserved (badly) in Timbuktu, and also in a large number of family libraries all over the Muslim areas of sub-Saharan Africa, are waiting to appear on the shelves of an 'African library' that would demonstrate that philosophical thought in Africa is not only the stake of the debate between ethnophilosophy and europhilosophy. And that the Aristotelian tradition of Logic or the metaphysics of being and its attributes have been the subject of African philosophical writings other than those of the Ghanaian Guillaume Amo or the Ethiopian thinkers studied by Claude Sumner. Attending to those whom Ousmane Kane (in a book published in 2003) has called *non-europhone African intellectuals*,[7] who have written in Arabic or their mother tongue using Arabic characters, will allow us to see the historical depth of *written* philosophical thought in Africa. We could also quote in particular the important work of setting up a catalogue of titles in African literature in the Arabic language and characters that has been undertaken over many years by the historians John Hunwick and Sean Rex O'Fahey.[8]

And there is yet one more encounter to arrange, the one between African intellectuals whose working language in philosophy is French, English or Portuguese and those who have been working in Arabic characters and are also the heirs of a philosophical tradition on Muslim soil born of the meeting with the Greek world.

Last, the need to do philosophy in African languages as well is often affirmed.[9] 'Fellow philosophers, let us learn to think in our own languages!' called Kwasi Wiredu. This task that we thus present ourselves with will be usefully illuminated in the light of the history of the philosophical evolution of Arabic and also the effective experience of the 'non-europhone intellectuals' who have already come up against that crucial aspect of the meeting of rationalities: the language aspect.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. Alain de Libera, *La Philosophie médiévale*, Paris, PUF, 1993, p. 53.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Here might I be allowed to refer readers to my own study of the controversy entitled 'Grammaire, logique et vérité', in *Entre les Grâces et les Muses. Eléments historiques de culture générale*, edited by D. Dauvois, C. Simon and J. Hoarau, Paris, Ellipses, 1994.

    The topicality of this issue will be noted; it would be taken up first in Alexis Kagamé's project to dig up the ontology carried by the Kinya-rwandan language by identifying its 'categories' following

the model of Aristotle's categories (Alexis Kagamé, *La Philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'être*, Brussels, Académie Royale des Sciences Coloniales, 1956); second, in Benveniste's article on 'categories of language and categories of thought', reprinted as Chapter VI in his *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966.

5. This is part of the title of the doctoral thesis he presented in Cambridge in 1907, which was translated into French by Eva de Vitray Meyerovitch with the title: *La Métaphysique en perse*, Paris, Sindbad, 1980.
6. On Muhammad Iqbal's thought, see Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *Islam et société ouverte. La fidélité et le mouvement dans la pensée de Muhammad Iqbal*, Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001.
7. Ousmane Kane, Dakar, Codesria, 2003.
8. See J. O. Hunwick and S. R O'Fahey (eds), *Arabic Literature of Africa*, Leiden/New York, E. J. Brill, 1994.
9. In no. 184 of *Diogène* (1998): *Afrique, regards croisés, regards pluriels*, the editors asked authors to summarize their text in their language: Yoruba, Wolof, Ebonics, Twi, Somali, Dhuluo, Akan, Beti.